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**Residents WILL get their say on merger as Councillors warn Christchurch would be 'oppressed minority' in super council**

**15 June 2016**

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CHRISTCHURCH would be "an oppressed minority" if it merged with Bournemouth, an extraordinary meeting of the full council was told. And councillors finally agreed unanimously to ask local residents what they think, nine months after the idea first emerged. Five councillors forced the issue to a debate for the first time on a possible union with Bournemouth and Poole, creating a single tier, all-purpose authority.

Cllr David Jones said the council needed to discuss the whole issue "openly and transparently. We have had very little chance so far to give our input. "It is sobering to think we could be meeting for the last time in 30 months. We are running out of time and we want the fullest possible consultation. We need to work out if this is in the interests of the ancient borough and how we can keep Christchurch special." He said there were only two real options, a shire unitary or a greater Bournemouth. "We would be a very oppressed minority in that situation."

The idea of a super council, first revealed by the Echo last summer, has been prompted by the government's devolution agenda, the need for economic growth and increasing financial pressures on all councils. But some councillors fear Christchurch would be swallowed up by Bournemouth and lose its identity. Cllr [Lesley Dedman](http://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/search/?search=Lesley+Dedman&topic_id=3681) told the meeting: "We are here to fight for the ancient borough. If we let our heritage go, on our heads be it. We have a huge amount to protect, including the mayoralty." Independent Cllr Colin Bungey said local residents' groups warned of "a wringing of hands" if Christchurch merged with Bournemouth.

Council Leader Ray Nottage laughed and Cllr Bungey told him: "You may well laugh but these are your voters." He said Bournemouth has a trading debt of £96m and Poole £86m not including pension deficits, while Christchurch was financially sound. "We do not know what is going on and that is the point of this meeting. Residents think there is too much secrecy in this council. Some even want to bring a vote of no confidence against the entire council."

Cllr Denise Jones said Christchurch could lose control of its planning which would have devastating consequences. "This is going to change Christchurch forever." Cllr Andy Barfield said Cllr Jones' speech was one of fear not facts. There were plenty of other options including working with [New Forest District Council](http://www.nfdc.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1&CFID=3829726&CFTOKEN=90489358).

Council leader Cllr Ray Nottage who has led negotiations with Bournemouth and Poole leaders said Christchurch would be a very reluctant bride "dragged to the altar." He added: "I give one promise and that is whatever we do we will represent the interests of all the residents not just the council. No deal has been done with anyone as far as I know."

Christchurch could end up with just 11 councillors and Bournemouth 59 in a new look authority. "If anyone thinks we can outvote Bournemouth, then I'll have a couple of pints of whatever they are on," said Cllr Jones, summing up the debate. "We will do everything in our power to keep Christchurch special."

Councillors agreed that any changes should result in better service delivery, that residents and businesses should now be consulted and the council be regularly updated on any developments.