

Approval of Future Dorset: February 26, 2018

“My Rt Hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid) has today made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

“On 7 November I told the House that I was minded to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the locally-led proposal I had received for improving local government in Dorset, and I invited representations before I took my final decision.

“Having carefully considered all the representations I have received and all the relevant information available to me, I am today announcing that I have decided to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, that locally-led proposal to replace the existing nine councils across Dorset – two small unitary councils of Bournemouth and Poole and the two tier structure of Dorset County Council and the district councils of Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset, and Weymouth & Portland by two new councils.

“These new councils are a single unitary council for the areas of Bournemouth, Poole, and that part of the county of Dorset currently comprising the Borough of Christchurch, and a single unitary council for the rest of the current county area.

“I am satisfied that these new councils are likely to improve local government and service delivery in their areas, generating savings, increasing financial resilience, facilitating a more strategic and holistic approach to planning and housing challenges, and sustaining good local services. I am also satisfied that across Dorset as a whole there is a good deal of local support for these new councils, and that the area of each council is a credible geography.

“In my statement of 7 November I noted that the nine councils were already working together in joint committees on planning possible implementation of the proposal, and that further steps were needed to secure local consent. I am clear that further steps have been taken, and that the nine councils are continuing to work constructively together on planning implementation.

“I now intend to prepare and lay before Parliament drafts of the necessary secondary legislation to give effect to my decision. My intention is that if Parliament approves this legislation the new councils will be established on 1 April 2019 with the first elections to the councils held on 2 May 2019. I also now intend to make and lay before Parliament an Order to delay for one year, as requested by the Borough Council, the May 2018 local elections in Weymouth & Portland so as to avoid members being elected for only one year if Parliament approves the legislation establishing the new councils.

“Finally, in my 7 November statement I said that once I had made my final decision on the Dorset proposal, I would decide whether to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, Dorset councils’ proposal for a combined authority. As a first step I intend now to ask the leaders of the Dorset councils how they would like to proceed with their combined authority proposal in the light of my decision on the proposal.”

Leader of Bournemouth Borough Council, Cllr John Beesley: “I am extremely pleased that the Secretary of State has acknowledged the strength of the case we collectively made for a new structure of local government in Dorset, and approved the plans submitted to him. One council serving the established urban area of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole will help to protect essential frontline services, will serve all residents far better than the structures we have today, and will be able to positively & strongly represent the area at a national and strategic level, for the benefit of residents and businesses.

“Bournemouth Council has a successful track record of prioritising those frontline services that our residents value the most, whilst putting in place ambitious programmes of regeneration and housing, and returning a balanced budget or better each year. However, the financial pressures presented to all top-tier councils – that is, ourselves, Borough of Poole and Dorset County – in respect of meeting the rising costs of demand-led services of adult social care and children’s services, made the existing structure of local government unsustainable. Despite the best efforts of all councils in Dorset, the ability to squeeze value out of partnership working in its many forms has not and would not reap the financial and other benefits that will be achieved by implementing Future Dorset. I firmly believe public services will be better protected, the economic interests of the area promoted and the quality of life of residents will be improved even further being served by a single, new unitary Council for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole.”

Leader of Poole Borough Council, Cllr Janet Walton: “I am absolutely delighted that Sajid Javid has approved the Future Dorset plan. In doing so, he has opened the door of opportunity for Poole, recognising the major benefits the plans will bring for our residents. One council means reduced central costs and a greater proportion of available funds spent on frontline services – including adult social care and children’s services.

“Poole already has an ambitious programme of regeneration. One Council for the area will have the clout nationally to help us access the funds we need to achieve these aspirations, to position Poole as an attractive location for business and to place at the heart of this our town’s unique maritime history and cultural offer.

“I know that all Poole councillors are committed to the Borough, and to achieving the very best future for our residents and businesses. I look forward to working with them to realise this exciting opportunity for the Poole we love and care about so much.”

Cllr Rebecca Knox, Leader of Dorset County Council: “I am delighted that we have been given this opportunity to create a new council for the heart of the county across Dorset. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to remodel local services with our communities and partners to be responsive, innovative and above all else, efficient and effective.

“As a Joint Committee we have already begun the work needed to take this huge step forward to providing better, joined-up services, that make sense for residents across the breadth of the county area. We have a strong financial case and will take this work forward making clear decisions at our meetings, supported by our task and finish groups. We are committed to building on our positive collective work to develop a thriving economy, support and encourage aspirations for our young people and deliver services that make a positive difference to people’s lives.

“We will work with our colleagues in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole to make sure individuals who rely on our services, staff and services are transferred in a seamless and positive way.

“Local Government Reform offers an opportunity to move to shared and collective delivery, with a democratic mandate that can act quickly as we work even more closely with our communities and partners to make sure Dorset is a great place to live and work. The way forward for Dorset will focus on investing in our future, good education, a growing economy and good service delivery. It is what our staff strive to deliver, what our residents need, and why councillors carry out the work they do.”

Cllr Anthony Alford, Leader, West Dorset District Council: “This is excellent news. Many of us have been working for a long time now to deliver a vision of better local government. We want to deliver good local services within our means, safeguard our unique natural environment, and support

people to have a home and develop their careers in Dorset. The final decision by the Secretary of State is another milestone on that journey.”

Cllr Graham Carr-Jones, Leader, North Dorset District Council: “I am thrilled. Dorset’s councils have a strong ethos for working together for the good of our residents which will form a very solid foundation for the new unitary councils. This change will really allow us to transform how public services are delivered in the county, which will bring huge benefits for local people.”

Cllr Jeff Cant, Leader, Weymouth & Portland Borough Council: “I welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State that we can now go ahead with establishing a new Unitary Council. This decision gives us a golden opportunity to look at new and innovative ways of delivering joined up services for the benefit of local people. As work progresses on the creation of the new council, I will make sure that the Weymouth and Portland community is fully represented in building and delivering the new services and structures and that the emerging Weymouth Town Council and Portland’s existing Town Council provide a strong local democratic platform around both community’s proud histories.”