

## **The South Coast Region Economic Partnership: an introductory overview**

edited by

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

This Discussion Paper is an initial outcome of a series of meetings between representatives of Southampton City Council and the University of Southampton (Department of Geography) in May/June 1997, during which the Department's involvement in research underpinning the proposed South Coast Region Economic Partnership (SCREP) was warmly welcomed. It was agreed that it would be helpful to produce a brief collaborative discussion paper which would (a) signify the Department's positive attitude towards involvement in this initiative and (b) provide an independent overview of some relevant issues.

As editor of the paper I am indebted to several colleagues, all current members of the human geography staff of the Department of Geography, who participated in the discussions and provided inputs towards this document: Dr David Martin, Professor Colin Mason, Dr Steven Pinch, and Professor Malcolm Wagstaff. In addition, contributions were received from Dr Peter John (Department of Politics) and from Dr Adam Tickell (Department of Geography, University of Manchester), due to join the Department of Geography at the University of Southampton later in 1997 as a professor of human geography. Individual contributors are not identified in the text.

Discussion Papers are usually regarded as preliminary, working papers, intended for modification in the light of comments received. Further analysis may lead to the preparation of papers or reports focussed upon specific issues. In this case, continued collaboration between the Southampton City Council and the Department of Geography may involve more detailed investigations leading to published results likely to be useful in the context of urban and regional planning.

*Southampton, July 1997*

## Summary

*This paper is a preliminary, working report designed as a contribution to current debates on the South Coast Region Economic Partnership. It comprises a summary of viewpoints offered by a range of individuals - primarily human geographers but including one political scientist - within the framework of a simple SWOT analysis. The collated opinions presented here underpin some well-recognised characteristics and provide some original insights into controversial issues.*

## Introduction

This paper is conceived as an 'ideas' document, independent of earlier work but framed, obviously, in the context of existing knowledge and experience. It does not report on any new research, but reflects the experience of a group of academic researchers who have been involved, collectively and individually, in the South Coast Region over varying periods of time but in some cases several decades. The aim is to provide an informed but independent, initially somewhat detached, overview, asking questions and highlighting issues for future investigation, rather than retailing information already generally available.

The essential focus is on the distinctive character of the South Coast Region in a competitive environment. The Region has already been very broadly defined (see attached map). The dual objective of the present exercise is to look at the Region in terms of its internal character and complexity and in terms of how it is perceived (and how it perceives itself) in a wider UK and European environment.

Despite the practical utility of not having clearly defined boundaries for the South Coast Region, this presents significant difficulties in making a case for the distinctiveness of the region. Attempts to construct a region out of whole local authority districts or unitary authorities may be particularly problematic when these do not themselves define distinctive compact geographical areas, as in the case of Test Valley, for example, which ranges from Southampton suburbs in the south to rural mid-Hampshire in the north. Statistical regionalization routines such as those developed by CURDS and used in the City Council's research are based on the grouping together of the most similar geographical units, so as to reduce within-region diversity.

It is therefore very difficult to reconcile this kind of approach with a concern to incorporate whole local government areas: either it must be accepted that the region is a political configuration, in which case some clear boundaries should be assigned for

the purposes of describing its characteristics, or the results of a statistical definition should be accepted as the basis for a distinctive region. It is likely that the avoidance of a clear boundary would cause difficulties at a later date if inclusion within the region should become a prerequisite for receipt of any form of resource or assistance.

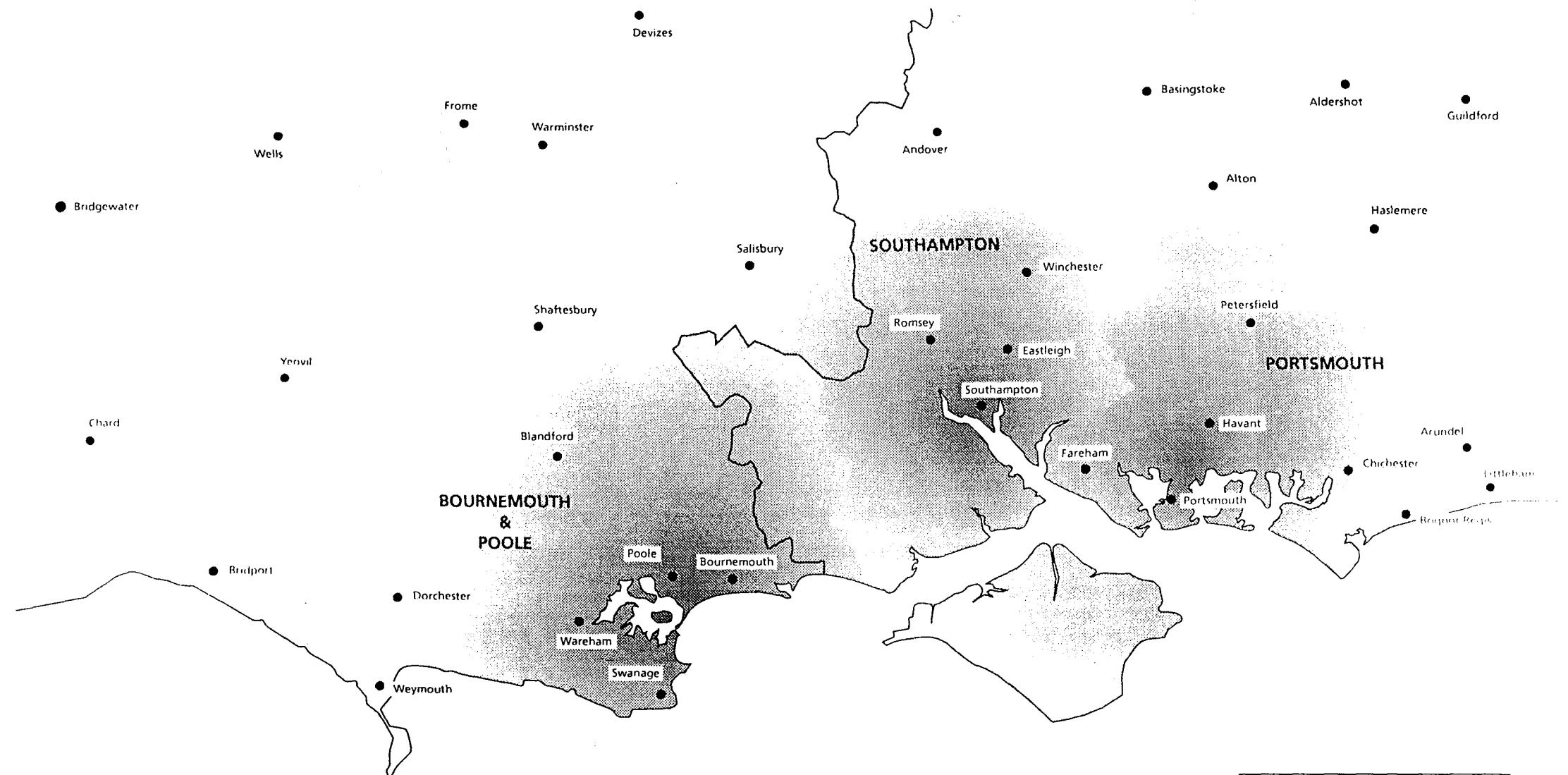
### **Methodology**

In order to produce a discussion paper at short notice and within a problematical time-frame, it was decided to base the paper on a simple SWOT analysis, highlighting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with the loosely-defined South Coast Region under a range of headings: historical, demographic, political, economic, transport and education. The method was extended to include internal and external perceptions of the region, the latter divided between UK and continental European perceptions.

The matrix designed to provide a framework for individuals' responses is reproduced as Table 1. Each area for comment is identified by a box number. Contributors were asked to produce comments, similarly identified by box numbers, for as many boxes as possible. If some comments appeared relevant to more than one box, they were identified by the most appropriate box (with other boxes indicated in parentheses).

This proved straightforward as a methodology, and produced some interesting comments. Some were simple one-liners, others ranged between a short paragraph and one page. Most comments were provided on disk to facilitate rapid collation and editing.

# South Coast Economic Area



South Coast Urban Areas  
— GOSE / GOSW Boundary

**Table 1**  
**SOUTH COAST REGION ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP:**  
**A SWOT ANALYSIS**

Contexts	Strengths Distinctive characteristics	Weaknesses Problems	Opportunities Challenges Needs	Threats Competition
<b><i>Historical</i></b> legacies, problems, orientations	A1	B1	C1	D1
<b><i>Demographic</i></b> characteristics, problems, issues	A2	B2	C2	D2
<b><i>Political</i></b> characteristics, systems, positions	A3	B3	C3	D3
<b><i>Economic</i></b> characteristics, development priorities	A4	B4	C4	D4
<b><i>Transport</i></b> systems development priorities	A5	B5	C5	D5
<b><i>Education</i></b> facilities needs	A6	B6	C6	D6
<b>Internal perceptions</b> local regional	A7	B7	C7	D7
<b>External perceptions</b> UK	A8	B8	C8	D8
<b>External perceptions</b> European	A9	B9	C9	D9

**I**

**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

**A1 Strengths: distinctive characteristics**

The legacy of the South Coast is its international identity based on its ports, its civic traditions in its main towns, its moderate local politics, its prosperity and its pleasant overall environment. There are a number of major historical sites in the region, including three historic cathedral cities: Chichester, Salisbury and Winchester.

The historic built environment enhances the quality of the residential environment with implications for in-migration of knowledge workers, forcing firms which require such workers to follow the locational preferences of the workers that they seek to recruit.

The image of the region portrayed in literature and film, notably the novels of Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy, attracts tourists to the region and could be used to attract more foreign investment. The Japanese read Jane Austen, and the Wessex connection is widely appreciated abroad.

Arguably the chief focal point of the entire region, the city of Southampton has developed its role over many centuries to become, today, a clear and well-established regional service centre. More widely, despite the phenomenon of commuting to London, a set of city regions can be delineated forming, collectively, a central southern region. The area is generally dynamic and growing. It benefits from decentralization from London. There is a view that a central-southern area can be easily distinguished despite problems in delimiting boundaries.

**B1 Weaknesses: problems**

The region as a whole appears to lack a clear perceived historical identity, particularly when compared with Wessex, although Wessex has a constructed and varying identity.

History creates a culture that is anti-growth and anti-development.

The area lacks strong local cultures and traditions of political cooperation.

The area comprises a diverse set of areas with very differing problems. The ports, for example, partly because of the diverse histories, have relatively little in common. Rural areas have quite different problems to the urban areas.

**C1 Opportunities: challenges and needs**

The area has tended to fall between the south west, governed from Bristol, and the south east, dominated by London.

**D1 Threats: competition**

The 'south coast region' is seen by many as somewhat artificial and contrived.

The region could be ignored in a SW/SE carve-up of southern England.

## II

### DEMOGRAPHIC ISSUES

#### A2 Strengths: distinctive characteristics

A major characteristic of the region is substantial recent population growth through in-migration, especially of skilled workers. There is easier recruitment by firms of workers that are nationally in short supply.

The area is characterised by high mobility, a skilled and adaptable workforce and the absence of acute social problems, except in some of the city areas.

#### B2 Weaknesses: problems

The region's infrastructure - roads, NHS, schools, land for housing - is generally under pressure.

There is a problem with unskilled workers, as economic growth is mainly in the knowledge industries.

Older urban areas present problems here as elsewhere. Such areas tend to be by-passed by economic growth which is mainly suburban/rural. There are health as well as poverty problems in the inner city areas.

An older population in a series of resorts - the *costa geriatrica* image - is part of the external perception of the region.

The demographic and economic characteristics of the region are, however, by no means uniform, and extensions beyond the Bournemouth-Southampton-Portsmouth grouping immediately begin to draw in areas which actually increase the diversity of the region rather than demonstrate its cohesiveness. Indeed, the Bournemouth and Poole conurbation is itself distinctly different from Southampton and Portsmouth, and is separated by the New Forest.

#### C2 Opportunities: challenges and needs

Research shows that a high rate of new business formation is positively associated with population growth.

### **C2 Opportunities: challenges and needs (continued)**

There are concentrations of elderly people in some areas, and of single-parent families in the inner cities. There is unemployment in some inner-city areas and in peripheral council estates.

The region is characterized by immigration and therefore also by younger active people.

There is rapid population growth, with consequent problems of service provision, in many suburban growth areas.

### **D2 Threats: competition**

The ageing population is a kind of demographic time-bomb, but the problem can be overstated. The active elderly are often a section of the population with high spending power.

### III

## POLITICAL CHARACTERISTICS

### A3 Strengths: distinctive characteristics

The politics of the area is complex. It is seen as a largely Conservative area but containing pockets of strong Labour interest. In the past it has been overshadowed by the power of the Conservatives, particularly on Hampshire County Council, but also in the districts and in parliamentary representation. The result was conservationist and cautious local policies, particularly with regard to economic development policy. In recent years Labour and the Liberal Democrats have increased ground markedly. Labour has become important in the politics of Southampton and Portsmouth; the Liberals have gained power elsewhere, especially in rural areas. The former have followed economic development policies; the latter have been ambiguous in this sector.

### B3 Weaknesses: problems

There is a fragmented system of political units and an overall lack of political vision/leadership. The region straddles two Government regions. There are conflicting political interests between urban and rural areas which make it difficult, perhaps impossible, for the region to speak with a single voice.

The main weakness is the lack of cooperation in the area, particularly between the various councils. Political competition and conflict has made partnership difficult to achieve or sustain, and has led to many competing partnerships. The lack of cooperation also extends to the other potential partners in the area, such as the private sector and quangos, although there are some signs of a change in attitude in recent years. Also there are some good examples of political cooperation, such as the South Coast Metropole, a European Union orientated economic partnership.

The other weakness is the large and vague political geography of the South-East which means that it is hard to develop a coherent regional strategy in which the South Coast can play a part. The sub-region is in two government offices for the regions, and the South-East extends right round London. These problems will be aggravated with the creation of Regional Development Agencies.

There is a legacy of conflict between the urban and rural local government areas reflecting their different characteristics and political objectives.

**B3 Weaknesses: problems (continued)**

Rural areas and Hampshire County Council have been very much concerned with containing urban growth and protecting the countryside. Conflicts were manifest in tensions within the old Hampshire Development Association (HDA). The South Coast Metropole was very much a reaction to the inadequacy of the HDA.

**C3 Opportunities: challenges and needs**

The major opportunity available is that political cooperation could foster a more competitive and dynamic local economy. Constructive political behaviour could enhance environmental values and minority interests in local economic development policy.

The South Coast Metropole has led to cooperation. Perception of common needs may lead to further cooperation.

**D3 Threats: competition**

The creation of Southampton and Portsmouth as unitary authorities, while sorting out some of the confusion of responsibilities between the tiers of government and addressing the feeling of loss of power in the main cities, may encourage distance between the main cities and other district authorities. Local voting trends under a Labour government could even revive Conservative dominance and retrenchment at the Hampshire County level - depending on the fate of the Liberal Democrats, possibly adding to the political conflict.

Generally, inter-jurisdictional rivalry could undermine collective efforts.

## IV

### ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

#### A4 Strengths: distinctive characteristics

South Hampshire has a prosperous diversified economy which is likely to benefit from further European economic integration. The location is attractive for knowledge-based companies because of the location preferences of knowledge workers. There is a high rate of new firm formation, and a relatively small manufacturing sector.

This is a diverse and growing area. There is still a significant manufacturing presence (Ford, BAT, Vosper Thorneycroft) but the overall trend for manufacturing jobs is one of decline. The decline of the defence element in Portsmouth, and the growth of leisure-based activities in museums etc, are important. Both consumer and producer services boomed in the 1980s in the region. There is now marked growth, too, in the higher education sector and in retailing, although many jobs in the latter are part-time.

#### B4 Weaknesses: problems

Older urban areas do not generally share in the general regional prosperity.

There are few large local firms to give security to employment and to compete effectively in Europe.

High land values have encouraged manufacturing companies to shift manufacturing to peripheral areas of the UK and to redevelop sites in the south for offices. The area is unlikely to have significant manufacturing job growth in the near future.

#### C4 Opportunities: challenges and needs

The rural parts of the area are likely to benefit from trends towards telecommuting.

There is much uncertainty over the future of some services. Will large regional offices be needed with the growth of direct selling?

#### D4 Threats: competition

The further expansion of the Port of Southampton could be adversely affected by environmental groups.

#### D4 Threats: competition (continued)

Urban development generally meets opposition, as in the case of the Stoneham Football Stadium.

Regional service centres could be undermined by decentralised direct selling offices in cheaper northern areas.

High-tech companies could be affected by the decline in defence expenditure.

Companies in the area may lose out to continental European companies if the UK does not eventually join a common EU currency.

Recent economic growth is tended to lead to a trend towards social polarization, although not on the same scale as in the USA. This trend involves the growth of highly paid jobs and the growth of relatively low paid jobs with a decline in the middle range of jobs.

V

## TRANSPORT ISSUES

### A5 Strengths: distinctive characteristics

The area is generally well connected by road, air and sea. Proximity to London is clearly a major advantage.

Connections with London have been greatly improved by the completion of the M3, despite the Twyford Down controversy.

Southampton and Bournemouth airports are booming with growth of regional air links in the wake of problems with the London airports.

There are good ferry connections with the European continent, in an increasingly competitive environment.

### B5 Weaknesses: problems

There is a need for more investment in rail, particular in the high-speed link to London.

The absence of east-west motorways is a significant disadvantage. East-west road links have improved but are still not good, especially to the west.

Heavy traffic in the area leads to frequent congestion, notably in urban and peri-urban regions at peak times, and on the M27.

Privatised rail services produce mixed reactions from customers who generally remain suspicious.

The region still awaits the completion of the Newbury by-pass for links to the north.

### C5 Opportunities: challenges and needs

Southampton International Airport has considerable potential for the expansion of routes and services, if this can be achieved without substantial local environmental damage.

The further development of the Port of Southampton is needed in order to allow the port to maintain and enhance its competitive position in a European context.

### **C5 Opportunities: challenges and needs (continued)**

Competition from other ports in the 'European River' zone of the Channel between Rotterdam and Le Havre has always been a problem for Southampton which is doubly marginalised by geography and by British government ports policy.

Within the region, especially in urban and suburban areas, there is a need to facilitate a higher proportion of non-car-based journey-to-work movements. People will not leave their cars unless the alternatives are attractive, inexpensive, efficient and convenient. Ultimately, the region needs a light-rail / rapid transit system, and could probably already support one of modest proportions designed for future extension.

Traffic management schemes such as 'park-and-ride', people-mover systems, and a more co-ordinated approach to regional transport policy, together with the further development of the region's rail, road and airport systems are all clearly needed.

### **D5 Threats: competition**

Cross-Channel ferries are to some extent under threat from competition with the Channel Tunnel and between themselves. The abolition of the sale of duty-free goods on board ferries is likely seriously to damage their traffic share.

## VI

### EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

#### **A6 Strengths: distinctive characteristics**

Educational facilities and provision in the region are varied and generally of high quality, as emphasised by recent Government assessments in schools and in higher education. As a whole the area is affluent with a high level of educational attainment.

There are excellent universities at Southampton, Portsmouth and Bournemouth, all with large student populations. The universities are major employers within the region, and contribute directly and very significantly to local economies.

The technological spin-off from the universities, especially Southampton, is already substantial and the potential is very considerable indeed.

#### **B6 Weaknesses: problems**

The costs, in every sense, of maintaining and enhancing quality represent an on-going problem. This is not, however, a problem peculiar to this region.

There are significant pockets of under-attainment in the inner-city areas.

#### **C6 Opportunities: challenges and needs**

There is a need to enhance the local, regional, national and international profiles of the universities (especially Southampton). One way of doing this is by expanding European links. The EU's SOCRATES system provides a useful if rather bureaucratic framework, but more positive independent initiatives may have their place. The establishment of a European Studies Centre at Southampton has been proposed.

The principal challenge is the maintenance and enhancement of quality and distinctiveness in all contexts and at all levels. Considerable reorganization and restructuring in the higher education sector seems likely in the light of the July 1997 Dearing Report.

#### **D6 Threats: competition**

Competition in higher education between and within the larger cities of the region - Southampton and Portsmouth - is possibly a threat, but also a stimulus to maintain individuality and excellence.

**VII**  
**INTERNAL PERCEPTIONS**

**A7 Strengths: distinctive characteristics**

The area has a diffuse identity, and beyond the core zone centred on Southampton most people have trouble in defining or characterizing the region.

**B7 Weaknesses: problems**

The lack of a clear regional identity is commonly recognised. The 'south coast region' is not seen as a region by local people. It is perhaps more likely to be seen as a 'region' by outsiders. This weakness of identity also extends to the main cities.

These differences are probably also significant in terms of the internal perceptions of the region, with Bournemouth and the outer rural areas being seen as very separate from the central Southampton-Portsmouth axis. The Isle of Wight also sits uncomfortably within this framework, being very different in demographic and economic terms to the central area, but having strong and obvious functional linkages with Southampton and Portsmouth.

**C7 Opportunities: challenges and needs**

Identity is hard to change. A challenge is to emphasise those elements of unity which exist, such as the clear agricultural base and the appearance of rurality.

## **VIII**

### **EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS: UK**

#### **A8 Strengths: distinctive characteristics**

The image is that of a comfortable part of Southern England, with a general absence of social and urban problems.

The area is perceived as an attractive place in which to live - a perception highlighted by various surveys which academics and commercial organisations have undertaken, asking people where in the UK they would most like to live.

International events, notably the BT Global Challenge and Whitbread races, give Southampton a high international profile.

Affluence, good transport links, proximity to the European continent, and a diverse economy all contribute to a positive and distinctive image.

The region is widely perceived to be an affluent area and therefore not worthy of regional assistance, despite substantial problems in the inner cities of Southampton and Portsmouth. In Southampton, these problems have been partially addressed by the Single Regeneration Budget project.

#### **B8 Weaknesses: problems**

Institutional fragmentation, an incoherent image, and domination by London are all seen as weaknesses. Relative affluence reduces government interest in the region.

Overall, the area is seen by some as a bit of a backwater - somewhere that people retire to. Also, the area is sometimes perceived to be anti-growth - a region of NIMBYs.

There area does not seem exciting or dynamic, although Bournemouth seems to be livening up.

#### **C8 Opportunities: challenges and needs**

The further development of inter-institutional cooperation.

If Portsmouth FC were to be promoted to the premier league this would enhance the city's profile considerably.

The erosion of some of the unfortunate images and perceptions indicated above.

**D8 Threats: competition**

The end of the current consumer boom.

The loss of Southampton FC's premier league status would affect the city's external profile.

**IX**

**EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS: EUROPEAN**

**A9 Strengths: distinctive characteristics**

The area has a strong international identity based on its ports and is close to Europe in terms of physical transport links and in terms of orientation and many kinds of connections, symbolised by the under-publicised but longstanding *jumelage* between Southampton and Le Havre.

**B9 Weaknesses: problems**

In some quarters there may be a low level of awareness of the region's real character, even its existence. Continental Europeans sometimes seem to think that the Channel coast lies immediately south of London, forgetting that a south coast region exists.

**C9 Opportunities: challenges and needs**

There is a major opportunity to involve Southampton and Portsmouth through their port and urban authorities in the International Association of Ports and Cities, based in Le Havre. This is increasingly a global organization, but British members are conspicuous by their absence and are consequently perceived as uncooperative and lacking interest in European integration.

