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**Christchurch councillors to debate pros and cons of a unitary authority**

**Thursday 9 June, 2016**

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A SPECIAL council meeting will take place in Christchurch next week to discuss the pros and cons of future council arrangements.

Arranged by a group of five councillors, the extraordinary meeting will be held on Tuesday at the Civic Offices. It will discuss the non-financial costs and benefits of a unitary authority and consider the criteria by which to assess any potential change.

All nine councils across the county have been discussing plans to change the way local government is run.

The extraordinary meeting has come about following a scrutiny committee in April where members requested the Mayor call a meeting to discuss the issues surrounding future reorganisation.

A business case is set to be finalised and published in June, with a public consultation on the unitary options taking place in August and September. After this, the leaders of all Dorset councils would consider the findings and report back in November or December.

The meeting on Tuesday will look at a number of council services including health and social care, housing, highways and transport and planning. It will also look at protecting the identity of Christchurch.

A report to the council says: "Christchurch, like many other areas, has a quality that many residents and visitors appreciate. The council is proud of the history of the borough and the democratic representation that dates back to 1297. There is concern that this identity would be diluted if the current council became part of a larger one. Whatever future arrangements may transpire, the borough of Christchurch would retain its recognised identity as it is now."

Other concerns centre around economic prosperity and local control retained by local people.

In March, members of Dorset County Council considered the local authority options, with members supporting the formation of two unitary councils in Dorset.

This would either see a 'shire' Dorset authority and a merger of Poole and Bournemouth, or a unitary of Poole, Bournemouth and Christchurch, with the other councils merging.

The vote was not binding and was made so councillors could indicate their preferred direction going forward.