Future Dorset plan to cut Dorset's councils to two gets Secretary of State's approval

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Bottom of Form

PLANS to divide Dorset between two unitary councils and dissolve existing authorities have been given the nod by the Government.

County officials have been awaiting a decision on the Future Dorset proposal since February, when it was originally submitted to Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Sajid Javid.

However events including the General Election in June delayed its consideration.

Mr Javid has indicated he is 'minded to' approve the proposal, although there will be a period of consultation until a final decision is made on January 8.

Mr Javid said: “I’ve always been clear that any change to council structures should be led by local councils as well as supported by local residents.

“I am satisfied that the proposals submitted are likely to improve local government, improve services and save local taxpayers money.

“So I am minded to support these plans at this stage, though further steps are needed to secure local consent, and I would urge all residents to take a look before a final decision is made.”

In a written statement to the Commons he said: "I understand that all the councils in the area are already working together in joint implementation committees.

"However, further steps are needed to secure local consent, and I hope this announcement will facilitate the necessary discussions to conclude this."

Future Dorset will see Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole boroughs combined under one new unitary authority, with the rest of the county combined under a second unitary authority.

The plans have proven controversial, and were rejected by councillors in Christchurch, East Dorset and Purbeck district councils. However, the Government's final decision could overrule their concerns.

Christchurch MP [**Christopher Chope**](http://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/search/?search=Christopher+Chope&topic_id=6447), a leading campaigner against the proposal, described the decision as "disappointing" and stated that in 2015 the Government promised it would "not abolish any local councils against their will".

Joint committees, mimicking the proposed unitaries, have already been established to prepare the way, with senior officers from Bournemouth and Poole warning that the delayed decision has resulted in time pressure to implement the decision.

The new councils were proposed to be up and running by April 2019.

The leaders of those existing councils which approved the proposal, namely Cllrs John Beesley of Bournemouth, Janet Walton of Poole, Rebecca Knox of Dorset County, Graham Carr-Jones of North Dorset, Anthony Alford of West Dorset and Jeff Cant of Weymouth and Portland, have issued a joint statement. They said:

“We presented overwhelmingly strong evidence to the Secretary of State – evidence of public support, of backing by Dorset’s business community and voluntary sector, and of immense benefits for the whole county. Our case for change showed that our plans will drive forward the economic prosperity of the county, helping people achieve a better quality of life."

They said the two larger councils would have more national influence and be better able to secure funding for infrastructure, such as roads and housing, attracting businesses to the area.

“Two councils will be more efficient, save money and protect public services.  They can begin to secure a sustainable future for the public services that people value and need, including and in particular, essential social care for our growing older population.

Replacing Dorset’s nine councils with two new ones - structured around the established urban and rural geography of the county – will bring a strong and prosperous future Dorset, with two councils better able to work together in the best interests of Dorset’s residents and the long-term success of the county."

Mr Chope said: "It is disappointing that after nine months of indecision the Secretary of State says he is minded to abolish Christchurch, East Dorset and Purbeck councils against their will.

"His decision to invite alternatives and modifications is, however, most welcome and encouraging. Parliament was promised in December 2015 by the Government that it would not abolish any local councils against their will.

"By expressing a possible willingness to renege on that promise, the Secretary of State is potentially on a collision course with democracy in Dorset. It is my sincere hope that such an outcome can be avoided.

"I was re-elected in June, with a record 70 per cent of the vote, on a strong platform to keep Christchurch and East Dorset sovereign and independent.

"True to that mandate I shall devote my energies over the next two months to promoting alternative solutions which work with the grain of public opinion and help bring about agreement among all involved in the best interests of those whom we serve."

Cllr Gary Suttle, leader of [**Purbeck District Council**](http://www.purbeck-dc.gov.uk/), said: “In January 2017 Purbeck District Council voted against the proposal and this position has not changed.

"Following today’s announcement by the Secretary of State, we will consider the implications for our residents and may make further representations during the consultation period."

Another joint statement has been issued by the county's MPs, excluding Mr Chope.

The others, Conor Burns, [**Richard Drax**](http://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/search/?search=Drax+Estate&topic_id=6452), Tobias Ellwood, Simon Hoare, Sir Oliver Letwin, Sir Robert Syms and Michael Tomlinson, said: "As Dorset Members of Parliament we warmly welcome the announcement made by the Secretary of State to support the reform of Dorset local government.

"The announcement paves the way for significant reorganisation leading to major cost savings, thereby allowing the delivery of quality public services which our constituents require.

"We will continue to work with our councils and communities to ensure the very best deal for Dorset.

"Today represents major progress and puts Dorset in the vanguard of public sector reform."