

Participation rates in local governance arrangement consultations – TCC opinion

Context

Figures from the Consultation Institute¹ suggest that respondent rates average about 1% for most decisions affecting local public services. It is also widely recognised that, unsurprisingly, local communities are not particularly interested in the political management arrangements of their local authority and are more interested in the services they receive. In Liverpool, for example, the response to the consultation exercise about local governance which went to every household elicited a rate of return of about 1% whereas their consultation about the future of the refuse collection service, conducted on the same basis, had a response rate of 26%.

This is why good consultation practice seeks qualitative as well quantitative insight and opinion to inform the decision-making process. This evidence is usually reviewed by the consultor alongside other relevant information, including financial, that will help them make their final decisions.

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.

The situation in South Hams and West Devon

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

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,

¹ The Consultation Institute, 2017: *Public consultations and the numbers game*

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.

The headline findings from the results received suggest that 3.02% of the total population for South Hams District and West Devon Borough responded to the consultation (this equates to 3.32% of South Hams population and 2.54% West Devon population). This is slightly higher than the average findings reported by the Consultation Institute.