

DAILY ECHO

It's official: Minister approves plans to merge Dorset councils into two

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THE Government has approved plans to cut the number of councils in Dorset from nine to two. The Future Dorset/Local Government Reorganisation proposal, also referred to as the 'super council' plan, was submitted to the then-Department of Communities and Local Government in February last year, having been approved by six of the county's authorities.

Now, a year later, Communities Secretary Sajid Javid has announced via a written statement to the House of Commons his intention to implement the proposal. He said: "I am satisfied that these new councils are likely to improve local government and service delivery in their areas, generating savings, increasing financial resilience, facilitating a more strategic and holistic approach to planning and housing challenges, and sustaining good local services. I am also satisfied that across Dorset as a whole there is a good deal of local support for these new councils, and that the area of each council is a credible geography."

It will see Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole councils abolished and replaced with a new unitary council covering the conurbation area, potentially with some wider boundary changes in due course. Dorset County Council and the districts of East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland would be abolished and replaced with a second unitary council. Christchurch, East Dorset and Purbeck councils initially rejected the plan, but the latter two authorities have since switched their position.

The minister's claim that there is a "good deal of local support" is likely to prove controversial in Christchurch, where a local referendum held before Christmas found 84 per cent of residents were opposed to the scheme.

Here is the full statement made today by Sajid Javid:

My Rt Hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid) has today made the following Written Ministerial Statement.

On 7 November I told the House that I was minded to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, the locally-led proposal I had received for improving local government in Dorset, and I invited representations before I took my final decision.

Having carefully considered all the representations I have received and all the relevant information available to me, I am today announcing that I have decided to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, that locally-led proposal to replace the existing nine councils across Dorset – two small unitary councils of Bournemouth and Poole and the two tier structure of Dorset County Council and the district councils of Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset, and Weymouth & Portland by two new councils.

These new councils are a single unitary council for the areas of Bournemouth, Poole, and that part of the county of Dorset currently comprising the Borough of Christchurch, and a single unitary council for the rest of the current county area.

I am satisfied that these new councils are likely to improve local government and service delivery in their areas, generating savings, increasing financial resilience, facilitating a more strategic and holistic approach to planning and housing challenges, and sustaining good local services. I am also satisfied that across Dorset as a whole there is a good deal of local support for these new councils, and that the area of each council is a credible geography.

In my statement of 7 November I noted that the nine councils were already working together in joint committees on planning possible implementation of the proposal, and that further steps were needed to secure local consent. I am clear that further steps have been taken, and that the nine councils are continuing to work constructively together on planning implementation.

I now intend to prepare and lay before Parliament drafts of the necessary secondary legislation to give effect to my decision. My intention is that if Parliament approves this legislation the new councils will be established on 1 April 2019 with the first elections to the councils held on 2 May 2019. I also now intend to make and lay before Parliament an Order to delay for one year, as requested by the Borough Council, the May 2018 local elections in Weymouth & Portland so as to avoid members being elected for only one year if Parliament approves the legislation establishing the new councils.

Finally, in my 7 November statement I said that once I had made my final decision on the Dorset proposal, I would decide whether to implement, subject to Parliamentary approval, Dorset councils' proposal for a combined authority. As a first step I intend now to ask the leaders of the Dorset councils how they would like to proceed with their combined authority proposal in the light of my decision on the proposal.