

West Christchurch Residents Association

Summary of Reshaping Dorset's Councils Consultation 2016

1. This paper is based upon the Opinion Research Services (ORS) paper *Reshaping Your Councils Consultation 2016* dated December 2016 and the Price-Waterhouse-Cooper's (PWC) paper *Case for change: Local government reorganisation in Dorset* also dated December 2016. Other background papers mentioned can be found at www.wcresidents.co.uk
2. The paper will concentrate upon *summarising* Christchurch within the context of Dorset. As such it will not explore minority views. If you want to read those you should read the full ORS paper. Nor will it rerun a discussion of all the financial pressures linked to Government actions that have precipitated this move to reorganisation. They are fully covered elsewhere, reiterated to some extent in the PWC paper and are generally accepted as something that has to be addressed.
3. In considering these matters it is important to remember that Christchurch represents about 6% of Dorset's overall population and as such is itself a minority.

Summary

4. A vital consideration in undertaking this type of analysis is that a consultation is neither an election nor a referendum. This is not simply a numbers game. We aim to report key results and to highlight issues— all aimed at assisting Councillors to reach rational conclusions that have a foundation in public opinion.
5. The main results and findings of which councillors need to be aware are:
 - 5.1. The results of the survey are statistically sound (overall 2% margin of error with 95% confidence level)
 - 5.2. The overall support for cutting duplication and reducing costs is overwhelming
 - 5.3. Quality of service, accountability and value for money are by far the most important criteria for change. Local identity is rated a low priority
 - 5.4. The proposed *Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole* unitary received majority support in all quarters except the statistically unreliable open public survey returns from Christchurch
 - 5.5. The support for the proposed *Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole* unitary was particularly significant in the business sector.
 - 5.6. PWC conclude that there is a compelling case for local government reorganisation in Dorset. Their analysis shows that the proposal to replace the current nine councils with two new unitary authorities has key strengths in the areas covered by the Government's tests

The Consultation Questionnaires

6. In October 2016 we produced a background paper *Reorganisation of Dorset Councils: Interpretation of Results of Public Consultation* and in that we said:

ORS will take into account all of the data arising from a number of sources: obviously the Consultation Questionnaire; the returns from the specially selected households across Dorset;

input specifically from town and parish councils; the forums that they held across Dorset; other miscellaneous input such as letters received from residents.

Ideally, a selected sample is a miniature representation of the population it came from. Unfortunately, this is usually not the case in practice. One of the biggest problems is non-response, which may cause some groups to be either over or under-represented. Another common problem is self-selection where mainly pressure groups and others with a greater than usual level of interest participate more than other members of the population.

7. The two largest sources of response were the Consultation Questionnaire that anybody could complete and the returns from the statistically weighted households selected from across Dorset. For full details see our paper *Overall Participation in Dorset Survey* dated November 2016
8. To properly consider the results in Christchurch necessitates an understanding of the difference between these two sources of data.
9. The statistically weighted households were selected to accurately reflect the size and mix of the local population. As such they are less likely to be skewed by self-selection caused by lobby groups and as such represent a better data source. Christchurch accounted for 11% of these – nearly twice what one would expect. The vast majority were submitted on-line.
10. The Consultation Questionnaire was available to anybody either online at Dorset-for-You or in paper form from libraries etc. Christchurch accounted for 13% of these – again more than twice what one would expect from an area accounting for just 6% of the population. The vast majority were submitted on-line. The results from this source are in any event less reliable than those obtained from the statistically weighted households. However, it is sad to note that in Christchurch some Questionnaires were found to contain a bogus guide instructing residents to voice an opinion against the proposal to replace nine existing councils with two new councils. To quote from the OPS report:

A note which referred to itself as an 'advisory guide' on filling in the consultation form was discovered among a batch of questionnaires received by a library in Christchurch. This slip was not printed as part of the information provided by the councils, and it was unclear how it came to be inserted in the questionnaires and how many had been distributed. The guide advised respondents to strongly disagree with the proposal to replace the existing nine councils with two new councils, as well as with options 2a and 2b, and to tick 'tend to support' for option 2c.

Results were analysed to examine the potential impact that this unofficial advisory guide may have had on respondents. In total, 56 responses from Christchurch were identified as matching all of these answers. These responses have been included in the results, but, as these responses account for less than 4% of Christchurch respondents, even if these responses were influenced by the advice slip it has not had a substantial impact on the overall results from Christchurch.

11. We don't entirely agree with the OPS conclusion here because it is impossible to know how many "guides" were distributed and what their overall effect amounted to. **This revelation renders the statistical results obtained from the public consultation questionnaire in Christchurch even less reliable than would otherwise be the case.**

12. The level of participation in Christchurch strongly suggest a heightened awareness amongst participants as compared with other areas in Dorset plus elements of self-selection with lobby groups increasing the participation level above what would be expected. It is difficult to ignore the distinct possibility that the activities of Residents Associations are at the root of this including the campaigning undertaken by for example Christchurch Citizens and the monthly e-newsletter produced by West Christchurch.

Cutting Costs

13. Across Dorset the support for cutting duplication and reducing costs was overwhelming with 91% supporting it overall in the statistically weighted group (82% in the Christchurch portion of the sample) and 88% supporting it in the less reliable open public group (76% in the Christchurch portion subject to the caveats previously mentioned). We believe that Christchurch Citizens campaigned to have respondents disagree with this premise and it would appear that they have had some impact.
14. We should note in passing that 102 of the 111 parish and town councils were in favour as were businesses.

Criteria for Change

15. *Quality of service, accountability and value for money* are by far the most important criteria for change. *Local identity* is rated a low priority

Replacing nine councils by two

16. Across Dorset 73% of the responses from the statistically weighted group supported this proposal (63% of specially selected respondents in Christchurch). In the less reliable open public group across Dorset 68% supported it (with an anomalous 41% of the Christchurch sample – but see previous comments. We believe this result is statistically unreliable).
17. {Technical note: the 63% recorded in Christchurch has margin of error of 8%. Thus to be completely accurate, between 55% and 71% of statistically selected respondents in Christchurch are in favour of replacing nine councils by two}
18. It is interesting that in the resident's workshops in Christchurch initially only 48% supported the proposal but when opinion was retested at the conclusion of the workshop this had risen to 65%
19. 72% of town and parish councils are in favour.
20. All of Dorset's largest employers commented upon the duplication, bureaucracy, inconsistency and inefficiency that they currently encounter and they strongly supported the reduction. They made the further interesting point that they hoped to deal in future with less insular, less provincial bodies that could look broadly at economic development.
21. In their commentary PWC stress the importance of this structure and the opportunity that it offers to adopt 21st Century methods that other avenues do not open up. This is very much the line adopted by Central Government and contains an important message for our councillors from a very important source.

Which configuration

22. The survey offered three choices:
- 22.1. *Bournemouth-Christchurch-East Dorset-Poole* as one council with all other councils forming a “Dorset Rump” (described as option 2(a))
 - 22.2. *Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole* as one council with East Dorset joining the “Dorset Rump” (described as option 2(b))
 - 22.3. *Bournemouth-Poole* as one council with Christchurch and East Dorset joining the “Dorset Rump” (described as option 2(c))
23. The *net level* of support expressed for each option by the statistically selected households across Dorset was as follows (*net level* is those in favour minus those against e.g. for Christchurch option 2(b) 64% in favour less 18% against gives +46, undecided and don’t knows ignored):

Council	Option 2(a)	Option 2(b)	Option 2(c)
Bournemouth	+5	+64	-9
Christchurch	-10	+46	-36
East Dorset	-17	+51	-23
North Dorset	+7	+43	-21
Poole	+4	+48	-14
Purbeck	+2	+42	-32
West Dorset	+6	+48	-22
Weymouth- P’land	+4	+33	-10
Dorset CC	-1	+45	-17

24. *Bournemouth-Christchurch-East Dorset-Poole* as one council received very little support from the selected households and support from only 13% of parish and town councils. PWC reiterate previous findings that *annual* savings of around £27.6 million are available for a one off outlay of £25 million but will involve a loss of £174,000 of foregone Council Tax over a 20 year period as tax bands are harmonised.
25. *Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole* as one council received consistent support across Dorset from the selected households as well as support from 75% of participants in Christchurch resident’s workshops and from 65% of parish and town councils.
26. This is also the chosen option of business.
27. In their commentary, PWC contrast urban needs and opportunities with rural needs and opportunities. They reiterate previous findings that *annual* savings of around £27.8 million are available for a one off outlay of £25 million but will involve a loss of £74,000 of foregone Council Tax over a 20 year period as tax bands are harmonised – significantly less than any other option.
28. *Bournemouth-Poole* as one council received no net support whatever from the selected households. It was favoured by 21% of parish and town councils.
29. PWC reiterate previous findings that *annual* savings of around £27.6 million are available for a one off outlay of £25 million but will involve a loss of £272,000 of foregone Council Tax over a 20 year period as tax bands are harmonised – significantly more than any other option.

Reasons for *Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole* as one council

30. As important as the expressed level of opinion are the reasons cited for holding those opinions. These are of course many and various and the ORS report details many of them. However, this is a summary and the commonest reasons cited for favouring this option were:

- 30.1. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole form a 'natural' urban and coastal unity – and their economies and infrastructures are inter-linked
- 30.2. Christchurch is not 'naturally' part of a large rural Dorset authority that will probably be governed from Dorchester
- 30.3. For the reasons above it has more in common with Bournemouth and Poole
- 30.4. The savings to be achieved through this combination are significantly bigger than under the other options
- 30.5. It seems the most efficient division of the existing local authority units
- 30.6. None of the boundaries of any of the existing councils will be retained. This should reinforce the view that an entirely new organisation is being created and no "take overs" are involved
- 30.7. This configuration gives the most balanced division of population and electoral divisions

Reasons against *Bournemouth-Christchurch-Poole* as one council

31. The commonest reasons cited against this option were:
 - 31.1. The borough's green spaces would be subsumed for the housing requirements of Bournemouth and Poole
 - 31.2. Christchurch's influence would be minimal compared to the other areas
 - 31.3. Bournemouth and Poole have historically mismanaged their budgets

Final Thoughts

32. This exercise has produced results that are surprisingly consistent right across Dorset. It isn't often that over 90% of respondents concur on any given proposition or that a suggestion earns a net level of support of +43 to +48 virtually everywhere. That in itself is significant.
33. Christchurch is a small but important part of this process. We would like to see our Councillors putting aside their differences and pulling together to secure a sensible outcome for residents and businesses. Petty parochial infighting amongst Councillors when large important issues are calling for their concentrated attention serves only to lower public confidence in them.

Jim Biggin

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