

Executive Summary

One Council Consultation Results

1.0 Number of respondents

- 1.1 Based on 2016 Office of National Statistics population figures 3.02% of the combined South Hams District and West Devon Borough population responded to the consultation. This equates to 3.33% of the South Hams population and 2.54% of the West Devon population. Or based on the 2017 Electoral Register 4.01% of South Hams residents registered to vote and 3.11% of West Devon population registered to vote (see Appendix A).
- 1.2 2,807 respondents stated they were based in South Hams and 1,387 stated they were based in West Devon. The vast majority of respondents stated they were residents in the area and there was a very modest take up from businesses and visitors equating to just over 1% of all respondents.

2.0 Support for the proposal

- 2.1 Of those who expressed a view either for or against the proposal 24% said 'yes' and 76% said 'no'. These percentages represent both authorities across all channels namely online, telephone and postal (paper) surveys (see Appendix A).

3.0 Council Tax Equalisation

- 3.1 South Hams residents were provided with six options for equalising council tax. The vast majority opted for the longest period of equalisation namely 10 years. 77% of those who were against the proposal opted for the 10 year equalisation period, compared with only 30% of those in favour of the proposal (see Appendix A).

4.0 Number of Councillors and frequency of contact

- 4.1 The for and against responses to the reduction of Councillors question was fairly evenly balanced with 44% of South Hams respondents and 47% of West Devon respondents stating they would be concerned at a reduction of Councillors. This compared with 48% and 47% respectively who stated they would not be concerned by a reduction.
- 4.2 38% of respondents in South Hams and 42% in West Devon had not had contact with their Councillor(s) over the last 2 years. However, 17% of South Hams respondents and 14% of West Devon respondents had contacted their Councillor(s) more than five times in the last two years (see Appendix A).

5.0 Variance in response rates

- 5.1 The telephone survey was undertaken by an independent and professional research company, namely Marketing Means. All respondents were screened to ensure they genuinely resided in the area and were statistically representative of the population in terms of age and gender. It is important to note that this representative sample provided significantly different results compared to the self-selecting online and paper survey respondents. In the telephone survey, of those who expressed a view either for or against the proposal 51% of all respondents said 'yes' with 49% choosing 'no'. This equates to 61% in West Devon and 41% in South Hams saying 'yes' (Appendix A).

- 5.2 There were 393 postal (paper) survey responses in total. Unfortunately 15 paper surveys were submitted on photo copied forms with the sequential number removed. 71 surveys contained incomplete responses to at least one question. However, all paper survey responses have been counted. Of those paper survey respondents who expressed a view either for or against the proposal 15% of respondents said 'yes' to the proposal and 85% said 'no'. This equates to 34% in West Devon and 8% in South Hams saying 'yes' (see Appendix A).
- 5.3 Online responses were by far the most popular way of responding with over 3,000 online responses. Of those online survey respondents who expressed a view either for or against the proposal 19% of respondents said 'yes' to the proposal and 81% said 'no'. This equates to 40% in West Devon and 11% in South Hams saying 'yes'. Over 300 of the online responses showed duplicate IP addresses this is an indication that a single household/business/building has submitted more than one response. However this might be due to multiple occupants and so all of these responses have been counted (see Appendix A).
- 5.4 The survey was open for just over 8 weeks and the response rates during this period increased most notably when the postcards were delivered at the end of August. Note, the consultation was extended by one day to compensate for an ICT glitch which was out of our control and occurred on the last Sunday of the consultation period (see Appendix A).

6.0 Qualitative Responses

- 6.1 An independent Market Research company (Marketing Means) was appointed to analyse the comments in each of the 4,221 responses.
- 6.2 For those who participated in the telephone survey the most popular comments with regards to benefits respondents would like to see in their community can be summarised as follows:
1. Protect or improve infrastructure and amenities (*e.g. schools, hospitals, libraries, health services*)
 2. Protect or improve recycling/waste/garden waste collections
 3. Protect or improve existing services/don't cut existing services further
 4. Improve roads/traffic issues
 5. Improve public transport and links
 6. Housing, property and planning changes/improvements
- 6.3 The most popular responses provided in the online/paper survey with regards to benefits respondents would like to see in their community were:
1. Merger will provide none/no benefits
 2. Other comments against the merger
 3. Council Tax: Reduce council tax or one off charges/don't put council tax up now or lessen future raises
 4. Avoid localised loss of identity, needs and representativeness / Too centralised
 5. One council will be penalised at the expense of the other / Need to prevent this
- 6.4 Comments or concerns expressed by telephone survey respondents can be summarised as follows:
1. One council will be penalised at the expense of the other / Need to prevent this
 2. Avoid localised loss of identity, needs and representativeness / Too centralised
 3. Would like more information about merger/other options
 4. Comments in support of merger (which did not fall in to any of the other categories)

6.5 Most popular responses provided in the online/paper survey with regards to comments, concerns are as follows:

1. One council will be penalised at the expense of the other / Need to prevent this
2. Avoid localised loss of identity, needs and representativeness / Too centralised
3. Other comments against the merger
4. No changes necessary/ happy as things are
5. Need to improve council savings/reduce council spending in other ways
6. Concerns about the financial viability/ service level of one council

6.6 The full Marketing Means qualitative analysis report can be found at Appendix B.

7.0 Stakeholder Responses

7.1 64% of Town & Parish Councils responded to the consultation (74% in South Hams, 52% in West Devon). Of all town and parish councils that responded, 13 support, 49 are against and 7 were not able to reach a decision.

7.2 Many of the Town and Parish Councils provided lengthy responses in respect of the proposal. Of those Councils against the proposal, some of the key themes were:

- Reduction in democratic representation across the larger area
- That more information was required on the proposal (such as where the HQ would be, how the savings would be generated and what the costs would be)
- Concerns over remoteness of access to services
- Acknowledgement of the difficult financial position of the Councils
- Loss of identity for the areas
- That options should be explored with other neighbouring authorities

7.3 Of the 19% of Town and Parish Councils that supported the proposal, some of the key themes were:

- That there were no realistic alternatives
- Ensuring that services remain accessible across the whole area would be important
- Wouldn't want to see service cuts
- That fair and proportional representation should be maintained

7.4 Of the Town and Parish Councils that did not provide a definitive response either way, the majority stated that they felt more information was required in order for them to make a decision on the proposal.

7.5 Responses from neighbouring authorities have stated they will support any decision made by South Hams District and West Devon Borough Councils and the vast majority of these stated they recognised the financial pressures faced and the rationale for the proposal. We had a very limited response from our letters to the business community, however in broad terms they were either supportive or neutral on the proposal.

7.6 There was also a low level of response from partner organisations (Housing Associations, LEP's, Health, Police and support groups etc). Of the 78 organisations that we wrote to (both email and

post), only 7 responses were received by the closure of the consultation. Of the responses received, the majority stated that it was not a subject that they have a specific view on either way but that they would have no specific objections to the formation of a Single Council. None were opposed to the proposal.

8.0 Press Coverage

- 8.1 Since the first article was published in June the Councils have issued 12 press releases to the local papers, TV and Radio. This includes explaining budget pressures and how the council tax system works. This has resulted in the Leaders talking on local radio, appearing on local BBC news and The Politics Show, talking about future budget cuts.
- 8.2 At least 44 news articles relating to the One Council proposal have been published in print and online since June. The content of 17 of these articles were negative towards the One Council proposal, 23 were fairly balanced, despite very negative and sensational headlines.
- 8.3 There were a few articles which we were unable to classify. Only the first few articles presented the One Council Proposal as a positive thing to do. Very quickly most articles present two arguments and it became difficult to classify which ones show the proposal in a positive or a negative light. Towards the end of the consultation, the majority of the articles were negative. Of the balanced articles often the language used by the journalist in reporting both sides does lean towards the sensational and could be misleading if not read in full.
- 8.4 There have been at least 26 letters pages containing letters written to the editors of local publications about the proposal. The majority of these are against the proposal.
- 8.5 During the consultation the Councils posted more than 310 messages on social media. Some of these were articles promoting the consultation events and directing people to the One Council webpage. Others were responding to enquiries made. The Councils also posted 35 videos explaining the forthcoming budget pressures and giving answers to likely questions the public might have. Each of these videos was viewed on average 400 times and the social media campaign to promote the consultation had a social media reach of over 450 thousand people throughout the 9 week period across Facebook and Twitter. In addition to this for the first time the councils ran a Thunderclap campaign which had a social reach of more than 15,000 people.

9.0 Consultation Events

- 9.1 During the eight week consultation, 33 events were held across the two Council areas which saw the Councils engage with a total of 823 individuals. While the number of events attended differed for each Council, the footfall for each Council was largely the same.
- 9.2 A total of 110 hours face to face engagement was undertaken through the formally arranged engagement events (this does not include Councillors attendance at Town and Parish Council meetings etc.)
- 9.3 To ensure that we engaged with the widest range of people, the events were held at a range of times across the week and weekend.

10.0 Independent Advisor Conclusion

- 10.1 An independent research company (The Campaign Company) recommended by the LGA provided advice on the compilation of the consultation and have concluded the following:

- 10.2 *In all public consultations, the response cannot be seen as representative of the population but it is representative of interested parties who were made aware of the consultation and were motivated to respond. It is therefore also good consultation practice to proactively seek opinion through additional surveys (either by face-to-face or telephone methods) with a randomly selected and representative cross-section of residents. This helps to ensure that the consultation process accurately captures the views of the wider population rather than just those who are self-motivated to respond.*
- 10.3 *Having reviewed the consultation channels that were used in the One Council Consultation carried out South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council, it is clear that:*
- *consideration had been given to make sure the consultation was representative across the two local authority areas and an extensive programme of public engagement was conducted (including wide promotion of the One Council survey and a large number of public engagement events). This also included offering respondents the opportunity to respond in ways that suited them rather than just the One Council survey*
 - *the commissioning of a telephone survey helped to ensure that a wider section of the population could be actively engaged in the process*
 - *information was presented clearly and in an accessible way on a central consultation hub that was developed specifically for the purpose of this consultation*
- 10.4 *On this basis, good consultation principles appear to have been adhered to: there have been a range of opportunities offered for people to get involved including a proactive approach, through the survey, to seek representative opinion to inform the decision-making process. This is the best that any consultor can do in terms of ensuring a fair and inclusive process.*
- 10.5 The full Campaign Company report can be found at Appendix C.