



JUMPERS AND ST CATHERINE'S HILL RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION

www.wcresidents.co.uk

7 Hurn Road, Christchurch, BH23 2RJ

01202-473-658

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A report on Local Government Reorganisation in Dorset

On 7th November 2017, a Statement from Secretary of State Sajid Javid was made to Parliament:

I am announcing today that, having carefully considered all the material and representations I have received, I am 'minded to' implement the locally-led proposal for improving local government in Dorset. This was submitted to me in February 2017.

The statement was widely welcomed by the important bodies such as the Dorset LEP. Two of the councils that previously opposed the Future Dorset proposal, East Dorset and Purbeck, have now reversed their earlier decisions, leaving only Christchurch Council in opposition.

After two years of consultation, research and analysis we have overwhelming evidence that the proposal known as 2(b) is the best way forward for the county.

The impact if the Minister now decided to say No

The arguments in favour of reorganisation can be classified under two broad headings: financial and strategic. We will look first at the financial scenario, *where the situation has worsened since the original case was drawn up* and the need to act has become even more acute.

Were the Minister to say no, Bournemouth and Poole could theoretically continue down the amalgamation path, albeit weakened by the exclusion of their logical partner Christchurch. They are on record as saying that is something they would rather not do. The financial case illustrates that they would be, in a relatively short space of time, no better off than now. *They would then certainly not be able to realise the vision and opportunities expressed for the conurbation in the Case for Change.*

The remainder of Dorset would be in financial disarray with the added risk of increasing their existing funding deficits and *preventing the safe provision of essential services*. Councils from North Dorset to Weymouth and everywhere in between would be set back to square one having wasted two precious years.

For several consecutive years Dorset County Council has spent more than it has taken in. It has been obliged to balance the books by transferring money out of reserves. Their unaudited accounts for 2016-17 show an *over-spend* of £31 million and overall net *liabilities* of £124 million.

(Our Treasurer adds: *The DCC Group Income and Expenditure Statement for 2016-17 - the latest statements available - shows a deficit of £31.0m. This figure is before allowing for a surplus on the revaluation of Property, Plant and Equipment of £13.0m and an Actuarial loss on the Final Salary Pension Scheme Fund Assets and Liabilities of £111.0m. The overall deficit for the year is therefore*

£129.0m. The Balance Sheet shows net liabilities of £124.0m, a substantial proportion of which is a Pensions Liability of £738.0m).

Dorset Council's usable reserves are dwindling. They can't afford to stand still, let alone suffer a setback. Were the Minister to say "no", they would have little option but to cut staff and services causing mayhem in the foster care system, adult social care and care for the elderly.

All our councils currently face funding deficits and desperately need to reduce their overheads. Some in the two-tier system currently adopted by Dorset have acute issues caused in part by the inherently inefficient and over-managed system they operate.

It has already become apparent that Christchurch, as represented by its MP and some councillors, has become isolated from the rest of Dorset and should the Minister say "no" could potentially be perceived as instrumental in preventing progressive service provision for the most vulnerable in society.

On the strategic front, inward investment would be discouraged across the county but particularly in Christchurch itself as business concluded either, that the new Bournemouth-Poole Unitary offered a better environment than a parochial backwater or, more likely, that other counties are more progressive.

A county in desperate need of new infrastructure would struggle to realise its potential. The effect upon future economic growth in Dorset would be extremely detrimental.

It will not have escaped the Minister's notice that as things stand one major economic driver – Bournemouth Airport (which is in Christchurch) – must potentially deal with: Hurn Parish Council; Christchurch Council; Ferndown Council; East Dorset Council; Dorset County Council; and Bournemouth Council.

That structure can only hinder rather than encourage future strategic development.

The economies of Christchurch, Bournemouth and Poole are heavily dependant upon tourism. A joint approach would clearly carry strategic advantage over individual, fragmented initiatives.

Were the Minister to say "no", a population in which 65% of people and 89% of businesses expressed their approval for option 2(b) would feel both cheated and ignored.

Is there an Alternative

Central Government have made it clear that they wish in future to deal only with a small number of "large" authorities. Christchurch, one of the smallest councils in England, is too small to be viable in the medium term.

From the moment Christchurch Council voted not to support option 2(b) we began asking them to lay out their alternative plan for Dorset. At the time of writing, nearly a year later, no such viable alternative has been produced.

It has been suggested that Christchurch could be part of rural Dorset rather than join with Bournemouth and Poole (known as option 2(c)) even though business and the public opinion survey significantly rejected that option in favour of 2(b)

The rationale for uniting the urban boroughs of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole is that together they form a single geographic and economic unit (also known as a travel to work area) where a high percentage of the population lives in one part and works in another. Such a

conurbation is best administered as a single unit. That would be to the advantage of Christchurch tax payers because it is generally cheaper per head of the population to run an urban council than a rural one.

People making strategic investment decisions want to deal with a single organisation that has clear, uncluttered, lines of responsibility. If Christchurch is not part of the coastal unitary that clarity and simplicity disappears and that could only be detrimental to the whole area.

The other eight councils in Dorset have stated their support for option 2(b). Business has made its preference for 2(b) very clear.

It is no exaggeration to say that the whole economic case for Dorset overall would implode were Christchurch to join the rural Dorset unitary rather than its natural partners, Bournemouth and Poole

The Christchurch Referendum

Despite the public consultation on option 2(b) and other related options, on 16th November Christchurch Council decided to spend around £60,000 on a local referendum, as if somehow business interest and the population of the rest of Dorset didn't exist.

The referendum, never a satisfactory way of judging opinion, was marred by several illegal events. We have given some detail in the Appendix

A turnout of 21,000 (53%) voted: NO 17,676; YES 3,321. This sort of result was never in doubt once Christchurch Council sent out their leaflet with the ballot papers, which all but told people to vote NO (see Appendix). One of the weaknesses of a referendum compared with a properly constructed opinion poll is that nobody knows the demographic make up of those that voted or those that did not.

This was a parochial referendum amongst some 6% of the population of Dorset. A turnout of 21,000 represents a little less than 3% of the population of Dorset. An against vote of 17,700 represents just over 2% of Dorset's population

Councils representing some 94% of Dorset's population are in favour of 2(b). Nobody knows what Christchurch Council is in favour of.

We conclude that the Minister should implement what a very large majority of Dorset support.

The Proposed Christchurch-Bournemouth-Poole Unitary

The Minister clearly likes the *Future Dorset* proposal because he has issued a "minded to" letter. In summary it offers significant cost savings *based upon evidence* that have become even more important since they were first analysed; more accountable, seamless decision making; great strategic benefit, which is why the LEP is so keen; the opportunity for our council to invest in technology; an integrated approach to our roads, to the tourism that is so important to our area.

It is supported by all the key Dorset institutions: the airport; the health authorities; Dorset LEP; Dorset police; and the universities.

The three councils involved are working hard together in their Joint Committee which is making considerable progress on several fronts such as disaggregation, the appointment of a Chief Executive for the new council and vitally, Council Tax harmonisation

A Council Tax Harmonisation strategy is well advanced and seeks to ensure that; no Council Taxpayer will see an increase greater than the Government's referendum limit and therefore pay no more than they would have done had there been no LGR; harmonisation across all areas is achieved in less than ten years; Council Taxpayers in the Christchurch area will see a freeze or reduction in their council tax throughout the harmonisation period.

One of the things that progressive people in Dorset have is a sense of opportunity. The feeling that this county, and especially our coastal region of Christchurch, Bournemouth and Poole, is ready to grasp our future.

To invest in the technologies and the skills that are required. To create the exciting new infrastructure our county needs. To look forwards, not backwards. To embrace change, not hide from it.

One of our members wrote to us:

What alternative are our Council offering us? In the commercial world Dorset Council would be verging on bankruptcy and must either reorganise or slash services to survive.

In the Christchurch Council Meeting I heard one councillor say, "someone will pay". I'm not prepared to trust my family's future to that sort of statement. On our doorstep we have an opportunity to build something for our children and future generations with Bournemouth and Poole. To ignore that would be like being on unemployment benefit and turning down a perfectly respectable job with a company down the road.

We are looking forward to the Minister giving us a green light so that we and others can work with our council officers and progressive councillors to create a new council fit for the twenty-first century

Jim Biggin on behalf of our Management Committee

D Barnett; J Biggin; M Biggin; S Fotheringham; M Green; L Oliver

Appendix: Shortcomings of the Referendum follows

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The referendum was tainted by the following events:

CBC Leaflet Distributed with the Ballot Papers

We drew the attention of the Returning Officer, David McIntosh, to the following shortcomings before the referendum took place.

We showed the explanatory material produced by the Council and distributed to residents with their ballot papers to a retired financial services Compliance Officer. He told us that if the material was being used to sell a financial product *the Financial Conduct Authority would insist upon its withdrawal*.

In particular:

The CBC Leaflet – the new Unitary will have fewer Councillors from Christchurch than from either Bournemouth or Poole

The leaflet fails to mention that CBC is part of DCC where it is represented by 5 out of 46 Councillors. It gives the impression that this is something new created by the proposed new Unitary rather than a continuation of the status quo. As such it amounts to misrepresentation by omission.

The CBC Leaflet – we have control over local services

This is factually incorrect – consider the roads for example. Again, it amounts to misrepresentation

The CBC Leaflet – CBC Strongly Dispute the Forecast Savings

No evidence is provided to support this claim but since it comes under the CBC logo some residents will be inclined to believe it. This is misleading.

The CBC Leaflet – Better Strategic Planning

Strategic Planning in Dorset is a responsibility of Dorset LEP. No evidence is produced to show how CBC on its own is going to produce better results than the LEP. This is misleading.

CBC Leaflet – partnership with EDDC could be extended to other Councils

CBC fails to name these other Councils, which makes this claim misleading. We now know that EDDC and Purbeck have rejected the idea of joining with CBC in promoting option 2(c) and have decided to endorse option 2(b) so even the inferred statement that the existing arrangement with EDDC can continue is of doubtful validity.

The CBC Leaflet – Christchurch would retain its sense of place

Sense of place has nothing to do with the internal structure of the local Council. The misleading impression is created that the new Unitary will somehow alter the way local people interact with each other and their surroundings.

The Referendum Question

Residents were asked to vote “yes” or “no” to option 2(b). There was no explanation anywhere as to what a “no” vote means in terms of alternatives. Thus, it is impossible to weigh up the pros and cons of different paths because no other outcomes are explained.

The Famous Leaflet

In April 2017 a highly coloured circular prepared by an individual who does not live in Christchurch was sent to most households in Christchurch. The circular: (a) used the logo of Christchurch Council without their permission (b) used the logo of Bournemouth Council without their permission (c) contained factually inaccurate information which was used as a basis to instruct people to vote “no” in the referendum.

As reported in the press, the originator was obliged to withdraw the circular, but the damage had been done. Our enquiries at that time revealed that a considerable number of residents believed that Christchurch and Bournemouth councils had written to them telling them to vote “no”

At the start of the referendum campaign the individual concerned produced a new leaflet that looked quite like the original. We know from speaking to members that this stirred memories of the first one when “*Christchurch told us to vote No*”. It is impossible to quantify the full effect of this leaflet.

The Christopher Chope MP Leaflet

Christopher Chope (MP for Christchurch) was obliged to withdraw his leaflet “*Six Good Reasons for Voting No*” on the grounds that it was illegal. A CBC Councillor and champion of the “*vote no*” camp distributed the illegal leaflet to residents in direct contravention of the CBC Code of Conduct. The leaflet was available in Christchurch Library and volunteers distributed it across the town.

The Illegal Posters

Illegal posters urging a “no” vote stating, “*say no to rule from Bournemouth*” appeared in several places.

Jim Biggin on behalf of our Management Committee

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