

SUMMARY OF ONE ITEM FROM CHRISTCHURCH CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION MEETING, 9 November 2015

[Words in italics are my comments on what I heard at the meeting]

The meeting was conducted by Nigel Cook, Chairman of CCA. The main item on the Agenda was a discussion over the future governance of Christchurch.

1. The discussion was opened by Cllr. Ray Nottage, Leader of Christchurch Borough Council. He said that the proposed changes were driven by the need to operate more efficiently to provide the services required by residents and that central government policies meant that things had to change. The Government is determined to move power and responsibility out, to be more 'local', but is not dictating how this should be achieved; it has however, indicated that 'devolution money' will be given to groupings of authorities, not to individual councils.

Ray then went on to outline the scheme for a Combined Authority of all 9 Dorset Councils (all 8 districts plus Dorset County Council). This CA will be a legal entity, to address strategic issues such as transport and economic growth. The individual councils will be represented on the CA by their Council Leaders, who will each have an equal vote; a tenth member of the CA will be the Chairman of Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership, but he/she will have no voting powers. Christchurch Borough Council has approved this body in principle, and work, which has been funded thus far by a grant of £755k from central government, will continue, the aim being to start operations in 2016. The CA will in itself not change the structure of our Council.

Moving on to consideration of a Unitary Authority comprising Bournemouth, Christchurch, E. Dorset & Poole, Ray said that leaders of these Councils were clear that setting up the strategic CA was not sufficient to ensure the future viability of local councils, so that they had got together to explore options, of which a 4-area UA seems most promising *[Dorset CC appears to favour a Unitary Authority across the whole of Dorset, but this has had relatively little publicity]*. This idea, which would mean radical change to existing Councils, has yet to be tested for viability; a comprehensive business plan is needed, to be put to the individual councils.

2. Cllr. Colin Bungey, Leader of the Opposition on Christchurch Borough Council, responded by saying that he accepted that change was inevitable and that he supported in principle the creation of the strategic Combined Authority. He is less clear about the ideas for a Unitary Authority for SE Dorset, which will have huge implications for Christchurch residents and of which he has very little knowledge, along with many other Councillors. Residents are very suspicious of the motives of other councils; access to the business opportunities created by the airport and the lack of land in Bournemouth for new housing are two matters which might cause problems in any merger. Another concern is the apparent perilous financial situation of both Bournemouth and Poole. Also, residents worry that 1000 years of Christchurch's history and heritage will be swallowed up if these proposals to come to fruition. Colin stressed the need for full scrutiny by CBC, public consultation and possibly a referendum before any merger is implemented; the suggested timescales seem very tight.

3. After giving an opportunity for others to add to what had been said, Nigel moved the meeting into a discussion session; I have attempted to summarise the main points below:

- There remained some confusion over the two proposed authorities' functions. Ray re-stated the facts, suggesting that the titles be ignored *[Perhaps the combined authority could be called the DORSET STRATEGIC AUTHORITY or the DORSET STRATEGIC BOARD to reduce confusion?]*.
- The strategic combined authority is a legal entity aimed at co-ordinating policies across the County and attracting inward investment. Its establishment will not preclude any reorganisation of constituent councils (but changes may well affect the governance and voting rights within the CA).
- All Councils have been considering the CA proposals and although some have expressed reservations, none has indicated that they will NOT take part. Recent Govt. 'rule changes' allow a CA to be set up without all eligible parties joining. *[I don't believe in practice that it would make sense for a strategic authority to*

attempt to implement policies which impact geographically or administratively on areas where there was no representative taking part in discussions about those policies].

- Ray said that it was his duty as Leader of the Council to explore ways of continuing to provide services to residents in an efficient way; his mandate came from the election of a Conservative majority on Christchurch Council.
- Christchurch BC has been 'prudent' with its finances over recent years, resulting in a relatively stable scenario until about 2020; however, after that, the game changes, as the central govt. element of our income, the Revenue Support Grant, will have been reduced to zero.
- The same stability does not apply to Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset CC, all of whom have problems now, with the need to make further substantial savings.
- CBC is talking to many parties about shared services, including New Forest District Council.
- The big financial item affecting any merger will be social services, which are currently handled by Dorset CC but which would devolve to any new UA (as is currently the case for Bournemouth and Poole).
- Ray is determined to keep the committee system of governance, rather than the cabinet system used in other councils.
- Christchurch Conservatives will meet (14 November?) to consider the merger proposals and there will be a seminar on the subject before Christmas.
- The next moves will be for CBC committees to consider any proposed merger in principle, allocate resources to produce a business plan and test its viability, consult residents, then move to adopt the final agreed form of governance *[The joint working between Christchurch and E. Dorset, started about 4 years ago, is not yet complete; the suggested timescales for the immensely more complex merger seem almost impossible, unless pressure from govt. on the provision of funding forces a hasty cobbling together, which could be disastrous for Christchurch].*
- Christchurch will continue to have a Council, come what may, although it was conceded that there will be significant changes to it if a merged Unitary Council is created *[Inevitably Christchurch Council's range of powers and responsibilities would be reduced].*

Mike Collard, Alliance of Christchurch Residents' Associations