

**Future Directions for Dorset's Towns and  
Larger Parishes**

**A Fresh Start?  
Findings on Key Policy Issues**

**Graham Sansom and Gordon Morris**

**March 2025**

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## **Preface**

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This report presents the policy-related results of a low-key, informal research project exploring the status and prospects of towns and larger parishes in Dorset since the 2019 reorganisation of local government. Its focus is the potential for towns and parishes to play an expanded role, and the urgent need for a more effective working relationship between them and Dorset Council.

The project arose from our respective interests concerning the need to add an extra 'community level' to Australian local government, and the future of parish and town councils across England as a whole:

- Graham Sansom is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Technology Sydney. Previously he was Director of the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government and Chief Executive of the Australian Local Government Association. In 2012-13 he chaired a major review of the local government system in the state of New South Wales.
- Dr Gordon Morris is a Research Associate of the University of Exeter and has been a part-time lecturer in Community Development at Bournemouth University. His research has focused on rural policy and governance, and in the early 2000s he worked on the Market Towns Initiative. He is a Dorset villager and a former parish councillor.

Both of us undertook this research in a personal capacity.

The project would not have been possible without the assistance of, and valuable contributions made by many people and organisations across Dorset – and in the final stages, Cornwall. We are especially grateful for the exceptional support provided by the Chief Executive of the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils, Neil Wedge, and the Association's team. Special thanks are also due to the former CEO of Dorset Council, Matt Prosser, and the Council's current Leader, Councillor Nick Ireland, for their personal contributions and endorsing the research.

Given the limited time and resources available for this research, and the complex and dynamic issues to be covered, we cannot claim to have produced a definitive analysis. However, we believe that this report does offer a useful independent perspective and highlights both questions that needed to be asked, and decisions that have been 'parked' for too long.

Within our resources we have made every effort to ensure the accuracy and fairness of statements made in this report. We acknowledge, however, that in many cases these are matters of opinion, and that there might be some errors of fact or interpretation. We would willingly correct the record where necessary.

**Graham Sansom and Gordon Morris**

**March 2025**

## Acronyms

<b>BCP:</b> Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole Council	<b>LCs:</b> Local councils (towns and parishes)
<b>CALC:</b> Cornwall Association of Local Councils	<b>LDP:</b> Liberal-Democrats Party
<b>CAPs:</b> Community Area Partnerships	<b>NALC:</b> National Association of Local Councils
<b>CPI:</b> Consumer Price Index	<b>PC:</b> Parish Council
<b>CGR:</b> Community Governance Review	<b>SLCC:</b> Society of Local Council Clerks
<b>DAPTC:</b> Dorset Association of Parish & Town Councils	<b>TC:</b> Town Council
<b>DC:</b> Dorset Council	<b>TLPs:</b> Towns and Larger Parishes

## Headline Findings

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1. The current relationship between Dorset Council (DC) and towns and parishes may fairly be described as ‘ships in the night’ – patchy and ambivalent, lacking shared purpose.
2. In its 2024 election manifesto DC’s LDP majority included: ‘*making decision-making as local and democratic as possible; listening more to local residents and creating a genuine partnership with town and parish councils.*’ However, there is still no policy framework in place to advance the LDP’s commitment.
3. Dorset has more than 160 parish and town (‘local’) councils, many with very small populations. But 70% of DC’s population is covered by just 25 towns and larger parishes (TLPs) that have real potential to expand their operations as valued partners for DC.
4. Cornwall’s achievements with ‘double devolution’ to local councils (LCs) since the advent of a unitary council in 2009 demonstrate what can be achieved. But in Dorset, little thought was given to the future of LCs when Districts were abolished in 2019.
5. The £26M spent in 2023-24 by just the 25 TLPs represented a 20-25% top-up of DC’s budget for its Place directorate: Cornwall’s experience shows that top-up could increase to 30-35% within 5-10 years by TLPs raising an extra £15M pa. in uncapped precepts. This would relieve pressure on DC’s increasingly stretched budget and facilitate sharing or transfer of some former District (‘municipal’) functions, as well as new local initiatives.
6. The need for DC to work more closely with towns and parishes was identified by Local Government Association peer reviews in 2019 and 2022. However, DC’s 2021-23 Community Governance Review missed the opportunity to consider systemic change.
7. While DC was intended to be a ‘district with county functions’, its budget and approach to policy development reveal a dominant ‘county culture’ that tends to relegate LCs to a peripheral role as one of many potential ‘community’ partners.
8. Similarly, DC’s Place directorate – effectively the successor to Districts and the ‘natural partner’ for LCs – appears to lack a strong presence and sense of direction.
9. Bringing about necessary change also depends on the 25 TLPs stepping up. TLPs need to establish a consistent, collective view on ways forward, promoted by a strong leadership group. Currently, without encouragement and guidance from DC, most appear to lack the confidence and drive required to chart the fresh course needed in the post-2019 era.
10. This applies particularly to a widespread reluctance to increase precepts to fund both essential upgrades to local services and facilities, and transfer of some functions from DC. In part, current low precepts reflect the lack of a requirement for medium-term

financial planning – most TLPs continue to budget only year-on-year. Precept increases should be carefully planned with community consultation, and justified on the basis that the additional revenue would be dedicated to local needs.

11. Locality planning also needs to improve: Dorset's TLPs lag well behind Cornwall's in completing statutory Neighbourhood Plans, although a number have social, economic or environmental strategies. The complex Neighbourhood Plan process is a barrier.
12. Some boundary changes will be required for TLPs to play an expanded role, especially in the emerging urban complex along the Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole border, as well as around several coastal and large market towns: Bridport has shown the way. More broadly, increased cooperation and information exchange amongst TLPs is essential.
13. Changes are also needed in the way local councils are structured and operate (numbers of councillors, use of wards, uncontested elections, community engagement) to strengthen community democracy in the face of centralist technocracy and a national devolution agenda that may shift key decision-making further away from localities.
14. DC's Council Plan 2024-29 still has little to say about TLPs, but does include several proposals that could engender real progress: a Coastal and Market Towns Strategy; regeneration of Weymouth; a Portland-Weymouth-Dorchester growth corridor; and a Strategic Asset Management Plan that suggests more Neighbourhood Plans, transfer of assets to LCs, and selective 'devolution deals'. Those initiatives should be managed as a package in full cooperation with TLPs, and with a clear objective to expand their role.

**Part 6 of this paper sets out a possible 5-year programme to advance the role of TLPs, 'double devolution' and DC-LCs working relations more broadly.** In addition to those already identified above (points 10-14), other key proposals include:

- Adoption of an overarching policy on DC-LCs cooperation (initially TLPs), including DC offering encouragement and support for LCs willing and able to 'rise to the challenge'.
- Establishment within the Place directorate of a Local Councils Liaison Unit to promote needed change and to provide a central point of reference and coordination within DC.
- Negotiation of model 'double devolution' deals with a few high-capacity TLPs.
- A trial of several flexible, 'bottom-up' area partnerships using a 'town plus hinterland' model around *all* larger TLPs – but not necessarily covering the whole DC district.
- A 'test case' transfer of a whole category of asset management/service delivery to all TLPs (and ultimately all LCs) eg public toilets, verges, street cleaning).
- A supplementary Community Governance Review to determine boundary changes in urban growth areas, plus a later, broader review that also focuses on local democracy.
- A major effort to upgrade knowledge and skills amongst LCs' elected members, clerks and staff (starting with TLPs), and awareness within DC of what LCs can and could do.

**In the final analysis, Dorset Council must decide whether it will encourage and enable local councils to strengthen their statutory role and capacity for sound place management, or whether it believes it can essentially 'go it alone', dominating all key areas of service delivery to communities and managing localities primarily from 'County Hall'. And the TLPs must decide whether to accept probably uncomfortable change in return for enhanced recognition and greater scope to advance the interests of their communities.**

## **1. Introduction and Strategic Overview**

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This report presents the Principal Findings on Key Policy Issues for the Future of Dorset's Towns and Larger Parishes that arose from practice-focused research carried out over the period mid-2022 to December 2024. The purpose of the research was threefold:

- To add to the body of research on local government reorganisation and the future of parish and town ('local') councils.
- To offer an independent perspective to the unitary Dorset Council (DC) and the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils (DAPTC) on how the role of local councils might now evolve following the abolition of District Councils in 2019.
- To identify experience and lessons learned of relevance to local governance in Australia, where there is no statutory equivalent to parish and town councils.

The analysis built on:

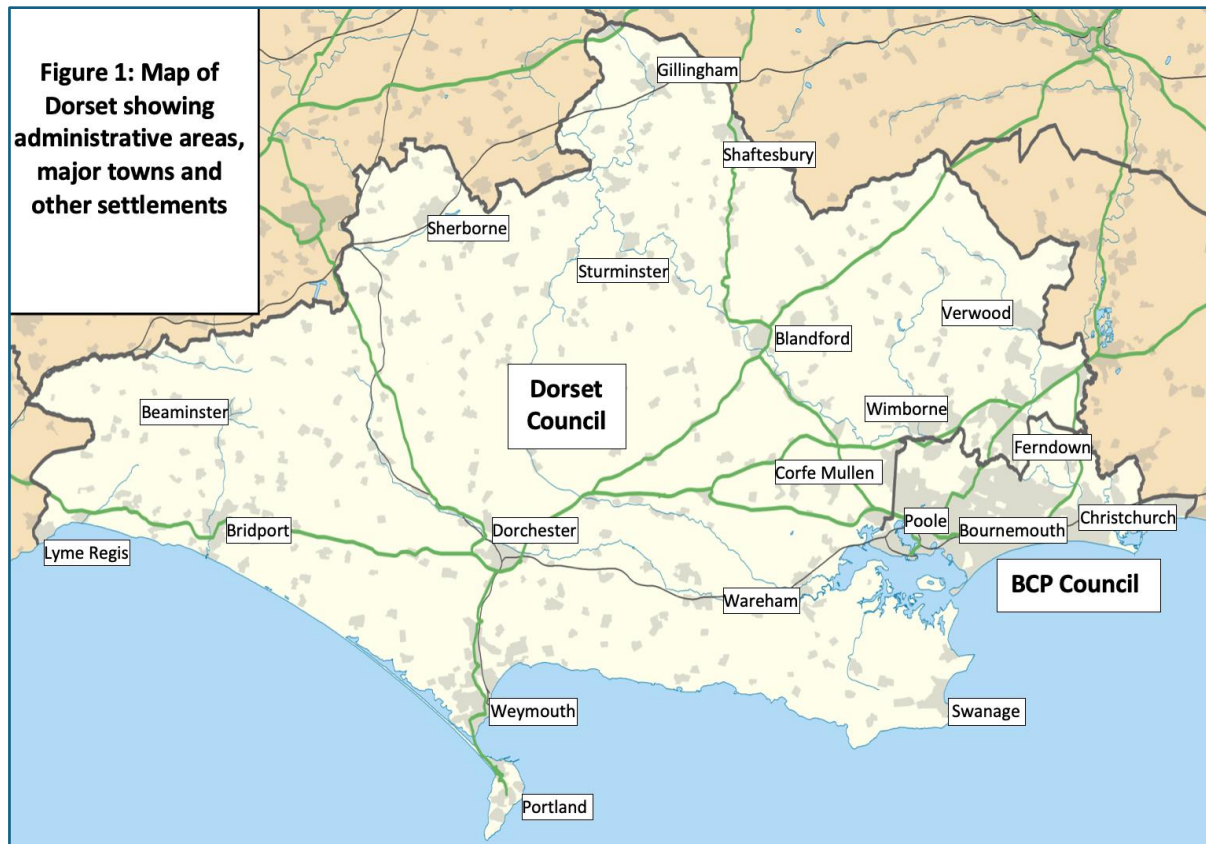
- Graham Sansom's observation of the context, process and implications of the 2019 reorganization of local government across Dorset, linked to his experience with similar processes in Australia.
- Gordon Morris's previous research into market towns, the sphere of influence of Sherborne in north Dorset, and the future of parish and town councils across England, as well as his personal experience as a parish councillor.

This was a low-key project conducted with very limited resources. Accordingly, a pragmatic decision was made to focus on the 25 member councils of DAPTC's Towns and Larger Parishes (TLPs) Committee. In addition to desktop review of relevant literature and reports, components of the research included:

- Fieldwork in May/October 2023 and June/November 2024, involving personal (and in several cases, repeated) visits to 18 of the 25 TLPs.
- An online survey in April 2024 of elected members and council clerks from the 25 TLPs.
- Two online meetings with the TLPs Committee and, in November 2024, two workshops with representatives of TLPs to explain and receive feedback on draft findings.
- Also in November 2024, meetings in Cornwall with the Association of Local Councils (CALC), several towns and parishes, and senior management of Cornwall Council, to review their 14 years' experience devolving additional responsibilities to local councils.
- Several discussions with senior representatives of DC – the current Leader, councillors, chief executive and heads of divisions.
- Conversations with academic and professional colleagues, including the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), the representative body for towns and parishes.
- Crucially, close cooperation and repeated discussions throughout with the leadership of DAPTC and the Dorset branch of the Society of Local Council Clerks.

## 1.1 Dorset's Governance Framework

Following the abolition of the former county and six<sup>1</sup> district councils, the unitary Dorset Council (DC) commenced operations in April 2019. It administers all the 'non-metropolitan' areas of the ceremonial county of Dorset outside the jurisdiction of the new Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole (BCP) Council, with which it shares a lengthy and complex boundary (see Figure 1). Dorset Council now has a population of around 385,000 and an annual budget of some £380M – of which more than 60% is spent on social care, health and children's services.



Within the DC's jurisdiction, there are about 160 functioning parish and town ('local') councils.<sup>2</sup> However, the 25 TLPs house around 70% of the area's total population (close to 60% in the largest 18, and 40% in two major urban complexes – see section 1.2.2), with a combined annual expenditure of some £23M on 'municipal' services such as parks and gardens, sporting and community facilities, streets and verges, heritage buildings, locality plans, aspects of environmental management, public toilets, cemeteries, allotments and others. This represents a substantial 'top-up' of DC's own annual expenditure of £104M on the 'Place' functions previously handled by District Councils.

England's parish and town councils were established as statutory units of government by the *Parish Councils Act 1894*, later replaced by the *Local Government Act 1972*. Since then, their

<sup>1</sup> Five former Districts were absorbed by Dorset Council, while Christchurch District became part of the new Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole unitary.

<sup>2</sup> In 2021 this included 36 grouped parishes that together included a total of 111 small parishes. There are also around 100 parishes that have no elected council and simply convene an annual Parish Meeting.



roles, powers and duties have been modified by further legislation. Crucially, they have the authority to levy a precept (in effect, a supplementary Council Tax) on properties within their jurisdiction; but unlike Council Tax, those precepts currently remain uncapped and may be increased at the discretion of each local council. Moreover, local councils enjoy a high level of autonomy in determining the scope and management of their operations, including (subject to certain conditions) having a general power of competence (see the beginning of section 2).<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, despite their history, status and potential, and although the abolition of Dorset's District Councils in 2019 risked creating a 'governance gap' for local places and their communities, very little thought has been given to how the roles of Dorset's towns and parishes, and particularly the better resourced TLPs, might evolve. This contrasts markedly with what has happened in Cornwall (see section 2.5 under *Comparison with Cornwall*).

As discussed later in section 6.3, the current relationship between DC and towns and parishes could fairly be described as 'ships in the night' – patchy, ambivalent and unfocused, without an overarching agenda and shared purpose. That may be about to change. Since DC's transition from Conservative to LDP control at the May 2024 local elections, towns and parishes are beginning to receive more attention. The LDP election manifesto committed to:

*'a well-run council with vision and ambition; making decision-making as local and democratic as possible; listening more to local residents and creating a genuine partnership with town and parish councils.'*

That core issue is referenced throughout this report.

## **1.2 Drivers for Further Change**

Many of the issues discussed in this report are underpinned by three critical factors:

- Dorset Council's worsening financial position and resulting questions concerning its capacity to achieve a satisfactory balance between on the one hand, increasingly expensive social services and personal support, and on the other effective place management<sup>4</sup> for the many different localities across its jurisdiction.
- Emerging patterns of urban and economic development, especially urban growth along the BCP border and around Weymouth.
- The now delayed move to establish a combined Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) with BCP, Somerset and Wiltshire.

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<sup>3</sup> For a useful summary of the national legislative and policy framework for parish and town councils, see Mark Sandford (2021) *Parish and town councils: recent issues*, House of Commons Library

<sup>4</sup> 'Place management' and 'place-making' are somewhat loosely defined terms that refer to the governance, management or 'making' of localities, neighbourhoods and/or public spaces in a way that enhances their physical, economic and social qualities, their identity and vitality, and the wellbeing and cohesiveness of their communities (building 'social capital'). This is seen to require a multi-faceted effort involving purposeful leadership by a responsible agency, improved coordination of public sector activity, and close working relationships with community organisations and the private sector.



### **1.2.1 Prospects for Dorset Council**

The new Dorset Council Plan<sup>5</sup>, adopted in December 2024, prioritises four ‘big picture’ items – economic development, housing, environment and ‘communities for all’ (the last focused largely on addressing needs for more effective social support). The Council Plan’s proposals and their potential implications for towns and parishes are discussed in section 4. However, as its Leader has pointed out<sup>6</sup>, the demands on DC’s budget for social care, housing, public health, children’s services and other statutory requirements leave relatively little for everything else, including ‘municipal’ or ‘place’ services provided by the former Districts (roads, planning, waste management etc), as well as new strategic initiatives. Current forecasts point to an ongoing significant weakening of DC’s financial position<sup>7</sup> and capacity to fulfil all its responsibilities, and the Plan acknowledges that there is already some dissatisfaction with the way DC responds to differing local needs and aspirations.

This raises the question of whether DC can realistically expect to ‘do it all’, combining and balancing both ‘county’ and ‘district’ functions – especially given the seemingly overwhelming demands of the former county’s role in social services. **Indeed, while DC was deliberately constituted as a ‘district council with county functions’, its operational focus suggests the opposite.** Moreover, for practical reasons the new council is based in the old County Hall (still named as such), and the term ‘county’ is often used as a descriptor. These seem to be significant influences and indicators in terms of corporate culture.

**Unless DC’s budget receives a major boost, and given that increases in their council tax precepts remain uncapped, towns and parishes will almost certainly have to do more in terms of ‘municipal’ services previously handled by the districts.** This will likely involve both helping to maintain local services at current levels and addressing the changing needs of their localities (see section 2.5 for a comparison with Cornwall).

### **1.2.2 Emerging Patterns of Development**

**Emerging patterns of urban and economic development appear certain to have significant implications over the medium term for the roles of towns and parishes and Dorset’s governance more broadly.** There are two elements to this. Firstly, Dorset’s rural and coastal areas are increasingly attractive places to live for both retirees and commuters to London and other major urban centres. The pressure to build more housing in and around Dorset’s towns and villages is compounded by central government targets aimed at tackling a nationwide shortage. This requires sensitive planning that accommodates essential development while maintaining and enhancing established character, sense of place and quality of life. TLPs can play a significant role in achieving the right balance.

Secondly, the historic distribution of population across non-metropolitan Dorset is being changed by the emergence of two major urban complexes: one along the BCP boundary, and another around Weymouth.

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/dorset-council-plan-2024-to-2029>

<sup>6</sup> Address to DAPTC Annual General Meeting, 23 November 2024

<sup>7</sup> See section 5.1 and <https://modern.gov.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?id=4293>

As shown in Figure 1, the boundary between DC and BCP is straddled by substantial urban areas that have grown considerably in recent years and are set to see significant further expansion to meet needs for increased housing supply. Around 60,000 people now live in six urbanised towns and parishes stretching from Wimborne in the west to the Hampshire border. A further 20,000 live along the western section of the BCP boundary in Corfe Mullen and Lytchett Minster and Upton. **Individually or collectively, these eight local councils<sup>8</sup> could be expected to play a considerably expanded role in managing growth.** This will likely require changes to boundaries, roles and electoral arrangements (see section 3.3).

Figure 1 also shows the growing urban complex centred on the towns of Weymouth, Portland and Chickerell, which have a combined population of about 74,000. Together, Weymouth and Portland constituted one of Dorset's former District Councils. Weymouth is now one of the largest town councils in England, but this reality was scarcely recognized during or following the 2019 reorganisation and the town council's role is considerably more limited than might have been expected.

The new Dorset Council Plan suggests a potential 'growth corridor' linking Portland, Weymouth and Dorchester. As well, DC has launched a 'Weymouth 2040' initiative, also involving Portland and Chickerell. This is apparently focused on economic growth, initially the development potential of four key DC-owned sites. However, apart from a sales brochure for the council sites, at this stage detail is lacking and it is not clear how the three town councils will be involved in either of the two initiatives. Again, there is a pressing need to address future local governance, including potential changes to town council roles and boundaries (see sections 3.3 and 4.4).

### **1.2.3 Potential Strategic Authority**

The UK Labour Government has flagged devolution of responsibilities and funding to England's regions as a key policy for economic growth and community wellbeing. It envisages an expanded network of local government 'combined authorities' led by elected Mayors<sup>9</sup>, each of which would be eligible for substantially increased government funding. In December 2024 the unitary Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire councils lodged an Expression of Interest to central government to establish a 'Heart of Wessex' (later simply 'Wessex') Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). Then in January 2025, BCP council agreed to join the bid – it had previously wanted to stand alone and opposed having an elected Mayor – creating a potential region of 1.9 million people.

While the four councils argued that they would continue to operate independently within the MSA, experience elsewhere in England suggests that over time there would be significant changes in governance and service delivery. One possibility is that central government's devolution of responsibilities for major service delivery to regions could intensify the pressure on cash-strapped principal councils (districts or unitaries) to devolve some of their 'municipal' functions to larger towns so that they can focus on 'county' and/or district-level infrastructure and services. Another possibility is that concerns about

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<sup>8</sup> In the longer term parts of the adjoining parishes of Holt, Pamphill & Shapwick, and Lytchett Matravers could also become involved (see Figure 4).

<sup>9</sup> Set out in the *English Devolution White Paper*, published 16 December 2024.

weakening of local democracy may focus more attention on the representative and community engagement roles of towns and parishes.

However, in early February 2025 the government announced that Wessex would not be included in its Devolution Priority Programme. Negotiations for a future deal could continue, but no further changes will be made until 2027 or beyond. In the case of DC, this deferral could exacerbate financial problems, and may well highlight the need for increased cooperation with BCP, including management of urban growth along the border. **It could also be seen as offering a welcome ‘breathing space’ to address the outstanding need for a policy framework on the future role of towns and parishes, especially TLPs, and to foster the ‘genuine partnership’ promised by the LDP.**

### **1.3 Structure of this Report**

The remainder of this report focuses on the scope for expanding the role of TLPs and establishing a more productive and mutually beneficial relationship between them and Dorset Council, built on a sound policy framework to facilitate necessary change. Research findings are presented and discussed under five main headings:

- Capacity and Potential of Towns and Larger Parishes
- 2021 Community Governance Review
- Dorset Council Plan 2024-29
- Operating Model and ‘Place-based’ Working
- Pathways for ‘Double Devolution’

The experience of Cornwall Council, which became a unitary following the abolition of the former county and district councils in 2009, a decade before Dorset’s reorganisation, offers an informative comparison. ‘Lessons from Cornwall’ are presented in text boxes and reflect the authors’ understanding of Cornwall Council’s almost 15 years of experience in advancing and managing elements of ‘double devolution’.

## **2. Capacity and Potential of Towns and Larger Parishes**

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As noted earlier, local councils enjoy a range of statutory powers and entitlements. These include the right to deliver numerous services (in some cases subject to the agreement of the principal council (ie. DC), and to be consulted on various matters, notably development applications. In addition, and provided they meet certain criteria, they may exercise a ‘general power of competence’ to do anything an individual can do, provided it is not prohibited by other legislation.<sup>10</sup> This could extend to commercial enterprises or contributing towards the provision of a service by another authority – both of which could enable extensive cooperative activities and shared service delivery.

### **2.1 Comparative Data**

Information on the circumstances, capacity and potential of the 25 TLPs was collected through desktop research, the online survey in April 2024, and in-person or online meetings with representatives of local councils, DAPTC and DC, as well as informed observers.

The TLPs are a self-selected group of local councils that includes all Dorset’s ‘towns’, plus 4 of the 8 still known as ‘parishes’ that have populations in excess of 2,000. They are very diverse in terms of their geography, socio-economic characteristics and the services they deliver. Table 1 provides comparative data for population, democratic representation, revenues and expenditure. Wide variations in size of population are immediately evident, reflecting historical differences in functions and development, as well as recent patterns of urban growth. Other significant aspects are identified in the following sub-sections.

Table 2 provides limited comparative data the other 4 large parishes that do not currently identify as TLPs, nor are members of DAPTC’s TLPs committee, but have populations similar to some of the smaller towns.

- Alderholt parish is based on the large village of the same name and covers an extensive area on the eastern boundary of Dorset, some distance to the north-east of Verwood.

The other three all adjoin established Dorset TLPs and are impacted to varying degrees by population growth and development in the border zone around BCP.

- West Parley is an urban area on the BCP boundary contiguous with Ferndown.
- Wareham St Martin is a large, mostly rural parish adjoining the town of Wareham to the north, centred on the village of Sandford.
- Lytchett Matravers is a large parish immediately north-west of Lytchett Minster & Upton, surrounding a growing town of the same name.

There is no obstacle to these four parishes joining the TLPs group and committee, if they so wish. Although they sit at the lower end of the TLPs population scale, they also have the potential and likely growing needs to play an expanded role. Currently, all levy precepts well below the TLP average.

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<sup>10</sup> The criteria are that at least two-thirds of the councillors must be elected as opposed to co-opted or appointed, and the council clerk must have designated qualifications.

# Final 20.3.25

Table 1: Indicative Comparative Data for Towns and Larger Parishes

Town/Parish	Population 2021	Number of Cllrs/Wards 2024	Population per Councillor*	Uncontested Elections 2024^	Total Precept £ 2023-24	Precept per Capita £ 2023-24*	Budgeted Expenditure £ 2023-24	Expenditure per Capita £ 2023-24*
Beaminster	3,154	8/0	394	U	241,935	77	292,307	93
Blandford Forum	10,607	16/5	663	U(5W)	825,250	78	913,745	86
Bridport #	8,205	18/2	456		844,484	103	1,429,031	174
Charminster	3,356	13/2	258	U(1W)	45,496	14	140,635	42
Chickerell	6,283	10/2	628	U(2W)	171,000	27	199,100	32
Colehill	7,498	12/2	698	U(2W)	125,534	17	174,729	23
Corfe Mullen	10,374	14/0	741	U	502,456	48	522,556	50
Dorchester	21,358	20/5	1,068	U(2W)	1,668,507	78	1,807,487	85
Ferndown	17,457	17/7	1,027	U(3W)	863,320	49	1,087,002	62
Gillingham	11,505	17/7	677	U(4W)	1,020,559	89	1,042,990	91
Lyme Regis	3,742	14/0	267	U	132,779	36	1,933,887	517
Lytchett Minster & Upton	8,649	12/2	721	U(2W)	345,637	40	505,457	58
Portland	13,558	14/3	968		544,751	40	598,924	44
St Leonards & St Ives	7,901	13/3	608	U(3W)	105,086	13	123,526	16
Shaftesbury	9,160	15/2	611	U(1W)	560,156	61	1,027,115	112
Sherborne	10,361	15/2	691	U(2W)	906,076	87	1,029,486	99
Stalbridge	2,668	11/0	243	U	135,500	51	256,746	96
Sturminster Newton	4,408	11/0	401		385,030	87	404,328	91
Swanage	9,426	12/0	786		849,030	90	3,354,730	356
Verwood	15,172	19/4	796	U(4W)	383,600	25	486,910	32
Wareham	5,877	16/0	367		495,945	84	623,265	106
West Moors	7,403	12/0	617	U	175,355	24	223,455	30
Weymouth	53,416	25/11	2,137		3,348,840	63	4,238,700	79
Wimborne Minster	9,059	14/2	647	U(2W)	530,829	59	630,085	70
Wool	5,374	15/2	358	U(2W)	94,240	18	96,803	18
<b>TOTAL/AVERAGE</b>	265,971				£15,301,365	Average £58	£23,142,999	Average £87

\* Based on 2021 population. ^ U (...W) indicates uncontested seats, either at large or in some wards. # Major changes took effect on 1 April 2024. There are now 20 councillors across 5 wards. Applying the new boundaries, the 2021 population would have been about 13,500, around 675 people per councillor.

Table 2: Selected Comparative Data for Other Large Parishes

Parish	Population 2021	Total Precept £ 2023-24	Precept per Capita £ 2023-24	Total Expenditure £ 2023-24	Expenditure per Capita £ 2023-24
Aldersholt	3,171	96,376	30	143,511	45
Lytchett Matravers	3,424	108,009	32	138,766	41
Wareham St Martin	2,774	35,000	13	54,448	20
West Parley	3,585	83,500	23	149,066	42

## 2.2 Democratic Community Governance

**Of critical importance to their future potential is the simple fact that all TLPs are statutory, elected bodies and thus provide an extra layer of democratic governance for their communities.** While Dorset ward councillors also play an important representative role for localities, towns and parishes are ideally placed to provide exceptionally rich and responsive community governance, with major benefits in terms of quality of life, local identity and sense of place. Nevertheless, several issues need attention.

- First and foremost, the democratic value of local councils is frequently questioned because many councillors do not face contested elections. This applies particularly to a high number of smaller parish councils outside the TLPs group, but as Table 1 shows, in 2024 nearly 80% of the TLPs had an uncontested election in at least one ward. This occurred even amongst some councils with the highest ratio of population per councillor. To fill the resulting vacant positions, councils had to hold costly by-elections<sup>11</sup> or seek volunteers for co-option.
- There are marked variations in the ratio of population per councillor, and in the use of wards within local councils. These lack any consistent pattern and appear questionable. Some survey respondents and interviewees commented that wards may create unwarranted divisions within communities: it is worth noting that almost a third of TLPs, including one with a population of nearly 10,000, operate satisfactorily without wards.
- Excluding Weymouth TC, the average number of councillors per town/parish is around 14, and the average population per councillor is only a little more than 600. This pattern is broadly consistent with national practice<sup>12</sup>, and having a large number of councillors may provide volunteer labour to 'get jobs done' when staff resources are limited – evidently that remains something of a tradition in local councils. Nevertheless, is attracting sufficient candidates to elect one councillor for every few hundred people – and especially to have enough for a truly contested election – realistic in the modern era? The data suggest that in many cases a substantial reduction in the number of elected councillors may be warranted, typically around 25% or more. This, coupled with the abolition of wards where appropriate, would increase the likelihood of contested elections. The reduced number of elected councillors might be offset by appointing non-voting members – especially people with needed skills and energy.

<sup>11</sup> The high cost of elections in general is a significant issue for many parishes with small budgets.

<sup>12</sup> As advocated by NALC. However, the legal minimum is just 5; there is no legislated standard ratio of councillors to electors; and official government guidance suggests a 'large number' is not usually required.

- Concerns were expressed by some respondents to the online survey that in many instances local councils are failing to inform and/or effectively engage their communities, and thus to garner needed support for their role and activities. If accurate, this observation is disturbing given local councils' fundamental democratic purpose and the high number of councillors per capita. It perhaps suggests an 'autocratic' approach on the part of some elected bodies, and/or that a lack of skills and ambition results in them simply 'going through the motions'.

The damaging impact of uncontested elections was demonstrated early in the 2019 reorganisation process, when the 'Case for Change' report commented as follows:

*.... in the most recent elections in 2015, only 9% of town and parish member elections were contested. This does raise questions about the capacity of some of the town and parish councils to take on additional functions. Careful consideration should be given to this issue before a localism strategy predicated on delegation is considered.<sup>13</sup>*

The report failed to explain that the great majority of uncontested seats were in small rural parishes where it may be unrealistic to expect contested elections whatever the number of councillors, given the cost involved, low numbers of permanent residents, and perhaps a tendency to reach a pre-election 'community consensus' on suitable councillors. Nevertheless, subsequent events suggest that the report's observation reflected an influential perspective amongst those who later finalised and implemented the reorganisation, perhaps leading to a 'lowest common denominator' approach by DC to the role of local councils generally.

**All these matters should be addressed by a future Community Governance Review, which is needed sooner rather than later (see section 3.2).**

## **2.3 Funding and Services**

The variations in own-source revenue (the council tax precept) and expenditure shown in Table 1 are important in three respects, reflecting:

- Current differences in capacity and effort to deliver services. Some local councils appear to do very little and rely on services in neighbouring towns – in 2023-24 seven TLPs raised less than £30 per capita in precepts, and spent less than £40 per capita.
- The ability of some councils to raise large amounts of revenue from other sources, perhaps suggesting that options to do so could be explored more widely.
- Untapped potential for local councils both individually and collectively to raise considerably more revenue, deliver a wider range of services and expand their role in the governance of Dorset – precepts well above the current TLPs group average are evidently acceptable to Cornwall taxpayers, and the same may well apply across much of the DC area.

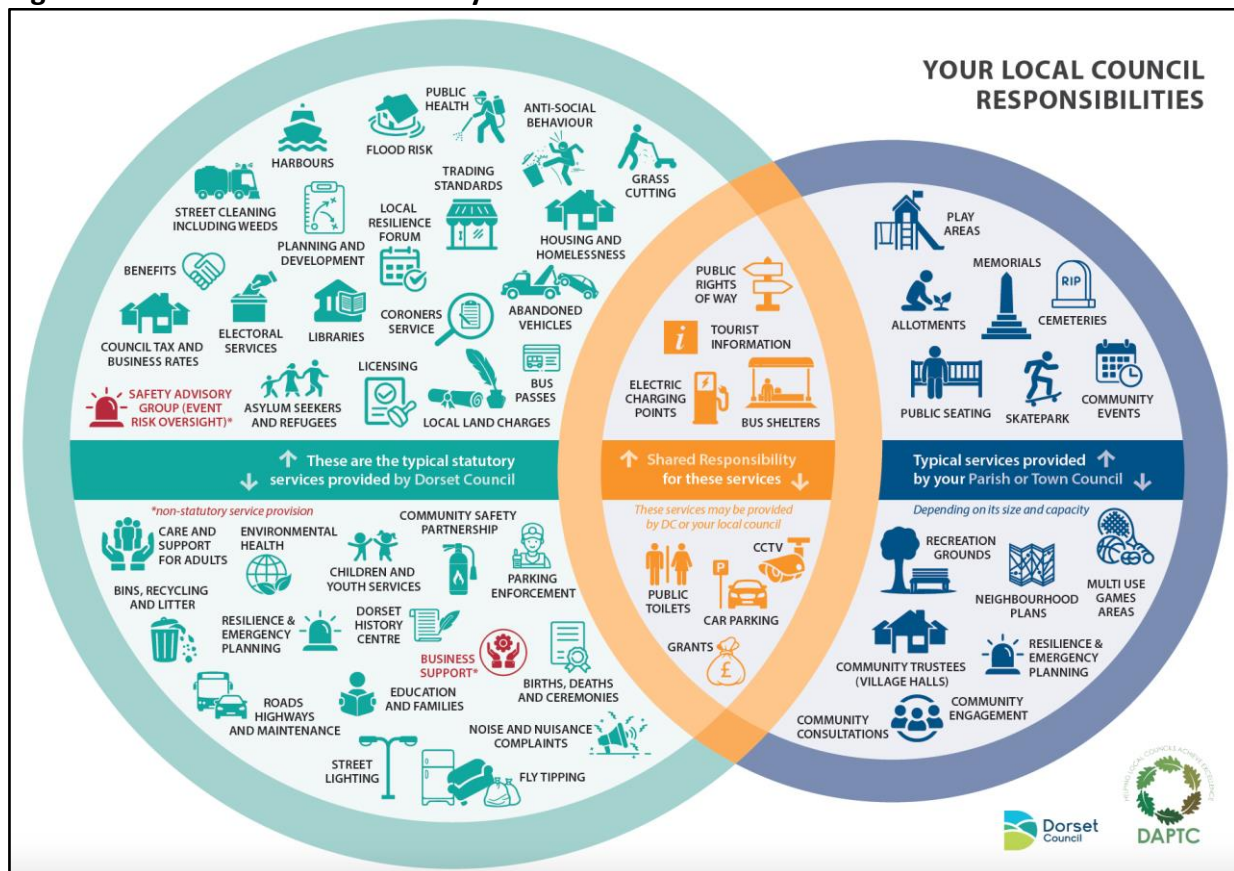
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<sup>13</sup> *Case for change: Local government reorganisation in Dorset*. PWC, December 2016, p.78. Available at: <https://moderngov.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/Data/359/201701121830/Agenda/Appendix%201%20-%20PwC%20Case%20for%20Change.pdf>



Figure 2 shows the range of services delivered by towns and parishes in general, and by DC. Local councils have very few statutory *obligations* (as opposed to powers) for service delivery, and many small parishes do not provide some or most of the typical 'core' (blue) services. However, all those services are provided to varying degrees by TLPs, together with some in the (orange) group for which delivery is shared with DC, and even in the (green) category of DC's statutory services. Notably, there are numerous examples of TLPs already taking partial or full responsibility for roadside verges, street cleaning, car parks, waste and litter collection, grass cutting, local markets, major/historic buildings, economic development, tourism, beaches, environmental protection, community resilience etc.

**Figure 2: Pattern of Service Delivery**



## 2.4 Perceived Scope to Expand Service Delivery

The online survey of local council clerks and elected members included several questions that explored the needs and scope for TLPs to expand their range of service delivery, and their likely willingness to do so (see Attachment A for a summary of survey findings).

Currently, the dominant areas of service delivery by TLPs (in terms of expenditure) are parks, gardens and play areas; community facilities (including halls, community centres, other buildings, allotments, cemeteries); sporting facilities (outdoor and indoor); community development (including events, grants, transport, social support, youth services, information and advice); and public toilets. Expenditure on most of those services has been increasing faster than inflation and that is expected to continue.

Key pressures for change in roles and priorities were seen as growth and (re)development; dealing with an ageing population; addressing threats to environmental quality; ensuring community participation and local democracy; and upgrading services and facilities to meet changing community needs. **This suggests an ongoing agenda for TLPs that blends managing growth and environmental concerns with a strong focus on local democracy and upgrading services to meet changing community needs (notably an ageing population).**

Large majorities of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statements that:

- *Our council will have to make significant changes to its functions and priorities over the next decade to address local needs and maintain quality of life.*
- *Our council can and should become a more robust advocate on behalf of the local community.*
- *Parish and town councils generally should establish a broader role in ‘place making’ and community development.*

These views were accompanied by a willingness to consider ‘downloading’ of a range of functions from DC, notably parks and gardens; streets (minor maintenance, lighting, cleansing, footpaths, verges etc); parking areas; public toilets; community facilities and community development. However, that willingness was laced with caution about financial implications and arrangements, and evident reluctance to contemplate large increases in precepts (discussed further in section 2.6) or structural change (amalgamation of towns and parishes or formalised shared services). **In part, this caution about accepting more responsibilities may reflect ambivalence about the quality of working relationships with DC, and the extent to which it really wants to see an expanded role for, and closer cooperation with, TLPs (see section 2.7).**

## 2.5 Comparison with Cornwall

Table 3 compares the finances of Dorset’s TLPs with their counterparts in Cornwall.

**Table 3: Dorset and Cornwall Compared**

	Dorset	Cornwall
<b>No. Towns &amp; Larger Parishes (TLPs)*</b>	25	34
<b>2021 Population of LGA</b>	380,000	570,300
<b>TLPs as % Total LGA Population</b>	70%	62%
<b>2021 Population Range</b>	2,668 – 53,416	2,240 – 23,830
<b>2021 Populations 10-20,000</b>	8^	14
<b>2021 Populations &gt;20,000 (&gt;30,000)</b>	2 (1)	6 (0)
<b>2021 Total Population in TLPs</b>	265,971	353,036
<b>2023-24 Total Precepts of TLPs</b>	£ 15,301,365	£ 27,039,548
<b>2023-24 Precepts Range</b>	£ 13 – 103	£ 37 – 138
<b>2023-24 Average Precept Per Capita #</b>	£ 58	£ 77

\* Defined in Cornwall as towns/parishes with precept income >£140,000; Self-defined in Dorset (in 2023-24 six raised less than £140,000). ^ Includes Bridport following recent boundary changes

# Based on 2021 populations, so perhaps by 2023-24 a little less than shown.

Since 2010 Cornwall Council has implemented a series of ‘double devolution’ policies to encourage local councils to do more, in part to relieve some of the financial pressures on itself, which have become severe. Attachment B presents extracts from one of several research papers analysing Cornwall’s experience. Discussions held during this project with representatives of Cornwall Council, the Cornwall Association of Local Councils (CALC), and several town and parish councils indicate that the trend to devolution is likely to continue.<sup>14</sup>

### **Box 1: Lessons from Cornwall #1**

While there some differences in context, the comparison between TLPs in Cornwall and Dorset is instructive. In response to Cornwall Council’s policies:

- Many larger towns have already taken on numerous – and costly – additional functions.
- Total revenue from local council precepts has increased by around 300% over 15 years.
- On-the-whole, residents appear to have accepted those increases with relatively little opposition or backlash – most likely because the result has generally been to save and/or improve services and to exercise greater local control, both of which are valued.
- It appears that towns and larger parishes are generally willing to do still more – Cornwall Council’s ongoing financial difficulties may leave no other option. Already, the budgeted increase in total precept revenues for Cornwall’s 34 TLPs in 2024-25 is 13.4% (still a relatively low amount in actual money).

**If the average precept per capita of Dorset TLPs had matched Cornwall’s level of £77, they would have raised an additional £5.25M (34%) in 2023-24. And at Cornwall’s projected average per capita precept for 2024-25 (£87), the total precept income of Dorset TLPs would now exceed £23M – an increase of 50%.** Moreover, this increase would represent only a small fraction of those accepted by residents in Cornwall. With the right policy settings and the endorsement of DC, Dorset’s TLPs could more than double their precept income over the next 5-10 years.

## **2.6 Corporate and Locality Planning**

An expanded role for TLPs in service delivery and place-making/place management<sup>15</sup> would need to be underpinned by effective corporate (including financial) and locality planning. Currently, however, the applicable legislation imposes only minimal demands for budgeting, financial reporting and audit, even in the case of larger towns and parishes. There are no requirements for multi-year financial plans (‘forward estimates’), nor for broader corporate or locality strategies.

As part of the online survey, local council clerks were asked; *What Town/Parish plans has your council completed, or are under way, or may be prepared in the next term?* Table 4 shows their responses (17 of the 25 clerks completed the survey).

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<sup>14</sup> For a recent re-statement of policy, see *Localism in Cornwall: The Power of Community* (2020)

<sup>15</sup> Defined earlier in footnote #3 on p.5

Table 4: Corporate and Locality Planning by TLPs

Type of Plan	Completed	Under Way	Maybe Soon	Most Unlikely
Council corporate/strategy plan	7	4	6	-
Statutory Neighbourhood Plan	4	4	4	5
Social/community plan	4	-	8	4
Environment/conservation plan	6	-	9	1
Climate action plan	8	2	6	1

Clearly, TLPs are doing – and/or intending to do – a fair amount of planning for their localities. The number of completed plans for environment/conservation and climate action appears noteworthy, and supplementary comments also mentioned plans for seafront and beach improvements, access (disability?) and movement, streetscape and heritage. This activity reflected widespread concerns about the need to address population growth and urban (re)development; maintaining local character; environmental challenges (including climate change); and economic development. On the other hand, relatively few TLPs had completed or were preparing corporate/strategy plans for their operations or statutory Neighbourhood Plans to guide development.

### 2.6.1 Corporate and Financial Plans

**The paucity of corporate and financial planning might simply reflect the relatively small-scale operations of most TLPs and the absence of any legal requirements beyond annual budgets and audited financial statements.** But it may also point to deficiencies in terms of skills, and of awareness on the part of staff and/or councillors about the need for a more professional approach (see section 2.7.1). In part, this may well reflect low expectations around the role and performance of local councils.

As noted above, this is reflected particularly in a reluctance to increase precepts, which remain uncapped but are still comparatively low. Responses to the online survey showed a widespread acceptance that expenditures should grow marginally or substantially faster than CPI to meet unmet, increasing or emerging needs. Yet the majority felt it was at best ‘just possible’ or ‘quite likely’ that their community would support such an increase, citing current cost of living pressures. Discussions also revealed a concern that increased revenue from precepts might be ‘siphoned’ for use elsewhere. **Precept increases would need to be carefully planned with community consultation, and justified on the basis that the additional revenue would be dedicated to local needs.**

In some ways the concerns being expressed are unremarkable. **What is alarming, however, is the extent to which increases in precepts in some towns and parishes are being held below CPI and even below the cap on council tax.** Zero increases are not uncommon, sometimes for successive years and even amongst large towns struggling to maintain a demanding range of services and lacking the funds to undertake essential improvements to infrastructure and facilities.<sup>16</sup> This somewhat ‘cavalier’ attitude to financial management is

<sup>16</sup> See for example news releases *Budget agreed by Weymouth Town Council*, dated 15.1.25: [comms@weymouthtowncouncil.gov.uk](mailto:comms@weymouthtowncouncil.gov.uk), and *Shaftesbury Town Council Announces Council Tax Precept Adjustment to Sustain Services and Develop Community Assets*, dated 21.1.25: [office@Shaftesbury-tc.gov.uk](mailto:office@Shaftesbury-tc.gov.uk)

enabled by the lack of a statutory requirement for medium-term financial planning and, it could be argued, any guidance from DC. Year-by-year budgeting allows difficult or contentious decisions about the adequacy of revenues and expenditure to be repeatedly deferred until a crisis looms. Questions also need to be asked about the adequacy of audits that may be conducted by people with limited qualifications and experience, or that fail to assess whether council finances are being managed responsibly and are on a sustainable trajectory.

### **2.6.2 Neighbourhood Plans**

Preparation and adoption of a statutory Neighbourhood Plan offers towns and parishes the opportunity to ensure that the Dorset Local Plan properly addresses the issues facing their locality; to play a stronger role in guiding growth and change, and improve the quality of development proposals; and to receive an increased share of developer contributions for community infrastructure and facilities. Given widespread concerns about the impacts of urban development, maintaining local character and environmental issues, it might have been expected that statutory Neighbourhood Plans would feature prominently.

**However, survey results and a check of council websites confirms that only 6 of the 25 TLPs have completed a Neighbourhood Plan, with two others underway. (This compares with 21 of 34 in Cornwall.<sup>17</sup>)** Several of the largest TLPs apparently have no intention of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan in the short-medium term: two started but then deferred further work. None of the local councils along the BCP boundary have one, although in the other urban complex, Portland and Chickerell have adopted plans and Weymouth's is well advanced.

Survey responses pointed to two key factors that may explain this situation: the length and complexity of the statutory process, and what are seen as excessive demands imposed on council and community resources, including financial costs. The delay in completion of the new Dorset Local Plan and hence uncertainty around the parameters for town and parish plans was raised as another significant factor (although the delay could be seen as an opportunity to 'get in first', engage residents and stakeholders, and draft a Neighbourhood Plan that advances community aspirations). As well, there is a view in some quarters that the benefits of Neighbourhood Plans could be achieved in other ways, such as non-statutory locality plans or gaining a more influential role in processing development applications. (How the latter can be achieved consistently without a Neighbourhood Plan is unclear.)

There is no doubt that preparation of Neighbourhood Plans is complex and imposes heavy demands on local councils and their communities. In the final analysis, the question is whether the benefits outweigh the costs. Viewed simply in terms of financial gain – the increased share of developer contributions – the answer may be 'no'. However, the value of a Neighbourhood Plan may also lie in the town or parish achieving more influence in local planning and a higher profile in decision-making across a broader range of issues. In that regard, Bridport's experience points to key elements of neighbourhood planning that warrant more attention in the wider Dorset context:

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<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/xdadmvmxz/neighbourhood-planning-activity-map-a3.pdf>



- A Neighbourhood Plan may be prepared and implemented *jointly* by several towns and parishes, and thus provide a basis for cooperative action on a wide range of interlocking issues (eg across Dorset's two major urban complexes).
- It may include *detailed* objectives, standards and guidelines that *must* be given due weight by applicants and by DC in the formulation and assessment of development proposals – and in the implementation of DC's Local Plan.
- It may address not only 'conventional' elements of land use planning and development control, but also broader environmental, economic and social issues and challenges (albeit with less statutory backing, but nonetheless persuasively).

**In short, a sound Neighbourhood Plan may help to position the town or parish concerned as a more substantial player in Dorset's system of governance, and a more capable partner.**

## **2.7 Weaknesses in Policy, Skills and Leadership**

Realising the potential of Dorset's TLPs and other large parishes will not be easy, even if there is broad agreement that it is a goal worth pursuing. This assessment reflects weaknesses in policy, skills and leadership across both TLPs and Dorset Council.

### **2.7.1 Failings amongst Local Councils**

**With some notable exceptions, Dorset's local councils have yet to rise to the challenges of the post-2019 era.** With the loss of District Councils, and in the absence of encouragement and guidance from DC (see below) many towns and parishes appear to lack the confidence and drive needed to chart a fresh course – even though (according to the survey results) they know more needs to be done to manage their 'place' and support its community. Without a concerted effort to increase resources and expertise most local councils will find themselves unable to do more than simply keep up with the day-to-day pressures of their current activities.

Previous sub-sections have highlighted weaknesses in corporate and locality planning, community engagement and financial management – notably the failure to increase precepts just to keep pace with inflation and ensure basic services, let alone fund an expanded role.

Another factor is insufficient communication and cooperation. Despite the efforts of DAPTC, it is evident that many local councils operate largely in isolation from each other – there is a distinct lack of common purpose that weakens DAPTC's ability to advance concrete policy proposals and advocate effectively. Survey respondents expressed a widespread belief that TLPs should exchange information and ideas and work together much more than they do currently.

A stronger skills base will be critical. There was broad agreement among survey respondents that: *both councillors and senior managers will need to substantially upgrade their skills to*

*lead the [town or larger parish] council effectively and respond to changing needs.* This requires joint action by DAPTC, SLCC and DC (see section 6.4).

Also, stronger leadership is needed to advance cooperative efforts and tackle thorny issues around funding and governance. TLPs need to bring together some of the most experienced elected members and council clerks to formulate and promote sound proposals for ‘bottom-up’ change. **There are more than enough talented people within the TLPs to provide forceful collective leadership, but some of the most capable are not in leadership positions at present, or contributing as much as they could.**

In summary, TLPs are doing a lot of valuable work, but if they do not broaden their horizons and ‘lift their game’ they are likely to become increasingly peripheral in Dorset’s system of local governance. **The TLPs must decide now whether to accept probably uncomfortable change in return for enhanced recognition and greater scope to advance the interests of their communities.**

### **2.7.2 Dorset Council’s Policy Blindspot**

**After nearly six years, DC still has no policy framework around the role it expects towns and parishes could or should play in the system of local governance, nor for how it will work with them collectively.**<sup>18</sup> During this research, the relationship between DC and TLPs was described by survey respondents as ‘generally productive’, but in practical terms it was revealed as patchy and inconsistent.

In October 2019 an initial peer review of DC by the national Local Government Association found that:

*The council has clearly made significant progress with its leadership of place agenda...[but] ... there is further work to be done with parishes and towns to fundamentally develop a strong and sustainable partnership plan...*<sup>19</sup>

A follow-up review in 2022 returned to that finding:

*Once more we heard about a willingness to engage between Dorset Council and its parish and town councils ... However, we also heard that **Dorset Council had a disposition to take the key issues away and look to solve the issues on behalf of, not necessarily with, partners. The feeling was that contributions from external partners were not necessarily being sought or encouraged** [emphasis added] ... the overriding sense we had, was that the concept of ‘co-production’ needed a turbo charge, so that everyone can work together on a common purpose and to collectively make progress.*<sup>20</sup>

Subsequently, in February/March 2023 DC endorsed proposed actions to advance ‘Place leadership’, including to: *Enhance ‘co-production’ in relation to town and parish councils.*

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<sup>18</sup> In fairness, it should be noted that DC is not alone in this regard, and that there appear to be widespread gaps nationally in policy and guidance concerning how the role of parishes and towns may need to change when unitary councils replace districts.

<sup>19</sup> Dorset Council 2022: [Progress review and reflections on impact of sector led improvement](#). Local Government Association, September 2022, p.7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp.12-13



However, this research found little progress on that front. The shortfall in policy and effort appears to reflect, among other things:

- Lack of interest on the part of the Conservative majority in office from 2019 to 2024. Among other things, it decided not to proceed with ‘area boards’ (see section 5.2), partly on the basis that Dorset ward councillors would provide the required ‘bridge’ to towns and parishes – an approach that appears to have fallen well short of expectations.
- The dominance within DC of former ‘county’ functions and objectives, notably around social support and welfare, coupled with the failure (or disinclination?) of the Place directorate (in effect the Districts’ successor) to champion localism and the work of local councils.
- Management’s intense focus on its ‘One Council’ theme (perhaps taken too literally?) around building a new organisation, which seems to have fostered a somewhat inward-looking, centralist bureaucracy that has only recently begun to highlight the need for effective relations with external partners (see section 5).
- Disruption caused by the COVID epidemic during the first two years after reorganisation.
- The absence of collective action and effective advocacy by local councils discussed above.

The challenge of creating ‘genuine partnerships’ between DC and local councils may now prove much more difficult than if, as in Cornwall, a substantial start had been made soon after reorganization. A considerable amount of ‘corporate memory’ about how to work effectively with towns and parishes appears to have been lost since the demise of the Districts 2019 due to disruption, loss of experienced staff and the focus on other priorities.

It is not DC’s job to ‘spoon feed’ local councils: they are statutory bodies in their own right and must behave accordingly. But they are a ‘lower tier’: DC can exercise a large measure of control or influence over their activities, and they will look to DC for guidance and encouragement. **DC has to decide whether it will work with DAPTC to formulate policies and strategies that enable TLPs to strengthen their status and capacity for sound place management (including by raising more revenue); or whether it prefers to ‘go it alone’, dominating all key areas of service delivery to communities, and managing localities directly from ‘County Hall’.**

### 3. 2021-23 Community Governance Review

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In Dorset, the lack of policy development around how the role of LCs might evolve under the new unitary framework was particularly evident in the conduct and outcomes of the Community Governance Review (CGR) begun in 2021. **The CGR can be seen as an important – but missed – opportunity for DC to consider the underlying issues involved.**<sup>21</sup>

#### 3.1 Limited Scope

The Consultation Paper for the 2021 CGR<sup>22</sup> referenced selected sections of the Guidance issued by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in 2008<sup>23</sup>, as well as informal advice provided by NALC. In broad terms, the purpose of a CGR is to update or improve the system of local councils in a local government area. The goal is to identify the most suitable ways of representing the people in a locality, ensuring that any proposals for change reflect the identities and interests of the community and enable ‘effective and convenient’ governance.

A CGR may therefore consider options for creating, merging or abolishing parishes or towns; adjusting their external and ward boundaries; establishing, changing or abolishing grouped parishes that share a council; and altering electoral arrangements (number of councillors, use of wards). It cannot *determine* financial or administrative matters (eg precepts, staffing or the scope of services a parish delivers), but the principal council (in this case, DC) can exercise considerable discretion regarding the way it conducts a review, and what factors it takes into account when determining necessary changes. Alongside a CGR it can also set out framework policies, such as the devolution strategy adopted by Cornwall Council.

The Consultation Paper for the 2021 CGR asserted that it was ‘an opportunity to put in place strong, clearly defined boundaries, tied to firm ground features, and remove any parish boundaries anomalies that may exist.’ Those words might have pointed to a strategic analysis of population and development trends, as well as related changes in the operating environment for both DC and local councils. However, no such analysis was undertaken and there was no contextual discussion of the need for fresh thinking or desirable future roles and directions for towns and parishes.

**Instead, the CGR adopted a ‘passive’ approach that relied on submissions lodged individually by local councils, and focused on the legal and technical aspects of adjusting boundaries and electoral arrangements. As a result, it essentially endorsed the status quo.**

Moreover, even though the recommendations relied on electorate projections for only the minimum 5 years, it was suggested that another review would not take place for a decade or more. This may accord with official guidance, but a long delay would impede timely adjustments to boundaries and governance as circumstances change.

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<sup>21</sup> This should be read as corporate failure, not personal criticism of those managing the CGR.

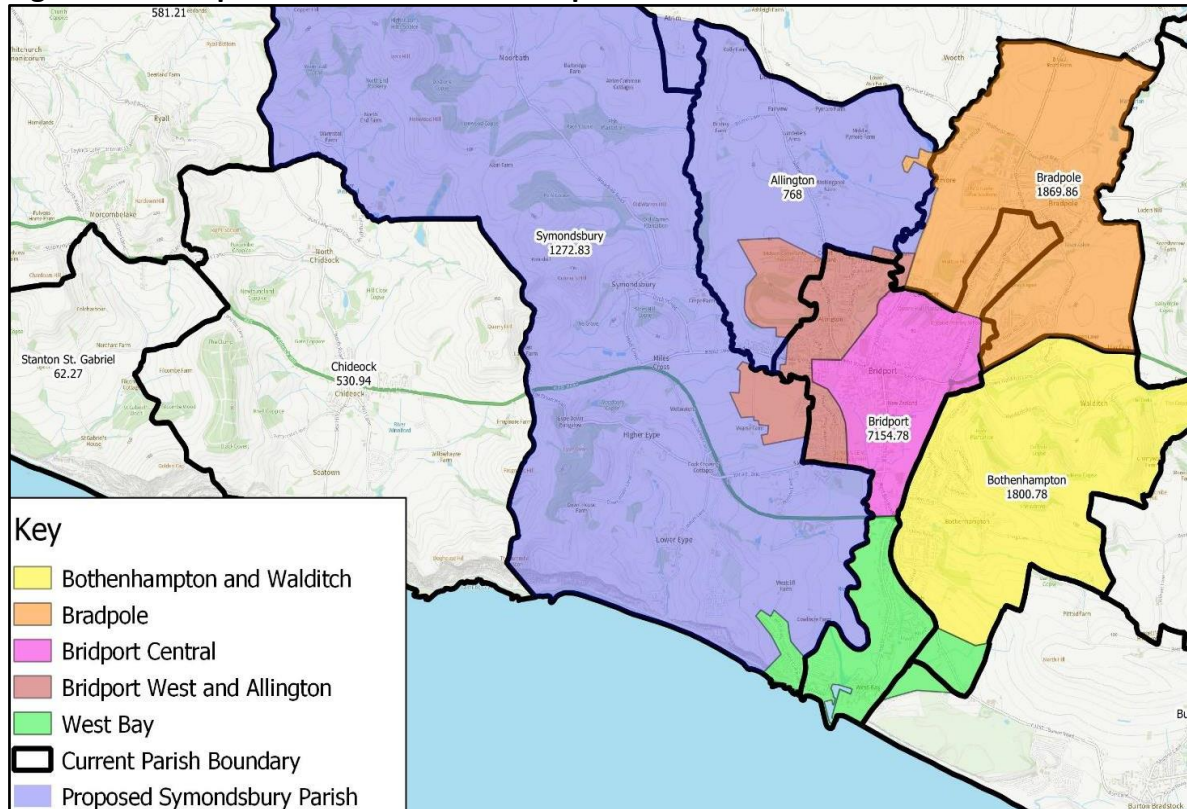
<sup>22</sup> [Dorset Council Community Governance Review Consultation Paper \(undated\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> It could have referenced additional material from the amended version released by the [Local Government Boundary Commission for England in 2010](#), which reflects an expansive view of the future of LCs.

### 3.2 The Bridport Exception

The limited vision of the 2021 CGR was highlighted by the one exception to what might be termed its 'minimalist' approach – the Town of Bridport and its 'suburban' parishes (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: The Expanded Boundaries of Bridport\***



\* The Town of Bridport now comprises the five wards coloured light and dark brown, purple, yellow and green. Most of Allington Parish was merged with Symondsburys.

Bridport TC had a history of cooperating with adjoining parishes through a Local Area Partnership, a joint Neighbourhood Plan, shared service delivery and economic development initiatives. However, despite population growth and urban expansion, the extensive use of Bridport's services by parish residents, and inequities in the respective precepts paid by town and parish property owners, there had been no boundary changes for 25 years.

The TC therefore seized the opportunity to make a detailed CGR submission advocating strategic change. It also consulted and negotiated directly with neighbouring parishes so as to present the CGR with a 'ready-made' package, notably based on an agreement with the Symondsburys PC. The case for change included lack of capacity in the parishes to deal with ongoing change and provide adequate services; uncontested elections in some instances; the precedent of adding major urban development at Poundbury to the Town of Dorchester; and the opportunity that would be created for more devolution of services and assets to the expanded Bridport TC. It also noted that resistance to boundary changes by a parish council does not necessarily equate to majority opposition amongst residents.

The CGR accepted Bridport's proposals, which have now been implemented, seemingly without turmoil. This appears to offer conclusive evidence that far-reaching changes can be

pursued successfully given sufficient time, careful preparation and political will. **When there is a demonstrable need and the opportunity presents itself ‘to put in place strong, clearly defined boundaries’ that will facilitate more ‘effective and convenient’ governance, tweaks and half-measures are not enough. Thorough preliminary analysis and consultation should be undertaken before future CGRs are launched.**

### 3.3 What Next?

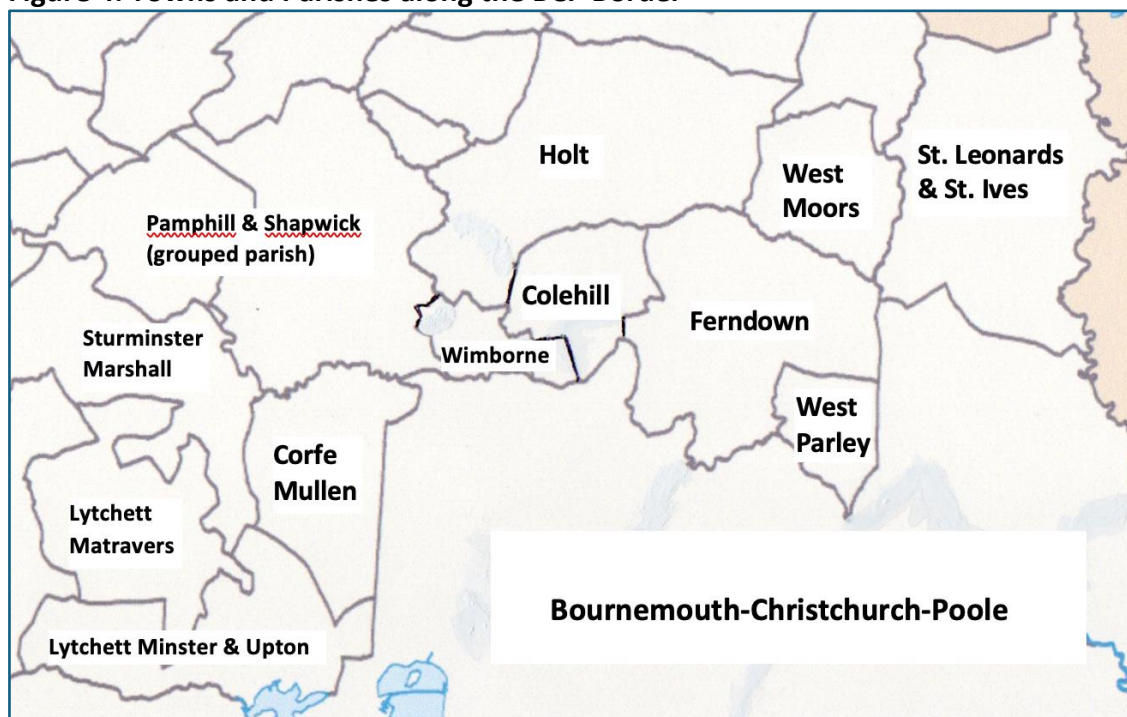
**The example of Bridport, coupled with development trends and problematic town and parish boundaries in several key locations across Dorset, indicate that a follow-up CGR cannot sensibly be left for another decade or more** (see section 6). The 2010 Guidance on CGRs makes it clear that a CGR may be conducted at any time if required.

The Guidance also states that local councils: *‘increasingly have a role to play in urban areas. We propose to build on the existing parish structure, so as to improve its capacity to deliver better services and represent the community’s interests’* (p.19).

With those provisions in mind, a selective CGR should be undertaken in the near future to examine options for future governance in at least the following four locations.

- The northern section of the BCP border area (see Figure 4), which comprises functional groupings of Wimborne/Colehill and Ferndown/West Parley/West Moors/St Leonards & St Ives. These are more or less contiguous urban areas requiring coordinated planning and management, but where no significant boundary changes were canvassed in the 2021 CGR and unwarranted variations in precepts need to be addressed.

**Figure 4: Towns and Parishes along the BCP Border**



- The proposed Portland-Weymouth-Dorchester growth corridor, including the medium-term future of the Winterborne Farringdon grouped parish between Weymouth and



Dorchester, as well as the Weymouth-Chickerell boundary. Although adjustments were made in 2024, a longer term assessment is required as the towns become increasingly inter-dependent – an outcome that may well be hastened by the current ‘Weymouth 2040’ initiative (see section 4.3.2).

- Blandford Forum, which unsuccessfully proposed substantial boundary changes in its submission to the CGR – a key factor being the lack of prior analysis and consultation. As in Bridport, a contiguous urban area is divided and the town pays for services also used by residents in adjoining parishes, with inequitable precepts.
- Dorchester/Charminster – although the urban areas are physically separate, they are closely inter-related and the issues involved (notably the extreme disparity in precepts and per capita expenditures) are similar to those in Bridport and Blandford Forum (see Table 1).

In all those locations, a future CGR needs to begin by considering medium-term strategies for managing growth and asking: **Is there a case for boundary changes, mergers or ‘tightly’ grouped towns and parishes (see Box 2) to create more substantial towns that are governed by a single or grouped council?**

**The CGR should also ask: in the medium term, what would be the most realistic and productive division of responsibilities between DC and the TLPs, taking into account DC’s financial challenges?** To what extent would larger ‘new’ towns have the capacity to play an expanded role as a partner to DC, carrying more of the financial burden of place management? Should they be seen as somewhat akin to previous urban districts – but using the current legislation for local councils?

#### **Box 2: Legislative Scope for Grouped Parishes/Towns**

Section 91 of the *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007* provides for a CGR to recommend grouping of parishes (including towns) under a single council. The 2010 CGR Guidance then states: ‘such proposals are worth considering and may avoid the need for substantive changes to parish boundaries’.

The Guidance also indicates (by default) that a principal council (viz. DC) may exercise considerable discretion in establishing a grouped parish/town council provided it meets the fundamental objective of ensuring effective and convenient governance; reflects a genuine community of interest; is not ‘artificially large’; and each existing parish/town has at least one councillor on the joint council.

Grouping can only take place with agreement of a parish meeting of each affected parish (section 11 of the *Local Government Act 1972*). Given the understandable wish of many communities to retain their identity, this may be an obstacle, but provisions to respect local identity can be built into the operations of a grouped council. Also, it needs to be understood that in some cases the only viable alternative could be an enforced merger. Again, this underlines the likely need for careful analysis and preliminary consultations before the formal stages of a CGR begin.

The legislation gives a principal council broad discretion to exercise its authority and/or influence as necessary to ensure a satisfactory outcome in the best interests of all concerned; and that the grouped parish/town is effectively structured and resourced as a ‘tight’, coherent operation under a single, professional administration in order to address the challenges facing its combined area.

**As well, there is a pressing need to take a fresh look at the community democracy issues identified in section 2.2:** stark inconsistencies in the ratio of population to councillors and the use of electoral wards; doubts concerning the need for and value of wards in all but the largest towns; whether Dorset's local councils are seeking to elect simply too many councillors, resulting in uncontested elections; and the need for more effective, ongoing community engagement.

These inconsistencies and concerns offer ready ammunition for those who question the democratic credentials of towns and parishes, but were not addressed as such by the 2021 CGR. It referenced unofficial advice from NALC on the ratio of councillors to population, which seems to have contributed to maintaining the highly variable number of electors per councillor; along with the preferences of individual councils (or maybe just the status quo?) regarding the use of wards. If councils as diverse as Beaminster, Corfe Mullen, Lyme Regis, Stalbridge, Sturminster Newton, Swanage, Wareham and West Moors can operate successfully without wards, why can't others? **There may be sound answers to that and other questions, but the 2021 CGR did not provide them.**

**Further steps are proposed in section 6 (Tables 8 and 9). There appears to be ample scope for follow-up CGRs that are more strategic and 'adventurous', with a view to creating a robust, sustainable and capable system of local councils for the medium-longer term.** This could include a number of expanded towns; increased use of high-functioning 'tightly' grouped parishes in both urban and rural areas; and a considerable reduction in the overall number of rural parishes by means of mergers and/or other groupings.

## 4. Dorset Council Plan 2024-29

Dorset's new Council Plan 2024-29 was adopted in December 2024. It nominates four 'big picture' priorities – economic development, housing, environment and 'communities for all'. The last appears driven largely by issues around social welfare and disadvantage: provision of social care, children's services, housing and public health account for around two-thirds of the council's annual budget. By contrast, 'municipal' services that are managed by DC's Place directorate and represent 'core business' for local councils, receive very little attention in the Plan. This section of the report discusses how the Plan and its implementation could both advance and benefit from further consideration of DC's relationship with TLPs.

### 4.1 Referencing Local Councils

Table 5 identifies elements of the Plan that could offer, or might have explored, opportunities to work more closely with towns and parishes, capitalize on their potential, and create a 'genuine partnership'.

**Table 5: Extracts from Dorset Council Plan 2024-29**

Council Plan Statements		Comments
<b>Priority: Provide affordable and high-quality housing</b>		
p.8	...town and parish councils and community groups support understanding of local housing need, and the provision of new homes through Community Land Trusts, led by local people working alongside the council and housing associations.	This is the only reference to local councils under the Housing priority, but there is no detail or explanation. Nor any mention of statutory Neighbourhood Plans.
<b>Priority: Grow our economy</b>		
pp.9	...develop and implement a strategy which...considers an approach to growth regardless of location but also plays on localised strengths and opportunities.	The notion of 'growth regardless of location' needs to be clarified. Is DC proposing to steer growth or not? If yes, how – and would TLPs have a role to play? (eg. Bridport's economic strategy).
p.10	<b>Key Action:</b> focus our efforts on delivering a small number of exciting, large-scale opportunities which will make a significant difference to the county's economic performance.	
p.10	<b>Target Measure:</b> support <i>community-led</i> [emphasis added] masterplans in at least 70% of the coastal and market towns by 2029.	Is this a target for the coastal and market towns strategy proposed below?
p.10	<b>Key Action:</b> kickstart the regeneration of Weymouth by developing underused sites to improve the offer and vibrancy of the town. Create a "growth corridor" with Portland and Dorchester, bringing economic benefits to the wider area.	How do these initiatives relate to the coastal and market towns strategy? What is the 'wider area' and the expected role of TLPs?
p.11	<b>Key Action:</b> develop a coastal and market towns strategy framework to support growth and regeneration, working in partnership with town and parish councils, and seeking funding from government	The only specific reference under this priority to partnering with TLPs, but they are not mentioned in its later section on 'Leadership and partnership'.



<b>Priority: Communities for all</b> (see also section 5.1)		
p.12	"We want public sector resources to be used as effectively as possible to meet local needs, and we need to redesign how the council works with communities...shaped through co-design with partners and communities themselves.	What is the intended scope of co-design and how would it be implemented? Is 'co-design' the same as 'co-production'? Are local councils 'partners' in this?
p.12	"Dorset has many strong communities, with an active voluntary and community sector and over 160 town and parish councils...Some communities are calling for us to work differently to better understand and meet the needs of towns and villages. Some of our town and parish councils are also calling for better partnership working."	One of only two specific references to local councils under this priority – the primary focus seems to be partnerships with health and care services, plus voluntary sector and community organisations.
p.14	<b>Key Action:</b> Thriving Communities – work more closely with town and parish councils and with voluntary and community sector organisations to support residents, investing in the infrastructure (sic).	What do 'work more closely', 'support residents' and 'investing in the infrastructure' actually mean?
p.14	<b>Key Action:</b> Commissioning and Procurement – co-design and deliver with communities and partners on a locality basis, devolving funding to neighbourhoods where appropriate.	Devolving funding for what precisely? Again, are local councils seen as 'partners' for this purpose?
p.15	<b>Key Action:</b> devolve or transfer more assets to communities to enable creation of local hubs where people can access support and care.	Local councils are best placed to accept assets – they are already in the business of asset management and local hubs <sup>24</sup>
p.15	<b>Leadership and Partnership:</b> play a clear role in building new health and care teams in neighbourhoods, working with the NHS, residents and communities.	Are 'neighbourhoods' the same as 'localities' and places'? Would local councils also be partners or a base for the new teams?
p.15	<b>Standing up for Dorset:</b> promote Dorset as a great place to live and work, recognising the "grey economy", identifying age-appropriate employment opportunities and recruiting a younger workforce through developing [local] training opportunities...	A rare statement under this priority that acknowledges some positives and goes beyond the focus on social care and health.
<b>Priority: Responding to the climate and nature crisis</b>		
p.17	Prepare for a changing climate: We are committed to helping our communities, ecosystems, and economies adapt to the unavoidable impacts of climate change, ensuring Dorset is resilient and well-prepared.	Some TLPs are already active in this space and need to know DC's expectations re future work they could undertake.
p.17	80% of our urban verges will be managed to enhance their value for nature by 2030 (currently 50%).	Local councils can play a greatly expanded role in managing verges and green space.
p.18	<b>Key Action:</b> helping residents and organisations to improve energy efficiency and use renewable energy in their homes and buildings.	What 'organisations' might be involved? Do local councils have a role to play?
p.18	<b>Key Action:</b> help communities adapt for climate change impacts and recover nature, working with town and parish councils and other partners.	Again, TLPs need to understand DC's expectations re their role (eg in community leadership)

<sup>24</sup> By contrast, devolving to 'communities' can be very complex as each asset needs its own governance, which may mean creating a new local group or Community Interest Company to manage it.

How this Council Plan will be delivered		
p.29	<b>Principal Strategies:</b> Climate; Local Nature Recovery; Economic growth [to be developed]; Communities [also tbd.]; Children, Young People and Families Plan; Adults 'A better life' strategy; Local Plan [in development]; Local Transport Plan [in development].	A broader policy on the future of local councils is needed urgently as context for several of these strategies, the Local Plan and the Local Transport Plan.
p.31	<b>Transformation:</b> "We are undergoing a major transformation programme...It includes establishing and embedding a new operating model...to streamline our operations and become more efficient and effective...[working] with partners and communities to achieve change together."	See section 5 for further discussion of the operating model.
p.31	<b>Budget priorities and financial strategy:</b> "We continue to face a challenging financial position, with rising demand for services, inflationary pressures and reduced funding from government. The budget setting process requires creativity, innovation, and robust prioritisation and planning."	Indeed, but the Plan does not specify <i>expenditure</i> priorities nor those functions most likely to face budget cuts. Nor does it consider whether local councils could do more (cf. Cornwall).

## 4.2 A Localist Perspective

The Plan presents a wide range of significant ideas and proposals that might involve TLPs, but in many instances further detail is required to explain precisely what is intended. **Three critical gaps in the Plan's coverage are immediately apparent:**

- While the Plan references towns and parishes in several places, it treats them mostly as 'just another' set of bodies that need to be consulted or could make a contribution to implementing DC's priorities, like voluntary sector organisations and community groups. Little or no weight has been given to local councils' statutory roles and functions as a formal level of elected local government, including their general power of competence and their authority to raise and spend large sums of public money to pursue their own priorities or contribute to joint initiatives.
- Flowing from that, the Plan fails to consider the potential for towns and parishes to relieve some of the financial and management pressure on DC by expanding their range of activities, as has occurred in Cornwall.
- The Plan does not identify the challenges associated with urban and population growth, demands on service delivery and complex governance relationships that impact both DC and towns and parishes along the boundary with BCP. These issues may be reflected in the upcoming Dorset Local Plan, but require a response well beyond land use planning.

Also of significance for TLPs is the Plan's tendency to talk more about Dorset's problems than how to build on its advantages. The Leader's 'Welcome' message notes that 85% of Dorset residents are satisfied with their local area as a place to live, compared to the national average of 75%, but then immediately turns to 'complex challenges' – the climate and nature emergency, scarcity of affordable housing, poor economic growth, health inequalities, and lack of social mobility. It is not until the very end of the 'Communities for all' section that Dorset is described as a great place to live and work with a strong 'grey economy'. What many people in Dorset and elsewhere would regard as *positives* – a healthy,

skilled older population; high weekly earnings; rising house prices; falling greenhouse gas emissions and an exceptionally low crime rate – are not documented until the attachments.

There are, of course, downsides to some of these positives, and very real issues of socio-economic disadvantage that must be addressed. The cost of housing is a pervasive concern across Dorset; several urban localities display high levels of multiple social deprivation (education, employment, housing, health/disability); and disadvantaged people are scattered across rural areas too. Physical access to services is a widespread problem in rural Dorset due to dispersed settlements and inadequate public transport. A rapidly ageing population may well exacerbate those concerns, although indications are that older people are increasingly in paid employment, healthy, independent and active in the community well into their seventies or early eighties.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, and without disregarding or understating the pressure on DC to maximise provision of what might broadly be termed ‘social care’, most indices of deprivation are around or below the national average. It seems probable that for most Dorset residents, a complementary strategy to the four nominated priorities would be to maintain and capitalise on the current quality of life and places – which is precisely where TLPs have a vital role to play. At the same time, the Plan has very little to say about DC’s ‘municipal’ functions undertaken by the Place directorate – functions that overlap extensively with the work of TLPs. While those functions may not be ‘headline’ priorities for the new administration, they remain critical in terms of the quality of life enjoyed by Dorset residents. **Maintaining that quality of place surely warrants its own strategic framework, including closer cooperation with TLPs – not just ad hoc references under other priorities.**

As discussed in section 2.7, the new Council Plan was prepared without the benefit of a DC policy on the role, functions and potential of LCs – specifically the better resourced TLPs that could offer a significant ‘helping hand’ in realizing the Plan’s priorities. Better use could be made of Neighbourhood Plans (which are not mentioned in the Council Plan) and other locality strategies to help achieve the Plan’s key priorities in line with the expectations of residents. TLPs can also help to address social disadvantage by providing community facilities and ‘hubs’ for decentralised services, improving disability access, supporting volunteer programmes, holding community events, disseminating information, and so on.

However, a concern for the short term is that several of the Principal Strategies needed for effective delivery of the Plan – and which would underpin a complementary strategy around ‘Place’ and working with TLPs – are as yet incomplete. They include the Economic Growth and Communities strategies, the Local Plan and the Local Transport Plan.

### **4.3 Other Implementation Issues**

As a general observation, the Plan has very little to say about implementation mechanisms or how the many ‘key actions’ will be prioritized and, where necessary, linked with each other. This applies in particular to the emphasis on building and strengthening partnerships.

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<sup>25</sup> See [State of Dorset 2024 report](#) and <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

**Despite recognizing the importance of partnerships, much of the Plan conveys the impression of an organization focused on its own view of the world and agenda.** Is there sufficient understanding across the DC organization of how to go about engendering and sustaining partnerships, especially the likely need to negotiate and compromise on priorities, and to make complementary changes internally to roles and structures? Will there be a central point of reference for potential partners, particularly TLPs?

**A related overarching issue is the lack of detail on the cost of achieving the Plan's priorities and DC's financial capacity to do so.** As indicated at the end of Table 5, the Plan acknowledges 'a challenging financial position' (which seems set to worsen), but there is no indication as to the potential implications for achieving the Plan's priorities. Which of the many proposed actions are deemed essential, and which might reasonably be set aside if resources prove insufficient – a possibility identified in the Medium Term Financial Plan<sup>26</sup> adopted alongside the Council Plan? Prospective government, private sector and community partners will be looking for answers to those questions, and for a consistent approach based on a realistic assessment of what DC can achieve over its 2024-29 timeframe.

**As a sphere of local governance in their own right, but inextricably linked with DC as the principal council, LCs have a special need to know more about DC's thinking around implementing the Plan.** They need to be consulted about proposed implementation processes; how they can engage in a coordinated way with all relevant areas of DC; and how they can add value through leadership in local communities, building on their statutory role, functions in place management, and potential area-based groupings (see section 5.2).

#### **4.3.1 Draft Strategic Asset Management Plan**

The Draft Strategic Asset Management Plan is an additional 'Enabling Strategy' that is well advanced.<sup>27</sup> Box 3 contains some key statements around 'place-making' and local planning.

##### **Box 3: Strategic Asset Management Plan Commentary re 'Place Making'**

*Taking a holistic approach to asset management in a locale can support place-making and lead to improvements in the quality of public spaces and communities... this strategic asset management plan provides an asset management framework which supports and enables regeneration in market towns, working with local partners to develop bespoke regeneration solutions embedded in local need and opportunity, and building on key themes associated with each market town.*

*This collaborative approach will link with neighbourhood plans and the local plan, including the opportunities and potential of local devolution deals. We will work with town and parish councils... to consider devolution and locally managed assets through asset transfers where appropriate.*

*In the case of market centres, the local plans set out town centre boundaries, (subject to review as part of the creation of the Dorset Council Local Plan), and these will be used as the boundaries for area-based asset reviews with regards future use of assets (included at appendix 6). These area-based reviews will seek to include other public sector partners and private sector landowners and partners where appropriate.*

<sup>26</sup> See: [Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan Strategy Report](#)

<sup>27</sup> See: [Dorset Council - Strategic Asset Management Plan 2024-2030: For Review and Consultation](#)

**Crucially, the draft Asset Management Plan identifies three key ways forward that are not mentioned in the Council Plan: making more use of Neighbourhood Plans; further (and speedier) transfers of assets to TLPs; ‘devolution deals’ with selected larger towns.** This perhaps reflects an emerging willingness to move in the same direction as Cornwall and to pursue the ‘genuine partnership’ envisaged by the LDP. A jarring note, however, is the suggestion that area-based asset reviews would only *seek to include other public sector partners and private sector landowners and partners ‘where appropriate’*. Surely it would *always* be appropriate in some way, certainly as far as TLPs are concerned.

#### **4.3.2 Coastal and Market Towns Strategy and Weymouth 2040**

The draft Asset Management Plan alludes to three important initiatives flagged in the Council Plan – the Coastal and Market Towns Strategy, the regeneration of Weymouth (also termed ‘Weymouth 2040’), and the Portland-Weymouth-Dorchester growth corridor.

A Coastal and Market Towns Strategy would presumably encompass most of the TLPs. The concept echoes the ‘Market and Coastal Towns Initiative’ implemented by the South West of England Regional Development Agency (RDA) in the early 2000s. That was a localised variant of the nation-wide Market Towns Initiative developed by the then Countryside Agency and implemented from 2000 to 2006. Valuable lessons for DC’s proposed strategy can be drawn from the experience gained, notably the value-adding leadership and democratic role that town councils can play (Box 4).

##### **Box 4: Lessons from the Market Towns Initiative (MTI) 2002-06<sup>28</sup>**

- The MTI was available to any country town with a population between 2,000 and 20,000. As noted above, a matching programme was implemented by the south-west RDA.
- Its purpose was to help ‘local people to appraise strengths, weaknesses, future demands and opportunities’. This reflected the increasing popularity of small town living in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, plus a concern to safeguard and enhance the quality of life towns offered.
- The MTI sought to leverage partnerships led by local stakeholders, many of whom were volunteers. Assessments found this to be a valid approach, but that often there was insufficient time to build partnerships, ensure effective leadership and assemble required information.
- More broadly, the MTI’s lifespan was too short to draw conclusions about the durability of a community-led model of development, although burnout amongst volunteers was a concern.
- The MTI appeared somewhat diffident about the role of local government. But assessments point to the considerable value added by town and district councils – especially the former, and particularly where town councils participated strongly and forged partnerships with their ‘hinterland’ parishes (eg Bridport, which was also selected as an exemplary ‘Beacon Council’).
- Careful consideration should be given to ensuring sufficient democratic accountability for decisions taken and expenditures made – another important role that town councils can play.

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<sup>28</sup> Based on Morris, G. *Leading Communities: Community-led Development in England’s Small Towns: the Market Towns Initiative*. Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance, Issue 11, December 2012; and The Countryside Agency. *Assessment of the Market Towns Initiative: a summary*. September 2004

To facilitate progress with the Council Plan's proposed initiatives, three points need clarification:

- The precise scope of each initiative – are they seen primarily as economic development projects (they sit under the 'Grow our Economy' priority) limited for the most part to town centres and/or other commercial and industrial sites; or more broadly in terms of urban (re)development and place management?
- How will they be coordinated and where necessary integrated with the new Local Plan, Neighbourhood Plans and other locality plans prepared by TLPs? Could they be fully integrated?
- Is there a priority order for involvement of the dozen or so towns that would be included in one or more of the initiatives? Work is already under way on at one aspect of 'Weymouth 2040', namely the marketing for redevelopment of four major sites owned/controlled by DC.<sup>29</sup>

**A holistic Coastal and Market Towns Strategy, approached from a localist perspective, and effectively integrated with other elements of the Council Plan, could go along way towards filling the gaps in policy around 'Place' and the future role of TLPs (see Table 7). It should encompass and be managed under the same umbrella as Weymouth 2040, the Portland-Weymouth-Dorchester growth corridor, and a further strategy to guide urban growth, service delivery and governance along the BCP border.**

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<sup>29</sup> See *Regeneration in Weymouth*: <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/w/regeneration-in-weymouth>



## 5. Future Operating Model and ‘Place-based’ Working

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This section looks at two further issues flagged by the new Council Plan: DC’s ‘transformation’ programme, including formulation of a new ‘target operating model’; and as an adjunct to that, how to frame ‘place-based working’.

### 5.1 Target Operating Model

Under the priority of ‘Communities for all’ (and only there) the Council Plan introduces the concept of a ‘target operating model’ for DC focused on ‘joined-up’ and ‘place-based’ working with communities (Box 5). The inclusion of these ideas under ‘Communities for all’, and the lack of complementary proposals under other priorities, conveys an impression that the ‘target operating model’ is being driven primarily by DC’s statutory role and relationships around social care and health, and by concerns about socio-economic inequality.<sup>30</sup>

#### **Box 5: Proposed Elements of Target Operating Model** (page numbers refer to Council Plan)

*We need to reduce the various inequalities between different groups...supporting more cohesive communities...This requires a different way of working with partners and in localities across our area...a comprehensive and joined-up response across public sector, the voluntary and community sector (VCS), with local businesses, and other partners... We want to build on, accelerate and enhance our approach to place-based working, which is about ‘working with’ and not ‘doing to’ people and our communities... Improvements to health, social mobility, inclusion, and reduced poverty not only benefit individuals and families but also support the wellbeing, resilience and prosperity of a whole community. In turn, this can also achieve a more sustainable model for statutory health and care services. (p.13)*

**Target Measure:** *a joined-up model of locality working, delivering through prevention and partnership: measures to be agreed with local partners and linked back to our priorities and the work of the NHS, the Health & Wellbeing Board and the Integrated Care Partnership. (p.14)*

**Key Action:** *simplify our approach to communities so it is consistent: a more joined-up and coherent model of place-based working, building on existing arrangements, developing strong relationships locally, and using existing assets in communities, such as libraries and family hubs. This will be built into our new target operating model. (p.14)*

**The wording of the proposed ‘Target Measure’ appears telling.** In one sense the thinking is understandable, given that social care, children’s services and health absorb such a large proportion of the budget, and a more effective approach to tackling disadvantage would be admirable, assuming it can be funded. However, an operating model that fits those services may well prove inappropriate or irrelevant when applied to building new housing, economic development or nature conservation, let alone highways, land use planning and waste management. It may also prove to be inconsistent with the needs and expectations of the majority of Dorset’s population, who are not (or do not see themselves as) ‘disadvantaged’.

Consequently, it may cut across – or distort – the concept of ‘holistic’ place management. **‘Care’ services may indeed contribute to broader community wellbeing, resilience and prosperity, but unlike local planning and provision of essential community infrastructure**

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<sup>30</sup> Under DC’s ‘Our Future Council’ project, cost-cutting, including reductions in staffing, is an additional key factor.



**and municipal services, their essential purpose is *not* to create better ‘places’ or ‘neighbourhoods’ as such.** Moreover, by definition place management requires quite different mixes of priorities, planning and services from one locality to another.

In this regard, a further risk that an increased emphasis by DC on working *directly* with local voluntary sector organisations concerned primarily with welfare and disadvantage could sideline both TLPs and other community bodies that have a different focus. In turn, this could result in failure to make the best use of available facilities and resources (see ‘Lessons from the Market Towns Initiative’ in Box 4). Moreover, the cost to DC of a stronger presence in localities could be considerable, and on current indications, unaffordable (see Box 6).

Therefore, before a new operating model is finalized and adopted, there needs to be careful consideration of its *scope*, *precisely* what it is intended to achieve, and *all* the key players that need to be involved. At present, the language on pp.13-14 of the Council Plan is ‘muddy’ and open to various interpretations. For example:

- Does the phrase: *We want to build on, accelerate and enhance our approach to place-based working* imply that DC already has such an approach? If so, what is it?
- Do the terms ‘locality working’ and ‘place-based working’ convey the same or somewhat different meanings (‘neighbourhood’ is also used on p.15 of the Council Plan)?
- Is the proposed *joined up model of locality working* under the Target Measure focused the same as the Key Action of *a more joined-up and coherent model of place-based working, building on existing arrangements, developing strong relationships locally, and using existing assets in communities?*
- What is meant by ‘existing arrangements’? Is there sufficient awareness across the DC organisation of local councils’ widespread activities in various aspects of community development (facilities, events, information and advice etc)?

Pursuing *a comprehensive and joined-up response across public sector, the voluntary and community sector (VCS), with local businesses, and other partners*, is a highly ambitious agenda. By definition, DC will need the willing cooperation of many parties, and the desired outcome cannot be achieved solely on DC’s terms: it must also accommodate the priorities of others. **This requires a flexible overarching framework that enables participants to join-up in somewhat different ways for different activities and localities as circumstances require. Imposing a uniform model is unlikely to deliver the desired outcome.**

Again, TLPs ought to be involved in a dialogue about how DC intends to proceed. The overarching question here is: **why not consider the option of a strengthened system of towns and parishes, especially TLPs, as an efficient vehicle for the Plan’s goal of ‘a more joined-up and coherent model of place-based working, building on existing arrangements, developing strong relationships locally, and using existing assets in communities?’**

## **5.2 Area Boards and Community Partnerships**

This leads to the question of whether, and if so, how DC should go about establishing formal ‘area boards’ or ‘community networks/partnerships’ across its jurisdiction, as did its unitary

counterparts in Wiltshire and Cornwall following their formation in 2009. Key features of those arrangements are summarized in Table 6. Box 5 presents some lessons from Cornwall.

**Table 6: Comparison of Wiltshire and Cornwall Models of Area-based Governance**

Wiltshire	Cornwall
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Population (2021) 510,000; 255 local councils</li> <li>■ 18 Area Boards</li> <li>■ Purpose: ‘to bring local decision making into the heart of the community’</li> <li>■ Membership includes Wiltshire councillors, towns and parishes, key agencies (NHS, police, fire and rescue, housing associations) and a diverse range of community organisations</li> <li>■ Significant delegated authority and funding, but Wiltshire councillors sitting on the boards lead decision-making</li> <li>■ Wiltshire Council staff support and guidance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Population (2021) 570,000; 212 local councils</li> <li>■ Initially 19 ‘community networks’ but later consolidated into 12 ‘community area partnerships’ (CAPs), largely due to costs</li> <li>■ Broad membership, but focus is on partnership between Cornwall Council and towns and parishes – CAPs operate within Cornwall’s double-devolution framework</li> <li>■ Principal roles: prepare Community Priority Action Plans, <i>recommend</i> grants for place-shaping, community projects, highways; provide broader policy advice</li> <li>■ Cornwall Council staff support, but less centralized control</li> </ul>

Prior to Dorset’s reorganization in 2019, the *Case for Change* report<sup>31</sup> referenced the approaches taken by Wiltshire and Cornwall in establishing ‘area governance arrangements’ and noted a critical difference between the two (p.77):

***However, in Cornwall the networks have been used as the principal vehicle through which the local authority has engaged town and parish councils in discussions about the delegation of service responsibilities*** [emphasis added]. *The council has also set up a framework to facilitate partnership working with local councils, enabling them to negotiate the basis on which they choose to take on any service responsibilities...*

There were widespread expectations that a similar set of area-based partnerships would be established in Dorset, in part to fill the ‘District gap’. No action was taken during DC’s first term, but the new LDP administration has revived interest in exploring options and some preliminary work has been undertaken. Once more, that work appears to have been heavily influenced by concerns about social disadvantage and inequality, as well as integration reforms linked to the 2022 Health and Care Act, and the concept of asset-based community development (ABCD), already embraced by DC’s Adults and Children’s directorates. In other words, the same thinking as that around a ‘new operating model’ discussed in section 5.1.

**What is not clear is whether the same area-based model can or should be applied to both ‘social services’ and ‘municipal’ services delivered by the Place directorate and TLPs.** As noted earlier, arrangements dominated by social care, children’s services and public health may divert attention from partnering with towns and parishes, relative to the NHS and voluntary sector. It may well make more sense to design two separate but connected models, with different primary objectives, key partners and lead directorates within DC.

<sup>31</sup> See footnote on p.13

**A second key question is whether to divide the *whole of DC's district* into 'areas' with boards/partnerships, or instead to focus available resources on coordinating planning and service delivery within larger towns and their hinterlands?** Would it matter if some small parishes and more 'remote' rural areas did not participate? Liaison with them might cover a narrower range of issues and be handled Dorset-wide, through DAPTC.

**Box 6: Lessons from Cornwall #2**

- Operating a district-wide system of area boards/partnerships is costly, especially in terms of staffing. This was a key factor in the decision to consolidate 19 community networks into 12 CAPs (and current discussions about a possible reduction to just 6).
- Dividing a population approaching 600,000 and more than 200 local councils into just 12 CAPs is unsatisfactory. In some cases there is now a lack of shared communities of interest, and the number of attendees at meetings may become unworkable.
- The key relationship is between Cornwall Council and the larger towns and parishes involved in devolution initiatives, and in practical terms (eg agreeing transfers of assets and services) this is conducted to a large extent **outside the CAPs processes** [emphasis added].
- There is probably no need to divide the whole council district into formal area partnerships.
- While there is some overlap in terms of community development and overall quality of life, the 'municipal' agendas of local councils and the social care agendas of voluntary sector organisations are often quite different and better handled separately.

Figure 5 shows a hypothetical division of the DC's district into 16 'local areas', based on 'top-down' combinations of DC electoral wards.<sup>32</sup> The difficulties involved are self-evident. Even setting aside the exceptional case of Weymouth-Chickerell with more than 60,000 people and 13 Dorset councillors, there are inevitably wide variations in geographical scale, populations and numbers of councillors, and in several cases the defined areas cut across functional communities of interest between towns and parishes.

The likely cost of such an approach will be a key factor. Cornwall's experience showed that a comprehensive network of area boards/partnerships is very costly in terms of both staffing and expenditure on meetings, projects etc. Also, trying to save money by having fewer, larger areas may be counterproductive because their diverse communities lose a sense of connection and shared interests. **This strengthens the case for a selective approach and/or one based on larger towns and facilitated by their councils.**

Currently, at a political level DC has endorsed a low-key 'pilot area board' based on Sherborne and built on voluntary cooperation with nearby parishes. This mirrors the Local Area Partnerships that existed in some parts of Dorset before the 2019 reorganisation,<sup>33</sup> and the 'town plus hinterland parishes' model that proved successful under the Market Towns Initiative (Box 4).

**All this again underlines the need to define precisely what a place-based operating model and area-based cooperation are intended to achieve, their likely effectiveness in realising desired outcomes, and the level of resourcing required and available.**

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<sup>32</sup> This was prepared informally by DC staff and carries no legal or official status.

<sup>33</sup> The former West Dorset District Council developed a [Local Area Partnership Policy 2012-16](#). At least two partnerships (Bridport, and Beaminster and Villages) brought together a town and neighbouring parishes.

Figure 5: Hypothetical Division of the Dorset Council District into 'Local Areas'



## **6. Pathways for ‘Double Devolution’**

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There is a strong case for Dorset Council to pursue a ‘double devolution’ agenda, initially focused on TLPs, along similar lines to Cornwall. This case rests on:

- A similar settlement pattern, with a dispersed rural population and a large number of established coastal and market towns with a long history of self-governance.
- The need to address and build on Weymouth’s capacity as a ‘super town’, as well as the demonstrated potential of towns such as Bridport, Dorchester, Sherborne, Gillingham, Shaftesbury, Blandford Forum and Swanage to play a larger role.
- Ensuring effective planning and governance of the urban complex along the BCP border.
- The evident scope for TLPs to raise additional local revenues, easing the pressure on DC’s finances (noting that uncapped precepts may not last forever), and make a substantial contribution to achieving the objectives of the new Council Plan.
- The importance of securing and strengthening community democracy in the face of an ongoing tendency to centralising technocracy and an English devolution agenda that seems set to shift the locus of making major decisions further away from localities.

Given those drivers, sections 6.3-6.5 outline a *possible* 5-year programme to bring about a substantial expansion of the roles and responsibilities of TLPs, together with closer and more productive relations with DC. The proposals build on the information and analysis presented in previous sections of this report. Nevertheless, they will need to be carefully reviewed against the evidence, and fine-tuned where necessary through engagement and debate.

### **6.1 A Fresh Start?**

The research has found significant potential – and willingness – amongst Dorset’s TLPs to play a substantially expanded role, both in their own right and as a statutory partner of DC. Yet as things stand, apart from a few proposals in the new Council Plan, as well as the personal support of the Leader, some other councillors and the former chief executive,<sup>34</sup> it has been hard to find enough impetus within DC to join with TLPs in exploring that potential.

Understandably, DC is currently preoccupied with its looming financial problems, especially the funding of adult social care, children’s services and public health; the challenges associated with housing needs, economic development and environmental concerns; and securing benefits under central government’s agenda for devolution. Towns and parishes, especially small parishes, may be seen to have relatively little to contribute to addressing those problems and challenges. Several key factors contribute to this perception:

- Inattention to the role and potential of local councils during DC’s first 5 years, exacerbated by the narrow brief pursued by the 2021 CGR, has left a policy vacuum.

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<sup>34</sup> The Leader, Cllr Ireland, encouraged towns and parishes to consider expanding their role when addressing the DAPTC Annual General Meeting, 23 November 2024; and the CEO until February 2025, Matt Prosser, convened regular meetings with the clerks of TLPs, albeit with limited tangible outcomes to date.



- A dominant ‘world view’ within DC that sees government agencies (especially the NHS) and the voluntary sector as key partners; and seeks stronger *direct* links between DC, ‘neighbourhoods’ and ‘communities’, potentially bypassing town and parish councils.
- The apparently limited influence of the Place directorate at DC’s ‘top tables’ (the Senior and Corporate Leadership Teams), compared to the social care and health directorates.
- Evident concerns that partial devolution of assets and services to local councils would leave DC with a ‘patchwork quilt’ of service delivery – which may or may not be a significant issue given that 20+ better-resourced TLPs collectively serve 60-70% of DC’s constituents and could facilitate cooperative service delivery with neighbouring parishes.

As semi-autonomous statutory entities the higher capacity TLPs will necessarily continue to adjust their operations in response to *their own* assessment of community needs and priorities, so their potential to do more does need to be factored into DC’s decision-making, regardless of its own, in-house assessment of the ‘bigger picture’. Moreover:

- As noted in sections 1.1 and 2.5, the £26M spent in 2023-24 by just the 25 TLPs represented a 20-25% top-up of DC’s budget for its ‘Place’ directorate, and Cornwall’s experience shows that top-up could increase to 30-35% in the medium term.
- Achieving satisfactory outcomes to the challenges facing DC (and perhaps in future a regional authority) will require broadly-based community awareness and support that local councils could and should help to engender.

**So, can the clock be turned back to 2019 and a fresh start made on moving towards a mutually beneficial partnership between DC and local councils – initially the TLPs – that underpins a better quality of life and place for their constituents?**

## **6.2 Learning from Others**

While Dorset’s geography, history, society and politics display many distinctive traits that must influence future policy around localism and devolution, there is no need to ‘reinvent the wheel’. Indeed, a belief that bespoke policies and programmes are essential carries grave risks – not least wasting valuable time, energy and money.

This research included discussions in Cornwall and background reading on Cornwall Council’s approach to ‘double devolution’, specifically transfer of a wide range of assets and services to local councils, thus reducing its own costs and management pressures (see Box 7).

Of course, Cornwall is by no means the only example of a new unitary council seeking a productive working relationship with local councils, especially larger towns, and further comparative analysis would be well worth the effort. However, Cornwall’s experience has been well documented and independently researched (Attachment B). Also, it spans all three dimensions of devolution and partnership-building that appear necessary in Dorset:

- Policy development and coordination of implementation within Cornwall Council, including ongoing consultation and cooperation with the Association of Local Councils.



### **Final 20.3.25**

- A concerted effort by dedicated staff to *negotiate* transfer of packages of assets and service delivery to towns and larger parishes, with ongoing expenditure to be funded largely by (increased) precept revenues.
- Flexible and evolving area-based partnerships focused principally on working with groups of towns and parishes.

#### **Box 7: Lessons from Cornwall #3** (based on Attachment B)

- Cornwall's 2015 devolution deal included a commitment to 'double devolution', driven in part by financial necessity and reflected in a concerted effort to devolve multiple services (libraries, public toilets, parks, community centres etc), which in many cases prevented their closure.
- In the circumstances, most local councils saw acceptance of devolution as 'the right thing to do' and part of a new 'social contract' with communities, supported by Cornwall Council (CC).
- This resulted in large increases in staffing in local councils (eg in Falmouth TC from 5 to 40) but also opportunities for efficiencies, multi-skilling and a stronger public profile.
- In the case of libraries – a statutory service – CC maintained ultimate responsibility but in most places (26 of 31 libraries) buildings, staff and operational decisions were devolved.
- Local councils needed to undertake case-by-case negotiations with CC, requiring the development of new skills.
- As noted in Box 1, consultation with communities and careful management of the change process led to a predominantly positive response, despite hefty increases in precepts.
- Resistance in some quarters, notably a vocal minority of elected members, was inevitable but can be managed: among other things, ensuring continuity of purpose and effort requires a focus on careful induction of new councillors and effective forward planning.

## **6.3 Shifting the Dial: 2025**

Currently, Dorset Council and the TLPs could fairly be described as 'ships in the night'. Their relationship looks ambivalent and unfocused, without an overarching agenda and shared purpose. Each addresses its own immediate pressures and priorities and there is a dearth of truly cooperative effort. Agreements between a town and DC on transfer of an asset or new arrangements for managing a service have occurred more by chance than strategy.

Importantly, weak and ineffectual relationships also apply in many cases to those amongst towns and parishes, manifested in unwarranted parochialism. This needs to be addressed as a priority in further CGRs (eg by exploring options for more grouped parishes and possible mergers – see Tables 8 and 9).

Another key factor is the tendency to 'lowest common denominator' thinking on both sides. As noted above, DC sees well over a hundred small parish councils with very little capacity to do more, and focuses on the problems that might arise if it 'lets go', rather than the untapped potential of the largest 20 or so that house two-thirds of its population. At the same time, many towns and parishes feel comfortable with their current limited roles and worry about the risks involved in taking on greater responsibilities.

**The new Council Plan includes several proposals that could spark systemic change, but they need to be articulated in much more detail and pursued in cooperation with affected**

**town councils from the outset.** In particular, an overarching policy on ‘Place’ and future directions for TLPs, including *whole of DC-TLP* working relationships, will be essential to ‘shift the dial’. This could build on packaging the proposed Coastal and Market Towns Strategy, ‘Weymouth 2040’ and the Portland-Weymouth-Dorchester growth corridor, to create much closer links with the larger towns.

**Table 7: Shifting the Dial 2025**

Steps Required	Who Leads?
<b>1.</b> Establish an agreed DC policy on ‘Place’ and Future Directions for TLPs, <sup>35</sup> including a ‘Statement of Mutual Expectations’, to clarify and follow-up references and omissions concerning TLPs in the Council Plan 2024-29; and to set out what DC and TLPs could reasonably expect of each other by 2029 in terms of a more productive working relationship, expanded activity by TLPs, <sup>36</sup> and DC’s recognition of their role and status.	DC Leader, responsible Cabinet Member; DAPTC/SLCC leadership
<b>2.</b> <i>Until Step 1 has been completed, defer implementation of any aspect of a new DC operating model, and/or area-based working, that would impede or limit the scope of a ‘genuine partnership’ with TLPs.<sup>37</sup></i>	DC Leader and CEO, DAPTC Executive
<b>3.</b> In parallel, make the proposed Coastal and Market Towns Strategy a top priority; combine it with Weymouth 2040 and the Portland-Weymouth-Dorchester growth corridor; broaden its scope to reflect a wide-ranging place management and community leadership role for TLPs; and apply the ‘town plus hinterland parishes’ model from the Market Towns Initiative.	DC Executive Lead for Place; Strategic Director of Weymouth 2040; DAPTC/SLCC leadership
<b>4.</b> Arising from #3, DC creates a small unit <i>within the Place directorate</i> , to lead and coordinate policy development for – and partnerships with – LCs (initially TLPs), to initiate and manage priority actions, and to provide a central point of communication (internal and external).	DC Executive Lead for Place, responsible Cabinet Member
<b>5.</b> DAPTC establishes a specialist leadership group (‘coalition of the willing’) of TLPs committed to exploring an expanded role (individually or through area-based partnerships). This group engages in both the strategic and policy work, and negotiations on mutual expectations.	DAPTC leadership, TLP Clerks and Mayors/Chairs
<b>6.</b> DAPTC compiles a register of ‘success stories’ and exemplars, including where TLPs have taken on additional functions, and/or transfers of asset/services from DC to a local council.	DAPTC CEO
<b>7.</b> DAPTC and SLCC strengthen arrangements for information exchange and shared learning amongst TLPs, and with counterparts in other counties.	DAPTC/SLCC leadership

## 6.4 Building Blocks: 2026-27

Once the essential foundations of a supportive policy framework and strategy are in place, more detailed planning and specific actions to expand the role of TLPs can begin. Those actions need to demonstrate tangible progress in terms of changes to ‘who does what’;

<sup>35</sup> A similar policy for all towns and parishes should follow in due course, but a more limited agenda is needed to secure a timely ‘win’ in the shorter term.

<sup>36</sup> Including necessary increases in precepts, which DC should validate where appropriate.

<sup>37</sup> This deferral would not affect action taken solely for the purposes of social care, children’s services and other ‘county’ functions (education, fire etc).

include ‘stretch targets’ that require a firm commitment on both sides to ongoing efforts to deal with difficult issues; and establish models that can be applied more widely in future.

Proposed examples of this approach include negotiating wide-ranging ‘Double Devolution Deals’ with larger towns that have demonstrable capacity and willingness to take on more responsibilities; formulating joint strategies for both the Weymouth and BCP borders urban complexes; and initiating more ‘bottom-up’ area partnerships that draw on the current ‘trial’ involving Sherborne and nearby parishes.

Another essential ‘building block’ will be a supplementary CGR where necessary to facilitate the outcomes of ‘Double Devolution Deals’ and/or effective management and governance of development in growth areas. As well, this second phase of the programme should also address identified needs for capacity building within TLPs, including corporate, financial and locality planning, and improved knowledge and skills (individual and collective) amongst elected members and staff.

**Table 8: Building Blocks 2026-27**

Steps Required	Who Leads?
<b>8.</b> DC negotiates exemplar ‘Double Devolution Deals’ with some of the most able and willing town councils (most likely Weymouth, Bridport and 2-3 others) – reflecting the agreed policy on Future Directions, Statement of Mutual Expectations and expanded Coastal and Market Towns Strategy. Such deals could cover any area of service delivery other than ‘county’ functions.	DC Executive Lead for Place and LCs Liaison Unit, affected TLPs, DAPTC leadership
<b>9.</b> DC and the relevant town councils develop strategies for the proposed Portland-Weymouth-Dorchester growth corridor and the emerging urban complex along the BCP boundary – encompassing both management of development and governance issues (see #10 below).	As above
<b>10.</b> DC undertakes a selective supplementary CGR to give effect to boundary changes and/or creation of new grouped parishes needed for effective growth management (section 3.3) and/or arising from steps #3, 8 and 9, as well as associated measures to enhance their democratic status (section 2.2).	Democratic Services in consultation with DAPTC and LCs
<b>11.</b> DC and DAPTC implement a small number of trial ‘area partnerships’ (in addition to Sherborne) using a bottom-up ‘town plus hinterland’ model that brings together larger towns and surrounding parishes (section 5.2).	As above
<b>12.</b> DC and DAPTC launch a major effort to expand and improve locality planning by all TLPs, including preparation/updating of corporate and financial plans, <sup>38</sup> plus more statutory neighbourhood plans and associated tools to advance local place management (section 2.6).	DC Executive Lead for Place and LCs Liaison Unit, DAPTC leadership
<b>13.</b> Linked to #12, DAPTC, SLCC and DC increase support and incentives for knowledge and skills improvement amongst elected members (especially mayors/leaders), clerks and staff.	DAPTC/SLCC leadership, DC Executive Lead for Place, LCs Liaison Unit

<sup>38</sup> This might need to extend to legislative change to *require* the adoption of 3-5 year financial plans, but in the first instance DC should use its leverage over towns and parishes – and the practical support it can offer – to achieve the desired outcome. The same applies to more widespread preparation of Neighbourhood Plans.

## 6.5 Consolidation and Enhancement: 2028-29

The ‘final’ two years of this concerted effort would focus on consolidating gains made and extending them as widely as possible across DC’s jurisdiction. As well as implementing further ‘Double Devolution Deals’ and ‘area partnerships’, this will require action on a broader front to strengthen community democracy and engagement, and to improve the quality of governance in local councils.

In particular, a district-wide Community Governance Review will be needed to deal with remaining ‘loose ends’ arising from other elements of the programme (notably boundary issues and possible mergers); to ensure the system of towns and parishes is as robust as possible (including in particular consideration of additional and more ‘tightly knit’ grouped parishes and an overall reduction in the number of small rural parishes); and to strengthen the democratic credentials of LCs by addressing weaknesses and inconsistencies in electoral and governance arrangements (eg. uncontested elections, use of wards, deficient community engagement).

**Table 9: Consolidation and Enhancement 2028-29**

Steps Required	Who Leads?
<b>13.</b> As an exemplar and ‘test case’ for broader devolution, DC and DAPTC negotiate the staged transfer of almost all public toilets – and the costs involved – to TLPs and, later, smaller parishes (noting that this will require increased precepts and mergers of small parishes or creation of new grouped parishes). <sup>39</sup>	DC Executive Lead for Place and LCs Liaison Unit, affected TLPs, DAPTC leadership
<b>14.</b> DC and DAPTC negotiate similar ‘universal’ transfers of assets/service delivery (but only to TLPs) with respect to street cleaning/minor maintenance, verges and grass cutting – these all being services in which TLPs are increasingly active.	As above
<b>15.</b> DC negotiates further wide-ranging ‘Double Devolution Deals’ with willing TLPs (individually or in formal collectives for service delivery eg grouped towns and parishes).	DC Executive Lead for Place and LCs Liaison Unit, affected TLPs, DAPTC leadership
<b>16.</b> DC and DAPTC implement a network of ‘area partnerships’ using the ‘town plus hinterland’ model around <i>a//</i> TLPs (individually or in groups) – but not necessarily covering the whole DC district (see section 5.2).	As above
<b>17.</b> DC undertakes a district-wide Community Governance Review to finalise further boundary changes/grouped parishes as required; to make changes to electoral arrangements that would enhance the democratic status of local councils eg by reducing the number of uncontested elections (see section 2.2); and to ensure the system of local councils is robust and sustainable <sup>40</sup> for the next 10-15 years (including a potentially substantial reduction in the number of rural parishes).	DC Democratic Services in consultation with the LCs Liaison Unit, DAPTC and SLCC

<sup>39</sup> A proposal for transfer of public toilets was advanced some years ago and preparatory work completed, but it was abandoned by the then administration. The new Leader has indicated a willingness to revisit that initiative. However, other areas of service delivery could be considered for the ‘test case’ eg street cleaning or verges and grass cutting.

<sup>40</sup> Taking note of the ‘upbeat’ tone of section 3 of the [Guidance on community governance reviews](#) issued by the Boundaries Commission in 2010

## Towns and Larger Parishes Online Survey: Summary of Results

### Introduction

The survey was conducted in March-April 2024 and covered the 25 member local councils of DAPTC's Towns and Larger Parishes Committee. It was administered online using the Survey Monkey platform, and open to all Clerks, all Mayors/Chairs/Leaders, and to other councillors who represent their town or parish on the Committee. Questions were formulated based on issues raised at previous face-to-face interviews with representatives of 11 of the member councils.

Returns were received as follows:

- 17 fully completed returns from Clerks (68%)
- 15-19 fully or mostly completed returns from elected members (about 50%).

The number of returns was somewhat disappointing, but while it was certainly insufficient for rigorous statistical analysis, overall the responses provided some useful indicative data and insights into prevalent perspectives of Clerks and elected members.

### Representativeness of Responses

Table 1 records responses from the 17 Clerks regarding the population, expenditure and precept income of their councils. The numbers in parentheses show how many of the 25 towns and larger parishes fall into each category. Overall, the distribution of responses from Clerks appears reasonably representative of the councils surveyed. However, the representativeness of the responses from elected members is unknown.

**Table 1**

Population 2021		Total Expenditure 2021-22		Band D Precept 2021-22		Total Precept Income 2021-22	
<5,000	2 (5)	£ <400K	5 (6+)	£ <60	3 (6)	£ <250K	6 (9)
5-10,000	9 (11)	£ 400-800K	4 (4+)	£ 60-120	5 (6)	£ 250-500K	3 (7)
10-15,000	2 (5)	£ 800-1,200K	3 (5)	£ 120-180	2 (5)	£ 500-750K	2 (3)
>15,000	4 (4)	£ >1,200K	5 (5)	£ >180	7 (8)	£ >750K	6 (6)

+ Actual number of councils in this category is higher, but there are gaps in the data

### Adequacy of Revenues

Most respondents considered that current levels of expenditure met the 'reasonable' needs and expectations of their community. However, most also saw a need for the budget to grow marginally or substantially faster than CPI to meet unmet, emerging or increasing needs. The majority view was that it was 'just possible' or 'quite likely' that their community would support such an increase. Less than a quarter felt there 'no chance' of support, but a substantial majority indicated that there was 'very little' or no scope to increase the precept by more than the CPI without significant adverse impacts on the majority of households' standard of living.

### Local Democracy

Almost all respondents agreed that: *A fundamental purpose of parish and town councils is local democratic representation and advocacy for our community.* However, a majority were concerned

that: *A low turnout of voters (less than 50%) in elections undermines our council's democratic and representative role*; and agreed that:

- *Most of the community does not engage with our council most of the time;*
- *We need to increase community consultation and report-back more often on current issues and the council's activities and achievements; and*
- *We could make better use of formal Parish/Town Meetings to engage the community.*

There was strong support for the view that: *Dividing parishes / towns into wards creates unnecessary complications and rivalries*; and a bare majority agreed that: *The legislation should define a stronger leadership role for the Mayor / Chair / Leader*. But most respondents (especially among Clerks) were opposed to: *a thorough governance review into our council's area, ward boundaries and the number of councillors*.

Supplementary written comments referred to the need for more delegations to officers; problematic councillor behaviour; the difficulty of gaining support for changes to town/parish boundaries; and a concern that the direction of a governance review had been 'hijacked' politically by Dorset Council.

### Service Delivery

Clerks were asked three questions about levels of expenditure on services (Table 2).

**Table 2**

Categories of services	Most costly areas of expenditure	Expenditure grew by significantly more than CPI over last 5 years	Expenditure declined by more than 5% over last 5 years
	Number of times mentioned: Top 5 shaded		
Parks and gardens including play areas	15	11	
Community facilities (halls, community centres, other buildings, allotments, cemeteries etc)	12	12	
Sporting facilities (fields, indoor centres etc)	10	9	
Community development and wellbeing (events, grants, transport, social support, youth services, help desk and advice etc)	10	6	1
Planning (development applications, control and enforcement, statutory Neighbourhood Plans or similar informal locality plans)	1	3	2
Economic advancement (including economic/tourism plans and facilities, business partnerships etc)	4	1	3
Streets (maintenance, lighting, cleansing, footpaths, verges etc)	5	5	
Parking areas (including management and enforcement if applicable)	3	2	1
Waste management (litter bins, recycling)	6	8	
Public toilets	9	7	
Environmental issues (climate action, countryside)	3	4	



All respondents were asked a further two questions about the relative importance of different categories of service delivery in terms of benefit to the local community, and to identify categories of service delivery that are likely to require the largest increases in expenditure over the next five years (Table 3).

**Table 3**

Categories of services	Greatest benefit to local community	Need for increased expenditure over next 5 years
	Number of times mentioned: Top 5 shaded	
Parks and gardens including play areas	33	20
Community facilities (halls, community centres, other buildings, allotments, cemeteries etc)	28	23
Sporting facilities (fields, indoor centres etc)	17	16
Community development and wellbeing (events, grants, transport, social support, youth services, help desk and advice etc)	22	14
Planning (development applications, control and enforcement, statutory Neighbourhood Plans or similar informal locality plans)	12	3
Economic advancement (including economic/tourism plans and facilities, business partnerships etc)	8	4
Streets (maintenance, lighting, cleansing, footpaths, verges etc)	10	6
Parking areas (including management and enforcement if applicable)	3	6
Waste management (litter bins, recycling)	9	5
Public toilets	13	14
Environmental issues (climate action, countryside)	9	12

The results presented in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that most respondents saw the future in terms of a continued focus on the ‘traditional’ functions of town and parish councils, except perhaps for increased attention to environmental issues. The views of Clerks and elected members were similar except that a higher proportion of elected members:

- saw community benefit in the planning roles of towns and parishes; and
- identified needs for increased expenditure on community facilities, community development, streets and public toilets.

### **Transfer of Services to/from Dorset Council**

All respondents were asked two questions about firstly, any attempts made by Dorset Council to ‘download’ or ‘cost-shift’ assets or service delivery to their town or parish; and secondly, whether in their opinion some assets or services could reasonably be devolved to towns or parishes (Table 4)

As would be expected, Clerks and elected members identified mostly the same areas where Dorset Council was said to have attempted cost-shifting, although a significantly higher proportion of elected members referred to the category ‘streets’. In supplementary comments mention was made of licensing and flood management in addition to the categories nominated in the table.

With respect to services that might reasonably be downloaded, it was notable that ‘planning’ was nominated by a higher proportion of members than Clerks; while the reverse applied to ‘streets’, ‘parking areas’ and public toilets.

From supplementary comments and responses to later questions it was evident that support for more devolution was to a significant extent dependent on matching changes to funding arrangements. One respondent emphasised the need for a ‘blank sheet’ review of ‘who does what’.

Of the 17 clerks, six indicated that their council and/or other local organisations had recently discussed possible transfer of assets and/or service delivery with Dorset Council. Only two considered those discussions fruitful. Discussions had variously covered sports fields, toilets, car parks, allotments, other parcels of land (including one for social housing), a town centre building and a heritage item.

**Table 4**

Categories of services	Services subject to attempted cost-shifting	Services that could reasonably be devolved
	Number of times mentioned: Top 5 shaded	
Parks and gardens including play areas	6	15
Community facilities (halls, community centres, other buildings, allotments, cemeteries etc)	9	14
Sporting facilities (fields, indoor centres etc)	5	12
Community development and wellbeing (events, grants, transport, social support, youth services, help desk and advice etc)	15	15
Planning (development applications, control and enforcement, statutory Neighbourhood Plans or similar informal locality plans)	3	10
Economic advancement (including economic/tourism plans and facilities, business partnerships etc)	6	9
Streets (maintenance, lighting, cleansing, footpaths, verges etc)	17	15
Parking areas (including management and enforcement if applicable)	5	16
Waste management (litter bins, recycling)	8	4
Public toilets	9	14
Environmental issues (climate action, countryside)	3	8

### Working Relationships with Dorset Council

Survey questions looked at the overall relationship between towns and parishes and Dorset Council, cooperation in service delivery, and the need for mechanisms to advance the relationship.

A substantial majority of respondents considered that: *On the whole, our council has a generally productive working relationship with Dorset Council*. However, respondents were noticeably less convinced that: *Dorset Council respects and supports the role played by towns/parishes*, or that: *All things considered, our council's relationship with Dorset Council is as good as we had with the previous District Council*.

Similarly, there was a widely held view that: *Usually, we know which officer to contact at Dorset Council when we need assistance*, but less confidence that: *Access to senior management and Cabinet members is usually available within a reasonable timeframe*.

A clear majority agreed that: *Our council's 'Twin Hat' councillors facilitate effective liaison with Dorset Council as and when required*.

Taken together, these results point to inconsistent, patchy and ambivalent relationships between towns and parishes and Dorset Council. That impression is reinforced by responses to the following questions.

Turning to cooperation in service delivery, respondents were asked to identify three categories of services in which their town or parish had the best working relationship with Dorset, and three in which that working relationship most needed to improve (Table 5).

**Table 5**

Categories of services	Best working relationship	Relationship most needs to improve
	Number of times mentioned: Top 3 shaded	
Parks and gardens including play areas	5	5
Community facilities (halls, community centres, other buildings, allotments, cemeteries etc)	2	4
Sporting facilities (fields, indoor centres etc)	4	3
Community development and wellbeing (events, grants, transport, social support, youth services, help desk and advice etc)	7	10
Planning (development applications, control and enforcement, statutory Neighbourhood Plans or similar informal locality plans)	14	21
Economic advancement (including economic/tourism plans and facilities, business partnerships etc)	6	8
Streets (maintenance, lighting, cleansing, footpaths, verges etc)	21	14
Parking areas (including management and enforcement if applicable)	6	6
Waste management (litter bins, recycling)	21	4
Public toilets	4	7
Environmental issues (climate action, countryside)	6	11

The views of Clerks and elected members were broadly similar, except that Clerks clearly identified 'streets' as the category in which working relationships were best, while elected members saw it as the area most in need of improvement.

In supplementary comments, Dorset Council's 'property team' received a favourable mention, while particular concern was registered in relation to 'cultural indifference' to the role of parishes and towns in development control. The latter perhaps explains why 'planning' was identified as the category in which relationships most need to improve.

There was widespread agreement that: *New mechanisms are needed to improve the working relationship between Parish and Town Councils and Dorset Council*, and that: *Towns and parishes*

*need to work more closely in area- and/or interest-based groups in order to exert more influence on Dorset Council.*

In terms of specific mechanisms to facilitate improved working relationships, *Community Area Partnerships (similar to those in operation in Cornwall)* ranked highest, followed by a *Formal Charter*, with lesser support for *Area Boards (similar to those in operation in Wiltshire)* and *Formal district groups of parishes/towns*. Supplementary comments included the desirability of including representatives of towns and parishes in Dorset Council's induction programmes.

It is worth noting that five 'Local Area Partnerships' comprising market towns and surrounding parishes were active under the former West Dorset Partnership, and that the former West Dorset District Council developed a Local Area Partnership Policy.

### Local Planning

Clerks were asked: *What Town/Parish plans has your council completed, or are under way, or may be prepared in the next term?* (Table 6).

**Table 6**

Type of Plan	Completed	Under Way	Maybe Soon	Most Unlikely
Council corporate/strategy plan	7	4	6	-
Statutory Neighbourhood Plan	4	4	4	5
Social/community plan	4	-	8	4
Environment/conservation plan	6	-	9	1
Climate action plan	8	2	6	1

The substantial number of completed plans for environment/conservation and climate action appears noteworthy, as does the relatively small number of council corporate/strategic plans and of statutory Neighbourhood Plans.

Other types of plans mentioned in supplementary comments included those for seafront and beach improvements, access (disability?) and movement, streetscape and heritage, and investment in local projects and improvements.

All respondents were asked to nominate the three most important issues of concern for local planning in their town or parish (Table 7).

**Table 7**

Issues of Concern	Number of Mentions
Population growth and new development	21
Redevelopment in existing urban/village areas	10
Maintaining local character	18
Environmental conservation/climate change	16
Economic development	10
Impacts of tourism	4
Social issues	9

Similar priorities were indicated by Clerks and elected members, except that Clerks placed relatively more emphasis on environmental conservation/climate changes responses and economic development.

Other issues mentioned in supplementary comments included affordable housing (linked to the increasing number of second homes); lack of land, infrastructure and community facilities to service growth; flooding; and overly restrictive heritage and conservation provisions that restrict sympathetic refurbishment of old buildings.

It might be expected that several of the identified areas of concern would be addressed by the preparation of statutory Neighbourhood Plans, but Table 6 indicates that is unlikely to be the case. Table 8 may provide an explanation: respondents from councils that have completed or nearly completed a statutory Neighbourhood Plan were asked to identify five phrases from the following list that best summarised their experience.

**Table 8**

Options	Number of Mentions
Complex and lengthy process	13
Excessive demands on council and community resources	10
Very costly	7
Valuable contributions by community volunteers	4
Productive community consultation	6
Community consultation yielded little essential input	4
Difficulty in finding suitable consultants	1
Useful advice and technical/financial support from 'Locality' program	8
Excessive delays by District/Dorset Council in completing its tasks	-
Lack of effective cooperation from District/Dorset Council	1
In the end, a worthwhile exercise with real benefits for the town/parish	3
Ultimately a wasted effort – benefits could be achieved in other ways	4

Clerks expressed particular concern about the complexity, cost and resource demands of the statutory process. There were mixed views regarding the benefits of community engagement and the ultimate value of completing a statutory Neighbourhood Plan: about half of respondents from councils that had done so considered it 'ultimately a wasted effort'.

Two further questions looked at particular aspects of the relationship in planning with Dorset Council.

First, respondents were asked: *To what extent has the delay in completing a new Dorset Local Plan been a problem for your town/parish?* A substantial majority (about 75%) expressed moderate or major concern that their local planning had been hindered by *that delay*.

Second, they were asked: How would you describe Dorset Council's responses to your council's submissions on development applications? Please select up to three boxes (from the table below) that together best reflect your experience (Table 9). Overall, there was a roughly even balance between positive and negative views. However, a relatively high proportion of Clerks ticked the boxes for 'Too often dismissive' and 'Rarely helpful'. Again, this points to inconsistent and ambivalent working relationships between towns and parishes and Dorset Council.

Table 9

Options	Number of Mentions
Reasonably prompt	6
Typically slow	10
Mostly respectful and constructive	13
Too often dismissive	12
Usually clearly explained with sufficient detail	9
Rarely helpful	9

### Future Role and Prospects

The final section of the survey sought views on pressures and pathways for change in the roles played by towns and larger parishes, and how the 2019 reorganisation of local government in Dorset might play out.

First, respondents were asked: *What are the key pressures for change in the role and priorities of your council? Please select up to 5 major issues/concerns in the list below* (Table 10).

Table 10

Options	Number of Mentions
Managing growth and (re) development	19
Addressing threats to environmental quality (inc. climate change)	17
Promoting local jobs/economic development (inc. tourism)	9
Tackling social disadvantage	12
Dealing with an ageing population	18
Upgrading services /facilities to meet changing community needs	16
Filling gaps in services/facilities provided by Dorset Council	12
Ensuring community participation and local democracy	18
Providing stronger community leadership	7

The top 5 issues/areas of concern stand out quite clearly and suggest an agenda for towns and larger parishes that blends growth and environmental management with a strong focus on local democracy and upgrading services to meet community needs (notably those of an ageing population). Compared to elected members, Clerks placed particular emphasis on the need to upgrade services and facilities.

In supplementary comments, housing affordability was again mentioned as a source of concern, along with dealing with government on environmental issues.

A series of questions followed on action needed to address those pressures for change.

Large majorities of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that:

- *Our council will have to make significant changes to its functions and priorities over the next decade to address local needs and maintain quality of life;*
- *Our council can and should become a more robust advocate on behalf of the local community;*
- *Parish and town councils generally should establish a broader role in 'place making' and community development;*



- *Both councillors and senior managers will need to substantially upgrade their skills to lead the council effectively and respond to changing needs;*
- *To improve their performance, all Dorset parish and town councils must greatly increase exchanges of information and expertise in areas of mutual interest; and*
- *Parish and town councils need more formal, legislated powers to enable them to perform their functions effectively and address future challenges.*

These results suggest an awareness of the need for change that contrasts with the picture painted in Tables 2 and 3. A particularly high proportion of Clerks agreed on the need for significant changes to functions and priorities.

On the other hand, responses to two other propositions were less positive:

- *Given that the precept is uncapped, parish and town councils have a responsibility to do more to fill gaps in service delivery; and*
- *To meet future needs, we should seriously consider amalgamation or a formal shared services agreement with adjoining town/parish councils.*

Only a third of all respondents agreed that towns and parishes should do more (implicitly with their own funds) to help fill gaps in service delivery. Clerks were evenly split on the issue. A substantial majority of Clerks, but only a third of elected members (most were 'not sure'), were favourably disposed to considering amalgamation or formal shared services agreements.

Finally, responses were sought to the propositions that:

- *Over time, the 2019 reorganisation of local government in Dorset will prove to be a success; and*
- *To make the 2019 reorganisation a success, there will need to be a marked shift in the balance of roles, responsibilities and funding from Dorset Council towards larger towns and parishes.*

Nearly half of all respondents agreed (only one strongly) that the 2019 reorganisation would prove successful, and few disagreed, but a third were unsure. Results were similar for both Clerks and elected members.

Large majorities of both Clerks and elected members endorsed the need for a marked shift in the balance of roles with Dorset Council, but supplementary comments made it clear that for many this depended on funding being devolved along with responsibilities.

### **Further Comments from Respondents**

Responses to the open-ended ('any further comments') question at the end of the survey for the most part underlined matters already raised under previous questions, but in doing so offered some clearer perspectives. Comments clustered around the following three broad issues.

#### **'Central-local' relations**

- Dorset Council was seen as excessively centralist – it has 'lost touch' with residents and needs to 'let go' to give towns and parishes more scope to address community issues.
- The needs to be a thorough review of respective roles and relationships, not only in terms of service delivery and funding, but also community consultation/engagement. Local people do not know 'who does what'.

***Quality of Local Democracy and Governance***

- Parish and town councils need to rid themselves of a ‘Vicar of Dibley’ image. This requires greater professionalism on the part of both councillors and officers.
- Particular attention needs to be paid to: numbers of councillors (in some cases too many, in others too few); the level of support they receive; the heavy demands placed on mayors/chairs of larger councils (becoming ‘an unpaid, full-time’ job’); respective roles of councillors and clerks (need for more oversight on the one hand, increased delegations on the other); councillors’ behaviour.
- Councillors should be ‘paid to perform’ with reasonable allowances.
- The quality and effectiveness of community consultation demands attention – towns and parishes have difficulty capturing people’s attention, but some are successful and more use could be made of community expertise.

***Financial Management***

- Some/many parish and town councils are approaching a financial crossroads – demands for services and facilities are outstripping potential growth in revenues (whether from new development or increased precepts).
- Larger councils need specialist finance managers, and/or all clerks need demonstrated financial expertise.
- Larger towns/tourist centres should receive a share of business rates.
- Surrounding parishes should be required to increase precepts to support services and facilities provided by a central town/larger parish.

## **Research on Cornwall's Experience**

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Extracts from: Jane Wills (Environment and Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter) The geo-constitution and responses to austerity: Institutional entrepreneurship, switching, and re-scaling in the United Kingdom. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2020, pp.1-16

These extracts are drawn from pp.6-12 of Professor Wills' paper. Other than selecting the material to be extracted (which has omitted a considerable amount of the paper), no changes have been made to the text except for deleting references to academic papers, some very minor edits and re-formatting.

### **The Research**

....Cornwall Council has been on a journey towards greater partnership working with its town and parish councils for more than a decade. The council's bid for unitary status, submitted in 2007, had to provide alternative ways for working with local people if the six intermediate district councils were to be abolished, as planned. Even at this time, the would-be unitary council envisaged a greater role for the lowest tier of local government saying that: "The new authority for Cornwall will, in consultation with the relevant councils, consider the case for the delegation of certain responsibilities to the local councils" (Cornwall County Council, 2007, p. 40).

These early efforts were subsequently boosted by Cornwall's nationally agreed devolution arrangement, signed with Government in 2015.... That agreement also reflected ambitions to increase the role of local councils, and the submission declared "We are committed to the idea of double devolution; many of the increased powers and freedoms that we are seeking will allow us to work with partners to empower local communities to address their needs" (Cornwall Council, 2015, p. 8).

While support for "double-devolution" has been about the principle of subsidiarity and working in partnership with local councils, it only really took off once austerity started to bite. Cornwall Council's revenue support grant was reduced by 90% between 2013/14 and 2019, falling from £105 million to just £14 million.... The new financial reality triggered major staffing reductions as well as cuts in support for the voluntary sector, while also accelerating efforts to devolve greater responsibilities to town and parish councils.

A very ambitious ongoing programme of asset transfer was developed to shift management and financial responsibility for important services such as public toilets, libraries, parks, and community centres to local councils. These councils have, in turn, been able to raise their council tax precept to pay for them, moving the financial burden away from the unitary authority. This institutional switching has saved almost all public toilets, parks, and libraries from closure, cuts, and/or sale....

### **Asset Transfer to Town and Parish Councils in Cornwall**

.... a large number of assets have been devolved to the local councils included in this research. However, there was no uniformity on the ground and each arrangement reflected a bespoke settlement, reflecting the interests of each party, the state of the assets concerned, and considerations of finance.... As might be expected, assets that cost money to maintain were more likely to move than ones attached to an income and a number of respondents bemoaned the fact that car parks were generally not on the table for negotiation, at least in the initial phase of the process.

All the [case study] councils had seen considerable increases in their size and responsibilities as a result of devolution. As an example, Falmouth Town Council had increased its staff numbers from 5 to 40 in just 8 years and almost all aspects of public services in the town had been transferred over to them. Even smaller parish councils, like St Agnes, had more than doubled their staffing and income in a very short time. St Austell Town Council was only created in 2009 and yet it had 19 staff in 2019.

As an example of these changes by service area rather than place, the library service remained the responsibility of the unitary pan-county council (and this is a statutory requirement) but most of the buildings and staff as well as day-to-day service decisions had been devolved to local organisations. In 2015, Cornwall Council provided 31 local libraries for local people, but only five of these were left by early 2019....

As would be expected, each council had increased its budget to pay for [transferred assets and services], and in some cases they had increased the precept (or taxation) by more than 100% over a very short space of time.... Each local council had engaged in long, sometimes difficult, negotiations over the terms of each transfer, and respondents reported having to learn a range of new skills to take on this work. This included being able to scrutinise the offer being made to them and the legal, management, and financial risks involved. Many felt that Cornwall Council had been trying to “pass the buck,” particularly in the early stages of the process, and it was only when the local councils developed more ability to scrutinise the process that relationships began to improve.

Despite such problems, however, almost all the respondents argued that devolving these assets was the “right thing to do.” When confronted with the potential closure of public toilets, the degradation of green spaces and parks, or the closure of the local library, clerks and councillors argued that they had to respond. As a councillor from Helston explained:

*You can't not have a public toilet, it's as simple as that ... A town like Helston that has, you know, several big events over the year such as Flora Day, and tonight, the Christmas lights turn-on where the town is really stretched to capacity ... You need to ensure that there is a proper facility for the people to use.*

.... Going further than this, however, a number of respondents also felt that devolution provided an opportunity for local councils to ensure that “the destiny of the community ... is not dictated from county hall” (clerk from St Agnes). As the clerk from Launceston put it:

*We should be cutting the grass in the town, it's our town; they're our verges, our parks. We should be running the library. If we're going to have public toilets ... they're all of ours and I think all towns have to do that but we have to balance that with explaining to local people that it's only ever going to cost you more money.*

In this regard, respondents had consulted their residents about devolution before taking things on. Camborne Town Council consulted local people about its parks and green spaces, St Agnes held a public consultation about the toilets and library, and St Austell hired a firm to conduct a formal consultation process, prior to proceeding with any devolution. In every case, local people supported the moves, albeit that they raised obvious concerns about having to pay more in taxation. Although framed in a different language, the councils recognised that asking for more money demanded a new conversation with local residents, and that this amounted to a new “social contract” with their community.

....A number of the councils had sought to rationalise their use of public spaces, combining local management of services in the town rather than leaving them as standalone services, as was done in the past. A good example was in St Ives, where the town council had taken over the tourist

information centre and its four staff but could then merge this service with the newly devolved library service, in one building, with longer opening hours. As the town clerk explained: “The staff are going to train and cross over disciplines, so [it will be] a better use of resources and hopefully, better for staff as well because they’re having new opportunities and upskilling with a more satisfying job.” In Truro, the transfer of the library and staff similarly provided an opportunity to bring the City’s Business Improvement District team, Citizens Advice Centre, and adult education into one building, with the library, managed by the council on site.

In Falmouth, the council had brought its outsourced labour in-house, arguing that this increased staff flexibility while also improving the quality of jobs as well as productivity rates. Given that Falmouth Town Council now needed to manage a number of parks, public toilets, public spaces, and a large cemetery, they could use generic grounds staff more efficiently than was possible before when each was subject to separate contracting agreements managed by the particular private firm contracted by a separate staff team employed by Cornwall Council.

Given that the larger towns like Camborne, Falmouth, and St Austell were now employing larger numbers of their own grounds and library staff, they had also sought to foster a stronger local branding for their services. They had bought uniforms for grounds staff, branded their vans, and improved their signage, seeking to ensure that local people knew who was doing the work.

### **The Challenges of Budgets and Boundaries**

.... While all the councils included in the research had majority support for devolution and localism, a minority reported serious, and in some cases growing, divisions of opinion among elected representatives. A councillor on St Ives Town Council, for example, was concerned about the scale and speed of devolution, saying that: “I think we’ve done too much, too quickly.” He also objected to the increase in costs when the services were largely the same, arguing that residents “are still getting the same toilets, the same library, the same service provided ... and that wouldn’t be too bad if there was a corresponding reduction in the Cornwall Council tax but there isn’t.”

.... In this regard, the research highlighted the extent to which devolution is vulnerable to changes in council representation and the outcomes of local elections. While the clerks and associated staff were critical to ensure continuity in vision, the increased importance of council operations made it more important to support any newly elected councillors. As part of his work in Falmouth, for example, the clerk had started to do a lot more work to induct new councillors when they got elected.... Now that Falmouth Town Council had started forward planning, they needed to ensure that there was continuity in vision and delivery despite any potential changes in elected representation.

The research also exposed a number of concerns about perceived injustices in relation to paying for devolved services. Whereas all Cornwall’s residents had previously paid for services like libraries, parks, and community centres, devolution meant that the burden for those facilities was falling on a smaller number of residents – within the boundaries of the town or parish – even if they were used by people from a much wider hinterland.

.... The research in Cornwall found that local councils had risen to the challenge of taking on services and paying for them, demonstrating that they could improve provision and find efficiencies in the process. However, this had to be carefully managed. There were dissenters within every council, and concerns about the injustice of taxation and access to services could have easily derailed the process. While councils had established a new social contract with their taxpayers, this was vulnerable to dissent, and hinged on satisfaction with the new management regime and service provision.

## **References**

Cornwall Council. (2015). *The Case for Cornwall*. Available at <https://cornishassembly.org/CaseForCornwall.pdf>

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Professor Wills' research is also reported in *A new geography of local government: The changing role of Town and Parish Councils in Cornwall, UK*. Centre for Geography and Environmental Science, University of Exeter, 2019. Available at: <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/37848>