

The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP  
Secretary of State for Communities and local  
Government  
Department for Communities and Local  
Government  
2 Marsham Street  
LONDON  
SW1P 4DF

By post and email

Dear Secretary of State

**Local Government Reorganisation in Dorset: Response from Dorset County Council**

Thank you for your statement on 7 November 2017 in which you announced that you are minded to implement Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Dorset, subject to Parliamentary approval. I am writing on behalf of Dorset County Council to confirm our continued support for this proposal, to urge you to take account of the issues set out below to assist in your final deliberations, and to make a final decision that supports change as soon as possible after the period for representations closes on 8 January 2018.

**The Strength of the Case for Change**

As you know, the submission that the six councils made in February 2017 included an extensive evidence base, which I won't repeat, except to say that:

- 75% of all Dorset councillors that voted on the proposal in January 2017 supported it
- 73% of residents supported change
- 65% of residents supported the proposed geographical composition
- 89% of businesses backed change, as does the Local Enterprise Partnership

All three elements of the evidence base – the public consultation, the financial analysis and the Case for Change – were undertaken by independent, expert companies. The public consultation was extensive and run in accordance with best practice by a company with extensive experience in this field. Importantly, the consultation involved a range of research methods and techniques, which included:

- An open questionnaire
- A representative household survey
- A survey of parish and town councils
- 15 deliberative workshops – one in each of the districts, three with parish and town councillors, two with the voluntary and community sector and two with the business community
- Nine in-depth interviews with Dorset's largest companies
- Written submissions of support across public and private sector, including our health and LEP colleagues



The consultation had both breadth and depth. We remain clear and confident that the case is robust, and accurately reflects the views of residents and partners.

### **Increasing Local Support**

We were delighted to read that, based on all this information, you reached the initial view that the proposal, if implemented, is likely to improve the area's governance, commands a good deal of local support and is based on a credible geography. In December 2017 East Dorset District Council voted to support the proposal, and Purbeck District Council voted overwhelmingly to withdraw their opposition, so the percentage of councillors in favour of the proposal is now higher than when the submission was first made.

All nine councils are represented on the Joint Committees we have formed, which are working well, and 13 Task & Finish Groups have been established between the two of them (five in Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Joint Committee and eight in the Dorset Area Joint Committee). The Groups are adding to a growing sense of expectation and excitement amongst members and it is likely that more will be established over the coming months. Papers for both Joint Committees are available at <https://bcjointcommittee.wordpress.com/> and at <https://dorsetareacouncils.wordpress.com/>.

Programme infrastructures have been put in place to support both areas, including Programme Directors and Programme Teams, and the work continues to be guided at a pan-Dorset level by the Chief Executives Group and the Leaders and Chief Executives Group. We are working extensively on rationalising our resources to make the most positive impact on local services with increasing service demand and our reducing financial base.

### **Increasing Financial Pressure**

Although the case for change has been overwhelmingly positive, and it is our proposal to meet the expectations of our communities, it is worth touching on the implications if LGR does not happen.

We face increasing demand for services, particularly in adults and children's services. To meet these we are taking a strong and positive approach to working with Health, with a strong Sustainability Transformation Plan, Better Care Fund and pilot status for our system-wide approach. However, the limits of the LG Finance Settlement make the current structure of local government unviable. Dorset County Council has taken more than £50 million out of its revenue budget in the last five years. Much has been taken from "back office functions", transforming service operations and delivery models, but it cannot continue to provide services on ever-diminishing resources.

The County Council would have to deliver £33.7 million of savings by the end of 2020, made up of £4 million managed savings in the current year from across the Council in order to come in on budget (reduced from £9.5 million projected overspend in May), £15.7 million in 2018/19, and around £14 million savings in 2019/20. This will mean making more cuts in all service areas, including adults and children's services. The review of the impact of negative RSG announced in the LG Finance Settlement in 2018/19 is welcome, but the outcome is not certain, and despite the significant impact for the County, would still not address all the financial pressures we face in that year.

As I am sure you can appreciate, the achievement of savings within adults and children's services comes with a degree of uncertainty and risk, due to the needs of an aging population. Dorset has a particular challenge with a significantly higher population of over 75s with increasing complex needs. The complexity of cases means that savings may not be achieved as planned and managed, and whilst we are an Authority with well-managed finances, we are not an Authority rich with reserves, having a legacy of investing in the County. We would want this to be the case in the future with the new Authority.

We believe that services to children and adults will not be viable in the future without organisational and structural change. LGR provides a route to a long-term, sustainable solution.

### **Christchurch Borough Council**

You will have seen the results from the local poll in Christchurch, and the draft representation that the Borough Council discussed at their full council meeting on 2 January 2018 (available on <http://moderngovcbc.christchurchandeastdorset.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=127&MId=1144&Ver=4> ). There have also been a number of issues proposed through local press which are of particular concern for the County Council.

In relation to the poll, we respect Christchurch Borough Council's wish to represent its community well and explore options and would understand any debate including the creation of a new Town Council, as has been done elsewhere in the County. However, the question posed related only to the geography of one of the proposed new authorities, not to any principles of change, nor was there any reference to alternatives or indeed any consideration of County Council services.

There are suggestions being made in the local press that County Council services, including social service could be seamlessly delivered in the future, with an alternative model of delivery for Christchurch. This would require a different operating model to the rest of the County area, which would not be something we could agree to, particularly given the extent of joint working across our Health system to deliver improvements supported by the Better Care Fund. This unilateral approach is in sharp contrast to the extensive engagement that led to the decision of the County Council to support the Future Dorset proposal.

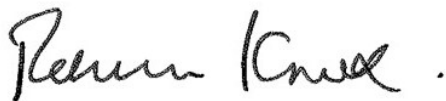
A range of support and information was offered to allow the work of the County Council to be properly considered, as we remain responsible for around 80% of the local services provided in Christchurch. It was most disappointing that this was not accepted and to see a campaign based on misleading and inaccurate information being circulated, not validated by the County Council or indeed Christchurch Borough Council. This was both before and while the poll was open, and must introduce the question of bias in the process and undermine the validity of the findings. Earlier this year an individual paid for a leaflet to be delivered to every home in Christchurch which was misleading and inaccurate, and similar material has been deposited in the local library, which would convey a message to the public that the County Council supported the content, which we absolutely did not, and we did not consent to this distribution. More information was displayed on noticeboards and other public spaces. I understand another council has provided you with a detailed list of these inaccuracies, so I will not repeat them, but I would urge you to judge the outcome against this background.

It is also with significant regret that I must dispute some of the content in the draft representation that Christchurch Borough Council discussed on 2 January 2018. The opportunity to check facts was once again not taken. There is a great deal that one could take issue with, but the Council's claim that the financial challenges facing the County Council have significantly reduced is misleading, as I have explained above, and quoting the County Council's own Chief Finance Officer was out of context, and inappropriate. The opportunity for factual information to be presented by the County Council, even at this late point, was not taken, despite the offer being made. Our Medium Term Financial Plan is a matter of public record and we manage our budget firmly, but it is not true to say that the financial challenges have reduced.

There are almost 800,000 residents in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole, and eight of the nine local authorities have found consensus over how to work together to respond positively to the challenges they face to continue to meet the needs of residents, businesses and other public bodies. This is a pan-Dorset solution which transcends issues of local concern and has extensive support from public bodies, the Local Enterprise Partnership, residents, town and parish councils and others. There is a growing and positive expectation for change, and we very much hope for a positive final announcement in January. The proposal was built on ambition and support across Dorset – any suggestion that Christchurch could be maintained as a District Council in Hampshire is not and has never been a consideration for the County Council. Our proposal is based in the integrity of our geography which holds strong for our economy, represented by the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership and our Health system.

We are now (we hope!) just 15 months away from the new councils. I would like to urge you to make your final announcement as soon as possible to give the new authorities the best possible chance of success.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rebecca Knox'.

Rebecca Knox  
Leader  
Dorset County Council

Copies to: Richard Drax MP  
Simon Hoare MP  
Oliver Letwin MP  
Michael Tomlinson MP