

CHRISTCHURCH BOROUGH COUNCIL

Exploring Future Local Government Options –

**THE INTANGIBLE COSTS
AND BENEFITS OF A
SOUTH-EAST DORSET
UNITARY AUTHORITY
(GREATER BOURNEMOUTH COUNCIL)**

Memorandum

***Presented to
Scrutiny and Policy
Review Committee
by***

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List of Abbreviations

CBC	Christchurch Borough Council
GBC	The putative “Greater Bournemouth Council” – <i>aka South East Dorset Unitary Authority</i>
SPRC	Scrutiny and Policy Review Committee, Christchurch Borough Council
SVPP	Stour Valley and Poole Partnership

Executive summary

PURPOSE	To consider the intangible (non-financial) costs and benefits of the proposed South-East Dorset Unitary Council
FACTORS	<p>The following factors are considered;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the strategic case for such an authority as set out in the paper to Scrutiny and Policy Review Committee, Delivery of Local Government Services to Christchurch residents Provision and Protection of a Sense of Place Local Control by Local People?
Strategic Case	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Economies of scale</i> – There will potentially be advantages for the Borough in this area, but there are also diseconomies of scale which must be considered. On balance, this might be considered to support a case for a GBC <i>Improving links with and the climate for business</i> – again, there are potential advantages for the Borough but it is not necessarily the case that a GBC would promote Christchurch at the expense of Bournemouth. On balance, this is probably, but by no means certainly, supportive. <i>More effective, integrated and consistent leadership across a wider area</i>; This may be taken to mean that authorised decision makers have the ability to make necessary decisions in a more timely manner with minimal constraints. While this might indeed speed the process of decision making and make those decisions have effect more quickly this says nothing about the quality of the decision making. It could be argued that more hasty and less considered decisions are likely to be of poorer quality than those where the policy behind the decisions has been the object of comprehensive scrutiny before introduction. While there are therefore possible advantages there are also potential disbenefits and this factor must be considered neutral. <i>Improved external influence</i> – a largely neutral factor
Delivery of Services	<p>Suggested to be a crucial and definitive factor.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Education</i> – a neutral factor given Government policy. <i>Finance</i> - Some potential benefits on the grounds of economies of scale but also potential disbenefits in that Christchurch would lose the ability to set its own financial priorities and would also have to bear a larger share of capital costs and a share of the debt of Bournemouth and Poole. On balance, potentially considerably harmful. <i>Highways</i> – there are potential benefits but also grounds for doubting that these benefits would materialise. Assessed as a neutral factor. <i>Housing</i> – In terms of loss of control over housing policy, very definitely a major disadvantage. <i>Planning</i> – Considerable potential benefits in terms of economies of scale,

	<p>greater resilience and flexibility, but outweighed by loss of control over planning policy. On balance, a major disadvantage.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Social Services – As the Borough is not a Social Services authority, on balance a neutral factor.</i> • <i>Waste – As it is assumed that the DWP would continue, a neutral factor.</i>
Sense of Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For many reasons, a sense of place is a huge factor in defining a town as somewhere where people want to live. • As long ago as 1969 it was accepted that in smaller towns people tend to associate the home area with the town and the smaller the town the more often they did so. Christchurch is a small town compared to Bournemouth and Poole: it could be argued that merger would guarantee loss of identity. • As one resident stated, someone who has to ask what is special about Christchurch just doesn't get it. It is not the buildings, it is not the public amenities, it is not the open spaces: it is the sum of all these things plus an indefinable "sense of something else". • It is argued that the sense of place which Members will be able to relate to from their own experiences is absent from Tuckton, Southbourne, Winton, or East Howe, to name a few. • It is argued that the sense of place is dependent on people's understanding that they are able to "make a difference" through their local Council. Whether this sense, evident in Christchurch, would survive "unitarisation" is very strongly doubted. <p>For these reasons it is suggested that merger with Bournemouth would be a major, if not devastating, blow to the "Sense of Place" in Christchurch.</p>
Local control by Local People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christchurch would lose control over all the services it now controls as of right. This would include planning policy, development control, housing and finance. • Christchurch Councillors would be in a small minority in the new Greater Bournemouth Council. • Although some services would be controlled more locally (in the geographic sense) Christchurch would have no authority over these services. • There are ways of mitigating this loss of control, but they are all mitigatory factors and of questionable effect. <p>If it is thought desirable that Christchurch people should control as many of the services as may practically be provided and decided at local level, a Greater Bournemouth Council would be, to a greater or lesser degree, disadvantageous to Christchurch.</p>
RECOMMENDATION	That Scrutiny and Policy Review Committee consider this paper and make such recommendations as may be thought appropriate to Council.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. The present leaders of Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch Borough Councils announced in September 2015 that they would like their Councils (together with East Dorset District Council) to merge into a single unitary authority for South-East Dorset. This aroused very considerable concern both among the other Dorset councils and among Christchurch Members.
2. As a result discussions took place and the leaders of all the Dorset councils agreed to commission the Local Government Association to prepare a “Business Case” setting out the financial costs and benefits of such an authority. Initially only three options were to be discussed: a South East Dorset unitary, a unitary council for the whole of geographic Dorset, and the *status quo*. Dorset County Council however at its meeting on 10th March 2016 gave its support in principle to two unitary councils – a Poole and Bournemouth unitary and a “shire unitary” of the remaining authorities.
3. As time has passed not only has it become clear that the creation of a GBC is the desired objective of the leadership of Bournemouth Borough Council (1) but that the time frame for deciding (a) whether a change in the present structure of local government in Dorset is desirable and (b) if so, what should be the preferred form of the new authority or authorities is very short.
4. Many Members believe that intangible considerations, such as responsiveness to consumer requirements, preservation of local identity and “sense of place”, remoteness of government, the ability of elected members effectively to represent their constituents and of constituents to contact their Councillors, the prospects for service delivery, etc. should be accorded as much weight as purely financial matters. It should be noted that Scrutiny and Policy Review Committee called for a wide ranging and thorough consultation with the people of Christchurch about the question of reform of local government but no action has been taken on this recommendation.
5. For this reason therefore in February 2016 a single member item, to discuss a report prepared, as is normal practice, by a Member, was submitted to the officers for inclusion on the agenda for the 1st March meeting. Although initially agreed by the officers the Chief Executive declined to accept this item on the grounds that the request was made out of time.
6. Members were unwilling to accept this and therefore a requisition for a special meeting of the Scrutiny and Policy Resources Committee was submitted on 21st February. Various unfortunate delays were encountered in processing this requisition, and the earliest date for the meeting now appears to be 28 April. It is

very much regretted that these unavoidable delays have prevented earlier discussion of these crucial matters.

7. This paper concentrates on the “intangibles”: it is not intended to be a replacement for the formal Committee report required by Scrutiny and Policy Review Committee but is offered as a contribution to debate on this vital issue for the residents of our Ancient Borough.

B. THE STRATEGIC CASE FOR ONE-TIER AUTHORITIES

1. The strategic advantages (as perceived by the Council’s political and administrative leadership) were clearly set out in the paper presented to Scrutiny and Policy Review Committee on 8 December. [2] Mr Robert Bullard [3] summarises the broad-brush arguments in favour of Unitary Authorities as “Having just one voice for an area should mean stronger leadership, more joined-up services, and clearer representation with other public agencies.”
2. The SPRC Report of 8 December set out a number of claimed “efficiencies.” These might be categorised as the ability to take advantage of the economies of scale, improving links with and the climate for business, more effective, integrated and consistent leadership across a wider area and improved external influence. It is appropriate to examine each of these in some detail.

3. Economies of Scale

- a. The concept of “economies of scale” is familiar to every businessman and indeed is applicable to local government. As an organization grows in size, there are opportunities for specialisation among its workforce, it improves its resilience (in that the illness or resignation of a key worker has less effect if there are others who can carry the burden) employment opportunities for the staff may be more attractive in a larger company, managerial unit costs are less and where three or four small firms are merged they may be considerable opportunities for staff rationalisation. Also, a bigger authority can exercise greater bargaining power in negotiating with suppliers to obtain favourable discount rates, payment periods, etc.
- b. However it has to be noted that there are also diseconomies of scale. A very technical and thorough study of economies and diseconomies of scale in American local government [4] has shown there is an optimal size for efficiency in local government, beyond which diseconomies of scale apply, and that that point is reached at a relatively small size.

- c. Anecdotally there are clear indications that over time bigger authorities tend to pay bigger salaries and the number of high salaried jobs tends to grow, thus negating the expected economies. Mr David Miliband, when Communities Secretary in the last Labour Government, admitted that the costs of formation of a unitary authority were invariably underestimated and the savings invariably over-estimated. Mr Eric Pickles put the matter more plainly in the House [5] in answer to an MP supporting Unitaries:-

The evidence for such gains is mixed and ... [you] provide no evidence to quantify such benefits.

- d. Ronald McQuaid found [6]

After the abolition of the Metropolitan County Councils overall employment rose by around 500 (although with wide differences between job categories) despite claims before abolition that staff levels would fall by up to 7000. ... many apparent capital savings were transfers or redistributions rather than efficiency savings due to abolition (see also Leech, 1990)

On a very small scale, this effect can be seen in Christchurch. the Partnership began with six Heads of Service and two Strategic Directors: there are now three Strategic Directors and five Heads of Service.

- f. Dis-economies of scale also occur in non-monetary terms. *Investopedia* sums this up very appropriately when it states

Finally, as a company grows, it has more communication and bureaucracy issues that interfere with efficiency...

In economic terms an organisation can grow to the point where it becomes sclerotic, resistant to proactive change and unable to react to change induced by external influences. Management becomes fixed in its ways, contact with its consumers becomes ineffective, and (as has been said of the NHS and of schools) the organization becomes something to be operated in the interests of its members, not of its consumers.

- g. In addition the workforce and elected members are not recruited or elected for their private enterprise skills and they may overestimate their ability to compete with the private sector. There is also the economic phenomenon of “crowding out” where government funding for projects displace those from private industry

thereby artificially distorting the market as well as placing business decisions in the hands of non-business men and women.

In summary therefore while there are indeed definite economies of scale of which advantage can be taken there are also corresponding disadvantages which can be severely detrimental to the organisation and / or its customers.

4. Improving links with business

- a. It must be said from the outset that growing the business or non domestic tax base will be a matter of the highest priority of any council in the coming years. It is a Council's duty to try to encourage business already in an area and to attract new businesses to the area.
- b. A Greater Bournemouth Council might well be able to do this more efficiently than the three Borough Councils simply because it can plan for the conurbation as a whole. Businesses moving into an area will seek a skilled workforce, availability of raw materials, easy access to markets, and freedom from unnecessary regulation. A GBC might be able to employ "business opportunity officers" to liase with incoming firms, locate suitable accommodation, encourage cooperation between businesses and e.g. secondary and further education, and generally act as a facilitator.
- c. There has to be, at the moment, an element of competition between the three conurbation authorities to attract desired businesses. There must be costs involved in such competition which could be avoided in a single authority.
- d. There are however certain concerns. The idea of the government (central as well as local) operating as an arm of the business community is not new but the first duty of councillors is to represent their constituents, not intermediate or major companies who sometimes require concessions by local government which are actually against the interests of some or all of the residents.
- e. While business may well be important, this importance should not be enhanced at the expense of residents. It must be remembered that businesses are accountable to their shareholders: the Council, sooner or later, is responsible to its electors.

It is suggested therefore that a GBC might well be able to have more effective links with business and might be able to be more effectively pro-active in

encouraging business to come into an area and stay when it was located. It has to be noted that there are disadvantages to being too closely linked with business, but these can apply whether or not reorganisation takes place. On balance, this is probably, though not necessarily, an advantage.

5. Place-Shaping and Effective, Integrated and Consistent Leadership

- a. The paper to SPRC [7] says that a unitary Council would provide “integrated and consistent leadership across a wider area”. There is one point which needs to be clarified immediately. It is suggested frequently that an integrated authority would provide clarity for citizens as that one single council would provide all services. This has never been completely correct: even in a “County Borough” the boundary between local government care services and NHS services is becoming very blurred.
- b. But in the new world of local government the Combined Authority will provide services “above” a GBC and parish or town councils will provide services “below.” A unitary council will not provide all the local government services in an area and the term itself is deceptive. The County Council have agreed to avoid using this term for this very reason.
- c. Reverting to the Scrutiny and Policy Review Committee paper, the question for Christchurch is what exactly is meant by this leadership and why would it be beneficial for the leadership to be exercised over a wider area.
- d. To some extent, this is clarified by the Report when it states in paragraph 3.2 as a benefit of a unitary authority “Enabling comprehensive place shaping in the area and therefore providing a catalyst for wider scale public sector reform.” Yet this simple statement does not hint at the underlying complexities. “Place shaping” and “strong leadership” are concepts which have crept into English local government since 2007 - though, as with much else, they were foreshadowed by the policy ideas of the Labour Government of 1964-70.
- e. The idea of “place shaping” as such was given currency by the Lyons Reports 2004-2007, [8], many of the principles of which were echoed or foreshadowed by the Labour Government’s Local Government White Paper [9]. This White Paper and the Lyons Reports were the basis for the forced “unitarisation” of a number of shire counties. It is not a concept which can be defined easily: Steven van der Walle [10] lists four different (but related) definitions.

- f. The concept extends beyond the traditional field of local government. It envisages a role for other public sector or institutions such as the Health Service and then goes on to suggest that only at the level of a “county borough” council or a county council that had absorbed all the second tier authorities (e.g. Wiltshire, Durham, and Cornwall) would this really be effective. “Place shaping” involves the granting and use of powers and is therefore fully in line with the present government’s concept of Combined Authorities. and how these powers may be used for the benefits of a locality.
- g. One element of the “place shaping” agenda is its emphasis on “creating” spaces. Logically of course if you create a space you have then to shape it. For example, the LGA, which is conducting the enquiry into the “Business Case”, says that

Place-shaping, in short, is ‘about creating a vision for a locality that is distinctive, identifying and building on its unique selling points, and creating a sense of local identity, distinctiveness and place. It is about creating places that are attractive, vibrant, prosperous, safe and friendly. Places for people to be proud to call home [11]

- f. Where these sentiments are applied to new towns such as Washington in Co Durham they are absolutely praiseworthy and are an exemplary statement of purpose. However, what is not studied anywhere in the literature is what happens to the places where there is already a very strong “sense of place.” Ominously, the CBC Report seems to be referring to this when it says

removing the existing boundaries would ... strip away much of the bureaucracy and local spatial borders

- g. Another study of place-shaping states that the aim is

creating loyalty within a certain geographic area, and thus, basically, shaping a place”. [12]

This does not, however, deal with the situation whereby loyalty within a geographic area already exists to the concept of that area as a political entity. Experience has shown that it is very difficult for an artificially constructed political institution, imposed without reference to the history of the area, to generate any form of loyalty – witness the artificial constructs of Avon, Humberside and Cleveland between 1974 and 1996. Where new authorities have no reserves of residual loyalty to a precursor council to draw upon

there is likely to be a further disconnection of the electorate from the local political process, in contradiction to what was hoped in the Lyons Reports.

- i. Coupled with place-shaping is the concept of “Strong Leadership.” This finds its ultimate expression in the desire for the establishment of elected executive Mayors who, while they might be **representative** of their community at the instant of their election, are not **responsible** to any body. While the hugely successful example of Boris Johnson is sometimes cited the opposite example of Mr Lutfur Rahman in Tower Hamlets tends to be overlooked, as does the imposition of Commissioners to control Doncaster and override the elected Mayor in 2010.[13]
- j. The University of Warwick [14] has set out the arguments for a directly-elected Mayor , and while it is assumed that there is no demand for an elected Mayor of Greater Bournemouth the arguments set out can also be used to support a stronger leadership model. The University makes a case for “Metro Mayors” who are able to manage “city regions” effectively. It points to the success of some elected Mayors for large conurbations, for example in America where (possibly of particular relevance to South-East Dorset) ten local authorities were combined into one. The new Mayor was able immediately to remove the strategic administrative blocks that were greatly hampering the development of a functioning transport system. Other arguments points to a strong leader as being able to have greater vision of what is needed for the conurbation and being able to leverage resources which would enable these problems to be resolved
- k. Applying this to our area, it might be argued that a single Mayor or Leader, freed from petty neighbourhood interests, would be able to take the measures needed to attract industry, bring in central government and other funds, provide “joined up government”, etc., and thus achieve the aim of “place shaping” the Borough and its wider economic region to the advantage of its residents.
- l. In contrast it may be argued that it is not just the process of decision-making or the *quantity* of decisions made which matters, but also the *quality* of those decisions. While slow or poor decisions may be made by responsible local government (i.e. by Councillors responsible to a Council which can dismiss them at any time) bad decisions can be made by strong leaders. Mr Lutfur Rahman gave Tower Hamlets strong leadership: not many would argue that it was beneficial leadership.
- m. Nor does the idea of “strong leadership” take into account the fact that what is good for (e.g.) Bournemouth may not necessarily be good for Christchurch

or Poole. It is a truism of history that when any two political units are merged the greater unit tends to dominate the lesser unit. One example of this may be found in the creation of the Hereford and Worcester County Council in 1974: Herefordshire residents were convinced that the greater proportion of public money was spent overwhelmingly in Worcestershire. This discontent led to the creation once again of Herefordshire Council in 1996.

- n. A further example of how “strong leadership” might not be in the interests of all the citizens of an authority is provided by the 1951 County Durham Development Plan. Ronald Snowden shows [15] that under this plan, entire villages in County Durham were to be eliminated and the inhabitants rehoused, and over two thousand homes in South-West Durham alone which could have been renovated for a fraction of the cost of new housing were demolished. It is ironic that this attack on those who regarded themselves as the vanguard of the working class was perpetrated by a Labour County Council: it is even more ironic that the same mistake was perpetrated on a much larger scale by Mr Prescott in his “Pathfinder” scheme. [16] Truly, he who does not learn from History is condemned to repeat it.

There is perhaps another historical comment which may be made: strong leaders are not necessarily either efficient or benevolent.

It is suggested that provided the aims of “place-making” and the style, character and purpose of “strong leadership”, once defined, are acceptable then this might be a factor of benefit to Christchurch in that the Borough would share in the gains that such factors could achieve for the whole conurbation. However until a better definition of the purpose of such leadership, and the terms in which it would be exercised, is provided the matter must remain very strongly in doubt.

6. Improved External Influence

- a. This again is a difficult item to discuss. The stated variables as set out above are our somewhat imprecise. For example, it is true that the public health authorities in the conurbation would probably find it easier to deal with one strategic authority rather than three. It is also true that the government has said that it wishes to agree devolution deals with a single authority rather than a multiplicity of authorities, but what this statement neglects to mention is that the government is referring to the *combined authority* which must not be confused with any possible unitary authority. A combined authority would be specifically set up to address issues of common and agreed interests, where they applied. A

2006-style unitary might be seen to address issues that were neither common or agreed.

- b. It is worth remembering that until 20 years ago there was such a single strategic authority for Bournemouth Poole and Christchurch - Dorset County Council. The then leadership of the Bournemouth Borough Council admired this stronger leadership and strategic direction so much that both they and Poole frantically lobbied to be separated from it.

It is suggested that the assumed benefits of this factor are somewhat ephemeral and in any event the case resting on this factor has no particular advantage over the present situation.

C. INTANGIBLE FACTORS I - DELIVERY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES TO CHRISTCHURCH RESIDENTS

1. Attempting to identify intangible factors is in itself not necessarily easy. However that does not mean it should not be attempted. It is possible to identify a number of areas related to local government which cannot be quantified in purely cash terms.
2. Perhaps the most important of these is the question of **service delivery** – how citizens of Christchurch, discounting for this purpose any other part of the conurbation, may benefit or suffer in terms of being able to access easily their required local government services. The question which has to be considered is “Could these services be better delivered to the residents of Christchurch by a Greater Bournemouth Council rather than Dorset County Council and Christchurch Borough Council?” The question of whether services could *best* be delivered by a Dorset Shire Authority is for discussion elsewhere.
3. This factor is intangible because while the financial cost of providing a service is measurable, the benefits of that service, in terms of meeting the needs of an individual consumer, are not so easily assessed, because so much depends on the interpretation of the word “better.”
4. It is all very well to say that a local authority can estimate what the people need and arrange to provide this, but this is to deny people the right to set their own standards to which they aspire. Central government, or local government acting on behalf of central government, has worked in the first of these ways for almost 75 years and can be summed up by “In the case of nutrition and health, just as in the case of education, the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves” [17]

5. It might for example seemed to be cost effective to collect non-food waste fortnightly, but while this service might be cheaper it is of less benefit – and might even be a disbenefit – to a consumer who generates of necessity unsavoury foul waste and has to have it rotting on the premises.
6. Considering present local government services, the table at Appendix I sets out the principal services provided by the county and borough councils. Of the services, it might be said that the ones which impact most obviously on our residents are education, finance, housing, planning, social services, transport and waste management.
7. Discussing each of the services in turn:-
 - a. **Education** is becoming less significant to local authorities as the government's drive for academy and free schools progresses. Indeed, in its White Paper of March 2016 the Government has confirmed that it intends all schools to be free of local authority control by 2020 [18]. Higher Education has long ceased to be a function of upper-tier authorities, and increasingly further education is provided in quasi-autonomous units. It would seem immaterial and indeed irrelevant whether the LEA for Christchurch is Dorset County Council or a GBC (although it must be admitted that the example of Poole is not encouraging.)

b. Finance, Revenues and Benefits

For the purposes of this paper finance is taken to refer to the financial planning and budget setting. With the exception of Bournemouth, the revenues and benefits for the area are dealt with by the SVPP which has been remarkably successful in its creation and in its administration of the system.

There are certainly advantages to be gained from having one budget setting process instead of three. While Christchurch is a collection authority, the great majority of the monies it collects go to the County Council, the police and fire authority. The Borough is responsible only for setting its council tax rates for its municipal area. Clearly there will be economies of scale available in that a single authority would be preparing a single budget and would be able to exploit the many commonalities between Poole and Bournemouth. Although there have been at difficulties in appointing suitable staff in Bournemouth, a Section 151 officer for the entire conurbation would obviously attract a higher salary than each of three separate chief finance officers - and indeed such a post would almost certainly attract better-qualified candidates.

However, from Christchurch's prospective, it has to be noted that Christchurch is debt free: Bournemouth and Poole most definitely are not. Just as all assets are

shared when three authorities join together, negative assets or debts must also be shared. One financial drawback therefore for Christchurch Council Tax payers is that they would have to pay to service the inherited debt.

In the financial planning process also, at the moment Christchurch can decide how it may apply taxpayers' money for the benefit of its residents. This would not necessarily cease on formation of a unitary council as the (putative) successor town council to CBC would also have revenue raising and spending powers - though as pointed out later these would be subject to the ultimate control of GBC.

Financial policy for the whole GBC would be decided centrally. The assets and liabilities of the former authorities (and relevant County Council assets, with the maintenance costs thereof) would pass to the GBC.

A further potential problem is the requirement that would face the new authority of dealing with the different Council Tax rates of the predecessor authorities. It is a legal requirement to set a common council tax across a local authority's area: the council tax charge against each property band, excluding towns and parishes, must be identical across a local authority. It would also be inequitable for different areas to be charged differently for the same level of service.

Thus when Councils are merged the successor authority faces the difficulty of variance. In Dorset this is significant: for 2015/16 Poole Borough Council had the lowest council tax at £1,209.60 and Weymouth and Portland Borough Council had the highest at £1,498.98, a difference of £290.

There are solutions. Harmonisation can be achieved in a variety of ways: by moving to the highest level; to the lowest level; to the average; to a level which will achieve the same level of income for the new authority as received by the former Council's; or some other variation. Also the Secretary of State has certain reserve powers – but it is not necessarily the case that Christchurch's Council Tax would, *pro rata*, be less under a Greater Bournemouth Council

It is suggested therefore that whatever the advantages of economies of scale these must be balanced against the loss of the right to set a budget for Christchurch on priorities decided in Christchurch and also against the imposition of a share in Bournemouth's debts.

c. Highways

Under the Local Government Act 1972 all transport was to be a County-level function, except in Metropolitan Counties where, while strategic transport was reserved to the County Council other issues were to be dealt with at the Metropolitan District / Borough level.

However power was given to County Councils to come to an Agreement with former Boroughs for them to continue to administer their own highways as Agents of the County Council. For whatever reason, in 2013 Dorset County Council abrogated the Agreement and assumed control of the Christchurch Highways section.

The results of this might almost be taken as a case study of the malign results of moving power from an authority local to its area to a more remote council. There are concerns over the standard of work done, the time the work is taking, the timely implementation of Traffic Regulation Orders, etc. While there has been much unjustified criticism levelled at the County Council's administration of Christchurch's highways it cannot be doubted that the service is perceived to have deteriorated since the County Council assumed that role. So there is a feeling of powerlessness and helplessness, however this might be falsely exaggerated.

However, it must be noted that while there have been budget reductions (and very drastic ones) which have had an impact on service delivery, would a Christchurch Agency authority would have been able, *at present*, to deliver the services which its leadership desires?

It is suggested therefore that if Christchurch were able to resume provision of its own highways services some of the friction generated by the removal of highways powers to Dorchester would be removed, and to this extent there would be benefits to the borough. However it must be noted that the economic case for a single highway authority covering the conurbation would in all probability be much stronger in terms of economies scale etc. than the new GBC allowing Christchurch to operate its own highways section. Further there is no guarantee that a Christchurch Authority would be able to afford the desired level of highways services provision.

d. Housing

Of the three Boroughs whose Leaders are contemplating merger, all are housing authorities. Bournemouth and Poole are direct social landlords, but Poole does not operate in the pre-1980s sense: it discharges its landlord functions through the Poole Housing Partnership, an Arms Length Management Organisation. As far as social housing tenants in Christchurch are concerned the formation of a

GBC would have absolutely no effect on their position, with remote organisations such as Sovereign, which has a diminishing local administrative presence while its main office is in Newbury, over 50 miles away.

With regard to necessary contact with the Council's Housing Department, it is assumed that a GBC would retain some form of contact point in Christchurch, though this is not guaranteed given the drive for on-line contact.

Where a change would arise is in the field of housing policy. At the moment, housing is controlled through the Housing Department, the Housing Portfolio Holder and the Community Services Committee. Under a GBC however housing would come under the aegis of a Cabinet member and decisions would be taken on a conurbation wide basis. This could have implications for Christchurch.

Housing strategy would also fall under the control of Bournemouth. This would include housing allocation policy. It might not necessarily be easy to maintain the "Christchurch homes for Christchurch people" policy in Housing Allocation. It would, in theory, be possible for a similar policy to be enacted by the GBC but this would be discretionary. Also there is a massive housing shortage in Poole and Bournemouth, particularly for their workforce to meet their city status aspirations; but little land available to build on. Therefore areas outside the Poole-Bournemouth conurbation might be thought to be ideal to provide commuter workforce housing.

It is suggested that there are no discernable advantages to Christchurch in being part of a conurbation-wide housing authority, and certain definite disadvantages in loss of control. These are discussed further later in the paper.

e. Planning

Planning, in terms of policy and development management, is perhaps the service with the most obvious results for the public at large. Planning policy seeks to ensure a pleasant and workable environment for the citizens of the borough: development management interprets planning policy and is far more at the "sharp end" than the somewhat more remote world of planning policy, but both are vital services. It is only necessary to look at the bleak sink estates and tower blocks created in the 1960s to see the harm that can be done when planning policy becomes too remote from reality. (To avoid giving unnecessary offence locally, the a scene from Killingworth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, is provided as an example – see Appendix IV)

There are two distinct aspects of planning – development control (or, to give it its modern name, development management) and planning policy. While at present both of these are primarily “second tier” issues certain aspects, for example minerals and waste planning and what are known as section three issues such as school construction, are reserved to the county council. Under a unitary system all matters are dealt with by the principal council.

It may be argued that planning is the borough service which most affects people’s lives. Whether it is the construction of a large housing estate, the removal of land from or addition of land to the green belt, permission to construct an extension of one’s own property – even to put up a fence more than 6 foot high requires planning permission. Could these services be provided more effectively by a Greater Bournemouth Council than it is by the present CBC?

There are advantages to a unitary authority in terms of “resilience.” It has to be accepted that even before the formation of the partnership the relatively small size of the Planning Control / Development Management Section at Christchurch could cause concern over diminished efficiency at times of increased workload or prolonged staff illness. While agency cover was always available, this is expensive. Further, it could be argued that it was difficult to attract highly qualified officers because of the relatively low salaries to which a small authority is limited. Despite this it has to be noted that Christchurch was fortunate in attracting some well qualified heads of service and achieved notable success in planning control, being in 2010 one of the top five high-performing authorities in the South-West.

Even following the establishment of the partnership, the relatively small size of even the combined Development Control Sections has not completely resolved the problem. As part of a larger authority it is argued that service delivery would be enhanced. Better qualified staff would be attracted, flexible working patterns possible with a larger staff would result in a much more even distribution of work, and in addition it would be easier to encourage professional development amongst staff if the capacity to absorb their work during study leave were present. Equally some staff are attracted to work in a smaller authority which they feel to be less of a large impersonal organisation and closer to their customers

Effective planning obviously requires considerable local knowledge and it is possible to argue that this is more easily acquired when dealing with a small discrete area such as Christchurch rather than a much more diverse and amorphous area such as the conurbation. Nevertheless this difficulty can be overcome by the creation of area teams. At present Planning in Christchurch, as in the days before the partnership, is dealt with by a distinct team of officers

under a team at the leader. There is no reason why this approach should not be continued in a Greater Bournemouth.

Relevant to this is the question of legal advice. Planning law is a highly specialised field and very necessary in these times of judicial review and other judicial activism. The County Council employs a specialist planning solicitor and also can rely on assistance from a highly qualified support staff. It is many years since CBC last enjoyed the services of a full-time planning solicitor, and even in terms of covering the whole of the Partnership there has only been a part time appointment; under a GBC Christchurch would presumably be able to take advantage of specialist planning solicitors.

Planning policy is already dealt with by Bournemouth and Poole Councils; the minerals and waste plan is already a geographic county document, and the three authorities co-operated well in the past in the Bournemouth Dorset and Poole structure plan and the Bournemouth Dorset and Poole Local Transport Plan. There are similar arguments in favour of increasing resilience and flexibility in a Greater Bournemouth Council but considerable improvements have already been made in terms of the partnership and the production of the Christchurch and East Dorset Local Plan.

The creation of a new unitary authority would mean that the next local plans for Bournemouth Poole and Christchurch would have to be prepared as a single document for the conurbation, in comparison with the already existing structure and aims of Christchurch and East Dorset, the level of efficiency gained by a GBC over and above the existing system for Christchurch must be queried.

It must be noted that the argument so far has concentrated on administrative matters. Over and above this is the question of political (not party-political) control, which is discussed at greater length later in this memorandum.

It is therefore suggested that while there would be no particular advantage accruing in planning policy, there would be potential advantages, in administrative terms, to Development Control of a Greater Bournemouth Council. There would also be disadvantages in terms of loss of control, as discussed later.

f. Social Services

Christchurch is not a social services authority. There is local provision in the sense that there is a Christchurch Office of the Dorset Social Services, but power is ultimately exercised by the director or the appropriate cabinet member in Dorchester. The five County Councillors in Christchurch exercise influence

to a greater or lesser degree and indeed have some notable achievements to their credit in resolving difficulties.

If Christchurch were absorbed into a South East Dorset unitary, it is very unlikely that there would be significant changes in the power structure. It is accepted that Social Services cannot be administered effectively on a town-wide basis and indeed in Wiltshire social services remain a county level function, although area boards (see later) do indeed provide some input – but this is influence, not control.

It is thought overwhelmingly likely therefore that following “unitarisation” control would still reside with the remote authority. It might be argued that Bournemouth is closer than Dorchester, so that Authority would be more accessible, but in line with the modern philosophy whereby people are encouraged to use electronic means to access a council this is not terribly relevant. But in terms of physical travel DCC has always been prepared to send its officers to the local office in Loring Road to meet Members and their constituents.

Financial costs are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth comparing the age profiles of the various authorities. Table II in the Appendices sets out the population figures for the present Boroughs of Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch, “shire Dorset” (i.e. The area at present administered by the County Council), the putative “Greater Bournemouth” (i.e. The three Boroughs but not East Dorset which has indicated that it does not wish to be part of a greater Bournemouth) and “residual Dorset” (i.e. The area of Dorset remaining after the establishment of the putative Greater Bournemouth.)

Of particular interest are the figures for the “elderly” population. Whereas in Poole and Bournemouth (who are already responsible for social care in their areas) there are some 65,000 people of pensionable age and likely at some point to be in need of social care, there are 15,000 people of pensionable age in Christchurch. Therefore the potential liability in terms of social care for a Greater Bournemouth would increase by some 25% while its working age population would increase by some 10%,.

It is therefore suggested that there is no evidence that social services can be provided either more efficiently or at a higher quality level in a GBC than by the present system.

- g. **Waste** – This is now indeed centralised under the Dorset Waste Partnership and it is not relevant to discuss it further.

D. INTANGIBLE FACTORS II - PROVISION AND PROTECTION OF A SENSE OF PLACE

1. In the rationale for initiating the process, the report of 8 December states that a unitary authority would provide a opportunity for “place shaping” on a larger and presumably more effective scale. But before the *shape* can be considered, the *place* has to be identified.
2. Redcliffe Maud [20] recognized in its research that for the overwhelming majority of people their “place” was either the parish (in the country) or 'a group of streets around their homes' (in towns) but with the crucial caveat that “Only in the smaller towns did people tend to associate the home area with the town and the smaller the town the more often they did so.”
3. This can easily be verified by asking local people from whence they come. West of the Stour, the answers tend to be not “Bournemouth” but “Tuckton”, “Southbourne”, “Winton” or “Alderney”: east of the Stour the answer is “Christchurch.”
4. So Christchurch is thought of as a “place,” distinct from South-East Dorset, Bournemouth or Poole, which the proponents of a Unitary Council wish to be able to shape more effectively. To discuss whether this is beneficial or otherwise it is necessary to determine what makes a place- what is the “sense of place” and why is it important?
5. Dr Jennifer Cross states that “Sense of place has become a buzzword used to justify everything from a warm fuzzy appreciation of a natural landscape to the selling of homesites in urban sprawl.” [21] but goes on to show that it involves the ways in which people relate to places , the types of bonds we have with places, and the depth and types of attachments to one particular place. From her research, it is clear that shared identity and shared experiences are added to the physical and “spiritual” attributes of a place which make it special. We have long recognised this, as our motto “Christchurch, where time is pleasant” is appropriate and clarifies the slightly unclear concepts used by advocates of change.
6. The sense of place is important to us because residents tend to want to protect, preserve and enhance that which is special to them. As one resident stated, someone who has to ask what is special about Christchurch just doesn’t get it. It is not the buildings, it is not the public amenities, it is not the open spaces: it is the sum of all these things plus an indefinable “sense of something else”. Thus the very strong sense of place in Christchurch might well go some considerable way to explaining why there is less vandalism, relatively less litter, and such a high degree of

voluntary commitment which sets Christchurch apart from other south coast towns. In other words it is a recognisable community!

7. But it can be argued that this stronger sense of local identity, which the authors of the December report claimed to value, is dependent on “a sense of being able to make a difference”: the sense that decisions affecting the town can be taken locally and that the town’s residents have a real say in its direction.
8. In one sense, a move of power from Dorchester to a GBC with its headquarters in Bournemouth would bring powers closer to the community and to that limited extent would enhance the feeling of local control. On the other hand, powers that have been exercised locally would transfer away from the community to a more remote body. While it is true that some decisions now made in Dorchester would now be made in Bournemouth many decisions intimately affecting local people now made in Christchurch would also be made in Bournemouth. This is the one drawback accepted by the proponents of unitarisation, but it is suggested that this is a very real drawback. The various methods suggested for mitigating the effects are examined in a later section.
9. One of the criticisms made of Redcliffe-Maud’s proposals was set out in the Spectator [22]

But what about the Redcliffe-Maud report's second desideratum, 'democracy'? Unhappily, while the report admits the need to strike 'the best practicable balance between the needs of efficiency . . . and the requirements of effective representation' it lamentably fails to do so. **It is a commonplace that people feel that existing local authorities are too remote: Redcliffe-Maud would make them still remoter, with nothing to compensate for this deprivation.**
(emphasis added)

10. One of the most visible symbols of a town’s sense of place is its mayoralty. At every Council meeting we meet under the list of names going back to 1297. Mayor making is a very significant occasion, and is recognized as such by the wide variety of local organisations who are there represented. Twice a year we process from the Old Town Hall to the Priory (where the Council used to meet) and there, on Civic Sunday and Remembrance Day the sense of place is almost tangible.
11. The advantages of an mayoralty can be seen in that many towns in Dorset which lost their Charter Mayor in 1974 who have sought to regain a mayoralty as a symbol of civic pride; the Mayor of Bridport, for example, retains not one but two Macebearers. There are very few town councils who have yielded to pressure from “modernisers” and abolished the mayoralty.

12. A town mayoralty can even survive being subordinate to a charter borough's mayoralty. A Greater Bournemouth Borough Council would be entitled to apply for a Charter as it would incorporate three Boroughs with Charter Mayors. There would be nothing to stop a Christchurch town council recreating the mayoralty even with a conurbation Mayor. The example of the mayoralty of Clitheroe in Lancashire which coexists happily with the Charter Mayor of Ribble Valley is cited.
13. Nevertheless there is one important drawback. A Charter Mayor is the Queen's personal representative in his or her borough. He becomes the Mayor, and therefore chairs the Council, because s/he is elected and invested as the Mayor at Mayor-making, a special Council meeting. A Town Mayor becomes such because they are elected as Chairman of that Council. While it is true that this is a distinction which may not be properly be appreciated, nevertheless it is a very real distinction. A Town Mayor does not have the dignity, status or rich history of a Borough Mayor.
14. While a Town Mayor for Christchurch might in some quarters be felt to be an acceptable substitute for a Charter Mayor, it is suggested that many local people would not share this view.
15. The loss of a sense of identity is recognised as a possible drawback to the establishment of a GBC. This is a common theme where Councils or towns are forcibly merged into a unitary authority. It is becoming obvious that people in, for example, Somerford do not wish to be governed from Brussels, Bristol or even – especially – from Bournemouth. The rise of minor parties is another possible consequences of this alienation.
16. Christchurch's Leader has recognised this by saying that power must be brought closer to people's front doors. Unfortunately, it is seven or so miles from Highcliffe, Burton, Somerford, and Hurn to Bournemouth Town Hall.

It is therefore suggested that Christchurch enjoys a very strong sense of place and a higher level of civic pride. It is extremely likely that this would be damaged by absorption into Bournemouth, to be replaced by a sense of inferiority (in the same way as Highcliffe, since a loss of its own council, has felt inferior to Christchurch.) It is noted though that there are mechanisms which might redress this loss of local identity and these are discussed later.

E. INTANGIBLE FACTORS III – LOCAL CONTROL BY LOCAL PEOPLE?

1. At this point a number of themes apparent in various sections of this paper come together From the time of the Redcliffe Maud report [19] onwards there has been a mantra among “the great and the good” of civil servants, academics and local

government administrators: that there are too many councillors and too many authorities. There are times when it is seemed as if the ideal solution from their point of view is the Elected Mayor system – voters elect a Mayor, possibly with a few elected councillors to act as community leaders and representatives and leave the elected Mayor and his “civil servants” to get on with the job unhindered by pesky councillors asking awkward questions. This might indeed be representative democracy: it is not responsible democracy.

2. In all the debates about democratic control, in the end the question has to be posed: Would a single unitary council be more or less responsive to the wishes of the people of Christchurch than the present system? (Again, there is a question of whether a Shire Authority with appropriate surrender of powers to Borough, Town and Parish Councils would be more responsive than the present system, but this is a question for another place.)
3. It has been shown above that in certain areas – finance and budget setting, housing allocation, development of local planning policy, development control - while the establishment of a Greater Bournemouth would indeed bring efficiencies the policies which would be applied in these areas would be determined by the new GBC. At the moment Christchurch Borough council determines its financial strategy, its planning policy, determines whether or not houses or proposed developments are congruent with its planning policy, its own housing allocation strategy: all of these would become the responsibility of Greater Bournemouth.
4. It has been argued that Christchurch would be able to influence these policies through the work of its councillors, and this is not denied. But influence is very different from authority.
5. In the debates on the combined authority, and previously, the leadership has repeatedly stressed that Christchurch should remain a sovereign council. Christchurch, it is said, exercises influence out of proportion to its size. It has been particularly noted, and welcomed on all sides, that in the new Combined Authority Christchurch would exercise 1/9th, or more than 10%, of the votes.
6. it may be relevant to ask how all Christchurch might continue to "punch above its weight" in the new circumstances. It must be understood that in any new sector the number of Councillors per elector would be required by the Boundary Commission to be identical throughout the area.
7. The Leader of Bournemouth Council has publicly stated that one-third of the conurbation's Councillors would go. [23] Thus if the new Authority were to have approximately 80 Councillors (given the rationale for saving and the belief in some “efficiency” quarters that the numbers of Councillors in an Authority can be

drastically reduced without losing democratic accountability), Christchurch would have at the most 11 representatives on the new body. These Councillors would have to perform all the casework, oversight, scrutiny and executive functions of the present 29. Table III sets out the present and forecast numbers of Councillors.

8. Referring again to Table I, Christchurch would lose almost all of the functions it now controls. The powers would pass to the new Council which would be, in effect, controlled by Councillors representing the area of the present Borough of Bournemouth. Bournemouth in its new guise would on the other hand have almost identical powers to those which it now enjoys.
9. The reduction in the number of Councillors under such a system is often put forward as an advantage. Yet councillors are part time: one concern frequently had is the conservative councillors tend to be elderly retired businessmen whereas Labour Councillors tend to be younger but on benefits or in public sector jobs where time to attend council meetings is freely given. While this is very much a caricature there is a certain amount of truth. In addition individual councillors do not cost much money: savings from unitarisation potentially achieve their highest level from a requirement for fewer officers. Once again, a democratic deficit is apparent in these proposals.
10. Turning now to specific loss of control, it is suggested that this would be most seriously felt in the areas of planning, housing and finance. As has been noted in particular, planning policy (and thus the replacement local plan) would be one of the functions of the new GBC. Development control functions at present are exercised by Councillors who all know Christchurch intimately and can bring to their decision making their own knowledge of the area. In a unitary authority, Councillors on the Development Control Committee would be chosen from the whole Greater Bournemouth area., although it would be possible for the new Authority to create Area Planning Boards for certain geographic areas. In County Durham, for example, the County is divided into three Area Planning Boards.
11. However, the planning policy framework would be decided by the whole authority. This of course means that the allocation of land for e.g. housing would in the last analysis be decided as set out above by Councillors elected for the area of the present Borough of Bournemouth. There are clear implications for the future of Christchurch's Green Belt (and also for the much more extensive East Dorset Green Belt and their unprotected open spaces, should East Dorset be forcibly incorporated into a Greater Bournemouth)
12. It has been suggested that this is a false argument because the "Duty to Co-Operate" placed on local authorities will require Christchurch to relinquish some of its Green Belt (in the example often cited, to NFDC) However, while co-operation

is indeed necessary, while Christchurch retains through its Partnership with East Dorset control of its planning policy it can decide which parts of the Green Belt are to be surrendered, where exactly new homes are built and can decide whether the new homes meet criteria for homes per acre, congruence with the street scene, attractive forms of development etc. Some members may be very comfortable with the idea of placing Christchurch's Green Belt in the hands of Bournemouth: others may not be so sanguine.

13. The difficulty with Housing has already been discussed: while there would undoubtedly be benefits in terms of the economies of scale, it might be very difficult to continue, in the long term, to operate a "Christchurch Homes for Christchurch People" policy.
14. To mitigate this loss of local identity and local control there are a number of possible solutions. The most common of these is the enhanced role for town or parish councils, as admitted by the authors of the CBC paper. Other solutions, which can be used as well as or in place of these, involve Area Boards (used in Wiltshire) Area Action Partnerships (as used in County Durham) or a variety of organisations such as Community Forums, Community Development Trusts, or Neighbourhood Management Teams.
15. County Durham's Area Action partnerships perhaps deserve a special mention. There was extreme unhappiness among local people when the County was "unitarised", and perhaps because of this particular care was given to ensure that communities did not become alienated. There are fourteen AAPs in the County: a study of one of them (Durham, covering the former Durham City Council area) reveals a two level structure: a Board, with 21 members – seven Councillors (six County and one Parish), seven "Partners" including the police, the CCG, the County Council – officer level, local traders and Durham Students' Union. There are seven public representatives. Below this is an open Forum, which is open to all residents. . The AAP sets priorities for the area: in Durham's case, they are Activities for Young People, Support for the Voluntary & Community Sectors, Health and Older People. Priority group meetings are open to forum members to attend.
16. However, this is a model for a shire County (for much of County Durham, like Dorset, is rural) and whether it would function as well in an urban unitary is open to question. It must be noted that Poole Borough Council has abolished its Area Boards. In addition, there must be, as there was with the Community Partnership system, serious questions about democratic accountability. Also, while AAPs have very considerable **influence**; they do not have **authority**.
17. It has been recognised as long ago as the Labour Government's 2006 White Paper (22) that "third-tier" (or second tier in Unitary Authorities) Councils can have a

major part to play in linking local government to the communities they serve. It advocated the concept of “double devolution” – in return for central government surrendering powers to Unitaries or City Regions these authorities must devolve power downwards to Town or Parish Councils. In North Somerset, for example, a Unitary Authority set up in 1996 from dissolution of the hated Avon County Council, Weston-super-Mare, a former Borough with a population of 76,000 has some thirty Councillors, four major Committees, controls cemeteries, allotments, youth services, tourism and is a Statutory Consultee on other matters.

18. It is worth reiterating, though, that despite the apparent strength of the Town Council it is a subordinate authority. Powers granted by agency agreement can be revoked and indeed the Authority itself exists only as long as the Principal Council involved so wishes. Southsea Town Council in Hampshire, which had an unfortunate habit of disagreeing with Portsmouth City Council, was dissolved by the City Council in 2011.

It is therefore suggested that while there are appropriate mechanisms which could be used to address the consequences of loss of local identity and control, they are not necessarily applicable, nor do they really solve the problem of “democratic deficit.”

CONCLUSIONS

1. This paper has attempted to look in as balanced a manner as possible at the intangible factors relating to the question of a south east Dorset unitary authority.
2. it must be stressed that this paper is written for and from the view point of a Christchurch councillor responsible to the electors of Christchurch. It addresses the advantages and disadvantages of a South-East Dorset Unitary, and does not attempt to deal with the advantages and disadvantages of a “Shire Unitary.”
3. It is firmly believed that what might be good for Bournemouth and Poole is not necessarily good for Christchurch
4. It is accepted that financial factors must be accorded considerable weight but it is also necessary to consider the intangible factors
5. It is accepted that there will be intangible benefits to the people of Christchurch and these have been assessed. However there are also drawbacks and disbenefits, and it is suggested that the most significant of these is that the electors of Christchurch shall suffer loss of local control over a number of crucial matters. This will inhibit the ability of the citizens of this Borough to ensure that time continues to be pleasant.

6. It is suggested that upon the evidence assessed in this paper the intangible disbenefits to those who live in Christchurch of the formation of a south east Dorset unitary authority considerably outweigh the benefits. For this reason, it is recommended that Council assess very carefully the supposed financial benefits of a Greater Bournemouth: it is suggested that unless these are of absolutely overwhelming weight, alternative solutions to the problems faced by the Council, either “status quo” or a “Shire Dorset”, would be more attractive in preserving our heritage and of more advantage to the Ancient Borough.

D C Jones
March 2016

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