



**Cabinet
Tuesday, 14 March 2017**

ADDENDA

- 6. Draft Proposal for the Future Organisation of Local Government in Oxfordshire (Pages 1 - 134)**

Annex 5, the Full Engagement Report is attached together with the Performance Scrutiny Committee Chairman's Report to Cabinet

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CABINET – 14 MARCH 2017

Proposals for the Future Organisation of Local Government in Oxfordshire: Full Engagement Report (Annex 5)

Supplementary Report by Chief Executive

1. A report has been published for consideration at Cabinet on 14 March 2017 entitled “Proposals for the Future Organisation of Local Government in Oxfordshire”.
2. In support of the contents of this report, a public and stakeholder engagement exercise has been undertaken by the Council. A summary report on this engagement exercise was published with the main report as Annex 3.
3. Following the completion of analysis, a full detailed report has now been prepared and is now published as Annex 5.
4. The full texts of institutional responses have been deposited in the Members’ Board room for review.

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Chief Executive

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March 2017

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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

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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.

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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 easy 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 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.
- 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.oneoxfordshire.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%

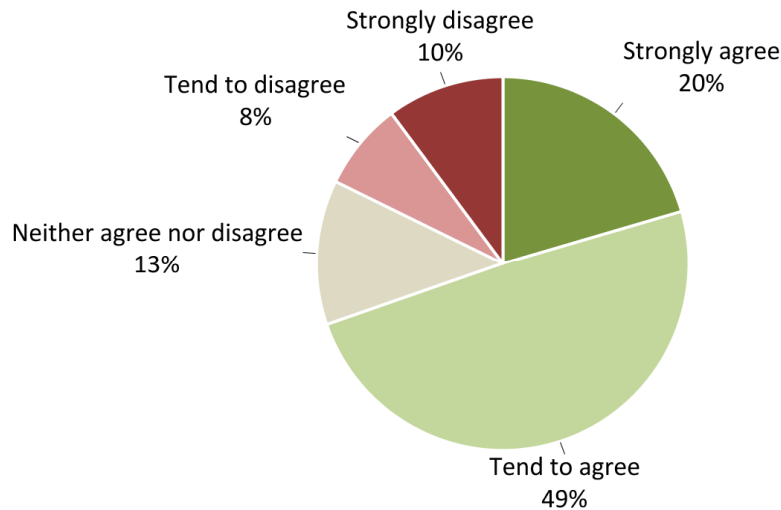
Interpretation of the Data

- 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?

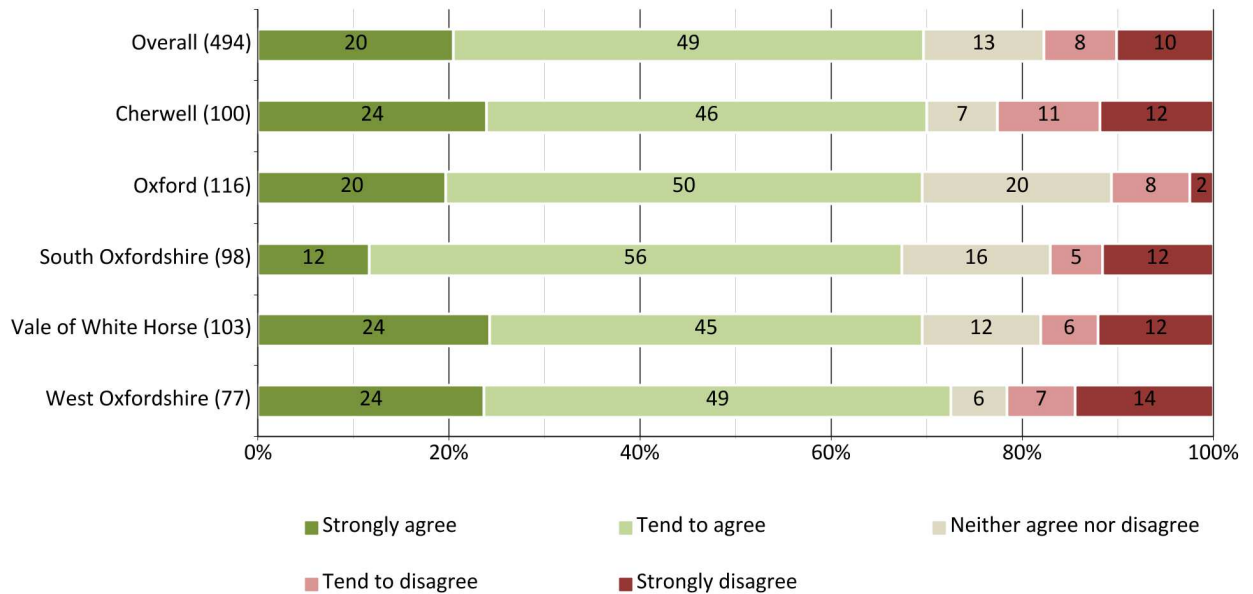
Figure 2: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire.



Base: All Residents (494)

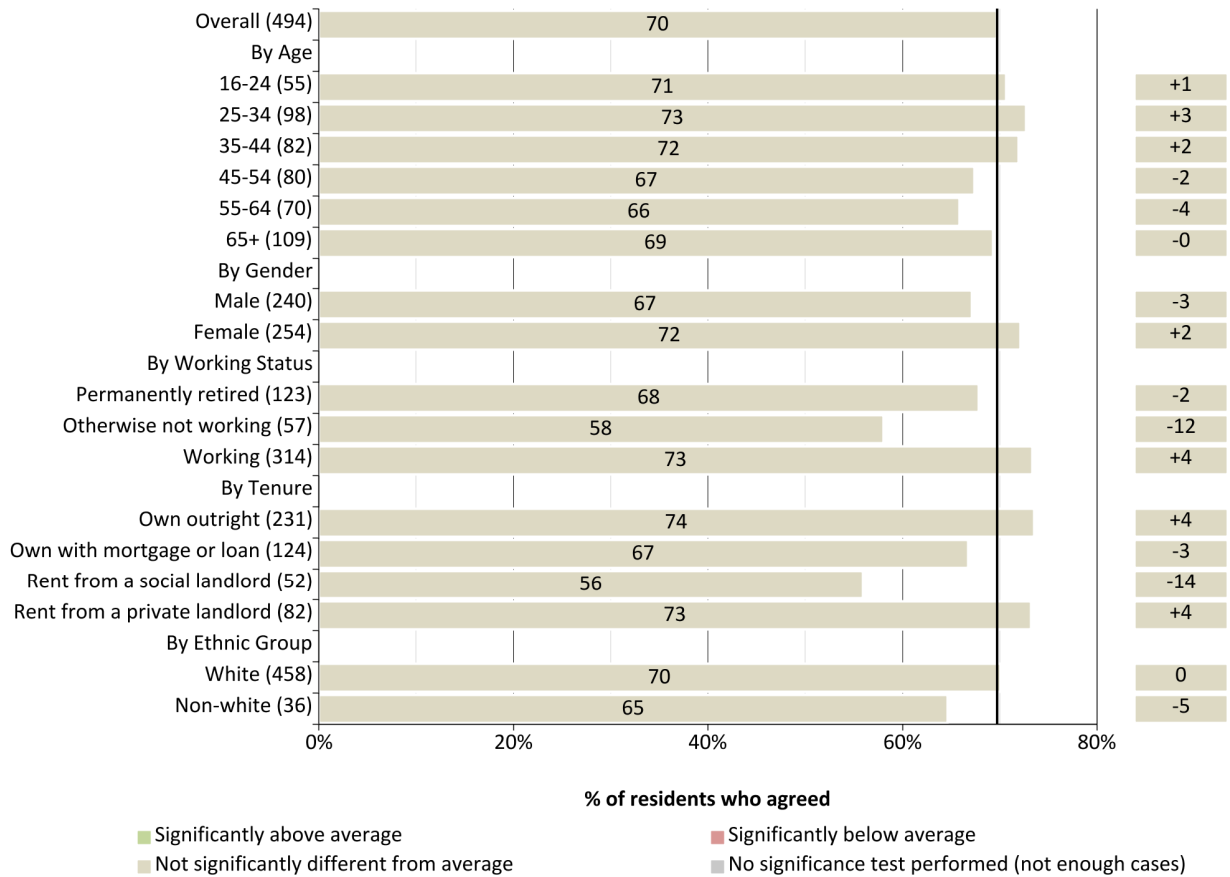
- ^{3.17} Residents were given a short introduction explaining the changes to government funding and the need for the councils to make savings, as well as explaining the increased demand for social care and its associated pressures. Residents were then asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed 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.

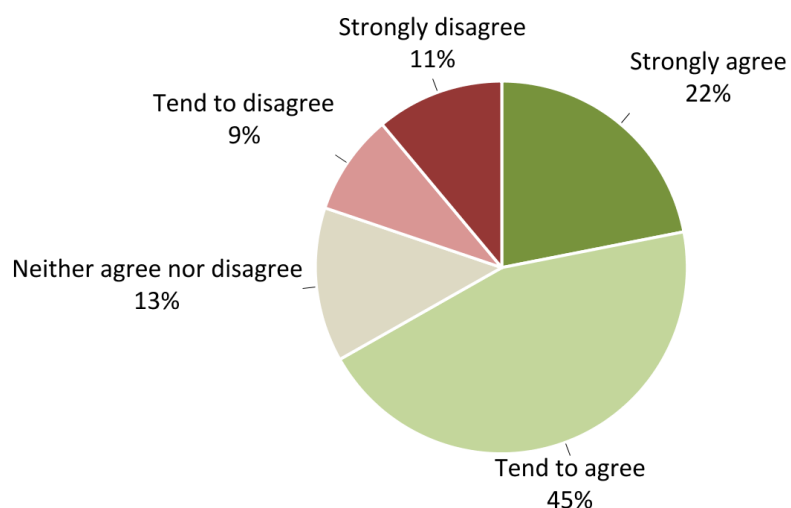
Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

- 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.

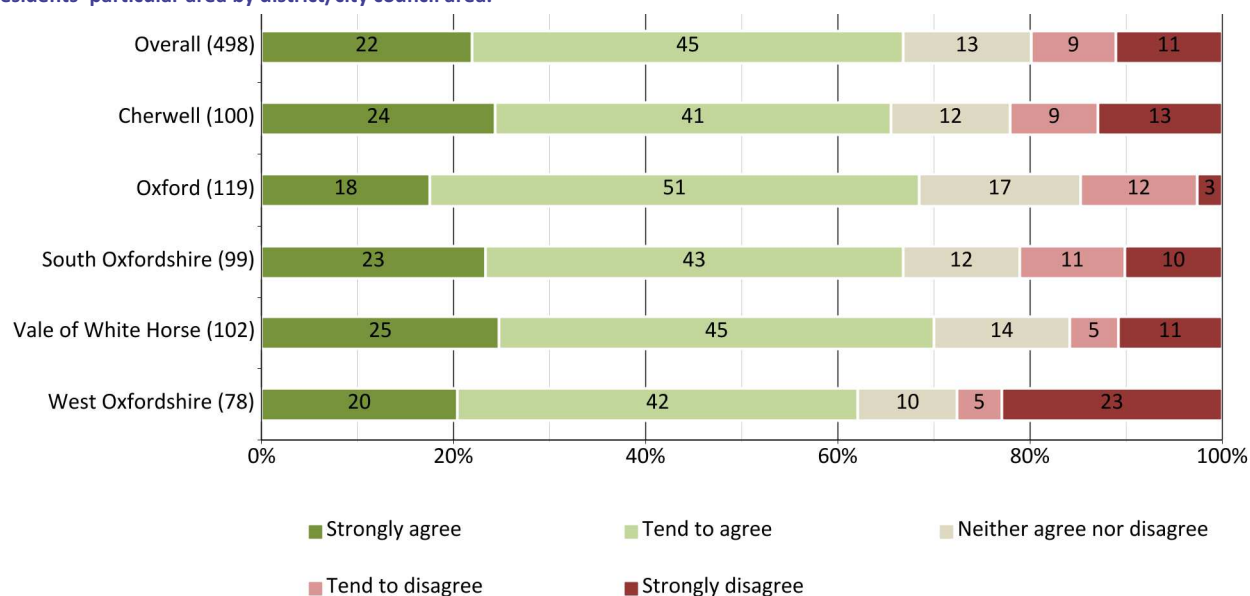
Figure 5: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in residents' particular area.



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).

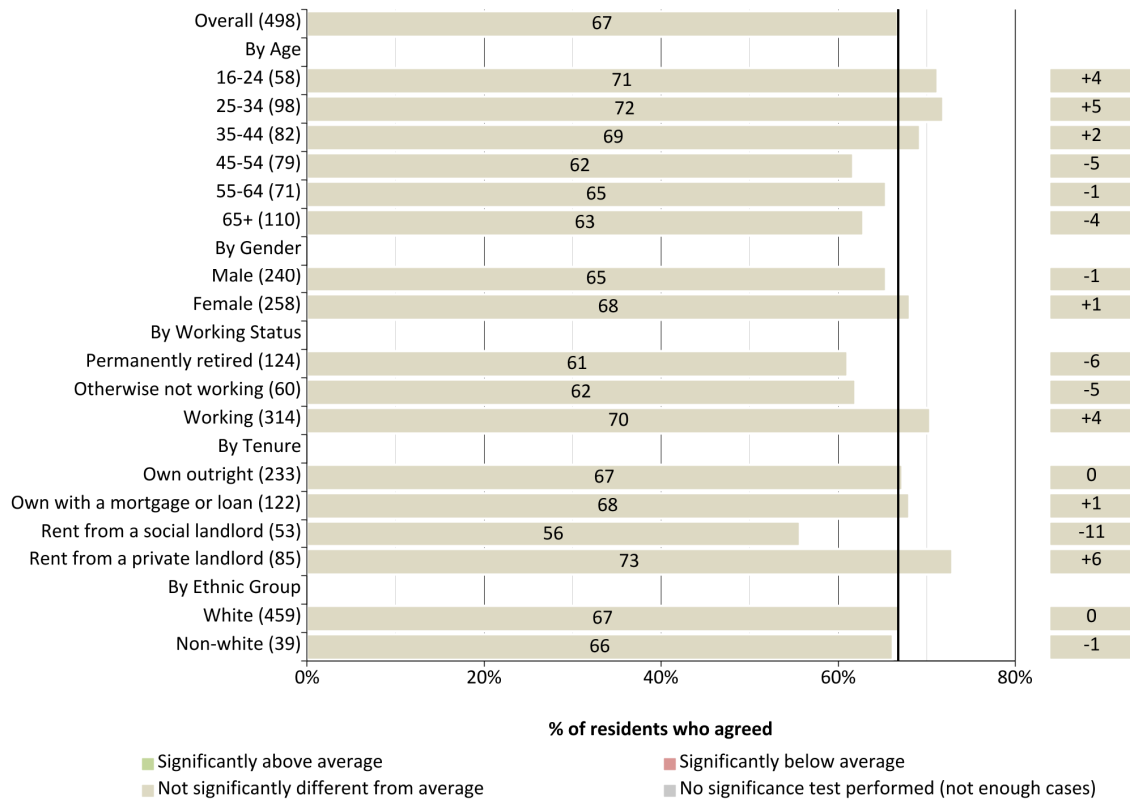
Figure 6: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in residents' particular area by district/city council area.



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.



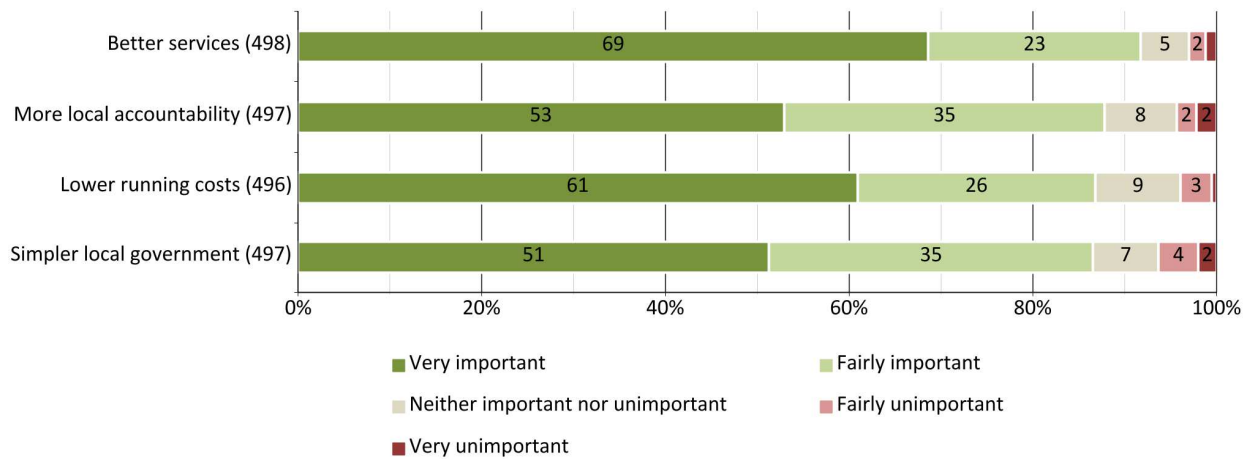
Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

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."

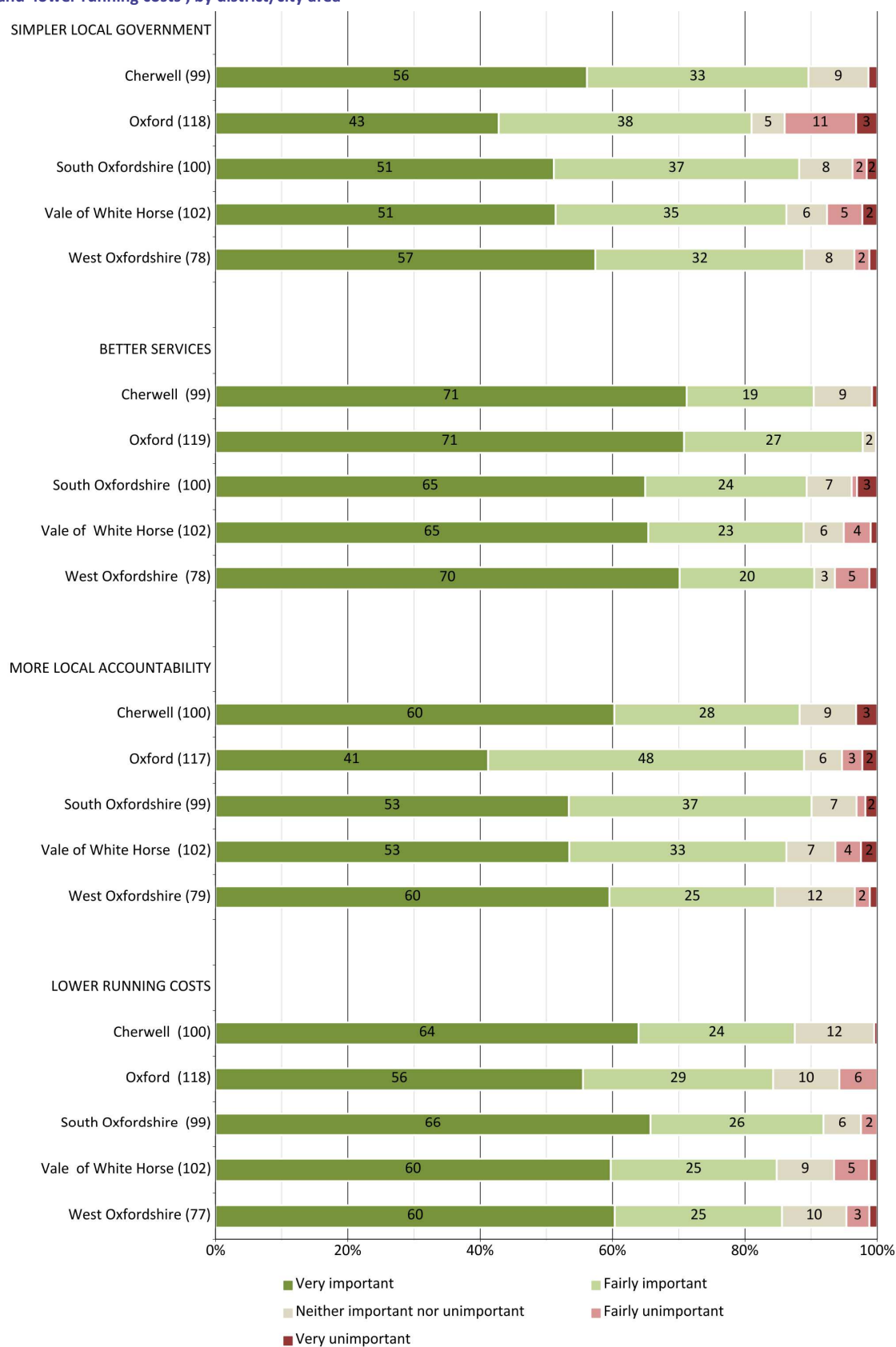
Figure 8: Perceived importance and unimportance of 'simpler local government', 'better services', 'more local accountability' and 'lower running costs'



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%).

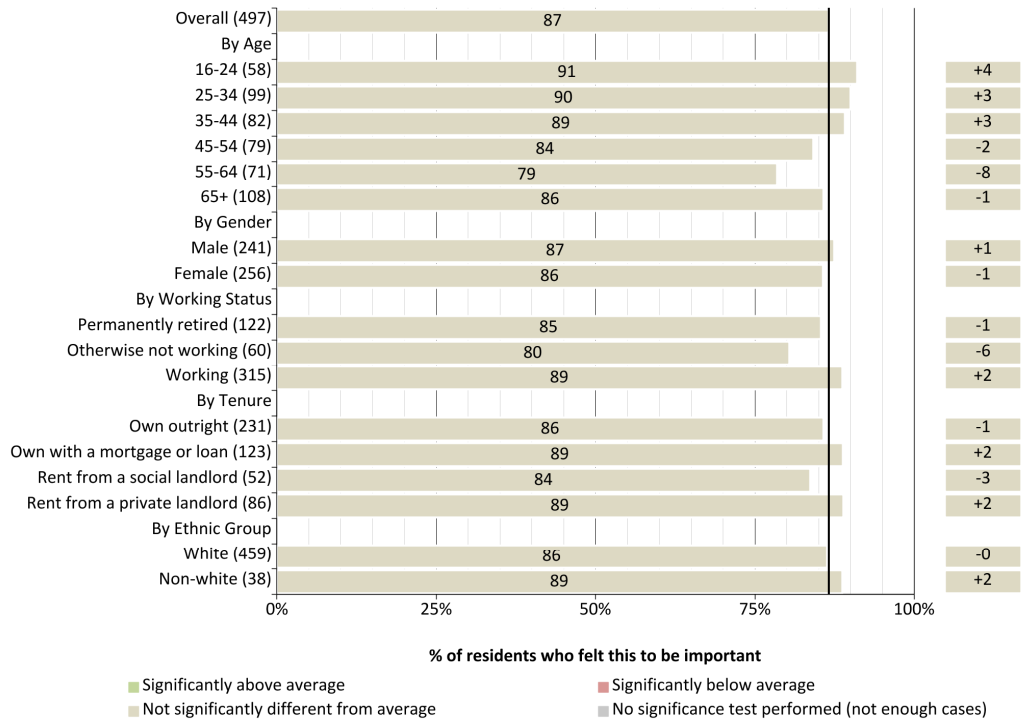
Figure 9: Perceived importance and unimportance of 'simpler local government', 'better services', 'more local accountability' and 'lower running costs', by district/city area



Base: All residents (number shown in brackets)

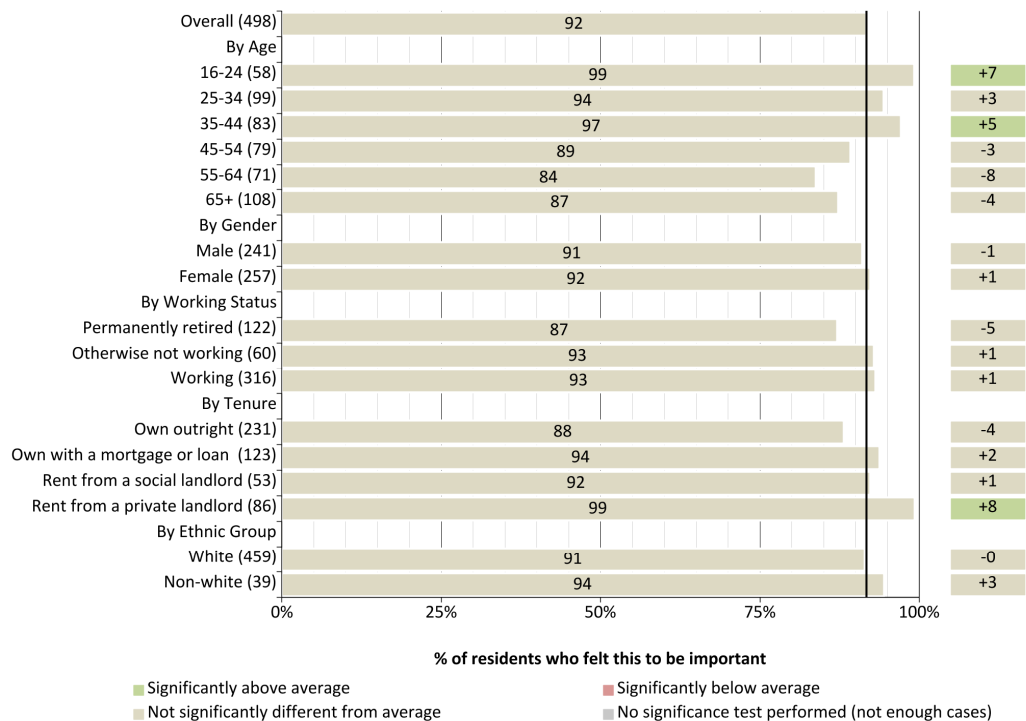
- 3.33 Figure 9 above shows the breakdown of views by each district/city council area. It can be seen that in all areas, significant majorities of residents felt each factor would be important. The single highest result was seen in Oxford, where 98% of residents felt 'better services' would be important.

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

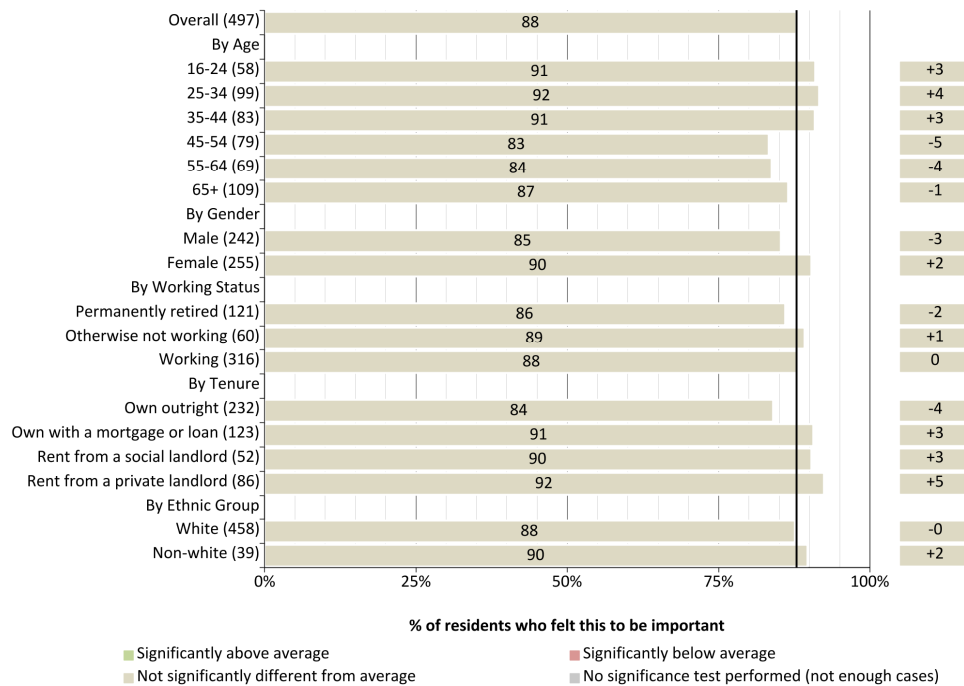
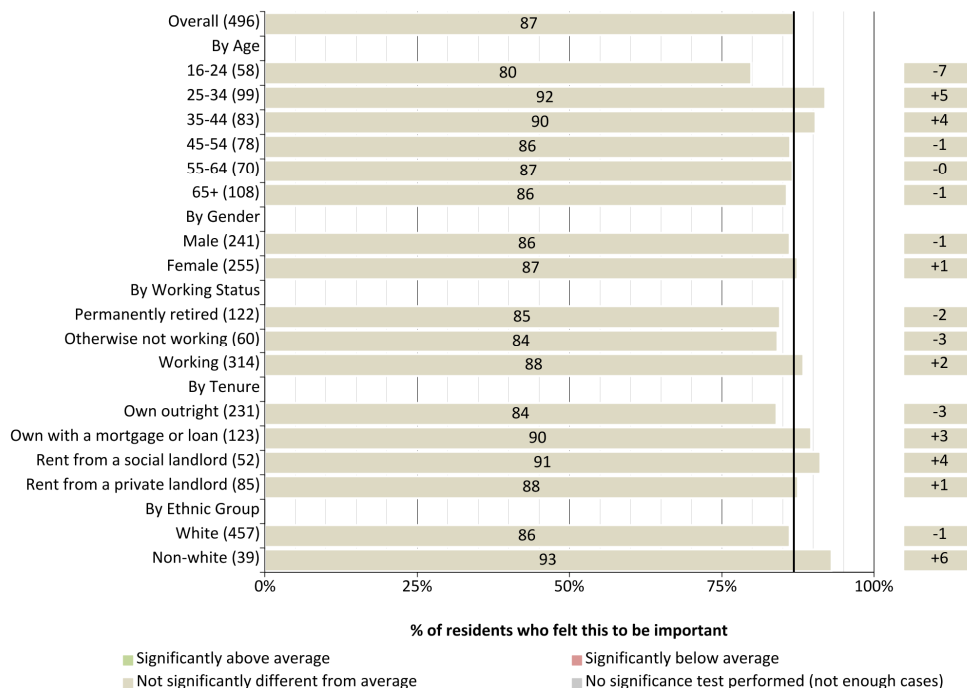


Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

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



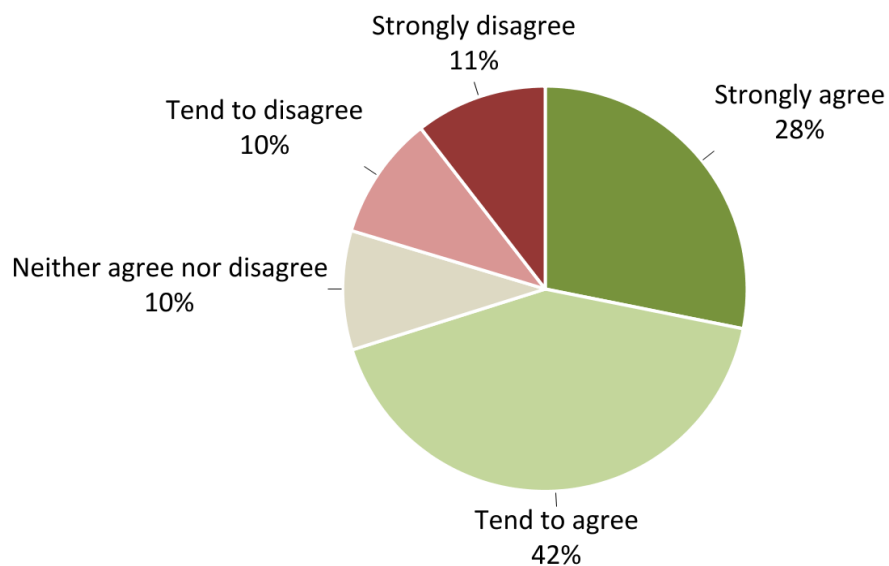
Base: All Residents (number shown in brackets)

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?

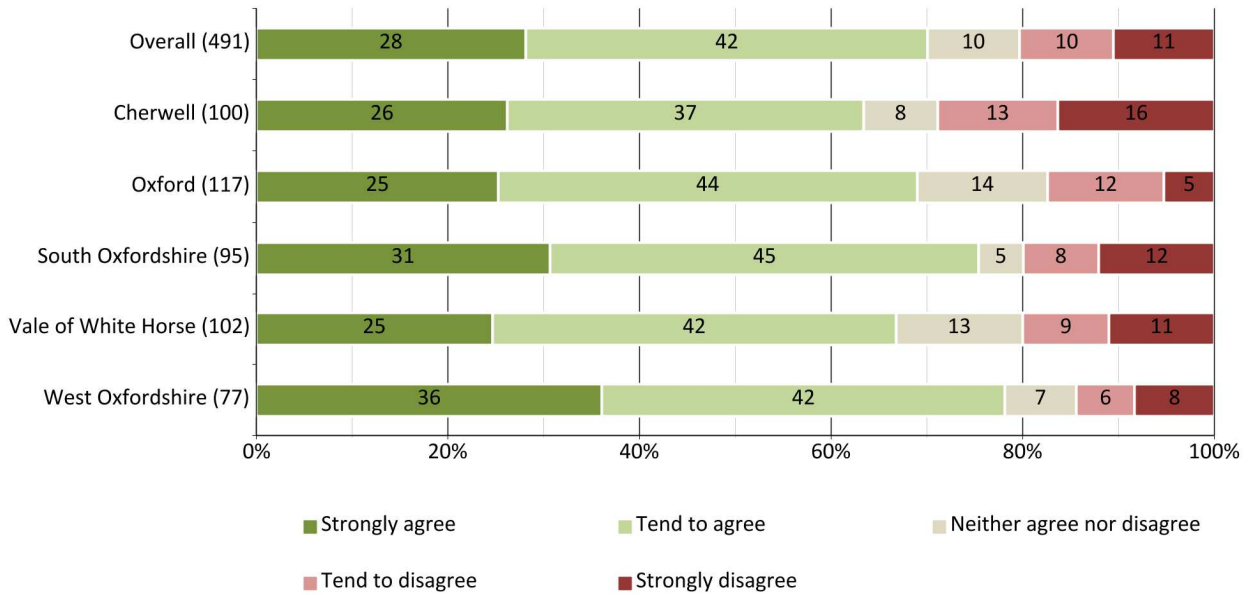
Figure 14: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposal to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire



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).

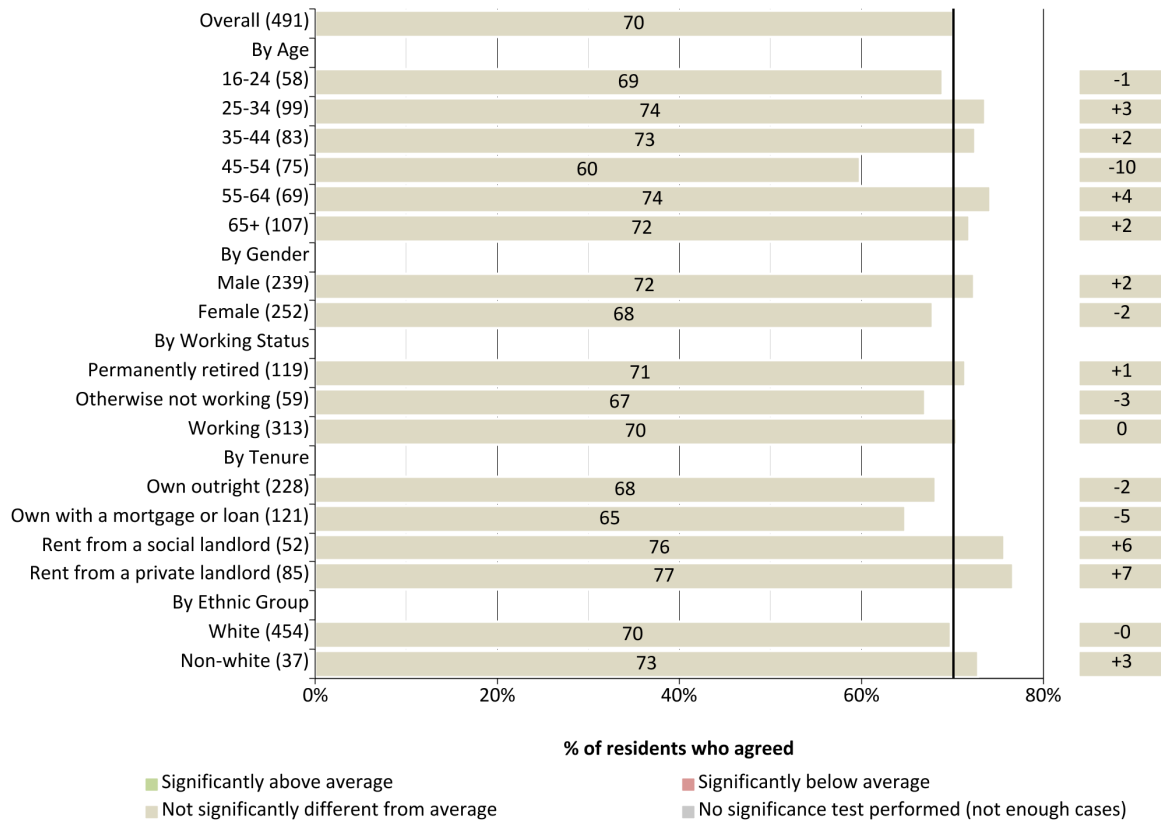
Figure 15: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposal to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire, by district/city council area.



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

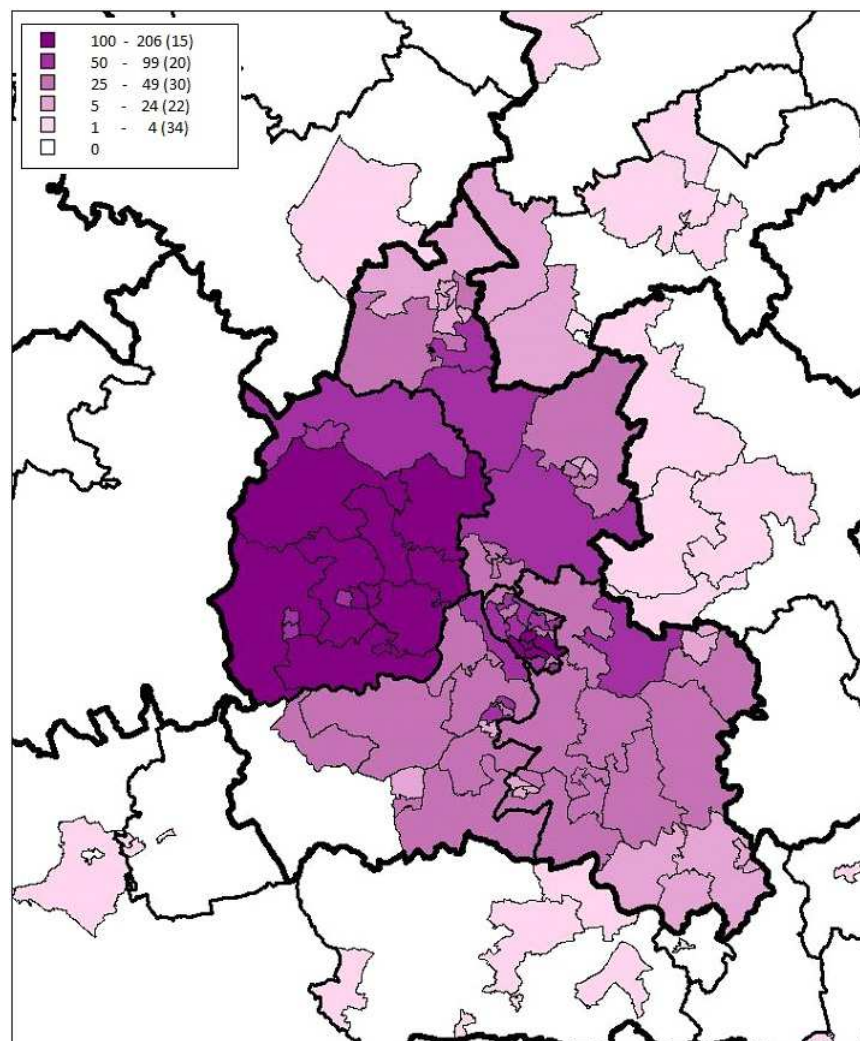
- 4.6 Figure 18 overleaf provides a breakdown of responses to the questionnaire by area (for respondents who provided their postcode, excluding responses from organisations), while figures for Oxfordshire's population are also outlined for comparison. Figures for Oxfordshire's population are based on 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.

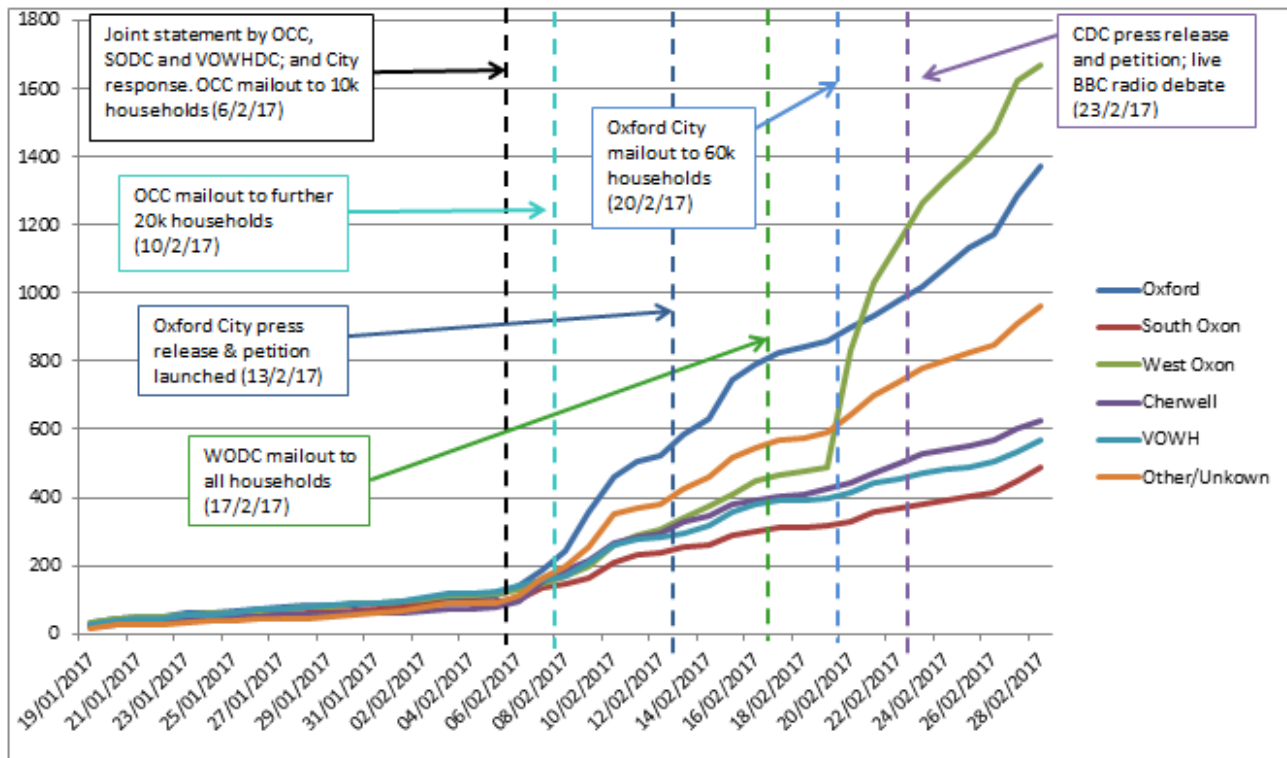
Figure 19: Number of responses to the engagement questionnaire by MSOA (Oxfordshire and areas on periphery only)



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



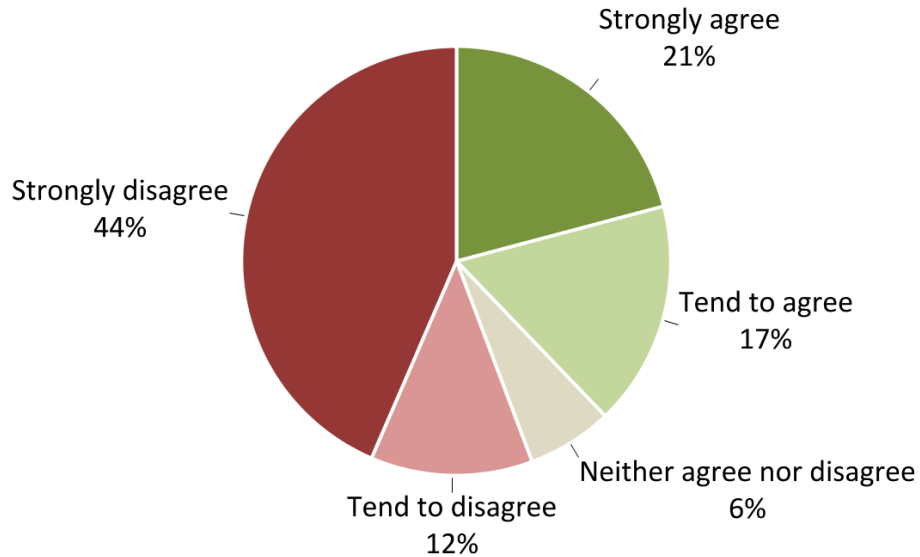
Interpretation of the data

- 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?

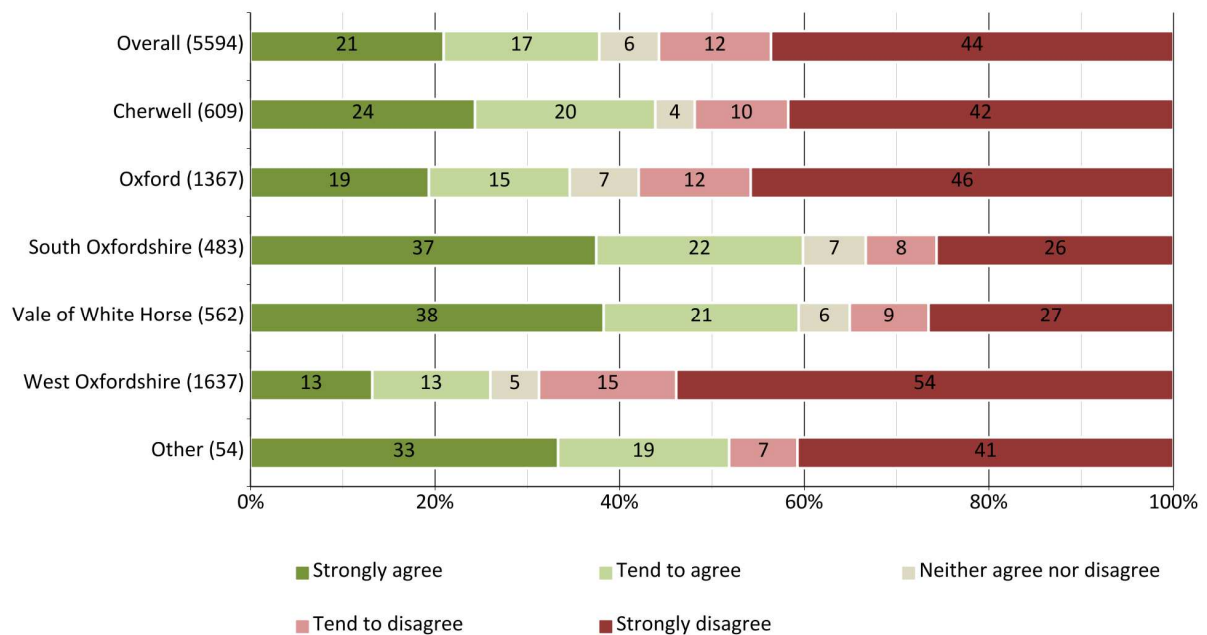
Figure 21: Agreement and disagreement with the need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire.



Base: All Individuals (5,594)

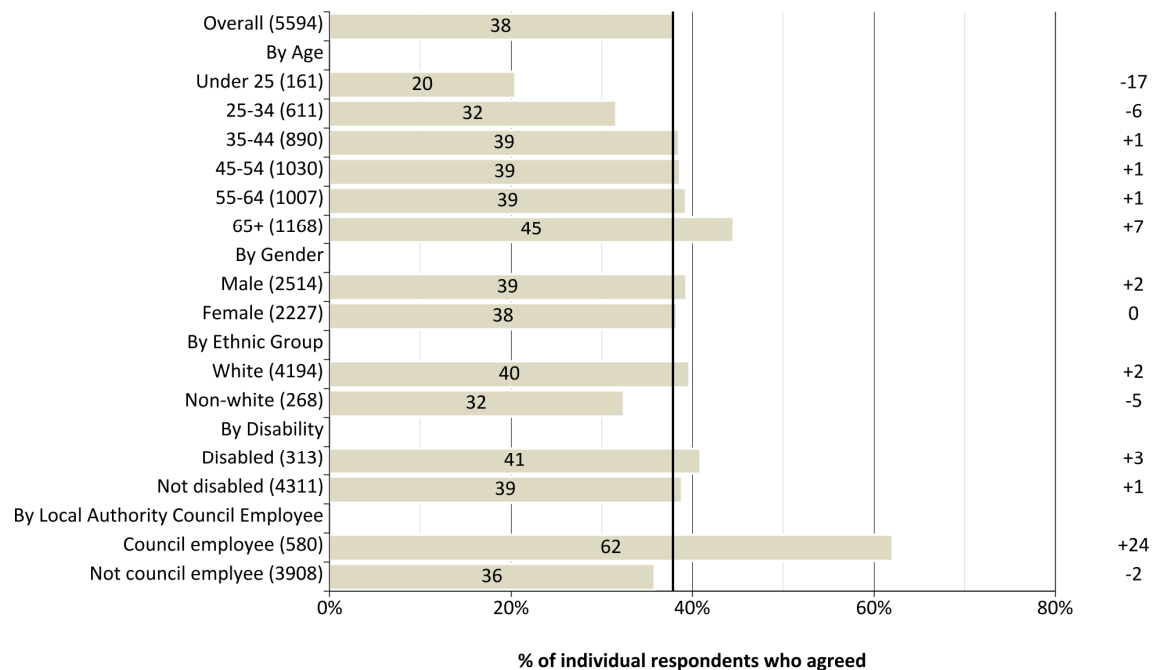
- ^{4.14} Respondents were initially directed to read the discussion document or alternatively to go to the One Oxfordshire website for more information. They were then given a short introduction explaining the changes to government funding and the need for the councils to make savings, as well as explaining 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.

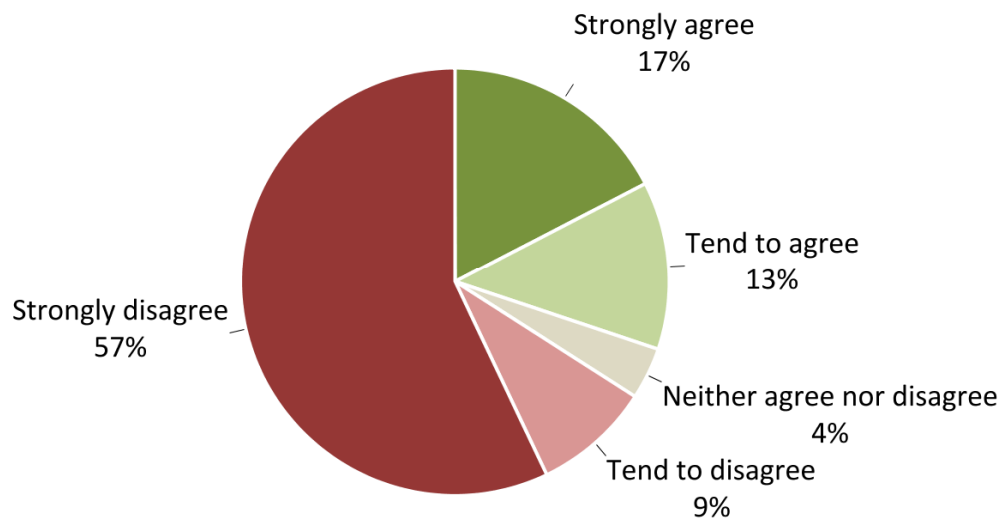
Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 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.

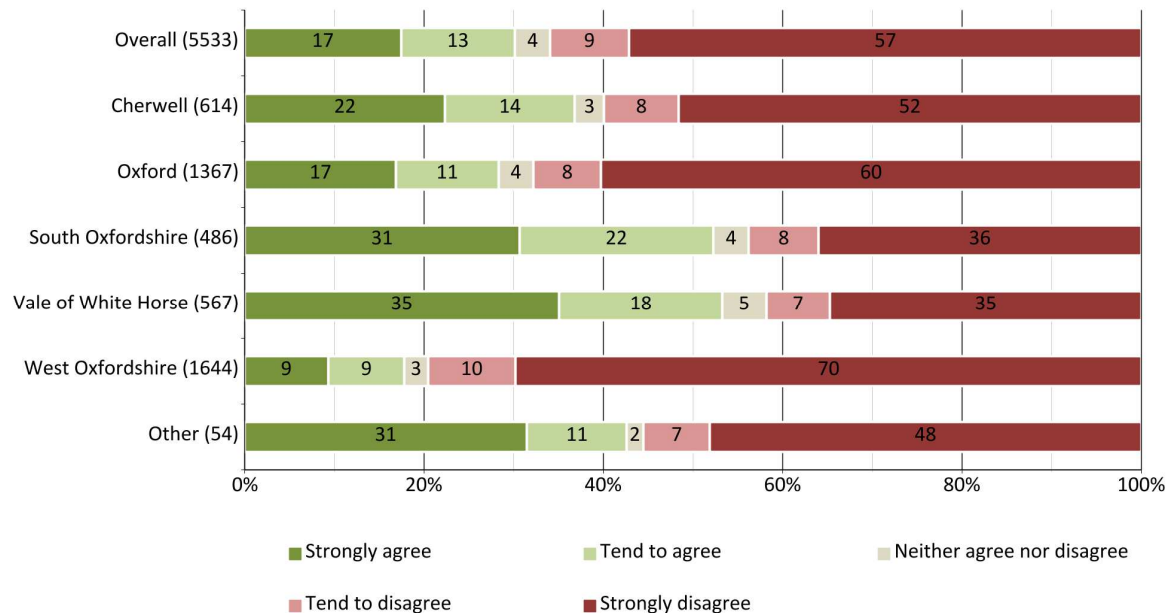
Figure 24: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in respondents' particular area.



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).

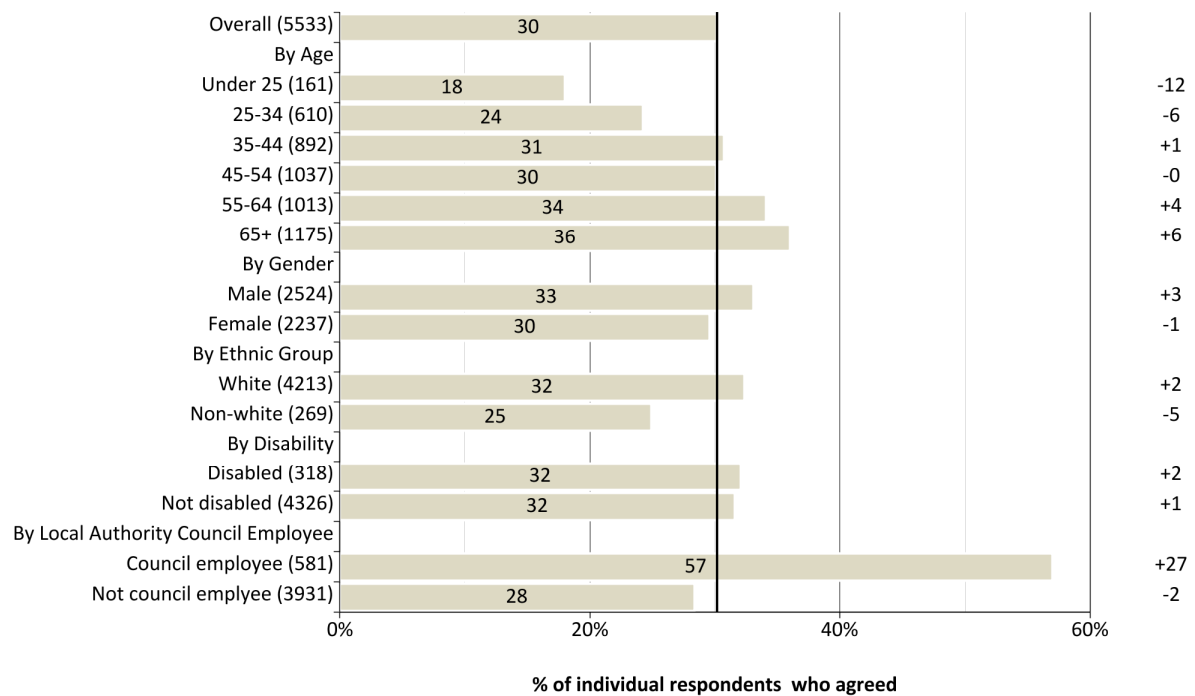
Figure 25: Agreement and disagreement with the principle that a ‘unitary council’ should provide all council services in respondents’ particular area by district/city council area.



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.

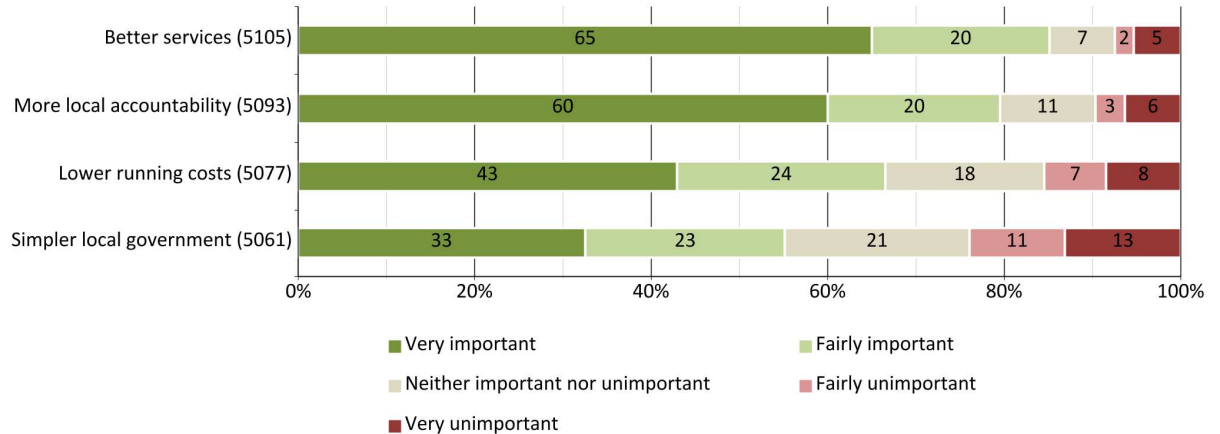


Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 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.

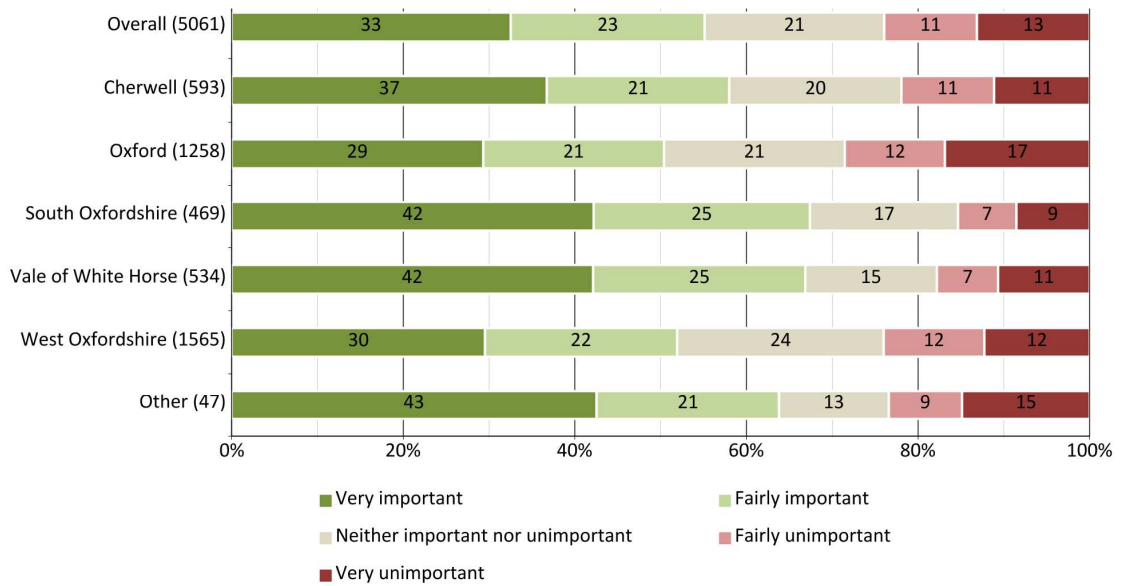
If local government was changed in Oxfordshire, how important or unimportant would the following be to you: simpler local government; better services; more local accountability; and lower running costs?

- 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)

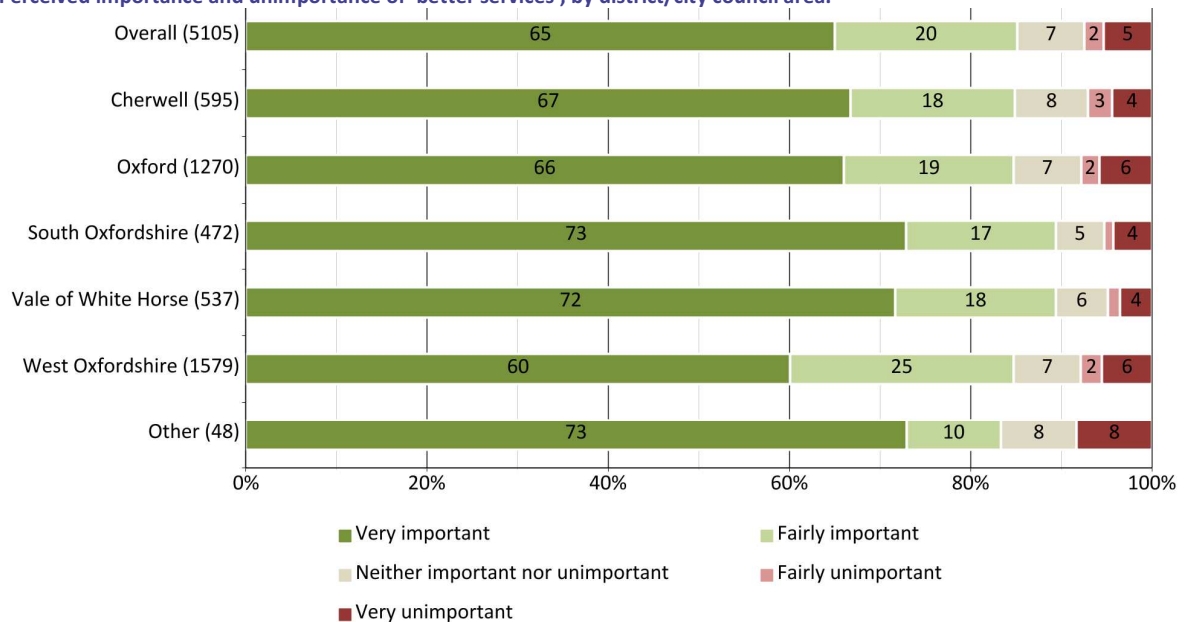
- 4.28 Overall, individual respondents attached greatest importance to 'better services' (85%) and 'more local accountability' (80%) (with absolute majorities of respondents – 65% and 60% respectively – regarding these as being 'very important').
- 4.29 Absolute majorities also felt 'lower running costs' (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)

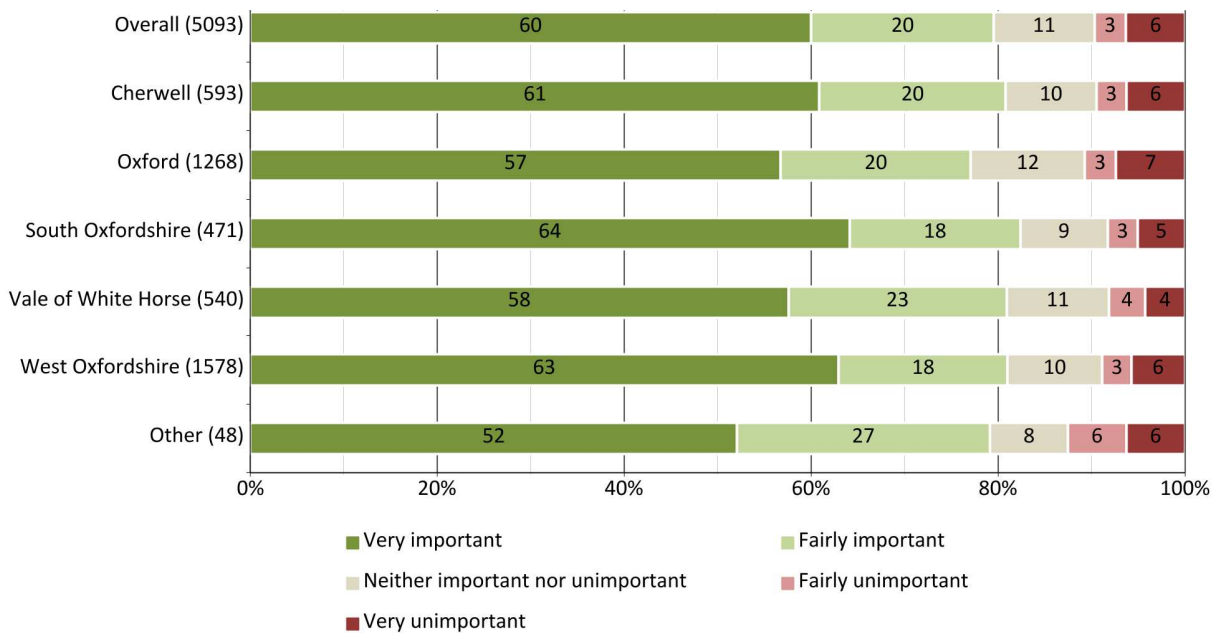
- 4.30 Around two thirds of individuals in South Oxfordshire (67%) and Vale of White Horse (67%) felt 'simpler local government' would be important, as did half or more in the remaining Oxfordshire areas: Cherwell (58%), West Oxfordshire (52%) and Oxford (50%) (Figure 28).

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



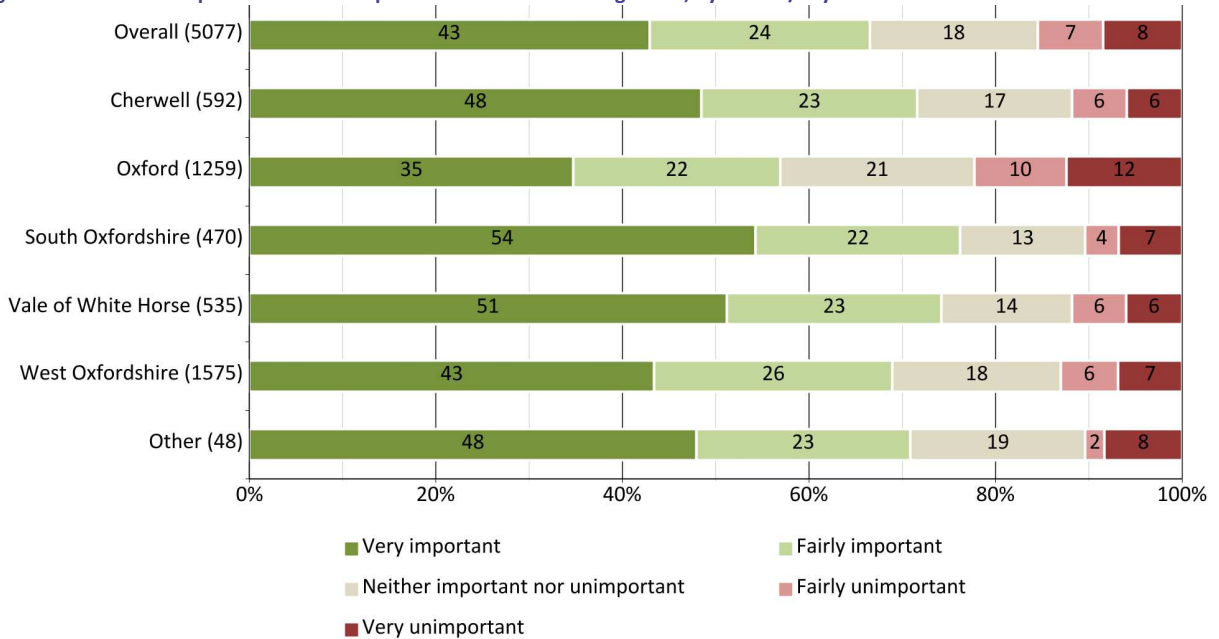
Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 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.

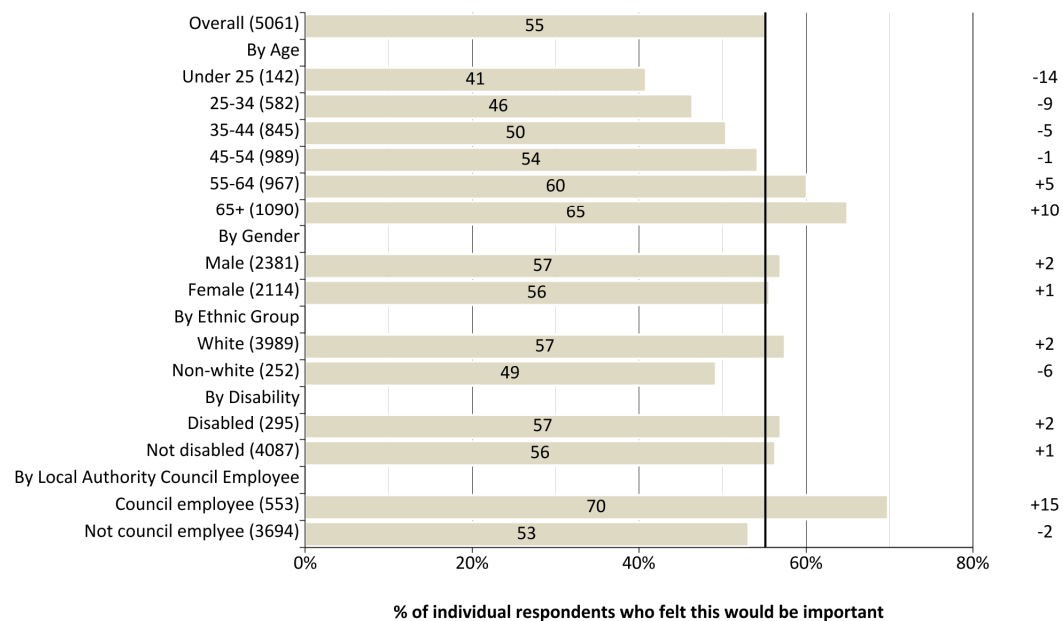
Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

- 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%).

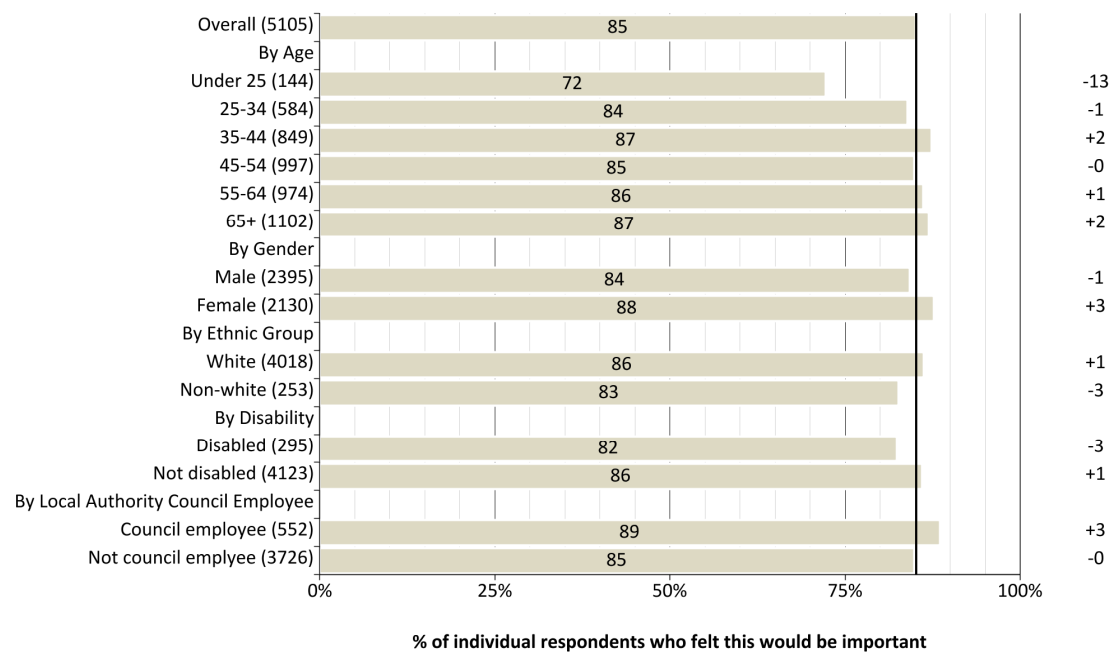
Figure 31: Perceived importance and unimportance of ‘lower running costs’, by district/city council area.

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

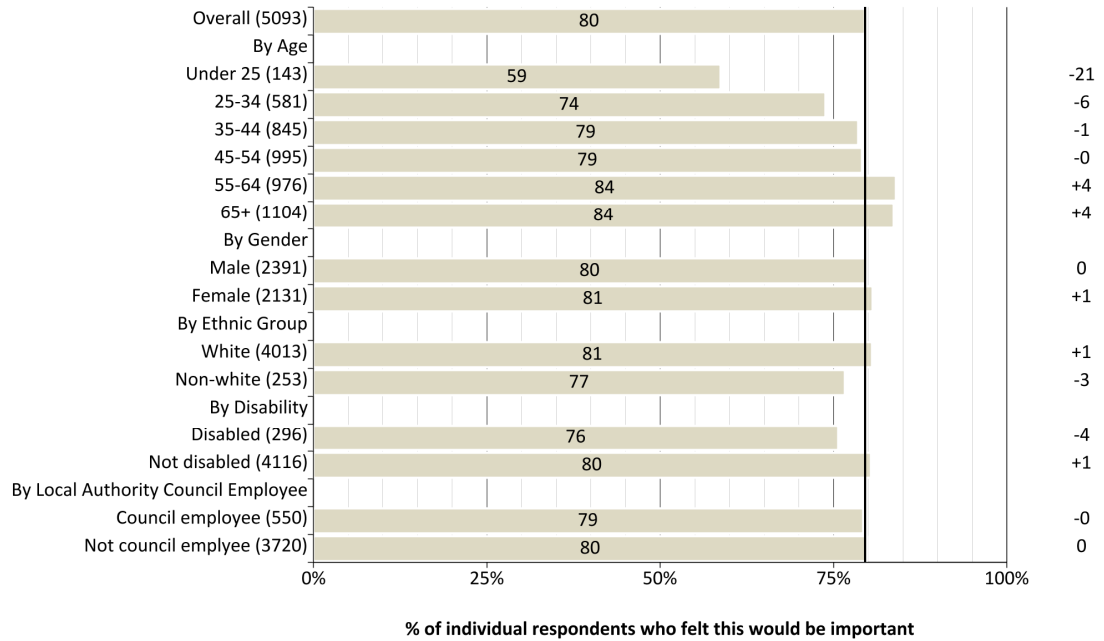
- 4.33 Around seven out of ten or more individuals responding from South Oxfordshire (76%), Vale of White Horse (74%), Cherwell (72%) and West Oxfordshire (69%) felt that ‘lower running costs’ would be important. The proportion of individuals in Oxford with this view was slightly lower (57%), but still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

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

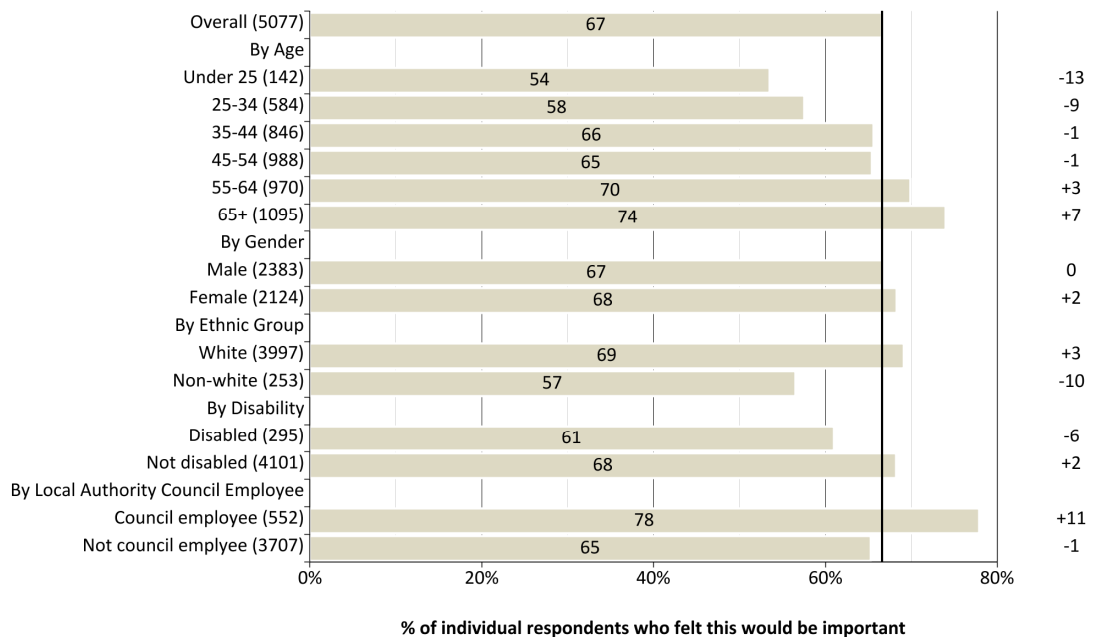
Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

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)

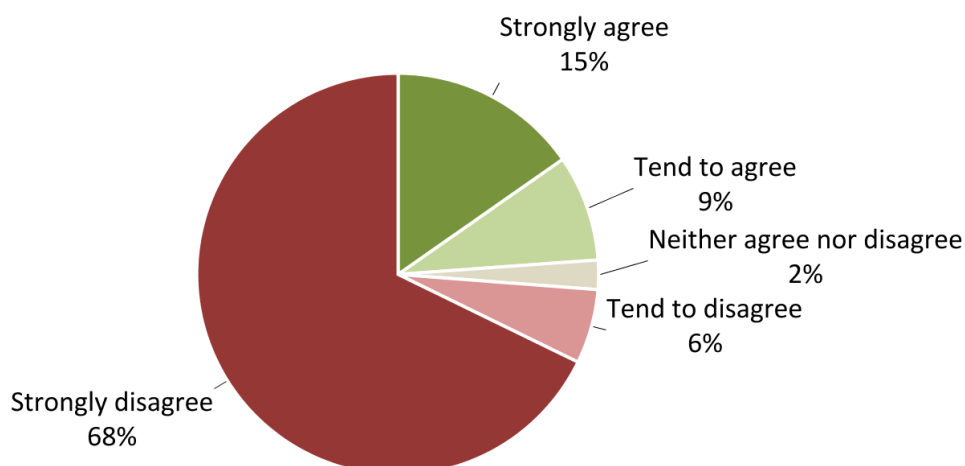
4.34 The charts above show how perceptions about the importance of 'simpler local government', 'better services', 'more local accountability', and 'lower running costs' varied across different demographic subgroups of respondents.

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?

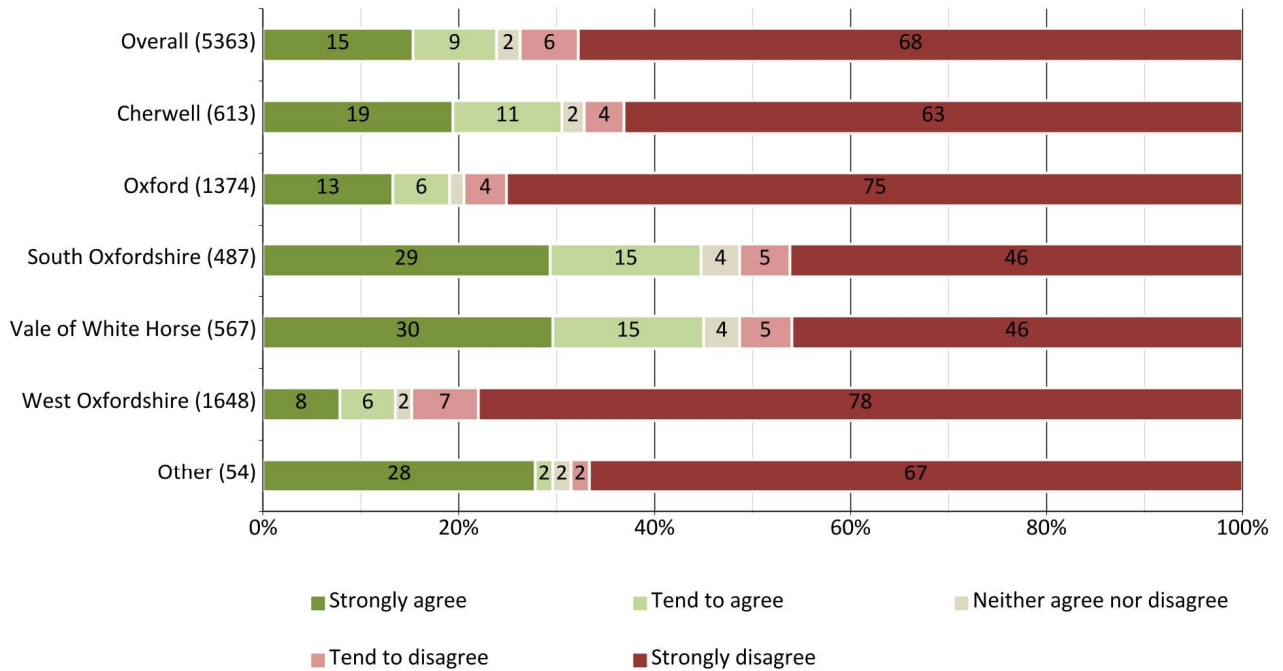
Figure 36: Agreement and disagreement with the draft proposals to abolish the six councils and replace them with one new 'unitary council' for the whole of Oxfordshire



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).

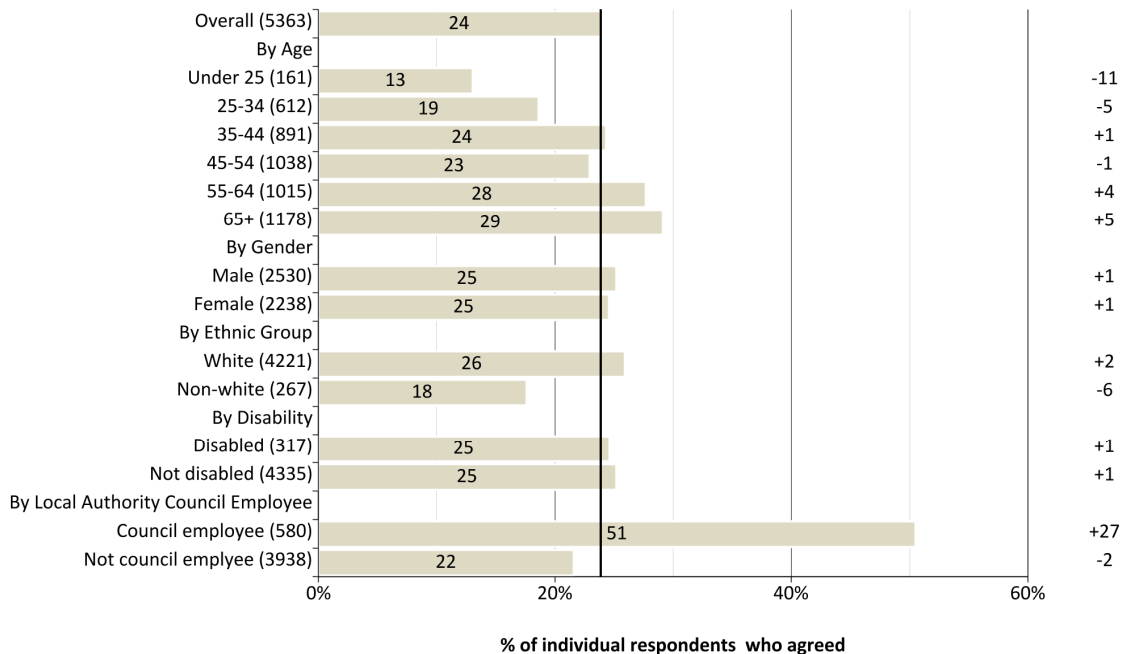
Figure 37: Agreement and disagreement with abolishing the six current councils and replacing them with one 'unitary council' for the whole of Oxfordshire. Responses by city and district council areas.



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)
	Unknown (14 responses)

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.

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Appendix A: Engagement document

ONE OXFORDSHIRE



SIMPLER



**MORE
LOCAL**



LOWER COST



**BETTER
SERVICES**



ONE new council for the whole of Oxfordshire?
Join the debate

Local government in Oxfordshire - time for a change?

We think so.

We believe the current system is complicated, wasteful and no longer financially sustainable. Without change, important local services could be reduced and some may be cut altogether.

Oxfordshire has six councils – one county council, four district councils and one city council. We think all six councils should be **ABOLISHED** and be replaced by just **ONE new council** for the whole of Oxfordshire. It would save over £100m in the first five years - money that could be used to improve local services and keep council tax down.

This is called a 'unitary' council. It would be simpler; offer better services; respond better to local priorities; and be more efficient and cost less to run.

This is what we mean by ONE Oxfordshire. We would like to know what you think of our draft proposals.



How services are currently organised

Oxfordshire currently has a two-tier system of local government. Some services are run by Oxfordshire County Council and others are run by the district or city council for your area.

This can be very confusing. For instance, the district councils collect your bins and the county council disposes of their contents. The district councils are responsible for benefits and social housing, while the county council provides social services.

County council services

- Child protection
- Fostering and adoption
- Adult social services
- Education support
- Roads and transport
- Fire and rescue service
- Waste disposal
- Public health
- Libraries
- Trading standards
- Countryside access
- Parking

District/city council services

- Housing and benefits
- Parks & leisure
- Local planning
- Street cleaning
- Waste collection
- Environmental health
- Council tax collection
- Electoral registration

Town councils and parishes

There are also over 300 town councils and parishes in Oxfordshire. They provide local services in some areas including allotments,

cemeteries and crematoria, common land, community centres and village halls. Giving town councils and parishes more say over services in their community is an important part of our proposals.



“It is not always clear what services are controlled by which council. The fewer tiers the better for transparency.”

Public submission to call for evidence for Grant Thornton review of options for local government.

The need for change

Since 2010, central government funding for councils has steadily reduced and will continue to do so. In future, council services will mainly be paid for locally from council tax and business rates.

At the same time, the demand for many council services (particularly for children and adult social services) is rising as the county's population grows and people get older.

We believe that the current six council system is not financially sustainable in the long term. Without change, important local services could be reduced and some may be cut altogether.



Why "ONE Oxfordshire?"

Two independent studies for the county and the district councils show at least £100m could be saved over five years by creating a single council for Oxfordshire. (This takes into account the one-off £16m cost of reorganisation.)

That's at least £20 million extra to spend each year on improving services, protecting them from further cuts, and keeping council tax down.

One council costs less to run than six councils, with one administration and fewer managers.

Counties including Wiltshire, Durham and Cornwall already have a 'unitary' council, and others such as Buckinghamshire recently asked the government to become a unitary council.

We believe one council for Oxfordshire would be simpler, better for services, more local and cost less.



We believe one council better for services, more

SIMPLER

- One website, one phone number, one contact for all your council services
- Other public services such as the NHS and police could work better with one council rather than several
- Businesses have a single point of contact for services such as trading standards, licensing and planning
- Joined-up planning for jobs, homes and transport is better for residents and the local economy
- One council taking decisions in the best interests of the whole of Oxfordshire

BETTER SERVICES

- Savings could be used to improve maintenance, including roads
- One council is responsible for all the environmental services such as street cleaning and road maintenance in your area
- Joining up social services, housing and benefits makes it easier to support people who need extra help
- One council for Oxfordshire can keep vulnerable children and adults safer

“ If it maintains the status quo... local government will not be fulfilling its wider duty to ensure Oxfordshire retains and leverages its competitive advantage for the benefit of the people and places it serves. ”

Oxfordshire Unitary Government Study, PwC, commissioned by district and city councils

Are there other options?

Independent studies were commissioned by the county council, and city and district councils. They also looked at splitting the county into two, three or four smaller unitary councils, as well as the 'no change' option.

After looking at the evidence, the county council concluded that replacing the existing six councils with a single unitary council for Oxfordshire is the best way to save money and improve services. The city/district councils' own study accepted that the greatest savings were from a single unitary council for Oxfordshire.

There has been some local debate about the best way to reorganise local government, but ONE Oxfordshire is the only firm proposal to have been produced.

**for Oxfordshire would be simpler,
e local and cost less to run.**

MORE LOCAL

- One local councillor representing your community who is accountable for all council services in your area
- Parishes and town councils have more influence over decisions for their own communities
- Your councillor takes local decisions as members of 'area boards' covering existing district/city areas

LOWER COST

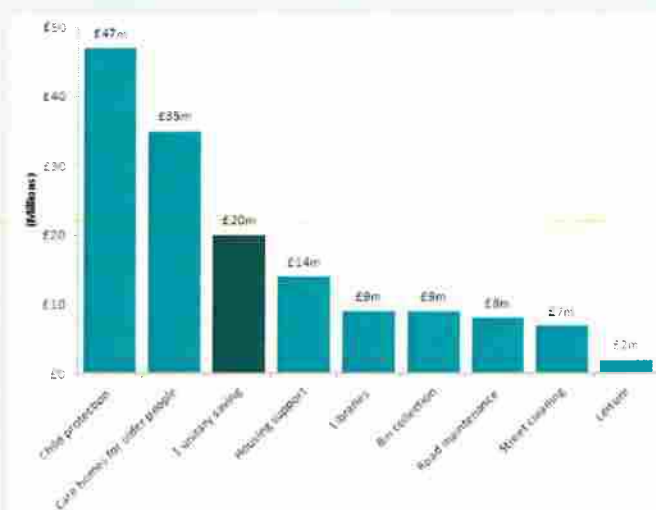
- No duplication – abolishing six councils to create one, brand new council costs less to run with fewer councillors and senior managers
- One council saves £20m each year, which can be used to deliver better services and protect them from future cuts
- Keeps council tax down



What could the savings mean for services?

The £20m annual savings from the ONE Oxfordshire proposal could be used to increase spending on any council service. The decision on how to use the savings would be made by the new councillors elected to the new council.

To give an idea of the impact of another £20m, this bar chart shows the net budgets for different council services in Oxfordshire. (District services - leisure, housing, bins and street cleaning - are combined budgets for all five district councils.)



Department of Communities and Local Government revenue account forms

What does the proposal mean for council tax?

The new unitary council would be responsible for decisions about council tax and budgets to pay for services. Savings made from abolishing all six councils could be used to pay for better services and keeping council tax down. We are asking the government for powers to allow council tax to be varied for different areas, according to local priorities decided by local councillors.



More benefits of the

Better planning for growth and infrastructure

Oxfordshire's roads are already heavily congested, particularly the A34 and A40, and investment is urgently needed.

Employers say that a lack of housing and transport infrastructure is slowing business growth, which is needed to create jobs for younger people.

Oxfordshire has some of the most unaffordable housing in the country, and we need 100,000 more homes to support the 80,000 new jobs predicted by 2031. This growth needs to be properly managed to make sure roads, schools and other infrastructure is in place.

Different councils are currently responsible for planning and transport, so there can be no single joined up development plan for the county as a whole. This makes taking decisions in the interests of the whole county more difficult.

The ONE Oxfordshire proposals include plans for a new £1bn investment fund that could use public and private sector money to pay for the infrastructure the county needs.

A joined-up planning system for housing, transport and jobs would manage growth properly and get the investment we need. Otherwise, communities will get unplanned development without the necessary infrastructure.



Devolution for Oxfordshire?

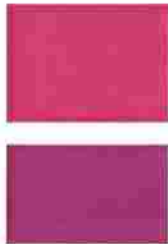
You may have heard of other areas doing 'devolution deals' with the government. This is when councils agree to work together to encourage economic growth in return for government handing over powers and funding.

The county, district and city councils are working together on a devolution plan, but this is **separate** from local government reorganisation. Government officials have said clearly that they will consider devolution and unitary proposals separately.

Agreeing a devolution deal with government is likely to mean creating a directly elected mayor for Oxfordshire and another layer of local government called a 'combined authority' to run transport and planning.

We think that a unitary council is a better and simpler option that links planning and transport more effectively, without needing yet another layer of local government.

However, we also recognise the importance of infrastructure and investment for Oxfordshire and will do all we can to make the devolution deal work.



ONE Oxfordshire proposals

Improving health and wellbeing

Unaffordable housing can lead to homelessness and families living in unsuitable, temporary housing. Good housing is vital to children getting the best start in life.

We also need more extra care housing in Oxfordshire. Older people can live independently in extra care housing, which is better for them and costs less than providing social care.

Joining up planning for housing and social services would provide more ways for older people to live independently, which improves wellbeing and reduces care costs.

Linking services such as town planning and leisure could encourage active lifestyles and improve public health, including childhood obesity.

More accountability for local communities

At the moment you have several councillors (district/city councillors and a county councillor) for your local area.

In the ONE Oxfordshire proposals, there would be fewer councillors. One unitary councillor would represent your local community for all services.

Your one councillor would take decisions for your local area on a new 'area board' and for the county as a whole as a member of the unitary council.

Local planning decisions could be taken by area boards within a county planning policy.

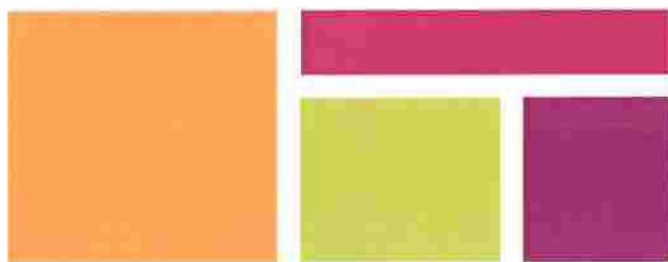
Area boards would work closely with town councils and parishes to give communities a strong voice in decisions, with an option to take on some additional powers and services if they want it.

Join the debate

The draft proposals were produced after discussions with a range of people, including other services such as the police and NHS; business; parishes and town councils; other councils and central government, and of course residents and service users.

By publishing the proposal as a draft, we want to continue the debate about the best way to run council services in Oxfordshire. A wide range of background material has been published to accompany our proposals.

We want to hear from residents, businesses and stakeholders so we can improve the proposals before sending it to the government.



Have your say

- Read the draft proposals and have your say online at www.oneoxfordshire.org
- Fill in a copy of the accompanying feedback form and hand it in at your local library or send it back using FREEPOST
- Come to a listening event in your local library
- Comments must be received by 28 February 2017.

What happens next?

Your feedback will be shared with all county councillors. A copy of the report of the public and stakeholder engagement and the proposals will be considered by county councillors (Cabinet members) on 14 March 2017.

The Secretary of State for Local Government is ultimately responsible for decisions about council reorganisation.

What will a new unitary council mean for me?

FOR RESIDENTS

- More efficient so more money spent on frontline services
- One website, one phone number, one council for all services
- One councillor for your area

FOR BUSINESSES

- Single voice for Oxfordshire
- More investment in infrastructure
- Joined up business services: planning, licensing, public protection

FOR PUBLIC SECTOR PARTNERS

- Single point of contact and decision-making
- Boundaries that make sense (eg NHS, police)
- Single strategies and policies for the whole county

FOR TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

- Better support for neighbourhood planning
- More devolution of powers for those that want them

FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND REGIONAL PARTNERS

- A coherent vision for Oxfordshire
- A financially resilient council

FOR THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

- Improved partnerships at community and strategic level
- Single organisation focusing on improving lives of people

Appendix B: Engagement questionnaire

Draft Proposals for Changing Local Government in Oxfordshire

FEEDBACK FORM

Oxfordshire County Council is seeking views on its draft proposals to change local government in Oxfordshire. Opinion Research Services (ORS) have been asked to support the council with this work.

Before filling in this form please read the summary of the county council's draft proposals available in all public libraries or online at www.oneoxfordshire.org
A wide range of supporting information is also available.

- To give your feedback online go to www.oneoxfordshire.org or
- Fill in a copy of this feedback form and hand it in at your local library or send it back using FREEPOST to the address on the back of this form, to arrive at ORS no later than 28 February 2017.

Oxfordshire has a two-tier system of local government. Some services are run by Oxfordshire County Council and others by the district or city council for your area. Oxfordshire has six councils in total – one county council plus four district councils and one city council.

Since 2010, central government funding for councils has steadily reduced and will continue to do so. In the future, council services will mainly be paid for locally from council tax and business rates. At the same time, the demand for many council services (particularly for children and adult social services) is rising as the county's population grows and people get older.

Oxfordshire County Council thinks the current system of local government is complicated, wasteful and no longer financially sustainable. It believes that without change, important local services could be reduced and some may need to be cut altogether.

Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire? PLEASE TICK ✓ ONE BOX ONLY

Strongly
agree

☐

Tend to
agree

☐

Neither agree
nor disagree

☐

Tend to
disagree

☐

Strongly
disagree

☐

Don't
know

☐

Oxfordshire County Council believes that local government in Oxfordshire should be changed to a **'single tier'**, where one council provides all services in a particular area. This type of council is called a 'unitary council' and there could be **one or more** unitary councils in Oxfordshire. Town and parish councils would not be affected.

Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in your particular area? PLEASE TICK ✓ ONE BOX ONLY

Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/>	Tend to agree <input type="checkbox"/>	Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/>	Tend to disagree <input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know <input type="checkbox"/>
---	--	---	---	--	---

Oxfordshire County Council believes the best way forward is to **ABOLISH** the current six councils and create **ONE new 'unitary council'** for the **WHOLE** of Oxfordshire.

Two independent studies for the county and the district councils show at least £100m could be saved over five years, taking into account the one-off £16m cost of reorganisation. This is money that could be used to improve services and keep council tax down.

Full details of Oxfordshire County Council's proposals are explained in its summary document. In particular the council believes ONE council for Oxfordshire would be **simpler, better for services, more local and cost less to run**.

<p>SIMPLER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One website, one phone number, one contact for all your council services • Other public services such as the NHS and police could work better with one council rather than several • Joined-up planning for jobs, homes and transport is better for residents and the local economy • One council taking decisions in the best interests of the whole of Oxfordshire 	<p>BETTER SERVICES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One council is responsible for all the environmental services such as street cleaning and road maintenance in your area • Joining up social services, housing and benefits makes it easier to support people who need extra help • One council for Oxfordshire can keep vulnerable children and adults safer
<p>MORE LOCAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One local councillor representing your community who is accountable for all council services in your local area • Parishes and town councils have more influence over decisions for their own communities • Your councillor takes local decisions as members of 'area boards' covering existing district/city areas 	<p>LOWER COST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No duplication – abolishing six councils to create one, brand new council costs less to run with fewer councillors and senior managers • One council saves £20m each year, which can be used to deliver better services and protect them from future cuts • Keeps council tax down

Q3. If local government was changed in Oxfordshire, how important or unimportant would the following be to you?

PLEASE TICK ✓ ONE BOX IN EACH ROW

	Very important	Fairly important	Neither important nor unimportant	Fairly unimportant	Very unimportant	Don't know
Simpler local government	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Better services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
More local accountability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lower running costs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q4a. 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?

PLEASE TICK ✓ ONE BOX ONLY

Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/>	Tend to agree <input type="checkbox"/>	Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/>	Tend to disagree <input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know <input type="checkbox"/>
---	--	---	---	--	---

Q4b. 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.

PLEASE ANSWER IN THE BOX BELOW AND CONTINUE ON A SEPARATE SHEET IF NECESSARY

Q5. Do you have any suggestions for how the county council's proposals for **ONE** 'unitary council' for the **WHOLE** of Oxfordshire could be improved?

PLEASE ANSWER IN THE BOX BELOW AND CONTINUE ON A SEPARATE SHEET IF NECESSARY

INFORMATION ABOUT YOU

What is your full postcode?

This will help us understand views in different areas

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If you are responding on behalf of an **ORGANISATION**, which organisation do you represent?

Please give us the name of the organisation and any specific group or department.

Please also tell us who the organisation represents, what area the organisation covers and how you gathered the views of members.

PLEASE ANSWER IN THE BOX BELOW AND CONTINUE ON A SEPARATE SHEET IF NECESSARY

--

If you are providing your own **PERSONAL RESPONSE**, please answer the questions below...

Oxfordshire County Council has a duty to promote equality and wants to make sure that it includes all parts of the community in its engagement exercise, but these questions are optional. It will take all responses fully into account when making decisions, regardless of whether you provide your details.

PLEASE TICK ✓ ONLY ONE BOX FOR EACH QUESTION

What was your age on your last birthday?

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Under 16 | <input type="checkbox"/> 55 to 64 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16 to 24 | <input type="checkbox"/> 65 to 74 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25 to 34 | <input type="checkbox"/> 75 to 84 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 35 to 44 | <input type="checkbox"/> 85 or over |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 45 to 54 | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say | |

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Prefer not to say

Do you consider yourself to be disabled?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Prefer not to say

What is your ethnic group?

- ☐ White
☐ Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
☐ Asian or Asian British
☐ Black, African, Caribbean or Black British
☐ Any other ethnic group
☐ Prefer not to say

Are you employed by a local authority in Oxfordshire?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Prefer not to say

If yes, which local authority(ies) employ you?

--

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

Please return the feedback form to arrive no later than **28 February 2017** to:

Opinion Research Services

FREEPOST SS1018 • PO Box 530 • Swansea • SA1 1ZL

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Appendix C: Submissions from Councils

Leader of the Council

Councillor Barry Wood



*Bodicote House
Bodicote
Banbury
Oxfordshire
OX15 4AA*

www.cherwell.gov.uk

1st March 2017

Please ask for: Councillor Barry Wood

Direct Dial:

Email:
Barry.Wood@Cherwell-
DC.gov.uk

Our Ref: BW/JP

Dear Ian and Peter,

Cherwell District Council Response to Oxfordshire County Council “One Oxfordshire” proposals for a unitary council

Whilst we consider it necessary to acknowledge that you have asked for views on your “One Oxfordshire” model for reforming local government across our area, we wish to make clear that we do not consider that we have been properly or formally consulted as a key stakeholder.

It is our strong view that there cannot be changes to the structure of local government within Oxfordshire without local consensus, including public, business and other key stakeholder support, and certainly not without serious consideration of the other options available. It is disappointing that you have either written off, or not considered those other options before deciding to ambush our communities and the Oxfordshire district councils with your preferred model.

There is strong evidence of mounting public and business opposition across the County to the “One Oxfordshire” model that you have been consulting on. In addition, three of the six council leaders and the majority of local MPs are also opposed to your proposal.

We are confident that this opposition will be further heightened when it becomes clear that the model you have been publicly consulting on is not the model that you appear to have

subsequently agreed behind closed doors with South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils as being the model you intend to submit to Government in March.

Where is the honesty and where is the transparency here?

Since launching your consultation you have announced jointly with South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils that you are now developing a joint bid for the Secretary of State and Government to consider; one which has fundamental changes to the proposals that formed the basis of public consultation.

It is disingenuous to engage in a public consultation exercise based on a specific model, and then fail to disclose to those who you are (and indeed are not) consulting that your proposal is changing, mid-way through the consultation process.

This raises serious questions about the integrity of your approach to consultation and of the trust we can place in you. This is no way to begin a journey of such monumental change with our constituents, or with the key stakeholders that you need to work with.

We do not believe it would be right for you to submit a bid to the Secretary of State to make fundamental and permanent changes to local government in Oxfordshire without proper consultation on a single set of proposals. With that in mind we ask that you are transparent about which set of proposals you intend to submit to Government, and that you consult and allow a reasonable period of time for response on those.

Consultation should be genuine, meaningful, timely, and recognised as consultation. It should include **all** the local authorities affected by your proposals both within Oxfordshire and beyond, such as our partner, South Northamptonshire Council and Cotswold District Council, the partner of West Oxford District Council. In both of these examples, any significant changes to the current operating model recommended by you will impact their future service delivery, their financial sustainability, their economic growth and the employment of their workforce.

There are significant omissions, unanswered questions and a lack of clarity and transparency about some extremely important issues that need to be addressed before a properly considered judgement can be reached on your proposals.

In places your document provides information which is incomplete and based on evidence which does not represent a balanced picture. For example, your portrayal of District's performance on housing delivery fails to recognise that Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxford are all delivering housing targets and have now agreed the allocation of 80% of Oxford's unmet need (with South Oxfordshire being the only local authority not to have agreed). Indeed Cherwell's reputation as an innovator in the housing sector is exemplary.

Examples of issues that require clarity so that they can be properly considered by all key stakeholders include:

- **The arrangements you are proposing for “enhancing local democracy and autonomy” through area boards**

Your “One Oxfordshire” model says there will be “area executive boards serving current district and city areas”. Your joint statement with South and Vale Councils says the new proposals will be for “decisions taken at a much more local level than offered by the area executive board model”. The Chief Executive of South and Vale Councils has subsequently advised us that the model would reflect something



nearer to 20 area boards. Which is correct and what are the implications of the latter?

- **How you will deliver on the proposal that such area boards will have tax raising powers**

This is not currently a legal proposition.

- **How do you propose to deal with the issue of council tax harmonisation?**

This is not explained in your consultation document. The work you cite from Grant Thornton suggests significant council tax rises for residents in some areas of the county. It is important that implications for residents across Oxfordshire are clarified before they can make an informed view of the proposals.

- **Savings**

More in depth analysis of the deliverability of the assumed savings is needed. The report by PwC into unitary options recommended that such an exercise would need to be developed in a business case for any one option.

- **What is the real cost of transition – both financial and non-financial?**

How do you propose to address the complex implications of unpicking the current and very successful contractual and collaborative working between Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council, and West Oxford District Council and Cotswold District Council? Have you even considered this in your model? Between Cherwell and South Northamptonshire Councils all of our services are now managed by a shared management team, and delivered through joint services. This is not just six district councils supporting six local areas you are proposing to dissolve and replace with one. Your proposals extend to impacting eight councils. Have you considered that?

- **What are your assumptions around delivery models which are currently raising income and delivering savings?**

The Cherwell and South Northamptonshire Councils partnership, described by government as being “exemplars of innovation” has developed a robust and imaginative strategic plan to ensure we are future-proofed; our “cycle of growth” will ensure our financial independence and sustainability. We see this as just one of the better alternatives to your model.

- **Clarity about what you are proposing as a new planning framework.**

Your “One Oxfordshire” consultation document says there will be a single local plan. However the joint statement with South and Vale Councils, and the subsequent comments of the Chief Executive of South and Vale Councils say that the planning framework protects and builds on existing and emerging local plans. Which is correct?

- **How do you propose to address the increasing budget pressures upon adult social care and who will be accountable?**

- **What are your plans for transforming services, particularly in the area of adult social care, and what efficiency savings do you expect them to deliver?**

- **Are you able to give assurances that the level of savings assumed in your proposals are sufficient to manage pressures and deal with the backlogs in**

social care, children's services, roads and highways maintenance and contribute to your infrastructure fund?

A single county unitary would be too large and remote, covering a population that would reach nearly 900,000 by 2031 if planned housing growth is delivered. Even at its current size it would be the third largest council in the country. The experience of Birmingham shows that unitary authorities of that scale can result in poor performance, inflexibility and a lack of focus on place with knock on cost to the local economy and local communities.

We believe that at this stage there are far too many unanswered questions for your proposals to be viewed as credible, or to instil trust in our communities and our workforce. We therefore reserve our detailed comments until you have set out a firm and transparent proposition, and one that all stakeholders are equally involved in, rather than negotiating private deals behind closed doors.

We are strongly of the view that a combined authority with an elected mayor is a better solution for Oxfordshire and for the UK economy as a whole, in the longer term. This would allow us to focus on the urgent and important priority of delivering our economic potential whilst protecting local decision making.

In a speech that he gave on 19th January, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made it clear that Government remains committed to continuing with devolution, that it welcomes proposals from local areas and that areas that opt for a directly elected mayor will always be in line for the greatest degree of devolution.

The combined authority and devolution deal **would** avoid the considerable disruption and distraction of focus that would come from unnecessary reorganisation of local services that are highly performing. It **would** provide robust governance for devolution of new investment from government to the county, and drive joint working on strategic planning, transport, infrastructure, skills and economic growth. And it **would** be able to drive forward a collective transformation and efficiency programme that could deliver greater savings than those estimated in your preferred model.

We agree with the LEP that we should not be derailed by the pursuit of unitary ambitions which have lacked transparency and a recognition of the importance of being in touch with the local communities, and hold absolutely no consensus of support.

We therefore ask you to do the right thing. To continue with the work we collectively agreed to do jointly in developing our devolution deal proposals and enable us all to continue to focus on delivering local services to our communities and growing our local and national economy.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Barry Wood
Leader of the Council



BEST TOWN/CITY AWARD



Councillor Bob Price
Leader, Oxford City Council
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Fax: 01865 252256
Email: clrbprice@oxford.gov.uk
Website: www.oxford.gov.uk

Town Hall
Oxford
OX1 1BX
Switchboard: 01865 249811

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Councillor Ian Hudspeth
Peter Clark

27th February 2017

Oxfordshire County Council
SENT VIA EMAIL

Dear Ian and Peter,

Oxford City Council Response to Oxfordshire County Council “One Oxfordshire” proposals for a unitary county council

We do not believe we have been formally asked for views on the proposals set out in your One Oxfordshire document, however following a motion passed by the City Council which requested a robust response opposing the One Oxfordshire proposals and the results of our petition, we wanted to set out the City Council's views on the proposals to date.

It is our strong view that there cannot be changes of the scale proposed without local consensus or public support. Three of the six council leaders and the majority of local MPs do not support the proposals and there is considerable public opposition– to date more than 5,800 residents have signed the petition against the proposals for a unitary county council. Since publishing your document and launching your consultation you have announced jointly with South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District councils that you are now developing a joint bid with fundamental changes to the proposals. As you have acknowledged, you have not yet produced a firm proposition and will be making significant changes to your proposals before submitting them to government.

We have raised with the County's Head of Paid Service, our significant concerns that your consultation process is flawed and will not reflect a representative sample of residents views. In response you have indicated that the current exercise is not a full consultation.

We do not believe it would be right for you to submit bid to the Secretary of State to make fundamental and permanent changes to local government in Oxfordshire without proper consultation on a firm set of proposals. We therefore ask that you confirm a coherent set of proposals and consult on them allowing a reasonable time for a response before you submit them to the Secretary of State. This consultation should include the local authorities affected by the changes both within and Oxfordshire and those in neighbouring areas that are partnering with the districts on service arrangements.

There are significant omissions, unanswered questions and a lack of clarity about some important issues within your “One Oxfordshire” proposal that have significant implications for residents in Oxfordshire and local partners that need to be clarified before a properly considered judgement can be reached on your proposals. In places your document provides information which is incomplete and based on evidence which does not represent a balanced picture. For example, your portrayal of Districts’ performance on housing delivery fails to recognise that Oxford City, West and Cherwell are all delivering housing targets and have now agreed the allocation of 80% of Oxford’s unmet need (with South Oxfordshire being the only local authority not to have agreed). We also disagree with your assertion that Oxfordshire will miss its housing targets by 40,000 homes as our evidence suggests that at least 90,000 homes have high certainty of being delivered.

Examples of issues that require clarity in a firm proposition that can be properly considered include:

- The arrangements you are proposing for “enhancing local democracy and autonomy” through area boards. Your “One Oxfordshire” document says there will be “area executive boards serving current district and city areas”. Your joint statement with South and Vale says the new proposals will be for “decisions taken at a much more local level than offered by the area executive board model”. This suggests a complex and confusing patchwork of local governance arrangements.
- How you will deliver on the proposal that such area boards will have tax raising powers? This is not currently a legal proposition.
- What services, functions and powers will these bodies have? The proposals say this is not possible to determine in advance of the creation of a new unitary county council. Since your proposals are clear that this would be a new authority, how can any commitment or assurances given by the leaders of the councils promoting the proposals be given any weight?
- Precisely how will you deal with the issue of council tax harmonisation? This is not explained in your document. The work you cite from Grant Thornton suggests significant council tax rises for residents in some areas of the county. It is important that implications for residents across Oxfordshire are clarified before they can make an informed view of the proposals.
- More in depth analysis of the deliverability of the assumed savings is needed. The report by PwC in to unitary options recommended that such an exercise would need to be developed in a business case for any one option.
- What is the real cost of transition and what are the implications of unpicking the contractual and partnership arrangements each of the existing councils already has in place in order to achieve harmonisation?
- What are your assumptions around delivery models which are currently raising income and delivering savings?
- What governance arrangements are you proposing for the city which you recognise “needs to incorporate the very different social and economic make-up of Oxford city and its vitally important economic importance to the whole county”.
- Clarity about what you are proposing as a new planning framework. Your “One Oxfordshire” document says there will be a single local plan, the joint statement with South and Vale says that planning framework will build on existing and emerging local plans.
- What are your assumptions about increasing budget pressures for adult social care, what are your plans for transformation of your services in this area and what efficiency savings do you expect them to deliver?

- Whether the level of savings assumed in your proposals are sufficient to manage pressures and deal with the backlogs in social care, children's services and roads maintenance and contribute to your infrastructure fund.
- What assumptions you have made about the availability of existing councils' assets and reserves given that these are already being used to support investment, for example the City council's investment in the £4 bn programme of major regeneration and development.

We therefore reserve our comments on your proposals until you have set out a firm proposition. However, you will be aware that the City Council's position, confirmed by a motion to our full council, is that Oxford, as a city of national economic significance with very different social and economic characteristics from the rest of the County needs to retain its own governance. An area board or parish council would be insufficient to fully reflect the place making needs of the city.

A single county council unitary authority would be too large and remote, covering a population that would reach nearly 900,000 by 2031 if planned housing growth is delivered. Even at its current size it would be the third largest council in the country. The experience of Birmingham shows that unitary authorities of that scale can result in poor performance, inflexibility and a lack of focus on place with knock on cost to the local economy and local communities.

A large, predominantly rural unitary county council would lack the flexibility and understanding to deal with the issues in the city that are typical to inner city urban areas such as community cohesion, migration, long standing problems of child protection, trafficking and child sexual exploitation in the city.

Oxfordshire's economic geography is not defined by a single functional economic area but is multi-faceted. Oxford City is demonstrably the functional engine of the city region economy and a major contributor to a connected regional cluster that is world leading in science, technology and knowledge as part of the Oxford-Milton Keynes Cambridge corridor. West Oxfordshire is part of the Cotswolds and Gloucestershire tourist economy. The north of the County is part of the Midlands economy and Banbury has a travel to work area that extends into Northamptonshire. The south of the County is part of the Reading travel to work area, the Thames Valley IT cluster and links to Heathrow and west to the M4 corridor. The health economy operates over a wider area covering Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire as reflected in the NHS STP footprint. A county unitary would lack the agility to combine a real focus and understanding of different local economies with managing strategic issues of infrastructure and strategic planning.

We are strongly of the view that a combined authority with an elected mayor is a better solution for Oxfordshire. This would allow us to focus on the urgent and important priority of delivering our economic potential whilst protecting local decision making. We do not believe we should allow arguments about local government structures to distract us from the urgent need and the opportunity to secure the significant investment in infrastructure in Oxfordshire that is needed to tackle barriers to growth, enable business to thrive and to deliver our considerable economic potential. In a speech that he gave on 19th January, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made it clear that Government remains committed to continuing with devolution, that it welcomes proposals from local areas and those areas that opt for a directly elected mayor will always be in line for the greatest degree of devolution.

The Combined Authority and devolution deal would avoid the considerable disruption and distraction of focus that would come from unnecessary reorganisation of local services that are highly performing. It would provide robust governance for devolution of new investment from government to the county, and drive joint working on strategic planning, transport, infrastructure and skills. It would also be able to drive forward a collective transformation and efficiency programme that could deliver greater savings than those estimated in your document.

We remain strongly supportive of the LEP's decision at the meeting in December which was agreed by all council leaders that our priority should be to focus on development proposal for a deal with government based on a mayoral combined authority. We agree with the LEP that we should not let that be derailed by pursuit of unitary ambitions which have no consensus of support. We therefore ask you to continue with the work we agreed to do jointly in developing our devolution deal proposals.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'B Price', with a short horizontal line underneath.

Councillor Bob Price
Leader

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Peter Sloman', with a long horizontal line underneath.

Peter Sloman
Chief Executive

Peter Sloman
Chief Executive
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Email: psloman@oxford.gov.uk
Website: www.oxford.gov.uk

Chief Executive's Office
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Oxford
OX1 1BX
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Peter Clark,
Oxfordshire County Council

07 March 2017

David Hill,
South and Vale District Council

Dear David and Peter

Better Oxfordshire

I received the notification of your Better Oxfordshire proposals yesterday by letter from David.

The proposals are radically different to the One Oxfordshire suggested option for local government. For example suggestions to create a Town Council for the City, the idea that Council Tax equalization could be resourced by a large scale precept just in the City, the idea of service delegation to Town and Parish Councils on a wide scale, the increase in the number of Area Executives to make them much smaller than District area level, abandoning local plan reviews necessary to meet the housing totals agreed in the City Deal. Indeed David's letter makes it clear that you consider the new proposals a major departure from the original proposals.

In light of this, Oxford City Council regard the Better Oxfordshire proposals as a brand new proposition. I note South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse rejected the "One Oxfordshire" idea but now support the new Better Oxfordshire proposal because they regard it as significantly different and a new approach.

The proposals suggest that the functions of the city council would be split between six councils: a new town council which currently does not exist, four parish councils and the new unitary. Since these arrangements are fundamental to the entire proposition in terms of accountable governance for the city but also the financial assumptions underpinning the new unitary county council, we believe that these proposals need to be properly explained and clarified and that the City Council and the Parish councils affected have a right to be consulted prior to the proposals being submitted.

Your three authorities cannot take a sound decision following public law principles to decide on a bid without consulting us on the new proposal. It would strengthen the bid to government if more councils agreed a set of common proposals so time is needed for us to understand the impact of what you are proposing and work with you to see if agreement is possible.

We would formally ask you to give the City Council eight weeks to consider your 150 page document and give you our response. We have employed some advisors to assist us in providing a carefully considered analysis of the proposals.

We will shortly enter the purdah period for the County Council elections and it will be difficult for me to consult my council on the matter until after the elections without reporting on controversial matters on which candidates have competing views. This will hamper our ability to take a decision on the proposition before the end of the Purdah period.

We have commissioned some independent opinion polling from MORI and the emerging results show that the public do not feel they are well informed about the original proposals, do not support the proposal that district services should be run by the county and that they believe they should be properly informed about proposals before taking a view. We believe you are under a moral and legal obligation to consult the public on the new Better Oxfordshire proposals after the purdah period for the county council elections so that the public can have their say.

After a year of studies on the County Council's unitary option we are surprised there is no coherent set of proposals covering the City which is so economically and socially vital for the county's future. It is not credible to apply to the Secretary of State suggesting he approve a new Council until the arrangements for the City are known and firm costed proposals are made. The suggestion of a further study of the governance options for the city seems reasonable, although late in the day, but I hope you agree any proposals from the convention you suggest would need to be subject to public consultation and that no application for local government restructuring could be reasonably made to the Secretary of State until the outcomes of this is known. The council tax equalization proposals are dependent on the outcome of this convention so the Secretary of State would want certainty on the matter before considering the proposals.

In summary then, as a result of the clear and material changes to the original One Oxfordshire proposal, and the fact that under your proposed timetable for submission to the Secretary of State these matters would fall to be considered during the forthcoming "purdah" period (which would place substantial restrictions on this Council's ability properly to respond), we consider any submission of your "Better Oxfordshire" proposal to the Secretary of State prior to your receipt of our considered response to be premature, inappropriate and a clear breach of the principles of both Public Law and natural justice. I wanted to let you know that should you proceed with your immediate submission, the City Council reserves the right to include your failure to comply with this request in any submissions we subsequently make to the Secretary of State, and indeed in any potential legal action we may take in regard to this matter.

In discussion with government officials yesterday we were advised that they expect areas to try to reach a consensus on structures locally and agree joint proposals. We are happy to work with you on a partnership basis on structure options especially as they impact on the city in an attempt to reach agreement on a compromise for the County. We believe a devolution deal application could be progressed now based on a combined authority. The combined authority and the councils could then implement in future changes in the local government arrangements that are agreed by all. By splitting Councils into two opposing camps around these proposals there is a danger the Secretary of State will feel unable to agree any proposals on structure or devolution and Oxfordshire will be the loser in this.

Could you urgently confirm that no decision to submit your Better Oxfordshire bid will be taken prior to giving the City Council reasonable time to consider the document you have produced and no bid for change in arrangement for the City will be made until your suggested convention reports on options and the public have been consulted.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Peter Sloman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Peter Sloman
Chief Executive

JAMES MILLS

Leader of the Council

Witney East Ward

Telephone: 01993-861617

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**WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Ian Hudspeth
Leader
Oxfordshire County Council
County Hall
OXFORD
OX1 1ND

Our Ref: JM/MS

28 February 2017

Dear Ian

**West Oxfordshire District Council response to Oxfordshire County Council
“One Oxfordshire” proposals for a single unitary Council for Oxfordshire**

I do not believe that West Oxfordshire District Council has been formally invited to respond to the County Council's 'One Oxfordshire' proposal. Nevertheless, we are taking this opportunity to respond on behalf of all the West Oxfordshire residents who have contacted us.

It is the strong view of this Council that there cannot be changes of the scale proposed without public support. There is an extremely high level of public opposition to the emerging 'One Oxfordshire' proposals and three of the council leaders, their Councils, and the majority of local MPs do not support these proposals.

This Council's opposition is based upon a number of fundamental concerns about the proposal, which:-

- 1) represents a re-run of previous failed top down reorganisation attempts;
- 2) focuses on a single option with no consideration of any alternatives;
- 3) seeks to reorganise hierarchical structures rather than transform service delivery;
- 4) stifles innovation and agile working;
- 5) delivers little, if anything, in terms of true transformational change and in this respect is narrow and unambitious;
- 6) reduces local democracy and choice;
- 7) has little public support from our residents.

This Council believes that the future success of local government in Oxfordshire should be built around collaboration not control. Indeed there is some irony in the fact that you have published your proposals so soon after the Oxfordshire authorities have collectively concluded discussions which see Oxford City's significant levels of unmet housing need being successfully planned for. Indeed we have also seen a step change in the local political thinking around a combined authority with elected mayor – the key elements for a strong devolution deal – with such a proposition being supported by all the Councils with the notable exception of the County Council.

Given the recent change in position of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council Leaders, who advise us that they have persuaded you to make fundamental changes to your proposal, it would be illogical for you to submit a bid to the Secretary of State to make fundamental and permanent changes to local government in Oxfordshire without proper consultation on these revised proposals.

We therefore ask that you confirm a coherent set of proposals, consult with us at an early stage, and work with all parties allowing a reasonable time for a response before considering any such submission to the Secretary of State. This consultation **must** include the local authorities affected by the changes both within Oxfordshire and those in neighbouring areas which are already partnering with the districts in shared service arrangements. This will ensure that any proposals are evaluated against realistic alternative options and allow us to identify how we can collectively deliver savings that are really meaningful for Oxfordshire taxpayers and are sustainable in the long term, based upon transformational change rather than just organisational change.

Furthermore, if we are being honest about building a new Oxfordshire model for the future, we must create a structure which stands the test of time. The current proposals are for an authority of a size already at the top end of government guidance and which within ten years of its inception will be significantly above those guidelines. It is clear from recent events that unitary authorities of the scale being considered by the County Council and its supporters run the risks of poor performance, inflexibility and a lack of focus on place with knock on costs to the local economy and local communities. I certainly do not want to be responsible for creating something that is so large it ceases to be agile and flexible but becomes monolithic and stagnant.

West Oxfordshire District Council remains of the view that a Combined Authority with an elected mayor is a better solution for Oxfordshire for at least the foreseeable future. We do not believe that we should allow arguments about local government structures to distract us from the clear and current opportunity to secure the significant investment in infrastructure in Oxfordshire that is urgently required in order to tackle barriers to growth, enable businesses to thrive and realise our considerable economic potential.

The Combined Authority and devolution deal would render unnecessary the considerable disruption and distraction of focus that would come from any reorganisation of district based services that are already performing to a high standard. It would provide robust governance to support the devolution of new levels of investment from government to the county, and drive joint working on strategic planning, transport, infrastructure and skills. It would also have the ability to drive forward a collective transformation and efficiency programme that could deliver greater savings than those estimated in your document.

Having regard to all of the above, and speaking on behalf of the whole of West Oxfordshire District Council in this regard, I would strongly urge the County Council to cease its work on One Oxfordshire, which clearly has little public support from our residents, and work together with us and other partners on a devolution deal. In the fullness of time and with the benefit of real experience of such a deal, we can assess the need for structural change, but that structural change of itself cannot be seen to be the solution to a problem that is as yet not clearly or fully defined.

In terms of evidence to support our proposition I include the outcome of our own public survey which has had an overwhelming response as set out below:-

Total Respondents	4,303
Total in favour of One Oxfordshire proposal	327
Total in favour of Councils working together rather than a single Council	3,967
% in favour of One Oxfordshire proposition	7.6%

In addition I could also cite the 180 plus phone calls I have had where members of the public have left their names and addresses in response to my letter. The response was unequivocal – all took time to call me and **all** were against the proposition of a single Unitary Council for Oxfordshire.

Furthermore, the survey comments, the contents of which we will share with the County Council and which we expect you to include with your survey evidence should you submit to the Secretary of State, are extremely powerful. These comments should be taken seriously by all local politicians as they are evidence of support for local decision making. Indeed 3419 people not only indicated support or otherwise but went on to explain why, and I think as local politicians we should take note of their views.

Whilst initially I did have some doubts about the cost of sending a letter to all residents, I now know it was absolutely the right thing to do – I have heard them loud and clear – have you?

Yours sincerely



JAMES MILLS
Leader of the Council

cc Peter Clark

CABINET – 14 MARCH 2017
Proposals for the Future Organisation of Local Government in
Oxfordshire - Performance Scrutiny Committee Chairman's report
to Cabinet

The Performance Scrutiny Committee discussed the Bid Document "Better Oxfordshire", the Recommendations to Cabinet and the feedback from the "One Oxfordshire" consultation process.

The following were the main issues raised by Councillors:

- The Committee recognised that Better Oxfordshire is only the start of a journey and that many of the principles and details will necessarily be for the Joint Committee and Implementation Executive to consider. The Scrutiny Committee was keen to ensure that there was adequate county councillor representation on both these bodies, and again stressed the importance of community voice informing the approach that is taken.
- Members were keen that individuals can clearly see what the proposals mean in terms of cost and local democracy, and in terms of what might be lost as well as gained.
- The Chair and members praised officers for their work in developing the proposal, noting that the process had been very open to collaboration with members, stakeholder groups and individual residents.
- The Committee welcomed the fact that the proposal had been adopted by the Cabinet and Council of the Vale of White Horse.
- "Option 6" that emerged from the Grant Thornton report greatly improved the unitary proposal in recognising the need for more local empowerment.
- However, there was still a concern that more community involvement needs to be embedded in the structure – in the City Convention, the Area Boards and the Joint Committee work to ensure that the new authority is built up from community to implementation.
- This work must recognise that communities are not just determined by places but also by issues and cultures.
- It's not clear if budgets will be devolved proportionally or by a bidding system.
- It is being proposed that the new local council for Oxford has a precept. It must be clear that this is to pay for better services and that residents are not paying more for the same services.
- Having too many Area Executive Boards could dilute their effectiveness.
- There is already a problem with lack of diversity among councillors and the reduction in the number of councillors could make that worse.
- How will the Implementation Executive be balanced, politically and in terms of cabinet members or 'backbenchers'?
- The City Convention should specifically include engagement with BME communities.
- The new council when elected may not include many experienced councillors and the unitary structure will be new to all, so training and member development will be important.
- There needs to be an awareness of the problems for areas on the political boundaries – both the county boundaries and divisions within the county.

- The new council needs to prioritise income generation.

Cabinet is asked to note the comments from the Performance Scrutiny Committee and in particular to ensure that there is significant community involvement in shaping the development of the Area Executive Board model.