

Christchurch – Structure, Functions and Workings of Local Government

This paper was prepared by Colin Dewsnap, a retired Chief Executive Officer of CBC

History - Civic

Christchurch is steeped in civic history; it was an ancient borough, having been granted a charter by King Alfred but was then bequeathed by Henry 1st to his cousin Richard de Redvers about 1100. This was when the town was called Twynham.

The first Mayor was John Leshelm in 1297 and a record of all mayors up to the present day decorates a whole wall in the Council Chamber. Members are expected to be robed on all civic occasions, including Mayor-making each year.

The town has 2 maces, the first was donated in 1662 (an earlier one having been lost during the Civil War) and the second in 1969 was donated by the old MEXE, which establishment played so vital a part in developing the Bailey Bridge in WW11 (hence the replica that stands on the Pizza Hut roundabout on Barrack Road today).

The town's Coat of Arms, a splendid design redolent with the historic features of the town was granted in 1970. The Mayor's chain was donated in 1898 by the then Mayor, Councillor William Tucker in memory of his family's 100 years connection with Christchurch

History – Structure & functions

The institution of local government goes as far back as that of national government, i.e. to the Middle Ages, and was based on the paradigm of a separation between town and country. There has never been a written constitution in this country so its structure and functions have grown haphazardly over generations. Over the past 40 years, its structure has changed substantially, and more recently its functions have been seriously eroded.

Present Structure (see also structure chart on website)

The structure covering England is very complicated but in Dorset consists of

1. A county council (DCC)
2. 6 district councils – CBC, East, North & West Dorset, Purbeck, Weymouth
3. 190 town councils, parish councils and parish meetings (note, local government parishes are distinct from church parishes)
4. 2 unitary councils, Bournemouth and Poole that provide all the services in their areas of the three levels listed above (except Police and Fire which cover the whole of the county)

Christchurch Statistics	population	area
	48,400	20 sq miles (52 Sq Km)
As a proportion of Dorset	6.4%	1.95%

For comparison with all other areas in Dorset and with other District Councils in England, please see the next section.

Comparative Statistics on District Council Sizes

Dorset	Population	Area (sq. miles)	Density per sq. ml
Bournemouth	177,700	18	10,527
East Dorset	87,900	137	643
North Dorset	69,900	236	296
Poole	149,000	25	5,948
Purbeck*	45,000	156	288
West Dorset	100,000	418	239
Weymouth	65,000	16	4,037
Christchurch*	48,400	20	2,482
Dorset Overall	742,900	1025	725
Rutland*	37,600	147	255
West Somerset*	34,600	281	123

*You will see that there are only 3 Districts with smaller populations than Christchurch, Purbeck, Rutland and West Somerset but they have significantly larger areas and correspondingly lower densities. **Out of 326 districts in England therefore, Christchurch has the distinction of being the smallest urban district council in the country**

Council Administration

The Council is made up of:

11 Electoral Wards, 9 of which elect 2 members and 2 of which elect 3 members making 24 elected members (Councillors) including the Mayor (Chair of the Council) and a Deputy (which are annual ceremonial appointments)

These Wards comprise: St Catherine's, Jumpers, Portfield, Town Centre, Purewell and Stanpit, Grange, Burton, Highcliffe, North Highcliffe & Walkford (all 2 members), Mudeford & Friars Cliff, and West Highcliffe (3 members each)

Areas of responsibility are headed by 7 members known as Portfolio Holders

Business is conducted through 5 standing committees

The 24 elected members are allocated to committees by ballot, in practice this is determined by the majority political party – currently The Conservative Party

The vast majority of decisions are made by the committees under specific delegated authority from the full Council. Only decisions involving new policy or significantly varying existing policy are decided by the full Council. However, any decision of any standing committee can be referred to full council by 3 elected members.

Functions

Dorset County Council –

Childrens' services
Highways
Public Transport
Planning
Countryside and Heritage
Social Care (children and adult)
Adult learning
Libraries
Museums and the Arts
Archives
Registrars
Trading Standards
Emergency Planning
Refuse Disposal
Elections
Economic Development
Finance
Personnel Services
(Staff and pensioners)

Dorset Police Authority

Policing

Dorset Fire Authority

Fire and Rescue

Christchurch Borough -

Economic development
Allotments
Anti-social behavior abatement
Beaches and Beach Huts
Democratic services, inc. the Mayoralty
Benefits (housing and council tax)
Building conservation
Building control
Council tax and business rates
Car park management, on-street and off-street parking and penalty charges
Environmental health and noise Nuisance
Cemetery
Information Centre – local & visitors
Coast protection
Planning
Composting
Conservation
Countryside services & Nature Reserves
Refuse collection
Recycling
Elections
Markets
Harbour and moorings
Highcliffe Castle
Housing
Listed buildings
Land charges
Parks and Gardens
Finance, Personnel and administration

Summary

A common complaint is “what do we get for our council tax apart from having the bins collected?” The answer is, as can be seen in the previous section, a great deal.

It is therefore most disappointing that this attitude prevails when local authorities provide a vast amount of information as to the services they provide and what they cost.

Added to this is the power struggle, underpinned by the tsunami-like force of party politics, that has developed in central government to exert more control over local government, Furthermore, the civil service never has had any conception of the historic importance of local government and its ability in terms of service delivery.

It is therefore not surprising that there has been a consistent move to reduce powers, functions and status from local government, which has come to a head with the present government.

This situation is actually nothing short of a travesty of justice. In any democracy, local government is one of the pillars of a civilised society. It adds to a sense of wellbeing and constitutes a focus on where we feel we belong, where our roots are. Also, in wider terms, it is a good antidote to the insidious trend of globalization. Surely therefore it is time local government fought back, for the good of democracy and for the “Common Good”. Surely it is time for a written Constitution so that all that is good about local government can be restored and preserved for all time.

As for Christchurch, its unique asset of being the smallest, urban district means that we can develop, both that degree of community spirit that is associated with village life and, at the same time, enjoy the higher public service provision that goes with urban living.

Many years ago I had the privilege of introducing the tag-line – “Christchurch, where time is pleasant”, we even made a video on this theme (which I still have). Maybe in this world of uncertainty and disillusionment this is what it could become for all our residents, young, old and those in-between. We could become an inspiration to the rest of the country in communal living.

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