

## One Oxfordshire proposal for local government reorganisation

### Public and stakeholder engagement summary

#### Introduction

- This report is a summary of a public and engagement exercise designed to both inform residents and stakeholders of the key elements of the proposal and to provide a range of opportunities for response and comments to help shape and improve it.
- The report sets out the overall approach and some headline findings. It is a precursor to, not a replacement for, a full independent report of the public and stakeholder engagement that is being prepared by Opinion Research Services for publication in support of the bid.

#### Key findings

- All county residents and stakeholders have had the opportunity to receive information about the draft proposal by means of a comprehensive communications strategy including: media releases; digital communications; direct communications; advertising; meetings; events and one-to-one conversations.
- Feedback has been received from thousands of individuals, organisations and groups through a variety of channels including:
  - 692 library drop-in session conversations
  - 200,000+ social media reach
  - 5,000 open engagement questionnaire responses (interim figure)
  - 500 door-step interviews
  - Five deliberative resident workshops
  - 4 meetings for parishes and town councils.
- In the representative household survey, public agreement for the single unitary draft proposal is 70% at a +/-5% confidence level. This includes majority public support across all city/district council areas.
- There was majority support for the draft proposal in three of the five deliberative workshops.
- Strong disagreement with the draft proposal is emerging from interim results from the open engagement questionnaire, with high numbers of people in Oxford and West Oxfordshire choosing to express their views through this channel.

- The potential for efficiency, cost effectiveness and the provision of joined-up services are key reasons for public support.
- Further clarity on localism and devolution of power (a key concern for parishes and town councils), service provision and improvements are key to shaping public and stakeholder opinion to counter mitigate expressed in these areas.

## **1. Background and approach**

1.1 On 19 January 2017, the county council announced its draft proposal for local government reorganisation: to abolish the existing two-tier structure (one county council and five city and district councils) and to replace it with one, new unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire. The benefits of this were distilled as:

- simpler for residents and business
- better, joined up services
- more local accountability
- lower cost to run.

1.2 A 5 ½ week period of public engagement followed (19 January – 28 February 2017), designed to both inform residents and stakeholders of the key elements of the proposal and to provide a range of opportunities for response and comments to help shape and improve it. The engagement was designed to include a mix of open and deliberative elements, giving everyone the opportunity to have their say while promoting informed engagement via the deliberative workshops and stakeholder meetings.

1.3 The county council appointed Opinion Research Services (ORS), a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research and major statutory consultation, to independently advise on, manage and report on aspects of the engagement activity.

1.4 ORS has a strong reputation in this field, having recently supported all nine authorities in Dorset with their significant consultation on local government reorganisation. They are also producing an independent report of the full engagement process on behalf of the council, of which this report is a precursor.

### **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 was 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 Department for Communities and Local Government, the County Council Network, the National Association of Local Councils, 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, the Emergency Services, Education and others)
- 10 meetings for parishes and town councils and one meeting for city stakeholders
- a public 'call for evidence' (led by consultant Grant Thornton who worked on the options appraisal) resulting in 626 public and stakeholder responses. This showed a majority belief that a single new unitary for Oxfordshire would be best able to meet the five assessment criteria.

1.7 Two public focus groups were held and an initiative called the 'Great Oxfordshire Shake Up' was established involving seven market stall events in town centres, a website and an online game.

## 2. Engagement Exercise

2.1 By means of a comprehensive communications strategy, all county residents and stakeholders have had the opportunity to receive information about the draft proposal. The strategy has included:

- a dedicated website - [www.oneoxfordshire.org](http://www.oneoxfordshire.org)
- four media releases, that have been covered by local print and broadcast media
- direct communications to over 45,000 members of the public using regular county council circulars, purchased direct mailing lists and the Oxfordshire Voice Citizens' Panel
- adverts on local radio, newspaper titles and digital channels
- posters and leaflets sent to all councillors, libraries, parishes and town councils
- content for local community media editors for use on their channels
- social media posts/tweets reaching more than 200,000 accounts.

2.2 The engagement process took many forms. The full draft proposal, a summary discussion document, contextual information and an online feedback form were published online at [www.oneoxfordshire.org](http://www.oneoxfordshire.org). Paper copies of the documents were placed in all libraries and other county council

buildings for collection and review. These included a summary of the full discussion document and paper copies of the feedback form.

### **Open engagement questionnaire**

- 2.3 The open engagement questionnaire was available for anyone to complete either online or in hard copy with a FREEPOST address between 19 January and 28 February 2017. A link was hosted on the One Oxfordshire website ([www.oneoxfordshire.org](http://www.oneoxfordshire.org)) and paper copies were available in all libraries and at County Hall.
- 2.4 The open questionnaire was designed to be inclusive as it offers everybody the opportunity to have their say, and it can provide considerable information about the views of particular groups and individuals at very local levels. In common with other such exercises, however, it cannot be expected to represent the overall balance of opinion in the general population as, for example, the more motivated groups or areas will typically be over-represented compared with others.
- 2.5 At the time of writing this report, final results are not available as responses are still being received and processed. The current count is over 5,000 responses with around 50 having been submitted by groups/organisations. A review of the emerging patterns of response shows that there was a particularly high level of response in Oxford and West Oxfordshire.

### **Representative 'door step' survey**

- 2.7 ORS completed 500 quota-controlled door-step interviews with residents aged 16+ between 5<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> February. A face-to-face personal interview approach was selected because it is considered by the research industry to be the best approach for surveys (the 'gold standard'), as it is the most inclusive method. It does not suffer from the same problems as telephone or online surveys, where some residents will inevitably be excluded from the sample. We also felt this methodology was particularly suited to this engagement as respondents needed to be provided with detailed information before they could reasonably answer questions.
- 2.8 ORS designed the research methodology to be representative at a county level. The survey featured a set of core questions (the same as the open questionnaire); including opportunities for people to put forward suggestions to improve the proposal as well as suggest an alternative model (including the status quo) for local government in Oxfordshire. Specifically, respondents were informed about the current two-tier system of local government in Oxfordshire and given the details of the draft proposal. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked about the extent to which they agreed or

disagreed that the six councils should be abolished and replaced with a unitary council.

- 2.9 To correct for response bias, ORS has applied statistical weighting to the completed data-set at both a county and district level to ensure the survey is representative of the entire Oxfordshire population aged 16+. Overall, the survey results are statistically reliable to around +/- 5% at the 95% level of confidence. This means that 19 times out of 20 the survey findings will be within 5% points of the result that would have been achieved had everyone in the population been interviewed.
- 2.10 The table below shows the percentage of people who agreed with each question. Please note that the statistical confidence intervals applied for the results at city/district council area are larger and will vary, but even taking the lower end of the confidence interval there is majority agreement for each question across all city/district areas.

	<b>County</b>	<b>Cherwell</b>	<b>Oxford</b>	<b>South</b>	<b>Vale</b>	<b>West</b>
<b><i>The case for change</i></b> <i>To what extent do you agree or disagree that there is a need to reorganise local government in Oxfordshire?</i>	70%	70%	70%	67%	70%	73%
<b><i>The principle of unitary council governance</i></b> <i>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the principle that a 'unitary council' should provide all council services in your particular area?</i>	67%	66%	68%	67%	70%	62%
<b>If local government was changed in Oxfordshire, how important or unimportant would the following be to you?</b>						
	<b>County</b>	<b>Cherwell</b>	<b>Oxford</b>	<b>South</b>	<b>Vale</b>	<b>West</b>
Simpler local government	87%	90%	81%	88%	86%	89%
Better services	92%	90%	98%	89%	89%	90%
More local accountability	88%	88%	89%	90%	86%	85%
Lower running costs	87%	88%	84%	92%	85%	86%
	<b>County</b>	<b>Cherwell</b>	<b>Oxford</b>	<b>South</b>	<b>Vale</b>	<b>West</b>
<b><i>The case for a single unitary council</i></b> <i>To what extent do you agree or disagree with Oxfordshire County Council's draft proposals to ABOLISH six councils and replace them</i>	70%	63%	69%	75%	67%	78%

<i>with ONE new 'unitary council's for the WHOLE of Oxfordshire?</i>						
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- 2.11 Among those who disagreed with the draft proposal, 31% favoured no change, 15% felt that the draft proposal lacks proof and 10% generally disagreed, with smaller numbers expressing various other concerns or suggesting other alternatives.

### **The difference between the open questionnaire and residents' survey**

- 2.12 The number of responses to any engagement questionnaire will tend to be highest in areas or among groups where there is particular strength of feeling, and may be influenced by any campaigning activities undertaken by strongly motivated groups. For example, Oxford City Council's leadership undertook an active campaign directing staff, residents and customers to complete the questionnaire; West Oxfordshire posted a document to all households asking them to oppose the proposals based on perceived risks to parking policy and tax levels; and Cherwell mounted an extensive social media campaign.
- 2.13 This survey, conducted using a quota based sampling approach, ensured that residents who may be less likely to be engaged with the wider engagement exercise were included and encouraged to give their views about the proposals.
- 2.14 The differences between the results for the representative survey and the open questionnaire should be considered in this context.

### **Deliberative workshops**

- 2.15 ORS designed and facilitated five deliberative workshops, which were attended by 88 Oxfordshire residents between 15 February and 23 February. The workshops were attended by a random selection cross-section of residents in each city/district council, with the group structure designed by ORS to broadly reflect the local population profile.
- 2.16 Each workshop lasted 2.5 hours and was led by an ORS facilitator following a standard presentation. A member of the County Council Leadership Team attended each to act as an 'expert witness' and listen first hand to the discussions.
- 2.17 The deliberative workshops were designed to allow members of the public sufficient time to consider the issues and proposal for change intelligently and critically. Because of their inclusiveness, their outcomes are indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

- 2.18 Overall, there was a broad division in 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. At the end of the workshops there was majority support from attendees of three of the five deliberative workshops (West Oxfordshire, Oxford City and South Oxfordshire), with a positive shift in opinion during the meetings based on full examination of the council's case for change.
- 2.19 Opinions shifted slightly in the other direction in the Vale of White Horse group due to concerns about the radical nature of the proposal and more markedly in Cherwell because workshop members disliked and rejected key aspects of the county council's case.

Area	Attendees	Reducing no. councils			Single unitary			Shift in favour
		For	Neutral	Against	For	Neutral	Against	
Cherwell	16	6	0	10	1	7	8	-5
Oxford	18	2	11	5	7	5	7	+5
South	17	5	4	8	11	4	2	+6
Vale	19	12	7	0	11	4	3	-1
West	18	4	10	4	10	0	8	+6
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>11</b>

- 2.20 ORS' high level summary of the views expressed in each group is set-out below.

**Cherwell workshop (23 February, Banbury Town Hall attended by 16 people)**

Initially, six of the 16 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.

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.

Following full discussion, only one person agreed with the 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 proposal. The Cherwell workshop was certainly the most critical of the proposals, 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.

#### **Oxford City workshop (16 February, County Hall attended by 18 people)**

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 proposals.

The small minority that agreed with the single unitary 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.

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, seven 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 workshop (16 February, County Hall attended by 17 people)**

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 proposal did so on the 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.

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 proposal was a persuasive factor for many of the 11 supporters.



Two participants explicitly rejected the 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.

### **Vale of White Horse (23 February, County Hall attended by 19 people)**

Initially, almost two-thirds of participants (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.

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 proposal - though for one person, while the case for change was understood, the actual proposal for change was too “extreme”.

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 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”.

### **Deliberative workshop for young people**

- 2.21 The council also organised a deliberative workshop for young people: 22 young 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’. 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.
- 2.22 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.

- 2.23 Discussion was dominated by the ‘more local’ strand and the importance and of local accountability, identity, size of the proposed council, and local access to services. The young people felt that they needed more detail on the day-to-day workings of the unitary council (including the location of the HQ etc.) in order to intelligently debate the issues. The potential for a single website and greater simplicity in contacting the council were viewed positively, albeit with some scepticism.

### **Library drop in sessions**

- 2.24 During the engagement period, the council organised 42 drop-in sessions in libraries between 24 January and 21 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 proposal, answer questions and encourage conversation about its key elements.
- 2.21 In total, 692 people were reached via this approach: this included 302 in-depth conversations about the draft proposal. The majority of people who took part were library customers, though a small number of people came in especially to share their views.
- 2.22 As with the deliberative workshops, there was a broad division in opinion (some people were very in favour of the proposal and some very set against), tinged with underlying apathy towards local government and scepticism about change, and the draft proposal. Many people wanted more information, or to consider the available information before giving a view. A number of people had very detailed questions. The main talking points were:

#### *General acceptance/support for change*

- Generally a good idea
- Will generate efficiencies, reduce need for cuts, cost-effectiveness
- Good if funding can be redirected to services, cost savings are needed to protect services
- Supportive of joining-up services and simplicity of customer access

#### *Concern/opposition to the draft proposal*

- Negative impact of existing county council cuts (bus services, children’s centres, libraries)
- Cost of reorganisation, predicted savings would not be realised
- Potential for degradation of local services, particularly district council services and loss of access to services (HQ, increase travel time etc.)
- The possible loss of local accountability, representation, identity and concerns about differing political ideology (city dominance and vice versa rural dominance)
- Concern about job losses for council employees

- Concern about local issues (e.g. loss of parking in West Oxfordshire, planning), the future role of parishes and town councils, too much/not enough devolution to parishes and town councils

### **Stakeholder responses**

- 2.23 The Stakeholder Advisory Group comprising key local stakeholder organisations (from Business, the Voluntary and Community Sector, Health, the Emergency Services, Education and others) met during the engagement period.
- 2.24 Previously, this group had worked with the Grant Thornton consultants, feeding into their report on options for local government reorganisation for Oxfordshire. Following the publication of Grant Thornton's report and Cabinet's decision to develop draft proposals for a single unitary authority for Oxfordshire (following the then named 'Option 6', later known as the 'Area Board model') the Advisory Group reconvened and continued in its challenge role. The Group also had meetings in late 2016 to help officers 'evolve' the Area Board model, and fed their thinking into the draft proposals published in January of 2017.
- 2.25 A number of stakeholders have chosen to submit detailed written responses on the draft proposal to the county council and some directly to the Secretary of State, copied to the county council. Such submissions are still forthcoming and being considered alongside engagement report.
- 2.26 Following on from the ten events for parishes and town councils in summer 2016, all such councils were directly informed about the draft proposal and invited to have their say. Their attention was directed to the draft proposals for:
- greater influence and involvement of parishes and towns on matters such as environmental services and local planning, including the role of neighbourhood plans
  - opportunities for those parishes and towns that want it, to take on more direct responsibility for services along with the necessary resources and precept raising powers
  - the role of parishes and town councils in a more local approach through democratic structures such as councillor divisions, and area executive boards.
- 2.27 Four meetings for parishes and town councils were organised during the engagement period and these sessions were attended by 68 councils. The role of local councils 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. Clarification was sought 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.

- 2.27 For some, the possible loss of democratic accountability was an issue: they felt that one unitary council would be too geographically and socially remote from its residents. Discussions ensued about the potential for the council to become too Oxford-centric if councillor numbers were to be based on population.
- 2.28 There was some discussion about potential implementation difficulties given only two of the district councils are “on board”, though the fact that South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse are involved was considered positive.