



## **JUMPERS AND ST CATHERINE'S HILL RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION**

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### **Christchurch Council (CBC) Alternative Proposal to Future Dorset**

For the past eleven months CBC have had a responsibility to their Council Tax payers to do more than just reject the Future Dorset proposal currently with the Secretary of State. Throughout that time, they have remained silent.

Suddenly, a paper dated 19<sup>th</sup> December 2017 titled *Further representation to the Secretary of State in response to a proposal for Local Government Reorganisation in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole* appeared for discussion at an extraordinary council meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2018 where it was approved by majority vote as an official Council submission.

The timing is interesting, and we will return to that.

CBC now propose that Bournemouth and Poole form a unitary and that the remainder of Dorset remains unchanged. That is a variation on option 2(c) in the public consultation. There has been no due diligence undertaken on the viability of this proposal; there is no analysis of the impact upon other Councils; and no evidence is cited to support its sustainability.

Both Bournemouth and Poole have already stated unequivocally that they do not support this proposal. No other Council in Dorset has expressed support for it. The Dorset public have not been consulted – an exercise that would cost the tax payer at least £400,000.

What primarily characterises the CBC paper is the parts that are missing, and we will have a look at those. Whilst we could, we don't intend to engage in a line by line, point by point, rebuttal of the CBC content. Much of it would just be our opinion as against theirs and we see little point in that. Every other Council in Dorset (representing 94% of Dorset's population) has weighed the evidence and their options and has accepted what CBC are trying to reject. We think that speaks volumes without our adding anything.

The CBC paper attempts to find fault with all three sources of independent research that underpin Future Dorset. The bodies that undertook that work are all well known, highly skilled organisations of good repute. For one of them to make an undetected, uncorrected serious mistake might be believable; for two of them to do so on the same project is stretching credulity; for all three is beyond the bounds of reasonable probability. No other council has formally detected these alleged failings. All of them have now formally accepted the Future Dorset proposal submitted to the Secretary of State.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> December 2017 we sent a paper to the Secretary of State that gave our reaction to his "minded to" letter. Where the content of this paper overlaps with that one, we will not repeat everything here but will rather refer the reader to our other paper.

### **What is missing from CBC – a strategic vision for Dorset**

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.

The inward-looking CBC paper doesn't even mention this aspect of our future. Encouraging infrastructure investment doesn't appear on their agenda.

They want to maintain the existing three-tier system of local government. **In the 2016 survey of opinion, all of Dorset's largest employers commented upon the duplication, bureaucracy, inconsistency and inefficiency that they currently encounter, and they strongly supported the reduction.** They made the further interesting point that they hoped to deal in future with less insular, less provincial bodies that could look broadly at economic development.

Consider the impact that the current structure has on say the airport.

Bournemouth Airport (which is in Christchurch) – must currently 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.

#### **What is missing from CBC – an acknowledgement of the opportunity for synergy**

Local Government Reorganisation isn't just about saving costs. It is about creating new opportunity, and one enormous potential for that will come from the synergy created by bringing Christchurch, Bournemouth and Poole together.

Consider tourism as an example. In its paper, CBC boasts about Highcliffe Castle in isolation. How much greater would the opportunity be if a single coastal unitary authority managed the promotion of all such assets across the conurbation.

Then consider the following quotation from the CBC Report: *“Even allowing for the peculiar circumstances of Christchurch being faced with a distrusted and aggressive neighbour (Bournemouth)”*. We find this a truly staggering statement that reveals a great deal about the supporters of the CBC report.

#### **What is missing from CBC – an analysis of what will happen in Dorset if the Secretary of State says “no” or delays a decision**

CBC is a small, very parochial second-tier council that can't survive on its own. It is part of Dorset Council and accounts for some of Dorset's deficit. In its paper it pursues its own ends with no regard as to the impact its actions could have upon Dorset Council or the rest of Dorset in general.

Unfortunately, Dorset Council has failed to function within its budget each year for at least the last three years. Their unaudited accounts for 2016-17 show excess expenditure over income of £31 million and a balance sheet bottom line of *net liabilities* of £124 million.

They have already admitted that in 2017-18 their expenditure, particularly on fostered children, is considerably over budget

Staff are clearly under massive stress. Staff sickness cost more than £2million in the period October 2016 – September 2017.

This is a council on the brink of a very serious situation that can't afford further delay

We analysed that impact in our paper to the Secretary of State dated 19<sup>th</sup> December. We said that if the Secretary of State now says "no", Dorset will be in disarray and we adhere to that opinion.

### **What is missing from CBC – the need to invest in technology**

This is so important that in our view it warrants a section of its own in the CBC paper. Unfortunately, it isn't even mentioned.

CBC is the sixth smallest council in England and can't afford the levels of expenditure that are going to be needed on technology during the coming decade. Only large councils with a sound financial base can attract the funds and the expertise that will be required.

**In their 2016 commentary Price Waterhouse Coopers stress the importance of option 2(b) and the opportunity that it offers to adopt 21<sup>st</sup> Century methods that other options do not present. This is very much the line adopted by Central Government.**

CBC talk about the number of councillors required to look after a section of the population. Their thinking ignores developments in technology. They fail to mention: the portable office; e-mail; Face Book; Twitter; and so on.

They talk about community in terms of the 1950s. Today community is often a virtual web based entity where people with a common interest interact freely. The internet and its forums are increasingly effective in providing support and progress within a community, successfully bridging the divide between people across the world.

### **What is missing from CBC – third party endorsement**

In stark contrast to the Future Dorset proposal, the CBC report cites no source of support from any independent body – and remember they've had nearly a year to build such support.

The report is not endorsed by: any other council in Dorset; any major businesses; the LEP; the universities; the airport; and so on

### **Timing of the CBC Report**

There is little in the CBC proposal that couldn't have been produced months ago. CBC have had a great deal of time to prepare this document but have waited until now to spring it upon us and predictably they ask for a deadline extension – which we trust will **not** be granted. Their proposal has not been subject to public scrutiny and if pursued would result in a delay of a minimum of six months to a year whilst also incurring huge costs for the public purse.

It could be suggested that rather than being a serious attempt to put forward a viable alternative to 2(b), this CBC proposal is in fact a deliberate delaying tactic.

It would probably not be the first time. Their foray into Hampshire was undertaken without first completing a SWOT analysis (*e-mail to us from CBC Democratic Services on behalf of Councillor Flagg dated 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2017*). They thus did no financial analysis and either didn't know that such a move would escalate their overheads to the point where they would have to cut benefits (*as was*

*confirmed to us by CBC CEO David McIntosh at a minuted meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2017) or more likely, they didn't care – because they were simply trying to cause frustration and delay.*

But Dorset County Council (amongst others) can't afford delay and to deliberately ask for it is to show how little regard CBC has for the needs of the rest of Dorset

### **The Last Word**

We're going to let the new Chair of Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership, Jim Stewart, have the final input. He has re-stated Dorset LEP's support for local government reform for Dorset:

*"Two unitary authorities for Dorset makes absolute business sense for our local economy. We firmly endorse the Future Dorset proposal.*

*We understand the financial pressures on local authorities and recognise that the restructure will bring compelling financial and administrative efficiencies.*

*Local reform presents challenges but will create greater opportunities for Dorset. Public service delivery, focusing on the urban and rural requirements of our county, will be transformed. Two leaner, stronger councils will be more influential on the national stage and be better equipped to secure funding for Dorset from central government. Businesses, jobs, housing and inward investment will all benefit from the change.*

*Dorset LEP looks forward to engaging with the two unitary authorities for the greater economic prosperity of Dorset."*

### **Jim Biggin on behalf of our Management Committee**

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