

Local Government Review in the Blyth Valley Borough Council Area, Northumberland

**Research Study Conducted for
The Boundary Committee for England**

The
Boundary
Committee
for England

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Introduction

This summary report presents the key findings of research conducted by the MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of The Boundary Committee for England in the Blyth Valley Borough Council area, Northumberland. The aim of the research was to establish residents' views about alternative patterns of unitary local government.

Background to the Research

In May 2003, the Government announced that a referendum would take place in autumn 2004 in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber regions on whether there should be elected regional assemblies. The Government indicated that, where a regional assembly is set up, the current two-tier structure of local government - district, borough or city councils (called in this report 'districts') and county councils - should be replaced by a single tier of 'unitary' local authorities.

In June 2003, the Government directed The Boundary Committee for England ('the Committee') to undertake an independent review of local government in two-tier areas in the three regions, with a view to recommending possible unitary structures to be put before affected local people in a referendum at a later date.

MORI was commissioned by COI Communications, on behalf of the Committee, to help it gauge local opinion. The research was in two stages. First, in summer 2003, MORI researched local residents' views about local government and how they identify with their local community. These findings can be found at the Committee's web site (www.boundarycommittee.org.uk) and MORI's web site (www.mori.com). The findings were taken into account by the Committee in formulating its draft recommendations for consultation. The second part of the research, which took place in Stage Three of the Committee's review, has been primarily concerned with residents' reactions to the Committee's preliminary proposals and the reasons for local people's preferences. The findings from the second part of the research are the subject of this report.

Coverage of Main Research

MORI's main research took place in all 44 districts in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber regions. Within each district, at least 300 face-to-face interviews were carried out in-home, between 1 December 2003 and 23 February 2004. A total of 13,676 interviews took place across the three regions.

In addition to the main research, the Committee also asked MORI to undertake further research where it considered it needed further evidence. First, in districts which the Committee identified may be split in the event of local government reorganisation, it asked MORI to interview additional respondents in order to gauge in more detail their views about options which would directly affect them.

The districts concerned were Selby (North Yorkshire), Crewe & Nantwich and Vale Royal (Cheshire), and Fylde, Rossendale, West Lancashire and Wyre (Lancashire). A total of some 2,000 interviews took place in these areas. Second, MORI was asked to interview a representative sample of some 300 residents in each of four unitary councils adjacent to review areas - Sefton, Wigan, Wirral and York.

This Summary Report

This summary report presents the key findings from MORI's main stage research in the Blyth Valley Borough Council area within the Northumberland County Council area (in the North East region). Detailed computer tabulations have been provided under separate cover. Separate summary reports cover the findings from each of the other districts in the county, and a separate more detailed report has been prepared for county-wide findings.

A total of 310 face-to-face interviews were carried out in Blyth Valley, in-home, between 1 December 2003 and 23 February 2004. The methodology applied in this research, and the marked-up questionnaire, are set out in later chapters of this report. Further details, and the show cards used in the research, may be found in the separate more detailed report on county-wide findings.

Publication of the Data

As part of our standard terms and conditions, the publication of the data in this report is subject to the advance approval of MORI. This would only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misinterpretation of the findings.

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Summary of Key Findings

Considering Boundary Changes

Blyth Valley residents think that the most important issues to consider when deciding how council boundaries should be changed are:

- the quality of services (32%);
- the need for accountability to local people (18%);
- responding to local people's wishes (17%); and
- the cost of services (13%).

The Options

- Respondents were briefed during the interview about the Committee's review of local government and shown cards setting out the main patterns of unitary local government on which the Committee consulted. The options are:

Option A: a single unitary council covering the whole of the county;

Option B:

- Blyth Valley and Wansbeck districts combined;
 - Alnwick, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Castle Morpeth and Tynedale districts combined.
- The Committee's Stage Three report (published in December 2003 and available from its web site, www.boundarycommittee.org.uk), sets out the details.

Most Preferred Option

- Almost half of Blyth Valley respondents (45%) prefer Option B. The main reason for liking this option is residents' preference for the council to cover a small area (mentioned by 55% of those who preferred Option B).
- A third of residents (29%) prefer Option A. The main reason for this preference is the view that it would be more efficient or provide better value for money (mentioned by 50% of those who preferred this option).¹

¹ Reasons for most or least preferring options are subject to small base sizes; see Marked-up Questionnaire for details of base sizes and Methodology for details of statistical reliability.

Strength of Feeling

- While residents' awareness of the review is low, they feel strongly about their preferred pattern of local government.
- Of those who prefer Option B, 83% do so very or fairly strongly. Of those who prefer Option A, 76% feel very or fairly strongly.

Other Options

- 6% of residents specify, unprompted, that they do not want a change from the current system.
- 19% do not have a view.

Least Preferred Option

- The least preferred option in Blyth Valley is Option A (nominated by 50% of residents). The main reason for this is residents' preference for a council which does not cover a large area (mentioned by 58% of those who least prefer this option).

Knowledge of Local Government

- 35% claim to know a great deal or fair amount about local councils and the services they provide, compared with 64% who know little or nothing.

Knowledge of the Review of Local Government

- At the time of the interview, 10% claimed to know a great deal or a fair amount about the review of local government.
- 51% had not heard of it.
- The main sources of knowledge about the Committee's review of local government, for those who had heard of it, were programmes or news on TV (37%), articles in local newspapers (32%) and advertisements in local newspapers (16%).

Methodology

Overview

Quantitative research seeks to answer the question of ‘what’ residents think, by measuring their attitudes on a range of pre-set questions.

Within each two-tier district in Northumberland at least 300 quantitative face-to-face interviews were carried out in-home between 1 December 2003 and 23 February 2004. A total of 1,891 interviews took place across all two-tier authorities in the county:

Alnwick	313
Berwick-upon-Tweed	314
Blyth Valley	310
Castle Morpeth	318
Tynedale	325
Wansbeck	311

Quotas were set by age, gender and work status using 2001 Census data. Data have been weighted back to the known demographic profile of each district by age and gender, and for aggregate county findings by the population size of each individual district. Full computer tabulations have been provided in a separate volume.

Interpretation of the Data

It should be remembered that a sample, not the entire population, of the district has been interviewed. Consequently, all results are subject to margins of error, which means that not all differences are statistically significant. In addition, care should be taken in interpreting the results, because of the small number of respondents in some sub-groups, to ensure that the findings are statistically significant.

Unless otherwise stated, the base size for each question is provided. Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to multiple responses, computer rounding or the exclusion of ‘don’t know/not stated’ response categories. An asterisk (*) represents a value of less than half of one per cent, but not zero.

Ideally, every subgroup base will be at least 100 to allow apparent differences between subgroups to be taken as real. Where the base number is very low (<50) it is not advisable to make any inferences about that sub-group.

Statistical Reliability

The sample tolerances that apply to the percentage results in this report are given in the table below. Strictly speaking, these only apply to a perfect random sample, although in practice good quality quota samples have been found to be as accurate. The table shows the possible variation that might be anticipated because a sample, rather than the entire population, was interviewed. As indicated, sampling tolerances vary with the size of the sample and the size of the percentage results.

Approximate sampling tolerances applicable to percentages at or near these levels			
	10% or 90%	30% or 70%	50%
<i>Base:</i>	±	±	±
Size of sample on which survey result is based			
1,891 (<i>e.g. total number of interviews in Northumberland</i>)	1	2	2
1,500	2	2	3
1,000	2	3	3
750	2	3	4
c.300 (<i>e.g. total number of interviews in each district council area</i>)	3	5	6
100	6	9	10
50	8	13	14

Source: MORI

For example, on a question where 50% of the people in a weighted sample of 300 respond with a particular answer, the chances are 95 in 100 that this result would not vary by more than around 6 percentage points, plus or minus, from a complete coverage of the entire population using the same procedures. In other words, results would lie in the range 44% to 56%, but would be most likely to be 50%, the actual finding.

Tolerances are also involved in the **comparison of results** from different parts of the sample, and between two samples. A difference, in other words, must be of at least a certain size to be considered statistically significant. The following table is a guide to the sampling tolerances applicable to comparisons.

Differences required for significance at or near these percentages			
	10% or 90%	30% or 70%	50%
<i>Base:</i>	±	±	±
Size of sample on which survey result is based			
750 and 750	3	5	5
c.300 and c.300 (<i>e.g. when comparing between district council areas</i>)	5	7	8
250 and 250	5	8	9
150 and 150	7	10	11
100 and 100	8	13	14
50 and 50	12	18	20
<i>Source: MORI</i>			

Definitions of Social Grade and Area

Social Grade

Social Grades are standard classifications used in research, and are based on occupation of the chief income earner. They are defined as follows:

- **A** Professionals such as doctors, surgeons, solicitors or dentists; chartered people like architects, fully qualified people with a large degree of responsibility such as senior editors, senior civil servants, town clerks, senior business executives and managers, and high ranking grades of the Armed Services.
- **B** People with very responsible jobs such as university lecturers, hospital matrons, heads of local government departments, middle management in business, qualified scientists, bank managers, police inspectors, and upper grades of the Armed Services.
- **C1** All others doing non-manual jobs; nurses, technicians, pharmacists, salesmen, publicans, people in clerical positions, police sergeants/constables, and middle ranks of the Armed Services.
- **C2** Skilled manual workers/craftsmen who have served apprenticeships; foremen, manual workers with special qualifications such as long distance lorry drivers. Security officers, and lower grades of the Armed Services.
- **D** Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, including labourers and mates of occupations in the C2 grade and people serving apprenticeships; machine minders, farm labourers, bus and railway conductors, laboratory assistants, postmen, door-to-door and van salesmen.
- **E** Those on lowest levels of substance including pensioners, casual workers, and others with minimum levels of income.

Area

Urban and rural classifications are based on the population density of the ward where the sample point is located. Wards with less than 2.8 persons per hectare are classified as rural, and wards with more than 2.8 people per hectare are classified as urban wards.

Topline Findings (Marked-up Questionnaire)
