

ACRA Informal Meeting with CBC-EDDC Directorate 3rd November 2015

CBC-EDDC was represented by David McIntosh, Neil Farmer and David Barnes.

ACRA were represented by Mike Collard (ACRA Chairman) and Jim Biggin (ACRA Secretary)

Budget 2015-16

1. The budgetary situation remains satisfactory with a balanced budget in place up to and including 2019-20. Projections for 2020-21, based upon a continued modest annual increase in Council Tax, show a possible small shortfall of circa £50,000. This is not significant at this stage.
2. The income from business rates remains healthy.
3. There are no known plans to try to devolve responsibility for Children's Services (mainly children in care) or Adult and Community Services (mainly demand for residential care) away from County. However, County Youth Service is looking to reduce budget by £1 million to £1.2 million. CBC is being asked what level of support it could provide. This is seen as a better way of managing than trying to reduce current expenditure of £Y down to £X whilst maintaining existing services.

Town Centre Planning

4. The latest theme based plan will be debated by members at the November 2015 meeting of the Community Services Committee. Heritage remains the most advanced theme.

Bargates Site

5. The police are finally vacating the police station. Potential developers are now involved in due diligence before progressing to contract negotiation. An outline planning application is anticipated in spring 2016 and will involve plans to reduce road congestion in Bargates and at Fountain Roundabout.

Housing Development at Roeshot Hill

6. The planning application is expected in spring 2016 (a busy time for the Planning Department). Following the well-attended presentation by developers Wimpey, residents have been asking questions about infrastructure development.
7. The health authorities have indicated that no additional medical facilities are required. DCC have stated that no additional school capacity is required. Both statements have caused some raised eyebrows in the local community.

8. Health and Social Care Act

Classification: PROTECT

9. Two main impacts of this legislation are emerging.
10. The first is the management of the balance that has to be maintained between spending money on treatment as against spending on preventative measures that will bear fruit at some point in the future. Doctors are the main point of expenditure control and they inevitably favour treatment today which is in direct conflict with the legal requirement imposed upon Councils to focus upon prevention.
11. The second is the clear intent that Central Government are pursuing to save money, thereby once again putting pressure on local authorities to find creative solutions to systemic problems, the solution of which has evaded Central Government for a long time. A Department of Health consultation paper on formulae to be used in 2016-17 to allocate resources is currently being studied by DCC who envisage significant reductions in funding of up to 40% phased over the three years 2016-2019.

Local Government Reorganisation

In the following section the **ACRA Notes** mainly reflect conclusions the ACRA representatives had reached following discussions each had prior to the meeting with various representatives of CBC, EDDC, DCC, and others that the meeting appeared to confirm. *They do not necessarily reflect the views of the CBC Officers.*

12. This has become a major local issue since our last meeting in April 2015 following the election of a Conservative Central Government combined with the Conservatives taking overall control of Bournemouth, Poole and all of Dorset's councils except Weymouth and Portland.
13. Central Government have made it clear that they wish in future to deal only with "large" authorities. Large is undefined but Dorset has four councils in the smallest twenty measured by size of electorate: Purbeck; Christchurch; Weymouth; and North Dorset. This is economically unsustainable whilst, in addition, both Poole and Bournemouth are each too small to survive as Unitary Authorities in the current political and economic climate. (**ACRA Note:** *one doesn't have to think much further than the cost of implementing and maintaining the complex computer systems that will be required to support e-commerce in Local Government to see that it's becoming a business model that will require large and expensive resources to support it*)
14. Utilising a £755,000 grant obtained from Central government, the work needed to explore the possibility of a pan-Dorset Combined Authority has continued, albeit with varying levels of commitment from the various district authorities. Each Authority is currently in the process of reviewing findings to date. Councils are also being asked to approve the submission of a case to Central Government under the relevant statutory provisions and to approve their joining of such an Authority once it has been established. (**ACRA Note:** *CBC full council gave such approval on 3rd November 2015*)

Classification: PROTECT

15. The inherent difficulty of trying to manage a project that embraces nine different authorities has led to a rate of progress that for some is unsatisfactory. In particular Poole needs to see faster progress and they are supported in that by Bournemouth. The two Unitary Authorities also believe that they, East Dorset and Christchurch together represent the financial muscle of Dorset as a whole. **(ACRA Note: Christchurch may be small but it contains within its bounds Bournemouth Airport and the associated industrial estate. East Dorset boasts the Ferndown Industrial Estate. The two authorities are managed by a team of officers who have direct, recent, experience of successfully merging two disparate administrations into a single coherent one and one of their senior colleagues has recently joined Bournemouth. These are attractive and perhaps underutilised assets).**
16. Inevitably perhaps, Poole, Bournemouth, East Dorset and Christchurch began to explore ways of moving ahead on a faster track. From these discussions emerged the idea of the four of them forming a new Unitary Authority to the initial exclusion of the remaining five councils. No business case has yet been developed and it is not clear how any gains in productivity might compare with gains potentially available under other possible schemes, such as the Combined Authority.
17. One possible weakness of the scheme to form a new Unitary Authority is that the remaining rump of Dorset might not be a viable economic entity and might not meet Central Government's definition of "large". DCC are aware and will need to explore that scenario.
18. It is also possible that a new Unitary Authority made up of all nine existing councils could be even more efficient than the four-council one currently proposed. It is not known at what scale size begins to detract from efficiency but such a council would still be smaller than Hertfordshire, Hampshire, Surrey and Kent for example. **(ACRA Note: Therein may be found the bones of an overall strategic plan under which the proposed new Unitary is formed and the remaining five councils are then subsequently merged in. Such an incremental plan would go a long way to de-risking the overall project, would over time remove the Dorset Rump problem and would meet Whitehall's requirements).**

Jim Biggin

November 2015

Classification: PROTECT