



NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Northampton Borough Council

Consultation on the creation of a new Town Council and Parish and/or Community Councils for the Northampton Borough Council Area

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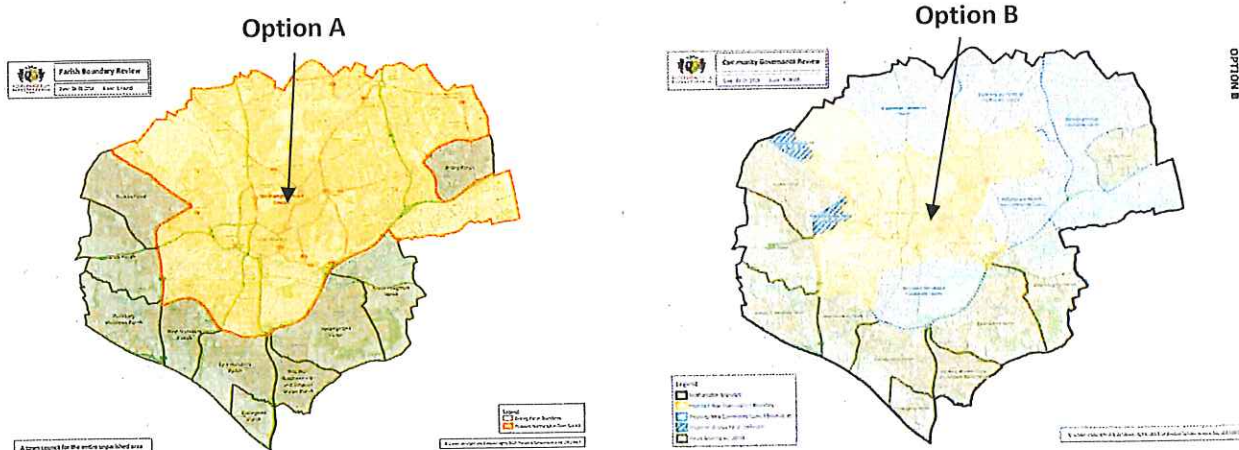
At all stages of the project, ORS' status as an independent organisation consulting stakeholders, councillors and members of the public as objectively as possible was recognised and respected. We are grateful for that trust and hope this report will contribute to the ongoing Community Governance Review (CGR) consultation process.

1. Executive Summary

Summary of main findings

The engagement context

- 1.1 All District and Borough Councils, including the County Council, are currently engaged in a restructure of local government across Northamptonshire. All existing Councils in the county were due to be abolished in 2021, with two new Unitary Authorities being created to provide all services in their respective areas; the existing Northampton Borough area is intended to fall within the new West Northamptonshire Unitary Authority. However, this has temporarily been put on hold until after the December 2019 General Election.
- 1.2 Northampton Borough Council (NBC) has been considering the benefits of creating a new Town Council for the town of Northampton to ensure residents have a stronger voice in the provision of services and the needs of the town; preserve the town's historic identity and heritage; and promote its interests once the new West Northamptonshire Unitary Authority comes into effect.
- 1.3 In Spring 2019, the Council undertook an initial listening and engagement phase of consultation to understand the views from key stakeholders on possible options for a new Town Council or any alternatives.
- 1.4 A subsequent debate at Full Council on 3rd June 2019 carefully considered the results of the initial stage of consultation and following this, the Council decided to:
 - » Undertake further localised consultation (letters to every household) in particular areas (Kingsthorpe, Far Cotton and Delapre) to understand views of residents on the possible creation of parish or community councils in these areas.
 - » Undertake a wider consultation on the possible creation of a new Town Council.
 - » Amend the shape and size of Option B (a smaller Town Council) to allow areas surrounding the town, the option of expressing interest in being separate parishes or Community Councils.
- 1.5 The two options for a new Town Council now being consulted on are:
 - » A: Creation of a new Town Council covering the whole of the Northampton area where no Parish/Community Councils currently exist; or
 - » B: Creation of a smaller Town Council covering the central urban core of Northampton¹



¹ The boundary would be dependent on which, if any, of the surrounding areas end up becoming Parish or Community Councils

The commission and consultation process

- 1.6 NBC commenced the second phase of consultation in September 2019. This final formal phase of consultation was designed to gather views on the two options outlined previously – as well as any proposed alternatives. These views will be considered by the Council before it makes its final decision on these matters.
- 1.7 The consultation period started on 27th September 2019 and ended on 8th November 2019. Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - was appointed by NBC to:
- » Design and analyse an open consultation questionnaire (which was available via the Council's website and on paper), to which there were 209 responses from individuals and 8 responses from organisations;
 - » Facilitate a forum with local stakeholders and parish councillors;
 - » Convene and facilitate three focus groups with 31 randomly-selected members of the public (one in the north, one in the east and one in the centre of Northampton); and
 - » Independently report all of these elements.

The report

- 1.8 This executive summary summarises the consultation outcomes to highlight the overall balance of opinion. We trust that this summary is a sound guide to these outcomes, but readers are urged to consult the full report that follows for more detailed insights and understanding of the assumptions, arguments, conclusions and feelings about the principle of and options for a new Town Council and Parish and/or Community Councils for the Northampton Borough Council Area. In contrast to the more thematic approach in this executive summary, the full report considers the feedback from the three main elements of the consultation in turn because it is important that the full report provides a full evidence-base for those considering the research and its findings. We trust that both this summary and full report will be helpful to all concerned.

Awareness of the change to the structure of local government in Northamptonshire

Residents' Survey

- 1.9 Less than half (45%) reported they were either very aware or fairly aware of the possible change to local government in the area.

Open Questionnaire

- 1.10 In contrast, around four fifths (81%) of individual respondents and all eight organisations reported they were either very aware or fairly aware of possible change to local government in the area. This demonstrates that respondents to the consultation questionnaire are more informed than general residents; it may therefore suggest that the profile of questionnaire respondents is somewhat different in composition, compared to general residents.

Importance of having an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, preserves its historic identity/heritage and delivers services at a local level

Residents' Survey

- 1.11 The majority said that it is important to them to have an organisation that delivers services at a local level (97%), promotes the interests of the town (95%) and preserves the town's historic identity/heritage (89%).

Open Questionnaire

- 1.12 Most said that it is important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town (93% of individuals; 8 of 8 organisations), delivers services at a local level (92% of individuals; 8 of 8 organisations) and preserves the town's historic identity/heritage (91% of individuals; 7 of 8 organisations).

Deliberative Sessions

- 1.13 In the focus groups and forums, there was considerable support for the *principle* of having a new Town Council, particularly within a more remote unitary local government structure, chiefly for the following reasons: promoting the interests of Northampton and its residents, preserving the town's historic identity/heritage and ensuring local service delivery. The overarching concern from the deliberative sessions was the need to revitalise the town centre.

Proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished

Residents' Survey

- 1.14 Over three fifths (62%) of agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished, whilst around one in seven (15%) disagree.

Open Questionnaire

- 1.15 Over two thirds (69%) of individuals agree with the proposal, as do 7 of 8 organisations, although nearly a quarter (24%) disagree.
- 1.16 As noted to some extent above, the main reasons for supporting the proposal were that a Town Council would: promote the interests of Northampton and its residents; retain decision-making at a local level; preserve the town's historic identity/heritage; and ensure local service delivery by residents with a care for their neighbourhoods. Moreover, it was suggested that a new Town Council would mitigate against the fear that as other areas of Northamptonshire are already largely parished, Northampton may not have as strong a voice as they would have within the proposed new unitary structure.
- 1.17 The most common reasons for opposition or concern were around: 'unnecessary bureaucracy' and the potential for damaging and divisive local politics; potentially unaffordable council tax rises for local residents; and the creation of duplication within services.

Deliberative Sessions

- 1.18 The main reasons given in the deliberative sessions for supporting the creation of a new Town Council were seeing the benefits of the town having a voice, yet having a small, focussed and accountable Town Council along with a perception that the Town Council would be a fresh start after the difficulties with local government in Northamptonshire over the previous few years. It was considered to be an opportunity to attract the best people.

- 1.19 In tandem with support for a Town Council came support for an increase in the number of parish or community councils outside the town centre, again to provide a local voice which is accountable locally.
- 1.20 Concerns about the proposal were based on a loss of faith in local government; that any new Town Council and unitary authority should not recreate a smaller version of the current structure (which is being dismantled) and that it should not be run by 'the same people'.
- 1.21 More generally, there were concerns that there should be representation for all across the (current) Borough; that preferably no area should be unparished and that monies gathered through the Council Tax precept should be spent across the area and not flow inequitably to the town centre; money should be spent in the local area where it is gathered. At the same time, deprivation in the town centre was recognised as an issue.

Which parts of the Borough a new Town Council should cover

Residents' Survey

- 1.22 Around half (48%) of residents reported that a new Town Council should be larger and cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst a similar proportion (50%) said it should be smaller and cover only part the central urban core of Northampton (Option B). 2% stated they would prefer the Town Council to cover a different part of the Borough.

Open Questionnaire

- 1.23 Over two fifths (45%) of individual questionnaire respondents felt that a new Town Council should cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst a similar proportion (42%) said it should be smaller and cover only part the central urban core of Northampton (Option B). 13% stated they would prefer the Town Council to cover a different part of the borough.
- 1.24 Looking at the organisational responses, three quarters (6 out of 8) felt a Town Council should cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst 2 out of 8 felt it should cover the central urban core of Northampton (Option B).

Deliberative Sessions

- 1.25 In the deliberative sessions, the majority of stakeholders in the workshop preferred Option A – a larger Town Council, with their primary reason being that a large Town Council would provide the strongest representation for Northampton residents within the new unitary structure. The majority in the focus groups favoured Option B – a smaller Town Council, as being the most advantageous option for local (parish) communities and did not emulate the existing structure in miniature.
- 1.26 Under either option, it was considered necessary to implement a plan, to revitalise the town centre to deal with social issues, re-let empty shops and increase other facilities designed to encourage people to come into the town centre for shopping and leisure – and a new Town Council was felt to be a good way to help with this.

Minimising costs to residents or taking responsibility for as many services as possible

Open Questionnaire

- 1.27 Three fifths of questionnaire respondents provided responses which fell at the extremes of the scale – 35% selected option 1 (Town Council should take responsibility for as many local services as possible),

whilst 25% answered option 9 (Town Council should minimise the cost to residents). A further 15% chose the middle option – option 5.

- 1.28 When percentages are combined, it is evident that respondents have a slight preference for the Town Council to taking responsibility for more local services (options 1-4; 46%), as opposed to minimising the cost to residents (options 6-9; 39%). Opinion was also similarly divided among the organisations responding.

Deliberative Sessions

- 1.29 There were a number of subtly different views expressed by the public focus group participants, but the general thrust of most were a concern that local taxes should be spent locally, and that spending should be accountable. One participant may have summed up the general feeling in saying: *"I don't necessarily want it to be cheaper, but I'd like them to spend the money better."* That said, participants were concerned that spending decisions should work for people who are already deprived. Starting small and building up from there was also suggested with the understanding that that residents would not mind paying more for increased local service provision if they are able to see the Town Council, and any new parish councils, achieving results from the outset.

Overall Conclusions

- Less than half of residents' survey respondents are aware of the proposed changes to government in the area, although most of open questionnaire respondents reported being very or fairly aware.
- It is considered important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, preserves its historic identity/heritage and delivers services at a local level.
- Most agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished.
- Opinion is equally divided over which parts of the Borough a new Town Council should cover.
- Respondents have a slight preference for the Town Council taking responsibility for more local services, as opposed to minimising the cost to residents.

- 1.30 While it was generally considered important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, preserves its historic identity and heritage and delivers services at a local level, there was considerable debate events about what the remit and responsibilities of any new organisation would be.
- 1.31 There are, though, concerns even among those who support the principle of creating a new Town Council, chiefly around: 'unnecessary bureaucracy' and the potential for damaging and divisive local politics; potentially unaffordable council tax rises for local residents; and the creation of duplication within services. Focus group participants also noted that the new structure should not replicate the existing structure and should not be run by 'the same people'.

- 1.32 Budgets and funding for a Town Council were matters of concern, particularly the size of the precept that residents would need to pay in parishes outside of the Town Council in relation to where the money would be spent; across the whole area from which it was collected or more focussed on the town centre.
- 1.33 As for the preferred size and shape of any new Town Council, opinion was equally divided in the residents' survey and open questionnaire, whilst in the deliberative events, Option B was slightly preferred by members of the public who attended the focus groups and Option A was favoured by stakeholders and parish councillors.
- 1.34 Those in favour of Option A noted that all Northampton residents will need local representation (with the introduction of unitary authorities) and that a large Town Council was the best option, whilst for those whose preference was Option B, they spoke of the benefits that could be obtained from creating a more community-centred body.
- 1.35 There is also a need for careful consideration of the level of precept which would need to be charged by any new Town Council, particularly under Option B, the smaller town council. Participants in favour of either option made important arguments about the need to keep council tax affordable, and also highlighted the comparatively large proportion of households around the town centre who are in receipt of benefits and therefore who do not pay Council Tax, which would be particularly relevant under the smaller Town Council, Option B. These points will need to be considered very carefully by decision makers in considering the most appropriate size and shape of any new Town Council and if one is created, its eventual budget and associated precept, as care needs to be taken around the possible disproportionate burden that any rise to council tax may place on the least affluent residents such as the working poor: *"The smaller {town centre} area encompasses some of the poorest areas... You're asking some of the poorest to pay more"*.
- 1.36 Lastly, many attendees of the deliberative sessions remarked that insufficient information was made available to residents; although in practice ORS notes that this is difficult, as the precise cost of any Town Council would depend on the size and shape, and the services it eventually took responsibility for.

2. The Consultation Process

Overview of the consultation

Background to the review

- 2.1 All District and Borough Councils, including the County Council, are currently engaged in a restructure of local government across Northamptonshire. All existing Councils in the county were due to be abolished in 2021, with two new Unitary Authorities being created to provide all services in their respective areas; the existing Northampton Borough area is intended to fall within the new West Northamptonshire Unitary Authority. However, this has temporarily been put on hold until after the December 2019 General Election.
- 2.2 Northampton Borough Council (NBC) has been considering the benefits of creating a new Town Council for the town of Northampton to ensure residents have a stronger voice in the provision of services and the needs of the town; preserve the town's historic identity and heritage; and promote its interests once the new West Northamptonshire Unitary Authority comes into effect.
- 2.3 In Spring 2019, the Council undertook an initial listening and engagement phase of consultation to understand the views from key stakeholders on possible options for a new Town Council or any alternatives. Findings from the engagement questionnaire showed that:
 - » Stakeholders feel that it is important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, preserves its historic identity/heritage and delivers services at a local level
 - » Opinion was divided over the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished (51 per cent support – 41 per cent opposed)
 - » Option A (a Town Council covering the whole of the unparished area of Northampton) was preferred to Option B (a Town Council for part of Northampton covering the town centre)
- 2.4 During this initial phase, the Council also received some petitions and expressions of interest for new parish and Community Councils to be created in particular areas that are currently unparished (e.g. Kingsthorpe, Far Cotton and Delapre etc).
- 2.5 A subsequent debate at Full Council on 3rd June 2019 carefully considered the results of the initial stage of consultation and following this, the Council decided to:
 - » Undertake further localised consultation (letters to every household) in particular areas (Kingsthorpe, Far Cotton and Delapre) to understand views of residents on the possible creation of parish or community councils in these areas. Undertake a wider consultation on the possible creation of a new Town Council.
 - » Amend the shape and size of Option B (a smaller Town Council) to allow areas surrounding the town, the option of expressing interest in being separate parishes or Community Councils
- 2.6 The two options for a new Town Council now being consulted on are:

- » A: Creation of a new Town Council covering the whole of the Northampton area where no Parish/Community Councils currently exist (this is the same area that was identified as Option A in the initial phase of the consultation); or
- » B: Creation of a smaller Town Council covering the central urban core of Northampton²

The commission

- 2.7 NBC commenced the second phase of consultation in September 2019. This final formal phase of consultation was designed to gather views on the two options outlined previously – as well as any proposed alternatives. These views will be considered by the Council before it makes its final decision on these matters.
- 2.8 The consultation period started on 27th September 2019 and ended on 8th November 2019. Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - was appointed by NBC to; design and analyse an open consultation questionnaire (which was available via the Council's website and on paper); facilitate one forum with local stakeholders and parish councillors; convene and facilitate three focus groups with randomly-selected members of the public; and independently report all of these elements.

Quantitative engagement

Residents Survey

- 1.1 The first form of quantitative engagement was the residents' survey. The survey was undertaken over the telephone with residents aged 18 and over to ensure that a broadly representative profile of opinions was achieved from those living in the unparished areas of Northampton using the same core questions as in the open questionnaire.
- 1.2 ORS staff conducted 300 structured telephone interviews between 14th October and 8th November 2019 using a 'CATI' (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) technology. The survey was conducted using a quota controlled sampling approach, to ensure a broadly representative sample across the unparished areas of Northampton.
- 1.3 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.
- 1.4 During this process, the demographic characteristics of residents were compared against data for the whole population (in this instance, the population in the unparished areas of Northampton) 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 The boundary would be dependent on which, if any, of the surrounding areas end up becoming Parish or Community Councils

- 1.5 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.
- 1.6 Survey results based on the weighted data are broadly representative of the unparished areas of Northampton. After taking account of the weighting process, we can be 95% confident that the residents' survey results will be within around $\pm 5.7\%$ 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 around 5.7% points of the survey estimate.
- 1.7 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 consultation questionnaire

- 2.9 The open consultation questionnaire was available for anyone to complete via the Council's website and on paper and 209 responses were received from individuals and 8 from organisations. The questionnaire included questions about:
 - » The extent to which people were aware of the proposed changes to local government in Northamptonshire;
 - » The importance or unimportance of having an organisation that preserves the town's heritage and history, promotes its interest and delivers services at a local level;
 - » The principle of a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished;
 - » The two proposed options; and
 - » The services a new Town Council could or should manage.
- 2.10 It should be noted that open questionnaires are important forms of engagement in being inclusive and 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 the more motivated groups or areas are also typically over-represented compared with others.

Deliberative engagement

Focus groups and forums

- 2.11 A series of deliberative sessions were held in October 2019: one with local stakeholders and Parish Councillors; and three with 31 randomly-selected members of the public (one in the north, one in the east and one in the centre of Northampton).
- 2.12 The stakeholders and parish councillors were invited to their meeting by NBC, whereas the randomly-selected members of the public were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS' 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.

- 2.13 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 focus groups met were readily accessible. 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). Overall, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents and, as standard good practice, were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.
- 2.14 Although, like all other forms of qualitative engagement, deliberative groups 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.

Deliberative events: the agenda

- 2.15 All sessions lasted for around two hours and began with an ORS presentation or verbal explanation to provide the contextual background information outlined above. Participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout, and the meetings were thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to the issues under question.

The report

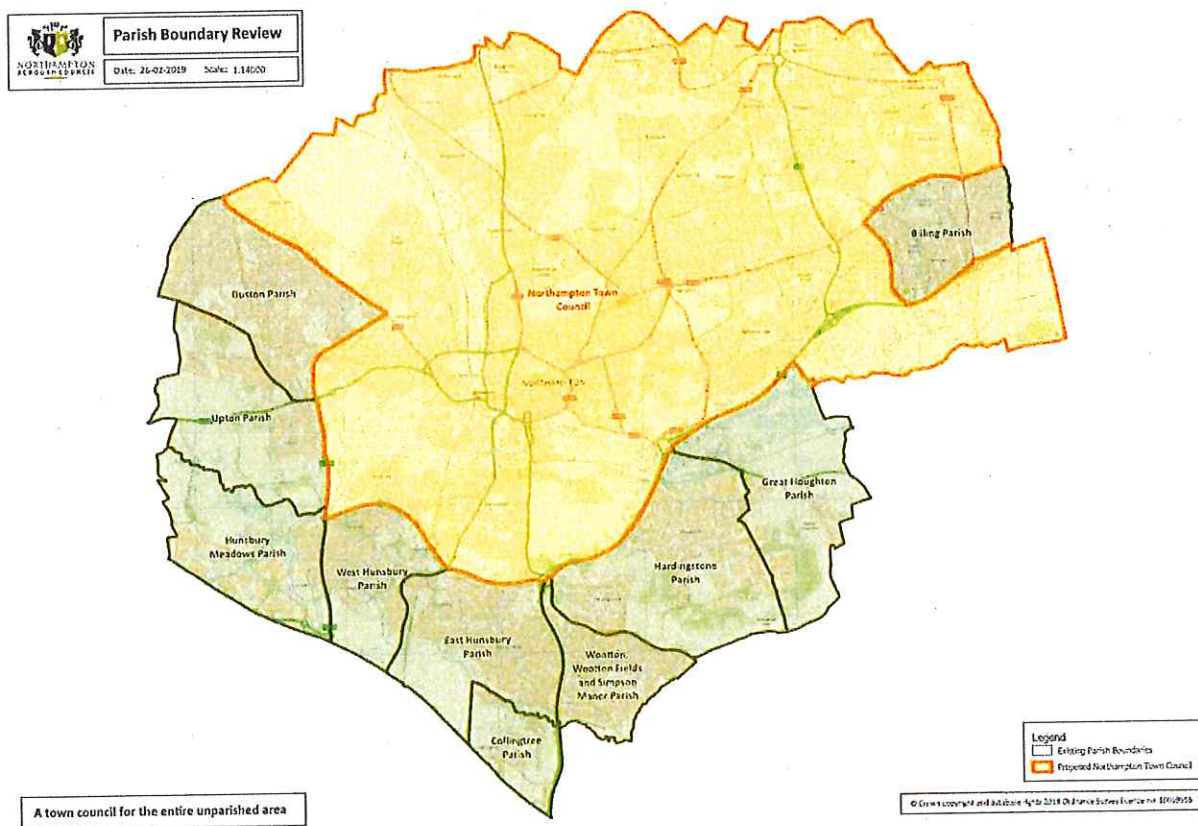
- 2.16 This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of respondents and participants on the proposals for a new Town Council and Parish and/or Community Councils for the Northampton Borough Council Area. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them - 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 those taking part.

3. Residents' Survey

The Survey

- 1.8 The purpose of the survey was to achieve a broadly representative sample of interviews with residents (aged 18 and over) living in the unparished areas of Northampton (i.e. the area highlighted in yellow in the map below) in order to provide an estimate of the views that would have been obtained had it been possible to survey the entire population.

Figure 1: Map outlining the (unparished) areas of Northampton interviewed as part of the residents' survey



- 1.9 The survey was conducted through structured telephone interviews undertaken by IQCS-trained interviewers using a quota based sampling approach. Residents were provided with summary information about both proposals before being asked the associated questions, based on the questions within the consultation questionnaire. Residents who wanted further information before responding were directed to NBC's dedicated consultation website and were given an opportunity to make an appointment to be interviewed subsequently.
- 1.10 Quota controls were applied by age, gender, working status and area ('town centre' and 'outer area') to ensure the achieved sample was representative of the (18+) population living in the unparished areas of Northampton. The survey was conducted using a quota controlled sampling approach, to ensure a broadly representative sample across the unparished areas of Northampton.

- 1.11 In total, ORS staff conducted 300 interviews between 14th October and 8th November 2019 using a 'CATI' (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system and residents were provided with detailed information about the proposals upon request.

Weighting the Data

- 1.12 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.
- 1.13 During this process, the demographic characteristics of residents were compared against data for the whole population (in this instance, the population in the unparished areas of Northampton) 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.
- 1.14 The returned sample was checked against comparative data for Northampton (from 2017 Mid-Year Population Estimates and Census 2011), for gender, age, economic status, ethnicity and area, then subsequently weighted by age, economic status and area. 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.
- 1.15 Survey results based on the weighted data are broadly representative of the unparished areas of Northampton. After taking account of the weighting process, we can be 95% confident that the residents' survey results will be within around $\pm 5.7\%$ 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 around 5.7% points of the survey estimate.
- 1.16 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

- 1.17 The tables below show the profile characteristics of respondents to the survey. Please note that the figures may not always sum to 100% due to rounding.
- 1.18 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.

Table 1: Residents survey responses (unweighted and weighted) and resident population by age, gender, ethnic group, economic status and area

Characteristic	Unweighted Count	Unweighted Valid %	Weighted Valid %	Population %
BY AGE				
18 to 34	103	34%	33%	33%
35 to 54	61	20%	35%	35%
55 to 74	93	31%	24%	24%

	75 or over	43	14%	8%	8%
	Total valid responses	300	100%	100%	100%
	<i>Not known</i>	-	-	-	-
BY GENDER					
	Male	139	46%	45%	50%
	Female	161	54%	55%	50%
	Total valid responses	300	100%	100%	100%
	<i>Not known</i>	-	-	-	-
BY ETHNIC GROUP					
	White	252	88%	87%	83%
	BAME	34	12%	13%	17%
	Total valid responses	286	100%	100%	100%
	<i>Not known</i>	14	-	-	-
BY ECONOMIC STATUS					
	In employment	162	54%	61%	59%
	Retired from work	101	34%	18%	18%
	Otherwise unemployed	37	12%	21%	23%
	Total valid responses	300	100%	100%	100%
	<i>Not known</i>	-	-	-	-
BY AREA					
	Town Centre	109	36%	48%	49%
	Outer Area	191	64%	52%	51%
	Total valid responses	300	100%	100%	100%
	<i>Not known</i>	-	-	-	-

Interpretation of the data

1.19 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

1.20 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.

1.21 In some cases, figures of 2% or below have been excluded from graphs.

1.22 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).

- 1.23 It should be remembered that a sample, and not the entire population living in the areas of Northampton that will be affected by the proposals, have 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.
- 1.24 Differences that are not said to be 'significant' or 'statistically significant' are indicative only.

Main Findings

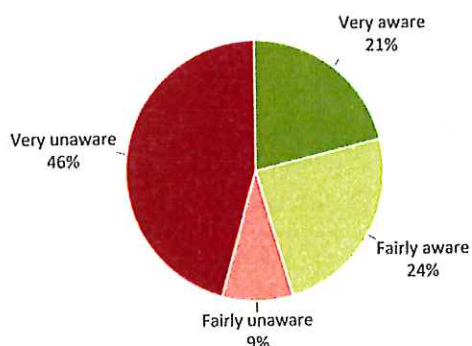
Less than half are aware of the proposed changes to local government in the area

Prior to this consultation exercise, to what extent were you aware of the possible change to local government in this area?

- 3.2 Less than half (45%) of residents reported they were either very aware or fairly aware of the possible change to local government in the area.

Figure 2: Awareness of possible change to local government in the area

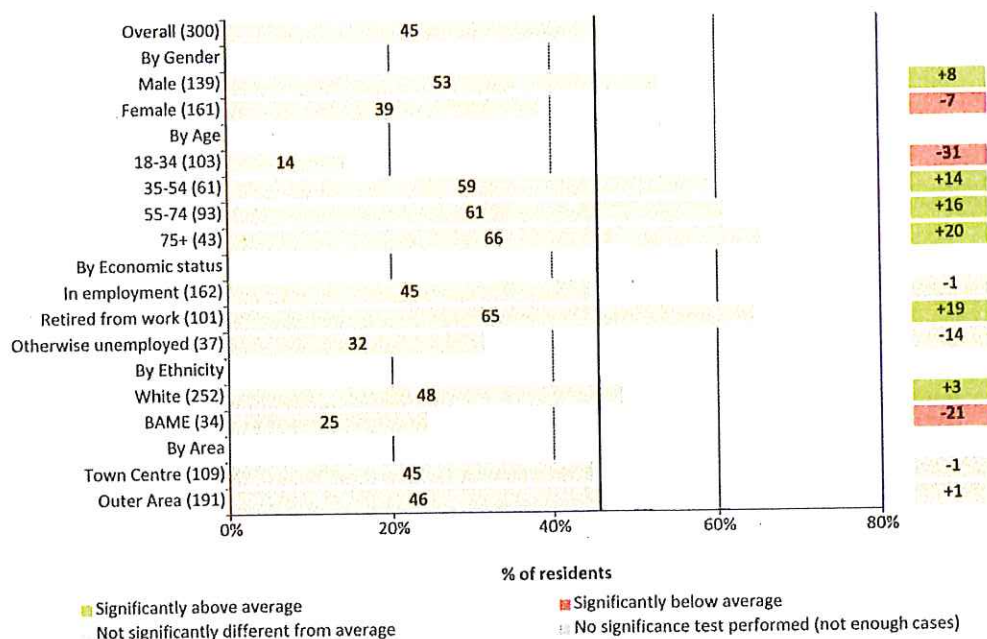
Base: All residents (300)



Differences by demographic sub-groups

- 3.3 The following chart shows how views varied across different demographic subgroups of residents who are aware of the possible change to local government in the area. For example, you can see that male residents, those aged 35+, retired from work or White are significantly more likely to say they are aware, whilst female residents those aged 18-34 or BAME are significantly less likely to say this.

Figure 3: Awareness of possible change to local government in the area: by demographic sub-group (Base: All residents)

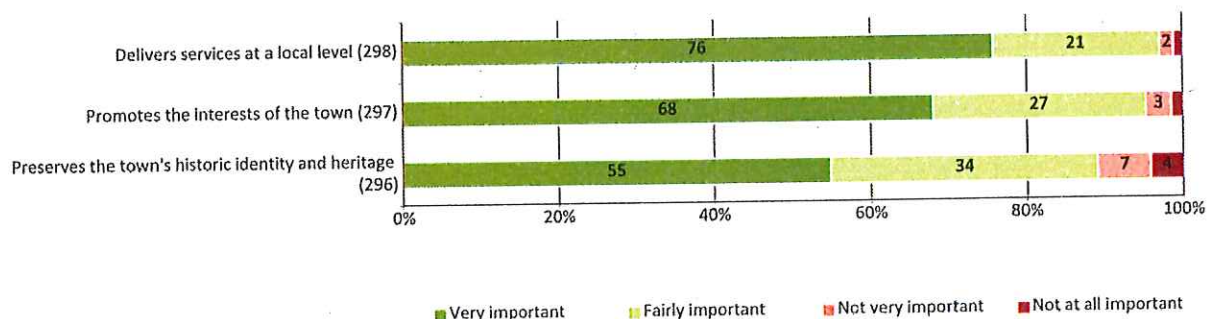


It is considered important to have an organisation that delivers services at a local level, promotes the interests of the town and preserves its historic identity/heritage

How important or unimportant is it to have either a Town Council in Northampton or a Parish Council in some areas of Northampton that...?

- 3.4 The majority of residents said that it is important to them to have an organisation that delivers services at a local level (97%), promotes the interests of the town (95%) and preserves the town's historic identity/heritage (89%).

Figure 4: Possible role of new organisation
Base: All residents (number of residents shown in brackets)

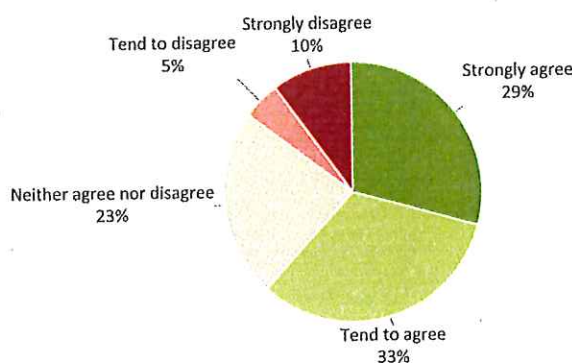


Over three fifths agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished?

- 3.5 Over three fifths (62%) of residents agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished, whilst around one in seven (15%) disagree.

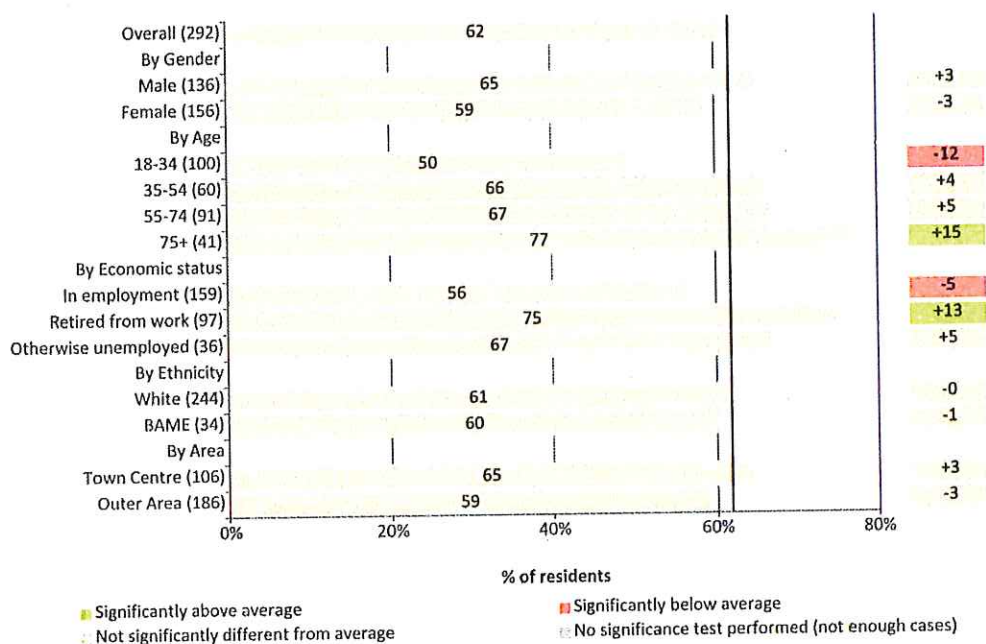
Figure 5: Agreement with proposal to create a new Town Council
Base: All residents (292)



Differences by demographic sub-groups

3.6 The following chart shows how views varied across different demographic subgroups of residents who agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council. For example, you can see that those aged 75+ or retired from work are significantly more likely to agree, whilst those aged 18-34 or in employment are significantly less likely to say this.

Figure 6: Agreement with proposal to create a new Town Council: by demographic sub-group (Base: All residents)



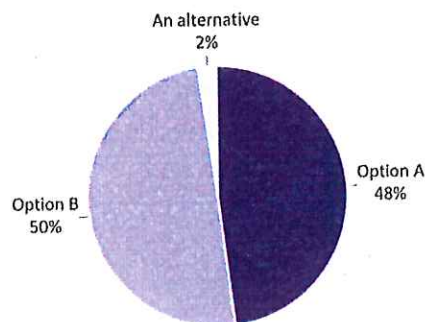
Opinion is divided over which parts of the Borough a new Town Council should cover

If a new Town Council were created, which parts of the Borough do you believe it should cover?

3.7 Around half (48%) of residents reported that a new Town Council should be larger and cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst a similar proportion (50%) said it should be smaller and cover only part the central urban core of Northampton (Option B). Only 2% stated they would prefer the Town Council to cover an alternative area in a different part of the borough.

3.8 It is worth pointing out that those currently living in the area which would become a Town Council under Option B (i.e. the town centre), were more likely to choose Option B (52%) than Option A (44%).

Figure 7: Parts of the borough a new Town Council should cover
Base: All residents (276)



If you support Option A, why is that?

3.9 Residents were given the opportunity to expand on and outline why they supported Option A. 104 residents provided comments and a summary is provided below:

Table 2: Reasons for supporting Option A
Base: All residents who made comments (104)

Explanation for answer		No. of comments	%
GENERAL ACCEPTANCE / SUPPORT FOR CHANGE	Prefer larger town council/better coverage/bigger is better/provides better access	61	61
	Best option/will provide better services/facilities	18	21
	Need to keep Councils local/local decision making/the interests of the area	17	19
	This is most cost efficient/best way to save money	6	6
	More local accountability	5	5
	Agree with the creation of a town council	5	4
	It will help with town centre improvements	4	3
	Need to preserve town identity/local town needs its own voice/protect historic tradition	3	3
	Urban/rural areas have different needs	3	3
	It will reduce unnecessary admin/duplication of services	2	2
	Prefer larger town council/easier to manage	2	2
	Generally support proposals/agree with the need for change	2	1
	Agree with Option A	1	1
	It will reduce unnecessary bureaucracy	1	1
CONCERN / OPPOSITION FOR CHANGE	Disagree with smaller town council/doesn't cover a large enough area	5	4
	Proposals will increase council tax/just an additional cost	3	2
	Urban/rural areas have different needs	1	1
OTHER COMMENTS	Other	19	15

If you support Option B, why is that?

3.10 Residents were given the opportunity to expand on and outline why they supported Option B. 133 residents provided comments and a summary is provided below:

Table 3: Reasons for supporting Option B**Base: All residents who made comments (133)**

Explanation for answer		No. of comments	%
	Prefer small town council/easier to manage	60	48
	Need to keep Councils local/local decision making/the interests of the area	50	38
	It will help with town centre improvements	23	18
	Best option/will provide better services/facilities	16	11
	Need to preserve town identity/local town needs its own voice/protect historic traditions	12	8
GENERAL ACCEPTANCE / SUPPORT FOR CHANGE	This is most cost efficient/best way to save money	8	7
	Agree with Option B as it is in the centre/keep things central	6	5
	Generally support proposals/agree with the need for change	5	3
	More local accountability	4	3
	Agree with the creation of a town council	3	3
	Agree with Option B	3	3
	Urban/rural areas have different needs	3	3
	It will help improve communication between councils	2	2
	It will reduce unnecessary bureaucracy	1	1
	It will reduce unnecessary admin/duplication of services	1	1
CONCERN / OPPOSITION FOR CHANGE	Disagree with larger town council/covers too large an area	8	5
	Disagree with Option A	1	2
	Proposal will spread councils too thin	2	1
ALTERNATIVE	Every ward should have a parish council	1	1
OTHER COMMENTS	Other	8	6

- 3.11 Only six residents said that a new Town Council should cover an alternative area (i.e. not the area covered by Option A or Option B) and were asked to clarify what area this should be. Responses included: *“Covering a smaller area but covering the areas that need it the most unlike the central districts”*; and *“I believe the borough boundary should be covered by one Council, Northampton. The other parts of Northampton should be covered by their own parish councils”*
- 3.12 These residents were also asked why they think a Town Council should be created in a different part of the borough and their comments are provided below:

Table 4: Why a Town Council should be created in a different part of the borough
Base: All residents who think a new Town Council should cover an alternative area (6)

Comment
<i>Either the town stands, or it doesn't. To select parts of the town and exclude the rest doesn't make a lot of sense to me.</i>
<i>I am against the idea.</i>
<i>I am talking about the villages around Northampton and they should be covered by a parish council.</i>
<i>I think there would be no miscommunication if there was one leading branch.</i>
<i>If its localised then it can deal with the local problems at the ground level.</i>
<i>There are areas that are affected by the lack of attention.</i>

- 3.13 In addition, a further eight residents answered ‘no Town Council’ when asked for their preference but were asked a follow up question to try and elicit a response. If a new Town Council were created and they had to choose, three said they would choose Option A and two would choose Option B (the other three residents could still not provide an answer).
- 3.14 Finally, 16 residents said they were unsure when asked what part of the borough a new Town Council should cover and were then asked what makes them unsure or what would help them decide. Most made comments relating to them needing more information to make a decision such as: *“I don't feel like I know enough about each individual Option And what would be best for residents”*; *“I don't really understand the benefits of the various options”*; and *“I don't know which option would benefit the community more”*.

4. Open Consultation Questionnaire

Introduction

- 4.1 A consultation document outlining the issues under consideration was produced by NBC, and a corresponding consultation questionnaire was available for completion online (on the Council's website) and on paper. The questionnaire included questions about the extent to which people were aware of the proposed changes to local government in Northamptonshire; the importance or unimportance of having an organisation that preserves the town's heritage and history, promotes its interest and delivers services at a local level; the principle of a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished; the two proposed options; and the services a new Town Council could or should manage. The questionnaire was available in online and paper formats between 27th September and 8th November 2019 and 217 responses were received in total.
- 4.2 Of the 217 responses, 8 were received from organisations. Responses from organisations might represent the views of large numbers of individuals or key stakeholders who might be particularly informed about the impacts on their members, or they could raise technical arguments that cannot easily be summarised. For these reasons, ORS typically reports the views of individual respondents and organisations separately.

Respondent Profile

- 4.3 It should be noted that open questionnaires are important forms of engagement in being inclusive and 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 population (and, as such, results indicate the views of those who choose to respond, rather than acting as a statistically reliable guide to the general population's views).
- 4.4 For example, the table overleaf summarising the 209 individual respondents to the questionnaire shows that very few responses were received from the very youngest and oldest residents, whereas over four fifths of respondents (84%) were aged between 35 and 74.
- 4.5 Table 5 overleaf provides a breakdown of the respondent profile of the 209 individuals who responded either online or by post to the open questionnaire.

Table 5: Open questionnaire responses by demographics and area

Characteristic	Unweighted Count	Unweighted Valid %
BY AGE		
Under 25	4	2%
25 to 34	10	6%
35 to 44	18	11%
45 to 54	26	16%
55 to 64	42	26%
65 to 74	51	31%
75 to 84	10	6%
85 or over	2	1%
Total valid responses	163	100%
<i>Not known</i>	46	-
BY GENDER		
Male	94	58%
Female	67	42%
Total valid responses	161	100%
<i>Not known</i>	48	-
BY ETHNIC GROUP		
White	145	94%
BAME	10	6%
Total valid responses	155	100%
<i>Not known</i>	54	-
BY WHETHER RESPONDENT HAS A DISABILITY		
Yes	15	9%
No	143	91%
Total valid responses	158	100%
<i>Not known</i>	51	-
BY OPTION A AREAS		
Existing parished area	27	19%
Proposed town council area under Option A	117	81%
Total valid responses	144	100%
<i>Not known</i>	65	-
BY OPTION B AREAS		
Existing parished area	27	19%
Proposed Town Council area under Option B	31	22%
Proposed community council under Option B	86	60%
Total valid responses	144	100%
<i>Not known</i>	65	-

Interpretation of the data

- 4.6 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 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.
- 4.7 Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of "don't know" categories, or multiple answers.
- 4.8 The consultation questionnaire contained a number of open-ended questions and, as with most engagement of this nature, some respondents do address the specific questions asked, but some respondents choose to focus on other issues not necessarily directly related to the question asked; however, in either case we have sought to classify and quantify the number of mentions of each comment.

Duplicate and Co-ordinated Responses

- 4.9 It is important that consultation questionnaires are open and accessible to all, while being alert to the possibility of multiple completions (by the same people) distorting the analysis. Therefore, while making it easy to complete the questionnaire online, ORS monitors the IP addresses through which questionnaires are completed. A similar analysis of "cookies" was also undertaken – where responses originated from users on the same computer using the same browser and the same credentials (e.g. user account). Some submissions were received with duplicate cookies, and after careful study of these responses, six were considered to be identical responses or appeared to be attempting to skew the results and were excluded from the results. However, no physical copies of questionnaires returned to ORS were considered to be duplicated responses.

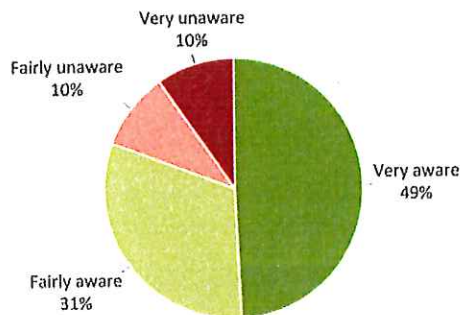
Main Findings (individuals)

Most respondents are aware of the proposed changes to local government in the area

Prior to this consultation exercise, to what extent were you aware of the possible change to local government in this area?

- 4.10 Around four fifths (81%) of consultation questionnaire respondents reported they were either very aware or fairly aware of the possible change to local government in the area. This is in contrast to the residents' survey (45% aware), and demonstrates that respondents to the consultation questionnaire are more informed than general residents; it may therefore suggest that the profile of questionnaire respondents is somewhat different in composition, compared to general residents.

Figure 8: Awareness of possible change to local government in the area
Base: All individuals (207)

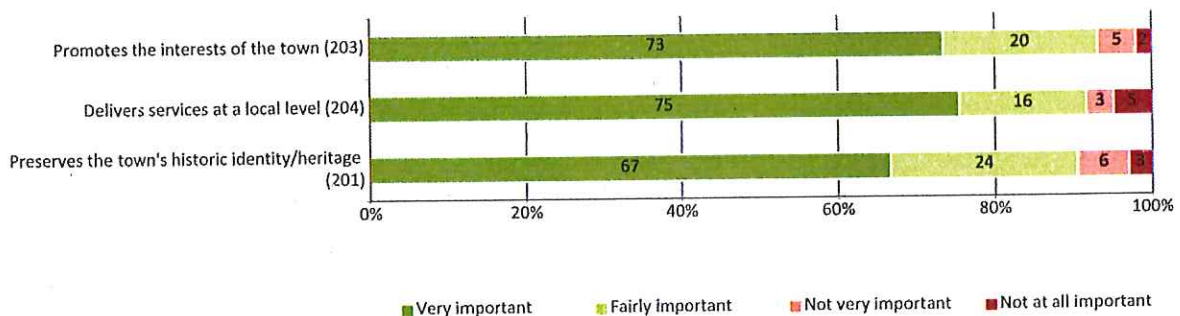


It is considered important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, delivers services at a local level and preserves its historic identity/heritage

How important or unimportant is it to you to have an organisation that...?

- 4.11 The majority of respondents said that it is important to them to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town (93%), delivers services at a local level (92%) and preserves the town's historic identity/heritage (91%).

Figure 9: Possible role of new organisation
Base: All Individuals (number of individuals shown in brackets)

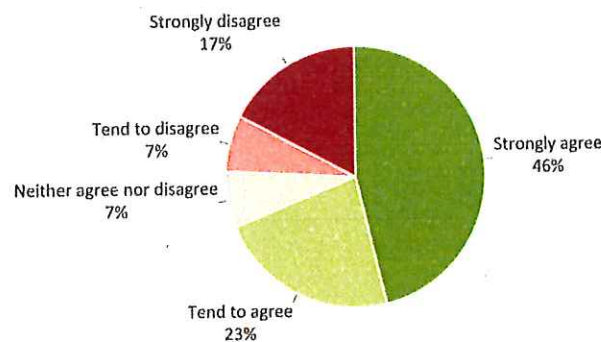


Most agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished?

4.12 Over two thirds (69%) of respondents agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished, whilst around a quarter (24%) disagree.

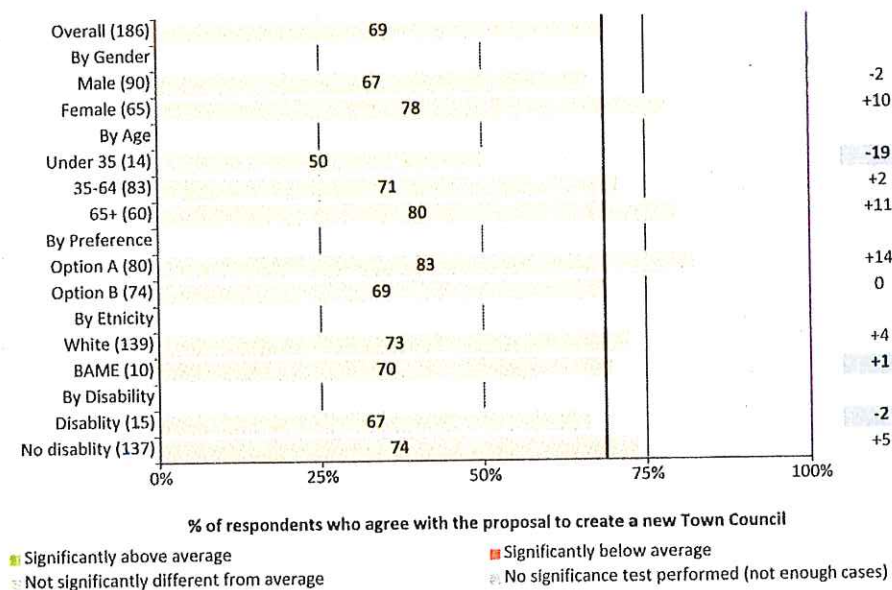
Figure 10: Agreement with proposal to create a new Town Council
Base: All individuals (186)



Differences by demographic sub-groups

4.13 The following chart shows how views varied across different demographic subgroups of respondents who agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council. For example, you can see that female respondents or those aged 65+ were more likely to agree, whilst those aged under 35 were less likely to (please note that the differences between sub-groups are indicative only).

Figure 11: Agreement with proposal to create a new Town Council: by demographic sub-group (Base: All individuals)



Please explain the reasons for your answer.

- 4.14 Respondents were given the opportunity to explain why they agreed or disagreed with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished. 140 respondents provided comments and a summary is provided below:

Table 6: Reasons for agreeing/disagreeing with proposal to create a new Town Council
Base: All individuals who made comments (140)

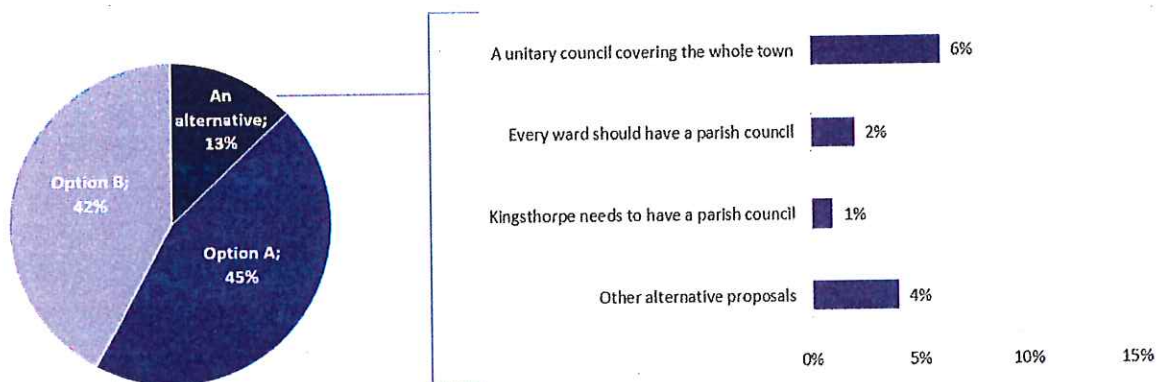
	Explanation for answer	No. of comments	%
GENERAL ACCEPTANCE / SUPPORT FOR CHANGE	Need to keep Councils local/local decision making/the interests of the area	46	33
	Need to preserve town identity/local town needs its own voice/protect historic tradition	22	16
	Generally support proposals/agree with the need for change	7	5
	Agree with the creation of a town council	7	5
	More local accountability	5	4
	Prefer larger town council/better coverage/bigger is better/provides better access	5	4
	Agree with Option A	3	2
	Agree with Option B	2	1
	This is most cost efficient/best way to save money	2	1
	It will reduce unnecessary bureaucracy	2	1
	It will help with town centre improvements	2	1
	Prefer small town council/easier to manage	1	1
	Agree with Option B as it is in the centre/keep things central	1	1
	CONCERN / OPPOSITION FOR CHANGE	Proposal will create added/unnecessary bureaucracy	13
Generally disagree with creating a town council		9	6
Proposals will increase council tax/just an additional cost		7	5
Waste of money		6	4
This is creating duplication within services		5	4
This will just cause confusion		5	4
Won't work/make a difference/improve anything		4	3
Disagree with larger town council/covers too large an area		3	2
Disagree with smaller town council/doesn't cover a large enough area		2	1
Less accountability with one council		1	1
Urban/rural areas have different needs		1	1
ALTERNATIVE	Disagree with additional town council as already too many parish councils/councillors	1	1
	A unitary council covering the whole town	10	7
	Kingsthorpe needs to have a parish council	5	4
	Every ward should have a parish council	4	3
OTHER COMMENTS	Other alternative comments	5	4
	Consultation is flawed/loaded question	3	2
	More funding is needed	3	2
	Need more information to make decision	2	1
	Maintain/keep old districts/disagree with decision to create unitaries	2	1
	Other	35	25

Opinion is divided over which parts of the borough a new Town Council should cover

If a new Town Council were created, which parts of the borough do you believe it should cover?

- 4.15 Over two fifths (45%) of respondents reported that a new Town Council should be larger and cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst slightly fewer (42%) said it should be smaller and cover only part the central urban core of Northampton (Option B). Only 13% stated they would prefer the Town Council to cover an alternative area in a different part of the Borough.
- 4.16 Looking at the alternative proposals in more depth, 6% reported that a unitary council covering the whole town, whilst smaller proportions said every ward should have a parish council (2%) and that Kingsthorpe needs to have a parish council (1%). 4% made other alternative proposals.

Figure 12: Parts of the Borough a new Town Council should cover
Base: All individuals (172)



Please outline the reasons for your answer and explain any alternatives you prefer.

- 4.17 Respondents were given the opportunity to expand on and outline why they supported Option A, Option B or explain any alternatives they prefer. 117 respondents provided comments and a summary is provided below:

Table 7: Reasons for supporting Option A, Option B or any alternatives

Base: All individuals who made comments (117)

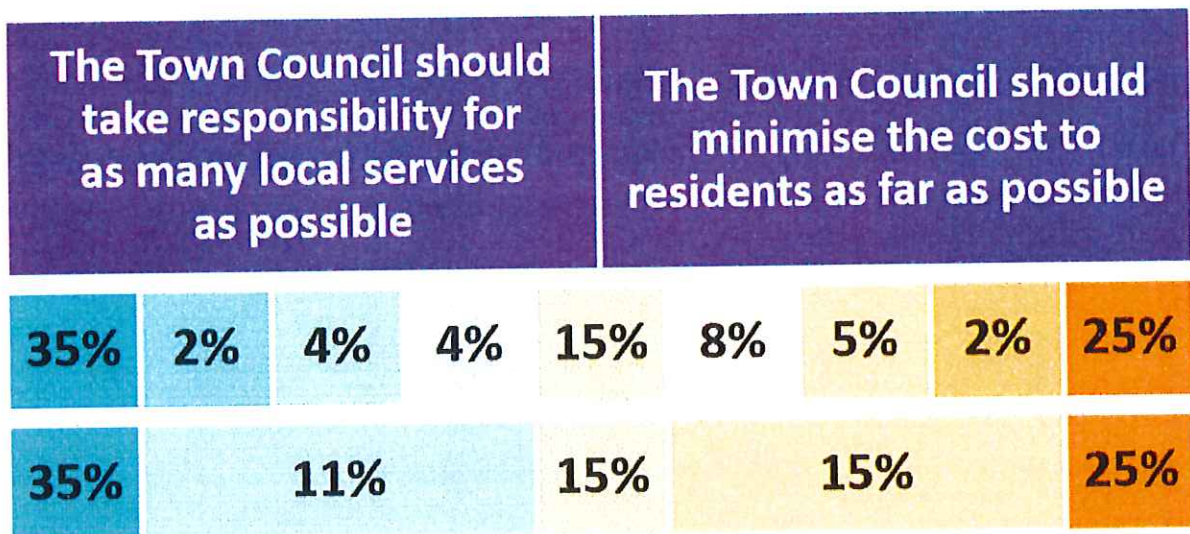
	Explanation for answer	No. of comments	%
GENERAL ACCEPTANCE / SUPPORT FOR CHANGE	Need to keep Councils local/local decision making/the interests of the area	16	14
	Prefer larger town council/better coverage/bigger is better/provides better access	10	9
	Agree with the creation of a town council	9	8
	Prefer small town council/easier to manage	8	7
	Generally support proposals/agree with the need for change	6	5
	Agree with Option B as it is in the centre/keep things central	6	5
	Urban/rural areas have different needs	5	4
	This is most cost efficient/best way to save money	5	4
	Need to preserve town identity/local town needs its own voice/protect historic tradition	4	3
	More local accountability	4	3
	Agree with Option B	3	3
	Agree with Option A	2	2
	It will reduce unnecessary bureaucracy	1	1
	It will help with town centre improvements	1	1
	Prefer larger town council/easier to manage	1	1
	CONCERN / OPPOSITION FOR CHANGE	Generally disagree with creating a town council	6
Urban/rural areas have different needs		6	5
Disagree with larger town council/covers too large an area		6	5
Disagree with Option B		4	3
Waste of money		2	2
Disagree with Option A		2	2
This is creating duplication within services		1	1
Proposal will create added/unnecessary bureaucracy		1	1
Proposals will increase council tax/just an additional cost		1	1
Disagree with smaller town council/doesn't cover a large enough area	1	1	
ALTERNATIVE	A unitary council covering the whole town	9	8
	Every ward should have a parish council	4	3
	Kingsthorpe needs to have a parish council	2	2
	Other alternative proposals	6	5
OTHER COMMENTS	Maintain/keep old districts/disagree with decision to create unitaries	3	3
	Consultation is flawed/loading question	2	2
	Need more information to make decision	2	2
	Other	39	33

Preference for a Town Council which takes responsibility for as many services as possible

How would you prioritise between the following two approaches?

- 4.18 The graphic below helps to illustrate how respondents would prioritise between having a Town Council which takes responsibility for as many local services as possible versus having a Town Council which minimises the cost to residents as far as possible.
- 4.19 Three fifths of respondents provided responses which fell at the extremes of the scale – 35% selected option 1 (Town Council should take responsibility for as many local services as possible), whilst 25% answered option 9 (Town Council should minimise the cost to residents). A further 15% chose the middle option – option 5.
- 4.20 When percentages are combined, it is evident that respondents have a slight preference for the Town Council to taking responsibility for as many local services as possible (options 1-4; 46%), as opposed to minimising the cost to residents (options 6-9; 39%).

Figure 13: Taking responsibility for as many services as possible vs minimising costs for residents
 Base: All individuals (179)



Organisations in the open engagement questionnaire

4.21 In total, 8 organisations and their representatives responded to the questionnaire, including: 3 Parish Councils (Billing; Kingsthorpe; and Hardingstone), 1 residents association (Far Cotton), 1 community organisation (Growing Together Northampton), 1 charitable organisation (Pastures Community Company), 1 county councillor and the Town Centre Conservation Areas Advisory Committee.

4.22 In terms of the initial questions about awareness of local government and the possible role of a new organisation:

All organisations (8 out of 8) were aware of the possible change to local government in the area;

All (8 out of 8) felt it was important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town and delivers services at a local level, whilst 7 out of 8 felt it was important to preserve the town's historic identity/heritage;

4.23 Regarding the proposal to create a Town Council and the parts of the Borough one should cover:

The majority (7 out of 8) agreed with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished;

Three quarters (6 out of 8) felt a Town Council should cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst a quarter (2 out of 8) felt it should cover the central urban core of Northampton (Option B).

4.24 Looking at Town Council priorities:

4 organisations indicated the Town Council should take responsibility for as many local services as possible (by selecting options 1-4), whilst 3 organisations suggested the Town Council should minimise the cost to residents as far as possible (by selecting options 6-9). 1 organisation provided no response to this question.

Other comments by organisations

4.25 When asked about the proposal to create a new Town Council, a couple of organisations noted that it was important for one to be created as the local town needs its own voice, for example *'most of the areas that are unparished have not expressed a wish to create local parish councils, this will mean that they have a less local voice - their only recourse will be via the local Councillor for the unitary authority. Many of these areas that are unparished are the more deprived areas of the town and it is therefore not surprising that there are fewer people interested in setting up a local parish council. Being part of a Town Council would give them a way to have a local voice'*.

4.26 In terms of the areas which a Town Council should cover, one organisation commented that *'the larger the Council, the more likely it is to be efficient and effective'*, whilst another organisation stated that *'I do think the unparished areas should be automatically put into Option B if they decide not to create their own parish council'*.

5. Focus Groups and Forums

Introduction

- 5.1 This chapter reports four deliberative meetings with members of the public and stakeholders (including local Parish, Town and County Councillors).

Three focus groups with members of the public

- 5.2 The focus groups with members of the public took place in three separate locations across Northampton Borough; in the Central, East and West areas of the Borough. The meeting was independently facilitated by ORS and each was structured around an ORS presentation outlining the context and background to the consultation, along with a series of discussions about issues related to the proposal to form a new town council in Northampton, as well as the specific options being put forward.
- 5.3 The ORS presentation ensured that standardised information was provided to each of the sessions and explained: the current council structure across Northamptonshire and the planned move to two unitaries (one for Northampton, Daventry and South Northamptonshire); the case for a new Town Council/Community Councils/Parish Councils; costs; and the proposed option and implications of change. Participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout, and the meetings were deliberative in listening to and responding openly to any evidence and issues raised. It was made clear that the planned move to unitaries was out of the scope of this discussion, while the proposal to form a Town Council was taking place in response to the creation of the new unitary authority.
- 5.4 Participants were recruited by phone, follow up letter and phone reminder in advance and in total 31 individuals attended the meetings, representing a range of gender, ages, ethnicity and social class:
- » 16 Female and 15 Male participants
 - » 12 participants aged 16-34; 8 aged 35-54; 11 aged 55+
 - » 22 White British; 8 Non-white British; 1 White EU national (long term resident in UK)

FOCUS GROUP LOCATION	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Central: Guildhall, Northampton	29 th October 2019	10
East: Blackthorn Community Centre, Northampton	30 th October 2019	10
West: The Beehive, Kingsthorpe, Northampton	31 st October 2019	11

Summary of responses

- 5.5 There was broad support for an organisation to preserve Northampton's identity and heritage, to promote its interest and give residents a voice.
- 5.6 Representation for unparished areas was considered important for focus group participants.

- 5.7 Budgets and funding for a Town Council were matters of concern, particularly the size of the precept that residents would need to pay in parishes outside of the Town Council and where the money would be spent; across the whole area from which it was collected or focussed on the town centre.
- 5.8 There was some variation in views regarding the effect of introducing a town council on individual communities; local decision-making was a key issue for focus group participants.
- 5.9 When asked to consider the two options put forward with regard to the size of a new council, the balance of opinion overall was in favour of Option B – a smaller, urban town council – on the basis that it was the best option for local communities, particularly those outside the urban centre of Northampton:
- » Option B – 20
 - » Option A – 5
 - » Undecided – 5
 - » Alternative suggestion – 1
- 5.10 In many cases, the choice of option made came with a caveat that it is based on the information provided. There was a request in all three focus groups for more information with figures for the costs and benefits for individual parishes as well as the prospective town council areas. At the same time, people requested that the information should be clear and simple.

Main findings from Focus Groups

There was broad support for an organisation to preserve Northampton’s identity and heritage, to promote its interest and give residents a voice was important

- 5.11 While a vote was not taken, most participants voiced support and none actively dissented to the idea of an organisation to promote Northampton and in particular the town centre of Northampton; that is, there appeared to be a consensus in support.
- 5.12 There was considerable debate about what the remit and responsibilities of any new organisation, but the broad consensus was that it would be beneficial to have a locally accountable organisation and that the creation of such a council represented an opportunity for a fresh start:

“Town councils have a better grip. I’m not sure it’s a better grip but they just CARE more. The borough is too big for very local issues.”

“You have to have it because it designates where the buck stops... you can go in and say I’m sorry this is your problem and you’re going to have to deal with it.”

“It is an opportunity to get rid of a lot of dead wood... I don’t think anyone should be assumed to get a job, they should apply for jobs”

- 5.13 It was felt that lessons could be learnt from other local towns that participants had positive experiences of:

“Daventry and Towcester, they manage it, they manage the planning very well.”

"It's no good us going down this route unless we can emulate what Daventry and Towcester have."

- 5.14 Some were particularly keen on preserving the heritage of the town, discussing the rich history and loss of museums summed up by stressing the consequences of that loss:

"The character of the town"

"Most important. If you forget your history, you are missing something very important."

- 5.15 Others may or may not be sympathetic to preserving the towns heritage, thought that too much heritage has already been lost and it was too late to restore much:

"The historic and heritage bit is a waste of time. They've got rid of most of the heritage."

- 5.16 A number of participants were concerned about planning:

"Northampton town centre is a victim of planning decisions in the past."

"...you can't get around the town; traffic is so bad in town."

- 5.17 ... and others about social issues in the town centre:

"I'm more worried about knife crime, the smell of weed everywhere."

- 5.18 The three focus groups all voiced ideas of ways to improve the town centre. Several participants felt that a strategy is needed to revitalise the town centre, largely by attracting in new businesses and people shopping or socialising:

"They need a strategy to attract people to Northampton town."

"...need a plan of what to do. Find ways to make money, find ways to bring in businesses."

"Why don't they lower the rents in these empty shops, get more people in the shops and get people in the town."

"Parking; used to be free parking, you have to pay now."

- 5.19 Some advocated that any new town or community council should take a cautionary, step by step approach in order to ensure that the organisation would be a success and could be seen as a success before residents were called on to pay for additional services:

"Whichever is decided, the Town Council should start small (and cheap), get up and running, then take on extra responsibilities – learn to walk before running."

Representation for unparished areas is important for focus group participants

5.20 There was also general agreement with the idea of creating a town or community council for the central core of Northampton Borough along with parish or community councils for the areas which are currently unparished. Again, there were no actively dissenting voices and it is likely that there was a consensus agreeing with the proposal.

5.21 However, there were caveats attached to the support by some participants, particularly supporters of Option A – a larger town council area. One theme running through all three discussions was loss of faith in local government, manifesting in several ways, such as that the new structure should not replicate the existing structure and should not be run by ‘the same people’:

“We went bust – the first county in the UK – now what we seem to be doing is recreating what the Government’s told us to get rid of and I can’t see the point.”

“Do not replicate what is there now.”

“My concern is that we are just replicating what we have already with the same people running it.”

“I’m concerned the same people will be running it.”

“My experience then was that the County wanted to keep hold of money.” [Need to avoid repeating that situation with the unitary]

5.22 There was some confusion between the responsibilities of the different councils; the County Council, borough and district councils, unitary councils and town/community/parish councils. Some of the concerns, which were raised in all three groups, about not having ‘the same people’ running the new structure included an element of confusion between the councils’ responsibilities, although these had positive as well as negative aspects:

“Are the current staff at the Borough Council going to take on new roles or is it going to be new people? Is it going to be a new name but the same operation?”

“It gives them the opportunity to identify the best people for the town council and say these are the people we want. It’s an ideal opportunity to cream the best staff.”

5.23 While the confusion about different councils’ responsibilities was real, nevertheless, many of the comments about not having ‘the same people’ running it came from a deep seated loss of faith in local government.

5.24 One corollary to this loss of faith in local government was a concern that consultation needs to be genuine:

“It’s important that we the people have a voice, but’s got to be realistic and it’s got to be authentic.”

5.25 Some attendees expressed concern that not having a town council, particularly of sufficient size to cover unparished areas, would leave many residents – included those in deprived areas – unrepresented, except by the unitary council covering Northampton, Daventry and South Northamptonshire:

"The areas outside [of the town council] are going to be a much smaller population."

"If we go with the smaller we risk isolating certain communities which are already isolated."

"Bigger would give everybody a voice."

- 5.26 The issue of representation for unparished areas was discussed further in relation to the specific options put forward about the potential structure and size of a town council, the details of which are reported below.

Issues of budgets and funding for a town council were discussed at length, with strong opinions about the size of the precept that residents would need to pay in parishes outside of the town council area

- 5.27 The relative finances available to be raised and spent within the proposed town council compared to the possible parish councils was discussed in some detail. There were discussions of whether the Council Tax from surrounding affluent areas would subsidise the town council area to make up for a larger number of smaller properties and households on benefits in the town centre area. Some participants focussed on the inequality of payment compared to services received, arguing that the money would be raised across a larger area, but was likely to be spent in the core town centre with little in the surrounding suburbs. Others focussed on the inequality already existing in the town, such as the number of households on benefits:

"Option A - combined [at £64 for a band D property] they get £2.9m, but would it be spent on [the parishes] area. Or would it just be spent on the town centre? There's no guarantee."

"My train of thought is if it's the smaller ... it's the most densely populated but it's all As and Bs. The higher Council Tax is all out of town. The relativity between the income and the outgoings [is large]... The population density of the town is not relative to the income coming in. It is relative to the outgoing. If it were a smaller town council only doing the minimum; sweeping the streets, fixing this and that in the town, it's the rural ones that are going to suffer."

"You're going to have place like Hunsbury where they pay higher amounts of council tax, they're going to have more money to spend than the town centre where they need the money."

"A larger proportion of people in the town centre claim benefits [and don't pay CT]"

"The town centre is a lot less wealthy than some of those surrounding areas. It will have a much greater number of people [on benefits]."

"The smaller [town centre] area encompasses some of the poorest areas... You're asking some of the poorest to pay more."

- 5.28 Others pointed to a potential benefit, whereby currently unparished areas which formed parish or community councils could have more to spend locally. One argument suggested in two of the focus groups is that, based on the illustrative figures presented, at a precept of £64 for a band D property under Option B the total Council Tax raised would be around £2.9m, while under Option A it would be £900,000. The suggestion is that under Option B and if all the currently unparished areas became parishes charging the same precept, then those parishes would have around £2m in Council Tax receipts. This is a subtle

argument and depends on several assumptions, but while the figures used were purely illustrative, in principle it proved persuasive to several participants:

"To my mind; if it's the larger area at £64 council tax, they'd get £2.9m, but if it's the small area they'd get £900,000... on Option B they'd [the currently unparished areas] get £2m."

- 5.29 Economies of scale were discussed and there was some support for the suggestion that under a structure of town, parish and community councils, these smaller councils should band together to commission some services. This was also seen by some as a reason to support Option A, the larger town council area:

"I though one of the reasons for us having a unitary council was so we could do things cheaper, now if they break of street cleaning into four areas, it's going to be more expensive."

"Economies have got to come in the larger the area you've got. If we set up 13 different parish councils all going to cut the grass, they've got to outsource it, there's no way they can afford it. There is economies of scale."

- 5.30 Spending efficiency is valued over actual cost, though there is also an acceptable limit to actual cost, again noting that the figures presented were illustrative but not unrealistic, even at the higher end:

"I don't necessarily want it to be cheaper, but I'd like them to spend the money better."

"There would be a riot if Council Tax increased by that amount... If I were paying £54 at the moment, I couldn't afford to pay £100. Whoever they are they need to be very careful about how much they charge."

- 5.31 In a similar vein, some participants valued local accountability overpaying higher Council Tax:

"Personally speaking, I'd pay a bit more for a parish council if it's going to give me accountability, if it's going to give me somewhere the buck stops. If I can go up there once a week, every single week and go 'How are you? This is problem, deal with it'. It gives me a huge amount of accountability. At the moment I'm not getting a person I can go to; I'm just getting this ether of responsibility that I can't actually get through."

There was some variation in views regarding the effect of introducing a town council on individual communities, particularly with regard to decision-making at a local level

- 5.32 Representation and involvement was a particular concern, notably the problem of committed local people to participate:

"With the parish councils, would you get enough people? If they [the parish councils] were local, then you might [get enough]."

"My concern is the town council. My experience is that people do not participate as much [in towns] as in the rural areas, the villages"

- 5.33 Those in favour of parish councils tended to be particularly vocal in their view that decisions about funding and services needed to be made as locally as possible. It was considered very important that town and parish councils are expected to be run by local people who knew and had a commitment to the local area:

"If people are being asked to spend more money they want to know it's being spent in their area."

"Option B...its money spent on that small area. With option A the money is spent on a large area and there's a high chance some things will be neglected."

"I quite like the bit ... they have to live and work in the area. That's quite important because they're going to be more interested in the area."

"They need that connection."

When asked to consider the two options put forward with regard to the size of a new council, the balance of opinion overall was in favour of Option B – a smaller, urban town council – on the basis that it was the best option for local communities, particularly those outside the urban centre of Northampton

- 5.34 For those in favour of a smaller town council, preferably in tandem with an increase in the number of parish or community councils, their conviction of the benefits of local, community-centred bodies was key:

"The smaller it is people are there to hear you, the bigger it is nobody is there to take your point."

"... under option B yes we've got to get it set up, but I think there's enough support around this room I think we would go along because it's local and challenge and I think there would be more control."

- 5.35 A number of participants felt that option A, the larger town council, would be too similar to the existing local government structure, which is being dismantled, and crucially, that the previous structure had not worked. This view remained irrespective of explanations about the different roles of borough and town councils, and the role of the new unitary authorities:

"Option B 100%. I see Option A as something similar to what we have now. Things need to change as they don't work. The people need to take the reins."

"A is more or less just a slightly trimmed version of what we've already got which has not worked."

- 5.36 The retention of funding, raised through council tax precepts, for use at a local level was a key factor behind some stakeholders' preference for Option B, allowing parish councils to benefit their communities, while under Option A some felt that that money raised in their area could shift to the proposed town council:

"Option B - we'll be able to keep the money in Kingsthorpe and other areas as well; they'll be able to concentrate on what's best for them.

"B for me, the reason being is if people are being asked to spend more money they want to know it's being spent in their area. Option A, I think the centre of Northampton regeneration will come up and I think a lot more money will be spent there."

"I want to know [the money] will be spent in our area."

A minority of the focus groups participants favoured Option A – a larger town council covering the whole of the borough that is currently unparished

- 5.37 Those favouring Option A were concerned that, with the introduction of unitary authorities, a large town council was the best option to represent all resident of Northampton:

"We do need the people of Northampton as a whole. If we were to have separate parishes we could then be bits rather than Northampton as a whole."

- 5.38 Of particular concern to those in favour of Option A was how deprived areas might be left unrepresented without a town council. Aligned with this was the thought that insufficient funds could be allocated to improving deprived areas within the town council or a parish council:

"I would go for option A because I'd hate to see the people who are disadvantaged anyway be even more disadvantaged."

"I prefer option A the larger one as it's a fairer distribution of money. B I don't think is fair."

Concerns were raised about the level of Council Tax precept in Northampton town centre

- 5.39 Several participants pointed out the need to keep Council Tax affordable while others noted that the town centre included a comparatively large proportion of household in receipt of benefits and therefore who do not pay Council Tax. There was concern that under Option B, the smaller Town Council would need to raise much of the finance necessary for effective interventions to revitalise the town centre from already deprived and less affluent households, such as the working poor. The Central focus group said:

- 5.40 Those favouring Option A were concerned that, with the introduction of unitary authorities, a large town council was the best option to represent all resident of Northampton:

"A larger proportion of people in the town centre claim benefits [and don't pay Council Tax]."

"The town centre is a lot less wealthy than some of those surrounding areas. It will have a much greater number of people on benefits."

"Is it going to cost us a fortune?"

"There would be a riot if CT increased by that amount... If I were paying £54 at the moment, I couldn't afford to pay £100. Whoever they are they need to be very careful about how much they charge."

5.41 Comments from the other focus groups also addressed this question:

"We're paying our council taxes now and you're taking one layer out, then you're introducing another layer so it's going to increase them."

"The smaller {town centre} area encompasses some of the poorest areas... You're asking some of the poorest to pay more."

Alternative approaches

5.42 Two alternative approaches were put forward. One suggested that all unparished areas should be forced into forming parish councils to ensure everywhere had representation. The second was to redraw parish council boundaries to ensure equity of representation and of affluence to a greater extent than at present. In neither case was the mechanism to achieve the aim explored:

"...force the other areas to become parishes."

"There needs to be a redrawing of parish boundaries – if they're prepared to redraw the district and county boundaries it should be nothing to change [parish] boundaries and for existing parishes to expand their boundaries. [Some of the existing parishes] have already got experience and would get more funding [due to having a larger population]"

There were concerns on all sides that there was insufficient information to make a decision

5.43 Several participants requested more information, preferably costed, at least with illustrative costs, for each potential parish as well as for the two town council options and for that information to be clear and simple:

"If they said you pay more and this is what you'd get, x, y, z, that's fine, but not just asking people to pay more and not know where it's going."

"I don't know, we need more information saying if we do bring in parish councils if we've got a budget this will be spent on each parish and this is what you'll get for it. Then we can make a decision on that. We need more information because there's pros and cons to both of them at the moment. A we know, B we don't. We need clearer and simpler information and make it easy to understand."

Main Findings from Stakeholder/Parish Councillors' Forum

Introduction

- 5.44 The meeting for stakeholders, including parish, town and county councillors, took place at Guildhall, Northampton between 11:15am – 1:30pm on Tuesday 29th October 2019. The meeting was independently facilitated by ORS and comprised a presentation outlining the context and background to the consultation, followed by a series of discussions about issues related to the proposal to form a new Town Council in Northampton, as well as the specific options being put forward.
- 5.45 Participants were asked to register in advance and 18 individuals in total attended the meeting, representing a range of local government bodies, residents' associations and community groups and organisations.

Main findings

There was broad support for an organisation to preserve Northampton's identity and heritage, to promote its interest and give residents a voice was important

- 5.46 The balance of opinion among stakeholders regarding the formation of, for example, a Town or Community Council in Northampton was in favour, with the majority agreeing that it was important to have an organisation which would preserve the historic identity and heritage of the town, to promote its interests and to give residents a voice:

"Yes – the town of Northampton needs a voice and a say in the town."

"Basically, our answer is yes: we do need it, and we need it so that the people have a voice. And also, so that somebody has ownership of the problem."

"Heritage is important and must be preserved."

- 5.47 There was considerable debate about what the remit and responsibilities of any new organisation; some stakeholders favoured a town council with a broad remit:

"... we need a large town council to promote Northampton's needs..."

"I was in the group looking at what we want Northampton to look like – how is it going to reflect the community... The historical is also modern, so when we talk about the historic identity, we must not just think of something that happened 500 years ago; we need that, but we also need to modern side of heritage...we're really keen to have the whole thing reflect Northampton..."

"We went as deep as talking about the mayoralty – who holds what. We've lost our Sergeant; it's about bringing some of the old back; let's tidy up what we have already and then move forward..."

- 5.48 Others were concerned that a new organisation should be limited in size and scope, citing reasons including potential costs to residents, a remit which would focus too much on the town centre and unnecessary overlap with parish and community councils:

"What are people's expectations of a Town Council? You want it to protect heritage; how is it going to do that? It doesn't have a budget to do that. How is it going to promote Northampton [if] it doesn't have a budget to promote it?"

"Would a Town Council end up collecting funds from all areas but with spending focused on the central area?"

"A lot of people in my ward hardly ever go into Northampton; they go to local shops... I don't know how they would feel about paying for a [Town Council]."

"It's important to promote the heritage, but that's a shared responsibility with District and Parish."

"Some people we've talked to have wanted a good seized council, but others – when they've had it explained – go for more parishes."

5.49 For other stakeholders, it was exactly the potential for developing the town centre itself which made the prospect of a Town Council or other organisation to promote Northampton's interests an attractive proposition. The potential benefits mentioned included:

- » Greater representation from a wider group of residents making decisions around the future development of the town;
- » One point of contact for residents;
- » A town-wide strategy;
- » Increased tourist attraction;
- » Equality of service delivery town wide;
- » Support for festivals, arts, culture to be enjoyed by all;
- » Better promotion for businesses in Northampton; and
- » A sense of ownership and inclusion leading to pride in history and tradition of town.

5.50 Some attendees pointed out that, to be successful, a Town Council would need to work with other organisations (including existing and new parish councils) in order to best represent and promote the interests of Northampton and its residents:

"It's not just about the shops; we have a unique opportunity to engage with other organisations to help those areas. It's an opportunity that other groups may have to engage, to move people into the town, and enable things to happen. It's not all about the shops and the council, there has to be a kind of joined-up thinking process..."

"Even if we are in existing parishes then we need representation/input to the town as it is a really important hub for us residents."

5.51 Therefore, while there was broad support for some kind of organisation to represent the interests of Northampton residents to be put in place, there were strong differences of opinion about the specific type, size and remit of such a body. There was, however, agreement that whatever solution was forthcoming, that it needed to be focused on working for the town:

"...we were very aware of the democratic input that is required; we were all in agreement that people need representation. It's about how they are best represented, really – that's what this discussion is about."

"The council must be accountable; it must work for the town."

An important factor for stakeholders who agreed with the principle of forming a new Town Council was representation for unparished areas

- 5.52 Some attendees expressed concern that not having a Town Council, particularly of sufficient size to cover unparished areas, would leave many residents – included those in deprived areas – unrepresented, except for via the unitary council:

"A major part of the eastern district is deprived; they can't afford to have a parish [council]. What happens to them?"

"If you don't have a big council, those deprived areas will be very poor."

"We've had a debate in our residents' association committee – we went around asking people [if they wanted to be a parish]. Only about 5% wanted to; the rest said, "No, it's too expensive; who's going to do that, who's going to be responsible for this... We want to be in the borough where we have more power, a more persuasive position."

"I'm very concerned about the areas that have not put forward an expression of interest [in becoming parishes]; what happens to them is crucial. Are they left in limbo? Do they become part of the unitary [authority]? Do they just sit there, with the option of becoming a parish, which is open to everybody? I think it is a huge problem for those areas because, well, where do they sit?"

- 5.53 The issue of representation for unparished areas was discussed further in relation to the specific options put forward in relation to the potential structure and size of a town council, the details of which are reported below.

Issues of budgets and funding for a Town Council were discussed at length, with strong disagreement about the size of the precept that residents would need to pay to receive worthwhile benefits

- 5.54 The value for money of a small Town Council with a relatively low level of funding was questioned by some who felt that, while a small precept (and therefore budget) could support a mayor's office – for example – the council would be very limited in scope and responsibilities:

"You can say that there is a half a million pounds budget for the Town Council, but if you want to promote other things and do other things, that budget is going to go up."

"Twelve quid and half a million pounds may pay for the mayoralty, but is it going to pay for [Guildhall]? If they announce they are going to take on this building then, yes, it will generate an income, but it's very, very costly... unless they are going to run it from someone's front room."

- 5.55 Some stakeholders, however, argued that funding for Town Council-run services, particularly those for which the new unitary authorities would otherwise be responsible, would come from existing council tax charges rather than a new precept:

"If you are looking at a band D property in Northampton, we would work on the premise of something like £12 per year; that would give you half a million pounds to work with... Now the Council does have to run the mayoralty and the staff [but] any work that comes from the unitary, they have to pay for. If unitary [council] want us to do certain work, they have to pay us to do it. We are not charging Northampton twice for council tax, and then a precept on top to do work that the unitary should be responsible for."

"Surely, if you are doing work that would [otherwise] be done by a unitary council, the unitary will pay for it..."

- 5.56 When the question of Town Council funding was discussed, some stakeholders questioned what they saw as an assumption that a Town Council covering a larger area would require less funding per resident or household than a smaller council:

"I'm not clear on the point that the larger the Town Council, the less the tax that is paid. Surely you have to set a budget for that proposed council and then, by a method of division, the budget is divided by the number of people who are going to pay it... We don't know the area that it is going to be collected from."

"Councils are going to be elected and councillors are going to have their own view... At the end of the day, those people who are elected to it are the ones who are going to decide the precept, and they may want to put it up; they may have great big aspirations."

There was considerable variation in views regarding the effect of introducing a Town Council on individual communities, particularly with regard to decision-making at a local level

- 5.57 Those in favour of parish councils tended to be particularly vocal in their view that decisions about funding and services needed to be made as locally as possible:

"Would I be right in thinking that, if you have a parish council... the precept raised would actually be spent in that area? Whereas, if you have this massive Town Council, you've got people in the eastern district, Kingsthorpe, Far Cotton, all paying – not for their own community – but paying for the town centre. Is that your vision?"

"This is going to be a big Town Council – that is my concern. Having too many people sitting, making decisions... It's about the people who live in the area they live in; what do they want? [In Far Cotton] we always work together as a community and we're not forgotten... As a group, we would love to become a parish council, and that big [Town] Council concerns me that we are going to lose our little say."

- 5.58 Other stakeholders, however, were keen to point out that any new Town Council would be made up of local representatives seeking funding for their own communities, not just the town as a whole:

“Could I pick up on the point from a minute ago, that the money collected within a parish is spent in the parish. Similarly, the money spent in the Town Council precept - the councillors are elected locally; there will be very vocal people within the Town Council to fight for their particular area. It’s not just an amorphous mass of citizens; people will be representing their locality, their residents and their area and they will be able to bid for and promote projects in their area. Everyone will be represented...”

- 5.59 One attendee argued that the need for a Town Council to be funded by all parts of the community was justified because even those areas with existing or planned parish or community councils would still be able to benefit from the new organisation through, for example, access to a town mayor’s office:

“The problem we’ve got is that some of the town is parish and some of it isn’t; the existing Town Council will be like a parish. It’s still fragmenting it all up; if we have a whole-Town Council and the parishes are still there, [the parishes] will have to continue to give into the Town Council to access the mayor. Otherwise you’re getting somebody to pay for the mayor, and [if] they see the mayor going to other areas, they’re going to think it’s unfair that they are the only people paying.”

- 5.60 Another responded, however, by arguing that this could lead to parishes wanting to charge residents from outside their communities to use the services they fund and run, e.g. local parks and leisure facilities:

“We’re a parish – we’ve got a lot of open space and a lot of people enjoy walking in that space; have we got to charge them? If we’ve got to pay for the mayor to come out to [us], we’re going to charge the people who live adjoining us. We pay to maintain all the grounds, and they come and enjoy them.”

When asked to consider the two options put forward with regard to the size of a new council, the balance of opinion overall was in favour of Option A – a larger town council covering the whole of the borough that is currently unparished

- 5.61 The biggest concern of those favouring Option A was that, with the introduction of unitary authorities, all Northampton residents will need local representation and that a large Town Council was the best option:

“What concerns me is that, if people choose the smaller option [Option B], and the only two that are out for consultation [to become parishes] now are Kingsthorpe and Delapre - what happens to the rest, where they have no representation and nobody on the Town Council?”

“It’s important – if there are no additional parishes then there is a demographic deficit; therefore, there has to be a larger Town Council”

“You’ll have certain areas – what I would call “cold” areas – that don’t quite fit into Kingsthorpe or Far Cotton... There will be parts of Northampton that fall through the loop.”

“Depending on roles and responsibilities, both options are valuable, but I prefer one point of contact [which] helps to engage with a wide cross-section of the town...”

"Areas of Northampton should not be left out of having a voice."

- 5.62 Of particular concern to those in favour of Option A was how those areas described as "deprived" might be left unrepresented without a Town Council, in part because they would be unlikely or unable to engage with or fund a parish or community council:

"Of the two options, Option A is the better as it saves areas, especially deprived areas, not being represented."

"Because of the areas they are, it's not going to be their top priority. If you are struggling to get by, I agree that you probably couldn't care less about this... It's our responsibility, as people who make decisions, to understand that."

A smaller number of stakeholders argued passionately in favour of Option B – a smaller, urban town council – on the basis that it was the best option for local communities, particularly those outside the urban centre of Northampton

- 5.63 For those stakeholders who spoke out in favour of a smaller town council, preferably in tandem with an increase in the number of parish or community councils, their conviction of the benefits of local, community-centred bodies was key:

"A smaller [council] – community focused; working for the community."

"Option B, because it's community focussed – this is all about community. We've got a borough council that's disappearing, and we've got people here who want to replicate it as a town council. I believe that parish councils are there to benefit the community... I've seen the benefits that they bring to the area."

"Option B: a small town council, and existing parish councils and new parish councils."

"Encourage other areas to become parishes and then go for a "town centre" parish or town council."

- 5.64 The role of parish and community councils in preserving services which might otherwise have been cut was cited as a good example of the advantages of smaller, localised organisations to represent the interests of communities:

"One of the primary examples around here is libraries; the County Council has shut the libraries. Delapre has got a library... a parish council could take on that building and keep that library running. Wooton is building an extension to their building to actually take in the library... Libraries would be a prime thing; if the parishes and town want to take them on, they can do."

- 5.65 The retention of funding, raised through council tax precepts, for use at a local level was a key factor behind some stakeholders' preference for Option B, allowing parish councils to benefit their communities, with the accompanying views that shifting locally funded services to a Town Council could cost more:

"[Under Option B] the precept is retained in community for the benefit of the community."

"They bring youth facilities, they bring facilities for the elderly, they do a lot of environmental work..."

"The fantastic work that is done in our parishes, particularly among the elderly and with young people – if that was to be replicated by a Town Council, you would be talking millions."

- 5.66 Some attendees who favoured Option B envisaged a Town Council that effectively operated in a similar way to a parish council and suggested that it should be named accordingly:

"If the Town Council will be operating in a similar way to a parish council, why not just call it Northampton Parish Council? Then you'll have an umbrella group to look after the [unparished areas]."

"Town Council is wrong – if they have the same responsibilities as parish councils then call them Northampton Parish Council."

- 5.67 One proponent of Option B caveated their support, recognising the concerns voiced elsewhere that unparished areas might not be well represented if a smaller Town Council was put in place:

"I would prefer a smaller Town Council but only if all areas outside this become Parish Councils."

- 5.68 By contrast, others arguing in support of parish councils felt that residents of unparished areas would nonetheless get sufficient representation from the unitary authorities, and that Option B was the best route forward for everybody.

There were concerns on all sides that there was insufficient awareness among residents about the options available and their implications

- 5.69 The theme of a lack of awareness of, or interest in, the exact nature and size of a town and/or parish councils among residents in all areas – both parished and unparished – was commented on by a number of stakeholders:

"Do the residents in [the unparished areas] really care? Are the people aware?"

"I find in my own parish that the only time they really care is when they have a problem; if everything is going fine, they don't want to know about it."

"I don't think that the people who live in the parishes that are not Kingsthorpe or Far Cotton are aware of the position that they are in at the moment."

- 5.70 The comments above, however, drew sharp disagreement from some other attendees:

"I think people do care. If you go door-stepping or talking to people on the street, they do care..."

- 5.71 Some of those present expressed concerns that a lack of awareness about the way that parish councils work and are funded might affect their views on the different options:

"It amazes me how many people I have spoken to who have absolutely no idea about what a parish council is. I think they have distorted views from television programmes; they don't understand what they are. The only thing they think is, "If we have a parish council, we are going to end up paying an awful lot more money than we already do now.""

"If you are in the know [a parish council] works well, but what percentage of the people in a parish understand exactly what it means?"

- 5.72 Furthermore, some attendees expressed concern that the consultation itself had not been publicised sufficiently and, in one case, that holding a referendum instead would have been a preferable option to the open consultation (although it was pointed out that statutory requirements and time constraints):

"I don't think that any of this has been publicised enough – a lot of people have no idea that this consultation is going on. A lot of the people I know who live in these [unparished] areas and could be unrepresented under the unitaries don't even know it's happening!"

"Would it not have been simpler, quicker and more accurate to put a referendum out to ask people of this town which of the options they wanted, clearly and precisely. You would not then get people saying, "We haven't heard anything". Only I, as a representative of the residents' association, have heard about this; most of the people I know, even in our neighbourhood watch group, know nothing about this."

- 5.73 By contrast, some stakeholders felt that the communities they represented were well informed about the possibility of becoming a parish council and had made an informed decision to reject it in favour of a larger Town Council, while one attendee felt that launching additional consultations in relation to forming new parish councils should be left until after the change to unitary councils had taken place:

"Those of us who ... have had a debate in our residents' association are going for Option A, because we believe that is what is better for the town."

"If areas can choose to become parishes at any time, why is there a rush to become parish councils now, when we are going through this hugely complicated business of becoming a unitary, which all of us are struggling with because it's a huge job to do. Surely we should just leave the status quo, have a bigger Town Council to be representative of Northampton, which is the county town, and then if people later want to be parished – well, we've got through the maze of what we're doing with the unitary – they can do that at a later date."

- 5.74 Further to concerns about promotion of the consultation, some attendees raised the concern that (particularly in relation to residents of 'deprived' areas) a lack of awareness of local government in general may mean that individuals who could make a significant contribution on behalf of their communities were unlikely to do so unless informed of the opportunity to do so:

"A successful parish or Town Council is successful because of the people who are actually on the council; the clerk and counsellors. You have to have people who are passionate. If [residents] don't know that this is happening, we won't get those passionate people coming forward; but they may be there - they may be living in those areas and desperate to come forward."

- 5.75 It should be noted that, at times, the discussions became quite heated with strong disagreement about the extent to which politics might both inform the opinions of those present, and might potentially impact a new Town Council and its work:

In support of Option A:

"I notice that all of those people who are going for Option B are [from] parish councils or would [choose to be] parish councils."

"[The issue is being] used as a political football to fight the unitary, not work for the community."

In support of Option B:

"...we're talking about a voice. Those parishes haven't had a voice under the previous administration, they will have one now. A Town Council is not about community – it's political..."

"A large council would be too political."

- 5.76 Other stakeholders disagreed, however, with one attendee concisely summarising their belief that a Town Council would not only *not* be political, but would also be strongly representative of local communities in Northampton:

"A Town Council would not have to be political; you would not have to belong to a political party to be a councillor. So, you would get this community representation and engagement; people would represent their communities and the streets they live in and I think that is a real strength."

Finally, the conversation returned to the subject of funding of services which might be run by unitary, town or parish councils (or a combination thereof)

- 5.77 A number of attendees reiterated the need for precepts and/or other funding to be distributed appropriately between different local government organisations to ensure that necessary services are provided without the burden of cost falling in the wrong place:

"If we have a higher parish precept or council precept, surely that would mean there would be no tax from the unitary because we would be doing the work that they would normally or should be doing."

"I've been asked, 'if we become a parish council, does it mean we will pay less council tax.' I said, 'No, there will be a precept depending on what you want to do.'"

- 5.78 One advocate of Option B reiterated the role that parish councils could play in helping to maintain local services, particularly non-statutory services which might otherwise be cut to make savings:

"The unitary authority will have statutory responsibilities... I don't think that [they] will be the be all and end all to resolving the financial problems that there are in this county. Therefore, the unitary is going to be looking to make savings from day one ... it can't cut social services, it can't cut children's services; it's got significant statutory responsibilities."

A lot of what the boroughs and districts do at the moment are not statutory services... we'll have to do some, but we won't have to do them all. It's those services that are currently done by the boroughs and districts that will be cut out by the unitary... I see that as an area where the parishes might be able to step in a work with them."

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