

How will a combined authority fit with discussions on unitary and devolution?

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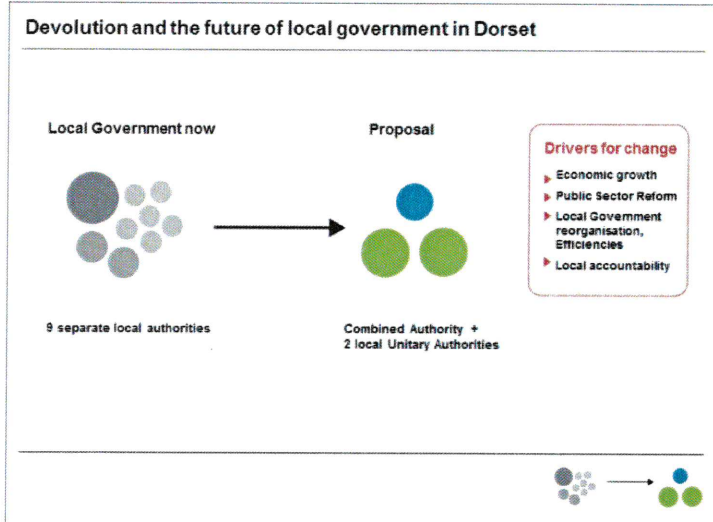
A Dorset Combined Authority would demonstrate our partnership approach and be a strong basis for us to request more responsibilities & powers from Government.

Combined authorities combine specific functions of two or more local authorities. The councils remain separate but they pool decision-making over what services they want to combine, acting as one strong and accountable body representing and responsible for the area. It is not yet decided what might happen in relation to unitary councils in Dorset but it is unlikely that there would be only one unitary council that replaced all the existing nine councils.

In terms of devolution, Government has made it clear that regional governance arrangements must change if they are to be successful in securing new powers and responsibilities. This proposed model for Dorset would offer this.

Under the new Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, combined authorities have the ability to take on much greater responsibilities than were previously available to them under the old legislation. Work on the establishment of a Combined Authority in Dorset began under the previous legislation as such is currently focussed upon strategic economic development, regeneration and strategic transport. However, the establishment of a Dorset Combined Authority would provide a strong basis on which to request additional powers and responsibilities and allow us to demonstrate our partnership approach. This has been seen with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the approach can be incremental, developing and growing over time.


This image shows how the local government landscape could change in Dorset. On the left, the current situation with nine councils. On the right, the proposed combined authority, which would sit with the outcome of the unitary debate currently happening in Dorset.



Devolution for Dorset?

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Dorset councils have submitted a 'statement of intent' to the Government declaring an interest in a potential devolution deal of the types seen in Cornwall and Manchester.


On 11 September the Prime Minister announced the most radical shake up of local governance in a generation  after 38 "landmark" devolution proposals from cities, towns and counties - including one from Dorset - were submitted to the government.

Earlier this summer the Chancellor asked areas to put forward proposals to follow in the footsteps of Greater Manchester's ground-breaking devolution deal with government last year. The Treasury initially invited only city regions that wanted to agree a devolution deal in return for a directly elected mayor to submit a case by the deadline of 4 September. However, councils from all over the country have been so keen to register an interest, in the hope of obtaining more power and resource from central government, that bids have been made from the length and breadth of the country.


Dorset's approach is based on three themes - people, places and prosperity - and each one is illustrated with an example of how additional powers or resource from government would allow Dorset to design its own solutions to local circumstances. Areas must have a unitary government or a combined authority in place in order to receive devolved powers and funding from government, so Dorset's councils are also looking to create a for Dorset.

Debbie Ward, Chief Executive of Dorset County Council said 'we were approached by government in mid August and encouraged to submit an expression of interest by the deadline of 4 September, even though we clearly don't meet the original criteria of being a city region! We very much welcome the opportunity to access more resource from government and more power over local services. We have had to do this in a matter of weeks and we are acutely aware of the need to engage with partners and residents to make sure we get the best deal for Dorset. Significant work and wider discussions will be essential.

We are also aware that although more money may be available, it will inevitably come with responsibilities and targets, many of which may be new to local authorities. These are un-chartered waters and we must ensure that any new function is accompanied by adequate new resources.'

Successful future deals from the proposals announced today will be supported through the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill  currently passing through Parliament.

The Bill puts in place the legal framework across the country that will make it simpler for devolving more powers to more places.

Councils are awaiting feedback from the government on their Dorset Devolution Statement of Intent 2015 (pdf, 3Mb)  and further information will be posted here.