



Dorset's Councils

Reshaping Your Councils Consultation 2016

Executive Summary

Opinion Research Services
December 2016



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Executive Summary by Opinion Research Services

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1. Executive Summary

Summary of main findings

The commission

- 1.1 Dorset's nine councils (Bournemouth Borough Council, Christchurch Borough Council, Dorset County Council, East Dorset District Council, North Dorset District Council, the Borough of Poole, Purbeck District Council, West Dorset District Council, Weymouth & Portland Borough Council) are working together to seek the views of residents, businesses and other stakeholders about the future structure of local government across the County – particularly on whether the number of councils in Dorset should be reduced from nine to two and, if so, which areas should the two new councils cover.
- 1.2 Opinion Research Services (ORS) is a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research and major statutory consultations. Following a competitive national tender, ORS was appointed jointly by Dorset's councils to advise on and independently manage and report important aspects of the consultation programme.

Consultation process

- 1.3 The formal consultation period was launched on 30th August 2016 and ended on 25th October 2016. During this period, residents and stakeholders were invited to provide feedback through a wide range of routes, including all the following:

An open consultation questionnaire for all residents, stakeholders and organisations: the questionnaire was available online and paper questionnaires were widely circulated in libraries and council offices and available on request

A representative household survey based upon 20,000 randomly selected households (from the Postal Address File): to provide an accurate profile of opinions in the general population across Dorset and also within each district/borough

A survey of all parish and town councils, available online and on paper

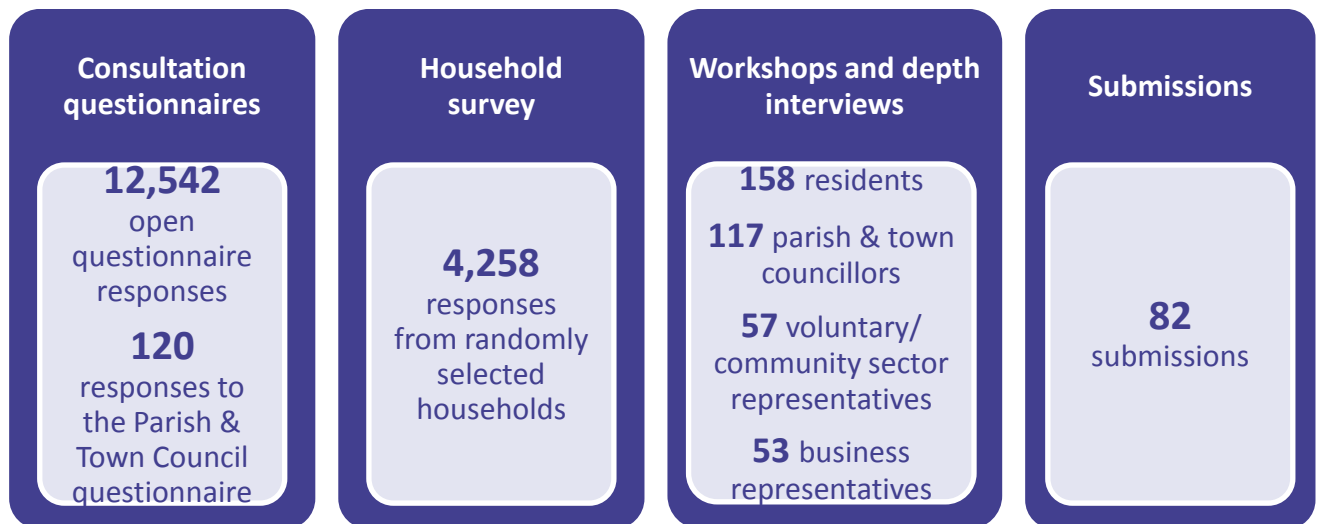
Fifteen lengthy deliberative workshops: eight were held with members of the public; three with parish and town councillors; two with representatives of the voluntary and community sector; and two with members of the business community

Nine in-depth telephone interviews were also done with representatives of some of Dorset's largest companies

Written submissions: residents, stakeholders and organisations were able to provide their views by writing to Dorset's councils or ORS

Petitions: while none were received during the consultation period, petitions were welcome.

- 1.4 The consultation programme was successful in achieving well over 17,000 responses as shown overleaf.



Proportional and fair

- 1.5 The key good practice requirements for proper consultation programmes are that they should:
 - Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken;
 - Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond;
 - Provide the public and stakeholders with enough background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically; and
 - Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.
- 1.6 As a well-established and specialist social research practice with wide-ranging experience of controversial statutory consultations across the UK, ORS is able to certify that the formal consultation process undertaken by Dorset's councils meets these standards. Overall, ORS has no doubt that the consultation programme has been conscientious, competent and comprehensive in eliciting the opinions of stakeholders and many members of the public. It was open, accessible and fair to all stakeholders across Dorset; and it conforms with 'best practice' in both its scale and the balance of elements and methods used. The consultation was also proportional to the importance of the issues.

Nature of consultation

Accountability

- 1.7 Accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible consultation while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully.
- 1.8 This does not mean that the majority views should automatically decide public policy; and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions. Above all, public bodies have to consider the relevance and cogency of the arguments put forward during public consultations, not just count heads.

The report

- 1.9 This executive summary report summarises the consultation outcomes to highlight the overall balance of opinions. We trust that this summary is a sound guide to the consultation outcomes and how they might be interpreted, but readers are urged to consult our full report for more detailed insights. After all, it is the journey, not just the destination, that matters to those wishing to understand the assumptions, arguments, conclusions and feelings about the possible reconfiguration of local government across Dorset. In contrast to the more thematic approach in this executive summary, the full report considers the feedback from each element of the consultation in turn (which can at times be repetitive given that similar issues emerged across the different strands) because it is important that the full report provides a full evidence-base for those considering the consultation and its findings. We trust that both this summary and full report will be helpful to all concerned.
- 1.10 ORS is clear that its role is to analyse and explain the opinions and arguments of the many different interests participating in the consultation, but not to 'make a case' for any option or variant. In this report, we seek to profile the opinions and arguments of those who have responded to the consultation, but not to make any recommendations as to how the councils should make use of the reported results. Whilst this report brings together a wide range of evidence for the councils to consider, it is for the elected members to take decisions based on all the evidence available.

The proposed options

- 1.11 The options proposed by the council were to retain all nine councils (option 1) or to change from nine councils to two new unitary authorities (options 2a-c). Options 2a-c for reorganising the councils proposed creating two new unitary councils that would cover different combinations of the current district/boroughs within the overall Dorset area. These options are as follows:

Option 2a

Unitary council A: **Large conurbation**

Bournemouth, Christchurch, East Dorset and Poole, plus the services currently provided by Dorset County Council in this area

Unitary council B: **Small Dorset**

North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland, plus the services currently provided by Dorset County Council in this area

Option 2b

Unitary council A: **Medium conurbation**

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, plus the services currently provided by Dorset County Council in this area

Unitary council B: **Medium Dorset**

East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland, plus the services currently provided by Dorset County Council in this area

Option 2c

Unitary council A: **Small conurbation:**

Bournemouth and Poole

Unitary council B: **Large Dorset**

Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland, plus the services currently provided by Dorset County Council in this area

Main findings

Cutting duplication and reducing administration costs

Open consultation questionnaire

- 1.12 Almost nine in ten (88%) respondents in the open questionnaire agreed with Dorset's councils' focus on cutting out duplication and reducing administration costs where possible. Only 8% disagreed. Support was broadly even across all the authorities, except in Christchurch where support was lower at 76% (but still overwhelming).
- 1.13 In the same questionnaire, 94% of the responding organisations agreed with the focus on cutting duplication and administrative costs.

Household survey

- 1.14 In the household survey, support for reducing duplication and costs was even slightly higher: nine in ten (91%) residents in the overall Dorset area (including residents in the Dorset County Council area, Bournemouth and Poole) agreed with the principle and only 5% disagreed. There were significantly higher levels of agreement in West Dorset (94%) and lower levels in Christchurch (82%).

Town and parish council survey

- 1.15 Nine in ten (92%) of the 111 parish and town councils responding to this question agreed that Dorset's councils should reduce duplication and administration costs where possible. Only 1% disagreed.

Criteria for change

- 1.16 The consultation questionnaires and deliberative workshops asked participants to score and rank five criteria that might inform the design of local government structures in Dorset. The scorings showed that participants felt that all the criteria were important, but their rankings revealed a clear and consistent hierarchy – as shown in the table below.

Criterion	Overall Rankings					
	Open consultation questionnaire	Household survey	Parish & town council survey	Residents' workshops	Parish & Town Council workshops	Voluntary/ community sector workshops
Accountability	2	3	3	3	3	5
Quality	1	1	1	1	1=	1
Local Identity	5	5	5	5	5	4
Access	4	4	4	4	4	3
Value For Money	3	2	2	2	1=	2

- 1.17 Overall, value for money and service quality were consistently considered to be the most important considerations, followed by accountability, access and local identity.
- 1.18 The voluntary and community sector representatives also ranked service quality and value for money first and second, but their next highest priorities were access and local identity, followed by

accountability in last place. In fact, they were the only group of participants to rank access and local identity higher than accountability (which was ranked third overall in all other consultation strands).

From nine councils to two?

Reducing the number of councils

Open consultation questionnaire

- 1.19 A large absolute majority of just over two-thirds (68%) of open questionnaire respondents agreed with the prospect of replacing the nine existing councils (option 1) with two new councils (options 2a– 2c) in order to protect services as far as possible. Just over a quarter (26%) disagreed.
- 1.20 Respondents in West Dorset (84%) and North Dorset (80%) were most likely to agree with reducing to two councils, whereas Purbeck and (especially) Christchurch were less likely to agree (63% and 41% respectively). Christchurch was the only area with an absolute majority (54%) opposing two councils.
- 1.21 In the same questionnaire, 79% of responding organisations agreed with the proposal to replace the nine existing councils with two new councils in order to protect services as far as possible.

Household survey

- 1.22 There were also high levels of support for two councils in the representative household survey. Overall, almost three quarters (73%) of residents in Dorset County, Poole and Bournemouth agreed with the proposal, while only 14% disagreed. As in the open questionnaire, North Dorset (78%) and West Dorset (77%) were more likely to favour two councils, while Christchurch was somewhat less positive, with 63% supporting the proposal.
- 1.23 Nonetheless, support for two councils was much higher in the representative household survey in Christchurch than in the open consultation questionnaire: in Christchurch the household survey showed a large absolute majority of 63% supporting two councils, whereas there was only 41% support in the less representative open questionnaire.

Parish and town council survey

- 1.24 Over seven in ten (72%) of the responding parish and town councils agreed with the proposal to replace the nine existing councils with two new councils in order to protect services as far as possible.

Deliberative workshops

- 1.25 At the start of the **residents' workshops**, participants were asked for their initial or immediate views on whether the number of councils in Dorset should be reduced to an unspecified number, but usually assumed by the participants to be “about four or five”. Later, following detailed discussions, the workshops were asked if the number of councils should be reduced from nine in order to create two unitary authorities. People's initial and final views are summarised in the table below, which shows the proportions of workshop participants who favoured change at different stages of the meetings:

AREA	INITIAL OPINIONS Proportion (%) favouring reduction	FINAL OPINIONS Proportion (%) favouring reducing to 2 councils
West Dorset	48% (10/21)	66% (14/21)
Weymouth & Portland	56% (9/16)	56% (9/16)
North Dorset	39% (9/23)	61% (14/23)
Purbeck	66% (14/21)	66% (14/21)
Christchurch	48% (11/23)	65% (15/23)
Poole	53% (9/17)	65% (11/17)
Bournemouth	31% (5/16)	25% (4/16)
East Dorset	66% (14/21)	52% (11/21)

- ^{1.26} In considering the table above, it is perhaps striking that even without detailed discussion, right at the start of the meeting, many residents favoured reducing the number of councils significantly; and in half of the sessions (following the presentation and detailed discussions) the balance of opinion shifted to be more emphatically in favour of reducing to two unitary councils. Only in Bournemouth and East Dorset were residents' final judgements about two councils less positive than their initial judgements about reducing the number of councils generally.
- ^{1.27} The shift from less to more positive views was particularly pronounced in North Dorset, West Dorset and Christchurch: Initially, less than half of their workshop participants favoured reducing the number of councils somewhat (definitely not, they said in Christchurch, to only two); but in all three areas the workshops' final judgements showed a large absolute majority in favour of two councils (66%, 65% and 61% respectively in West Dorset, Christchurch and North Dorset).
- ^{1.28} Furthermore, it should not be assumed that all those who were not finally supporters of two councils were therefore definite opponents. For example, in Purbeck's final judgement only three of the 21 workshop participants (14%) wanted to keep nine councils, while four said they were 'don't knows'. The range of views of those not supporting change in Bournemouth and elsewhere was not dissimilar.
- ^{1.29} Other groups were not asked about their initial opinions, so the following table shows the final conclusions of the **parish and town councillors, voluntary/community sector** and **business workshops**.

TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILLORS	
AREA	PROPORTION (%) FAVOURING REDUCING TO TWO COUNCILS
Western Dorset	88% (30/34*) *2 left prior to vote
Northern Dorset	52% (26/50)
Eastern Dorset	69% (20/29)

VOLUNTARY/COMMUNITY SECTOR REPRESENTATIVES	
AREA	PROPORTION (%) FAVOURING REDUCING TO TWO COUNCILS
Western Dorset	30% (6/20)
Eastern Dorset	67% (22/33*) *4 left prior to vote
BUSINESS SECTOR REPRESENTATIVES	
AREA	PROPORTION (%) FAVOURING REDUCING TO TWO COUNCILS
Poole	85% (28/33)
Weymouth	100% (11/11)

- 1.30 In general, there was absolute majority support for reducing from nine to two councils in all of the above workshops, with the exception of western Dorset voluntary/community sector. Again though, it should not be assumed that all those who did not support two councils were definite opponents. For example, in the western Dorset voluntary/community sector workshop there were only two explicit opponents, while the rest (of those not in favour) either abstained or were 'don't knows'. In fact, five opposed two councils because they preferred a single unitary authority for Dorset).
- 1.31 Furthermore, 21 of the 50 northern Dorset parish and town councillors were 'don't knows' and there were three abstentions – so very few actually opposed two councils.
- 1.32 In the depth interviews with some of Dorset's largest employers, all of them supported reducing from nine to two councils on the grounds of consolidation, simplification and efficiency.

Written submissions

- 1.33 There were 82 written submissions, including 31 from organisations and 51 from residents. Only two 'organisational' submissions (from Chris Chope, MP, and from the Parish Council of Langton Matravers) wanted to maintain nine councils across Dorset: all the others supported some form of radical change. On the other hand, only four residents explicitly supported two councils, whereas 20 argued for the 'status quo'. (Many residents did not express explicit views on the number of councils or the three options.)

Reasons for reducing the number of councils significantly

- 1.34 Those supporting two councils (and many of those who did not, but could see the need for rationalisation) felt that the case for change had been made: they were persuaded by the financial evidence that reorganisation is both necessary and desirable to make savings and eliminate duplication. There was also recognition that reducing from nine to two councils could:

- Mitigate reductions in services and their quality
- Rationalise the number of managers and councillors
- Simplify the varying and complex structure of local government
- Ensure better co-operation between councils
- Synergise culturally-distinct areas of Dorset

Establish larger political units with more local, regional and national power and influence

Raise the marketing profile of Dorset

Maintain an already successful partnership-focused direction of travel between authorities.

- 1.35 Five of the nine representatives of Dorset's largest employers interact with three or more local authorities across Dorset and all commented on the duplication, bureaucracy, inconsistency and inefficiency they have encountered. Therefore, the reduction in councils was supported on the grounds of consolidation, simplification and efficiency. There was also support for larger, more regional-style councils on the grounds that these would be less insular in outlook and would take a wider, less provincial outlook on issues such as infrastructure and economic development.

Reasons for keeping nine councils

- 1.36 Many of those who in their final judgements did not support reducing the number of councils from nine to two nonetheless felt a case for change had been made – though they felt that reducing to only two councils was too drastic. A significant minority, though, wanted to retain the current nine councils because they thought that the £30 million required savings (between 2019 and 2025) are feasible without radical changes to the structure of local democracy. They said that existing councils have the scope to be more efficient.
- 1.37 Some of the parish and town councillors were concerned about the possible increased devolution of services to parish and town councils without sufficient funding. Similarly, in the voluntary and community sector workshops there were concerns about the continuity of their funding, particularly for smaller organisations and local projects.
- 1.38 Other reasons for wishing to retain existing structures (or indeed accepting the need for change but objecting to its proposed scale) were that:
- Service quality and resilience may reduce with fewer people available to deliver services to an increasing population – and access to services will suffer
 - Democratic accountability will be reduced with two large councils that will inevitably be remote from their populations
 - Staff redundancies will negatively impact on those who lose their jobs and on those who remain but with larger workloads - and will also be costly
 - The interests of the urban areas will take precedence over the rural areas due to the relative proportions of their populations and councillor representation
 - The projected savings from reducing councils will never be realised in practice
 - Very different areas would be subsumed under a single council
 - Services currently provided by district and borough councils would suffer as a result of an increasing focus on those provided by the county council and the two unitaries (most notably social services for an ageing population).
- 1.39 While clearly important, these objections were minority views in the context of the overall consultation outcomes.

Three options for change

Option preferences

Open consultation questionnaire

- ^{1.40} Overall, option 2b had absolute majority support (53%) from residents in the open questionnaire, whereas 2a and 2c had only 28% and 29% support respectively.
- ^{1.41} The same option also had absolute majority support in all areas of Dorset, except in Christchurch, where support for 2b was only 32% and 57% opposed it. By far the most unpopular option in Christchurch was 2a, with 67% opposing this option, and option 2b was the least unpopular of all three options. With the exception of Christchurch, a greater proportion supported option 2b than opposed it in all districts and boroughs, while 2a and 2c were distinctly unpopular in all areas.
- ^{1.42} In the open questionnaire option 2b also received absolute majority support from organisations (51%) compared with options 2a (40%) and 2c (36%).

Household survey

- ^{1.43} Option 2b had even higher levels of support from residents in the representative household survey. In Bournemouth, almost three-quarters (74%) preferred 2b, and support levels exceeded 60% in all the other areas, (including Christchurch, at 64%) except for Weymouth and Portland, where 54% preferred 2b. This is still indicative of an absolute majority (when taking the confidence interval into account).
- ^{1.44} It is notable that for Christchurch the findings of the representative household survey contrast with those from the open questionnaire (as they also did in relation to reducing from nine to two councils). In the household survey 64% supported option 2b, whereas in the open questionnaire only half as many (32%) preferred 2b (and two-thirds (67%) supported 2a). The findings of both means of consultation are important, of course; but the household survey is a better guide than the open questionnaire to the balance of general public opinion across Christchurch.

Parish and town council survey

- ^{1.45} In the context of the difference between the two outcomes in Christchurch, it is significant that option 2b received emphatic absolute majority support from almost two-thirds of parish and town councils (65%) compared with options 2a (13%) and 2c (21%).

Deliberative workshops

- ^{1.46} The relative support for the three options across all 15 workshops is shown in the tables on the next page (where a blank/grey box indicates no support at all).

RESIDENTS' WORKSHOPS				
AREA	Option 2a % support	Option 2b % support	Option 2c % support	Don't know/ Abstain
West Dorset		52% (11/21)	10% (2/21)	38% (8/21)
Weymouth & Portland		50% (8/16)	50% (8/16)	
North Dorset	13% (3/23)	43% (10/23)	22% (5/23)	22% (5/23)
Purbeck	5% (1/21)	81% (17/21)	5% (1/21)	9% (2/21)
Christchurch		75% (17/23)	2% (1/23)	23% (5/23)
Poole		71% (12/17)	29% (5/17)	
Bournemouth		100% (16/16)		
East Dorset	5% (1/21)	48% (10/21)	38% (8/21)	10% (2/21)
OVERALL	3% (5/158)	64% (101/158)	19% (30/158)	14% (22/158)

The table above shows the relative levels of support for each option in the residents' workshops as both a percentage and fraction of the numbers attending. For example, in West Dorset just over half (52% or 11 out of 21) supported option 2b. In Weymouth and Portland, opinion was exactly split between options 2b and 2c. The data for parish and town councillors and the third sector is shown in the tables on the next page.

PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILLORS				
AREA	Option 2a % support	Option 2b % support	Option 2c % support	Don't know/ Abstain
Western Dorset	6% (2/34)	41% (14/34)	38% (13/34)	15% (5/34)
Northern Dorset		64% (32/50)	8% (4/50)	28% (14/50)
Eastern Dorset		69% (20/29)	10% (3/29)	21% (6/29)
OVERALL	2% (2/113)	58% (66/113)	18% (20/113)	22% (25/113)
VOLUNTARY/COMMUNITY SECTOR REPRESENTATIVES				
AREA	Option 2a % support	Option 2b % support	Option 2c % support	Don't know/ Abstain
Western Dorset*		11% (2/18)	50% (9/18)	38% (7/18)
Eastern Dorset*		48% (12/25)	20% (5/25)	32% (8/25)
OVERALL		33% (14/43)	33% (14/43)	34% (15/43)
* Several participants had left prior to the 'vote', particularly at Eastern Dorset				

BUSINESS SECTOR				
AREA	Option 2a % support	Option 2b % support	Option 2c % support	Don't know/ Abstain
Poole	30% (9/30)	57% (17/30)	10% (3/30)	3% (1/30)
Weymouth		82% (9/11)	18% (2/11)	
OVERALL	22% (9/41)	63% (26/41)	12% (5/41)	3% (1/41)

- 1.47 In northern and eastern Dorset, option 2b had absolute majority support from about two-thirds of parish and town councillors and it was the most popular option in western Dorset, too (though 2c was nearly as popular there).
- 1.48 In the business workshops and also in the nine telephone interviews with large employers, 2b was also the most popular option.
- 1.49 In the two voluntary sector workshops there was a wider spread of opinion: in western Dorset half supported 2c; in eastern Dorset 2b had most support; but in both cases there were many who abstained or were 'don't knows'.

Written submissions

- 1.50 Seven of the 'organisational' submissions (from the Bournemouth Chamber of Trade and Commerce, the LGB&T Dorset Equality Network; the Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals, the RSPB, the UK Nepal Friendship Society, Unity in Vision and Uniting the Conurbation) favoured option 2a - but this option had little support from residents: only one person explicitly supported it.
- 1.51 As in the workshops, there was most support for option 2b among the organisations' responses: 13 preferred it (including AFC Bournemouth, Blandford Forum Town Council, the Bournemouth 2026 Trust, the Bournemouth Labour Party, Sherborne Area Partnership, Historic England, Michael Tomlinson MP, the West and South Dorset Green Party and five local businesses). Option 2b was explicitly supported by only four residents though.
- 1.52 There was no support for option 2c among the 'organisational' submissions, but two residents supported it. A couple of others also felt they could support option 2c as the most preferable of the three, but only without the addition of town councils for Christchurch and Weymouth & Portland. They reasoned that this would add unnecessary costs to a project designed to save money, and that people in other areas may feel aggrieved at not being offered this provision themselves.

Reasons for option preferences

Option 2a

- 1.53 There was only minority support for option 2a (within the submissions and among business representatives) on the grounds that it represents the best split geographically, demographically and from business perspective, and because East Dorset links better with the urban east than the rural west. There was little support for option 2a overall and the main reasons for its emphatic rejection were that:

The 'small Dorset' rural authority would have an unsustainable level of debt combined with a relatively low council tax yield;

The financial imbalance resulting from this option would also be very 'unfair' to most rural residents; and

The large conurbation would be well-off but would jeopardise the interests of rural eastern Dorset in the context of the very different interests, priorities and traditions of the urban areas.

- 1.54 There was particular opposition to 2a in East Dorset, where participants felt that their area does not 'fit' with the urban boroughs of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and where they also feared a 'land grab' and loss of green space for housing.

Option 2c

- 1.55 Option 2c fared a little better overall: some respondents and participants preferred it on the grounds that: it would be better financially for rural Dorset; it best differentiates Dorset's main urban and rural areas; it is the most similar to the current structure and thus potentially the least disruptive to implement; and, more specifically, that Christchurch 'fits' better with the rural councils.

- 1.56 Most respondents and participants, though, rejected option 2c – primarily for the following key reasons:

Bournemouth and Poole form a 'natural' urban and coastal unity with Christchurch - and their economies and infrastructures are inter-linked;

Christchurch is not 'naturally' part of a large rural Dorset authority that will probably be governed from Dorchester;

The savings that this option would achieve would be more or less equally (and fairly) split between the two unitaries, but the total savings would be less than under the other options';

The large Dorset authority would be too 'unwieldy' to be governed effectively and efficiently; and

It is insufficiently aspirational in terms of creating a unitary council with a high national profile.

Option 2b

- 1.57 Option 2b emerged as clearly the most popular option overall because:

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole form a 'natural' urban and coastal unity – and their economies and infrastructures are inter-linked;

Christchurch is not 'naturally' part of a large rural Dorset authority that will probably be governed from Dorchester; for the reasons above it has more in common with Bournemouth and Poole;

Under option 2b, the two 'medium sized' unitaries would each have a 'fair share' of the savings yielded by the reorganisation;

The savings to be achieved through this combination are significantly bigger than under the other options; and

It seems the most efficient division of the existing local authority units.

- 1.58 There were, though, concerns in Christchurch that: the borough's green spaces would be subsumed for the housing requirements of Bournemouth and Poole; Christchurch's influence would be minimal compared to the other areas; and that Bournemouth and Poole have mismanaged their budgets.

Alternative suggestions

- 1.59 There was minority support for a single all-Dorset unitary authority on the grounds of economy and streamlining, but it was generally rejected where discussed.
- 1.60 A small minority of open questionnaire and household survey respondents preferred alternative council groupings, including the following:

Three councils: either:

Bournemouth and Poole; Christchurch, Purbeck and East Dorset; and North Dorset, West Dorset and Weymouth & Portland

or

Bournemouth and Poole; Christchurch and East Dorset; and North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset and Weymouth & Portland

Two councils:

Purbeck, Poole, Bournemouth and Christchurch

and

East Dorset, North Dorset, West Dorset and Weymouth & Portland;

A unitary authority of Bournemouth and Poole or Bournemouth and Christchurch, but leaving the other districts and boroughs as they are

Retaining the eight existing authorities while dispensing with Dorset County Council.

- 1.61 Some in the eastern Dorset third sector workshop proposed a Christchurch and East Dorset unitary authority, but this was not widely promoted.

- 1.62 The following suggestions were made by residents in written submissions:

A three-centre unitary option (with one primary and two secondary centres) comprising:

A Primary Centre at Dorchester with responsibility for County-wide policy and planning and local administration (for the current West Dorset and Weymouth & Portland Councils); and

Secondary Centres at Bournemouth (for the current Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch Councils) and Blandford Forum (for the current North Dorset, East Dorset and Purbeck Councils), each with responsibility for local administration in their areas.

A three-centre unitary option (one primary & two secondary centres) comprising: North Dorset, East Dorset and Christchurch; West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland and Purbeck; and Bournemouth and Poole.

A four-centre unitary option comprising: Bournemouth and Poole; Christchurch and East Dorset; North Dorset and part of West Dorset; and Weymouth & Portland, Purbeck and the south part of West Dorset.

The status quo but with 'the end of Dorset County Council', whose budget and responsibilities could be shared out among the remaining councils.

Overall conclusions

- 1.63 The outcomes of this exercise are more consistent than is usually the case in complex statutory consultations; and the findings suggest that the restructuring of local government in Dorset is not generally a deeply controversial matter – though there are certainly some strong feelings in some areas.
- 1.64 Overall, across both the quantitative and deliberative means of consultation, there was clear and even emphatic support for moving to two councils.
- 1.65 The singular exception to that generalisation is Christchurch where the open questionnaire showed that a majority of respondents opposed reducing to two councils (54%) as well as opposed options 2a (67%), 2b (57%) and 2c (60%). However, in the more representative household survey in Christchurch support for two councils was much higher (63%) and residents also supported option 2b strongly (64%). Moreover, in Christchurch the shift from less positive to more positive views was particularly pronounced in the residents' workshop, where nearly two-thirds of the participants ended by approving a reduction to two councils. The findings of all means of consultation are important, of course; but in this case the open questionnaire is a less than perfect guide to the balance of general public opinion across Christchurch.
- 1.66 In general, across all the areas of Dorset, there was an emphatic preference for option 2b as the fairest and most balanced of the three. In contrast, 2a was considered too unbalanced, unfair and unsustainable, whereas 2c was described by many as potentially creating a council that was 'too small'.
- 1.67 The alternative options proposed during the consultation are interesting, but the councils will have to decide how practical some of them are; and their very diversity indicates the need to focus on clear and relevant options that will provide the desired efficiencies.
- 1.68 Despite the general consistency of the positive findings summarised above, the consultation does not mean that the local government in Dorset must be reformed, for the councils may have sound reasons for not proceeding. But equally, the overall balance of opinion expressed through the consultation should not prevent them going ahead if (on the basis of all the available evidence) they are minded to do so. The evidence of the consultation is that there is widespread public support for the restructuring of local government.