



A Fresh Start for Oxfordshire: Proposals for a new Unitary Council

Report of Public and Stakeholder Engagement

19th January 2017 – 28th February 2017

Report for:



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Opinion Research Services
March 2017**



Oxfordshire County Council

A Fresh Start for Oxfordshire: Proposals for a new Unitary Council

Report of Public and Stakeholder Engagement

19th January 2017 – 28th February 2017

by Opinion Research Services

Opinion Research Services

The Strand • Swansea • SA1 1AF

01792 535300 | www.ors.org.uk | info@ors.org.uk

As with all our studies, findings from this report are subject to Opinion Research Services' Standard Terms and Conditions of Contract.

Any press release or publication of the findings of this report requires the advance approval of ORS. Such approval will only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation

This study was conducted in accordance with ISO 20252:2012 and ISO 9001:2008.

© Copyright March 2017

Contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| The ORS Project Team | 6 |
| 1. Executive Summary | 7 |
| Summary of main findings | 7 |
| The commission | 7 |
| The engagement process | 7 |
| Building on conversations | 8 |
| Proportional and fair | 8 |
| Nature of engagement | 9 |
| Accountability | 9 |
| The report | 9 |
| Main findings | 9 |
| The need for change | 9 |
| Residents' survey | 9 |
| Open questionnaire | 10 |
| A unitary authority in principle | 10 |
| Residents' survey | 10 |
| Open questionnaire | 10 |
| Criteria for change | 10 |
| Residents' survey | 10 |
| Open questionnaire | 11 |
| Residents' workshops and OCC Meetings | 11 |
| From six councils to one? | 11 |
| Reducing the number of councils | 11 |
| Residents' survey | 11 |
| Open questionnaire | 12 |
| Residents' workshops and OCC meetings | 12 |
| Reasons for keeping six councils | 13 |
| Residents' survey and open questionnaire | 13 |
| Residents' workshops and OCC meetings | 13 |
| Residents' survey and open questionnaire | 14 |
| Residents' workshops and OCC Meetings | 14 |
| Alternative suggestions | 15 |
| Residents' survey and open questionnaire | 15 |
| Residents' workshops and OCC meetings | 15 |
| Other issues | 16 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Overall conclusions | 16 |
| 2. The Engagement Process | 18 |
| Overview of the Engagement..... | 18 |
| The commission | 18 |
| The engagement process | 18 |
| Building on conversations | 20 |
| Quantitative engagement | 20 |
| Residents’ survey | 20 |
| Open questionnaire | 21 |
| Deliberative engagement..... | 22 |
| Deliberative workshops with members of the public | 22 |
| The Agenda | 23 |
| OCC meetings..... | 23 |
| Written submissions..... | 23 |
| Mailbox communications..... | 23 |
| Nature of engagement..... | 24 |
| Proportional and fair..... | 24 |
| Accountability | 24 |
| Interpreting the outcomes..... | 25 |
| The report | 25 |
| 3. Residents’ Survey..... | 27 |
| The Survey..... | 27 |
| Weighting the Data | 27 |
| Respondent Profile..... | 28 |
| Interpretation of the Data..... | 29 |
| Main findings..... | 30 |
| 4. Open questionnaire and individual responses | 44 |
| Introduction | 44 |
| Individual respondent profile..... | 44 |
| Geographical spread of respondents | 45 |
| Change in response over time, by district..... | 47 |
| Interpretation of the data | 48 |
| Findings from the engagement questionnaire (individual responses) | 49 |
| Further Comments (individuals) | 63 |
| Responses received from individuals separately to the main questionnaire | 64 |
| 5. Deliberative and Other Meetings..... | 66 |
| Introduction | 66 |
| The meetings..... | 66 |
| Workshops with Members of the General Public..... | 66 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Overview | 66 |
| Main Findings | 67 |
| Overall Summary | 67 |
| Awareness of current local government structures | 67 |
| Awareness of Local Government Reorganisation debate..... | 67 |
| Criteria for assessing local government structures..... | 68 |
| Reducing the number of councils: initial and final opinions..... | 68 |
| Reasons for and against reducing to one unitary council | 71 |
| Reasons for keeping six councils | 71 |
| Reasons for reducing to one unitary council | 74 |
| Suggested Alternatives..... | 77 |
| Other issues..... | 78 |
| Other Meetings | 78 |
| Overview | 78 |
| Library drop-in events | 79 |
| Deliberative workshop for young people..... | 82 |
| More local accountability..... | 83 |
| Simpler for residents and businesses..... | 84 |
| Better, joined-up services | 84 |
| Lower cost to run | 84 |
| Other issues..... | 85 |
| 6. Stakeholder Engagement..... | 86 |
| Introduction | 86 |
| The Stakeholder Advisory Group | 86 |
| Stakeholder Engagement Activities | 87 |
| Engagement with town councils and parishes..... | 87 |
| Main Findings | 87 |
| Findings from the engagement questionnaire (organisation responses)..... | 93 |
| Written submissions..... | 94 |
| Mailbox communications..... | 96 |
| Engagement with Oxfordshire City and District Councils | 97 |
| List of Figures | 98 |

The ORS Project Team

Project management and reporting

Dale Hall

Kester Holmes

Kelly Lock

Alys Thomas

Fieldwork management

Robyn Griffiths

Leanne Hurlow

James Greenwood

Amy Bone

Workshop Facilitation

Dale Hall

Kelly Lock

Hannah Champion

Data analysis

Richard Harris

Matjaž Bone

Ian Ulph

Sheng Yang

1. Executive Summary

Summary of main findings

The commission

- 1.1 Oxfordshire County Council (henceforth OCC) is seeking the views of residents and other stakeholders about the future structure of local government across the county - and particularly on whether the current two-tier system of six councils should be replaced with one unitary authority. The council's wide-ranging engagement was designed to inform Oxfordshire residents and stakeholders about its draft proposal for local government reorganisation and to provide a range of opportunities for response and comments to help shape and improve the final proposal.
- 1.2 Opinion Research Services (ORS) is a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research particularly major statutory consultations (including the recent successful consultation on local government reorganisation for all nine local authorities in Dorset) and engagement processes such as this. ORS was appointed by OCC to advise on and independently manage and report important aspects of the engagement programme.

The engagement process

- 1.3 The engagement period started on 19th January 2017 and ended on 28th February 2017. During this period, residents and stakeholders were invited to provide feedback through a wide range of routes, including all the following:

An open questionnaire for all residents, stakeholders and organisations: the questionnaire was available online and paper questionnaires were widely circulated in libraries and at county hall – and east read documents were available on request;

A face-to-face residents' survey based on 500 interviews representative at a county level: to provide an accurate profile of opinions in the general population across Oxfordshire and also within each district/city council area;

Five residents' workshops (one in each city/district council area) with a representative cross-section of members of the public;

42 drop-in events in Oxfordshire's libraries;

Direct communications, meetings and one-to-one conversations with a large number of individual stakeholders and stakeholder groups and organisations from different sectors including: Government departments and ministers, statutory bodies, local councils, education, business, voluntary and community sector, and those for people with specific protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010;

Three briefing sessions for parishes and town councils and a deliberative workshop for young people

Written submissions: residents, stakeholders and organisations were able to provide their views by writing to OCC; and

Wide ranging communications activity including microsite, press releases, social media (Facebook Instagram, Twitter, YouTube), advertising and direct email/mail).

- 1.4 The engagement programme was successful in achieving well over 6,000 responses: including 5,717 open questionnaire responses and 503 responses to the residents' survey. Furthermore, 88 residents attended the five area-based workshops and OCC engaged with many more people through its own internal programme of engagement.

Building on conversations

- 1.5 This latest period of engagement is a continuation of dialogue started in the spring of 2016, when the council was considering the case for unitary government and a detailed options appraisal. This dialogue was intended to explore: perceptions of the current local government system; opportunities created by devolution; and important factors to consider when designing any new unitary authority.

- 1.6 This work included:

Communication and conversations with national and local stakeholders, including: the Department for Communities and Local Government; the County Council Network; the National Association of Local Councils; the Centre for Public Scrutiny and other advisors;

Establishing a Stakeholder Advisory Group comprising key local stakeholder organisations from Business, the Voluntary and Community Sector, Health, Police, Fire & Rescue, Education and others;

Holding 10 meetings for parishes and town councils and one for city stakeholders;

A public 'call for evidence' (led by consultant Grant Thornton) resulting in 626 public and stakeholder responses that showed a majority belief that a single new unitary for Oxfordshire would be best able to meet the five assessment criteria under consideration.

- 1.7 Furthermore, two public focus groups were held - as well as an initiative called the 'Great Oxfordshire Shake Up', which involved seven market stall events in town centres whereby members of the public could play the 'Shake Up' game designed to test their knowledge of council services. There was also an associated website and the aforementioned game was available online.

Proportional and fair

- 1.8 The key good practice requirements for proper engagement programmes (as with formal 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.

- 1.9 As a well-established and specialist social research practice with wide-ranging experience of controversial statutory consultations and engagement processes across the UK, ORS is able to certify

that the process undertaken by Oxfordshire County Council meets these standards. Overall, ORS has no doubt that the engagement programme has been conscientious, competent and comprehensive in eliciting opinions. It was open, accessible and fair to all stakeholders across Oxfordshire; and it conforms with ‘best practice’ in both its scale and the balance of elements and methods used. The engagement was also proportional to the importance of the issues.

Nature of engagement

Accountability

- 1.10 Accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible engagement while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully.
- 1.11 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 engagement processes, not just count heads.

The report

- 1.12 This executive summary report summarises the engagement outcomes to highlight the overall balance of opinions. We encourage people to read the full report for more detailed insights and to get a better understanding of the assumptions, arguments, conclusions and feelings about the possible reconfiguration of local government across Oxfordshire. The full report considers the feedback from each element of the engagement programme in turn (which can at times be repetitive given that similar issues emerged across the different strands) and provides a full evidence-base for those considering the engagement and its findings. We trust that both this summary and full report will be helpful to all concerned.
- 1.13 ORS is clear that its role is to analyse and explain the opinions and arguments of the many different interests participating in the engagement process, but not to ‘make a case’ for any draft proposal. In this report, we seek to profile the opinions and arguments of those who have responded, but not to make any recommendations as to how the reported results should be used. Whilst this report brings together a wide range of evidence for consideration, decisions must be taken based on all the evidence available.

Main findings

The need for change

Residents’ survey

- 1.14 Seven out of ten residents (70%) agreed that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire, whereas nearly a fifth (18%) disagreed.
- 1.15 At least two thirds of residents in each district/city council area agreed with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire. Levels of agreement ranged from 67% in South Oxfordshire, to 73% in West Oxfordshire. In the three remaining areas (Cherwell, Oxford and Vale of White Horse), 70% of residents

agreed. It is worth noting that more than a fifth of residents in Cherwell (23%) and West Oxfordshire (22%) disagreed with the need for reorganisation.

Open questionnaire

- 1.16 Nearly two-fifths of individuals (38%) who responded, including respondents within and outside the overall Oxfordshire area, agreed that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire, whereas an absolute majority of respondents (56%) disagreed.
- 1.17 An absolute majority of individual respondents in two areas agreed with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire: South Oxfordshire (60%) and Vale of White Horse (59%).
- 1.18 Fewer individuals agreed in the remaining Oxfordshire areas: Cherwell (44%), Oxford (35%) and West Oxfordshire (26%). Moreover, in these three areas, absolute majorities disagreed (52% in Cherwell, 58% in Oxford and 69% in West Oxfordshire).

A unitary authority in principle

Residents' survey

- 1.19 Around two thirds of residents (67%) agreed with principle that a unitary council should provide all council services in their area; a fifth (20%) disagreed. The level of agreement varied from 62% in West Oxfordshire, to 70% in Vale of White Horse; therefore an absolute majority of residents agreed in each of the five areas. Around two thirds of residents in Oxford (68%), South Oxfordshire (67%) and Cherwell (66%) agreed with the principle that a unitary council should provide all council services.

Open questionnaire

- 1.20 Three out of ten respondents (30%) agreed with the principle that a unitary council should provide all council services in their area; however, around two thirds of respondents disagreed (66%), and an absolute majority (57%) strongly disagreed.
- 1.21 More than half of respondents in Vale of White Horse (53%) and South Oxfordshire (52%) agreed with the principle that a unitary council should provide all council services in their area; however, more than two-fifths disagreed (44% in South Oxfordshire and 42% in Vale of White Horse).
- 1.22 Fewer respondents agreed in Cherwell (37%), Oxford (28%) and West Oxfordshire (18%). Furthermore, at least three-fifths disagreed in each of these areas: 60% in Cherwell, 68% in Oxford, and 80% in West Oxfordshire.

Criteria for change

Residents' survey

- 1.23 As in the engagement questionnaire, residents were asked how important 'simpler local government', 'better services', 'more local accountability' and 'lower running costs' would be to them if local government was changed in Oxfordshire." All four of these aspects were felt to be important (either 'very' or 'fairly') by more than four fifths of residents, and an absolute majority felt each to be 'very important'. Overall though, most importance was attached to 'better services' (92%) - followed by 'more local accountability' (88%), 'lower running costs' (87%), and 'simpler local government' (87%).

- 1.24 In all district/city council areas, significant majorities of residents considered each factor to be important. The single highest result was seen in Oxford, where 98% of residents felt ‘better services’ were important.

Open questionnaire

- 1.25 Respondents were asked how important ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’ would be to them if local government was changed in Oxfordshire.”
- 1.26 Overall, individual respondents attached greatest importance to ‘better services’ (85%) and ‘more local accountability’ (80%). Absolute majorities of respondents - 65% and 60% respectively - regarded these as ‘very important’.
- 1.27 Absolute majorities also felt that ‘lower running costs’ (67%) and ‘simpler local government’ (55%) would be important - though it is also worth noting that around a quarter (24%) felt that ‘simpler local government’ would be unimportant.
- 1.28 Around two thirds of individuals in South Oxfordshire (67%) and Vale of White Horse (67%) felt ‘simpler local government’ would be important, as did half or more in the remaining Oxfordshire areas: Cherwell (58%), West Oxfordshire (52%) and Oxford (50%).
- 1.29 More than four fifths of the individual respondents in each district/city area felt that ‘better services’ would be important. The results were slightly higher in South Oxfordshire (89%) and Vale of White Horse compared to the remaining three areas of Oxfordshire (all 85%).
- 1.30 Substantial majorities of individuals in each Oxfordshire district/city area felt that ‘more local accountability’ would be important: South Oxfordshire (82%), West Oxfordshire (81%), Vale of White Horse (81%), Cherwell (81%) and Oxford (77%).
- 1.31 Around seven out of ten or more individuals responding from South Oxfordshire (76%), Vale of White Horse (74%), Cherwell (72%) and West Oxfordshire (69%) felt that ‘lower running costs’ would be important. The proportion of individuals in Oxford with this view was slightly lower (57%), but still an absolute majority.

Residents’ workshops and OCC Meetings

- 1.32 When asked about the relative importance of the four aforementioned criteria for the future of local government in Oxfordshire, the overwhelming majority of workshop participants agreed that ‘better services’ was most important and that savings arising from a unitary authority should be re-invested to enable improvements. Views were mixed on the relative importance of the other three criteria.

From six councils to one?

Reducing the number of councils

Residents’ survey

- 1.33 Seven out of ten residents (70%) agreed with the draft proposal to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire. A fifth of residents (20%) disagreed with the draft proposal.

- 1.34 The highest levels of agreement were seen in West Oxfordshire (78%) and South Oxfordshire (75%), while around two thirds or more agreed in Oxford (69%) and Vale of White Horse (67%). The lowest level of agreement was seen in Cherwell (63%) and it is worth noting that around three out of ten residents in this district (29%) disagreed with the draft proposal (as did a fifth - 20% - of residents in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse).
- 1.35 Nonetheless, an absolute majority of residents in each area agreed with the draft proposal on the basis of the information provided.

Open questionnaire

- 1.36 Around a quarter of respondents (24%) agreed with the draft proposals for a single unitary council covering the whole of Oxfordshire; however, around three quarters (74%) disagreed (and around two thirds - 68% - strongly disagreed).
- 1.37 Levels of agreement were noticeably higher among individuals responding from South Oxfordshire (45%) and Vale of White Horse (45%) than elsewhere; however, even in these two areas around half of respondents disagreed (51% in both districts).
- 1.38 Nearly a third of Cherwell respondents agreed (31%); whereas around two thirds disagreed (67%). However the lowest levels of agreement (and highest levels of disagreement) were seen among individuals in West Oxfordshire (14% agreed; 85% disagreed) and Oxford (19% agreed; 79% disagreed).

Residents' workshops and OCC meetings

- 1.39 Following the opening questions on awareness of current local government structures, but before any of the explanatory presentation, participants in the workshops were asked for their initial or immediate views on whether the number of councils (not counting parish and town councils) in Oxfordshire should be reduced (but to an as yet unspecified number). Much later in the meetings, following a presentation and detailed discussions, the workshops were asked if the number of councils should be reduced to create a single all-Oxfordshire unitary authority. People's initial and final views are summarised in the table overleaf which shows the proportions of workshop participants who favoured, opposed or were unsure about change at different stages of the meetings.

| AREA | Some reduction in the number of councils? | | | A single Unitary Council? | | | Shift in favour/against |
|---------------------|---|--------------|--------------|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| | For | Unsure | Against | For | Unsure | Against | |
| West Oxfordshire | 4/18 | 10/18 | 4/18 | 10/18 | 0/18 | 8/18 | +6 |
| Oxford City | 2/18 | 11/18 | 5/18 | 7/18 | 5/18 | 6/18 | +5 |
| South Oxfordshire | 5/17 | 4/17 | 8/17 | 11/17 | 4/17 | 2/17 | +6 |
| Cherwell | 6/16 | 0/16 | 10/16 | 1/16 | 7/16 | 8/16 | -5 |
| Vale of White Horse | 12/19 | 7/19 | 0/19 | 11/19 | 5/19 | 3/19 | -1 |
| TOTAL | 29/88 | 32/88 | 27/88 | 40/88 | 20/88 | 27/88 | +11 |

- 1.40 Overall, there was a broad division of opinion across the residents' workshops, but generally the final opinions were more positive than negative - except in Cherwell which was the most critical group of all. In three of the other four groups - West Oxfordshire, Oxford City and South Oxfordshire - there was a positive shift in opinion during the meetings (from people's initial to their final views) based upon a full examination of OCC's case for one unitary authority; whereas opinion shifted slightly in the other direction in Vale of White Horse (due to concerns about the radical nature of the proposal) and more markedly in Cherwell (because the workshop members disliked and rejected key aspects of OCC's case). This somewhat mixed response demonstrates that real deliberation took place in the workshops, with people forming views and changing their minds in different directions based on their perceptions of the evidence presented.
- 1.41 As with the deliberative workshops, there was a broad division in opinion around whether the current six councils should be reduced from six to one unitary authority at the library drop-in events. Some people were very in favour of the draft proposal and some very much opposed, for example: views were positive overall at Wheatley, Littlemore, Stonesfield, Woodstock, Headington and Faringdon; but negative overall at Carterton, Charlbury, Cowley and Old Marston. In many other areas there was some positivity also, but this was tinged with underlying apathy towards local government and scepticism about change and the draft proposal itself.

Reasons for keeping six councils

Residents' survey and open questionnaire

- 1.42 Those in favour of maintaining the status quo raised various concerns about the draft proposals, around aspects such:
- Concerns the proposals would not work, would fail to save money
 - Concerns about a loss of local accountability
 - Concerns about specific negative impacts on either rural areas (e.g. that these would be 'neglected'), or on Oxford City (e.g. as a result of it having different political makeup to the rest of the county)
 - Concerns about job losses
 - Concerns about residents having to travel further to access services.

Residents' workshops and OCC meetings

- 1.43 Many of those who opposed a single unitary council were concerned about local democratic accountability: they felt that one unitary council would be too geographically and socially remote from its residents and would not be able to recognise or cater for the needs of Oxfordshire's different areas; and also that fewer councillors would reduce local representation. Even those not opposed were concerned about these matters.
- 1.44 Nonetheless, many workshop participants could see the advantages of a single unitary authority, particularly with effective Area Boards. In fact, only Cherwell residents remained almost wholly unconvinced of the draft proposal - partly due to their perception of OCC as a kind of planning 'Big Brother' - and they did not think the Area Boards were sufficiently clear or sufficiently guaranteed to offset undesirable centralisation in a single unitary authority.

- 1.45 Many participants were concerned about diluting Oxfordshire’s political landscape: that is, with fewer councillors they could foresee a largely “blue county” with reduced political diversity and fewer checks and balances. This was a particular concern in Oxford City, whose local political make-up diverges greatly from that of the rest of the county.
- 1.46 Furthermore, it was said that the City has different social issues and needs to the rest of the county, which are best met locally rather than through a larger, more remote unitary authority that may not give them sufficient focus (though in the rural areas people were concerned that a single unitary authority would become too “Oxford-centric” at the expense of the county’s rural areas).
- 1.47 Some participants in most of the workshops thought the £20 million annual savings are not particularly significant in the context of the total revenue budget - and could be found through further efficiencies and economies within existing structures. Related objections were that the draft proposal is about financial savings but fails to focus on the human context; that the predicted savings may not be achievable in practice; and that they would be “swallowed up” by the needs of social services.
- 1.48 There were also worries that: council tax harmonisation might be controversial and difficult; the changes might not be ‘future ‘proof’; councillor workloads could become so unmanageable that they are unable to focus sufficiently on local issues; transitory arrangements may prove challenging; job losses could have implications not only for employees, but also on redundancy costs for the Council and the quality of service provision; and that a new unitary authority may focus too much on the provision of statutory services to the detriment of those ‘discretionary’ ones currently provided by district councils.
- 1.49 Finally, it should be noted that a few people in the residents’ and young persons’ workshops and many at the library drop-ins felt they could neither support nor oppose a reduction to one unitary authority because they had not received enough information in the workshop on which to base their decision.

Residents’ survey and open questionnaire

- 1.50 Positive comments about the proposals tended to comment on aspects such as:

The importance of making financial savings, and an acceptance that the proposals can achieve this;

The importance of a joined-up and effective approach;

Suggestions that the proposals are long overdue, and should be implemented quickly.

Residents’ workshops and OCC Meetings

- 1.51 Across the residents’ workshops and OCC meetings, those supporting one unitary authority (and many of those who did not, but could see the need for rationalisation) felt that the case for change had been made: they had been persuaded by the financial and other evidence presented that reorganisation is both necessary and desirable to make savings and efficiencies, eliminate duplication and safeguard services.
- 1.52 There was also recognition across the various sessions that reducing from nine to two councils could:
- Simplify the complex and sometimes “confusing” structure of local government across Oxfordshire for residents;
 - Ensure easier and better co-operation, communication and integration between council departments, especially in terms of: developing and implementing a coherent county-wide planning strategy for housing, transport and employment; better safeguarding; and

ensuring easier working relationships with other public bodies such as the NHS and Thames Valley Police;

Better enable the implementation of essential infrastructure improvements across the whole of Oxfordshire;

Widen political diversity within the current districts by “making local politics more open to a wider demographic away from middle class, older people...” and

Ensure fewer “*competing interests*” in financial terms (insofar as a budget controlled by one authority would allow it to “*put the money where it needs to be*”).

- 1.53 The importance of including Area Boards within the draft proposal should not be underestimated: in all the residents’ workshops, several of those initially opposed to reducing the number of councils (on the grounds of democratic accountability) were convinced of the merits of doing so, providing these boards have a central and tangible role to play within any new authority. There was even a sense that OCC should better emphasise Area Boards in order to overcome people’s concerns around the dilution of political representation and the potential disregard of local needs and wants.
- 1.54 Furthermore, there was some suggestion among parishes and town councils that five Area Boards may be insufficient - as well as a desire for much more information around how exactly they would work in terms of roles, responsibilities and powers and where they would be based.

Alternative suggestions

Residents’ survey and open questionnaire

- 1.55 Many respondents wanted to see the existing district/City councils maintained (and some wanted responsibilities transferred from the County Council to these other councils).
- 1.56 Among those who suggested different alternatives, there were some calls for a different number of unitaries, e.g. three (possibly based on North, South and the City), or two (the City and the rest of Oxfordshire).
- 1.57 Others suggested an alternative would be to make savings elsewhere, or reduce the number of councillors.

Residents’ workshops and OCC meetings

- 1.58 Some Cherwell and West and South Oxfordshire workshop participants were concerned about being offered what they described as a binary choice between retaining six councils and creating a single new one. While some agreed that change is necessary, they considered OCC’s draft proposal to be too drastic and suggested that there must be some feasible “in-between” options.
- 1.59 The most commonly suggested alternative proposal was a two-unitary system: one covering the City and the other the rest of the county. Nonetheless, there was some recognition that the city’s population may not be sufficient to sustain a unitary council and that not including the city within a wider unitary authority could be detrimental to the rest of the county given it is the area’s largest revenue generator by far.
- 1.60 One participant at the young people’s workshop suggested that, rather than wholesale change in the form of One Oxfordshire: “why don’t we work out which areas need to be changed or adapted or

improved and then work out what structure would support those changes? Certain ones won't need adapting or changing because they are working well". This view was also strongly supported by other participants.

- 1.61 At the town council and larger parishes meeting, there was a spontaneous mention of the Durham model of unitary government and specifically the Area Action Partnerships (the equivalent of the proposed local area boards in Oxfordshire)¹. This hub and spoke model is founded on the premise that not one size fits all and is based around natural communities that vary in size and role - and the Area Action Partnerships are supported by officers, offer a role to towns and parishes and have flexible geography and the ability to work both collectively and individually. The view of the room was that this could work in Oxfordshire, though it was recognised that it has taken time to develop and embed.
- 1.62 Other infrequent suggestions were to: introduce larger council tax rises to reduce funding gaps; abolish the county council to create three unitary councils based upon merging existing districts (suggestion made at Cherwell); cross-border collaboration with the Hampshire districts; and a more graduated approach to local government reorganisation by, for example, reducing to three councils in the first instance with the potential to decrease further should this prove successful.

Other issues

- 1.63 It is important to note that the role of town councils and parishes within any new unitary structure was a primary concern for participants in the town council and parish meetings (and for some at the library drop-ins): the desire for more influence on both the implementation and ongoing function of a new authority was clear, as was a perceived need for improved feedback mechanisms between unitary councillors and town councils and parishes.
- 1.64 It was said in the meeting for town councils and larger parishes that "town councils are fed up with paying for services that the county has dropped" - and there was scepticism as to whether the required finance would materialise in the current financial climate. Unsurprisingly then, several questions were asked across the sessions around how exactly the devolution of power to town councils and parishes would be achieved - particularly in relation to the funding and resources thought to be needed to enable the provision of additional services.

Overall conclusions

- 1.65 The engagement programme reported here was commissioned to understand levels of support for Oxfordshire County Council's draft proposal to reconfigure local government in the county - and to gather feedback on the draft proposal so it could be improved to address people's priorities and concerns. The council will draw its own conclusions from the engagement and from the other evidence available for its consideration - so ORS does not intend to advise at this stage, but only to identify where there was general agreement or disagreement in the engagement process.
- 1.66 The results from the open engagement questionnaire and residents' survey diverged considerably: while only a quarter (24%) of respondents to the open questionnaire agreed with the draft proposals for a single unitary council covering the whole of Oxfordshire; almost three times as many respondent to the residents' survey- 70% - agreed.

¹ <http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/1960/About-AAPs>

- 1.67 It should be noted that while open questionnaires are important engagement routes that are accessible to almost everyone, they are not ‘surveys’ of the public in the same way as the residents’ survey was. Whereas the latter required proper sampling of the population, the open questionnaire was distributed unsystematically or adventitiously and was more likely to be completed by motivated people while also being subject to influence by local campaigns. As such, because the respondent profile of the open questionnaire is an imperfect reflection of the Oxfordshire population, its results must be interpreted carefully. Crucially though, this does not mean that its findings should be discounted: they are analysed in detail in this report and must be taken into account as a demonstration of the strength of feeling of residents who were motivated to put forward their views (and in many cases concerns) about the proposed options. Nonetheless, we would recommend that the residents survey is the better guide to general public opinion.
- 1.68 As for the deliberative workshops, overall there was a broad division of opinion, but generally people’s final opinions were more positive than negative (except in Cherwell which was the most critical group of all). Mixed views were also expressed in the other forms of engagement such as the written submissions, library drop-ins, OCC-run meetings and stakeholder engagement: while many concerns were raised around the draft proposal, it was also supported by many.
- 1.69 It should be noted that engagement with informed audiences (who have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for particular proposals is especially valuable). All engagement elements are important and none should be disregarded, but the deliberative workshops, other meetings and submissions are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and the reasons for people’s opinions.
- 1.70 Overall then, the engagement exercise reached a broad range of residents and stakeholders. As is to be expected, a range of different views were expressed, but and in answering the question of whether there is support for the draft reconfiguration proposal, it would be fair to say that each engagement strand demonstrates some support - and indeed majority support in the representative residents survey (which is the best guide to overall public opinion), and majority support in most of the deliberative workshops.

2. The Engagement Process

Overview of the Engagement

The commission

- 2.1 Oxfordshire County Council (henceforth OCC) is seeking the views of residents and other stakeholders about the future structure of local government across the county - and particularly on whether the current two-tier system of six councils should be replaced with one unitary authority. The council's wide-ranging engagement was designed to inform Oxfordshire residents and stakeholders about its draft proposal for local government reorganisation and to provide a range of opportunities for response and comments to help shape and improve the final proposal.
- 2.2 It should be noted that, on 6th February 2017, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils gave their backing to the draft proposal². They did so with a view that the draft proposal should be revised to include significant improvements that ensure the priorities of local communities are fully addressed - for example by:

Strengthening the model of local accountability, with decisions taken at a much more local level than offered by the area executive board model;

Ensuring locally held reserves are used for the benefit of local residents, while recognising the collective benefits of pooling resources to leverage investment;

Commitment to a revised model of council tax harmonisation across the county over a reasonable period of time;

Ensuring that the planning framework builds on existing and emerging local plans; and

Establishing a housing company to ensure delivery of sustainable housing and infrastructure.

- 2.3 Opinion Research Services (ORS) is a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - particularly major statutory consultations (including the recent successful consultation on local government reorganisation for all nine local authorities in Dorset) and engagement processes such as this. ORS was appointed by OCC to advise on and independently manage and report important aspects of the engagement programme.

The engagement process

- 2.4 The engagement period ran for eight weeks, from 19th January 2016 until 28th February 2017 and the full programme included all the following elements:

² <http://www.oneoxfordshire.org/joint-statement-1>

Independent research by ORS

Advising on the engagement activity;

Designing informative and interactive presentation material suitable for use at the deliberative workshops;

Designing, implementing and analysing responses to online and/or paper versions of an open engagement questionnaire and a representative residents' survey;

Recruiting, facilitating and reporting five deliberative workshops with randomly selected members of the public; and

Producing an overall report of all findings and guidance on the interpretation of the material.

OCC's additional engagement activity

Developing the www.oneoxordshire.org website to include contextual information, the discussion document, background documents, Frequently Asked Questions, myth busters, media releases and an online feedback form;

Producing a summary discussion document for distribution to all libraries, parishes and town councils and available at county hall (the county council's headquarters) - as well as an easy read version for use at specific meetings;

Undertaking:

42 drop-in events in Oxfordshire's libraries to raise awareness of the draft proposal, answer people's questions and take feedback;

Three events for parishes, one for town councils and larger parish councils and a small number of separate meetings and conversations with local councils who have requested one; and

One workshop for children and young people and presentations to a number of different meetings including: the OxLEP Board, Oxfordshire Governor's Association, the Age UK Social Care Panel; and My Life My Choice (learning disabilities charity);

A Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting and a number of one-to-one conversations with stakeholders.

Sending letters and emails to stakeholders and providing an email address for stakeholders to submit written responses (which was also given to the public on request);

Advertising via local radio and via the main Oxfordshire print media channels;

Providing:

Digital communications (the 'One Oxfordshire' microsite; headlines and news items on the OCC website; and social media activity via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube); and

Direct Communications (posters sent to all parishes and town councils for display; 30,000 direct emails to adults aged 18+ across Oxfordshire; approximately 2,000 direct emails/letters to members of the Council's Oxfordshire Voice residents

panel; and various eNewsletters (including the YourOxfordshire list which reaches over 8000 subscribers); and

Media releases.

- 2.5 Furthermore, a number of the county council's elected members have been working extensively within their communities to inform and engage as many people as possible around the draft proposal.

Building on conversations

- 2.6 This latest period of engagement is a continuation of dialogue started in the spring of 2016, when the council was considering the case for unitary government and a detailed options appraisal. This dialogue was intended to explore: perceptions of the current local government system; opportunities created by devolution; and important factors to consider when designing any new unitary authority.

- 2.7 This work included:

Communication and conversations with national and local stakeholders, including: the Department for Communities and Local Government; the County Council Network; the National Association of Local Councils; the Centre for Public Scrutiny and other advisors;

Establishing a Stakeholder Advisory Group comprising key local stakeholder organisations from Business, the Voluntary and Community Sector, Health, Education and others;

Holding 10 meetings for parishes and town councils and one for city stakeholders;

Commissioning a detailed study of the options, including a public 'call for evidence' (led by consultant Grant Thornton) resulting in 626 public and stakeholder responses that showed a majority belief that a single new unitary for Oxfordshire would be best able to meet the five assessment criteria under consideration.

- 2.8 Furthermore, two public focus groups were held - as well as an initiative called the 'Great Oxfordshire Shake Up', which involved seven market stall events in town centres to inform residents about two-tier local government and the possibility of reorganisation. There was also an associated website and online engagement opportunities.

Quantitative engagement

- 2.9 A discussion document outlining the issues under consideration was produced by OCC. With that foundation, ORS (in conjunction with OCC) then designed a questionnaire that was adapted for online and face-to-face formats and included sections inviting respondents to make any further comments and also to profile those responding.

Residents' survey

- 2.10 The first form of quantitative engagement was the face-to-face doorstep residents' survey. The survey was undertaken with residents aged 16 and over to ensure that a broadly representative profile of opinions across Oxfordshire was achieved about the same core questions as in the open questionnaire.
- 2.11 ORS staff conducted 500 structured face-to-face interviews between 5th and 19th February 2017 using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing ('CAPI') technology. The survey was conducted using a quota controlled sampling approach, to ensure a broadly representative sample across Oxfordshire.

- 2.12 The extent to which results can be generalised from a sample depends on how well the sample represents the population from which it is drawn, and different types of people in different places may have been more or less likely to take part. This is known as response bias, and can be corrected through a process of statistical weighting.
- 2.13 During this process, the demographic characteristics of respondents were compared against data for the whole population (in this instance, from Oxfordshire) to identify which types of people were more or less likely to take part in the survey. Statistical weights were then calculated and applied to the data so that the survey results are broadly consistent with the overall population.
- 2.14 During the weighting process, it is important to ensure that no individual respondent has an unduly large influence on the overall survey results, so the statistical weights are ‘capped’; therefore, the survey data may not be identical to the comparative data even after it has been weighted.
- 2.15 The survey data, once weighted, is representative of the population of Oxfordshire and the survey results provide a statistically reliable estimate of the views of the county’s residents.
- 2.16 Survey results based on the weighted data are broadly representative of the entire population across Oxfordshire. After taking account of the weighting process, we can be 95% confident that the residents’ survey results will be within around $\pm 5\%$ points of the views of the population that the sample represents. Therefore, if everyone in the population had given their views, then 19-times-out-of-20 the results would be within 5% points of the survey estimate.
- 2.17 Given this context, when the report refers to results based on the weighted data the results are given as the proportion of “residents”. Any results based on unweighted data (including the results from the open questionnaire) refer specifically to the proportion of “respondents”.

Open questionnaire

- 2.18 The second form of quantitative engagement was the open questionnaire which was available for anyone to complete – either via the ‘One Oxfordshire’ website (between 19th January and 28th February 2017) or through paper versions that were widely available in libraries and at county hall (and they were also available on request by post). The questionnaire was designed to be completed on the basis of the issues presented in the discussion document - with questions about the case for and draft proposal for change.
- 2.19 Open questionnaires are important forms of engagement in being inclusive and in giving people an opportunity to express their views; but they are not random sample surveys of a given population - so they cannot normally be expected to be representative of the general balance of opinion. For example, the young are usually under-represented while the elderly are over-represented; and those who are motivated against such proposals more generally are also typically over-represented compared with others.
- 2.20 5,717 responses were received, including 5,662 from individuals and 55 on behalf of organisations.

Deliberative engagement

Deliberative workshops with members of the public

2.21 The meetings reported here used a ‘deliberative’ approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the draft proposal for reorganising local government in Oxfordshire, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing their ideas in detail. The approach taken in these sessions will be particularly important in shaping the final proposal as it was designed to ensure people developed a full understanding of the county council’s draft proposal and uncover their underlying attitudes towards it.

2.22 All the meetings lasted for around two-and-a-half hours and, in total, 88 members of the public participated.

| WORKSHOP TYPE/ LOCATION | DATE | NUMBER OF ATTENDEES |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| West Oxfordshire (Witney) | 15 th February 2017 | 18 |
| Oxford City | 16 th February 2017 | 18 |
| South Oxfordshire (Didcot) | 16 th February 2017 | 17 |
| Cherwell (Banbury) | 23 rd February 2017 | 16 |
| Vale of White Horse (Abingdon) | 23 rd February 2017 | 19 |

2.23 Local residents were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling (to landline and mobile numbers) from ORS’s Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, all participants were then written to - to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is an effective way of ensuring that the participants are independent and broadly representative of the wider community. The aim was to achieve between 15 and 20 participants for each session, which was achieved in all cases.

2.24 In line with standard industry practice, an incentive payment of £35 was offered to all participants to further encourage a representative cross-section of attendees and to minimise ‘dropouts’. This was also intended to cover any expenses incurred in attending the workshop, and as a gesture of thanks to participants for giving their time.

2.25 Overall, the public participants were a broad cross-section of residents from the local areas and, as standard good practice, were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the workshops met were readily accessible. People’s special needs were taken into account in the recruitment and at the venues. The random telephone recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example: gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI). The Cherwell meeting, held in Banbury, was the only forum in which the age profile of the 16 participants was imbalanced in favour of residents aged 45-plus, perhaps partly due to the storm (Doris) that night.

- 2.26 Although, like all other forms of qualitative engagement, deliberative workshops cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively. Because the meetings were inclusive, the outcomes are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

The Agenda

- 2.27 All forums began, for the sake of context and consistency, with a concise review of the current council set-up across Oxfordshire. Following this, the prospect of reducing the number of councils from six to one was considered in detail. Throughout, discussion was stimulated via a presentation devised by ORS to inform and encourage dialogue on the issues - and participants were encouraged to ask any questions they wished throughout the sessions.

OCC meetings

- 2.28 As part of the engagement process, OCC undertook:

42 drop-in events in Oxfordshire's libraries to raise awareness of the proposal, answer people's questions and take feedback;

Three events for parishes, one for town councils and larger parish councils and a small number of ad-hoc meetings and conversations with local councils who have requested them;

One workshop for children and young people and presentations to a number of different meetings, including: the Oxford 50+ network; the Age UK Social Care Panel; and My Life My Choice.

Written submissions

- 2.29 A number of stakeholders chose to submit detailed written responses on the draft proposal to the county council and some directly to the Secretary of State, copied to OCC. Such submissions are still forthcoming and are being fully considered by OCC alongside this engagement report.

Mailbox communications

- 2.30 OCC also received the following communications to its 'One Oxfordshire' and 'Better Oxfordshire' mailboxes.

| ONE OXFORDSHIRE MAILBOX | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | QUESTION | COMMENT |
| Parish and Town Council | 12 | 24 |
| District Council | 0 | 3 |
| Individual | 13 | 7 |
| Political Party | 0 | 2 |
| Health | 0 | 2 |
| Business | 1 | 1 |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Education | 1 | 1 |
| Voluntary and Community | 0 | 2 |
| Public Sector | 0 | 1 |
| Union | 1 | 0 |
| Staff | 1 | 2 |
| TOTAL | 29 | 45 |
| BETTER OXFORDSHIRE MAILBOX | | |
| | QUESTION | COMMENT |
| Parish and Town Council | 5 | 2 |
| Individual | 0 | 2 |
| Business | 0 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 5 | 5 |

Nature of engagement

Proportional and fair

^{2.31} OCC's engagement programme was conscientious: that is, it was open, accessible and fair to stakeholders across Oxfordshire. The process was also proportional to the importance of the issues and conforms with good practice, both in its overall scale and in the balance of elements included. The key good practice requirements for proper engagement programmes (as with formal 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 draft proposals intelligently and critically; and

Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

^{2.32} Taken together, these four elements do much to ensure the 'accountability' of public authorities.

Accountability

^{2.33} Engagement should promote accountability and assist decision-making. Public bodies should give an account of their plans or proposals and they should ensure that all responses are taken into account in order to:

Be informed of any issues, viewpoints, implications or options that might have been overlooked;

Re-evaluate matters already known; and

Review priorities and principles.

- 2.34 Nonetheless, this does not mean that engagement processes such as this are referenda. Properly understood, accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible engagement while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. 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.
- 2.35 For the public bodies considering the outcomes of engagement, the key question is not *Which proposal has most support?* but, *Are the reasons for the popularity or unpopularity of the proposals cogent?* In this context, OCC and ORS were clear that this important engagement programme should include both 'open' and deliberative elements in order to allow many people to take part via the open questionnaire while promoting informed engagement via the deliberative workshops.
- 2.36 Engagement with informed audiences, who have the opportunity to question and test the evidence for particular proposals, is especially valuable. All engagement elements are important and none should be disregarded, but the deliberative workshops and other meetings are particularly worthy of consideration because they explore the arguments and the reasons for people's opinions.

Interpreting the outcomes

- 2.37 Importantly, the different engagement methods cannot just be combined to yield a single point of view on the future of Oxfordshire's councils that reconciles everyone's differences and is acceptable to all stakeholders involved. There are two main reasons why this is not possible. First, the engagement methods differ in type: they are qualitatively different and their outcomes cannot be just aggregated into a single result. Second, the different areas and sub-groups will inevitably have different perspectives on the draft reconfiguration proposals and there is no formula in the engagement process that can reconcile everyone's differences in a single way forward.
- 2.38 It is also important to recognise that the outcomes of the engagement process will need to be considered alongside other information available about the likely impact of the 'One Oxfordshire' draft proposal. Whilst the process highlights aspects of this information that stakeholders consider to be important, appropriate emphasis should be placed on each element. In this sense there can be no single 'right' interpretation of all the engagement elements and other information in the decision-making process.

The report

- 2.39 This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of respondents and participants on OCC's draft proposal for reorganising local government in Oxfordshire. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them - but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse any opinions, but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants.
- 2.40 ORS is clear that its role is to analyse and explain the opinions and arguments of the many different interests participating in the engagement, but not to 'make a case' for any draft proposal. In this report, we seek to profile the opinions and arguments of those who have responded to the engagement, but

not to make any recommendations as to how the reported results should be used. Whilst this report brings together a wide range of evidence for the councils to consider, decisions must be taken based on all the evidence available.

3. Residents' Survey

The Survey

- 3.1 Where a population is large, as in the case of Oxfordshire, it is impractical to obtain the views of all residents. In these circumstances it is normal to carry out a survey to estimate what the result would be if the views of the entire population had been asked.
- 3.2 As such, a face-to-face residents' survey was undertaken with residents aged 16 and over to ensure that a broadly representative profile of opinions across Oxfordshire was achieved using the same core questions as in the open questionnaire.
- 3.3 ORS staff conducted 502 structured face-to-face interviews between 5th and 19th February 2017 using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing ('CAPI') technology, with interviews conducted 'on the doorstep' or in respondents' homes. The survey was conducted using a quota controlled sampling approach, to ensure a broadly representative sample across Oxfordshire.

Weighting the Data

- 3.4 The extent to which results can be generalised from a sample depends on how well the sample represents the population from which it is drawn, and different types of people in different places may have been more or less likely to take part. This is known as response bias, and can be corrected through a process of statistical weighting.
- 3.5 During this process, the demographic characteristics of respondents were compared against data for the whole population (in this instance, from the city and four districts in Oxfordshire) to identify which types of people were more or less likely to take part in the survey. Statistical weights were then calculated and applied to the data so that the survey results are broadly consistent with the overall population.
- 3.6 The returned sample was checked against comparative data for Oxfordshire (from 2015 Mid-Year Population Estimates, Census 2011, and Annual Population Survey data for the year ending September 2016), for age interlocked with student status for 16-24s, gender interlocked with age, tenure ethnic group and working status, then subsequently weighted by tenure, working status, ethnic group, age interlocked with student status for 16-24s and gender interlaced with age all interlaced with district. To ensure that no individual respondent had an unduly large influence on the overall survey results, a cap of 5 was then applied and then a final weight for district.
- 3.7 Survey results based on the weighted data are representative of the entire population across Oxfordshire, and broadly representative of the population within each district. After taking account of the weighting process, we can be 95% confident that the survey results will be within around $\pm 5\%$ points of the views of the population that the sample represents. Therefore, if everyone in the county's population had given their views, then 19-times-out-of-20 the results would be within around 5% points of the survey estimate (NB confidence intervals for results in each individual district will be somewhat larger i.e. around $\pm 10\%$ or more).

- 3.8 Given this context, when the report refers to results based on the weighted data the results are given as the proportion of “residents”. Any results based on unweighted data (including the results from the open questionnaire) refer specifically to the proportion of “respondents”.

Respondent Profile

- 3.9 The tables on the following pages show the profile characteristics of respondents to the survey. Please note that the figures may not always sum to 100% due to rounding.
- 3.10 During the weighting process, it is important to ensure that no individual respondent has an unduly large influence on the overall survey results, so the statistical weights are ‘capped’; therefore, the survey data may not be identical to the comparative data even after it has been weighted.

Figure 1: Residents’ survey responses (unweighted and weighted) and resident population by district, age, gender, working status, ethnic group, and tenure (Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding)

| Characteristic | Unweighted Count | Unweighted Valid % | Weighted Valid % | Resident Population % |
|------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| BY DISTRICT | | | | |
| Cherwell | 100 | 20 | 21 | 21 |
| Oxford | 120 | 24 | 24 | 24 |
| South Oxfordshire | 100 | 20 | 20 | 20 |
| Vale of White Horse | 103 | 21 | 19 | 19 |
| West Oxfordshire | 79 | 16 | 16 | 16 |
| Total valid responses | 502 | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| BY AGE | | | | |
| 16-24 | 58 | 12 | 15 | 15 |
| 25-34 | 100 | 20 | 17 | 17 |
| 35-44 | 83 | 17 | 16 | 16 |
| 45-54 | 80 | 16 | 17 | 17 |
| 55-64 | 71 | 14 | 13 | 13 |
| 65+ | 110 | 22 | 22 | 21 |
| Total valid responses | 502 | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| BY GENDER | | | | |
| Male | 244 | 49 | 49 | 49 |
| Female | 258 | 51 | 51 | 51 |
| Total valid responses | 502 | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| BY WORKING STATUS | | | | |
| Working | 318 | 63 | 60 | 63 |
| Retired | 124 | 25 | 23 | 19 |
| Other | 60 | 12 | 17 | 17 |
| Total valid responses | 502 | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| BY TENURE | | | | |
| Own | 359 | 72 | 67 | 68 |
| Rent from a social landlord | 53 | 11 | 13 | 13 |
| Rent from a private landlord | 90 | 18 | 20 | 19 |
| Total valid responses | 502 | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| BY ETHNIC GROUP | | | | |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| White | 463 | 92 | 91 | 92 |
| Non-white | 39 | 8 | 9 | 8 |
| Total valid responses | 502 | 100% | 100% | 100% |

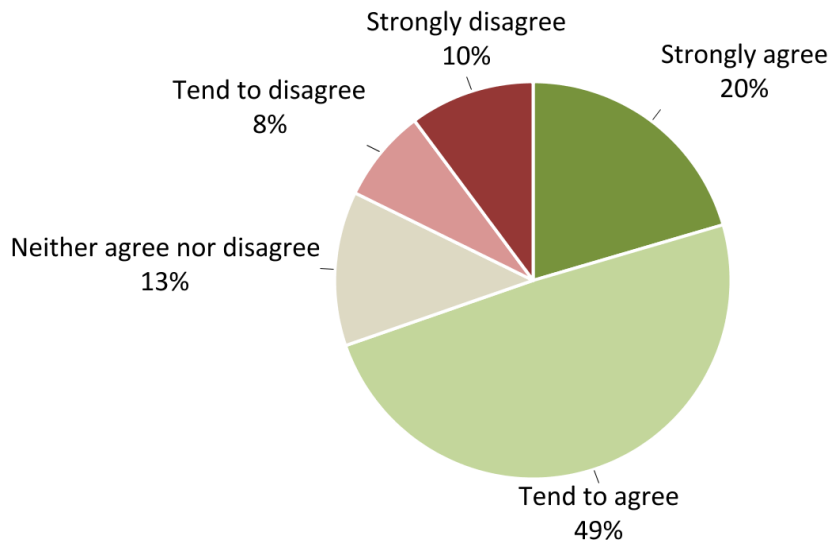
Interpretation of the Data

- 3.11 Graphics are used extensively in this report to make it as user friendly as possible. The pie charts and other graphics show the proportions (percentages) of respondents making relevant responses. Where possible, the colours of the charts have been standardised with a ‘traffic light’ system in which:
- Green shades represent positive responses
 - Beige and purple/blue shades represent neither positive nor negative responses
 - Red shades represent negative responses
 - The bolder shades are used to highlight responses at the ‘extremes’, for example, very satisfied or very dissatisfied
- 3.12 Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of “don’t know” categories, or multiple answers. Throughout the volume an asterisk (*) denotes any value less than half a per cent.
- 3.13 In some cases figures of 2% or below have been excluded from graphs.
- 3.14 The base numbers provided alongside each chart show the unweighted number of responses on which results are based (‘don’t know’ and ‘missing’ responses are treated as invalid and excluded from charts; this also accounts for the variation in base sizes across the different charts).
- 3.15 It should be remembered that a sample, and not the entire population of Oxfordshire, has been interviewed. In consequence, all results are subject to sampling tolerances, which means that not all differences are statistically significant. When considering changes in responses between different groups within the population, differences have been analysed using appropriate statistical means to check for statistical significance (i.e. not happened ‘by chance’). Statistical significance is at a 95% level of confidence.
- 3.16 Differences that are not said to be ‘significant’ or ‘statistically significant’ are indicative only.

Main findings

To what extent do you agree or disagree that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire?

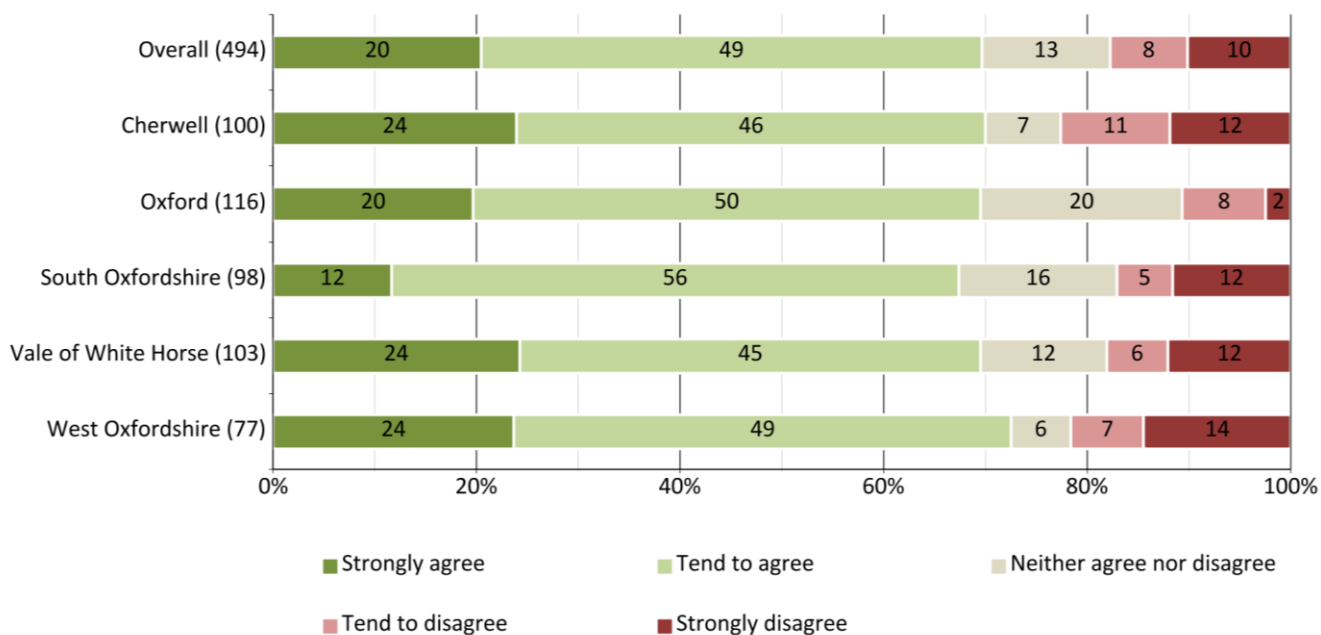
Figure 2: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire.



Base: All Residents (494)

- 3.17 Residents were given a short introduction explaining the changes to government funding and the need for the councils to make savings, as well as explaining the increased demand for social care and its associated pressures. Residents were then asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire.
- 3.18 Overall, seven out of ten residents (70%) agreed that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire, whereas nearly a fifth (18%) of residents disagreed (Figure 2).

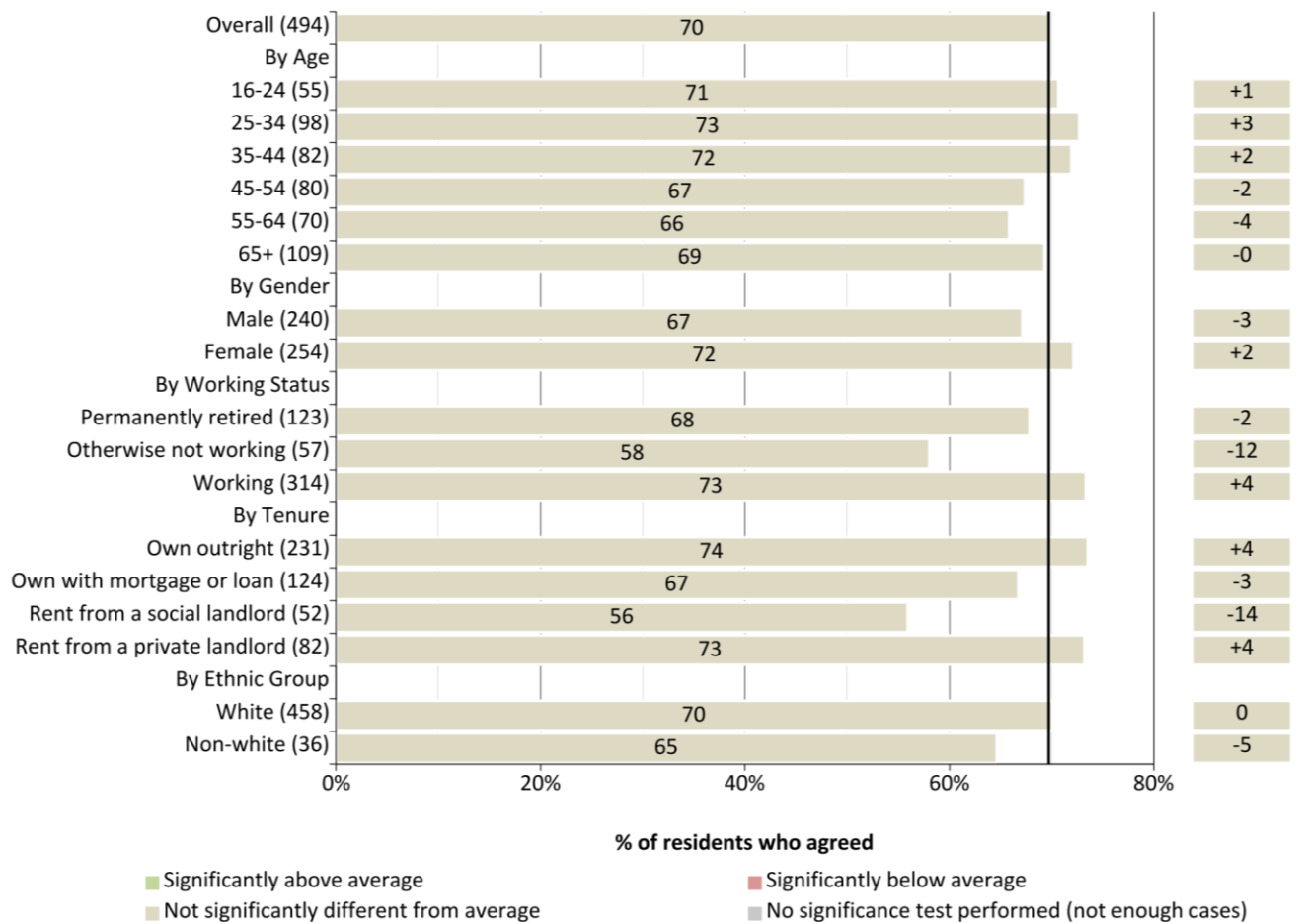
Figure 3: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire by district/city council area.



Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

- 3.19 As Figure 3 shows, at least two thirds of residents in each district/city council area agreed with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire.
- 3.20 Levels of agreement ranged from 67% in South Oxfordshire, to 73% in West Oxfordshire. In the three remaining areas (i.e. Cherwell, Oxford and Vale of White Horse), 70% of residents agreed.
- 3.21 It is worth noting that more than a fifth of residents in Cherwell (23%) and West Oxfordshire (22%) disagreed with the draft proposal, whilst a fifth (20%) of residents in Oxford neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 4: Demographic differences in agreement with the need to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire.



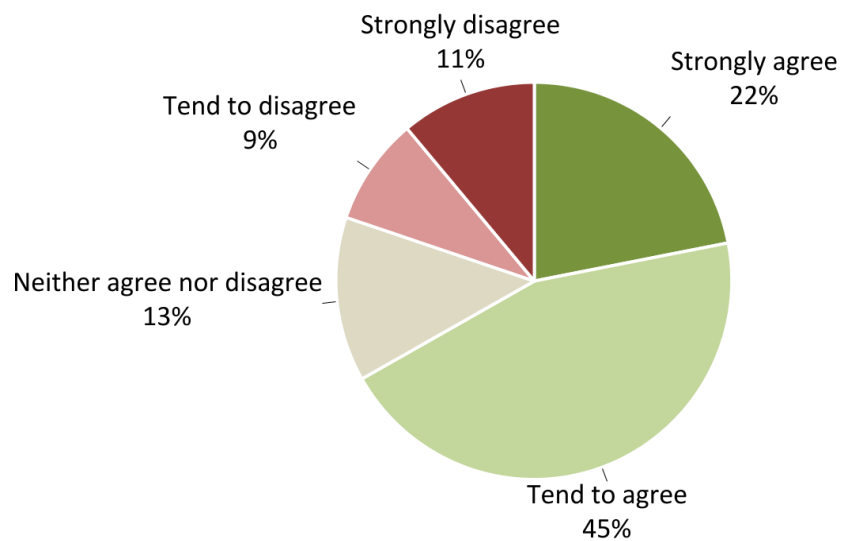
Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

3.22 The chart above (Figure 4) shows how levels of agreement varied across different demographic subgroups of residents, with the column on the right showing the differences between each subgroup and the overall result. It can be seen that there are no statistically significant differences from the overall result.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in your particular area?

3.23 The questionnaire was designed to help inform the decision-making process; so after seeking people's views on the need (or otherwise) to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire, it then sought to establish the extent of agreement or disagreement with the principle of a unitary council providing all council services across Oxfordshire in order to further establish the overall support for or opposition to change.

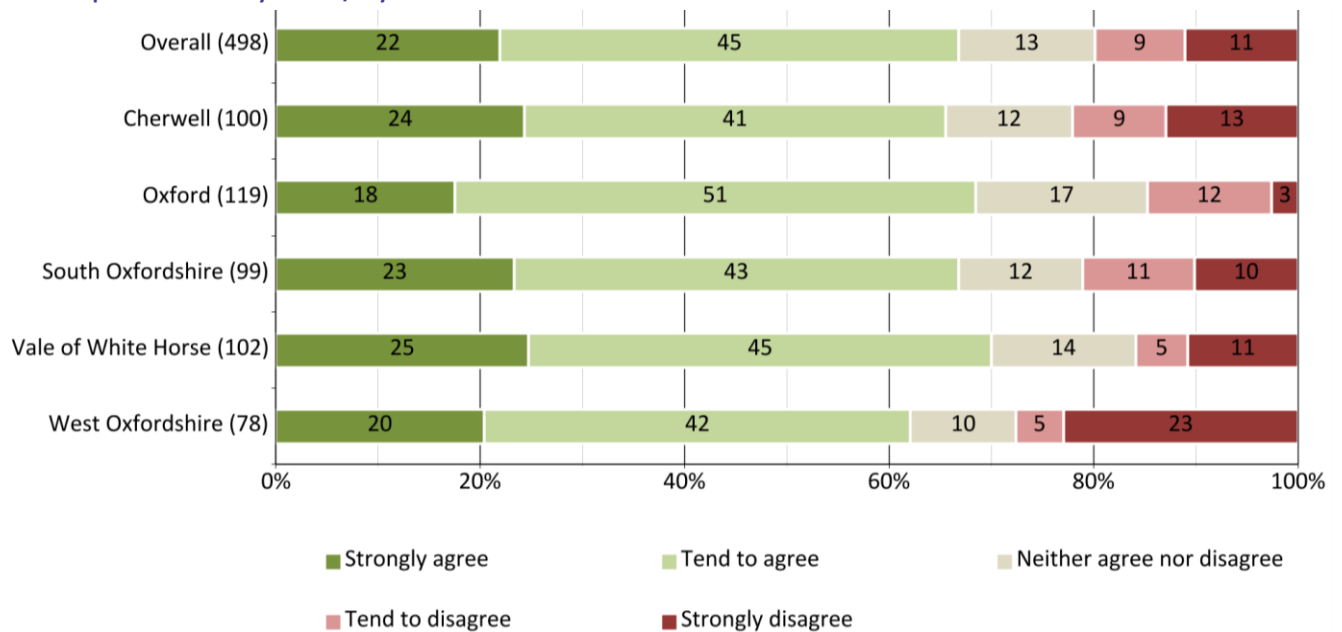
Figure 5: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in residents' particular area.



Base: All Residents (498)

3.24 Around two thirds of residents (67%) agreed with principle that a unitary council should provide all council services in their area; a fifth (20%) disagreed (Figure 5).

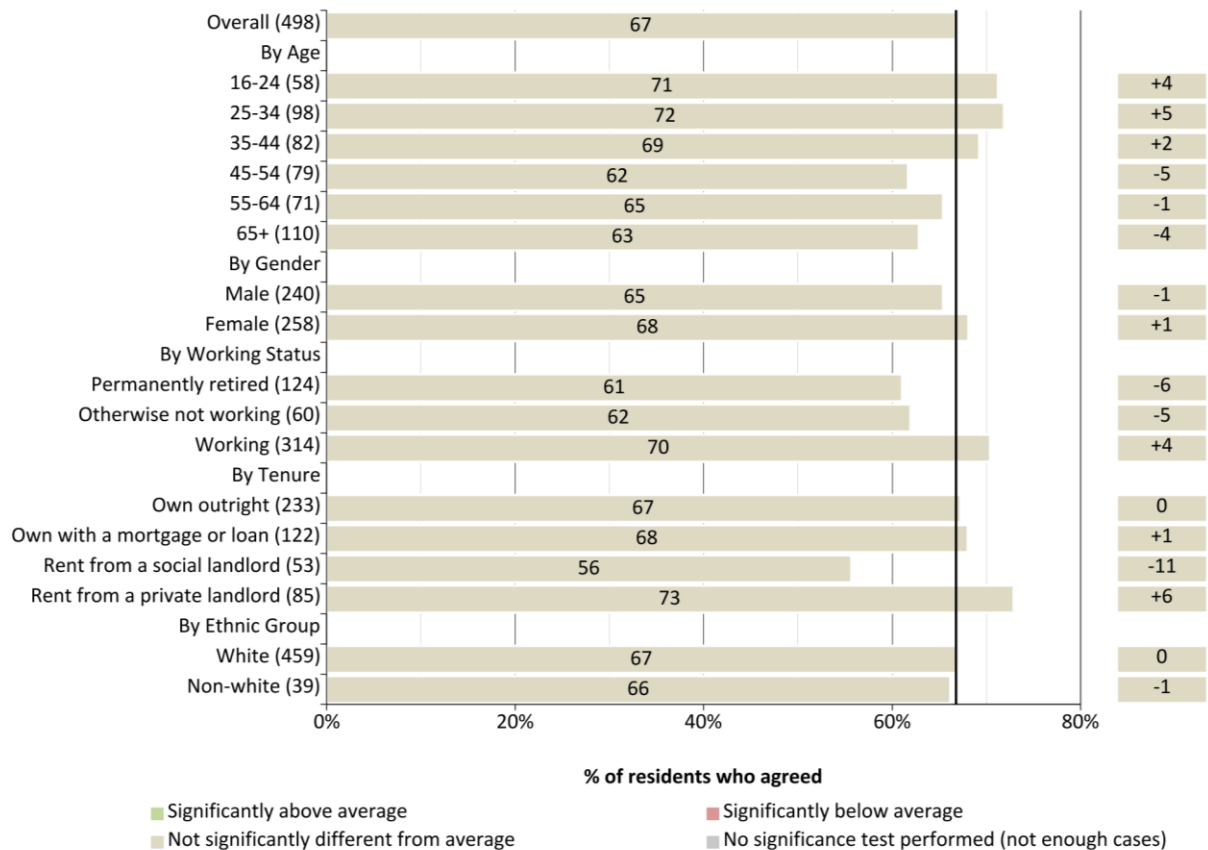
Figure 6: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in residents' particular area by district/city council area.



Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

- 3.25 Figure 6 shows the breakdown of views by district/city council area. The level of agreement varied from 62% in West Oxfordshire, to 70% in Vale of White Horse; therefore an absolute majority of residents agreed in each of the five areas.
- 3.26 Around two thirds of residents in Oxford (68%), South Oxfordshire (67%) and Cherwell (66%) agreed with the principle that a unitary council should provide all council services.

Figure 7: Demographic differences in agreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in residents’ particular areas.



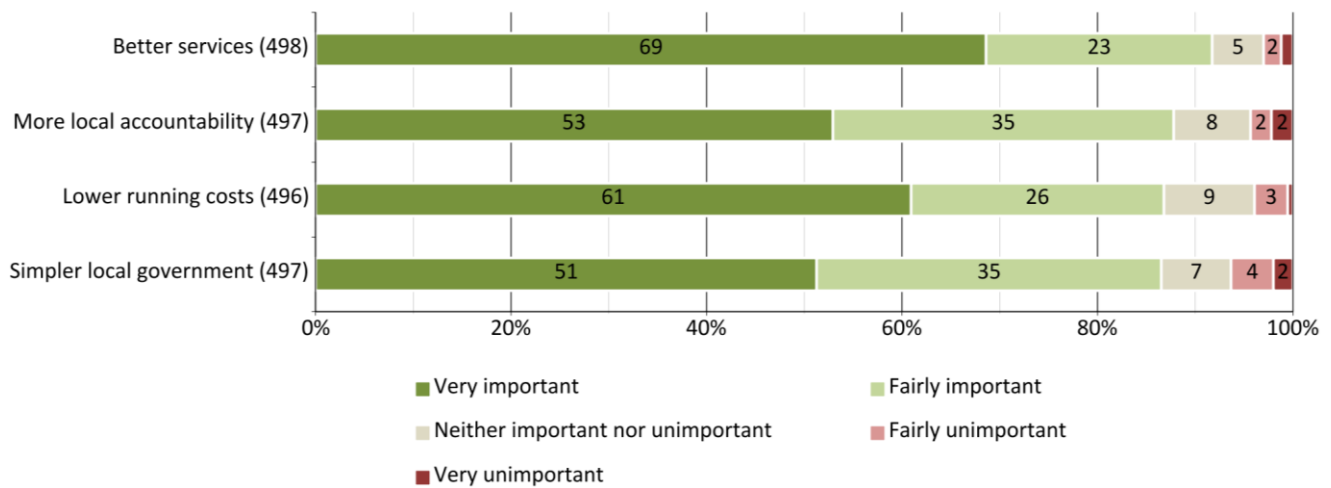
Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

3.27 Figure 7 above shows how the responses varied across different demographic subgroups of residents, with the column on the right showing the differences between each subgroup and the overall result. It can be seen that there are no statistically significant differences from the overall result.

If local government was changed in Oxfordshire, how important or unimportant would the following be to you: simpler local government; better services; more local accountability; and lower running costs?

- 3.28 The questionnaire explained OCC’s view that the best way forward is to abolish the current six councils and create one new ‘unitary council’ for the whole of Oxfordshire, on the grounds that the council believes this would be simpler, better for services, more local and cost less to run.
- 3.29 Residents were then asked how important ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’ would be to them, if local government was changed in Oxfordshire.”

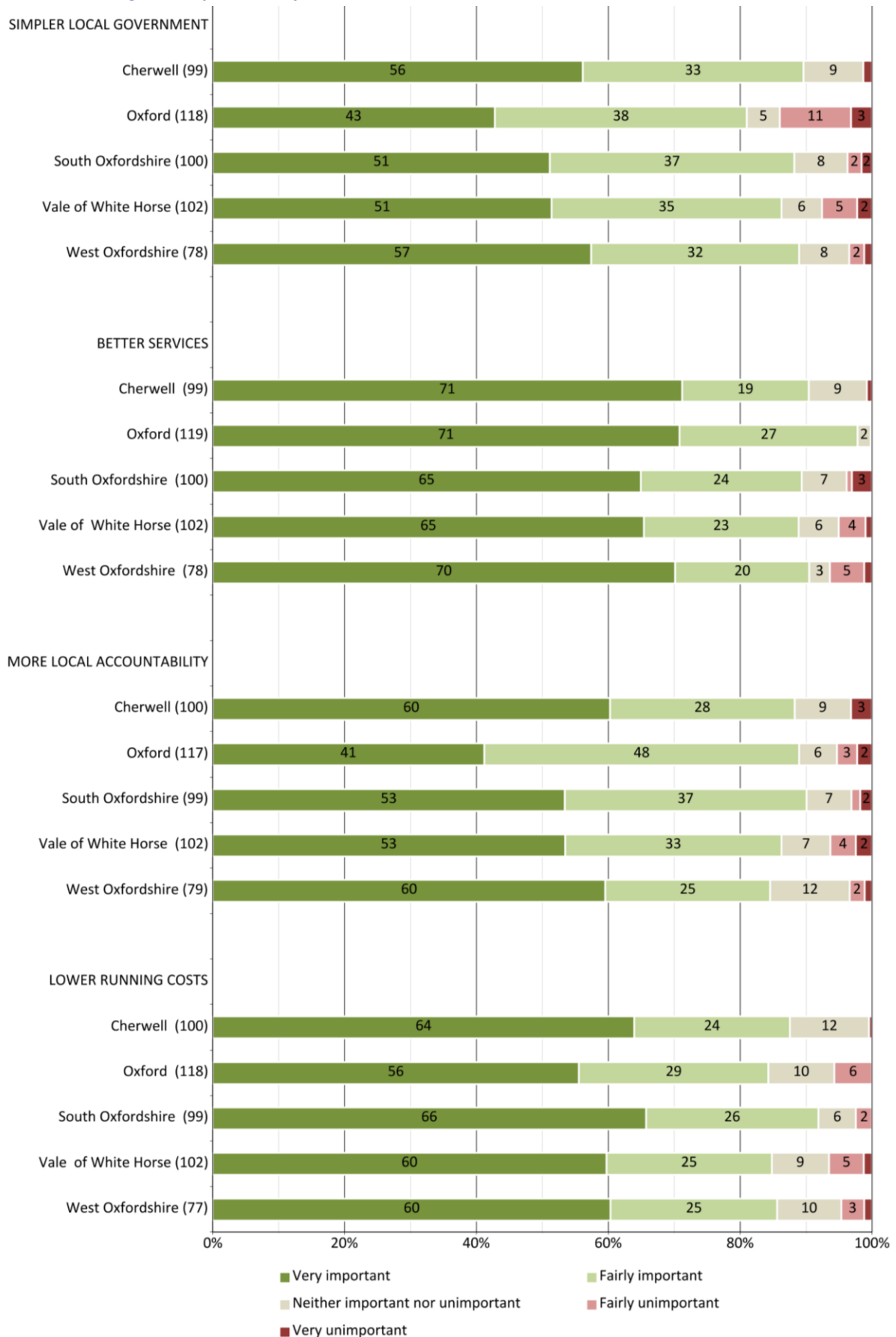
Figure 8: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’



Base: All residents (number shown in brackets)

- 3.30 As Figure 8 shows, all four of the aspects were felt to be important (either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’) by more than four fifths of residents, and an absolute majority felt each would be ‘very important’ (Figure 8).
- 3.31 Overall, most importance was attached to ‘better services’ (92%).
- 3.32 This was followed by ‘more local accountability’ (88%), ‘lower running costs’ (87%), and ‘simpler local government’ (87%).

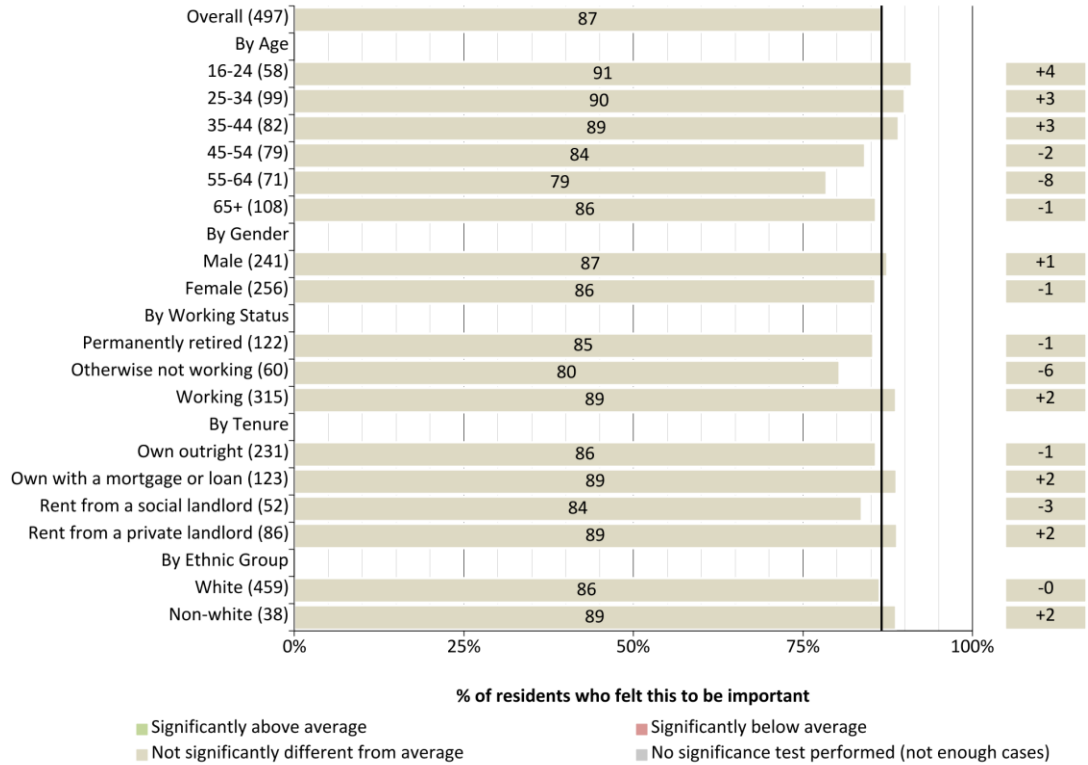
Figure 9: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’, by district/city area



Base: All residents (number shown in brackets)

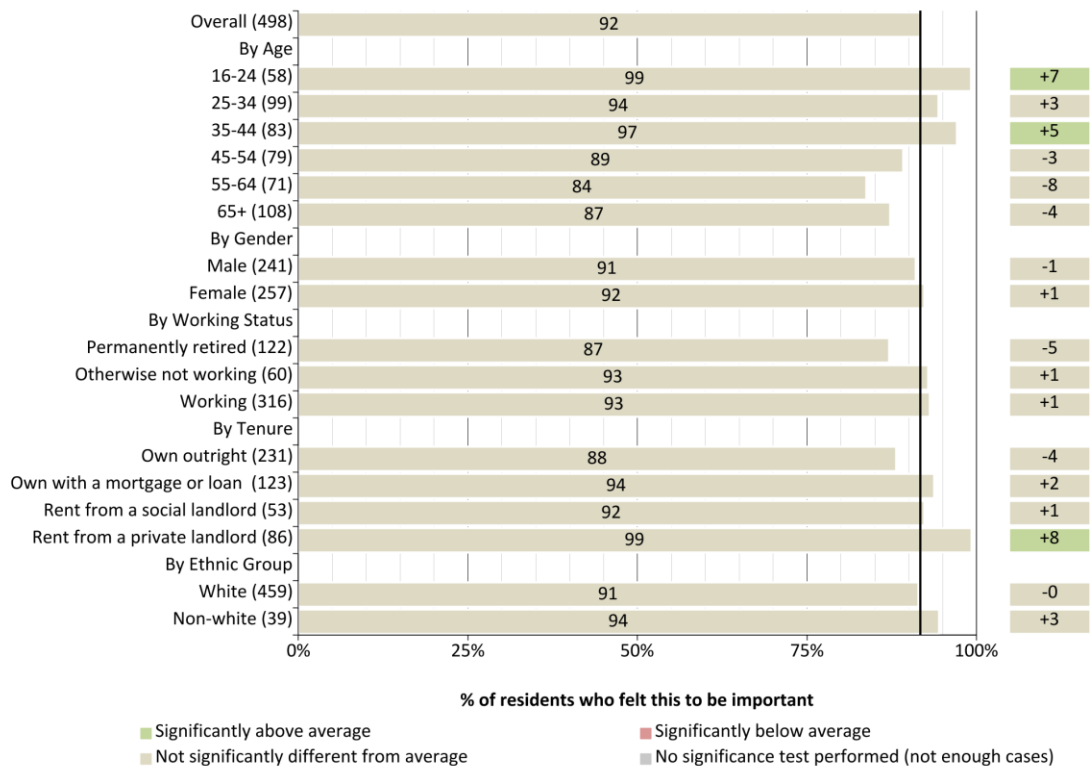
3.33 Figure 9 above shows the breakdown of views by each district/city council area. It can be seen that in all areas, significant majorities of residents felt each factor would be important. The single highest result was seen in Oxford, where 98% of residents felt ‘better services’ would be important.

Figure 10: Demographic differences in levels of importance attached to ‘simpler local government’.



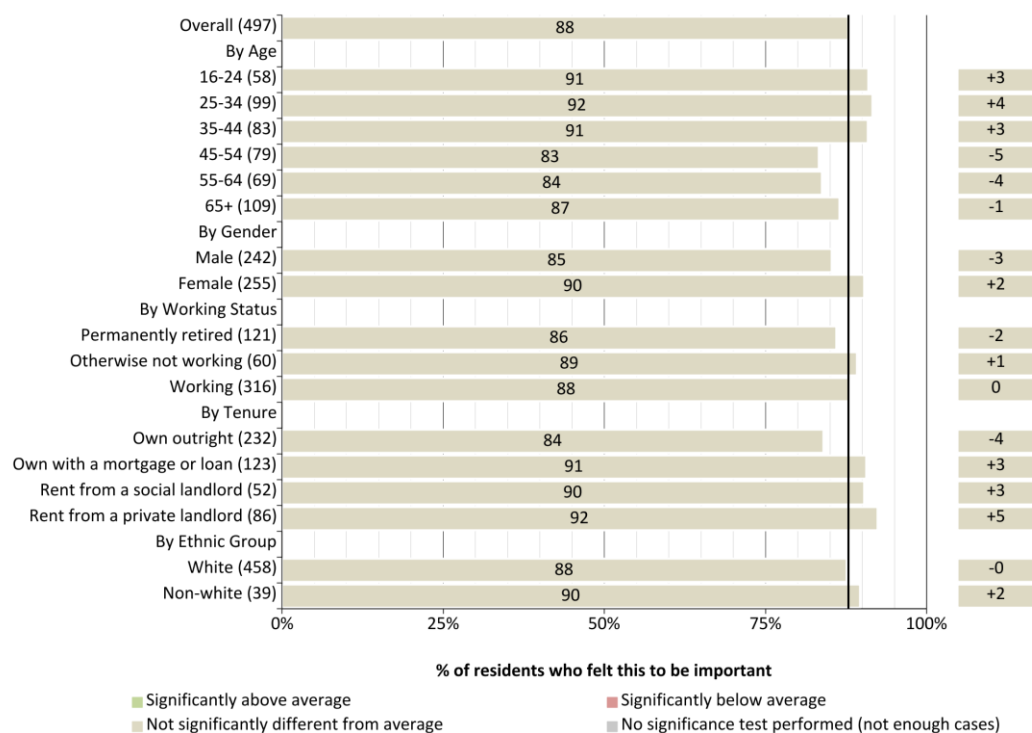
Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

Figure 11: Demographic differences in levels of importance attached to ‘better services’.



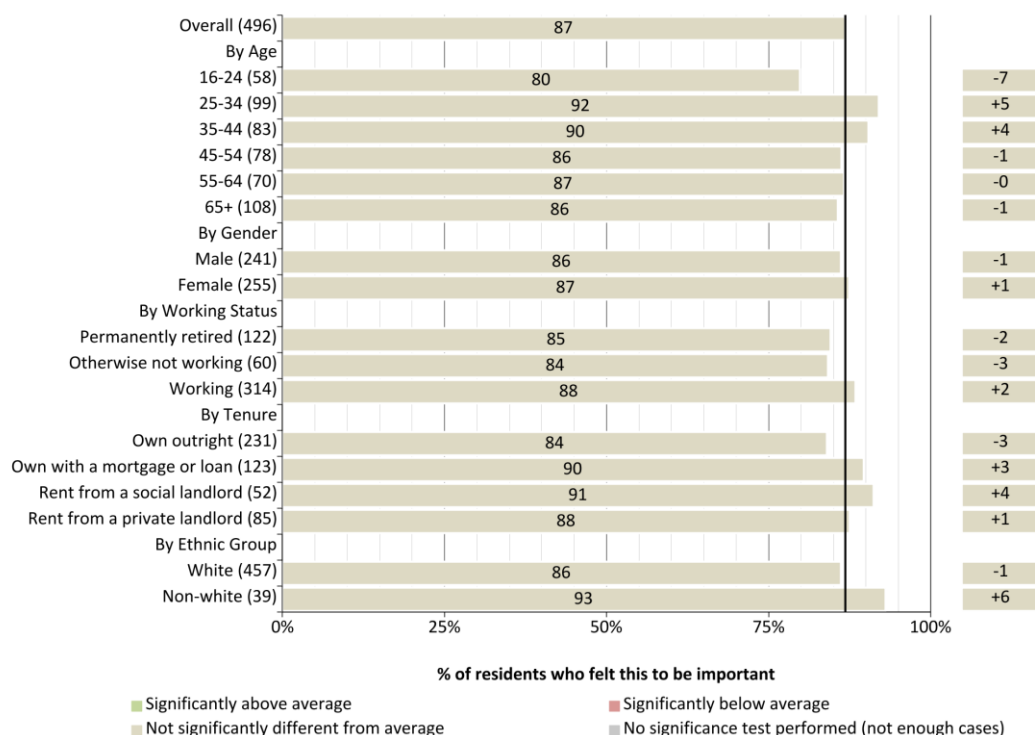
Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

Figure 12: Demographic differences in levels of importance attached to ‘more local accountability’.



Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

Figure 13: Demographic differences in levels of importance attached to ‘lower running costs’.

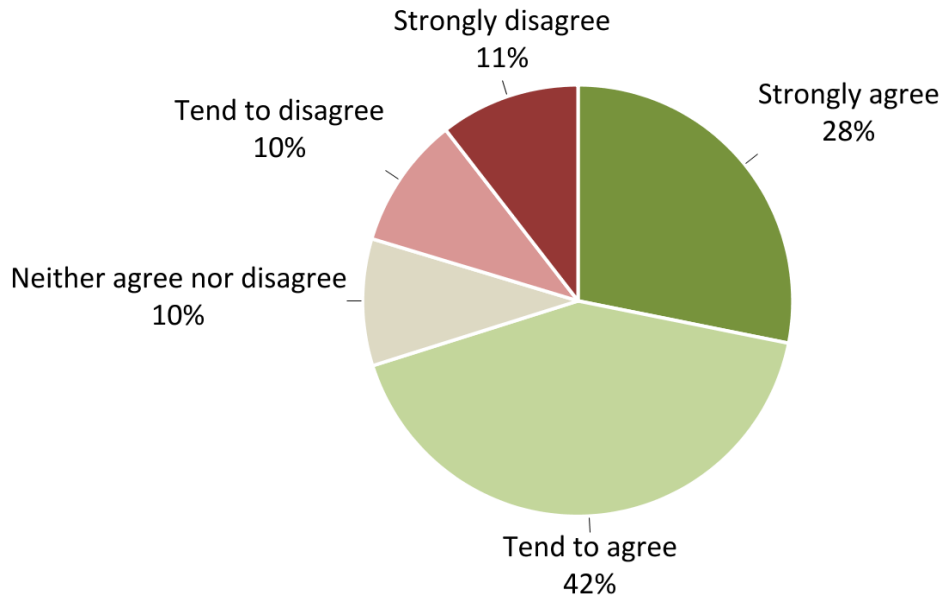


Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

3.34 Figures 10 to 13 show how perceptions of importance varied between different demographic subgroups of residents, with the columns on the right showing the differences between each subgroup and the overall result. In general most sub-group results are similar to the overall results; however, it is worth noting that residents in certain age groups (aged 16 to 24 or 35 to 44) and residents who rent privately are all significantly more likely to view ‘better services’ as being important compared with the overall result (see Figure 11).

To what extent do you agree or disagree with Oxfordshire County Council's draft proposals to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new 'unitary council' for the whole of Oxfordshire?

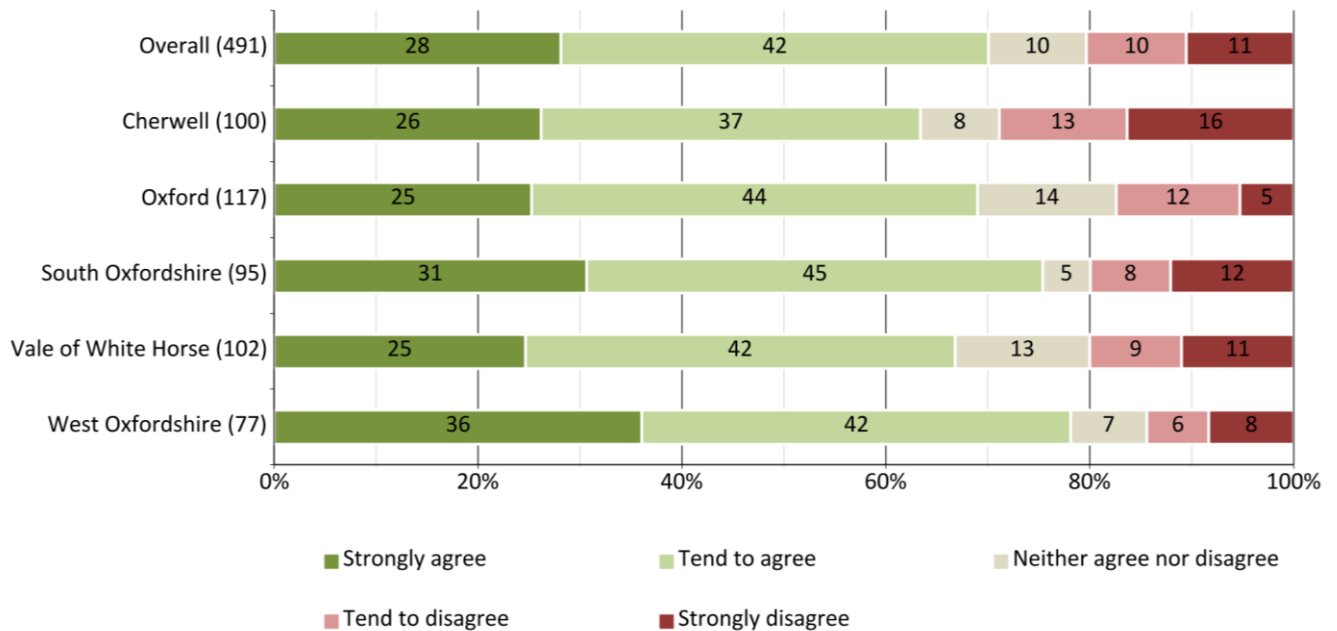
Figure 14: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposal to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire



Base: All Residents (491)

- ^{3.35} Seven out of ten residents (70%) agreed with the draft proposal to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire.
- ^{3.36} A fifth of residents (20%) disagreed with the draft proposal (see Figure 14).

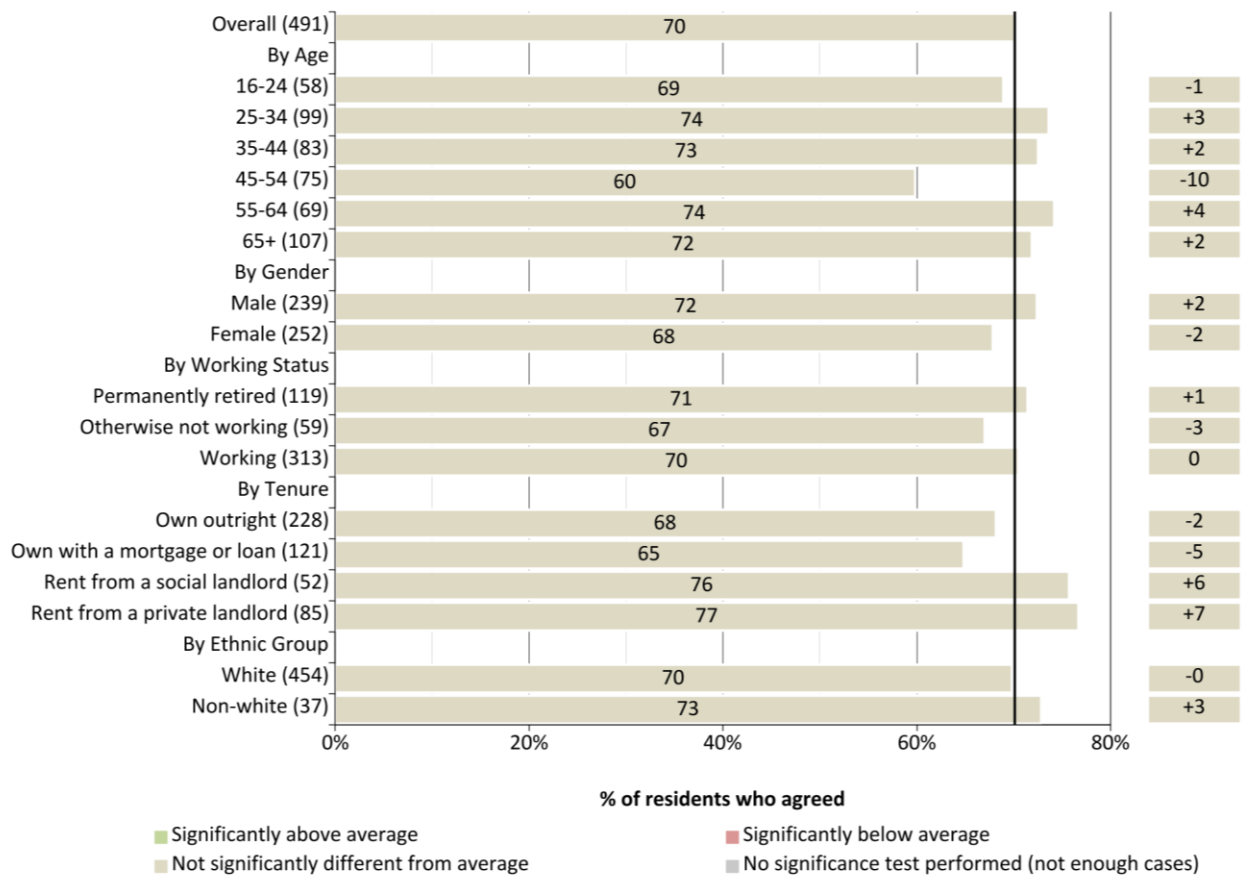
Figure 15: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposal to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire, by district/city council area.



Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

- 3.37 Figure 15 shows levels of agreement and disagreement with the draft proposal by district/city area.
- 3.38 The highest levels of agreement were seen in West Oxfordshire (78%) and South Oxfordshire (75%), while around two thirds or more agreed in Oxford (69%) and Vale of White Horse (67%).
- 3.39 The lowest level of agreement was seen in Cherwell (63%) and it is worth noting that around three out of ten residents in this district (29%) disagreed with the draft proposal (as did a fifth – 20% – of residents in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse).
- 3.40 Nonetheless, it can be seen that an absolute majority of residents in each area agreed with the draft proposal on the basis of the information provided.

Figure 16: Demographic differences in support for abolishing the six current councils and replacing them with one ‘unitary council’ for the whole of Oxfordshire.



Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

3.41 Figure 16 above shows how levels of agreement to the question about the main draft proposal varied across different demographic subgroups of residents, with the column on the right showing the differences between each subgroup and the overall result. It can be seen that there are no statistically significant differences from the overall result.

If you do not agree with the county council's proposals for ONE 'unitary council' for the WHOLE of Oxfordshire, please say what you think the best option would be.

- 3.42 Residents who did not agree with the proposals were asked what they instead thought the best option would be.
- 3.43 127 individual respondents provided further comments.
- 3.44 Of these, 44 respondents called for maintaining the status quo, 16 respondents said they did not think the proposals would work or improve services, and 10 generally expressed disagreement. Other specific concerns were raised by smaller numbers of respondents e.g. around costs, job losses, and a lack of local accountability.
- 3.45 Small numbers proposed other alternatives or configurations, such as making savings elsewhere, having two or three councils, and ensuring that the City Council remains a separate entity.

Do you have any suggestions for how the county council's proposals for ONE 'unitary council' for the WHOLE of Oxfordshire could be improved?

- 3.46 Finally, all residents were given an opportunity to suggest ways in which the proposals could be improved.
- 3.47 Similar themes were raised: in particular, 26 respondents disagreed with the proposal generally, while 20 generally agreed, and a further 24 made general comments about council services which currently need improving in their area.
- 3.48 A wide variety of much more specific points were raised by smaller numbers of individuals.

4. Open questionnaire and individual responses

Introduction

- 4.1 An engagement document outlining the issues under consideration was produced by Oxfordshire County Council - and with that foundation, ORS (in conjunction with OCC) designed a corresponding engagement questionnaire which included questions intended to examine the case for change and perceptions of the draft One Oxfordshire proposals. Additional sections allowed respondents to make any further comments on or make alternative suggestions to the proposals, and captured information about the type of response being submitted and respondent demographics.
- 4.2 The questionnaire included information from the engagement document, as a basis from which to consider how to answer the questions.
- 4.3 The discussion document and open questionnaire were available via the dedicated 'One Oxfordshire' website between 19th January and 28th February 2017 (the duration of the engagement period). Paper versions were also made available in libraries and other venues across Oxfordshire for those who were unable to fill in the questionnaire online - and were available on request from council offices or by post.
- 4.4 The open questionnaire could be completed by individuals or on behalf of organisations. In total, 5,717 responses were received, including 5,662 from individuals and 55 on behalf of organisations.

Individual respondent profile

- 4.5 Figure 17 overleaf provides a breakdown of the respondent profile of the 5,662 individuals who responded either online or by post to the open questionnaire.

Figure 17: Socio-demographic characteristics for the open questionnaire (Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding)

| Characteristic | All responses from individuals | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| | Number of Responses | % of Valid Responses | |
| BY AGE | Under 25 | 161 | 3.3% |
| | 25-34 | 614 | 12.5% |
| | 35-44 | 897 | 18.2% |
| | 45-54 | 1,043 | 21.2% |
| | 55-64 | 1,020 | 20.7% |
| | 65+ | 1,183 | 24.1% |
| | Total valid responses | 4,918 | 100.0% |
| <i>Not known</i> | 744 | - | |
| BY GENDER | Male | 2,536 | 52.9% |
| | Female | 2,255 | 47.1% |
| | Total valid responses | 4,791 | 100.0% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | 871 | - |
| BY ETHNIC GROUP | White | 4,239 | 94.0% |
| | Non white | 269 | 6.0% |
| | Total valid responses | 4,508 | 100.0% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | 1,154 | - |
| BY DISABILITY | With disability | 321 | 6.9% |
| | No disability | 4,353 | 93.1% |
| | Total valid responses | 4,674 | 100.0% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | 988 | - |
| BY COUNCIL EMPLOYEE | Council employee | 583 | 12.8% |
| | Not council employee | 3,957 | 87.2% |
| | Total valid responses | 4,540 | 100.0% |
| | <i>Not known</i> | 1,122 | - |

Geographical spread of respondents

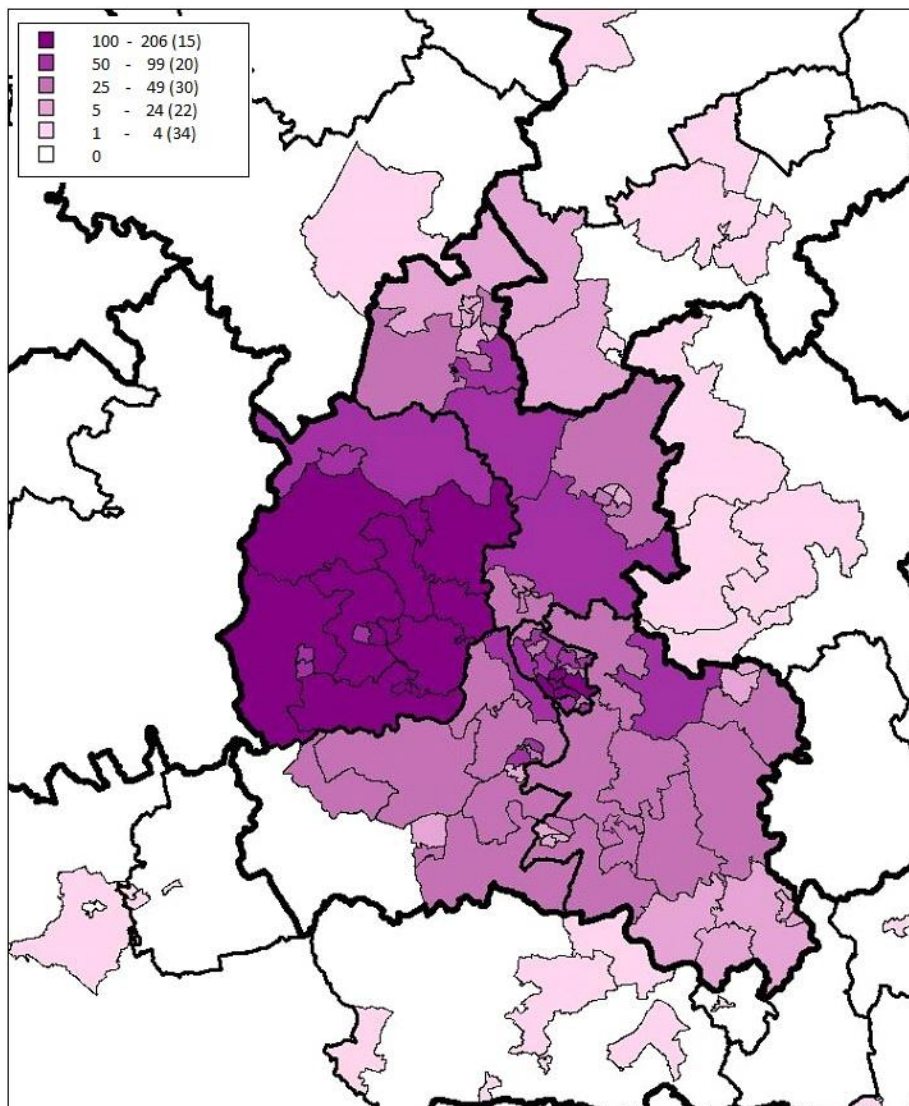
- 4.6 Figure 18 overleaf provides a breakdown of responses to the questionnaire by area (for respondents who provided their postcode, excluding responses from organisations), while figures for Oxfordshire's population are also outlined for comparison. Figures for Oxfordshire's population are based on 2015 ONS Mid-year Population Estimates (16+).
- 4.7 It can be seen that respondents from West Oxfordshire and Oxford are somewhat overrepresented in the questionnaire response, relative to their incidence in the wider Oxfordshire population (whereas the remaining three areas are somewhat underrepresented). This is likely to reflect the particular strength of feeling from respondents in these areas, and may also be related to the various campaigning and communications activities known to have been undertaken by West Oxfordshire and Oxford City district councils (e.g. mailouts to all households).

Figure 18: Breakdown of individual responses to the open questionnaire by area and comparison to Oxfordshire’s population (Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding)

| Characteristic | | All Responses | | Oxfordshire population 16+ | |
|----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| | | Number of Responses | % of Valid Responses | Number of residents | % of population |
| BY AREA | Cherwell | 616 | 13.1% | 116,830 | 21.2% |
| | Oxford | 1,378 | 29.3% | 132,498 | 24.0% |
| | South Oxfordshire | 489 | 10.4% | 111,209 | 20.2% |
| | Vale of White Horse | 568 | 12.1% | 102,554 | 18.6% |
| | West Oxfordshire | 1,657 | 35.2% | 88,451 | 16.0% |
| | Total within Oxfordshire | 4,708 | 100% | 551,542 | 100% |
| | <i>Outside Oxfordshire</i> | 54 | - | - | - |
| | <i>Unknown</i> | 900 | - | - | - |

4.8 Figure 19 shows the number of responses that were received for the open questionnaire (based on respondents who provided their postcode), within each Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA). The darker the shading in each MSOA, the higher the number of completed questionnaires. The map further illustrates the particularly high levels of response in many parts of West Oxfordshire and Oxford City.

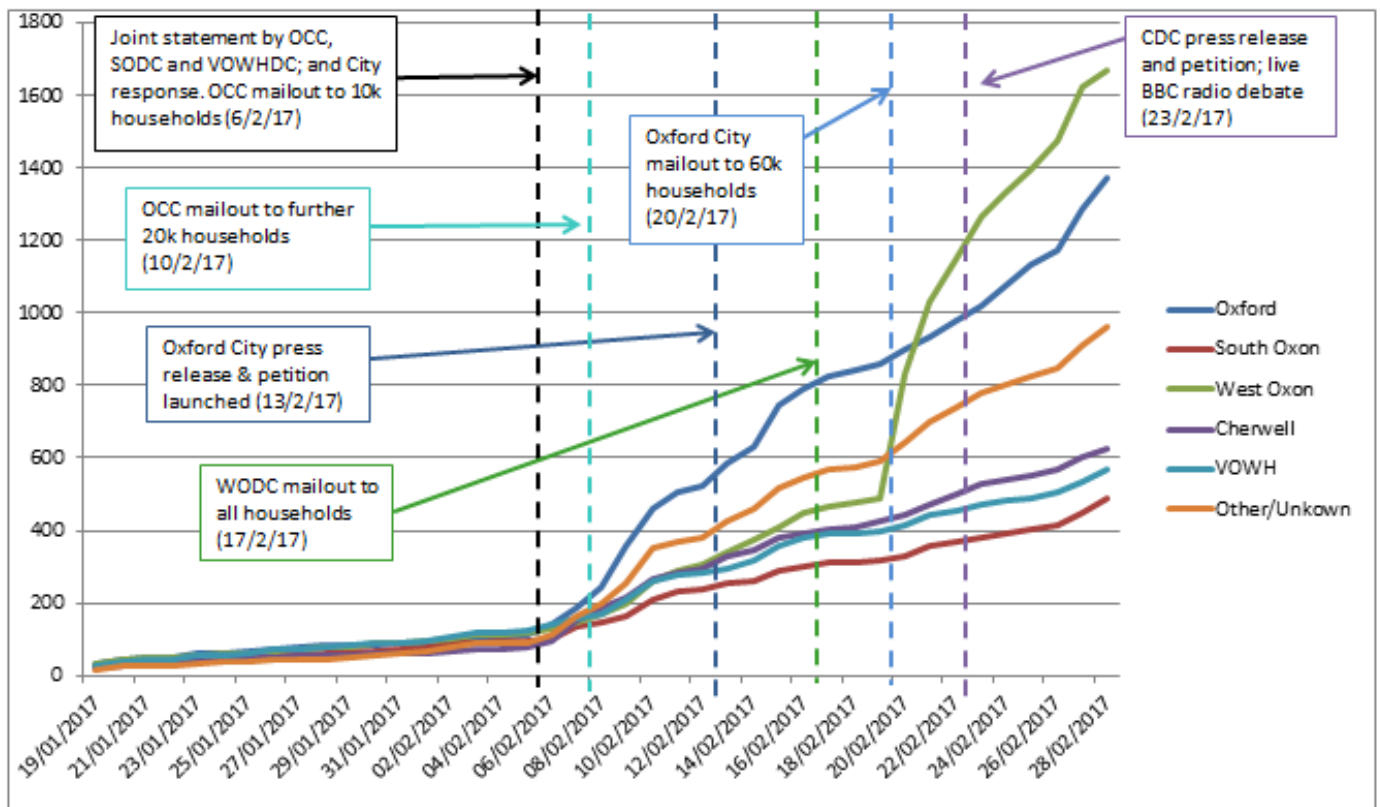
Figure 19: Number of responses to the engagement questionnaire by MSOA (Oxfordshire and areas on periphery only)



Change in response over time, by district

4.9 The chart below shows changes in the cumulative response from each district, over the duration of the engagement period. A selection of some of the major activities taken to publicise the engagement have been indicated on the chart, to suggest the possible extent of any influence on the response rate.

Figure 20: Cumulative response to the engagement questionnaire, by district



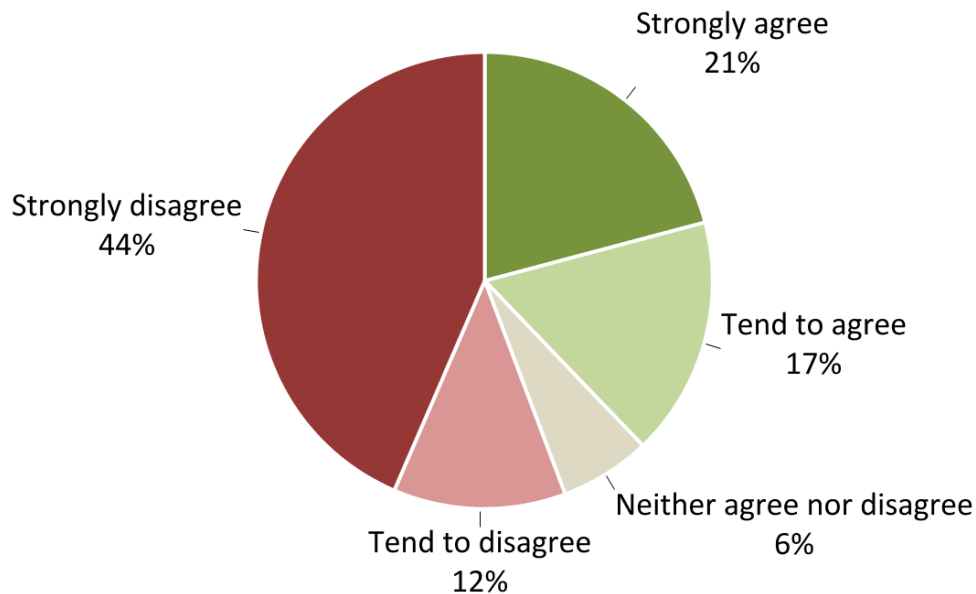
Interpretation of the data

- 4.10 The results from the open questionnaire are presented in a largely graphical format. The pie charts and other graphics show the proportions (percentages) of respondents making responses.
- 4.11 Where possible, the colours of the charts have been standardised with a ‘traffic light’ system in which green shades represent positive responses, red shades represent negative responses, and beige and purple shades represent neither positive nor negative responses.
- 4.12 The bolder shades are used to highlight responses at the ‘extremes’, for example, strongly agree or strongly disagree.
- 4.13 Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of “don’t know” categories, or multiple answers. Throughout the volume an asterisk (*) denotes any value less than half of one per cent. In some cases figures of 2% or below have been excluded from graphs to avoid potential identification of individual responses.

Findings from the engagement questionnaire (individual responses)

To what extent do you agree or disagree that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire?

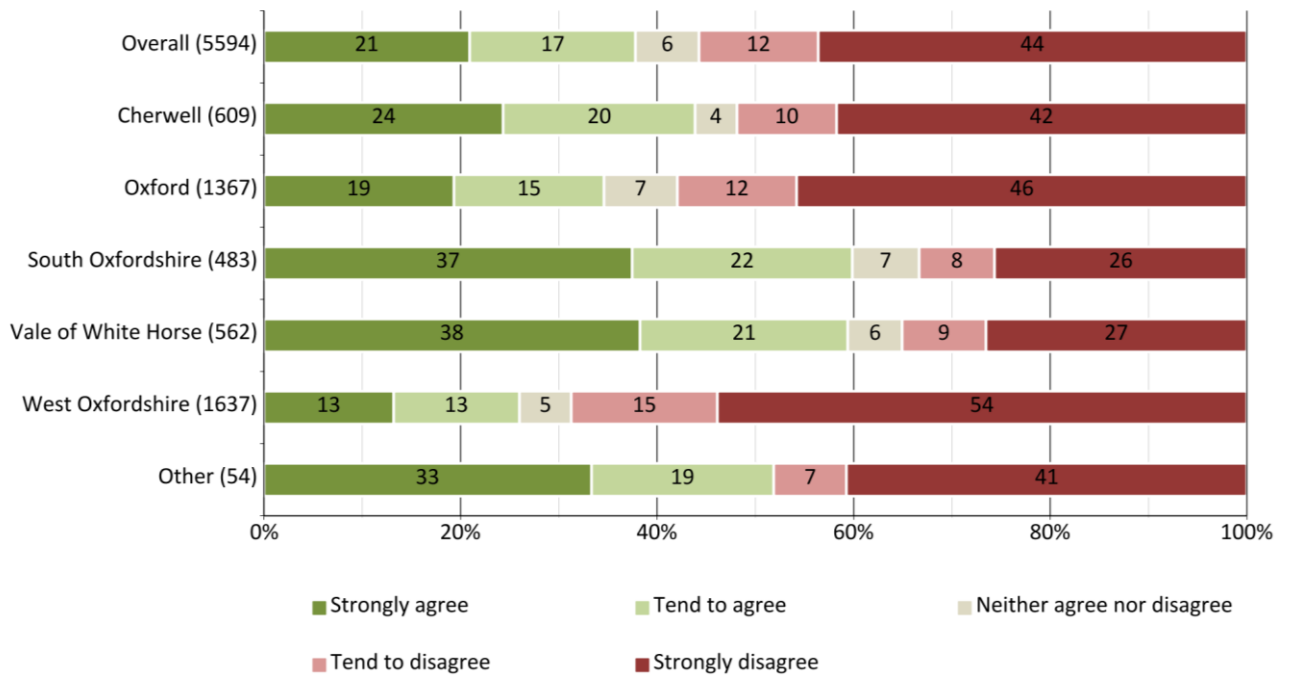
Figure 21: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire.



Base: All Individuals (5,594)

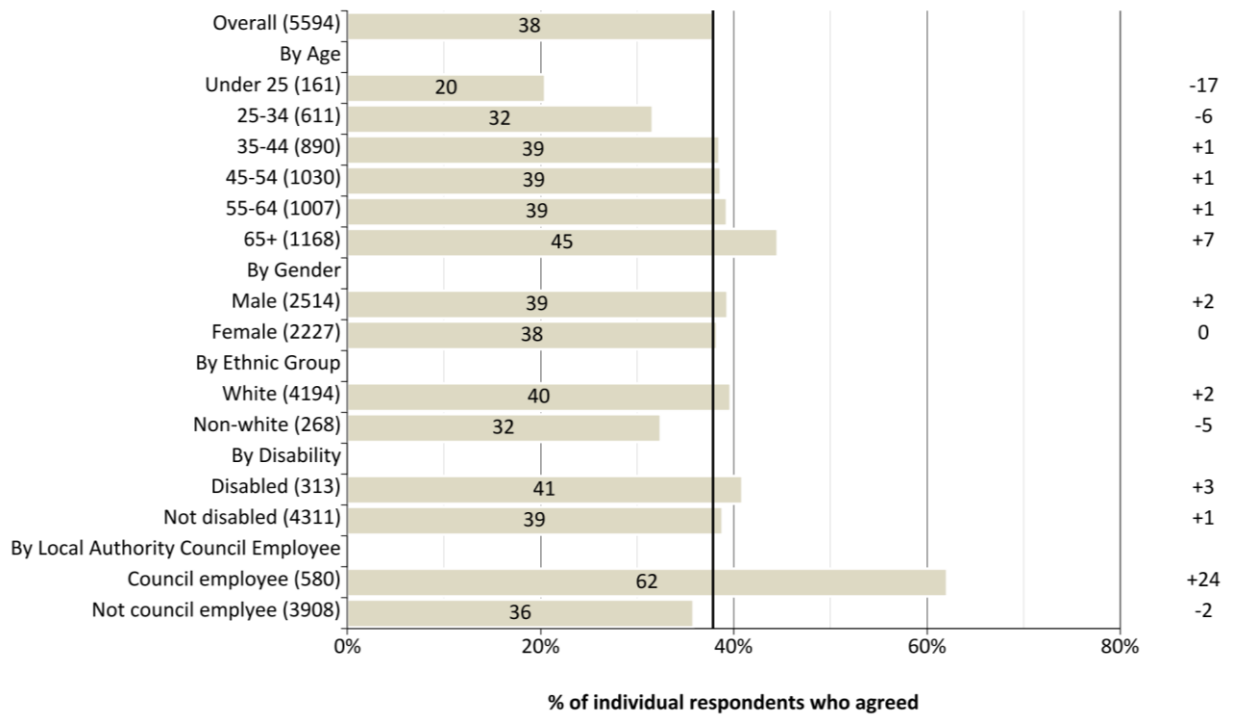
- 4.14 Respondents were initially directed to read the discussion document or alternatively to go to the One Oxfordshire website for more information. They were then given a short introduction explaining the changes to government funding and the need for the councils to make savings, as well as explaining the increased demand for social care and its associated pressures. Respondents were then asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire.
- 4.15 Nearly two fifths of individuals (38%) that responded, including respondents within and outside of the overall Oxfordshire area, agreed that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire, whereas an absolute majority of respondents (56%) disagreed (Figure 21).

Figure 22: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire by district/city council area.



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 4.16 An absolute majority of individual respondents in two areas agreed with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire: South Oxfordshire (60%) and Vale of White Horse (59%).
- 4.17 Fewer individuals agreed in the remaining Oxfordshire areas: Cherwell (44%), Oxford (35%) and West Oxfordshire (26%). Moreover, in these three areas, absolute majorities disagreed (52% in Cherwell, 58% in Oxford and 69% in West Oxfordshire).

Figure 23: Demographic differences in agreement with the need to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire.

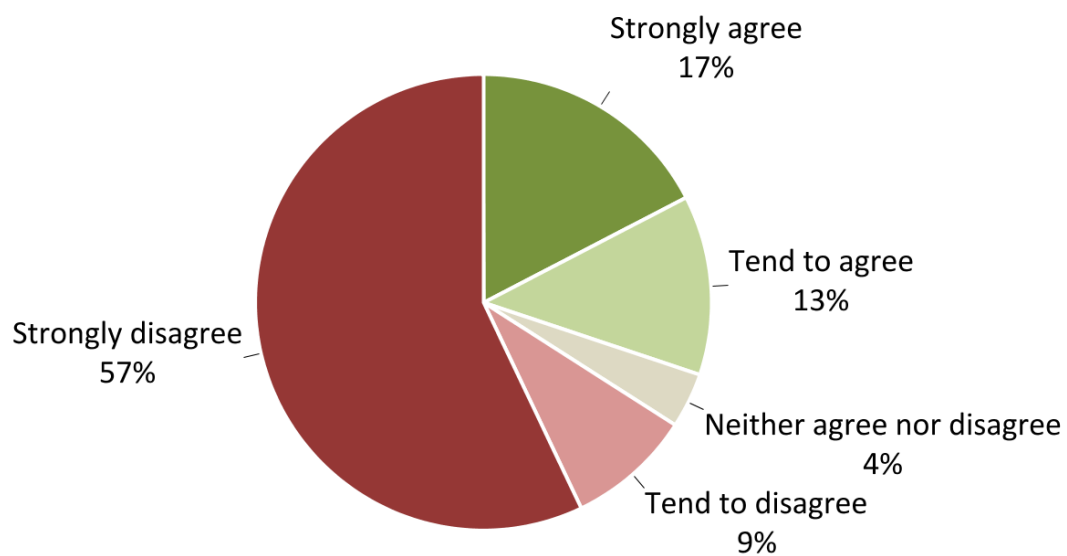
Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 4.18 The chart above (Figure 23) shows how the responses for overall agreement varied across different demographic subgroups of respondents, and shows that in general there was somewhat more agreement among older age groups compared to younger age groups, and among council employees.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the principle that an 'unitary council' should provide all council services in your particular area?

- 4.19 The questionnaire was designed to help inform the decision-making process; so after seeking people's views on the need (or otherwise) to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire, it then sought to establish the extent of agreement or disagreement with the principle of a unitary council providing all council services across Oxfordshire in order to further establish the overall support for or opposition to change.

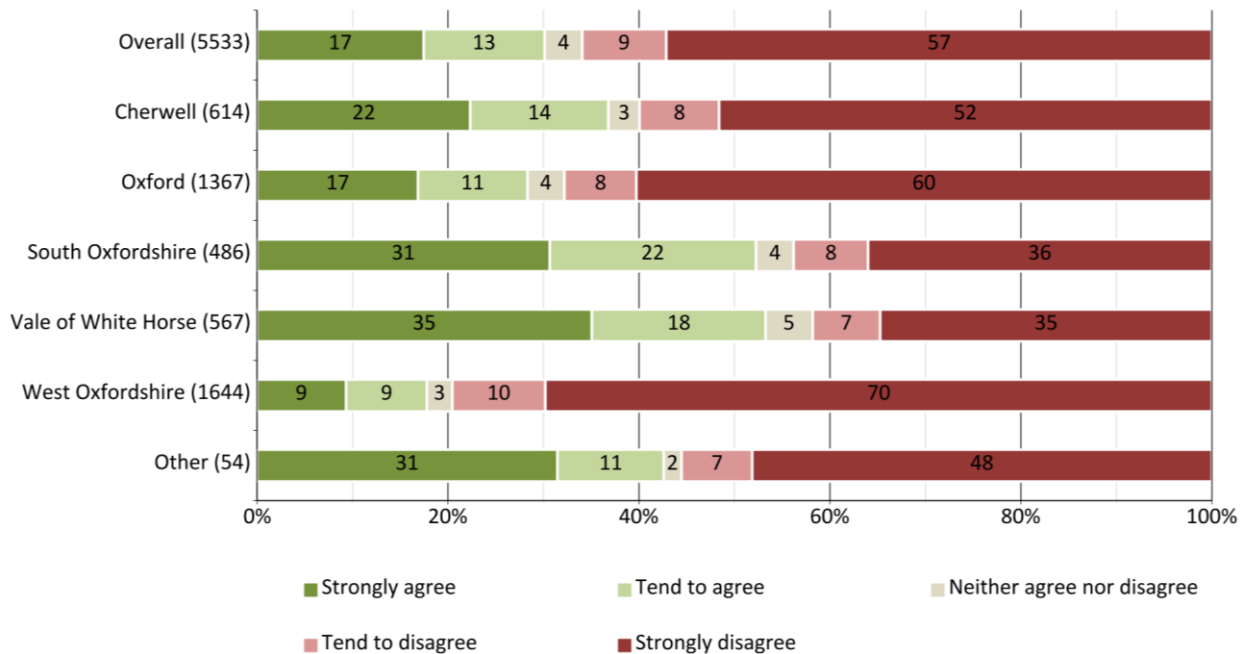
Figure 24: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in respondents' particular area.



Base: All Individuals (5,533)

- 4.20 Three out of ten respondents (30%) agreed with principle that a unitary council should provide all council services in their area; however, around two thirds of respondents disagreed (66%), and an absolute majority (57%) strongly disagreed (Figure 24).

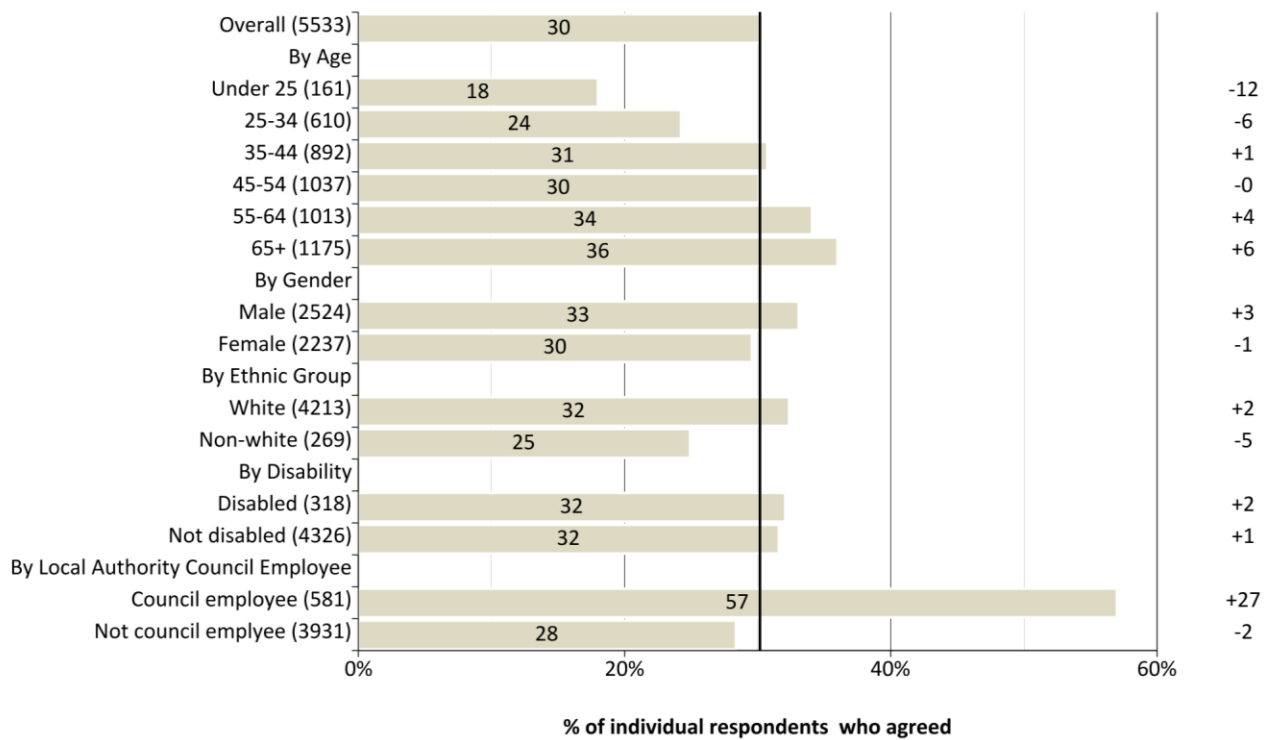
Figure 25: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in respondents’ particular area by district/city council area.



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 4.21 More than half of respondents in Vale of White Horse (53%) and South Oxfordshire (52%) agreed with the principle that a unitary council should provide all council services in their area; however, more than two fifths disagreed (44% in South Oxfordshire and 42% in Vale of White Horse).
- 4.22 Fewer respondents agreed in Cherwell (37%), Oxford (28%) and West Oxfordshire (18%).
- 4.23 Furthermore, at least three fifths disagreed in each of these areas: 60% in Cherwell, 68% in Oxford, and 80% in West Oxfordshire.

Figure 26: Demographic differences in agreement with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in respondents' particular area.

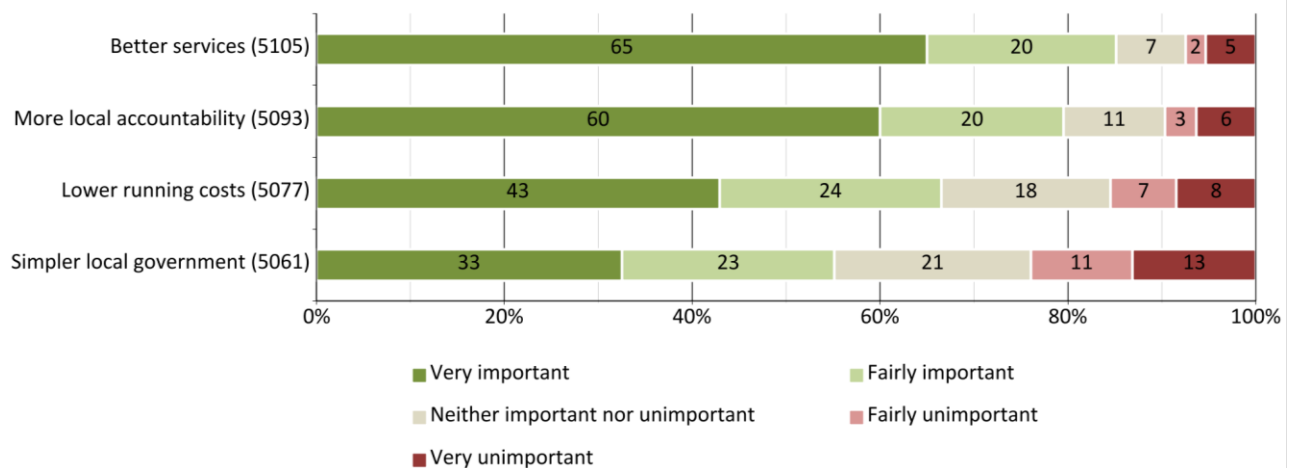


Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 4.24 The chart above (Figure 26) shows how the responses for overall agreement varied across different demographic subgroups of respondents, and shows that there was somewhat more agreement among older age groups compared to younger age groups, and among council employees.

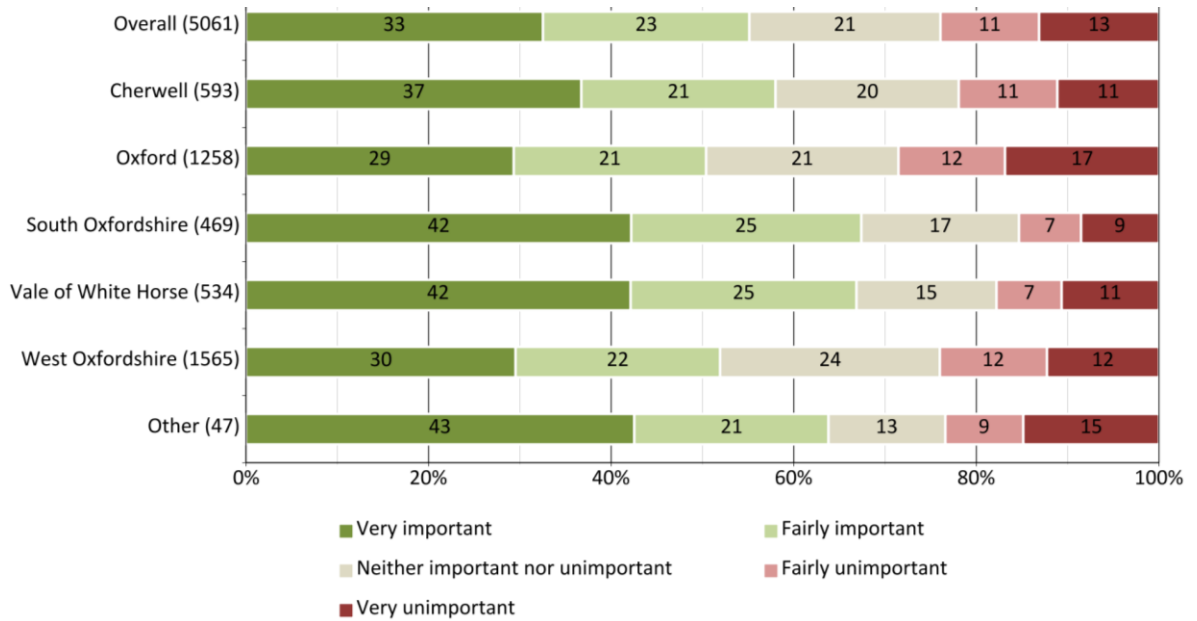
If local government was changed in Oxfordshire, how important or unimportant would the following be to you: simpler local government; better services; more local accountability; and lower running costs?

- 4.25 The questionnaire explained OCC's belief that the best way forward is to abolish the current six councils and create one new 'unitary council' for the whole of Oxfordshire because this would be simpler, better for services, more local and cost less to run.
- 4.26 Respondents were then asked: if local government was changed in Oxfordshire, how important would the following be to them: simpler local government; better services; more local accountability; and lower running costs.
- 4.27 **Figure 27: Perceived importance and unimportance of 'simpler local government', 'better services', 'more local accountability' and 'lower running costs'.**



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

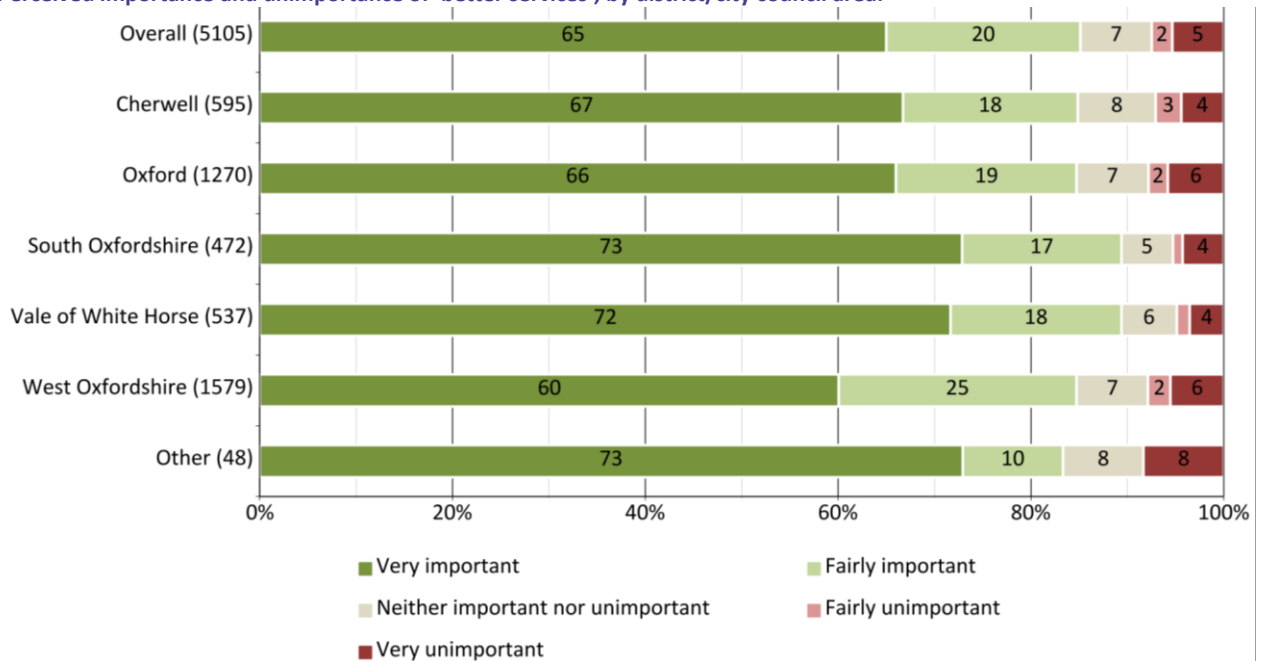
- 4.28 Overall, individual respondents attached greatest importance to 'better services' (85%) and 'more local accountability' (80%) (with absolute majorities of respondents – 65% and 60% respectively – regarding these as being 'very important').
- 4.29 Absolute majorities also felt 'lower running costs' (67%) and 'simpler local government' (55%) would be important – although it is also worth noting that around a quarter (24%) felt that 'simpler local government' would be unimportant.



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

4.30 Around two thirds of individuals in South Oxfordshire (67%) and Vale of White Horse (67%) felt ‘simpler local government’ would be important, as did half or more in the remaining Oxfordshire areas: Cherwell (58%), West Oxfordshire (52%) and Oxford (50%) (Figure 28).

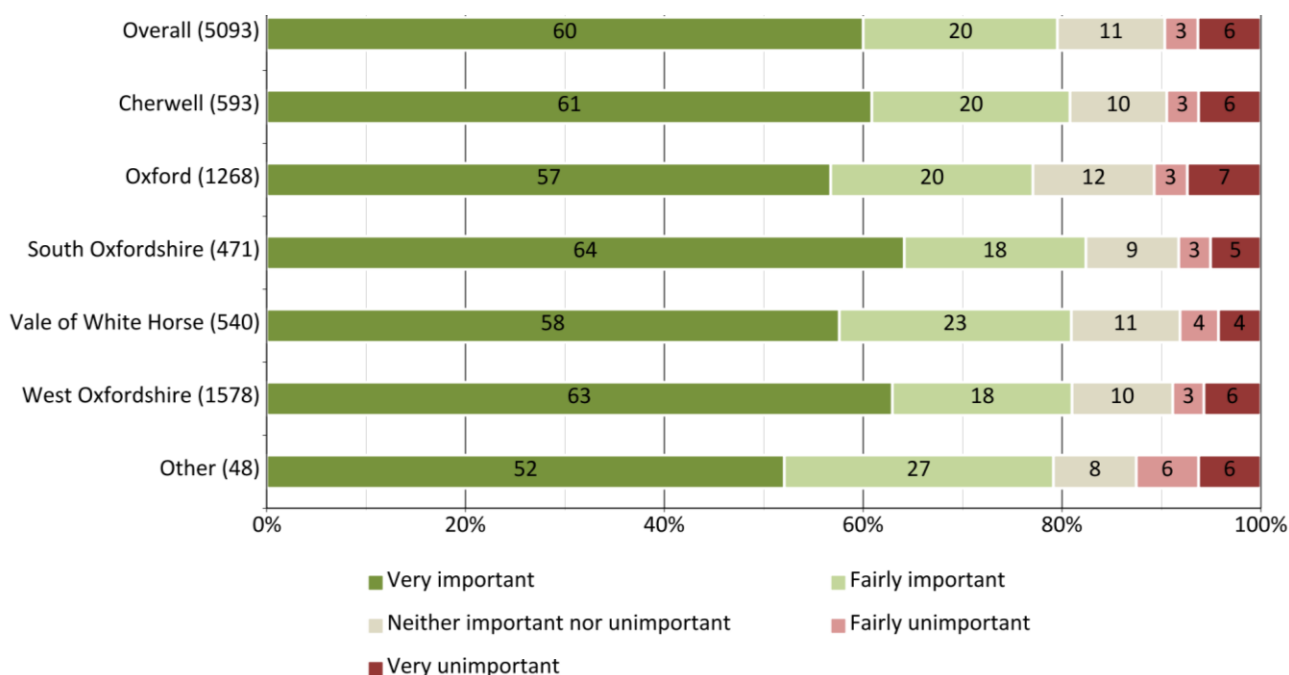
Figure 29: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘better services’, by district/city council area.



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

4.31 More than four fifths of the individual respondents in each district/city area felt that ‘better services’ would be important. The results were slightly higher in South Oxfordshire (89%) and Vale of White Horse (89%) compared to the remaining three areas of Oxfordshire (all 85%).

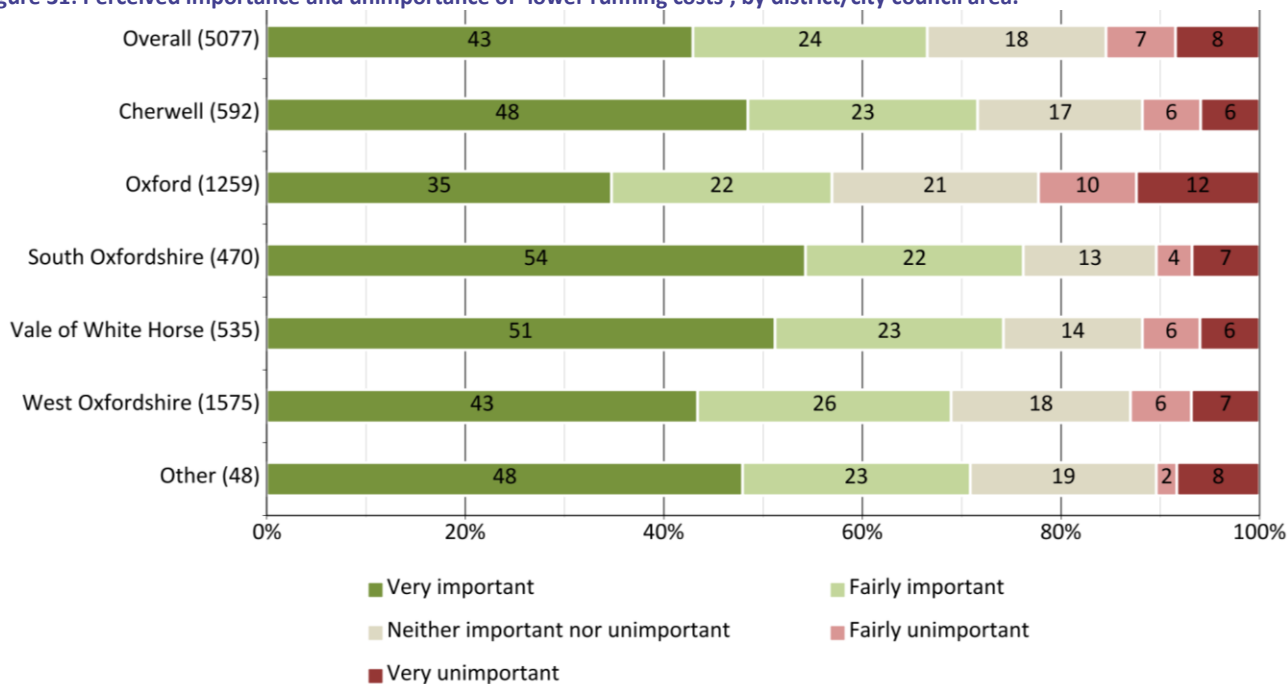
Figure 30: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘more local accountability’, by district/city council area.



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

4.32 Substantial majorities of individuals in each Oxfordshire district/city area felt that ‘more local accountability’ would be important: South Oxfordshire (82%), West Oxfordshire (81%), Vale of White Horse (81%), Cherwell (81%) and Oxford (77%).

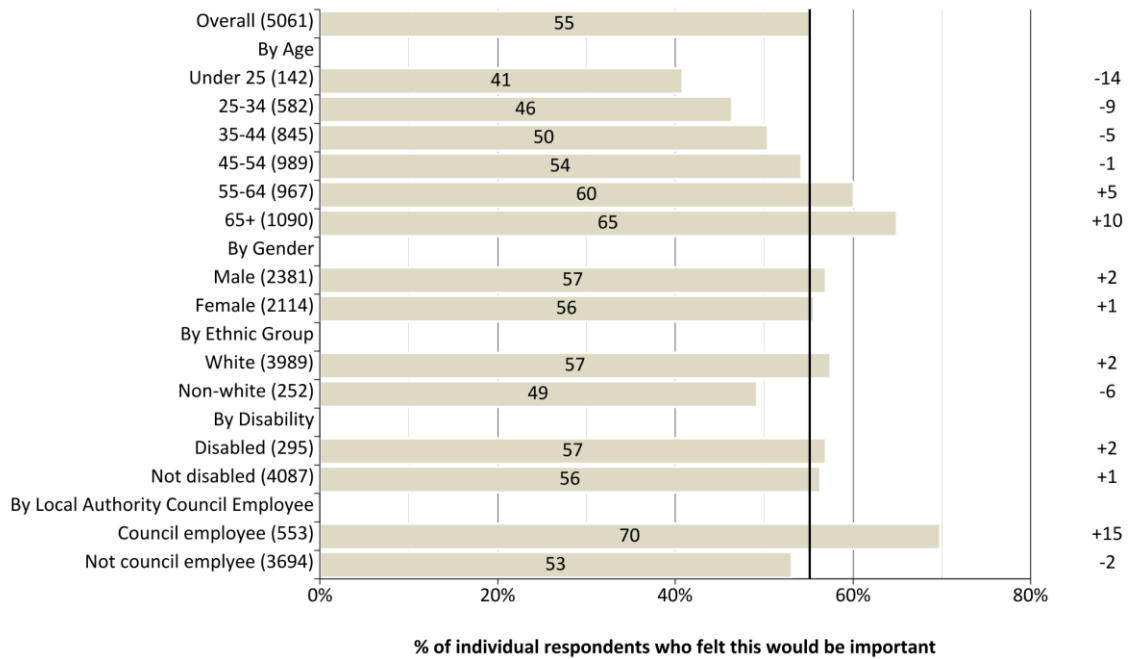
Figure 31: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘lower running costs’, by district/city council area.



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

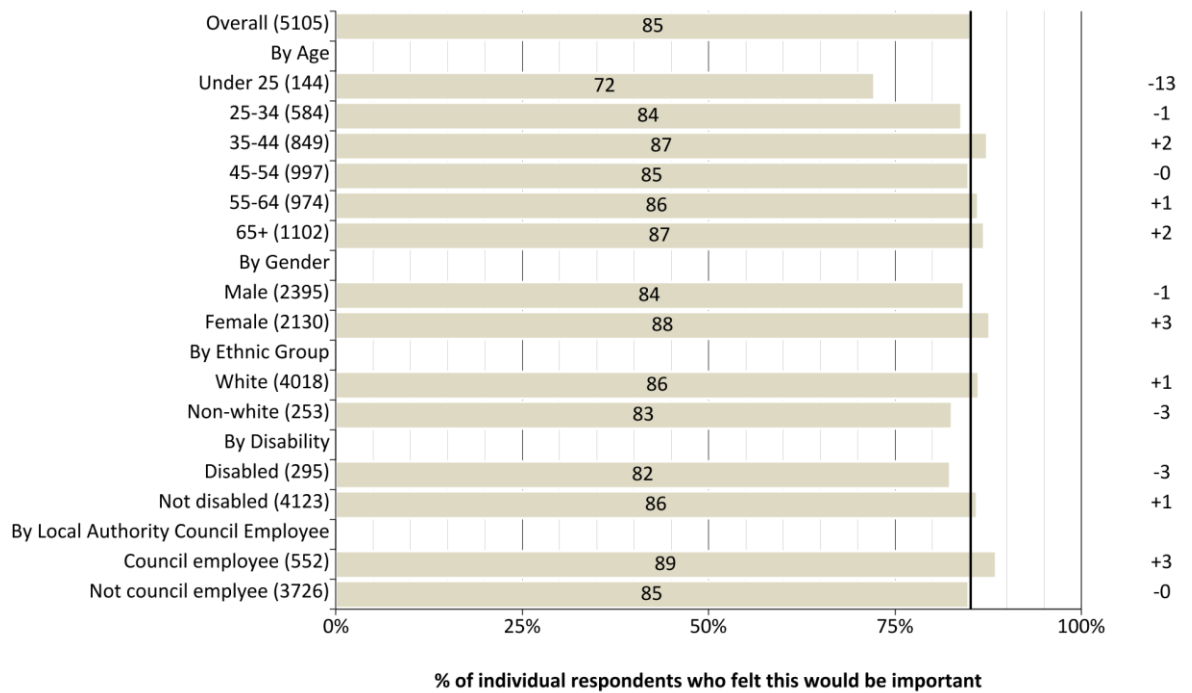
4.33 Around seven out of ten or more individuals responding from South Oxfordshire (76%), Vale of White Horse (74%), Cherwell (72%) and West Oxfordshire (69%) felt that ‘lower running costs’ would be important. The proportion of individuals in Oxford with this view was slightly lower (57%), but still an absolute majority.

Figure 32: Demographic differences in perceptions of importance of 'simpler local government'



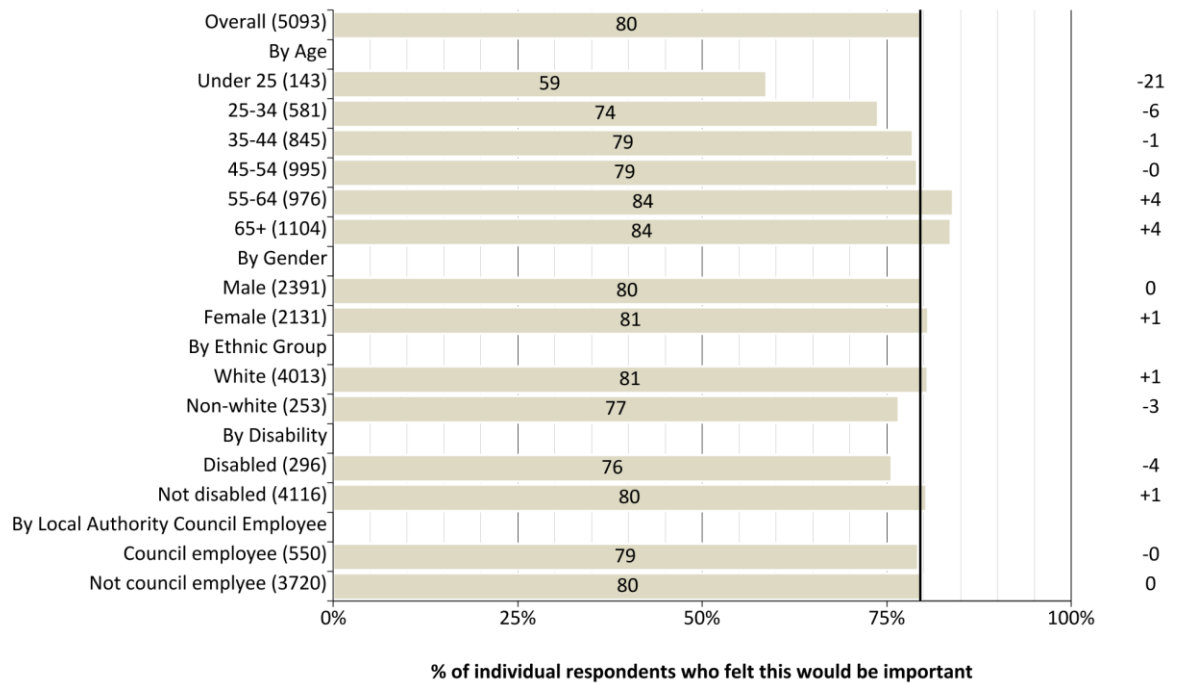
Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

Figure 33: Demographic differences in perceptions of importance of 'better services'



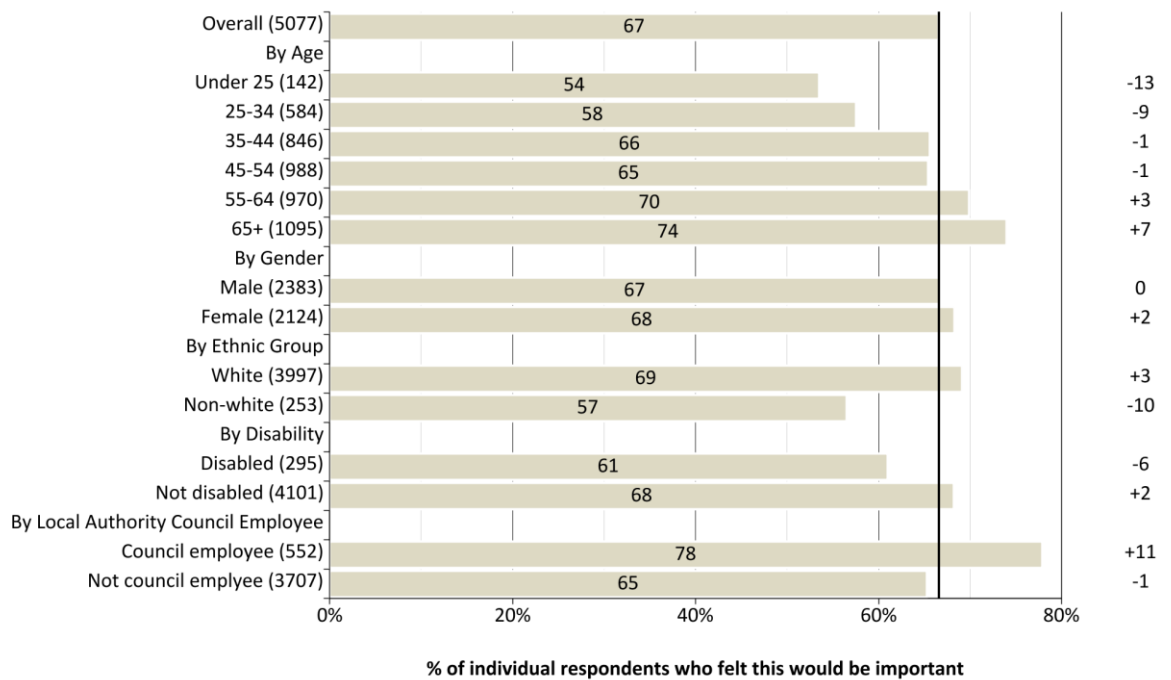
Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

Figure 34: Demographic differences in perceptions of importance of ‘more local accountability’



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

Figure 35: Demographic differences in perceptions of importance of ‘lower running costs’



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

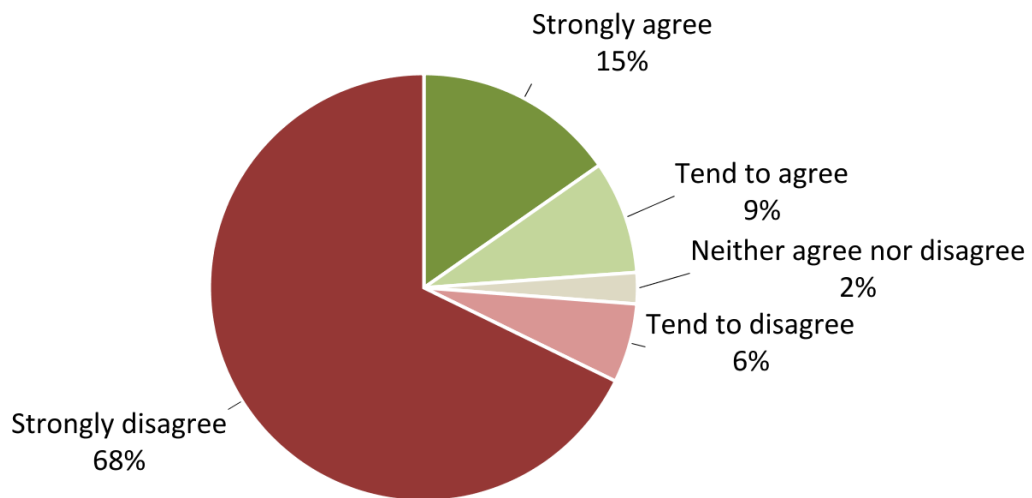
4.34 The charts above show how perceptions about the importance of ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’, and ‘lower running costs’ varied across different demographic subgroups of respondents.

4.35 It can be seen that there was a great deal of consistency between sub-groups in terms of perceptions about the importance of ‘better services’.

- 4.36 Respondents in older age groups tended to have somewhat higher perceptions of importance compared to younger respondents, particularly in relation to ‘simpler local government’ , ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’.
- 4.37 Respondents who were council employees also attached somewhat higher levels of importance to ‘simpler local government’ and ‘lower running costs’.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with Oxfordshire County Council's draft proposals to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new 'unitary council' for the whole of Oxfordshire?

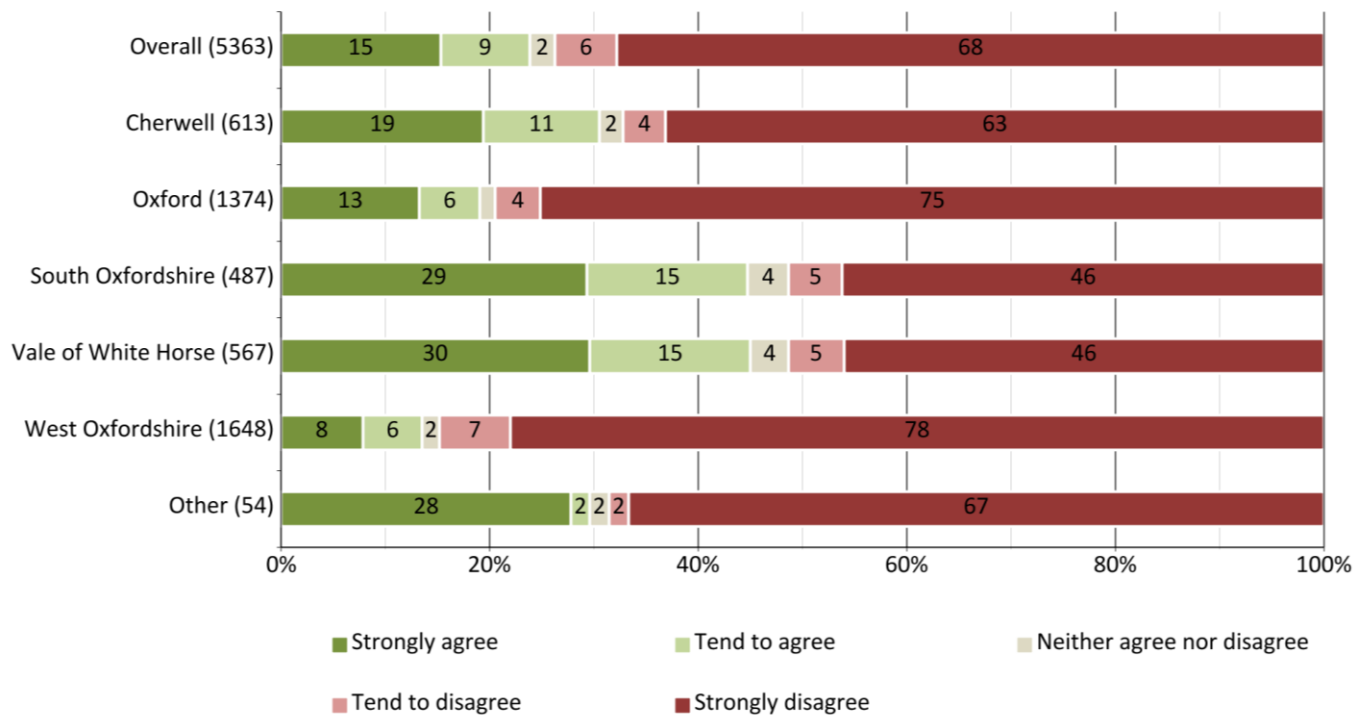
Figure 36: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposals to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new 'unitary council' for the whole of Oxfordshire



Base: All Individuals (5,363)

^{4.39} Around a quarter of respondents (24%) agreed with the draft proposals for a single unitary council covering the whole of Oxfordshire; however, around three quarters (74%) disagreed (and around two thirds – 68% – strongly disagreed) (see Figure 36).

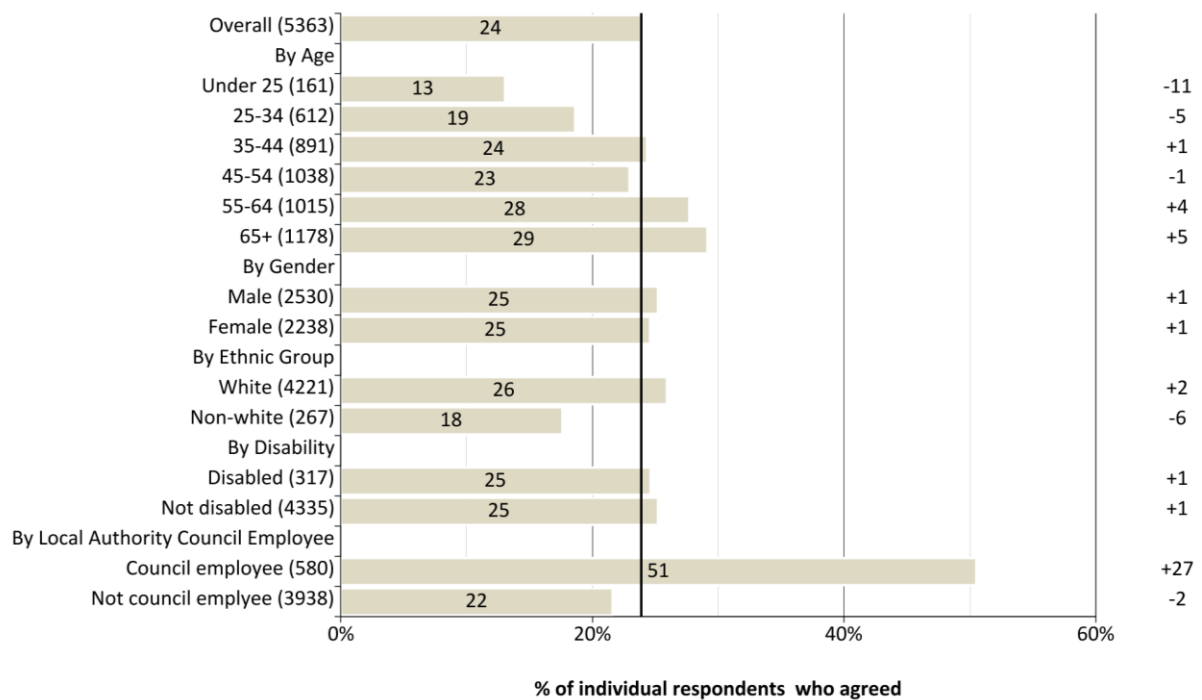
Figure 37: Agreement and disagreement with abolishing the six current councils and replacing them with one ‘unitary council’ for the whole of Oxfordshire. Responses by city and district council areas.



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 4.40 Levels of agreement were noticeably higher among individuals responding from South Oxfordshire (45%) and Vale of White Horse (45%) than elsewhere; however, even in these two areas around half of respondents disagreed (51% in both districts).
- 4.41 Nearly a third of Cherwell respondents agreed (31%); whereas around two thirds disagreed (67%). However the lowest levels of agreement (and highest levels of disagreement) were seen among individuals in West Oxfordshire (14% agreed; 85% disagreed) and Oxford (19% agreed; 79% disagreed).

Figure 38: Demographic differences in agreement with the draft proposals for a single unitary authority covering the whole of Oxfordshire.



Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 4.42 The chart above (Figure 38) shows how the responses for overall agreement varied across different demographic subgroups of respondents, and shows that in general there was somewhat more support among older age groups compared to younger age groups white respondents compared to non-white respondents, and among council employees.

Further Comments (individuals)

If you do not agree with the County Council's proposals for ONE 'unitary council' for the WHOLE of Oxfordshire, please say what you think the best option would be.

Do you have any suggestions for how the County Council's proposals for ONE 'unitary council' for the WHOLE of Oxfordshire could be improved?

- 4.43 Detailed counts of the different comments will be available to the County Council. These will be classified against a list of key themes, some of the more frequently mentioned points being (bearing in mind a large proportion of respondents are from Oxford City and West Oxfordshire):

Comments in support of maintaining the current arrangement/keeping the status quo;

Comments in favour of keeping the City Council;

Comments in favour of transferring more responsibilities from County Councils to the districts;

Comments about West Oxfordshire e.g. concerns about council tax increases, or the loss of free car parking.

Responses received from individuals separately to the main questionnaire

- 4.44 OCC also received seven email communications from individuals to its 'One Oxfordshire' and 'Better Oxfordshire' Mailboxes.
- 4.45 One respondent expressed their strong support for the proposal and noted the City Council's "aggressive" campaign in opposition to the draft proposal. The respondent suggests that the City Council does not represent the overall view of the citizens of Oxford.
- 4.46 One response expressed general opposition to the draft proposal and another was opposed because "Oxford is and has been a great City, which County and SODC strategies seem to aim to undermine and reduce the City to the status of a village and the University to the level of an ex-Polytechnic".
- 4.47 A further respondent suggests that the revised proposals remain unacceptable to all rural areas in the county, as "the rural areas lose any protection from the fiscal and planning deficits of the city of Oxford in all iterations". They say the county: does not need roadworks in and around Oxford, but a bypass to avoid it completely; does not need a new town in Eynsham, but the City of Oxford boundary extending; and does not need a single unitary authority, but a four-tier unitary structure, established through consensus of history, that works for all residents in our area.
- 4.48 The final, and particularly detailed, response makes the following main points:

Representation

The proposal for one councillor to cover a larger area with an increased number of electors means that this one councillor will need to pick up all current district & county business; a workload increase. How, the respondent asked, is this to be achieved without loss of representation? If the proposed solution is to insist on full-time councillors, it is said that this is effectively reducing the number of residents able to stand for Councillor to those able to support themselves, which is not good for democracy.

It was suggested that a reduction from 600+ councillors to less than 200 cannot offer the same level of service as currently - and that OCC should look at current Councillor workloads and ensure the new number of Councillors are able to properly serve their residents.

Stakeholder engagement

Current councils hold stakeholder consultations/meetings and there are no suggestions that Area Boards are to do the same. This, it was felt, must be guaranteed in the final proposal.

Council Tax

The respondent sought an explanation of how the council tax harmonisation process will work in practice - and noted that Area Boards may be able to raise a precept to pay for 'extras' that each area may want to provide. This, it was said, "is fine but can't be used to top up the overall tax take...it would be seen as unfair as again each areas total tax will be different to cover the same core services". The respondent felt that residents should know exactly how their council tax is to be calculated in future.

The respondent also desired clarification on exactly how the proposed £20 million annual savings will be spent – and questions whether "all the recent cuts can be restored within the current savings, or would this require another tax hike?". They suspect that OCC is "spending the savings several times over!"

Staffing Levels

While recognising that there will be definite savings in back-office functions, the respondent saw very limited savings in the front-office as demand for services continues or grows. They again suspect that *“there is somewhat of a saving identified in the Accountants’ reports which actually won’t materialise!”*

Area Boards

The respondent suggested that each current district has rural and urban area with completely different needs, and so it would be better to develop a rural Board for North, South and possibly West, and an urban Board for the towns outside of Oxford City. That way, *“each area receives services that suit their needs and the different Boards could spend their funding in the ways their areas need”*.

Clarification was sought on whether Area Boards will serve to ensure that residents can easily access local services to prevent residents & businesses from having to travel to visit offices and councillors. Furthermore, they asked whether each Area Board will be serviced by their own planning officers to prevent excess travel (and thus cost) on their part.

Finally regarding Area Boards, the respondent saw a need to ensure that, wherever possible, central contracts for services are NOT devolved to Area Boards for efficiency reasons. Similarly, they suggested that similar reasons apply to Area Boards delegating to their Parish Councils - if the service is the same across each PC, then the contract should be issued at Area Board level (or even Unitary level if the service is Authority-wide).

Unitary Authority

It was said that care is needed to ensure residents views are gathered and acknowledged at each policy stage: current councils consult and consider residents’ views wherever possible – and a new unitary authority must also do so in future.

Furthermore, it was suggested that:

Fire and Rescue could become a combined authority similar to the Police areas;

A full review of unitary authority should be carried out as *“we wouldn’t want to see the UA searching for suitable properties just because a suitable property was sold off to soon”*; and

Any proposal for a directly-elected Mayor should require a referendum across the whole area to obtain public approval.

^{4.49} Of the final two responses, one was a complaint about the engagement process (specifically the timing of the library drop-in sessions) and another was a complaint about the engagement questionnaire which, it was said, *“does not allow the respondent sufficient scope to expand on their views. The simplistic options available mean that you are forcing respondents to support you option”*.

5. Deliberative and Other Meetings

Introduction

The meetings

- 5.1 This substantial chapter firstly reports the findings from five deliberative workshops with members of the public from across Oxfordshire - followed the various meetings and conversations held by OCC during the engagement programme.

Workshops with Members of the General Public

Overview

- 5.2 Five 2.5 hour deliberative workshops were held with **88** randomly selected Oxfordshire residents to discuss the possible reorganisation of local government in the county (with one workshop taking place in each of the district or city authorities). The schedule of meetings and attendance levels were as shown below.

| WORKSHOP LOCATION | DATE | NUMBER OF ATTENDEES |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| West Oxfordshire (Witney) | 15 th February 2017 | 18 |
| Oxford City | 16 th February 2017 | 18 |
| South Oxfordshire (Didcot) | 16 th February 2017 | 17 |
| Cherwell (Banbury) | 23 rd February 2017 | 16 |
| Vale of White Horse (Abingdon) | 23 rd February 2017 | 19 |

- 5.3 The meetings were facilitated by ORS and attended by a county council officer who was available to answer questions for clarification. Before the explanatory presentation and detailed discussions, participants were asked briefly about their:

Awareness of Oxfordshire's current local government structure and finances; and

Initial (or immediate) general view about local government reorganisation: not counting parish and town councils: *what is your 'initial reaction' to the idea of reducing the number of councils across Oxfordshire?*

- 5.4 The point of these questions was to clarify the current structure so that the discussions began with a common baseline level of awareness and to allow for a comparison between people's 'immediate' opinions and their more considered judgements following two-and-a-half hours of detailed discussions.
- 5.5 These introductory questions were followed by a presentation (in order to ensure that standardised information was provided to each of the sessions) which outlined in-depth: the current council set-up across Oxfordshire; the case for change; and the 'One Oxfordshire' draft proposal and implications of

change. Participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout and round-table discussions were undertaken to allow everyone to have their say. The meetings were thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.

Main Findings

Overall Summary

- 5.6 Overall, there was a broad division of opinion across the workshops, but generally the final opinions were more positive than negative - except in Cherwell which was the most critical group of all. In three of the other four groups - West Oxfordshire, Oxford City and South Oxfordshire - there was a positive shift in opinion during the meetings (from people's initial to their final views) based upon a full examination of OCC's case for one unitary authority; whereas opinion shifted slightly in the other direction in Vale of White Horse (due to concerns about the radical nature of the proposal) and more markedly in Cherwell (because the workshop members disliked and rejected key aspects of OCC's case). This somewhat mixed response demonstrates shows that real deliberation took place in the workshops, with people forming views and changing their minds in different directions based on their perceptions of the evidence presented.

Awareness of current local government structures

- 5.7 Participants in all five workshops were relatively well informed about the two-tier structure of local government since most knew that there are six councils in Oxfordshire (not counting parish and town councils); but there was a range of estimates by those who were less aware (from four to seven councils).
- 5.8 Most were also aware that, although they pay their council tax to their district or borough council, it is Oxfordshire County Council that spends most of the money raised. However, while many people were aware that adult and children's social services and education are costly services to run, few knew how high these services are compared with others run by the county council and district authorities.
- 5.9 In all the meetings, following the initial awareness questions, the facilitator's presentation explained the current local government structure for Oxfordshire clearly so that everyone had a common level of understanding as the basis for the detailed discussions.

Awareness of Local Government Reorganisation debate

- 5.10 Knowledge of the current debate around the draft proposals for reorganising local government across Oxfordshire was mixed.
- 5.11 Awareness was high in the Oxford City and Cherwell workshops: 16 of 18 people at the former and at least three-quarters at the latter had heard of the debate before coming to the meetings via a range of local media - and most of these knew that Cherwell District Council and especially Oxford City Council are opposed to OCC's draft proposal which, in the case of the latter, may explain why only two of the 18 participants were initially in favour of any reorganisation at all). Awareness was, however, lower in West Oxfordshire and especially in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, where only around a third of participants had been aware of the debate before coming to their respective meetings. This is perhaps reflective of the political situation, the amount of direct communication received from district and city councils and differing media attention.

Criteria for assessing local government structures

- 5.12 OCC believes that the four key benefits of one unitary council for Oxfordshire would be: ‘simpler local government’; ‘better services’; ‘more local accountability’; and ‘lower costs’. When asked about the relative importance of these criteria for the future of local government in Oxfordshire, the overwhelming majority agreed that ‘better services’ was most important and that savings arising from a unitary authority should be re-invested to enable improvements:

I don't care where services are provided from as long as they're good...It's how it's implemented that's important (South Oxfordshire)

The £20m savings should be used to protect services not to reduce council tax in a new authority (Oxford City)

No matter what is decided, service improvements must be the result (Vale of White Horse)

We'd rather pay more if it means better services and any savings should be put back into services rather than lower council tax. (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.13 Views were mixed on the relative importance of the other three criteria and some illustrative comments are below:

Simpler is important too. When you're 80 and you can't look after yourself, how the hell do you know who to phone? You just get passed from pillar to post; it would be so much better to be able to just go to one person (West Oxfordshire)

It's all about better services but how do you define better? What's better for South Oxfordshire may not be better for other areas and in the unitary authority how do you make those decisions? So the local aspect is important too (South Oxfordshire)

Keeping the local aspect is an important part of this...and if you have a big umbrella unitary authority it is increasingly important (Vale of White Horse)

Cost isn't what really matters. We resent the kind of government that puts cost-cutting ahead of quality services (Oxford City)

But we cannot ignore cost in the current economic climate. (Oxford City)

Reducing the number of councils: initial and final opinions

- 5.14 Following the opening questions on awareness of current local government structures, but before any of the explanatory presentation, participants in the workshops were asked for their initial or immediate views on whether the number of councils (not counting parish and town councils) in Oxfordshire should be reduced (but to an as yet unspecified number). Much later in the meetings, following a presentation and detailed discussions, the workshops were asked if the number of councils should be reduced to create a single all-Oxfordshire unitary authority. People's initial and final views are summarised in the table overleaf which shows the proportions of workshop participants who favoured, opposed or were unsure about change at different stages of the meetings.

| AREA | Some reduction in the number of councils? | | | A single Unitary Council? | | | Shift in favour/against |
|------|---|--------|---------|---------------------------|--------|---------|-------------------------|
| | For | Unsure | Against | For | Unsure | Against | |
| | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| West Oxfordshire | 4/18 | 10/18 | 4/18 | 10/18 | 0/18 | 8/18 | +6 |
| Oxford City | 2/18 | 11/18 | 5/18 | 7/18 | 5/18 | 6/18 | +5 |
| South Oxfordshire | 5/17 | 4/17 | 8/17 | 11/17 | 4/17 | 2/17 | +6 |
| Cherwell | 6/16 | 0/16 | 10/16 | 1/16 | 7/16 | 8/16 | -5 |
| Vale of White Horse | 12/19 | 7/19 | 0/19 | 11/19 | 5/19 | 3/19 | -1 |
| TOTAL | 29/88 | 32/88 | 27/88 | 40/88 | 20/88 | 27/88 | +11 |

- 5.15 In most of the meetings, the initial question was based on a possible reduction in the number of councils (usually assumed by the participants) to be to “about three or four”. It is on this basis that the table above compares opinions at the beginning of the meetings with people’s more considered judgements following the presentation and discussions.

West Oxfordshire

- 5.16 In **West Oxfordshire**, initially four of the 18 participants favoured a reduction in the number of councils, only four were explicitly against and the remaining 10 people were ‘don’t knows’. Those supporting a reduction did so on the grounds of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and the provision of more joined-up services. Those against were concerned that local identity and democratic accountability would be lost and that the needs of the “*very different*” areas of Oxfordshire could not be adequately served by one large unitary authority).
- 5.17 After detailed discussions, the number favouring a reduction from six to one unitary council increased to 10, whereas the remaining eight firmly disagreed. The former were persuaded that a single council would offer greater efficiency, large cost-savings and more joined-up services, and that Area Boards would protect democracy at a local level. The latter, though, disagreed and felt the proposed change would reduce both democratic accountability locally and political diversity across the county.

Oxford City

- 5.18 In **Oxford City**, initially only two of the 18 participants felt that the number of councils should be reduced from the existing six while five disagreed. The remaining 11 participants were either ‘don’t knows’ or said they were open minded and prepared to listen to OCC’s case for a single unitary authority - though it should be noted that the tone of the discussion that followed shortly after the initial ‘vote’ was mainly critical of the draft proposals.
- 5.19 The small minority that agreed with the single unitary draft proposal at the initial stage did so on the basis of financial considerations (what they described as “*financial dysfunctionality*” currently) and that a unitary system is desirable - whereas the five who initially disagreed were particularly concerned about what they perceived as threats to Oxford because of the differences between the City and the rest of Oxfordshire.
- 5.20 There was some shift of opinion by the end of the session, when seven of the 18 participants agreed with the proposed reduction to one unitary council, six disagreed and five were either ‘don’t knows’ or

remained open minded about possible change. The shift was due mainly to the focus on area boards and some recognition that the population of Oxford City may be too small to sustain an unitary system.

South Oxfordshire

- 5.21 In **South Oxfordshire** initially, just under a third of the workshop members (5 of 17) favoured a reduction in the number of councils, eight explicitly disagreed and the remaining four participants were ‘don’t knows’. Those who agreed with the draft proposal did so on the grounds of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and the provision of more joined-up services. Those who disagreed were concerned about loss of local accountability and identity and that one large unitary authority could not adequately cater for the needs of the differing areas of Oxfordshire.
- 5.22 By the end of the session, there was a considerable shift in opinion. Almost two-thirds of participants (11 of 17) supported creating one unitary authority, though several caveated their support with, for example: the need for proper management to ensure smooth implementation; and the importance of having proper and sufficient ‘checks and balances’ within the process. Furthermore, the inclusion of Area Boards within the draft proposal was a persuasive factor for many of the 11 supporters.
- 5.23 Two participants explicitly rejected the draft proposal and there were four ‘don’t knows’: they remained unconvinced that a new unitary authority would maintain a sufficiently local focus and political diversity, commented on the relatively low savings yielded as a proportion of the total budgets of the six councils and worried about possible councillor “*overload*” as a result of taking responsibility for more services and, in some cases, more people.

Cherwell

- 5.24 Initially, six of the 16 **Cherwell** participants felt that the number of councils should be reduced from six, but most of them did not think it desirable to reduce to less than four. 10 of the members did not want to reduce the councils at all.
- 5.25 The main reasons for considering a reduction of councils were: to reduce costs and duplication; allow for the abolition of the county council; and protect at least three merged district councils. Those who supported a reduction of councils on these grounds were also keen to protect the interests of rural communities (from urban incursions) through “localism” in policies and local government structures. Those who wanted to keep all six councils were often relatively critical of the county council. Above all, they wanted to minimise centralisation while protecting what they saw as the democracy of the district council structure.
- 5.26 Following full discussion, only one person agreed with the draft proposal for a single new unitary council for Oxfordshire. Eight were strongly opposed and seven were ‘don’t knows’, though the tone of the discussion overall suggested that they would be hard to convince of the merits of the draft proposal. The Cherwell workshop was certainly the most critical of the draft proposal, partly due to the participants’ perception of OCC as a kind of planning ‘Big Brother’ and participants were not convinced that Area Boards would protect the rural areas from neglect and domination in the planning process. Overall, the workshop was very suspicious of any proposal or structure with an “Oxfordshire” branding and was very concerned about local control.

Vale of White Horse

- 5.27 Initially, almost two-thirds of participants at the **Vale of White Horse** workshop (12 of 19) favoured a reduction in the number of councils. None explicitly disagreed and the remaining seven were open-minded and prepared to listen to OCC's case for a single unitary authority. Those who agreed did so on the basis of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and the provision of simpler local government structures. Those who disagreed expressed concerns around the potential remoteness and inaccessibility that can occur as a result of centralisation.
- 5.28 Opinion shifted very slightly to the negative when participants made their final judgements, for 11 supported a reduction from six councils to one unitary authority. Most of those who supported the initial unspecified reduction also supported the 'One Oxfordshire' draft proposal - though for one person, while the case for change was understood, the actual draft proposal for change was too "extreme".
- 5.29 Of the remaining eight participants, five were 'don't knows' as they either desired more information about the precise implications of change in areas such as Wiltshire and Cornwall or because they could see both "pros and cons" to the draft proposal. The three who opposed the proposed change did so on the grounds that: the predicted savings would not be realised in practice; an unitary authority would not guarantee simpler, more joined-up services; centralisation can result in a loss of local decision-making power; and that reorganisation would be very difficult with only three of the six councils "on board".

Reasons for and against reducing to one unitary council

- 5.30 The following two sections of this chapter outline the main reasons for and against one unitary authority for Oxfordshire. For ease of access and understanding, the main reasons expressed for keeping six councils have been reported first, followed by those for establishing one unitary authority - but this should not be taken to imply that there was a consensus on the various points for many participants raised both positive and negative issues prior to making their final judgements on the desirability of OCC's draft proposal.
- 5.31 It should also be noted that this workshop report risks accentuating the negative at the expense of the positive because participants understandably came along with many questions and concerns about a controversial draft proposal (in many cases having read or heard negative things about it in the local media). Even if those who expressed such worries ultimately declared their support for one unitary authority having weighed up the evidence for and against it, it is only fair that their concerns are reported here as they will be shared by many members of the general public and so should be fully considered by OCC. So while it may be the case that more negative than positive issues are reported below and overleaf, it must be remembered that this is somewhat inevitable for the reasons outlined above - and that only in one workshop (Cherwell) was there majority opposition to the draft proposal.

Reasons for keeping six councils

- 5.32 Many of those who opposed a single unitary council were concerned about local democratic accountability: they felt that one unitary council would be too geographically and socially remote from its residents and would not be able to recognise or cater for the needs of Oxfordshire's different areas; and also that fewer councillors would reduce local representation. Even those not opposed were concerned about these matters. Some typical comments were:

The unitary authority is not going to be more local. This is fundamentally anti-democratic. Reducing the number of councillors dilutes the quality of local representation and

promotes the cult of personality we've seen with the Boris factor, the Trump factor, the Jeremy factor. It will lead to the popularisation of certain narrow views (West Oxfordshire)

It's a no brainer in terms of not having people passed around from pillar to post etc. And you can see the efficiency case. In practice though if you take something and centralise it...everything gets focused in one place and it becomes less local (West Oxfordshire)

The unitary authority or authorities would lose their localism (Oxford City)

I think localisation works better than centralisation and I feel there is always a lack of local power and input into these sorts of processes (South Oxfordshire)

I personally don't think it can all be done by one council; it would be impossible. One big council would not understand what the people in the different areas want... (South Oxfordshire)

Theoretically it sounds like a really good idea but practically a lot less so. Each district council has its own character and its own local issues which are dealt with very well at the moment. A unitary council wouldn't be able to cope with the differences between the different areas of Oxfordshire (South Oxfordshire)

Oxfordshire is large and it's quite diverse. Local councils can be aware of what's needed and the individual character and needs of the different areas (West Oxfordshire)

Could a single unitary do the work of the district councils effectively? Wouldn't it be too remote? We want local government (Cherwell)

A one-county structure would be too centralised and lack democracy (Cherwell)

I don't think centralisation is necessarily the most desirable thing as things become too impersonal and it all becomes very hard to access. And it will be imposition from one central place...they will impose the housing here, the roads. We will lose our local decision-making ability except for very small-scale issues. (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.33 Nonetheless, many could see the advantages of a single unitary authority, particularly with effective Area Boards. In fact, only Cherwell residents remained almost wholly unconvinced of the draft proposal - partly due to their perception of OCC as a kind of planning 'Big Brother' - and they did not think the Area Boards were sufficiently clear or sufficiently guaranteed to offset undesirable centralisation in a single unitary authority. Some typical Cherwell comments were:

We don't want a totalitarian single council imposing a single development plan on the whole county! (Cherwell)

Why are five Area Boards better than five district councils? (Cherwell)

- 5.34 Many participants were concerned about diluting Oxfordshire's political landscape: that is, with fewer councillors they could foresee a largely "blue county" with reduced political diversity and fewer checks and balances. This was a particular concern in Oxford City, whose local political make-up diverges greatly from that of the rest of the county:

- 5.35 If we cut down on the number of councillors we will just have a completely blue county (West Oxfordshire)

- 5.36 My concern is the political level of this. If you have one unitary council with one head, that's just one person whose elected rather than six. Some positions will disappear from the political

landscape...political diversity could disappear and fewer people will have a say. That is very concerning. (South Oxfordshire)

5.37 It's not just economics but politics; Oxfordshire County Council is generally conservative compared to Oxford City so it seems alien to us... The politics of the City and county are very different; we want to keep the political diversity (Oxford City)

5.38 Other specific issues raised at the Oxford City workshop were that:

The City has different social issues and needs to the rest of the county, which are best met locally rather than through a larger, more remote unitary authority that may not give them sufficient focus

5.39 Oxford's social issues would get less focus in any merger of councils (Oxford City)

5.40 Housing policy is very important for the City but that does not happen in the districts...this is a weakness that has not been acknowledged (Oxford City)

Oxford City Council is "trusted" a great deal more than Oxfordshire County Council by the City's residents

If a unitary council is created then the expertise of the City's staff should not be lost but incorporated into the new authority - for example:

5.41 The city council has a masterplan for the City and it's vitally important that the plan is not lost if there were a single unitary authority. (Oxford City)

5.42 However, in the rural areas participants were concerned that a single unitary authority would become too "Oxford-centric" at the expense of the county's rural areas:

5.43 It would all become so Oxford-centric that the countryside would lose out. Places like Witney are really supportive of industry and retail with the free parking...Oxford has never embraced things like that. (West Oxfordshire)

5.44 Most of the workshops thought the £20 million annual savings are not particularly significant in the context of the total revenue budget - and could be found through further efficiencies and economies within existing structures:

This is just about saving money but it saves very little in the context of the overall local authorities' spending (Oxford City)

£20 million a year is not an enormous figure. Is it worth it? It's such a small percentage of what is spent overall (West Oxfordshire)

There are ways of managing things properly and making efficiencies without doing something so radical. (Vale of White Horse)

5.45 Some in the Cherwell group were statistically aware and they repeatedly criticised the county council's chart showing £20m savings alongside the costs of a small number of services. The critics emphasised that £20 million in savings was a very small proportion of the full revenue budget; and although the facilitator stressed that other ways would have to be found to make the equivalent savings, the slide was still criticised by confident participants who believed the county's case to be "spin" or "dishonest". A typical comment was:

This is appalling; a saving of £20 million is irrelevant to the growing social needs. It's just spin to justify the case! (Cherwell)

- 5.46 Related objections were that the draft proposal is about financial savings but fails to focus on the human context and might even not achieve the benefits it seeks:

There has been too much emphasis on advantages on the money side and not enough on the disadvantages on the people side (South Oxfordshire)

I was sceptical and I still am. I can see the value in it but I'm not convinced that just because it will release more money, services will miraculously get better (South Oxfordshire)

Why should a single unitary authority join up services? It's just a hope but not guaranteed! Structure does not determine efficiency and effectiveness; you could have separate authorities working together well (Oxford City)

One council won't make much difference to the transport infrastructure; it's all just about potential and aspiration (Cherwell)

We've all seen it before; they say they'll bring the cost down and the very opposite happens...I've been involved in mergers in the public and private sector and I've never known the savings predicted to be realised (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.47 There were also worries that: council tax harmonisation might be controversial and difficult; the changes might not be 'future proof'; and that councillor workloads could become so unmanageable that they are unable to focus sufficiently on local issues:

Someone living in a little cottage down the road from here is going to be paying the same as someone in Oxford City but the person in Oxford will be getting many more services (Vale of White Horse)

Oxfordshire's population might approximate to a million within five to ten years and a single unitary council with such a population would be too big so you might need two unitaries with 400,000-500,000 people (Cherwell)

A merger could jeopardise the local services currently provided by the district and city councils in favour of adult and children's services (Cherwell)

In terms of councillors having bigger workloads; what will stop them getting so busy they won't be able to focus on local issues? (South Oxfordshire)

- 5.48 Finally, it should be noted that a few people across the five workshops felt they could neither support nor oppose a reduction to one unitary authority because they had not received enough information in the workshop on which to base their decision.

Reasons for reducing to one unitary council

- 5.49 For those who supported a reduction to one council, the case for change was made: they had been persuaded by the financial and other evidence presented that reorganisation is both necessary and desirable to make savings and efficiencies, eliminate duplication and safeguard services. Some of the very many typical quotations from across the five workshops were:

- 5.50 I got the economies of scale argument very quickly...and the strategic overview argument is very persuasive. The better communications argument is, too (West Oxfordshire)

- 5.51 You wouldn't lose any services; just the authority delivering them would change...you would only need one chief executive for example. There would be more efficiency (West Oxfordshire)
- 5.52 The more administration, the more duplication...if you can cut it down then surely that's better? (West Oxfordshire)
- 5.53 With six authorities there must be a great deal of duplication of back-office functions. Yes demand for social care will grow and we wouldn't want to see any reductions made at the sharp end, but there have to be savings available in reducing the structure above them because of the duplication (South Oxfordshire)
- 5.54 Six councils must have a lot of duplication and there must be some cost savings to be had. I'm a retired businessman and I think local authorities do waste a lot of money and six must be wasting more money than one would...Looking at it objectively, when you have a lot of small groups you do have a lot of duplication, lack of professionalism and lack of structured organisation. So conceptually it is a good idea. (South Oxfordshire)
- 5.55 Money is an issue nowadays and we need to make savings so £20 million – which is significant if used for services (Oxford City)
- 5.56 The system is very broken; we can't afford our services any more. We have to do something and this is probably, on the evidence, a sensible way forward (Vale of White Horse)
- 5.57 I absolutely agree that we should do it. It is broken at the moment and we have to meet the statutory, essential responsibilities in terms of social care etc. (Vale of White Horse)
- 5.58 There was also recognition that reducing from six to one council could simplify the complex and sometimes "confusing" structure of local government across Oxfordshire for residents:

When you've got a problem [to report] you get pulled and pushed from pillar to post. I'm looking at the complication of the tiers not the money. Under unitary whatever your problem is you'll know where to go... (West Oxfordshire)

I'm for it because of the better service. If you've got a problem you need to know where to go. I have a parent that has experienced this and it would be so much easier for us to be able to go to one department. It's very difficult to find the right person to speak to at the moment (West Oxfordshire)

Less fragmentation equals greater efficiency equals better for individuals (West Oxfordshire)

Things are very disjointed at the moment and it could make a lot of sense to bring all the services together (South Oxfordshire)

It would be good to have more consistency (Oxford City)

Unifying the council to make it simpler to provide services would be a big benefit of this so it's definitely something worth trying (Vale of White Horse)

If you ask the average man in the street 'who would you talk to about this, that or the other?' they wouldn't have a clue. So to reduce the levels of local government would only be a good thing. (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.59 Many also felt that a single unitary council would ensure easier and better co-operation, communication and integration between council departments, especially in terms of developing and implementing a coherent county-wide planning strategy for housing, transport and employment and ensuring easier working relationships with other public bodies such as the NHS and Thames Valley Police:

I agree with the argument because there must be more joined-up thinking between councils and councillors...planning for things like roads, housing etc. will be seen as part of the bigger picture...Services overlap but different areas don't talk to each other which reduced quality of service. There is a greater need for a concerted county-wide approach to many issues like houses, roads etc. (West Oxfordshire)

We have one big police force and they don't seem to work very well with the councils at the moment. They don't seem to know what level of council they should be dealing with over specific issues; there's a lot of confusion (Vale of White Horse)

The most compelling thing for me is that it will make the big decisions more effectively...it's essential that we get the planning for things like housing and social care right for the whole county (Vale of White Horse)

There's a huge lack of co-ordination between planning and roads. (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.60 The importance of including Area Boards within the draft proposal should not be underestimated: in all forums, several of those initially opposed to reducing the number of councils (on the grounds of democratic accountability) were convinced of the merits of doing so, providing these boards have a central and tangible role to play within any new authority. Some typical comments were:

Area Boards would maintain a local element and representation and are essential (West Oxfordshire)

I'm happy with the idea providing the local Area Boards have a genuine say in what's going on and don't just pay lip service. I think that's important in terms of accountability (West Oxfordshire)

The Area Boards will make a big difference as long as they are put in place properly; we need to keep Oxford City Council's expertise (Oxford City)

It's definitely got to change and it does look like it would be more efficient. But we definitely need to have the Area Boards to make sure the local interest is paramount... (South Oxfordshire)

If we can sort out the Area Boards so we keep the locality aspect it could be a very good way forward. (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.61 There was even a sense that OCC should better emphasise Area Boards in order to overcome people's concerns around the dilution of political representation and the potential disregard of local needs and wants:

The big surprise tonight was the Area Boards. That needs to be bigged up more as it will go a long way to alleviating people's 'loss of local autonomy' concerns. More needs to be made of them and the council needs to emphasise that it agrees some decisions are best taken locally and that this is what the Area Boards are for. (West Oxfordshire)

- 5.62 While there was general support for the Area Boards though, residents in the Vale of White Horse and Cherwell were critical of the idea that they could include non-councillors - because powerful unelected local people with vested interests could exert undue influence on local politics. Both workshops thought that membership should be restricted to elected representatives only:

I would not like to see unelected people on that board influencing decisions with no mandate...It could happen that you get local lobbyists lobbying the Area Boards for their own benefit. I would much prefer it to be restricted to elected local councillors meeting as a local group to consider local issues. (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.63 Furthermore, across all the forums many wanted more information on how the Areas Boards might operate in practice - for example:

A lot of the troublesome aspects of this have been put in a box labelled 'Area Boards' and there needs to be much more information and precision about exactly what these will entail. (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.64 Finally, the need for adequate 'checks and balances' was stressed across the workshops, in order to ensure ongoing scrutiny and accountability within a streamlined political structure and ensure fair funding for different areas of the county. Some typical comments were:

Different authorities can provide checks and balances to each other (Oxford City)

It will provide a single point of success but also a single point of failure, so a set of checks and balances, goals and objectives are imperative as part of the proposal because going from six sets of people who are accountable to one set is always risky (South Oxfordshire)

What safeguards are there in place to make sure all areas have sufficient funding and that everything wouldn't just go to Oxford because they feel their need is greater than other areas? (West Oxfordshire)

I think there should be some kind of monitoring body to oversee the set-up and implementation and to keep check that it is working on an ongoing basis. (South Oxfordshire)

Suggested Alternatives

- 5.65 Some Cherwell and West and South Oxfordshire participants were concerned about being offered what they described as a binary choice between retaining six councils and creating a single new one. While some agreed that change is necessary, they considered the 'One Oxfordshire' draft proposal to be too drastic and suggested that there must be some feasible "in-between" options:

We're being asked to consider an either-or proposition, but there may be shades in-between. I can see the desirability of merging housing and social services for example...but I don't think that draws us to the conclusion that to achieve it we have to abolish the current system completely. Better services can be achieved through better strategic oversight, but a single authority works against efficient operational delivery. There may be a third way (West Oxfordshire)

Given there is no third route proposed...everyone with a contrary opinion is disregarded. We shouldn't be asked to make a binary choice; an either/or decision. We should be able to consider other options (South Oxfordshire)

- 5.66 The most commonly suggested alternative proposal was a two-unitary system: one covering the City and the other the rest of the county:

Oxford should be a unitary by itself (Oxford City)

I like the idea of urban and rural councils. We are very different and I can see why the City is so against this as it does have issues that the rural areas don't have (West Oxfordshire)

York has a unitary city council. What concerns me is that the City of Oxford is very different to the rest of rural Oxfordshire so I think it might be worth looking at Yorkshire as an example. (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.67 Nonetheless, there was some recognition that the city's population may not be sufficient to sustain a unitary council and that not including the city within a wider unitary authority could be detrimental to the rest of the county given it is the area's largest revenue generator by far:

But how would Oxford's council afford all its services with a population of only 160,000? (Oxford City)

Oxford City has the university and is the hub for tourism, which we don't have. It is also one of the biggest revenue generators in terms of bringing outside money in and it generates most of the business rates. That is a significant factor. If they were to go unitary, would the rest of the area lose out? (Vale of White Horse)

- 5.68 Other infrequent suggestions were to: introduce larger council tax rises to reduce funding gaps; abolish the county council to create three unitary councils based upon merging existing districts (suggestion made at Cherwell); cross-border collaboration with the Hampshire districts; and a more graduated approach to local government reorganisation by, for example, reducing to three councils in the first instance with the potential to decrease further should this prove successful.

Other issues

- 5.69 Other relevant issues raised across the five workshops were that:

Even radical reorganisation will not solve the "social care funding problems" which is a national issue that can only have a national solution through higher taxation;

Careful consideration should be given to councillor representation to ensure that one area cannot exert undue influence within a unitary structure; and

The need for local authorities to gather *more input from business and industry as that's the only way to make savings effectively!* (Cherwell)

Other Meetings

Overview

- 5.70 As part of the engagement process, OCC (without any involvement from ORS) undertook:

42 drop-in events in Oxfordshire's libraries to raise awareness of the draft proposal, answer people's questions and take feedback;

Three events for parishes, one for town and larger councils and a small number of ad-hoc meetings and conversations with town councils who were unable to attend the larger session;

One workshop for children and young people and presentations to a number of different meetings including: the Oxford 50+ Network; the Age UK Social Care Panel; and My Life My Choice; and

A Stakeholder Advisory Group meeting and a number of one-to-one conversations with stakeholders.

- 5.71 The main findings from the library events, meetings for town councils and parishes and the Young people’s workshop are reported below. The My Life My Choice, Oxford 50+ Network and the Age UK Social Care Panel meetings were more informally noted and so have not been reported - but their outcomes will be fully considered by OCC.

Library drop-in events

- 5.72 During the engagement period, the council organised 42 drop-in sessions in libraries between 24th January and 21st February. The sessions were advertised online, in the press, through community news channels and via social media. Their primary purpose was to share information about the draft proposal, answer questions and encourage conversation about its key elements.
- 5.73 In total, 692 people were reached via this approach (this included 302 depth conversations about the draft proposal). Most people who took part were library customers, though a small number of people came in especially to share their views.
- 5.74 As with the deliberative workshops, there was a broad division in opinion around whether the current six councils should be reduced from six to one unitary authority. Some people were very in favour of the draft proposal and some very much opposed, for example: views were positive overall at Wheatley, Littlemore, Stonesfield, Woodstock, Headington and Faringdon; but negative overall at Carterton, Charlbury, Cowley and Old Marston. In many other areas there was some positivity also, but this was tinged with underlying apathy towards local government and scepticism about change and the draft proposal itself.
- 5.75 Those who supported a reduction to one council had been persuaded by the financial and other evidence presented that reorganisation is both necessary and desirable to make savings and efficiencies, eliminate duplication and safeguard services. For example:

It's good to reflect and shake it up and ask 'is what we have working?'

It's positive because of economies of scale...

Sounds like a good idea. Might make issues around money between districts easier to manage

Directing money to crucial services is important.

- 5.76 It was also said that reducing from six to one council could simplify the complex and sometimes “confusing” structure of local government across Oxfordshire for residents:

The current system is confusing

We don't always know which services are provided by which councils

Everything in the same place; that sounds good

- 5.77 Several people also felt that a single unitary council would ensure easier and better co-operation, communication and integration between council departments, improving county-wide planning for issues such as safeguarding children and housing development:

A joining up of some of the services would work

Cut duplication and join services up because that helps people (child safeguarding for example)

If there was 'One Oxfordshire' the housing issue would be a shared problem; at the moment people don't see it as a shared problem. The current set up is divisive.

- 5.78 As in the deliberative workshops, many of those who opposed or were concerned about a single unitary council were concerned about local democratic accountability and access: they felt that one unitary council would be too large and remote from its residents and would not be able to recognise or cater for the needs of Oxfordshire's different areas; and also that fewer councillors would reduce local representation. Some of the very many typical comments were:

I'm worried about losing 'local' services and local decisions

How local would local be? How big an area and how many different towns and villages would it cover?

I don't want a large, remote and impersonal council. Don't make it like another layer of faceless government where you feel like you are banging your head against a brick wall

I'm worried that the unitary would be too big. Services can work together without being joined at the hip

Oxfordshire County Council is remote...as a Parish we don't have a relationship with our county councillor who has never responded to us...

How will less councillors be better when it's already so difficult to get to speak to one?

How does less councillors mean more local?

There is a concern that local decisions will be overridden by the one council. It is a strong perception that this happens now and is one reason why some people are 'anti' the county council

We are a parish and it can't get more local than that and local people aren't interested in us. Why would people be interested with a remote, far away 'One Oxfordshire' council?

Oxfordshire is too big; they will forget the small towns

- 5.79 The differing political ideology of Oxfordshire was also raised as a concern: there was particular worry that the City's predominantly Labour voice would somewhat lost given the Conservative-dominated political make-up of the rest of the county:

I'm concerned that the local Labour ethos would be lost

How to take on the hugely diverse needs across the county. The labour majority of the City will be submerged in the Conservative rural sea. How can Labour maintain its position?

- 5.80 Furthermore, it was again said that the City has different social issues and needs to the rest of the county, that may be best met locally:

The needs of Oxford City will be overlooked

Oxford City has different requirements to the rest of the county.

However, in the rural areas there was concern that a single unitary authority could become too “Oxford-centric” at the expense of the county’s rural areas – and that steps must be taken to mitigate against this and ensure fairness:

We're a rural county so how will we continue to be properly represented?

The needs of the people in the City will be prioritised over rural communities

How will the hugely differing needs across the City and county be addressed? How will it be made fair? How can it be that the City don't get the lions share (perception or reality)?

- 5.81 The implications of widespread job losses were noted by several people, not only in terms of the effects on employees themselves, but also redundancy costs for the Council and the possibility that the quality of services may decrease with fewer staff providing them:

If we lose staff delivering services, won't service be at the loss of quality?

Cutting back on number of staff doesn't necessarily equal more efficient service. You can create inefficiency with less staff.

- 5.82 Indeed, the possible degradation of services - especially those currently provided by district councils - was a concern for many, who argued that while a new authority's focus should certainly be on the provision of statutory services, it should not neglect the more 'discretionary' services that are most used by most people:

I'm all for saving money but will it be spent on services that make a difference?

OCC should remember what is in forefront of people's minds: the state of the roads, cutting of rural bus routes, street lighting. These are seen as a non-priority

There would be less money for things like grass-cutting which is really important locally.

- 5.83 Several people desired more information on exactly how Area Boards would function in practice – as well as clarification on how town and parish councils will fit within any new structure and while some suggested that more power (and finance) should be devolved down to this level of government, others were worried that the additional responsibility could prove too burdensome:

OCC are using volunteers to cut costs. How long if this possible for?

There would be even more work and challenges for parish councils in the future.

- 5.84 Other concerns and issues were around: the cost of reorganisation and the possibility that predicted savings will not be realised in practice; possible council tax rises; councillor workloads; the future of local and neighbourhood plans and existing cross-boundary partnership arrangements between councils; and how transitional arrangements will be organised. Many more local worries were also raised, for example planning for housing developments (it was said that “rural areas and towns think they are a

dumping ground for the City's housing problem") and the possible loss of free parking in West Oxfordshire.

- 5.85 Finally, many people wanted more information, or to consider the available information before giving a view - and a number asked very detailed questions on a wide range of issues. It should also be noted that the views of many of those with a negative opinion toward 'One Oxfordshire' were coloured by what they saw as the negative impact of recent county council cuts to, for example, bus services, children's centres, libraries, day services and road maintenance:

Oxfordshire County Council is doing less and less (grass cutting, libraries, children centres) and asking others to do more and more. So that's the platform from which people receive the 'One Oxfordshire' message; this will mean more cuts and it's all about saving money

Oxfordshire County Council cuts everything that matters to local people

Oxfordshire County Council continually cut services: libraries; youth services, children centres and now daytime support. Won't it keep cutting?

Deliberative workshop for young people

- 5.86 OCC organised a deliberative workshop for young people: 22 people attended, representing a good cross-section of Oxfordshire's youth. A member of the county council Leadership Team was present and answered questions in the capacity of an 'expert witness'.
- 5.87 As a warm-up exercise, workshop participants were invited to play the 'Great Oxfordshire Shake Up' game. Each young person was given a number of magnetic pieces showing different council services and asked to place them in either the 'city/district council town hall' or the 'county hall'. The young people were then asked to consider in small groups whether they thought the services were in the right place (and self-correct if they wished) and whether the current division of services makes sense.
- 5.88 Although this section of the workshop was not specifically reported, it was successful in encouraging the young people to think about the scope of council services, their importance in day-to-day life and whether or not having a two-tier system of local government is right for Oxfordshire.
- 5.89 The second part of the workshop was structured around the four pillars of the draft proposal: simpler for residents and business; better, joined up services; more local accountability and lower cost to run. This section was prefaced by short introduction to the county council's draft proposal, including a video of the council's political group leaders filmed at the launch event. Workshop participants were actively encouraged to read the summary leaflet available on their tables and ask questions to help inform their round-table discussion.
- 5.90 Overall, the young people at this session were very involved and asked probing and insightful questions both about how the current structure of local government works and about the draft proposal. They also strongly desired more information about the draft proposal in terms of its implications and its "pros and cons"³:

³ The group was held at the start of the engagement period and thinking about some of the proposal's details (the City Convention for example) had yet to be detailed.

We want answers from someone who knows and can lay out the pros and cons to be able to make an informed decision

We want to hear and read the counter argument in order to be able to truly comment and have an opinion

We can't approve it because we don't have all the answers

The questions that we have haven't been answered yet because it's too early to say about it; we need to be more informed about it before we know more about it.

More local accountability

- ^{5.91} Discussion was dominated by the 'more local' strand and the importance of: local political representation and accountability; identity; the size of the proposed council; councillor workloads; and local access to services. Some of the many typical questions and comments were:

Will there be less power for councillors because it goes from four or five councillors to one councillor?

At the moment the young person's experience of MP's is "out of office" or "your comments have been noted" and no actual contact. It doesn't function; will councillor contact be better?

Under the banner of more local it could be less local; if the district councillors are being taken away how can it be more local?

How can one person represent a whole area? How can this be fair; a large area represented by one person versus one person representing a small area

Local councillors have a better view of local issues and problems

Will there be too much administration for one councillor if it's currently spread across four or five. How can the work of five be done by one person?

How can one big system take care of all the little things that matter?

Will they care more about the mass rather than the important individual thing?

Other places are smaller that have a unitary authority, so will it work with Oxfordshire as we are bigger than Wiltshire?

- ^{5.92} The young people certainly felt they needed more detail on the day-to-day workings of a new unitary council in order to intelligently debate the issues. For example, they sought clarification on exactly how a new council would be established - and they were interested in where a new headquarters might be based, anticipating that it would be in Oxford City to the detriment of people on the "outskirts":

How would all the councils be abolished? What organisation would make that happen and what organisation would set up the new organisation?

Some people might not be able to get to the 'One Oxfordshire' county or district offices

People on the outskirts of Oxford would feel lost because they don't have a district council near them.

- ^{5.93} There was, though, some positive feeling that the proposed new structure might widen political diversity within the current districts:

Will the new structure make local politics more open to a wider demographic away from middle class, older people...more of a mix

Simpler for residents and businesses

- 5.94 Current role duplication across the six councils was recognised, and the potential for a single website and greater simplicity in contacting the council was viewed positively, albeit with some scepticism around the possible increased use of automated telephone systems:

We don't need lots of people doing the same thing

It's a lot simpler and you can do everything as one

Something could be quicker if it is in one place or one number to call

One number in theory sounds good but will it mean one of those automated system with their annoying press one for this and two for that? When I ring a number I want to speak to a person

It sounds simpler and cheaper for the council but will it mean simpler and better for us?

Better, joined-up services

- 5.95 There was some recognition that one unitary authority could result in more joined-up services, especially in the areas of safeguarding and social work:

Is it easier for safeguarding if together?

Will it make contact and communication, follow through and action easier with social workers?

However, some participants were sceptical that any money saved would be spent on improving services:

There may be more money but where's the proof that it will be spent on services that will make a difference?

Will it change?

- 5.96 One participant suggested that, rather than wholesale change in the form of One Oxfordshire: "why don't we work out which areas need to be changed or adapted or improved and then work out what structure would support those changes? Certain ones won't need adapting or changing because they are working well". This view was also strongly supported by other participants.

Lower cost to run

- 5.97 The young people were primarily keen to understand exactly how the proposed £20 million per annum would be saved - as well as how it might be spent in future:

Explain how you save £20 million

Who decides how the £20 million gets spent and what's the system for working out what to spend it on? Without knowing in advance what it will be spent on I can't really say if I agree or not...

- 5.98 Furthermore, they questioned whether the projected savings would be realised in practice given the need for redundancy payments and, potentially, future benefits payments to those who lose their jobs as a result of reorganisation:

People will lose jobs and therefore need to claim benefits and that has a cost

Will you still be saving money even if you take into account benefits and job losses?

- 5.99 The fact there would be fewer “*competing interests*” in financial terms was considered positive by the young people, who felt that a budget controlled by one authority would allow it to “*put the money where it needs to be*”.

Other issues

- 5.100 Other issues and concerns raised at the young people’ workshop were:

The effect of job insecurity and redundancy on existing staff;

The need to fully include town councils and parishes in the process;

If it’s going to be ‘One Oxfordshire’ why can’t the parish and town councils be part of it too? If it’s going to be all about local then you can’t leave them out

Whether the councils can function effectively during the transitional period;

The need for OCC to publish the eventual proposal “*that goes before the Cabinet*”; and

How a new unitary authority would affect Looked after Children leaving care.

6. Stakeholder Engagement

Introduction

- 6.1 Key to developing the One Oxfordshire proposal for engagement and its ongoing refinement has been engagement with a wide variety of national and local stakeholders. This includes Government departments and ministers, statutory bodies, local councils; and representatives from the education, business, voluntary and community sectors, and groups and organisations for people with specific protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.
- 6.2 The county council is continuing to engage with stakeholders as it refines its joint proposal for a Better Oxfordshire with South Oxfordshire District Councils and Vale of White Horse District Council. These conversations are ongoing. Set out in this chapter is summary of the stakeholder engagement specifically relating to the development of, and engagement with, the draft ‘One Oxfordshire’ proposal.

The Stakeholder Advisory Group

- 6.3 A Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) independently chaired by the Right Reverend Colin Fletcher, Bishop of Dorchester, was established in April 2016 to inform the initial Grant Thornton report into the future of local government in Oxfordshire and subsequently to help and challenge the development of proposals. The SAG fed into the initial report and reconvened following the County Council’s decision to pursue a preferred option continuing its challenge role. In late 2016 the members of the SAG met with officers to help ‘evolve’ the overall governance model and feed their thinking into the discussion document published in 2017.
- 6.4 The SAG comprises key local stakeholder organisations from business, the voluntary and community sector, health, the emergency services, education and others.
- 6.5 The group met during the engagement period in the presence of officers from both Oxfordshire County Council and South and Vale District Councils. OCC’s records show that the main feedback and questions on the developed proposals were around:

The number, functions and powers of area executive boards;

A view that Oxfordshire communities tend to focus at the level of the market town (or in the case of Oxford, the city);

The possible relationship between partner organisations and the area executive boards;

How the move to a unitary council will change the role of councillors and the balance between “professional” and “community” approaches;

Support for steps being taken to unblock infrastructure challenges;

Concern that information in opposition to the changes was having more public purchase than communications explaining the proposals;

Clarity required on the functioning of governance arrangements in the City of Oxford;

Concern that assumptions should not be made about the functions that parishes and towns would be able or willing to take on; and

Overall support for the proposals from specific organisations.

Stakeholder Engagement Activities

- 6.6 Stakeholder engagement activities undertaken by the council during the public engagement period (19th January – 28th February 2017) on the draft proposal included: written direct communications (letters and emails), sector specific briefings, and face-to-face and telephone conversations. A list of the stakeholder groups/meetings attended is below:

| MEETING |
|--|
| Age Concern Social & Health Care Panel |
| Oxfordshire 50+ Network |
| Oxfordshire Governors' Association |
| Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) |
| My Life My Choice |
| Thames Valley Fire and Rescue Services |
| Society of Local Council Clerks - Oxfordshire Branch AGM |

Engagement with town councils and parishes

- 6.7 During summer 2016, OCC engaged with about 120 of the 316 parish and town councils and parish meetings to discuss the possibility of unitary local government and understand their priorities. There was strong engagement, with representatives interested in greater influence while seeking reassurance that unmanageable decision-making and service deliver burdens would not be placed on them.
- 6.8 After publication of the draft proposal, OCC organised three briefing sessions for parishes and another for larger parishes and town councils during the engagement period: each was led by OCC's Chief Executive (joined by the Chief Executive of South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council at three of the four meetings) and, overall, the sessions were attended by 66 councils and the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (as below). They provided an opportunity for councillors to hear about the 'One Oxfordshire' draft proposal first hand, to have specific questions and points of clarification addressed, and for people to listen to the perspectives of others. ORS's report of the main findings from these sessions follows.

Main Findings

- 6.9 The role of town councils and parishes within any new unitary structure was the primary concern for participants: the desire for more influence on both the implementation and ongoing function of a new authority was clear, as was a perceived need for improved feedback mechanisms between unitary councillors and town councils and parishes. Some typical comments were:

Parishes and towns are felt to be ignored. How can you make it that they can have more influence? (Banbury)

What ability will parishes have to input into the strategy? (Didcot)

Will there be parish engagement on the implementation executive? (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

It is really important that town and parish leaders have a decision-making role, though sometimes legally it will need to be the unitary councillors who actually take the decisions (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

What will parishes see from this proposal? There's a feeling that all requests fall on stony ground at present (Didcot)

You have to put in place a mechanism to receive feedback from the towns and parishes (Banbury)

Will there be a one-to-one relationship between councillors and parishes? (Didcot)

- 6.10 It was said in the meeting for town councils and larger parishes that “town councils are fed up with paying for services that the county has dropped” - and there was scepticism as to whether the required finance would materialise in the current financial climate:

Given the financial reality, will towns get the money to deliver? (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

- 6.11 Unsurprisingly then, several questions were asked across the sessions around how exactly the devolution of power to town councils and parishes would be achieved - particularly in relation to the funding and resources thought to be needed to enable the provision of additional services:

How are you going to fund devolving of responsibilities to parish councils? (Didcot)

How will responsibilities be pushed down to parishes without resources? (Witney)

How will small parishes, who don't have any staff, integrate into the new model? (Witney)

How will devolved funding work? (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

- 6.12 As in the workshops with members of the public, a possible loss of democratic accountability was an issue for some town and parish councillors, who felt that one large unitary council would be too geographically and socially remote from its residents:

Could there be degradation of the link between electorate and member? (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

In my experience of living in a rural community, the people who make the best decisions are the people who live locally. In a unitary authority the people making the decisions will be miles away (Witney)

- 6.13 As such, developing a structure that retains an element of localism was considered essential:

It is important to align district services and make sure you retain local knowledge (Banbury)

What structure will there be for local working? (Didcot)

- 6.14 Of course, the proposed Area Boards are designed to do just that, and town and parish councillors across the four sessions were keen to understand: how exactly they would work in terms of roles, responsibilities and powers (at Didcot, tax-raising powers were considered especially important as “unless Area Boards have significant funds to allocate what freedom do they have?”); and where they would be based;

What’s important for Parishes is how Area Boards work? (Banbury)

What responsibilities do you envisage the areas boards having? (Didcot)

Will the Area Boards have fundraising powers? (Didcot)

Would the Area Boards have their own area offices with departments split into those areas? (Banbury)

- 6.15 It was suggested at Banbury that five Area Boards may be insufficient - and there was some scepticism at Witney as to whether they would be implemented in practice, as well as whether they would actually prove to be much different from the existing district councils:

Five Area Boards would be insufficient. Could we go back to the pre-1974 boundaries? (Banbury)

With a new council there would be elections and a Cabinet that would decide on its policies. This Cabinet will make all the decisions; we may not get the Area Boards, it’s all speculation! (Witney)

If they are to be more than talking shops they will need staff, resources etc. What is to stop them migrating back to district councils? (Witney)

- 6.16 At the town council and larger parishes meeting, there was a spontaneous mention of the Durham model of unitary government and specifically the Area Action Partnerships (the equivalent of the proposed local area boards in Oxfordshire)⁴. This hub and spoke model is founded on the premise that not one size fits all and is based around natural communities that vary in size and role - and the Area Action Partnerships are supported by officers, offer a role to towns and parishes and have flexible geography and the ability to work both collectively and individually. The view of the room was that this could work in Oxfordshire, though it was recognised that it has taken time to develop and embed.

- 6.17 Though not raised as an issue at Didcot, some participants in all other sessions felt that a new unitary authority could potentially become too Oxford-centric if councillor numbers were to be based on population. Their main fear in this respect seemingly centred around a ‘land grab’ whereby the City’s housing needs would be met through re-allocation to other districts:

How can people be reassured that Oxford is not more important than Witney for example? (Banbury)

In terms of a single council; would we have a city-dominated council because members are based on population numbers? (Witney)

I fear that the north will suffer from an Oxford-centric single unitary council. For example, the gap in the planning for Oxford homes (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

⁴ <http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/1960/About-AAPs>

West Oxfordshire District Council have a local plan for 15,900 houses. Cherwell and City have in excess of 30,000 each. What safeguards would there be to fight against lower local plan numbers; city councillors forcing other areas to have higher housing numbers. (Witney)

- 6.18 Other worries were around potential implementation difficulties given only two of the district councils are “on board” - though in the meeting for Town Councils and Larger Parishes the fact that South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse are involved was considered positive in the sense that the draft proposal is now “*more of a merger not an acquisition*”:

How much of a problem is it that only two of the district councils are on board? (Banbury)

Although the county and two others agree the others are still fighting (Banbury)

To be clear; the county council will be submitting a proposal with the support of only two district councils. Three oppose? (Witney)

- 6.19 At Witney, however, it was said that these two districts are not entirely on board given they have asked for amendments to the original proposal and will only agree to it if these are made:

South and Vale want amendments to the document published in January so they’ve not agreed it. (Witney)

- 6.20 Despite the concerns noted above, some positive comments were made at the meeting for town councils and larger parishes, where a couple of participants felt one unitary authority for the whole of Oxfordshire may be beneficial in ensuring infrastructure improvements and achieving better alignment with other public bodies such as the NHS:

The infrastructure to support growth...is this more likely in a unitary? (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

We could get alignment with other partners and service clusters such as the NHS. Then co-location etc. would be possible. (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

- 6.21 Some other less frequent concerns, issues and questions around the ‘One Oxfordshire’ draft proposal and its implications (and indeed in some cases more generally) can be seen below:

The £20 million annual saving is relatively small

The £20M saving is not much as a percentage. It’s similar to inflation (Didcot)

Savings of £20m a year is a very small figure compared to overall expenditure (Witney)

The timetable is too rushed

This timetable is almost the same as Brexit; is it achievable? This feels hugely rushed (Didcot)

County Durham for example has taken a long time to make it work (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

The possibility for further consultation - and what happens if the engagement outcomes are largely negative

Can you clarify when there would be more public consultation? (Banbury)

If the vast majority of responses are negative what will happen? (Witney)

The future of Local and Neighbourhood Plans

I have concerns about the Cherwell Local Plan which offers a reasonable amount of protection...what will happen to the Cherwell Local Plan? (Banbury)

What role will neighbourhood plans have? (Didcot)

The social care “crisis” and why it has not been addressed sooner

Thirty years ago we were aware that there would be population growth and an aging population? (Banbury)

Why has this escalated to a national level? (Banbury)

Infrastructure improvements (i.e. where will the money come from and will they be achievable in practice?)

Where do you get the real money to improve the simple things like potholes? (Banbury)

You are talking about planning more growth but this is still dependent on the private sector delivering. Currently lots of developers with permissions are not delivering (Banbury)

Housing issues

Does the document deal with the fact that the City has retained its housing stock and districts have housing associations? (Witney)

I'm not clear how the county council will take responsibility for the houses that aren't built (Banbury)

Councils work well in partnership already

Didn't Oxfordshire County Council transport and highways have a part to play in the Cherwell Local Plan? (Banbury)

Staff workloads

If you've got fewer staff doing the same amount of work, it will put more pressure on those delivering services (Witney)

Councillor workloads and responsibilities

I have concern over the breadth of responsibility that the new unitary councillors will have; remember they are volunteers (Didcot)

Potential loss of “checks and balances”

Checks and balances will be reduced? (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

The decision-making process

Will we see the final form of the proposal before it's submitted? (Witney)

Does the Secretary of State have any say over the form or is it a yes or no? (Witney)

Council tax harmonisation

West is losing in services because they are collecting the lowest precept (Banbury)

Will the impact of the city council mean it goes up? (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

Views of other political parties

Three main political parties came together; what about other parties? (Witney)

Use of reserves

The document says what the district councils reserves are as a percentage of the county council reserves. The percentage of what is not explained in the document. The county hold the biggest reserves in terms of actual money (Witney)

Use of Section 106 monies

In terms of community infrastructure, in the document it talks about use of all local Section 106 monies; will all of this go to the unitary authority? (Witney)

The influence of the Local Enterprise Partnership within a new system

What about the LEP, which has the power to make infrastructure decisions and is not democratically-elected? (Didcot)

Potential Boundary Commission changes

Does one councillor per 6,000 people mean that there would need to be a boundary commission change? (Banbury)

Councillors and boundaries need to reflect growth (Town Councils and Larger Parishes)

The Cabinet versus Committee System

One of things that has made districts and county more remote is the cabinet style of government. If you have a member of a different political group how do they get listened to by cabinet? (Banbury)

- 6.22 Finally - in terms of alternative suggestions, increasing council tax beyond the proposed levels was suggested at Banbury:

Why weren't you looking for an increase in council tax and referendum to increase funds? (Banbury)

Wouldn't you agree that doing this and then getting a government deal would be a preferential option? (Banbury)

- 6.23 Overall then, while supporting the idea of simplifying local government structures and making efficiency savings, the town councils and parishes were very concerned about a potential loss of local influence within one unitary authority.

- 6.24 A number of town and parish councils also responded to the engagement questionnaire. Their responses have been provided in full to OCC to further consideration. Meanwhile a summary of the main issues raised by these groups (and other types of stakeholder) has been provided below.

Findings from the engagement questionnaire (organisation responses)

6.25 The table below provides a list of the organisations which responded to the engagement questionnaire.

Figure 39: List of organisations responding to the engagement questionnaire

| Stakeholders responding to the open engagement questionnaire | |
|--|--|
| Adderbury Parish Council | Launton Parish Council |
| ATC. | Milton Under Wychwood Parish Council |
| Banbury Museum Trust | Oak Grove Associates Ltd |
| Banbury Town Council/Banburycross Party Working Group. | Oxford Civic Society |
| Bodicote Parish Council | Oxford Climate Lobbying - Part Of Low Carbon Headington |
| Brize Norton Parish Council | Oxford Malayalee Club |
| Burford Town Council | Oxfordshire Green Party |
| Chadlington Parish Council | Shipton-Under-Wychwood Parish Council |
| Claydon With Clattercote Parish Council | Sonning Common Parish Council |
| Clifton Hampden Parish Council | Sovereign Housing Association |
| CPRE Oxfordshire (Campaign To Protect Rural England) | St Helen Without Parish Council |
| Curbridge And Lew Parish Council | Steeple Aston Parish Council |
| Filkins And Broughton Poggs Parish Council | Stratton Audley Parish Council |
| Finstock Parish Council | Sunningwell Parish Council |
| Hampton Gay And Poyle Parish Council | Sunningwell Parishioners Against Damage To The Environment (SPADE) |
| Hornton Parish Council | The Great Tew Estate (Estate Surveyor) |
| Need Not Greed Oxfordshire Coalition | Sibford Gower Pc |
| Kennington Parish Council | Waterstock Parish Council |
| Kirtlington Parish Council | Unite (3 responses) |
| | <i>Unknown (14 responses)</i> |

6.26 27 organisations agreed with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire (9 of which strongly agreed) and 21 organisations disagreed (18 of which strongly disagreed).

6.27 17 organisations agreed with the principle of one unitary council providing all services in a particular area (8 of which strongly agreed) and 29 disagreed (of which, 28 strongly disagreed).

6.28 In terms of the four aims of ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’:

- *Simpler local government*: 34 organisations felt this would be important; 9 felt it would be unimportant;
- *Better services*: 44 organisations felt this would be important; 2 felt it would be unimportant;
- *More local accountability*: 41 organisations felt this would be important; 3 felt it would be unimportant;

- *Lower running costs*: 37 organisations felt this would be important; 10 felt it would be unimportant.

6.29 Finally, 9 organisations agreed with the draft proposals for a single unitary and 39 disagreed (of which, 35 strongly disagreed).

6.30 The text comments provided by organisations (including a number of town and parish councils) as part of their responses to the engagement questionnaire have been provided in full to OCC for further consideration.

6.31 A selection of some of the points raised is provided below:

Concerns from rural areas (particularly parish councils in these areas) that any new authority will favour more urban areas, be less tuned to rural needs, and be less locally accountable;

Concerns about a perceived lack of clarity over the proposed role of parish and town councils and Area Boards;

Some support for three or four unitary authorities (following the example of Berkshire, which has more than one unitary), or for separate City and rural councils, or for the abolition of OCC and its powers being transferred to the districts (perhaps working in partnership with one another);

Concerns about political differences between the City and the rural areas (which might jeopardise policies in Oxford aimed at promoting affordable housing, sustainable development and a Living Wage; and tackling homelessness and environmental issues);

Some concerns about the engagement process (awareness, impartiality of engagement document and questionnaire)

Written submissions

6.32 A number of stakeholders chose to submit a response to the engagement exercise using the survey form (both online and in writing). Other chose to send in detailed written responses to the county council, and others directly to the Secretary of State, copied to OCC. Such submissions are still forthcoming and are being fully considered by OCC alongside this engagement report. A summary of the submissions received to date are below.

6.33 In addition to the communications received from Oxford City Council and West Oxfordshire and Cherwell District Councils (which are summarised below and reproduced in their entirety in Appendix C), the following respondents also submitted a written response to OCC.

| Stakeholders submitting a written response | |
|--|--|
| Abingdon Town Council | Oxfordshire Governors' Association (OGA) |
| Age UK Oxfordshire (& Action for Carers Oxfordshire) | Oxfordshire Green Party |
| Aston, Cote, Shifford & Chimney Parish Council | Oxfordshire Mind |
| Bloxham Parish Council | Salford Parish Council |
| Charlbury Town Council (2 responses) | Skanska |
| Chilton Parish Council | Sonning Common Parish Council |

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| East Hendred Parish Council | Standlake Parish Council |
| Harwell Campus | Thame Town Council |
| Longcot Parish Council | Thames Valley Police |
| Northmoor Parish Council | Wardington Parish Council |
| Oxford Civic Society | Watchfield Parish Council |
| Oxford Labour Party | Waterstock Parish Council |
| Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils | Woodstock Town Council |
| Oxfordshire CCG | Wootton Parish Council |

6.34 OCC has read and classified the responses using standard themes; the main views were as follows:

13 of the 29 responses (from Skanska, Longcot Parish Council, Watchfield Parish Council, East Hendred Parish Council, Waterstock Parish Council, Abingdon Town Council, Charlbury Town Council, Harwell Campus, the OGA, Chilton Parish Council, Charlbury Town Council, Woodstock Town Council and Thame Town Council) were generally in favour of the proposals;

Abingdon Town Council, Watchfield Parish Council, Woodstock Town Council and Wootton Parish Council specifically stated that one unitary authority is required to make efficiency savings and reduce duplication – whereas Skanska, Abingdon Town Council, Harwell Campus and Oxfordshire CCG felt it would enable more effective joined up working between council departments and with outside agencies;

Six of the 29 responses (from Sonning Common Parish Council, the Oxford Labour Party, the Oxfordshire Green Party, Wardington Parish Council, Salford Parish Council and Standlake Parish Council) generally opposed the proposals;

The main issues of concern were around a potential loss of democratic accountability, local political representation and ‘localism’ more generally under one unitary authority which, it was felt, would be too geographically and socially remote from residents. These were worries for Abingdon Town Council, Aston, Cote, Shifford & Chimney Parish Council, Bloxham Parish Council, Longcot Parish Council, the Oxford Civic Society, the Oxford Labour Party, the Oxfordshire Green Party, Salford Parish Council, Sonning Common Parish Council, Standlake Parish Council, Watchfield Parish Council, Waterstock Parish Council, Wardington Parish Council and Wootton Parish Council;

A further concern for Aston, Cote, Shifford & Chimney Parish Council, Bloxham Parish Council, the Oxford Civic Society, the Oxford Labour Party, Standlake Parish Council and Waterstock Parish Council was that the proposed changes will not achieve the savings predicted - and Northmoor Parish Council, Sonning Common Parish Council and Watchfield Parish Council were not convinced that service improvements would result from the draft proposal;

Aston, Cote, Shifford & Chimney Parish Council, Chilton Parish Council, Wardington Parish Council and Watchfield Parish Council worried that the needs of Oxford City would be prioritised over those of the rural areas;

Bloxham Parish Council, Northmoor Parish Council and the Oxford Labour Party made generally negative comments about Oxfordshire County Council;

Other, far less common, issues and concerns were that:

More than one councillor is required for each area (Bloxham Parish Council and Watchfield Parish Council);

More power should be devolved to town councils and parishes if a unitary council is implemented (Bloxham Parish Council and East Hendred Parish Council);

The political landscape may become diluted and the voice of the Labour-voting city may be drowned out by the Conservative-voting county (the Oxford Labour Party and Sonning Common Parish Council);

An elected mayor for Oxfordshire is unnecessary (Chilton Parish Council, Thame Town Council);

Council assets should not be disposed of (Thame Town Council);

More information is required prior to making a definitive decision (Watchfield Parish Council);

Council tax harmonisation may be contentious in some areas (Wardington Parish Council); and

The impact of Brexit is unknown and must be monitored (Watchfield Parish Council).

Two alternatives was proposed: Woodstock Town Council suggested two unitary authorities - one for the City and one for the county; and Bloxham Parish Council and the Oxfordshire Green Party said they would prefer three unitary councils; and

Watchfield Parish Council and Woodstock Town Council complained that the engagement process has been somewhat “leading” - and the Oxford Civic Society and Watchfield Parish Council also made general criticisms of the process.

Mailbox communications

^{6.35} OCC also received the following communications to its ‘One Oxfordshire’ and ‘Better Oxfordshire’ mailboxes from stakeholders seeking points of clarification on the draft proposal or engagement process.

| ONE OXFORDSHIRE MAILBOX | |
|----------------------------|----------|
| | QUESTION |
| Parish and Town Councils | 12 |
| Business | 1 |
| Education | 1 |
| Trade Union | 1 |
| BETTER OXFORDSHIRE MAILBOX | |
| | QUESTION |
| Parish and Town Council | 5 |
| Individual | 0 |
| Business | 0 |
| TOTAL | 5 |

Engagement with Oxfordshire City and District Councils

- 6.36 The Chief Executive of Oxfordshire County Council wrote to the City and District Councils on 18 January sharing the discussion document that was due to be published on 19 January and inviting these councils to engage in the formative stage to help the development of proposals.
- 6.37 In early February, Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils subsequently agreed to work with the county council to develop proposals as a joint-bid. Subsequent joint working has led to the proposals as published.
- 6.38 Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council and West Oxfordshire District Councils wrote to the County Council during (or in the case of Cherwell shortly after) the engagement period. Their correspondence has been summarised by OCC below and appended in full as appendix C to this report.

Issues raised by Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire

- 6.39 While acknowledging that they had been asked for views, all three councils felt that they had not been properly or formally consulted.
- 6.40 These three councils felt that, in their view, there is no consensus on changes to local government structures and other options have not been fully considered. The three councils were concerned that the open and iterative engagement process and the engagement with Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils that together led to improvements being considered and introduced invalidated the engagement on the original proposition.
- 6.41 The three councils were concerned that engagement should extend to district councils beyond Oxfordshire's borders engaged in partnerships with Oxfordshire districts. [Responses were received from Cotswold and Forest of Dean District Councils principally concerned with the impact on existing partnership arrangements between districts including West Oxfordshire].
- 6.42 The three councils felt that the assessment of housing delivery was inaccurate.
- 6.43 The three councils were concerned at a lack of clarity and detail in some areas including: the area executive board model; council tax harmonisation; the costs of transition particularly with regard to existing contractual and partnership arrangements; governance arrangements for the City of Oxford; the planning framework; budget pressures and transformation plans for adult social care and the position regarding existing councils' reserves and commitments.
- 6.44 The three councils were concerned that future projected population growth would mean that the new council would in time become too large.
- 6.45 West Oxfordshire was concerned that changes would be top-down and hierarchical rather than focussing on transforming service delivery and that local democracy and choice would be reduced. West Oxford also specifically sited poor public support.
- 6.46 The three councils were of the view that a combined authority with an elected mayor with the retention of the existing district and county councils was a better solution for governance in Oxfordshire.
- 6.47 A further letter was received from Oxford City Council (in appendix C) highlighted areas of legal challenge and requested a delay to consider the revised Better Oxfordshire proposal.

List of Figures

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1: Residents’ survey responses (unweighted and weighted) and resident population by district, age, gender, working status, ethnic group, and tenure (Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding) | 28 |
| Figure 2: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire. | 30 |
| Figure 3: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire by district/city council area. | 31 |
| Figure 4: Demographic differences in agreement with the need to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire. | 32 |
| Figure 5: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in residents’ particular area. | 33 |
| Figure 6: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in residents’ particular area by district/city council area. | 34 |
| Figure 7: Demographic differences in agreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in residents’ particular areas. | 35 |
| Figure 8: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’ | 36 |
| Figure 9: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’, by district/city area | 37 |
| Figure 10: Demographic differences in levels of importance attached to ‘simpler local government’ | 38 |
| Figure 11: Demographic differences in levels of importance attached to ‘better services’ | 38 |
| Figure 12: Demographic differences in levels of importance attached to ‘more local accountability’ | 39 |
| Figure 13: Demographic differences in levels of importance attached to ‘lower running costs’ | 39 |
| Figure 14: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposal to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire | 40 |
| Figure 15: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposal to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire, by district/city council area. | 41 |
| Figure 16: Demographic differences in support for abolishing the six current councils and replacing them with one ‘unitary council’ for the whole of Oxfordshire. | 42 |
| Figure 17: Socio-demographic characteristics for the open questionnaire (Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding) | 45 |
| Figure 18: Breakdown of individual responses to the open questionnaire by area and comparison to Oxfordshire’s population (Note: Percentages may not sum due to rounding) | 46 |
| Figure 19: Number of responses to the engagement questionnaire by MSOA (Oxfordshire and areas on periphery only) | 46 |
| Figure 20: Cumulative response to the engagement questionnaire, by district | 47 |
| Figure 21: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire. | 49 |
| Figure 22: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire by district/city council area. | 50 |
| Figure 23: Demographic differences in agreement with the need to reorganise local government across Oxfordshire. | 51 |
| Figure 24: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in respondents’ particular area. | 52 |

Figure 25: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in respondents’ particular area by district/city council area. 53

Figure 26: Demographic differences in agreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in respondents’ particular area. 54

Figure 27: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘simpler local government’, ‘better services’, ‘more local accountability’ and ‘lower running costs’ 55

Figure 28: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘simpler local government’, by district/city council area. Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets) 56

Figure 29: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘better services’, by district/city council area. Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets) 56

Figure 30: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘more local accountability’, by district/city council area. 57

Figure 31: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘lower running costs’, by district/city council area. Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets) 57

Figure 32: Demographic differences in perceptions of importance of ‘simpler local government’ 58

Figure 33: Demographic differences in perceptions of importance of ‘better services’ 58

Figure 34: Demographic differences in perceptions of importance of ‘more local accountability’ 59

Figure 35: Demographic differences in perceptions of importance of ‘lower running costs’ 59

Figure 36: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposals to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new ‘unitary council’ for the whole of Oxfordshire..... 61

Figure 37: Agreement and disagreement with abolishing the six current councils and replacing them with one ‘unitary council’ for the whole of Oxfordshire. Responses by city and district council areas. 62

Figure 38: Demographic differences in agreement with the draft proposals for a single unitary authority covering the whole of Oxfordshire. 63

Figure 39: List of organisations responding to the engagement questionnaire 93

