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## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN DORSET**

I am writing to let you know that I have today announced that I have decided to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the locally led proposal submitted by Dorset councils to replace the existing nine councils in the area with two new unitary councils, one covering the areas of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and a second covering the rest of Dorset. I enclose a copy of my Written Ministerial Statement.

On 7 November 2017, I announced that I was minded to implement this locally led proposal and invited representations to be submitted in the period ending 8 January 2018. I also noted that further steps were needed to secure local consent. Having carefully considered the proposal afresh alongside the representations received, and the increased level of consent among councils, I have concluded that there is a compelling case for implementing the proposal. I am satisfied that the proposal fully meets our publicly stated criteria for unitarisation – namely that if implemented, the proposal is likely to improve local government in the area, has credible geography and commands local support. My assessments of the Dorset proposal against these criteria, which we have undertaken to Parliament would be made in the round across the whole area subject to the proposed restructuring, are described below.

### **Improving local government**

I am clear from the information available to me, including financial estimates from the work of independent professional firms, that establishing these new unitary councils has major benefits for service delivery, will give greater value for money, and yield significant cost savings estimated at some £28 million per year. Such savings and the larger size of the councils will increase financial resilience, help sustain good quality local services and cement partnership working in the area. The new structures will also facilitate stronger strategic and local leadership across the area, and enable a more strategic and holistic approach to planning and housing challenges.

### **Credible geography**

I am also confident, having regard to the representations that I have received, that there is a general consensus that the two unitary councils are structured around the natural and established sense of identity across the geography of the county. There is clear evidence that this geography aligns well with other public service provision, including health, police, and the fire and rescue service. In short, the area of each of the new unitary councils is a credible geography.

### **Local support**

I am satisfied that across Dorset as a whole there is a good deal of local support for these two new councils. The consultation, which the nine councils undertook using a professional Social Research Practice prior to submitting their proposal, included a representative household survey which showed that across the area as a whole 65% of the public support the new two unitary structure. Nearly 80% of councillors across the whole area support the proposal, and the representations that I have received demonstrate that businesses and key public sector partners overwhelmingly support the new structure. I have also carefully considered the advisory poll which Christchurch Borough Council undertook, the representations I have received about it, and its result showing that a majority of those that voted were against a single council for Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole. In short, I am satisfied that not only the majority of the public across Dorset support the proposal, but that the poll, involving only some 6% of the area's population, does not undermine my judgment that the local support criterion is met.

### **Conclusion**

I will now be seeking the necessary Parliamentary approvals to implement the proposals to establish the two new unitary councils on 1 April 2019. I intend to lay before Parliament towards the end of March the draft secondary legislation, which if approved by Parliament and subsequently made, will establish the new

councils. Before laying the final drafts I will share drafts of this legislation with you, the other council leaders and with the Dorset MPs. I know that your council and the other eight councils will be continuing to work in joint committees to plan for implementation, and my officials will be working closely with your officers as detailed arrangements are developed which will feed into further secondary legislation, in particular on the financial arrangements of transition.

I envisage bringing forward this further secondary legislation around June or July. Central to this will be provisions on council tax harmonisation which give effect to my role of specifying the maximum period for equalisation. In deciding what that maximum period shall be I shall have regard to local preferences, the impact on individual council tax bills across the areas concerned, and the financial implications for the authorities. There is a balance to be struck between ensuring council tax payers do not experience a large increase in bills and not allowing residents in one predecessor area to be concerned that they are effectively contributing more to the cost of services than others in the area.

I am also proposing to make and lay before Parliament shortly an order to postpone the May 2018 elections in Weymouth and Portland by one year. This will avoid members being elected for only one year, if Parliament approves the legislation establishing the new unitary councils.

Finally in my 7 November statement I said that once I had made my final decision on the Dorset unitary proposal, I would decide whether to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, Dorset councils' proposal for a combined authority. As a first step I will be seeking your and your colleagues' thoughts on what role, if any, there might be for a combined authority in a future when there are two unitary councils across the whole area.

I am writing in similar terms to the other Dorset council leaders, the Dorset MPs, the Lord Lieutenant, and the Chair of the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Javid', with a small comma at the end.

**RT HON SAJID JAVID MP**