

The BSS Opinion Survey: An alternative analysis.

Dear Frank,

The availability of the survey results in the wallet at the Conference gave members virtually no time to read and assimilate them prior to 8:30 am on Saturday. Conferences are busy social occasions, particularly on arrival day, there is much to do and to discuss, greetings and anecdotes to be exchanged. Members do not have time to read the contents of their wallet immediately and in any case they are unlikely to delve into serious stuff as light bedtime reading. Given your commitment to open communication (which I share) I cannot understand why the results were not circulated prior to the Conference with the last NL & Bulletin to all members' not just Conference attendees. That said and now with more time and inclination, I have been able to look at the analysis.

Basically I do not agree with it. It is flawed, lacks neutrality and demonstrates a pre-emptive bias in favour of a desired result.

In summary these are the issues:-

- 1) Regardless of interpretation it is very unrepresentative because only 64 members out of 400 replied. So it does **not** represent 'a most informed insight into member's views' as claimed. With such a low response the results should be expressed not as percentages or fractions but simply by counting heads which then explicitly exposes how few members are actually involved.
- 2) Blank or no responses to questions have been recruited as critical or negative votes. This is not scientific; zero responses cannot be counted on either side.
- 3) Members aged over 80 have had their opinions removed from a critical question on the grounds that they used the wrong method to return their survey, and therefore were not competent to answer whilst those under 80 who did exactly the same were not so penalised. This is a quite extraordinary rigging of the result.
- 4) Assertions of 'Trust me, I have seen 100's of opinion surveys...I know how to read between the lines...this survey reveals despair and discontent' are just not acceptable either here or in a General Election. It is a simple arithmetic problem, the results are realised by counting, not by mind reading or use of magical dark arts.

By analysing the available reported statements arithmetically and avoiding the selective bias described above, a neutral analysis clearly shows that on every major topic a large majority of the respondents are very satisfied and supportive of the current BSS management style, methods and activities. Several who spoke also share my criticisms of the analysis. Although it is not denied that progressive evolution is desirable in any organisation there is no evidence whatsoever in the survey of 'a widespread call for change and improvement'. In fact it is quite the reverse. My positive result is a measure of the past development and current state of the Society so it is important to recognise the value of anything before it is discarded. It is curious that a negative result has been contrived to provide support for intended changes that the New Council has the authority to implement anyway.

I wish the New Council well but think that the biased analysis of the survey results reflects badly and is not a good start. I just wonder how many Council members analysed and agreed the methods before publication? Whatever the case and looking forward, there are still three major issues for us all to focus on and solve, the same as we had in April 2011:-

More members, More volunteers and a specified Reserves Policy.

Best wishes, Graham

Review of the published Results.

These tables use the numbers available in the published report to extract the number of members. The overall results of this neutral analysis clearly show that in all cases except one the members are very well satisfied with the current situation. In the published version blank or withheld votes on a topic have been arbitrarily counted as negative opinions and used to supplement the 'unsatisfactory' vote which is neither scientifically valid nor would be legal in a political election. In the case of the 'website satisfaction question' a subset of positive votes by the over 80s has been excluded because apparently their opinion is not to be trusted on this topic. This then rigs the result to falsely register dissatisfaction with the website. For these reasons alone the published results are seriously flawed and offend the ethos of a Society fundamentally dedicated to scientific and mathematical accuracy. A more rigorous re-analysis is required to be carried out by an impartial sub committee with full access to the original submissions.

Age.

Groups (approx.)	No of Members
1 in 5 over 80	12.3
2 in 5 in 70's	25.6

1 in 3 in 60's	20.8
1 in 10 in 40's or 50's	6
Total	64.2

Some members did not disclose their age although this fact is not acknowledged in the published results.

Seeking a New Direction.

Groups (approx.)	No of Members
1 in 5 seek a change in direction	12.8
4 in 5 do not seek a change (no blanks reported)	51.2
Age Breakdown	
2 in 5 aged 40-50s seek change(2*6/5)	2.4
1 in 4 in 60's seek change (1*20.8/4)	5.2

Those seeking change are 7.6 members in the 40-60 range and 5.2 members in the 70-80 range. The survey claims that there is a significant bias to 'youth' but it is neither true nor irrelevant.

Overall those not seeking a new direction outnumber those who are by 4 to 1.

Program of events.

Groups (approx.)	No of Members
1 in 6 seek additional events	10.7
5 in 6 are content with current events	53.7

Members who are satisfied with the program of events outnumber those who are not by more than 5 to 1

Management.

Groups (approx.)	No of Members
More than 1 in 2 rated it satisfactory or better	34
3 in 4 of 1 in 2 gave no opinion (0.75*30)	22.5
1 in 4 of 1 in 2 were critical (0.25*30)	7.5

The published survey erroneously claims without any proof that 'no answer' means critical.

Members who are satisfied with management outnumber those who are not satisfied by more than 4 to 1.

Communications

Groups (approx.)	No of Members
1 in 2 rated it satisfactory or better	32
1 in 4 gave no opinion	16
1 in 4 were critical	16

Those who are satisfied with communications outnumber those who are not satisfied by 2 to 1.

Internet use and use of Web

Groups (approx.)	No of Members
75% of over 80's use website (0.75*12.8)	9.6
94% of 40-70s use website (0.94*51.2)	48.1

This fact is reported to illuminate a flaw on the 'Satisfaction with the BSS website' question which is discussed later.

Survey returns by paper or electronic.

Groups (approx.)	No of Members
Electronic return by over 80's	0
45 % Electronic return by 40-70's (0.45*51.3)	23
Paper return by all age groups	41

Members returning paper copies are spread across all age groups and they outnumber those using an electronic method by nearly 2 to 1.

Satisfaction with the BSS website.

The Correct Analysis

Counting all the opinions of 64 members regardless of age

Groups	No of Members
1 in 3 rate it satisfactory or better	21.3
1 in 3 gave no opinion	21.3
1 in 3 were critical	21.3

An equal number of members are either satisfied or unsatisfied.

NowThe Flawed Analysis.

In the table below the assessor then removed the 8 positive votes placed by 12.8 members aged over 80 because they were considered 'unrealistic' because they had submitted their survey return on paper not electronically. But prejudice against paper is not consistent, 29 other members aged less than 80 also made their returns on paper but were not penalised. It seems that by being over 80 years means members are judged incapable of voicing a valid opinion on selected topics.

Counting the opinions of only 52 members, excluding the over 80s

Groups	No of Members
1 in 4 rate it satisfactory or better (52/4)	13
3 in 8 gave no opinion (3*52/8)	19.5
3 in 8 were critical (3*52/8)	19.5

This blatant selective exclusion of valid positive votes now gives the negative result that was apparently sought by those critical of the website.

New Help.

Groups (approx.)	No of Members
Help offered with Specific Tasks	2
Help offered on an Ad Hoc basis	4
Members not offering to help	48

The lack of significant offers of New Help is the single most important and sobering result in the whole survey. This should be the entire focus for any discussion for the future of the BSS, without member participation the Society will cease to function whether it has (or even needs) a strategic direction or not.

Comments.

These results reveal several serious flaws and bias in the analysis of the survey data.

1)Exclusion of the over 80s votes on the web site question on the pretext that that they did not know what they were saying is just blatant ballot rigging and is insulting. The exclusion was made on the basis that all the over 80s submitted their survey on paper and this (erroneously) indicated that they were not 'internet savvy' so their 8 positive opinions of satisfaction using the web site were removed! However it transpires that at least 29 other

members aged less than 80 submitted their input on paper but their opinions were not excluded, they were not considered to be ga ga and ineligible to vote.

2) Unanswered questions or 'silence' in a survey cannot ever be considered as an indicator of either criticism or support. In political elections non votes are not allocated by dark choice to any competing political party, not at least in the UK. Such opinions are neutral and must be treated as 'non answers' which is exactly what they are. It must be accepted that the member has the right and has chosen not to answer this particular question. In the same way that 336 members chose not to take part in the whole survey. In reality people don't complain unless they are positively unhappy which is quite opposite to the confident view taken in this survey.

3) Keyword counting and counts of the incidence of certain words cannot be indicators of support or criticism because the words are taken out of their context. e.g. "Newbury is a great event." "Newbury type events should move around the country". "Newbury must be more rigorously managed." "I have never attended a Newbury event" "Four counts of the word"Newbury" does not mean that the event has universal support, there are neutral uses of the word, some are positive, others are critical.

4) There is the "it would be nice" syndrome..."The Conferences are great but it would be nice if they were located nearer to where I live..." This is neither criticism nor approval. The survey has not explained how this type of dilemma was interpreted.

5) In the survey analysis it is important to recognise outright criticism (unfit for purpose) and constructive suggestions for development and growth of features. Unfortunately this differentiation has not been exposed in the survey results.

6) In view of these and other flaws members cannot be confident that this analysis has been conducted impartially. There should be full visibility of the actual returns (made anonymous) so that the quality of the published interpretation can be reviewed by an independent sub committee. The returns have been very poor; only 1 in 6 members have replied consequently the published survey results cannot reliably be used to justify radical changes to the direction of the Society..

General Questions.

These are questions that arose initially on reading the results.

Q1. Only 64 (16%) members responded, the other 336 (84%) members did not respond (in the words of the survey they remained totally 'silent'.) How can this survey be regarded as representative?

Q2. Why were the results not published pre conference with the last NL? Why should the conference attendees have priority over the other 320 members?

Q3. How many members of Council worked on the detailed analysis and discussion of the results? Were the results and methods approved by the Council?

Q4. How many overseas members responded? And how did the analysis take account of their quite different perspectives, remoteness and aspirations?

Q5. How were the opinions of those who had never attended a Conf, a 'Newbury', a Safari or entered a competition, weighted against those who had?

Q6. Despite the poor response there must have been worthy ideas and unexpected suggestions from individual members in the survey. These should also be published. Will the Council give due consideration to them so that maximum benefit can be extracted from the survey?

Graham Aldred

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