

ACRA

Alliance of Christchurch Residents Associations

Minutes of the meeting on **Tuesday 13th September 2016 at 7.30pm**

1. **Present:** Sue Bungey (Christchurch Citizens); John White (Christchurch Citizens); Debbie Stephens (SAMRA); Emma Rickard (Somerford and Grange); Chris Hopkins (Somerford and Grange); Jim Biggin (West Christchurch – Secretary); David Barnett (WCRA); Sam Bragg (Winkton);
2. **Apologies for absence:** Friars Cliff; Highcliffe
3. **Acceptance of Minutes:** the minutes of June 2016 were accepted
4. **Treasurer's Report:** ACRA funds amount to £102.43. Jim Biggin confirmed he saw no need to visit DCC in Dorchester for the moment
5. **ACRA Blog:** Jim Biggin confirmed that SAMRA had now paid WCRA £23 towards the blog but that Friars Cliff had refused. He indicated that the blog has been discontinued and that some lessons had been learned. Chris Hopkins indicated that she too viewed this type of communication as a valuable future tool. She is in touch with somebody who uses it extensively and will put them in touch with us
6. **Meeting with Martyn Underhill, Dorset PCC:** Jim Biggin confirmed that he had contacted Martyn Underhill who had declined to meet ACRA on the basis that he was too busy seeing other people. This combined with his recent ill-judged foray into the public domain to make rather foolish remarks about the proposed reorganisation of Local Authorities in Dorset combined with the lack of progress on making proper use of Dorset Alert left delegates with a rather poor view of the Dorset PCC.
7. **Reinstatement of waste bins on the Quomps:** the replacement of these bins was greeted with universal satisfaction.
8. **Highcliffe Beach Huts:** the withdrawal of this scheme was welcomed by all. It was noted that CBC were not to be sued by their contractor for premature termination of the contract.
9. **Local Government Reorganisation – Public Consultation**
 - 9.1. Christchurch Citizens: At a very well attended CCA meeting on 5th September 2016 at Druitt Hall the options for the proposed reorganisation of Christchurch and eight other Councils in Dorset were discussed, debated and voted upon.
 - 9.2. Members were very unhappy with the content of both the *Reshaping Your Councils* and the *Consultation Questionnaire* which they considered to be severely flawed. It was resolved to write to The Secretary of State The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, Christopher Chope MP, Leader of DCC Cllr Robert Gould, Leader of CBC Cllr Ray Nottage and CBC CEO David McIntosh expressing their disquiet. So far only Cllr Robert Gould has replied. All replies will be conveyed to CCA members at their next meeting on Monday 3rd October 2016.

- 9.3.** The meeting also voted unanimously in favour of Christchurch and the other eight Councils remaining independent but working closer together to make further savings as has already been achieved by CBC and EDDC
- 9.4.** It was also suggested by members that perhaps a protest march could be organised to highlight concerns about the proposals and possibly a petition could be organised
- 9.5.** SAMRA have circulated their members with the correct Dorset-for-you website with the dates of the DCC Roadshows and will be holding a public meeting on 30th September 2016. They do not see any real cost effective alternative to the formation of two new unitary authorities
- 9.6.** Somerford and Grange are to hold a public meeting on 24th September 2016. They will be going door-to-door to talk to residents. They are also in favour of leaving the nine existing councils as they are and looking to make cost savings by greater cooperation between councils
- 9.7.** WCRA have been sending e-newsletters on this topic to over 1,500 local people since October 2015. They have just sent a special e-newsletter dealing with the planned reorganisation and have hand delivered nearly 800 printed newsletters to their members who do not use e-mail.
- 9.8.** They have no major issues with the official guide notes *Reshaping Your Councils* or the *Consultation Questionnaire*.
- 9.9.** They see leaving the nine existing councils as they are and looking to make cost savings by greater cooperation between councils as unrealistic given the size of savings that are required across Dorset. They see no real cost effective alternative to the formation of two new unitary authorities. They believe urban Christchurch Council tax payers will be financially better off if Christchurch, Bournemouth and Poole merge to form a new unitary rather than Christchurch joining with rural Dorset.
- 9.10.** They have been speaking to some residents about this issue whilst collecting annual subscriptions.
- 9.11.** Winkton are still undecided but leaning in preference to leaving the nine existing councils in situ.
- 9.12.** They have e-mailed their members information to date on Roadshows & Public Meetings.
- 9.13.** Printed material is being produced to be delivered to all residents on Thursday 15th September 2016 updating all on the situation. An additional page will be sent out with an amended version of the WCRA Newsletter template.

10. Local Government Reorganisation - Financial Analysis: David Barnett (WCRA) and Jim Biggin (WCRA) drew special attention to four problem areas within the Local Partnership document dated 24th August 2016

- 10.1.** There is no full list of assumptions made with explanations – even simple assumptions such as the inflation rate are missing. This omission is unusual, regrettable and inevitably raises questions as to why?
- 10.2.** The assumption added as an apparent afterthought as a footnote to page 11 is thought to be extremely unsatisfactory. In summary the assumption made is that during the creation of the new unitary authorities surplus space will be disposed of with no refurbishment costs incurred for a price greater than the book price of the property. That alone appears unrealistic. In addition, the paper does not mention that a due diligence examination of such property has occurred, which is quite contrary to prudent practice and potentially leaves Council Tax payers of Authority A having to fund part of a shortfall when a property owned by Authority B is sold at a capital loss
- 10.3.** The LP paper appears to assume that Council Officers will simultaneously (a) keep the business ticking over (b) work to reduce the projected funding deficits present in most Dorset Councils and (c) work to plan and effect a merger with other councils (d) in the space of 3 years 2017-2020. This appears unrealistic
- 10.4.** The increase in actuarial strain on the Staff Pension Fund as a result of early retirements is mentioned but not explored. As the schemes are final salary based so that the Council Tax payer is the funder of last resort and the funds are currently projecting actuarial deficits this is regarded as a serious shortcoming in the report

11. Local Government Reorganisation - Projected Funding Deficits in Dorset Councils: Christchurch Citizens and Somerford and Grange raised the issue of projected funding deficits. They recalled that last December 2015 Jim Biggin and David Barnett had been concerned at the size of these projected debts in Bournemouth and Poole and wondered if that concern was still felt. Jim Biggin replied that yes, they were still a concern but since December they have learned much more about the finances of the rural Councils, who are also in funding difficulties (some of a potentially critical nature, David Barnett confirmed). They now saw all of these Councils as being in much the same boat

12. Local Government Reorganisation – withdrawal of Government Funding: at the end of an interesting and lively debate Jim Biggin urged delegates as they progressed matters through their organisations to please not forget that the withdrawal of Revenue Support Grant and the requirement to make a future positive contribution to The Treasury has placed Local Authorities in an extremely difficult position. Bristol have just announced a £29 million budget shortfall and Lancashire a £40 million shortfall in 2016-17 requiring a transfer from reserves into current account – just as DCC has done for the last two years.

13. The Noisy Lobster: SAMRA drew attention to this topic to be debated at the next CBC Planning Committee Meeting at 6pm Thursday 15th September

14. Next Meeting : Tuesday 13th December 2016 at the Hall on the Hill, West Christchurch at 7.30pm.

Jim Biggin, Secretary

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