

# Residents will get a say on council merger proposals

## Fears Christchurch will be 'swallowed up' by neighbours

BY MICHELLE RAY

THE leader of Christchurch council has promised no deal will be done over a possible future merger with Bournemouth and Poole until local people have been consulted, amid fears the borough could be "swallowed up" by the larger towns.

Coun. Ray Nottage made the pledge at a full meeting of the council where members heard the criteria that should be taken into account — including growing the economy, housing provision, and managing the environment — when assessing any potential change to the current structure.

In November 2015, prompted by the government's devolution agenda, Christchurch agreed to submit a case for a combined authority — a single tier, all-purpose authority with Bournemouth and Poole — to address the need for economic growth and increasing financial pressures on councils.

Subsequent allegations from councillors and residents were made of deals being done between leaders behind closed doors, with no public consultation. So five members — councillors Denise Jones, Lesley Dedman, Janet Abbott, David Jones and Peter Hall — called for Tuesday's ex-

traordinary meeting so the issue could be discussed in public.

Coun. David Jones said the council needed to talk openly and transparently.

"We have had very little chance so far to give our input," he said. "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."

He continued: "We need to work out if this is in the interests of the ancient borough and how we can keep Christchurch special."

Coun. Jones added he feared the town would be "a very oppressed minority" in a combined authority, with potentially just 11 members to Bournemouth's 59.

Independent Coun. Colin Bungey said local residents' groups, which, combined, comprised over 10,000 homes forming the Alliance of Christchurch Residents Associations, had warned of "a wringing of hands and a gnashing of teeth" if a merger went ahead.

Coun. Nottage laughed and Coun. Bungey responded: "You may well laugh but these are your voters."

He said Bournemouth had a trading debt of £96m and Poole £86m, not including pension deficits, while Christchurch was financially sound.

"Would Christchurch have to contribute towards that?" asked Coun. Bungey. "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 and there is a lack of trust. Some even want to bring a vote of no confidence against the council, that is the strength of feeling about this."

Some councillors expressed fears that Christchurch would be swallowed up by Bournemouth and lose its identity.

Coun. Dedman said: "We are here to fight for the ancient borough. We have an embarrassment of heritage riches, including Highcliff Castle and The Priory. If we let that go, on our heads be it."

"We have a huge amount to protect, including the mayoralty."

Coun. Denise Jones said the decision would "change Christchurch forever" and worried it could lead to the borough losing control of its planning and development decisions.

But Coun. Andy Barfield said Coun. David Jones' speech was based on fear not facts, and that there were other options for the future including working with New Forest District Council.

A report to members by David McIntosh, chief executive of the Christchurch and East Dorset Partnership, said: "The council is proud of the history of the borough and the democratic representation that dates back to 1297. There is concern that this identity would be diluted if the current council became part of a larger one."

"Whatever future arrangements may transpire, the borough of Christchurch would retain its rec-

ognised identity as it is now. The features that local people love and visitors come to see, clearly will remain part of the Christchurch area."

It added: "The mayoralty is considered by some to be an important and historic local tradition that highlights the sense of local identity. The Department for Communities and Local Government recognises the importance of a mayoral figurehead both at a strategic level as well as at a local level."

Coun. Nottage said: "We must look forward with a great deal of opportunity. The consultation starts in the summer and is to be intense and co-operative with people."

"I give you my promise that whatever we do we will represent the people and residents of Christchurch to have an aspiration benefit to them more than just the benefit to the council."

"No deal has been done with anyone as far as I know."

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

Public consultation will take place in August and September. After the councils have considered the findings, a report will be drawn up and submitted to the Secretary of State by May 2017.