

Exploring Options for the Future of Local Government in Poole, Bournemouth and Dorset

- 6 The Committee considered a report by the Chief Executive on the future of Local Government in Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole. The Committee was asked to scrutinise and comment on the report prior to it being considered by the County Council on 26 January 2017.

The Chairman reminded members that their role at the meeting was to consider and comment on the report from the County Council's perspective and how it affected its constituents. Members had a further opportunity to comment as district and borough councillors when the report was considered by them throughout January 2017.

The Chief Executive presented the report in detail summarising previous discussion of the subject at County Council meetings, the case for change report from PricewaterhouseCoopers, financial analysis from the Local Partnership, the results of the public consultation, the involvement of the Shaping Dorset's Future Group and the Leaders and Chief Executives Group. This had led to a common approach being agreed by all nine local authorities on the sustainability of local government in Dorset as set out in the report being considered. Each of the councils would consider the report in January 2017.

A very thorough and rigorous approach had been taken throughout this process and there had been a robust challenge of the figures and principles to ensure that a good evidence base was used to help councillors in their decision-making. Reports had been made available and briefing sessions held for councillors in order to provide time for questions, debate and discussion prior to any decisions being taken. The evidence provided a case for change for local government in Dorset with Option 2(b) - two unitary authorities, one based on Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole and one on East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland – being the favoured option.

Some members favoured Christchurch being included in Shire Dorset and some spoke in favour of keeping the current close working relationship between the County Council and district and borough councils and the flexibility this provided. Some expressed concern about the transfer of power away from residents and some spoke in support of devolution and the involvement of Town and Parish Councils. In response to the latter point, it was explained that the Shaping Dorset's Future Group was progressing this. The Chief Executive of the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils (DAPTC) had attended the last meeting and the Head of Organisation Development attended the Executive meeting of the DAPTC to progress joint working.

Some members advocated services being provided at the most appropriate level and for decisions to be taken at the most appropriate level nearest to the people affected by them. Some concern was expressed about the increased number of people councillors would represent under any new arrangements and whether this would be "democratic". The need for strong democratic representation under any new arrangements was highlighted.

In response to concerns expressed about the consultation process, the Chief Executive confirmed that the consultation process followed had been valid and supported by the Department for Communities and Local Government. All the assumptions had been clearly set out and gave a basis on which to take a reasoned

financial view. She was confident that the figures gave a basis for financial viability. The Chairman added that Opinion Research Services, who had carried out the public consultation exercise, were confident that the process would stand up to any judicial review.

During the discussion the following additional recommendation was proposed, seconded and agreed:-

“That regard be paid to Christchurch Borough Council and, should that council so request, that Dorset County Council support the inclusion of Christchurch in the new Shire authority.”

With regard to the potential costs of transformation, the Chief Financial Officer confirmed that Government had not indicated that any transformation grant would be provided but authorities would continue to ask for this. If this was not forthcoming, all nine authorities would share the costs, initially from reserves, based upon population. It was hoped that any remaining costs could be capitalised and paid back from savings made as a result of the new authorities.

Following concern about devolution and Town and Parish Council involvement, another recommendation was proposed, seconded and agreed unanimously:-

“That the preparatory work with Town and Parish Councils begun by the Shaping Dorset’s Future Group is further developed to enable a clear process by which downward devolution of powers to third tier authorities can be timetabled and managed.”

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that these additional recommendations, and members’ comments would be included in the minutes to be considered by the County Council on 26 January 2017.

The Chairman stated that he believed in the public consultation and that the views expressed by the public could not be disregarded. He referred back to the minutes of the recent meeting of Christchurch Borough Council which also concluded that more weight should be given to the results of the household survey and he, therefore, supported Option 2b.

The Vice-Chairman thought that recent changes in the Local Government supported the need for fewer councillors but he expressed concern about the potential of the new city deal for Bournemouth and Poole and how this might affect Dorset’s future. He thought that a model should be created for devolution and that this should be better explained for the public so that it was clear where they should go for the services and to allay concerns about “take-over bids”.

RECOMMENDED

That the County Council consider the following recommendations:-

1. That regard be paid to Christchurch Borough Council and, should that council so request, that Dorset County Council support the inclusion of Christchurch in the new Shire authority.
2. That the preparatory work with Town and Parish Councils begun by the Shaping Dorset’s Future Group is further developed to enable a clear process by which downward devolution of powers to third tier authorities can be timetabled and managed.