<u>Summary and results of the resident engagement conducted by Oxfordshire County Council</u>
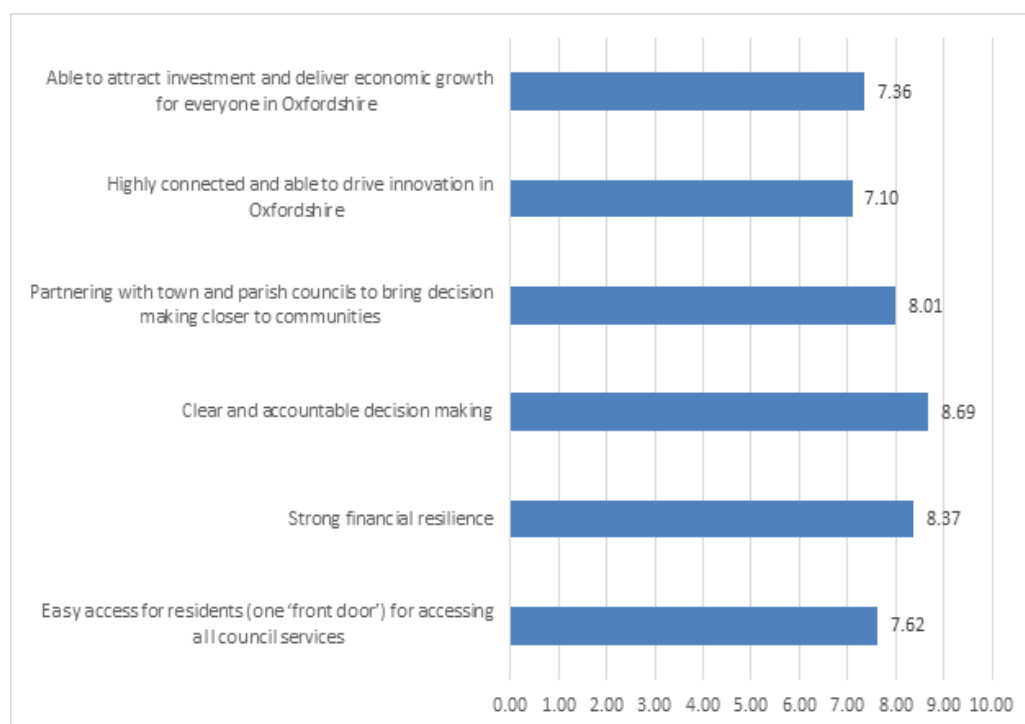
1.   The open survey, and its accompanying engagement activity, was deployed to support the understanding of, and engagement with, plans for reorganisation of Oxfordshire's councils. The survey and marketing activity was predominantly targeted at county residents as opposed to a stakeholder audience, and is part of a multi-strand package of engagement including:

2.

(a)   The same questions asked of residents as part of the council's annual representative residents' survey.

(b)   Discussions with residents on local government reorganisation in focus group format, as part of the council's planned research programme to inform the development of its latest strategic plan.

(c)   Discussions with secondary school children on local government reorganisation in sounding board format, as part of the council's planned research programme to inform the development of its latest strategic plan.

(d)   A total of 1,344 individuals participated in the survey, including 1,275 Oxfordshire residents, 17 members of the public living outside Oxfordshire, and 46 stakeholders.

3.   The key findings of the engagement are summarised below:

The most frequently cited benefits of the 'one unitary' proposal

(a)   Respondents highlighted the potential for reduced duplication, improved coordination, and a more joined-up approach to governance.

(b)   Cost savings were also a significant theme, with 383 mentions. Some respondents believed that a single unitary council could lead to financial efficiencies and better use of public funds.

(c)   Other notable benefits included clearer accountability and responsibility (179 mentions) and a single point of contact for residents (140 mentions).

(d)   The most dominant concern of the council's 'one unitary' LGR proposal was balancing the diverse needs of different areas within Oxfordshire, mentioned 262 times. Loss of local knowledge and disconnection from communities was another notable concern, with 218 mentions. Some respondents worried that a larger, centralised authority would be less attuned to the specific needs of smaller towns and rural areas.

(e)   Other concerns included the potential for increased costs, negative impacts on service quality, and reduced accountability.

(f)   Quantitative feedback was also measured and is displayed below:

4.

Question 3: On a scale from 1=Not important at all to 10=Extremely important, how important are each of the following in thinking about how any future unitary council(s) in Oxfordshire should operate

Attribute	Mean score
Able to attract investment and deliver economic growth for everyone in Oxfordshire	7.36
Highly connected and able to drive innovation in Oxfordshire	7.10
Partnering with town and parish councils to bring decision making closer to communities	8.01
Clear and accountable decision making	8.69
Strong financial resilience	8.37
Easy access for residents (one 'front door') for accessing all council services	7.62

When exploring quantitatively the relative importance of different attributes for future unitary councils, clear and accountable decision-making was rated as the most important attribute, with a mean score of 8.69. Strong financial resilience followed closely, with a mean score of 8.37. Partnering with town and parish councils was also highly valued, with a mean score of 8.01.
 The three most highly valued attributes identified in this question align with the three core benefits of the one unitary proposal, closer to communities, cost effective and connected (as outlined in paragraph 4 of this chapter).

Question 4: And on a scale from 1=Not important at all to 10=Extremely important, how important are the following aspects of local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire to you?
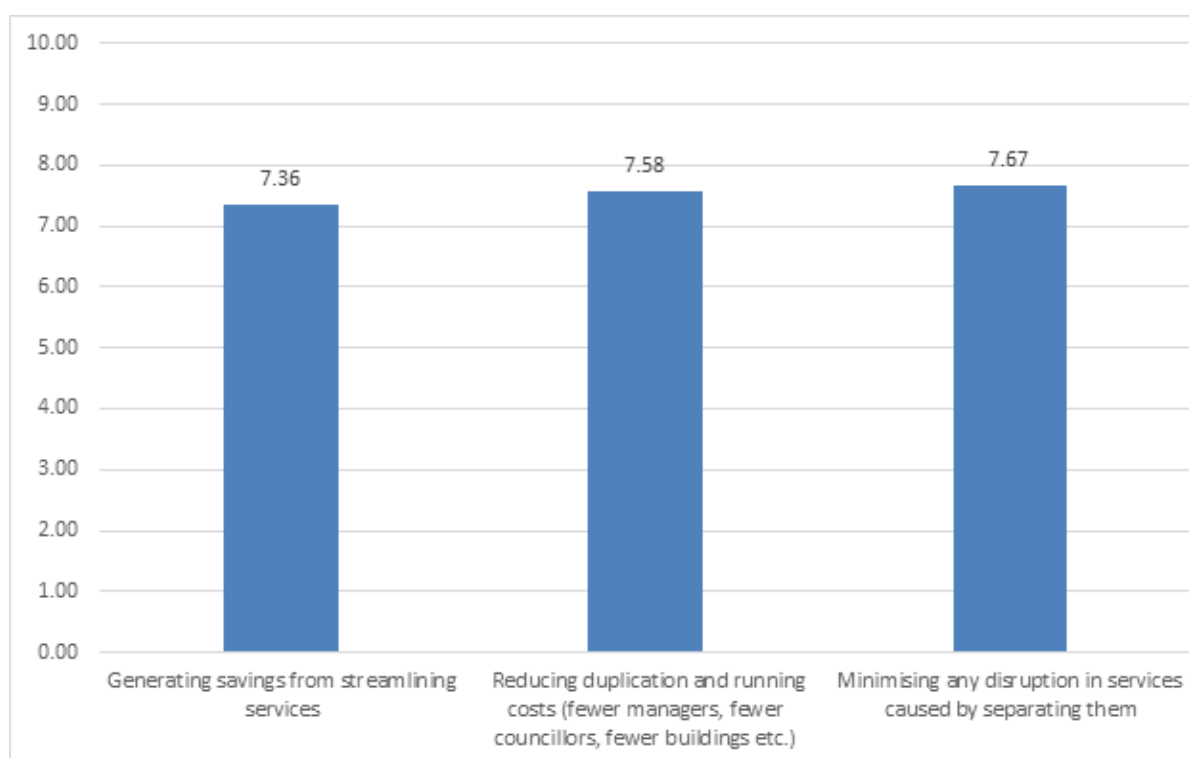
Minimising disruption in services during reorganisation was the most important area of focus for local government reorganisation, from the three attributes tested quantitatively, with a mean score of 7.67. However, both reducing duplication and running costs (mean score of 7.58) and generating savings from streamlining services (mean score of 7.36) were also highly valued.

The results of this question demonstrate the rationale for the one unitary proposal in regard to service delivery. The formation of a single unitary will result in comparatively less disruption than the formation of multiple unitaries as much service is already delivered on a county footprint and so these pre-existing service areas will not be split up.

Additionally, the council were pleased to see that residents recognised the importance of streamlining services and reducing duplication as is consistent with the single unitary proposal (as there would be one council delivering services in the county).

<u>School focus groups feedback and outcomes</u>

5.   Between Friday 27 June and Thursday 17 July 2025 Oxfordshire County Council held four in-person sounding boards for secondary school aged children. The sounding boards were part of a multi-strand package of engagement to inform the development of the council's new strategic plan and proposal for LGR.

6.   The focus groups were held in the following schools:
   a. Greyfriars (Oxford)
   b. Henry Box School (Witney)
   c. Lord Williamson (Thame)
   d. Faringdon Community College (Faringdon)

<u>Benefits</u>

7.   Students shared their thoughts on having a One Oxfordshire Council. Significantly, most of the comments saw it as a way to increase efficiency, improve communication, and provide better services across the whole county. They thought it promised easier access for residents, stronger voices and community links, and more effective use of resources.
   e. **Increased efficiency and budget management:** A single council would reduce confusion, consolidate budgets, and cut administrative expenses, allowing for better allocation of funds and quicker decision-making.
       "Services can cross over unlike before, more people will benefit"

   f. **Improved access and communication:** Residents from right across the whole of Oxfordshire would know who to contact and would benefit from having one point of contact for services, simplifying interactions with authorities and enhancing public engagement and communication.
       "Less confusing as you only have one place to go if you have complaints or problems, it's also easier to know which party controls your area."

   g. **Stronger community and equality:** Uniting different towns under one Oxfordshire council encourages a wider sense of community, promotes equality in service quality, and encourages collaborative decision-making across the county.
       "We can all be in unison across Oxfordshire"

   h. **Enhanced opportunities and development:** The combined council could generate more ideas, support local businesses, improve public

amenities, and address larger problems more effectively, benefiting a wider population.
"Less money wasted as you can concentrate all the money in one place and spend well and it will maybe have more impact"

Concerns

8.   There was widespread concern from the students about merging multiple councils into a single large council. The main issues revolved around the potential loss of local focus, inefficiency, financial concerns and unequal representation of smaller towns compared to larger ones.

    i.   **Loss of local focus and representation:** Residents worry that a single large council would struggle to address specific local issues effectively, with smaller areas receiving less attention and voices being unheard. This could weaken the sense of community and reduce the council's ability to manage diverse local needs. Concentrating power in the city raised worries of reduced responsibility for the villages, and the possibility that problems in council meetings could have widespread negative effects across the county.

    "Harder decision making because it's so broad/big"

    j.   **Increased complexity and slower decision-making:** Combining councils was seen as creating a broad organisation that would face difficulties in decision-making, leading to slower responses and potential conflicts among members due to differing priorities, becoming frustration for residents.
    "More conflict and disagreements"

    k.   **Economic and employment concerns:** There were fears that merging councils could lead to job losses, reduced opportunities, and higher costs, with villages and towns potentially facing increased taxes but receiving less services, funding and maintenance.
    "More taxes will be asked because the bigger places need more money but the smaller places won't get as much"

Postal Survey feedback and outcomes

9.   The resident's survey (sent to households) and street interviews represents a cross cut of Oxfordshire's population as opposed to residents' who were motivated to fill out the online survey). The survey was conducted and analysed by the independent research agency Marketing Means between 26

June and 20 August 2025 and included questions designed to gather perspectives on local government reorganisation in the county. A total of 1,203 responses were collected and responses were weighted to the demographic profile of Oxfordshire residents by age, gender, and district. Marketing Means findings are presented below:

Benefits

10. The main perceived benefits of bringing all council services together under a single unitary council for Oxfordshire in the future, taken from comments given in response to an open-ended question, were, in descending order of frequency:

    l. Reduces costs/ More cost-effective

    m. Comments relating to increased efficiency, less duplication and wastage, on themes such as:

        i. Greater efficiency/ Less time wasted

        ii. Reduces duplication across activities/ tasks

        iii. Everyone under one roof, staff working together/ more coordination

        iv. Reduces job duplication/ headcount

        v. Shared knowledge from different councils/departments

    n. Comments relating to Improved consistency and coherence across the council, on themes such as:

        i. Consistency in process/ in the service residents receive/ fair distribution of resources

        ii. Coherent/ clear view of situation/'singing from the same hymn sheet'

Concerns

11. The main potential concerns regarding bringing all council services together under a single unitary council for Oxfordshire in the future, taken from comments given in response to an open-ended question, were, in descending order of frequency:

    o. Difficulties with local decision-making/ local knowledge/ representation/ consideration of local needs

    p. Rural or smaller areas may be marginalised/ urban areas such as Oxford city will be prioritised

    q. Comments related to being overlooked by a larger council, on themes such as:

        i. Remoteness / Less accessibility / Concerned over accessibility to a local office

        ii. Services/ resources won't be fairly distributed/ ineffectively distributed

    r. Concerns unitary council will be too big/ covers a vast area

    s. Concerns over reduced services/ Services being cut or outsourced

    t. Comments related to staffing and management of the authority, on themes such as:

        iii. Redundancies/ Too few staff/ Need to retain staff knowledge

        iv.   Less accountability/supervision/ More corruption of power

        v.   Poor management/ Poor quality of councillors or staff/ Becoming too self-serving

   u. Comments related to financial issues, on themes such as:

        vi.   Financial savings won't be realised/ Harder to keep control of costs/ Costs will go up

        vii.   Change to unitary status will cost too much/ waste money/ Uncertainty over costs

Respondent's priorities

12. Marketing Means asked respondents to rate the relative importance of six different attributes in thinking about how any future unitary council(s) in Oxfordshire should operate.

    Clear and accountable decision-making drew the highest importance ratings.

    Two others were ranked closely together in second and third place for importance; Strong financial resilience and Partnering with town and parish councils to bring decision-making closer to communities.

    Although still considered important overall, the two that were least likely to be rated as important were Easy access for residents (one 'front door' for accessing all council services), and Highly connected and able to drive innovation.

13. Marketing Means also asked respondents to rate how important three other specific aspects of local government reorganisation in Oxfordshire to them.

    Two of the three drew very similar high ratings for importance; Minimising any disruption in services caused by separating them and Reducing duplication and running costs.

    The other, Generating savings from streamlining services was considered important overall, but by significantly fewer respondents than the first two aspects.

School focus groups feedback and outcomes

14. Between Friday 27 June and Thursday 17 July 2025 Oxfordshire County Council held four in-person sounding boards for secondary school aged children. The sounding boards were part of a multi-strand package of engagement to inform the development of the council's new strategic plan and proposal for LGR.

15. The focus groups were held in the following schools:

   v. Greyfriars (Oxford)

   w. Henry Box School (Witney)

   x. Lord Williamson (Thame)

   y. Faringdon Community College (Faringdon)

Benefits

16. Students shared their thoughts on having a One Oxfordshire Council. Significantly, most of the comments saw it as a way to increase efficiency,

improve communication, and provide better services across the whole county. They thought it promised easier access for residents, stronger voices and community links, and more effective use of resources.

a. **Increased efficiency and budget management:** A single council would reduce confusion, consolidate budgets, and cut administrative expenses, allowing for better allocation of funds and quicker decision-making.

"Services can cross over unlike before, more people will benefit"

b. **Improved access and communication:** Residents from right across the whole of Oxfordshire would know who to contact and would benefit from having one point of contact for services, simplifying interactions with authorities and enhancing public engagement and communication.

"Less confusing as you only have one place to go if you have complaints or problems, it's also easier to know which party controls your area."

c. **Stronger community and equality:** Uniting different towns under one Oxfordshire council encourages a wider sense of community, promotes equality in service quality, and encourages collaborative decision-making across the county.

"We can all be in unison across Oxfordshire"

d. **Enhanced opportunities and development:** The combined council could generate more ideas, support local businesses, improve public amenities, and address larger problems more effectively, benefiting a wider population.

"Less money wasted as you can concentrate all the money in one place and spend well and it will maybe have more impact"

Concerns

17. There was widespread concern from the students about merging multiple councils into a single large council. The main issues revolved around the potential loss of local focus, inefficiency, financial concerns and unequal representation of smaller towns compared to larger ones.

a. **Loss of local focus and representation:** Residents worry that a single large council would struggle to address specific local issues effectively, with smaller areas receiving less attention and voices being unheard. This could weaken the sense of community and reduce the council's ability to manage diverse local needs. Concentrating power in the city raised worries of reduced responsibility for the villages, and the possibility that problems in

council meetings could have widespread negative effects across the county.

"Harder decision making because it's so broad/big"

b. **Increased complexity and slower decision-making:** Combining councils was seen as creating a broad organisation that would face difficulties in decision-making, leading to slower responses and potential conflicts among members due to differing priorities, becoming frustration for residents.

"More conflict and disagreements"

c. **Economic and employment concerns:** There were fears that merging councils could lead to job losses, reduced opportunities, and higher costs, with villages and towns potentially facing increased taxes but receiving less services, funding and maintenance.

"More taxes will be asked because the bigger places need more money but the smaller places won't get as much"

<u>Overview and results of the resident engagement conducted by REMind Research</u>

18. Oxfordshire County Council commissioned REMind Research to conduct a series of focus group discussions with Oxfordshire residents in July 2025. The feedback from these focus groups is summarised below:

(a) "Residents are particularly mindful that streamlining services and removing duplication of departments/buildings should result in greater cost efficiencies, ultimately creating more budget to fund key services.

19. Also identified as key benefits are:

(a) the potential for better coordination of services such as public transport, roadworks, housing developments to minimise disruption.

(b) having one point of access so it is easy for residents to know where to go for support and resulting in better communications.

(c) greater consistency and fairness of policies and services across the county

(d) Improvements in decision making and time time saving in agreeing policy is considered a key potential advantage".

20. The biggest concern for residents is that there will be a loss of understanding about their particular local area and a reduction in local face-to-face contact points for residents.

21. Also identified as key concerns are:

(a) Whether there will be comparatively fewer staff to deal with services than currently, ultimately leading to greater backlogs and slower decision making.

(b) How distribution of funds and services will be balanced across the whole county with differing political tendencies

(c) Ensuring services are not disrupted through the transition to a new administration (especially if currently well performing)

(d) The cost of transitioning people and processes to a single unitary authority and the potential for job losses/ redundancies

22. The REMind report at page 3 states "There is minimal awareness of future local government reorganisation; except among older residents. On balance, the benefits of establishing a single countywide unitary authority are generally seen to outweigh the concerns — provided those concerns are properly addressed.

The main perceived advantages include cost savings, greater efficiency, more consistency, fair and coherent policies across Oxfordshire, plus a single point of access for all key services.

However, concerns remain about the potential loss of focus on the specific needs of local areas and the risk of service disruption during the transition.

While most intuitively feel a county-wide unitary authority is a logical step, older residents, in particular, tend to be more sceptical about the benefits of moving to a unitary system, regardless of what final structure is implemented."

Local Businesses Engagement

23. The council engaged with local businesses on LGR in a variety of formats. This included; written correspondence (to a broad business network), virtual meetings, and in-person events. These meetings are detailed below.

24. Local Government Reorganisation Business Engagement Session – 28 July 2025, Bee House, Milton Park
The session aimed to inform Oxfordshire business leaders about the potential impacts of a single unitary council and gather their feedback. It featured a presentation and Q&A with the County Council Leader, senior officers, and business representatives from sectors including science, technology, consulting, retail, transport, and health.
Feedback was broadly positive, with strong engagement and support for the single unitary option. Some stakeholders committed to joining a delegation to Westminster to advocate for the proposal.

25. Virtual Town Hall – 30 July 2025
Held online, the session featured a presentation by the Cabinet Member for Future Economy and Innovation and Enterprise Oxfordshire, followed by a Q&A. Attendees included representatives from sectors such as sport, transport, consulting, health, and education. Feedback showed that attendees were eager to hear detailed information about how LGR and devolution will

ultimately impact each other and businesses. The feedback received in this session took a keener interest into the details of the development of LGR and highlighted that though most feedback the council is receiving is positive there is an appetite for information sharing.

Local MP Engagement

26. Engagement with Oxfordshire MPs has included joint and individual meetings, as well as written correspondence, to discuss the LGR programme - resulting in constructive dialogue on statutory requirements, and some expressions of support for the 'one unitary' interim proposal. The specifics of this engagement are detailed below.

27. Joint virtual meeting - 11 July 2025
The meeting was attended by the Leader of the council and senior officers involved in LGR, with invitations extended to all six Oxfordshire MPs. Five MPs or their staff representatives participated.
    a. Discussions focused on the relationship between the LGR programme and Devolution plans.
    b. Feedback included reaffirmed support from some MPs for the 'one unitary' interim proposal, with offers to help promote it. Additional queries addressed statutory requirements for both local and central government.

28. Following written correspondence, individual meetings with MPs and senior council officials are being held in the near future.

Council Staff (internal) Engagement

29. The council utilised various pre-existing staff groups to enable effective information sharing and gathering of input from staff.

Engagement with the 'Delivering the Future Together' (DTFT) Network.

30. Two DTFT staff network meetings on LGR were held virtually on 24 and 26 June. The network highlighted key strengths of the single unitary interim plan, including improved efficiency, enhanced customer service, economies of scale, simplified resident access, strategic alignment, and greater influence. Concerns raised included potential job losses, diminished local identity, transition challenges, service disparities, public perception and communication issues.

Devolution and LGR representatives

31. Council directorates have nominated staff to support the development of the LGR proposal and business case. These representatives help establish a support network, raise visibility of LGR and Devolution projects to senior leadership, and ensure consistent communication across and within

directorates, particularly important as both programmes enter a transitional phase.

<u>Local Council Engagement</u>

32.   Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC) 'Talking Tables' – 18 July

Approximately 40 parish and town representatives attended, including clerks and chairs, with all three unitary proposals for Oxfordshire represented.
 There was notable support for a single unitary authority, seen as a familiar footprint and a way to reduce inefficiencies—particularly when accessing services such as grant funding.
Parishes expressed interest in taking on additional responsibilities, acknowledging the need for flexibility across areas. However, concerns were raised about incurring extra costs.
Services discussed included grass and verge cutting, trees, parks, sports facilities, toilets, and dog waste bins.
The council's recognition of towns and parishes as central to local democracy was well received, with the charter viewed as a meaningful step. Their role as connectors with valuable local insight—especially in planning—was reiterated.
Suggestions for improvement included better emergency access to the council (e.g. during flooding), clearer points of contact, and more consistent communication on priorities and activities.

33.   Following outreach from Witney Town Council on the impact of LGR, council officers coordinated a meeting with Witney Town Council representatives on 15 August 2025:
   c.   The agenda focused on the role of town and parish councils under a single Oxfordshire unitary authority including financial implications. Town/parish responsibilities and mechanisms for engagement between towns/parishes and the unitary.
   d.   Specific feedback on the LGR proposal was not solicited during the meeting to preserve Witney Town Council's neutral stance in working collaboratively with all Oxfordshire councils; instead, the session served as a listening exercise to gather insights from town and parish councils on how unitarisation may affect them from their own perspectives.

<u>Town Council Workshop – 1 September 2025</u>

34.   This session brought together representatives from the council and OALC's Large Councils Group (councils with a population over 6,000) to engage them on the development of a parish framework under LGR. The purpose was to share the County Council's vision, gather feedback, and collaboratively explore how a future unitary authority might work with local councils. Key themes included the devolution of services (with emphasis on local control,

capacity, and funding), community asset transfer, place shaping and neighbourhood governance, the importance of flexibility and tailored approaches for different councils, mechanisms for local influence and accountability, and the need for early, clear consultation and practical pilots. The discussion highlighted both opportunities and challenges, with a focus on ensuring effective partnership, democratic engagement, and sustainable service delivery in a future unitary Oxfordshire.

35.	There were representatives from the following Town and Parish councils alongside this council:

    a.	Banbury Town Council, Abingdon Town Council, Carterton Town Council, Thame Town Council, Faringdon Town Council

Concerns

    a.	Services being devolved to parish councils without consultation or resource

    b.	LGR timeline and being unsure about when things will start to impact town and parish councils (eg if they have to take on more responsibility or increase budgets etc)

    c.	Becoming even more distant / arms length from a unitary service with less influence, even though overall supportive of a single unitary / unitarisation

    d.	Wanting to be included in local government and influencing local decisions

Voluntary and Community Service (VCS) Engagement

36.	The council has actively engaged VCS as part of the LGR programme. This sector is particularly important to the area and so engagement was valued, especially the opportunity for balanced engagement (where all three proposals were presented to representatives from VCS) considering the likely impact LGR will have on these groups.

37.	A virtual event titled 'Local Government Reorganisation – a chance for the VCS to have their say' was held on 19 August.

Council representatives attended a virtual event hosted by Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA), one of the largest VCS groups in the County. The event brought together representatives supporting each of the three Oxfordshire LGR proposals, ensuring a balanced platform for engagement. Following a presentation outlining the proposals, a question-and-answer session was held between VCS representatives and council officers from across district councils and the county council.

Public sector providers (health, police, fire)

38.	As per the statutory invite, public service providers in the local area are expected to be engaged with on LGR in their areas. The other formats for engagement with public sector providers consisted of a mixture of written correspondence and meetings with senior officers and councillors.

39. Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) and Hospitals
     Letters were sent to both ICBs and Hospitals, recognising them as key health stakeholders within the county. The written responses provided valuable insight into each organisation's priorities and concerns. A consistent theme across the feedback was a strong call for health inequalities to be a central focus in any future Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), regardless of whether one, two, or three unitary authorities emerge. Additionally, the care boards expressed a keen interest in the devolution process expected to follow LGR.

40. Fire and Rescue Association (FRA)
     The FRA service sits within the existing County Council and so the Chief Fire Officer was included in strategic leadership briefings on LGR and was consistently engaged on detailed updates.

41. Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and office of Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC)
     Both the PCC and OPCC officers actively engaged in discussions with senior council officers and councillors regarding Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). LGR was incorporated into the agendas of existing forums for regular engagement and joint working. The PCC has publicly expressed support for a single county model in the local press—a position that has been positively received by the council.

42. South Central Ambulance Service (SCAS)
     Written correspondence was passed between the council and SCAS on initial LGR proposals and potential impacts. The service were interested in the strategic impact of redrawing council boundaries and how this may lead to savings over a long-term period.