Future Northants

Report of Local Government Reform Consultation

Opinion Research Services

August 2018

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Report of Local Government Reform Consultation

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Opinion Research Services (ORS)

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1. Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

Background

1.1 Following an adverse Northamptonshire County Council Best Value Inspection Report (January-March 2018) that found that the County Council lacked governance and processes to manage its finances effectively, the government appointed Independent Commissioners to take over the County Council's strategic financial planning, governance and scrutiny functions.

1.2 The government also wrote to the eight Northamptonshire councils at the end of March 2018 inviting them to *"submit locally-led proposals for establishing unitary authorities across the county"* in accordance with some key requirements – namely, that future unitary structures should be: likely to improve local government and service delivery in terms of value-for-money, savings, sustainability and leadership; based on existing local authority areas and have populations "that at a minimum [are] substantially in excess of 300,000; and command a *"good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal"*. The government has indicated that the status quo and a single unitary council for the whole of Northamptonshire would be unacceptable.

1.3 With some reluctance, Northamptonshire's eight councils have accepted that urgent change is necessary to achieve a sustainable local government structure across the county. They are considering a proposal to replace the two-tier system of eight councils with two unitary councils and have appointed ORS to conduct and report an extensive public consultation programme to test whether the proposal commands a *"good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal".*

Consultation programme

1.4 The consultation period ran from June 18th to July 22nd and during this five-week period, residents and stakeholders were invited to provide feedback through a wide range of routes. While the consultation period was shorter than usual (due to the urgency of the government's timetable) the councils' consultation programme was conscientious and inclusive.

1.5 Accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take account of public views, but it does not mean that majority views should automatically decide public policy: the popularity or otherwise of proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances.

1.6 In this case, the government requires that any proposal should command a *"good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal"*. This requirement is for elected members to interpret and apply, but we suggest it does not necessarily mean that the proposal should have absolute majority or even majority support – for support from a substantial minority can qualify as a good deal of support; and judgements about 'local' support can be made at various levels, including the all-county level, or within the proposed North Northants and West Northants council areas, or at the existing district and borough levels.

ORS report

1.7 ORS does not endorse any opinions reported here but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While offering guidance on the consultation methodology and its interpretation, we seek to profile the opinions and arguments of those who have responded; but we make no recommendations on the decisions to be taken by each of the eight councils.

Consultation findings

Open Questionnaire and Residents' Survey

1.8 Based on the informative 11-page consultation document, ORS designed an accessible online and paper open questionnaire featuring four core questions – on whether change is needed, whether the number of councils should be reduced, whether unitary councils should be introduced, and whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the proposal for two unitary councils. ORS also undertook representative, quota-controlled telephone survey based on the same core questions as the open questionnaire.

1.9 Both the residents' telephone survey and open questionnaire showed overwhelming agreement with the need to make changes, to reduce the number of councils, and with the principle of introducing unitary councils (albeit with some variation in views by area, primarily in the open questionnaire).

1.10 The telephone survey showed that absolute majorities of all residents both across the county and within each of the two proposed unitary areas agree with the proposal (74% support overall, and 77% and 70% in West and North Northants respectively).

1.11 The less representative open questionnaire also showed most respondents supporting the proposal in the North Northants area, but a majority opposed in the proposed West Northants area. There were also variations in views between districts.

1.12 In the open questionnaire, Corby was the most critical of all – with far fewer respondents than in other districts agreeing with the need for changes (albeit with a small majority in favour), and a large majority against reducing the number of councils, introducing unitary councils, and also against the main proposal.

1.13 In the open questionnaire, there was also a contrast in respondents' views in Daventry, South Northamptonshire and Northampton: these areas strongly supported the general principle of unitary councils but were all strongly opposed to the specific proposal for North and West Northants, mainly because they want three unitary councils including Northampton.

1.14 In summary, then,

> **Overall, there was overwhelming support for change and for reducing the number of councils**
>
> **The creation of unitary councils was supported in principle in all areas of the county (except in Corby (in the open questionnaire))**
>
> **The representative residents' survey found overwhelming support for two unitary councils across the county as a whole, and in both the proposed West and North Northants areas**
>
> **The open questionnaire found widespread support for two unitary councils in North Northants (except in Corby) and considerable opposition from respondents in West Northants**.

Deliberative consultation

Members of the public

1.15 Seven two-and-a-half-hour deliberative forums were held with a total of 82 randomly selected Northamptonshire residents to discuss the possible reorganisation of local government in the county (with one in each of the districts or boroughs).

1.16 Some participants in all seven workshops were relatively well informed about the structure of Northamptonshire's local government since they knew that there are eight councils in Northamptonshire (not counting parish and town councils); but there was a wide range of estimates by those who were less aware (from two to thirty-two councils), with many not even wanting to hazard a guess. Many knew about their part of the county but had little idea of the overall county-wide structure.

1.17 Most were aware that Northamptonshire County Council spends most of the money they pay in council tax, but most were unaware of the 73% proportion.

1.18 Once the County Council's difficulties were discussed, most residents were indignant by what they said had been a lack of accountability by managers, members and auditors. The sense that public sector finances could go so badly wrong prompted apprehension that any proposed changes could not be guaranteed to work well.

1.19 When all the groups were asked to score the relative importance of five possible criteria to inform the restructuring of local government in the county, there was a surprising consistency in the judgements made. For example:

> The Wellingborough, Northampton and Corby groups considered accountability most important, followed by value for money and quality of services
>
> In East Northamptonshire, Daventry and Kettering, value for money and quality were most important, followed by accountability
>
> Access was typically ranked fourth
>
> Local identity was considered the least important of the five criteria in all seven sessions.

1.20 At the start of the meetings, people were asked for their 'immediate views' on whether the number of councils should be reduced; and at the end they were asked for their 'final judgments' on the proposal for two unitary councils. The table below shows the number of participants who favoured these positions at different stages of the meetings as a proportion of all those who responded (including those who said 'don't know).

AREA	INITIAL VIEWS Proportion (%) favouring reducing number of councils	FINAL JUDGEMENTS Proportion (%) favouring two new Unitary Councils
East Northamptonshire	**80% (8/10)**	**64% (7/11)**
Wellingborough	**45% (5/11)**	**27% (3/11)**
Daventry	**75% (9/12)**	**92% (11/12)**
South Northamptonshire	**67% (6/9)**	**56% (5/9)**

Northampton	**46% (6/13)**	**79% (11/14)**
Corby	**70% (7/10)**	**69% (9/13)**
Kettering	**17% (2/12)**	**58% (7/12)**
All-Northamptonshire aggregated	**56% (43/77)** **(+5 did not respond to the question)**	**65% (53/82)**

1.21 The initial opinions demonstrate that many people are not wedded to the continuation of the current structures. For example, except in Kettering the initial views showed either a majority for reducing the number of councils, or opinions that were about equally divided.

1.22 Following detailed discussions, the balance of opinion was even more emphatically in favour of two new unitary councils, with almost a two-thirds aggregate majority. In six of the seven districts/boroughs, the focus groups' final judgements showed majorities in favour of the two-unitary model. Wellingborough was the single exception, with only a quarter in favour.

1.23 Many of those supporting two unitary councils (and others favouring other options) were influenced by the financial evidence to conclude that reorganisation is necessary and desirable to make savings, reduce duplication, increase democratic accountability, and address the financial problems.

1.24 While accepting the two-unitary proposal, many people wanted assurances that the new councils really would make a difference and that no one responsible for the financial problems would be re-employed or hold senior office in the new councils. Every group stressed concerns about the risks of not ensuring accountability and sound management under the new structure.

1.25 No other options found any general support following consideration in wide-ranging discussions. For example:

> Because they either opposed unitary councils on principle or were unconvinced that they could solve the historical problems, only a small minority of participants wanted to retain the current eight councils.
>
> There was curiosity across about why the single unitary option had been excluded from formal consultation, but it was generally readily accepted that it would perpetuate the County Council in another form.
>
> The idea of a separate Northampton unitary within a three-unitary model was dear to some, but not taken up by the great majority of participants
>
> While some protested that the government's 300,000 population threshold was arbitrary, most could accept it as reasonable in the context of the geography of Northamptonshire and the need for viable councils.

1.26 In summary, then, **the six out of seven focus groups with a cross-section of local residents supported the proposal for two unitary councils (in some cases with overwhelming majorities in favour)**.

Business people

1.27 The Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses for Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland very helpfully organised two successful forums that together included 49 senior business people.

1.28 Both forums showed overwhelming absolute majority support for the proposal for two unitary councils and unanimously rejected a single all-county unitary council. There were only two people who favoured an alternative two-unitary 'doughnut structure' based on Northampton and the rest.

1.29 A third of the people from small businesses wanted more information. Overall, there were anxieties about the councils' capacity to manage the change and achieve the successful new start required. Governance and the need for effective accountability were emphasised as important requirements; and IT challenges and associated costs were identified as real risks.

1.30 In summary, then, **the business community overwhelmingly supported the proposal for two unitary councils**.

Parish and Town Councils

1.31 The Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (NCALC) helpfully organised two forums for parish and town councillors (and some clerks) that were attended by a total of 117 people. Many of these had formed strong opinions before attending the workshops.

1.32 In both meetings, there was emphatic absolute majority support for the principle of unitary authorities.

1.33 However, in relation to the creation of two new unitary councils, there was a contrast in the views of the two forums: in western Northamptonshire there was a big absolute majority against reducing to two unitary councils, while in northern Northamptonshire there was a majority in favour of two unitary councils. Those who objected were concerned above all about Northampton's urban interests trumping rural needs in the new structure.

1.34 Overwhelmingly, most parish and town councillors supported unitary authorities in principle; but there were deep-seated worries about urban and rural areas being combined unsympathetically in a two-unitary structure. Therefore, there was some division of opinion: in western Northamptonshire there was a big majority for Northampton to form a third unitary council, but only a third supported the same idea in northern Northamptonshire.

1.35 The prospect of a single unitary council was mentioned, but it was not seriously proposed, and the idea had very little support indeed. Likewise, the two-unitary 'doughnut option', with Northampton as a unitary within a large rural unitary, was mentioned but not proposed.

1.36 If the new authorities are created, then there is a need for them to pay serious attention to mitigating the sense of urban/rural divide.

1.37 In summary, then, **the parish and town councils overwhelmingly supported unitary authorities in principle, but the forums were divided on whether there should be two or three unitary councils**.

Northamptonshire Health and Wellbeing Board

1.38 The Health and Wellbeing Board neither supported nor opposed the proposal for two unitary councils. Some members saw the change as a positive opportunity, but the dominant mood was uncertainty laced with scepticism about the ability of structural change to improve services and co-ordination. The police support the proposal but would prefer a single unitary council.

1.39 Following the meeting, five depth interviews were conducted with some board members (and a representative of one other relevant organisation). In summary, the organisations welcomed the opportunities for closer integration and partnership working offered by fewer authorities; but they were sceptical that two councils would be better than one. There were concerns around possible inefficiencies, conflicting priorities and disjointedness if county-wide services were divided. To mitigate these risks, stakeholders wondered whether two councils might deliver services through a 'joint vehicle', or whether they might be able to commission certain functions jointly with health services.

1.40 In summary, then, the **Health and Wellbeing board members saw a positive opportunity for change but had major concerns about the creation of two unitary councils rather than one – though they thought that the risks could be mitigated by a 'joint vehicle'.**

Submissions and petitions

1.41 A total of 31 written submissions were received, including eight from parish and town councils, seven from external local authorities (one of which represented the views of the CEOs of four district councils outside Northants), six from other community organisations, two from health organisations, one from the police and crime commissioner, two from district councillors and five from residents.

1.42 Many of the submissions supported the case for changing local government in Northamptonshire. Even those that did not explicitly support a change seemed implicitly to accept (or at least did not directly challenge the idea). For example, only one all the response advocated keeping the two-tier system (albeit with some districts merging). A number of the other responses simply outlined issues to be managed or mitigated if a unitary model was introduced, without commenting on the proposed number of unitary councils.

1.43 Most of the submissions from larger stakeholders and statutory organisations supported the principle of unitary councils, mainly because it would simplify local government, increase public understanding, and allow for the integration of services.

1.44 Nonetheless, the larger stakeholders were concerned whether the two-unitary model was optimal compared with a single, all-county unitary – mainly because the latter would be cheaper and would not involve splitting the current county-wide adult and children's social services. The responses questioned the costs of the division, how the two new authorities would align with health and police organisations (and other partners), how future commissioning would work, and whether health inequalities would be increased. Therefore, some important stakeholders advocated a single unitary council for Northamptonshire.

1.45 Many other stakeholders (most notably the parish and town councils, but also a handful of others) were more ambivalent about the principle of unitary councils. Many said that the County Council's problems were due to mismanagement and 'incompetence', rather than a consequence of two tier structure. They were concerned that a unitary structure might not solve the financial problems, particularly if the debts and liabilities of the County Council were inherited by the new councils.

1.46 More specifically, the parish and town council favoured three unitary councils (mainly because of the difficulties of reconciling urban and rural needs within a single unitary) – with Northampton as the third unitary. Such responses rejected the population threshold of 300,000 for being arbitrary and not taking planned housing growth into account.

1.47 Citing the four Gunning principles in a single submission, the three CEOs of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe district councils argued that the consultation process was defective since the Northants councils had over-simplified and misinterpreted the government's criteria, and as a result the councils had prematurely narrowed the range of their unitary options by not giving due consideration to possible cross-border mergers.

1.48 In passing, it should be noted that in the text comments on the open questionnaires some respondents mentioned a diverse range of possible cross-border mergers; but overwhelmingly most of the focus fell on combinations within Northamptonshire.

1.49 In summary, then, **the submissions generally accepted unitary authorities in principle, but were divided on whether one or three councils would be best: some of the larger organisations preferred one, while many parish and town councils favoured three**.

Corby Borough Council

1.50 Corby Borough Council did not make a formal submission based upon its own large consultation exercise, but ORS was made aware that the council found very high levels of opposition to the proposal for two unitary councils. However, the apparent contrast between the borough's and ORS' findings is accounted for by the very different questions asked and the different methodologies. We have every confidence in the ORS findings.

Conclusions

Requirement for a "good deal of local support"

1.51 In ORS' opinion, the consultation findings show that the government requirement for the proposal for two unitary councils to command a "good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal" is more than satisfied. In considering this question, we suggest that:

> In principle, a "good deal" of support does not necessarily mean majority support, for a substantial body of opinion favouring the proposal (for example, say, 35-49%) would meet the requirement – for a level of support substantial enough to be credible and to suggest that the proposal could be widely acceptable over time
>
> The assessment of "local support" should be "taken in the round", in terms of overall support across the proposed unitary authority areas and/or the county as a whole (with both levels of analysis qualifying as "the whole area of the proposal"); in other words, individual districts and boroughs are not the most appropriate units of analysis in relation to the proposal.

1.52 While important in principle, these two points are in a sense 'academic' since support for two new unitary councils has been found to be so very high.

Consultation supports the proposal

1.53 Consultation on complex and controversial proposals arising from a financial crisis within a major authority cannot be expected to achieve a consensus; but in this case the consultation outcomes are very supportive. For example:

> In the deliberative meetings, six out of seven focus groups with a cross-section of residents, and two substantial business forums, supported the proposal for two unitary councils (in some cases with overwhelming majorities). The two large parish and town council forums also overwhelmingly supported unitary authorities in principle, but with one supporting two unitary councils while the other supported three. Only the Health and Wellbeing Board had major reservations about the two-unitary model (for splitting county-based functions), but its members supported unitary local government based on a single all-Northants council.
>
> The 31 written submissions generally supported the case for change, for reducing the number of councils, and for unitary councils; but they were often divided on the appropriate number of unitary authorities (and some proposed cross-border mergers).
>
> The quantitative consultation methods showed overwhelming support for change, for reducing the number of councils, and for unitary councils. The representative residents' survey found overwhelming support for two unitary councils across the county as a whole, and in both the proposed West and North Northants areas. The open questionnaire also supported unitary councils in principle in all areas of the county (except in Corby) and showed widespread support for two unitary councils in North Northants (except in Corby), but opposition from respondents in West Northants.
>
> The apparent contrast between these findings and those of Corby Borough Council is accounted for by the very different questions asked and the different methodologies used.
>
> Regarding alternative options, there was not one that emerged as a close contender with the proposed two-unitary model. For example, some larger statutory stakeholders and some neighbouring local authorities supported a single unitary council on the grounds of cost and the county-wide integration of services; parish and town councils and some interests in Northampton and Daventry wanted a three-unitary model, to better respect the differences between urban and rural needs; and there were other submissions advocating cross-border mergers. But none of the alternatives proposed emerged as clear second-in-line: many local Northampton and South Northamptonshire interests favour three unitaries, but large statutory stakeholders favour one.

1.54 Overall, then, while there is nothing in the consultation that means the eight councils must go ahead with the draft proposal for two unitary councils, there is nothing to discourage them from doing so. The evidence of the consultation is that there is widespread public support for the restructuring of local government in Northamptonshire.

2. Introduction

Background to the consultation

2.1 In April 2018, an adverse Northamptonshire County Council Best Value Inspection Report (January-March 2018) by Max Caller found that the County Council lacked the right culture, governance and processes to manage its finances effectively – and consequently has not only over-spent its budget in previous years, but also faces substantial on-going deficits. The report concluded that:

> *The problems…are now so deep that it is not possible to promote a recovery plan that could bring the council back to stability and safety in a reasonable timescale…A way forward with a clean sheet, leaving all the history behind, is required.* [paragraphs 4.16-17].

2.2 In the light of that report, the government took the unusual step of appointing Independent Commissioners to take over the County Council's functions associated with strategic financial planning, governance and scrutiny. To promote a longer-term and sustainable solution to the problems, the government also wrote to all eight Northamptonshire councils at the end of March 2018 inviting them to *"develop and submit locally-led proposals for establishing unitary authorities across the county"* – with an initial deadline for proposals of the end of July, since extended to the end of August 2018. Potential proposals were circumscribed by the government guidance that any future unitary structures should be:

> Likely to improve local government and service delivery in terms of value-for-money, savings, sustainability and leadership
>
> Based on existing local authority areas and have populations *"that at a minimum [are] substantially in excess of 300,000"*
>
> Command a *"good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal".*

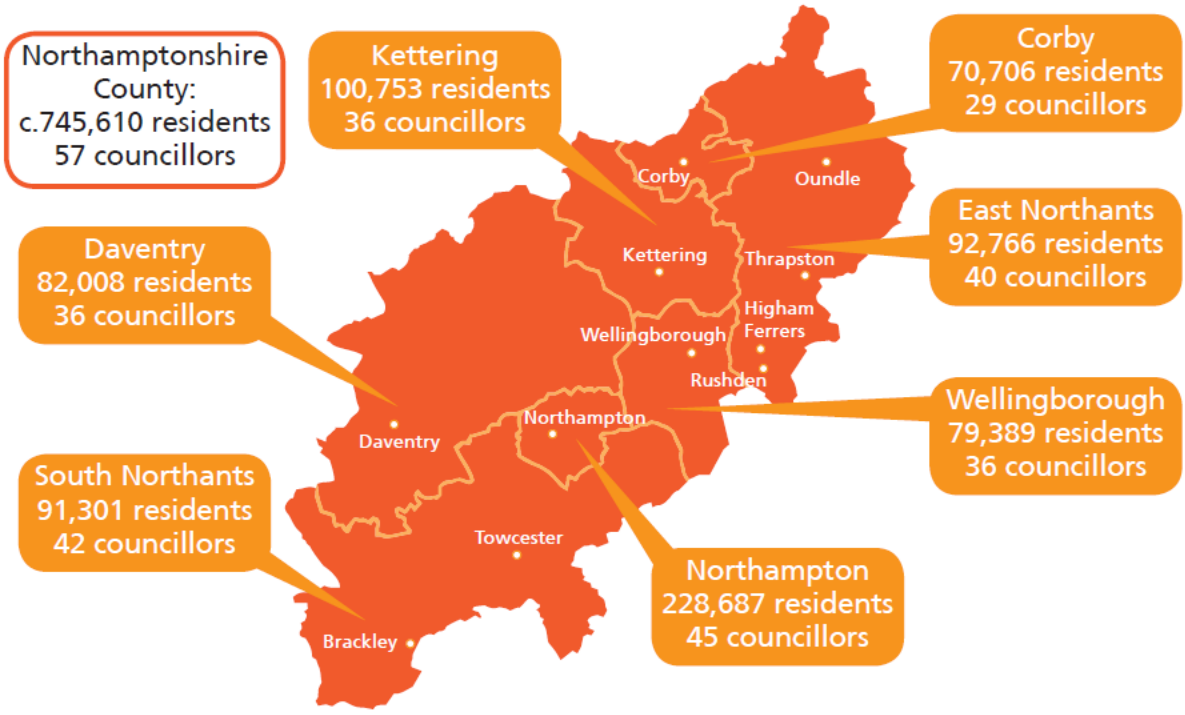
2.3 The government has also indicated that both the status quo and a single unitary council for the whole of Northamptonshire would be unacceptable because neither would solve existing problems and deliver a 'new start'.

2.4 While they are in many cases reluctant to see the two-tier system abolished, Northamptonshire's eight councils have accepted that urgent change is necessary to achieve a sustainable local government structure across the county. Having studied the government's three requirements, all the councils are jointly considering a proposal to replace the two-tier system of eight councils with two unitary councils.

Current two-tier system and proposed unitary structure

2.5 The current structure of Northamptonshire local government is shown below, with populations and numbers of councillor positions.

Figure 1: Current Councils in Northamptonshire (Source: 2016-based Sub National Population Projections)



2.6 The proposal under consideration by the councils is that the existing county council and the seven borough/district councils should be abolished and replaced by two new unitary councils (North Northants and West Northants) in April 2020, as shown on the map on the following page, with respective populations.

Figure 2: The two proposed unitary Councils for Northamptonshire (Source: 2016-based Sub National Population Projections)

Consultation by ORS

Introduction

2.7 The eight councils appointed ORS (Opinion Research Services)to conduct and report an extensive public consultation programme to inform their consideration of the proposal before making a final decision (whether to submit the two-unitary proposal to the government at the end of August), and also to test whether the proposal commands a *"good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal*".

2.8 ORS is a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research and major statutory consultations (including for recent local government reorganisations in Dorset, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire).

2.9 The consultation period ran from June 18th to July 22nd and during this period, residents and stakeholders were invited to provide feedback through a wide range of routes, including all the following:

An open consultation questionnaire for residents, stakeholders and organisations: the questionnaire was available online and paper questionnaires were widely circulated and available on request; Easy Read versions were available for people with various needs

A representative telephone survey of 500 residents (by random digit telephone dialling): to provide an accurate profile of opinions from the general population across Northamptonshire;

Seven deliberative focus groups with members of the public (one in each of the districts/boroughs)

Two deliberative forums with town and parish councillors;

Two deliberative forums with business people

Telephone interviews with five key local stakeholder organisations

Analysis of written submissions and petitions.

2.10 ORS also drafted the 11-page consultation document and hosted the www.FutureNorthants.co.uk consultation website (on behalf of the councils) containing background documents, a link to the questionnaire, dates for stakeholder events, and press releases/updates.

Quantitative consultation

Introduction

2.11 Based on the informative 11-page consultation document, ORS designed an open questionnaire and telephone survey, both of which featured the same four core questions – on whether change is needed, whether the number of councils should be reduced, whether unitary councils should be introduced, and whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the proposal for two unitary councils. Respondents were also invited to rank five possible criteria that the councils should consider when considering the future structure of local government in the county; and in both versions there were sections inviting respondents to make any further comments, and to profile those responding.

Open consultation questionnaire

2.12 The open questionnaire was available for anyone to complete online, and paper versions were readily and widely available in libraries and council venues across the county. The open questionnaire could be completed by individuals and on behalf of organisations. In total, 6,287 responses were received, including 6,171 from individuals and 116 on behalf of organisations.

2.13 Open questionnaires are important forms of consultation, 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 public 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.

2.14 It is important that open questionnaires are accessible to all, but without allowing multiple completions (by the same people) to distort the analysis. Therefore, while making it easy to complete the survey online, ORS monitors the IP addresses through which surveys 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). A few submissions were received with duplicate cookies, but none were considered to be identical responses or appeared to be attempting to skew the results; so we have not excluded any online submissions on the basis of a duplicate IP address or cookies. Similarly, no paper questionnaires returned to ORS were considered to be duplicate responses (though more than 500 from Northampton residents were ‘co-ordinated’ in using the same photocopied questionnaire for separate completions).

Residents' telephone survey

2.15 The residents' survey was undertaken to ensure that a representative profile of opinions across Northamptonshire was achieved for the same core questions as in the open questionnaire. To capture the views of the general population, 500 residents across the county took part in structured telephone interviews with ORS interviewers during the consultation period. A survey approach was used because, with a population of almost 746,000 residents, it would have been neither practical nor cost-effective to do a postal census of all households or residents.

2.16 The survey used random digit dialling combined with quota-based sampling to ensure that residents who were less likely to engage with the consultation were included and encouraged to give their views about the proposals. Residents were provided with summary information before being asked for their views. Those who wanted further information before responding were directed to both the county and district councils' websites, and they were given an opportunity to make an appointment to be interviewed subsequently. Paper copies were also available upon request to those without access to the internet.

2.17 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, for different types of people may be more or less likely to take part. Such 'response bias' is corrected by statistical weighting based on a comparison of the demographic characteristics of the respondents with data for the whole population – to identify and correct any under- or over-representation.

2.18 In this instance, the returned sample was compared against comparative data for age, gender, working status, ethnicity, tenure and urban/rural, and then weighted by tenure, working status, disability (for Northamptonshire) and by age and gender, ethnicity, urban/rural area (all interlocked with the proposed North and West Northants unitary areas). On that basis, appropriate statistical weights were calculated and applied to the data, so that the survey results are broadly representative of the overall population of Northamptonshire and provide a statistically reliable guide to opinions on the restructuring proposal.

2.19 The telephone survey's overall achieved sample of 500 responses yields overall findings for the general population of Northamptonshire that are accurate to within ±5 percentage points at a 95% level of confidence. In other words, 19 times out of 20 (95%) if the whole population was interviewed then the findings would not differ by more than ±5 percentage points from the results from the 500 sample. Considering the sample sizes, the opinion splits, and the degrees of statistical weightings used (to compensate for different response rates from different demographic groups), the survey findings are accurate enough for reliable conclusions to be drawn about residents' opinions on the councils' proposal.

2.20 When this report refers to results based on the weighted data, the results are given as the proportion of "all residents"; but results based on the open questionnaire refer specifically to the "respondents" (because they are not necessarily representative of all the residents).

2.21 While the overall sample is reliable at the county level, the district and borough sub-samples (ranging from 44 to 149 interviews) are in most cases too small to be statistically significant. However, findings for each of the two proposed unitary council areas are reliable, with error margins of ±7 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence.

Deliberative consultation

Introduction

2.22 The consultation programme included a wide range of deliberative meetings with members of the public, business people, town and parish councillors and members of the Health and Wellbeing Board drawn from across Northamptonshire. In summary, the programme included:

Seven focus groups with randomly selected members of the public, one in each local authority area (with a total of 82 participants);

Two forums with business people (with a total of 49 participants)

Two forums with parish and town councillors (with a total of 117 participants)

Short discussion session with the Health and Wellbeing Board (and 5 follow-up telephone interviews).

Focus groups with members of the public

2.23 The consultation also used a 'deliberative' approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the proposals, while both receiving, and questioning in detail, background information. Seven two to two-and-a-half hour deliberative focus groups were held across Northamptonshire (one per district/borough) with a total of 82 randomly-selected residents. The schedule of meetings and attendance levels are shown in the table below.

WORKSHOP LOCATION	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
East Northamptonshire (Thrapston)	**4th July 2018**	**11**
Wellingborough	**5th July 2018**	**11**
Daventry	**9th July 2018**	**12**
South Northamptonshire (Towcester)	**12th July 2018**	**9**
Northampton	**16th July 2018**	**14**
Corby	**17th July 2018**	**13**
Kettering	**18th July 2018**	**12**

2.24 Participants were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS' Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, participants were also 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.

2.25 In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors: the venues for meetings were accessible, and people's special needs were properly considered. 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)). As standard good practice, people were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part. Overall, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents across the county.

2.26 Although, like all other forms of qualitative engagement, deliberative focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the seven 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 based on similar discussions.

2.27 The focus groups began with a presentation by ORS to provide standardised information about the current structure of local government in Northamptonshire and the background to, and implications of the current proposal. In most groups, participants 'before-and-after' views were elicited (on whether the number of councils should be reduced), to compare their opinions before and after the presentation and extensive discussions. Participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout and the meetings were thorough and truly deliberative in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.

Forums with business people

2.28 We are grateful that both the Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses for Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland very helpfully organised successful forums that together included 49 senior business people – and we thank the staff of both organisations for their positive co-operation in assisting the consultation process. The meetings and attendance levels can be seen in the table below.

FORUMS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Chamber of Trade (Northampton)	**July 16th 2018**	**17**
Federation of Small Businesses (Kettering)	**July 17th 2018**	**32**

2.29 At both meetings, the issues were presented and the discussions facilitated by ORS (using a slightly condensed version of the presentation used in the public focus groups); and the participants took part readily.

Forums with parish and town councillors

2.30 The Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (CALC) was most helpful in organising two open workshops for parish and town councillors from across Northamptonshire. Councillors were invited to attend one of two meetings below – and a total of 117 councillors and clerks attended. The schedule of events and attendance levels are shown in the table below.

FORUM LOCATIONS	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
West Northamptonshire (Towcester)	**3rd July 2018**	**51**
North Northamptonshire (Wellingborough)	**12th July 2018**	**66**

2.31 We are grateful to the NCALC staff for organising the meetings. The well-informed parish and town councillors took an active interest in the issues and asked many questions. Most of them were familiar with the reorganisation debate, and many had formed opinions on the issues before attending the workshops. The meetings were chaired by the NCALC, but the issues were presented, and the discussions facilitated and reported, by ORS.

Northamptonshire Health and Wellbeing Board

ORS attended a meeting of the Northamptonshire Health and Wellbeing Board on July 12th 2018, when the board's busy schedule allowed for a 50-minute session on local government reorganisation (including a presentation and discussion). Unfortunately, most of the participants declined to express an opinion on the proposal and associated issues (either for themselves or for their organisations). The one exception was Northamptonshire Police who supported the proposal but declared their preference for a single unitary authority for all-Northamptonshire.

Following the meeting, and due to the importance of the Health and Wellbeing Board opinions, ORS was asked urgently to conduct in-depth telephone interviews with some senior members, to encourage them to express any opinions they had. Within the very urgent timetable 5 interviews (each lasting about 10-20 minutes) were conducted.

Submissions and petitions

2.32 Members of the public and stakeholders were also encouraged to make written representations about any aspects of the proposal – for ORS to analyse and report. The number of submissions received was relatively small (considering the scale of change in prospect and comparisons with other important consultations). In total, 31 written submissions were received (one of them from the CEOs of four Buckinghamshire district councils). Most submissions were up to three pages in length.

2.33 ORS normally summarises petitions; without auditing the signatures, we usually comment on the header statements and (if possible) on the way signatures were assembled. In this case, ORS is only aware of one petition, entitled *"Make Daventry District Council (DDC) into a Unitary Authority",* which was available via the petitions section of the parliament.uk website. This petition had received 324 signatures at the time of writing.

Adequacy of the Consultation

Gunning principles

2.34 The key good practice requirements (so-called 'Gunning principles') for consultation programmes are that they should:

Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken

Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond

Provide the public and stakeholders with enough background information to allow them to consider the issues and any proposals intelligently and critically

Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

2.35 In this case, the consultation was conscientious in eliciting people's opinions on important proposals, even though the five-week period for responses was significantly shorter than the normal eight or even 12 weeks, and there were severe limitations on the preparation time, the financial information that could be provided, and the possible range of cross-border options because of the urgency of the timetable required by the government.

2.36 In any case, the consultation was open, accessible and fair to all stakeholders; it sought to conform with 'best practice' and was 'proportional' in terms of its scale and the balance of elements and methods used. It is important now that sufficient consideration is given to the findings alongside all the other evidence.

Nature of consultation

2.37 Accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible engagement while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully. This does not mean that the majority views should automatically decide public policy; and the popularity or unpopularity of draft proposals should not displace professional and political judgement about what is the right or best decision in the circumstances. The levels of, and reasons for, public support or opposition are very important, but as considerations to be taken into account, not as factors that necessarily determine authorities' decisions. Above all, public bodies have to consider the relevance and cogency of the arguments put forward during public engagement processes, not just count heads. The key question is not, *Which proposal has most support?* but, *Are the reasons for the popularity or unpopularity of the proposals cogent?* In this context, it was helpful that the consultation programme included both 'open' and deliberative elements, to allow many people to take part via the open questionnaire while promoting informed engagement via the deliberative focus groups.

Interpreting "a good deal of local support…"

What does it mean?

2.38 Even before considering the consultation findings in this case, it is appropriate to consider the meaning and implications of the government's requirement that any proposal for the reform of local government in Northamptonshire should be shown to have a "good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal". What does the requirement mean in practice? How much support is a "good deal"? Must it be an absolute majority? Or just a majority? Or could significant minority support qualify as a "good deal" of support? Ultimately, these questions are for elected members to determine, but ORS is able to offer some general guidance towards the interpretation of the essentially ambiguous term, a "good deal".

2.39 To free ourselves from possible bias in connection with the support (or otherwise) for two unitary councils, it is helpful to 'reverse the perspective' by considering what a "good deal of opposition" would mean in connection with any proposal – by considering a range of dichotomous opinion-splits. For instance, if any given proposal had overwhelming 90% support, a hypothetical 10% opposition would be called a small minority; and the same would be true for an 80%-20% split. However, if the opposition was about a third (67%-33% split) then we could well say that there was a substantial minority against whatever was the proposal; and if the opposition was, say, 40% (60%-40% split) then the judgement that there was a "good deal" of opposition would certainly be reasonable. In other words, even with absolute majority support, it is still possible sensibly to say that there is a "good deal" of opposition.

2.40 Of course, the examples above are unrealistically simplified in being dichotomous, for there would normally be 'don't knows' and minorities supporting 'other options'. With, say, a majority of 40% favouring a proposal, 30% opposed, 20% 'don't knows', and 10% proposing 'other options' it would certainly be appropriate to refer to a "good deal" of opposition.

2.41 If we now return to the proposal for two unitary councils by correcting the 'reversed perspective' to consider levels of support (rather than opposition), it is evident that support from a significant minority can qualify as a good deal of support. Interpreters' judgements will vary, but a "good deal of local support" might well be in the range from, say, a third to, say, 47% (assuming a dichotomous split). Therefore, the government's criterion for a "good deal of local support" is not a requirement for absolute majority or even majority support, but simply (as the phrase itself says) for a substantial show of support from a sizeable number of residents. Had the government meant "majority support" it would have said so.

2.42 Of course, the government says that support should be "assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal" – so the distribution of support and opposition is important, too. But judgements about levels of support or opposition can be made at the all-county level, or within the proposed North Northants and West Northants council areas, or at the existing district and borough levels. The relevant level of analysis is for elected members to determine; but ORS suggests the 'count' should not be on a district-by-district basis but county-wide or for each of two the proposed unitary areas.

The ORS report

2.43 This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of respondents and participants. Some verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them, but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse any opinions but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants and ORS is clear that its role is to analyse and explain the opinions and arguments of the many different interests participating in the engagement, but not to 'make a case' for any proposal or variant.

2.44 While offering guidance on the consultation methodology and its interpretation, we seek to profile the opinions and arguments of those who have responded; but we make no recommendations on the decisions to be taken by each of the eight councils.

3. Quantitative Consultation

Introduction

3.1 There were two main quantitative elements in the programme of consultation activities, namely:

Representative telephone survey of 500 residents (done by random digit dialling with quota controls) – to profile of the opinions from the general population across Northamptonshire

Open consultation questionnaire – an inclusive means for anyone (residents, stakeholders and organisations) to express their views (in paper and online formats, with an Easy Read version also available).

3.2 The telephone survey was designed to sample the general population (aged 16+) and, when weighted, is broadly representative of all Northamptonshire residents. While the open questionnaire, on the other hand, does not yield a representative sample, it provides considerable information about the views (and strength of feeling) of groups and individuals; but it over-represents people aged 45+ (especially those aged 65-74) and under-represents people aged 16-44 (especially those aged 16-25). Therefore, when we report the survey, the results are given as proportion of "all residents", whereas the findings of the open questionnaire relate to its particular "respondents".

Residents' survey

Introduction

3.3 Based on the sample sizes, opinion splits, and degrees of statistical weightings used, the survey findings are sufficiently accurate to allow confident conclusions to be drawn about opinions on the councils' proposals. At a 95% level of confidence, the findings at the overall county level are accurate to within about ±5 percentage points – which means that 19 times out of 20 if the whole population were interviewed then the findings would not vary by more than ±5 percentage points from the results for the sample.

3.4 While the sample is reliable at the overall county level, the district and borough sub-samples (ranging from 44 to 149 interviews) are in most cases too small to be statistically significant – so the following charts do not break the data down to that level of disaggregation.

3.5 However, findings for each of the two proposed unitary council areas are statistically significant, with error margins of ±7 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence – so results for the proposed North Northants and West Northants areas are included in all cases.

Respondent profile (residents' survey)

3.6 The table below profiles the respondents to the residents' survey. Figures may not always sum to 100% due to rounding.

Table 1: Residents survey responses (unweighted and weighted) and Resident Population[1] by area and demographics

Characteristic	Unweighted Count	Unweighted Valid %	Weighted Valid %	Resident Population %
BY PROPOSED UNITARY AUTHORITY				
North Northants	223	45%	46%	46%
West Northants	277	55%	54%	54%
Total valid responses	**500**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
BY AGE				
16 to 24	53	11%	12%	12%
25 to 34	78	16%	16%	16%
35 to 44	67	13%	16%	16%
45 to 54	84	17%	18%	19%
55 to 64	105	21%	15%	15%
65 to 74	76	15%	14%	13%
75 or over	37	7%	7%	9%
Total valid responses	**500**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
BY GENDER				
Male	225	45%	49%	49%
Female	275	55%	51%	51%
Total valid responses	**500**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
BY ETHNICITY				
White	437	93%	92%	93%
Non-white	34	7%	8%	7%
Total valid responses	**471**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
Not known	*29*	-	-	-
BY WORKING STATUS				
Working	324	65%	61%	62%
Retired	107	21%	22%	22%
Otherwise not working	69	14%	17%	16%
Total valid responses	**500**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
BY DISABILITY				
Activities limited a lot	30	6%	8%	8%
Activities limited a little	32	7%	10%	11%
No limiting illness or disability	417	87%	82%	81%
Total valid responses	**479**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
Not known	*21*	-	-	-

[1] Population data based on Sub-National Population Projections for 2018 (2016-based), Census 2011, and the Annual Population Survey 2018.

BY TENURE				
Own outright	173	37%	29%	28%
Own with mortgage	175	37%	43%	44%
Social rent	70	15%	15%	12%
Private rent	53	11%	14%	15%
Total valid responses	**471**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
Not known	*29*	-	-	-

Open Questionnaire

Introduction

3.7 The open questionnaire was available to be completed by individuals and on behalf of organisations. In total, 6,287 responses were received, with 6,171 from individuals and 116 from organisations. An Easy Read version available for those with learning difficulties and various accessibility needs, and 258 were completed (and have been included in the main dataset and the totals above)[2]. Responses from organisations may represent the views of key stakeholders or could raise technical arguments that cannot easily be summarised. Therefore, ORS typically reports the views of individuals and organisations separately.

Duplicate and co-ordinated responses

3.8 The residents' survey sampling was carefully controlled to interview 500 separate (randomly selected) people, so there were no duplicate responses.

3.9 In contrast, open questionnaires are accessible to all and multiple completions (by the same people online or through photocopying) are in principle possible. Therefore, ORS therefore monitors the IP addresses through which surveys are completed (and analyses cookies) to see where responses originate from users on the same computer using the same browser and the same credentials (e.g. user account). None of the online responses were identical, or aroused suspicion, so ORS has not excluded any of them.

3.10 However, 513 of the postal questionnaires received by ORS were apparently co-ordinated responses in favour of Northampton becoming a unitary council: they were completed separately but using photocopies of one (original) questionnaire. All 513 agreed with the need for change, with reducing the number of councils, and with unitary authorities; but they uniformly disagreed with the proposal for North and West Northants unitary councils. Instead, they all called for Northampton to be a unitary authority in its own right. Since they were completed by different people, ORS has not excluded any of the 513 responses. Nonetheless it should be borne in mind that these co-ordinated responses account for about a third of the total response for Northampton; and so the results (particularly at district level) should be considered in this context.

[2] The Easy Read questionnaire included a slightly reworded form of the preambles, questions and response options, in order to make the consultation themes more accessible to those who might have a learning disability. However, there are a range of individuals who might choose to fill in the Easy Read (e.g. for accessibility reasons: large font etc.) and area subgroups would not be large enough in the easy read to pull out separately. For these and other reasons, ORS has merged the Easy Reads with the main questionnaire, but separate results for Easy Read can be seen in Appendix C and the full preambles/question wordings in Appendix D.

Respondent profile (open questionnaire)

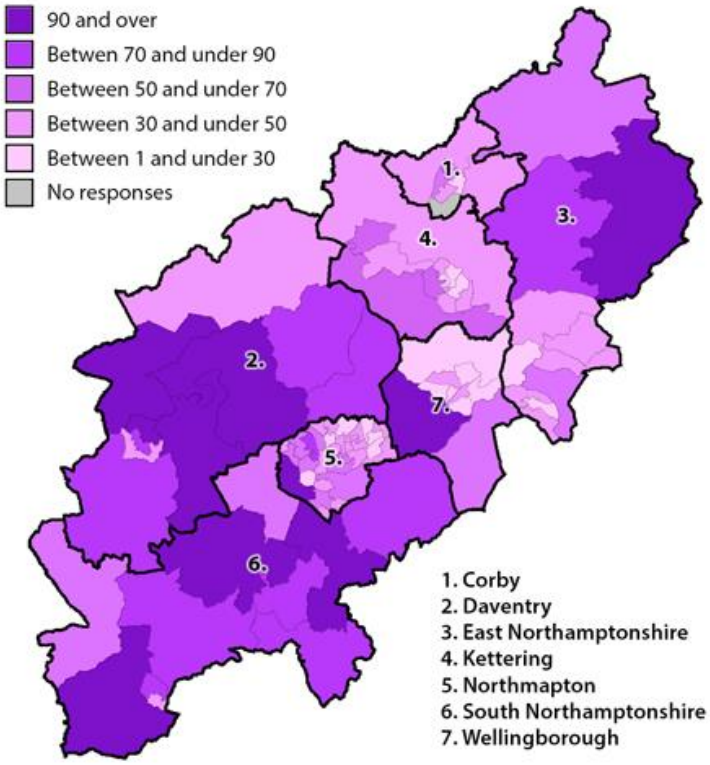
3.11 The table below profiles the individual respondents to the open questionnaire. Figures may not always sum to 100% due to rounding.

Table 2: Open questionnaire responses (individuals) by demographics and area

Characteristic	Unweighted Count	Unweighted Valid %
BY AGE		
Under 25	78	2%
25 to 34	303	7%
35 to 44	641	15%
45 to 54	890	21%
55 to 64	943	22%
65 to 74	1,076	25%
75 or over	380	9%
Total valid responses	**4,311**	**100%**
Not known	*1,860*	-
BY GENDER		
Male	2,155	51%
Female	2,038	49%
Total valid responses	**4,193**	**100%**
Not known	*1,978*	-
BY ETHNIC GROUP		
White	3,914	97%
Non-white	113	3%
Total valid responses	**4,027**	**100%**
Not known	*2,144*	-
BY WHETHER RESPONDENT HAS A DISABILITY		
Yes	530	13%
No	3,592	87%
Total valid responses	**4,122**	**100%**
Not known	*2,049*	-
BY WHETHER EMPLOYED BY A LOCAL AUTHORITY		
Yes	537	11%
No	4,164	89%
Total valid responses	**4,701**	**100%**
Not known	*1,470*	-
BY LOCAL AUTHORITY		
Corby	360	8%
Daventry	789	17%
East Northamptonshire	522	11%
Kettering	410	9%
Northampton	1,429	30%
South Northamptonshire	870	18%
Wellingborough	348	7%
Outside Northants	28	1%
Total valid responses	**4,756**	**100%**
Not known	*1,415*	-

3.12 Responses have also been mapped according to the number of questionnaires received in each Middle Super Output Area (or MSOA). This shows responses widely spread across the whole county, but with somewhat higher levels of participation in Daventry, East Northamptonshire, South Northamptonshire, and in the southern half of Wellingborough. The lower responding areas were mainly in Northampton or in parts of proposed North Northants unitary (particularly the northern half of Wellingborough).

Figure 3: Number of individual open questionnaire responses by MSOA (Northants MSOAs only)



Findings in graphical format

3.13 For simplicity and ease of access, the results of both the residents' survey and open questionnaire are presented in a largely graphical format. Where possible, the colours used on the charts have been standardised with a 'traffic light' system in which:

Green shades represent responses that 'tend to agree' or 'strongly agree'

Beige shades represent those who 'neither agree nor disagree'

Red shades represent responses that 'tend to disagree' or 'strongly disagree'

3.14 The numbers on pie charts are percentages indicating the proportions of residents or respondents agree/disagree on a particular question.

3.15 The number of valid responses recorded for each question (base size) are reported throughout. As not all respondents answered every question, the valid responses vary between questions. Every response to every question has been taken into consideration.

Four key questions

3.16 As well as important explanatory material from the consultation document[3], the questionnaire included four key questions relating to the proposal for two new unitary councils – which were, ***"Do you agree or disagree…"***

> That we need to make changes to respond to these challenges?
>
> That there is a need to reduce the number of councils in Northamptonshire?
>
> That a number of unitary councils should be introduced in Northamptonshire?
>
> With the specific proposal to replace the existing councils with two new unitary councils: North Northants and West Northants?

3.17 The findings on each of these questions are reported graphically below, using the colour conventions outlined under "Findings in graphical format" above.

Summary

3.18 The graphics below are intended to be clear, but an overall summary can nonetheless be helpful. Both the telephone survey and open questionnaire show overwhelming agreement with the need to make changes, reduce the number of councils, and the principle of introducing unitary councils; but views on the specific proposal for two new unitary councils show more variation.

3.19 The representative residents' survey (by telephone) shows that absolute majorities of all residents both across the county and within each of the proposed unitary areas agree with the proposal. Indeed, the majorities in favour may properly be described as overwhelming, with 74% support overall, and 77% and 70% in West and North Northants respectively.

3.20 The less representative open questionnaire results also show most respondents supporting the proposal in the North Northants area, but a majority opposed in the proposed West Northants area. There are also variations in views between districts.

3.21 In the open questionnaire, Corby was the most critical of all – with far fewer respondents than in other districts agreeing with the need for changes (albeit still a small absolute majority), and a large majority against reducing the number of councils, introducing unitary councils, and also against the main proposal.

3.22 There was also a contrast in respondents' views in Daventry, South Northamptonshire and Northampton: these areas strongly *supported* the *general* principle of unitary councils but were all strongly opposed to the *specific proposal* for North and West Northants, mainly because they want three unitary councils (including Northampton as a separate unitary).

3.23 In summary, then, the residents survey found overwhelming support for two unitary councils in both West and North Northants, while the open questionnaire found considerable support in North Northants (except in Corby) and considerable opposition from respondents in West Northants. The creation of unitary councils was supported in principle in all areas of the county (except Corby in the open questionnaire).

[3] The full introductory preambles to the four core questions can be seen in Appendix D.

The need for change

To what extent do you agree or disagree that we need to make changes to respond to these challenges?

3.24 The charts below show overwhelming support for the case for change. In the telephone survey, 90% of residents agreed with the need to make changes (with big absolute majorities in both of the proposed North and West Northants unitary areas (see Figure 4). The open questionnaire showed 83% of individuals respondents agreed, too (see Figure 5). Support was lower in Corby (53%), but still an absolute majority. (The district with the second lowest level of agreement was East Northamptonshire, where 83% agreed).

Figure 4: RESIDENTS' SURVEY responses to the question about whether the councils need to make changes to respond to the challenges, overall and by proposed unitary area

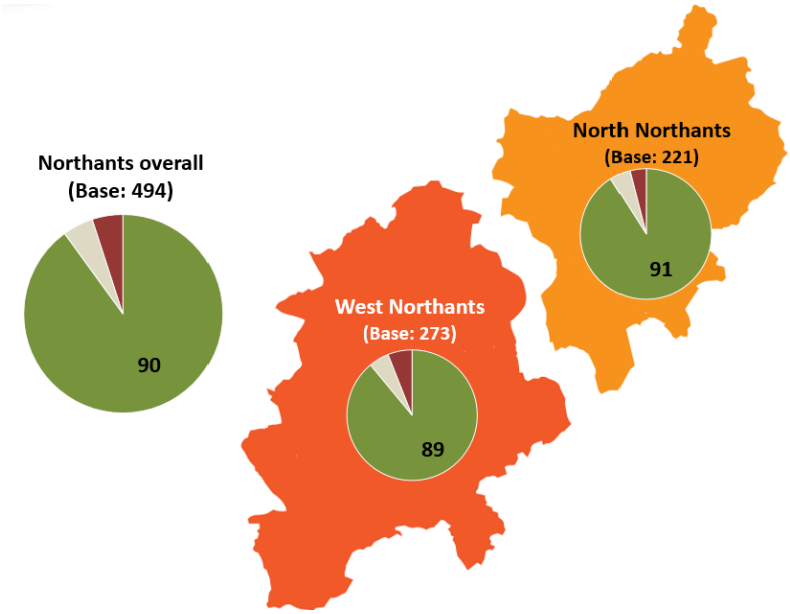
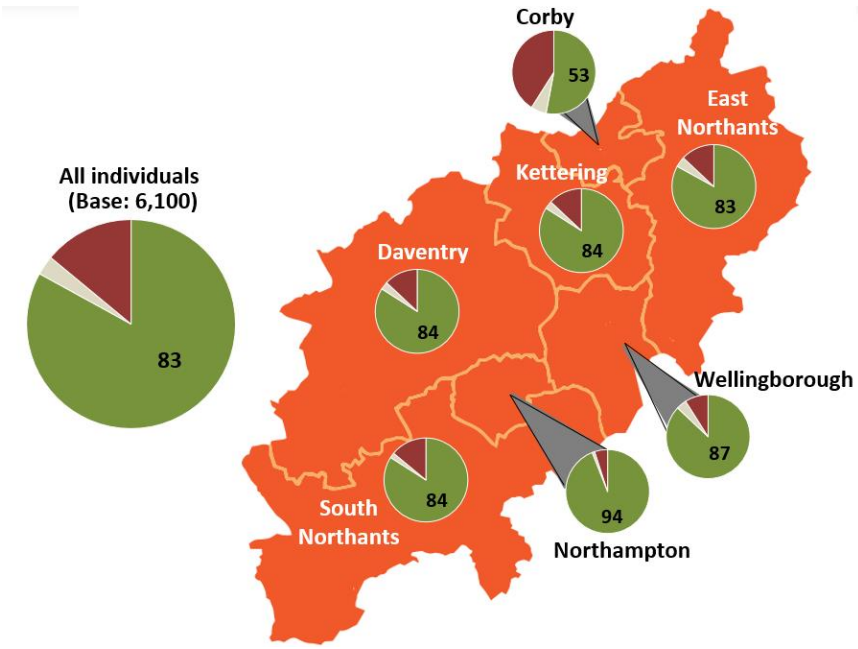


Figure 5: INDIVIDUAL OPEN QUESTIONNAIRE responses to the question about whether the councils need to make changes to respond to the challenges, overall and by district



Reducing the number of councils

To what extent do you agree or disagree that there is a need to reduce the number of councils in Northamptonshire?

3.25 The telephone survey shows that an absolute majority of residents (56%) agreed with a reduction in the number of councils; only a quarter disagreed. The level of agreement was higher in the proposed West Northants unitary (62%) compared to North Northants (49%) (see Figure 6). Two-thirds of individuals in the open questionnaire agreed, but with some considerable differences at district level: in Corby only about a fifth agreed, compared with nearly nine in 10 in Northampton (see Figure 7).

Figure 6: RESIDENTS' SURVEY responses to the question about whether there is a need to reduce the number of councils, overall and by proposed unitary area

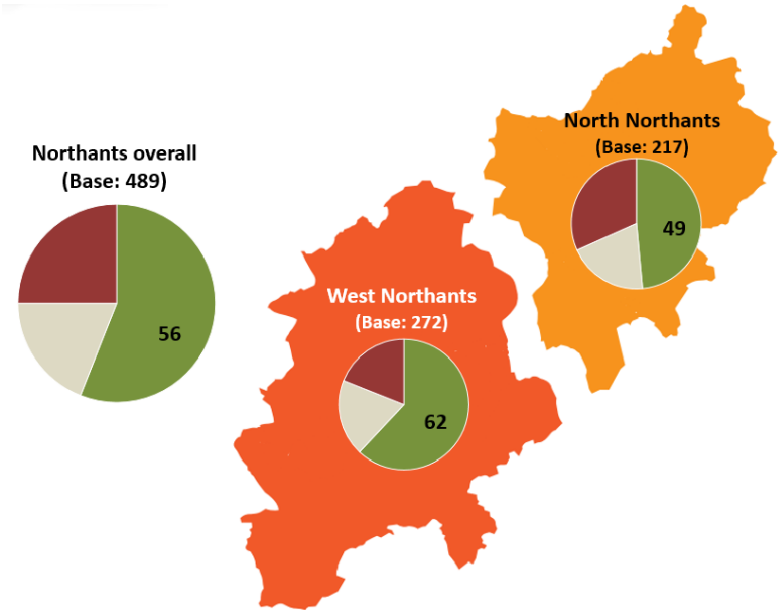
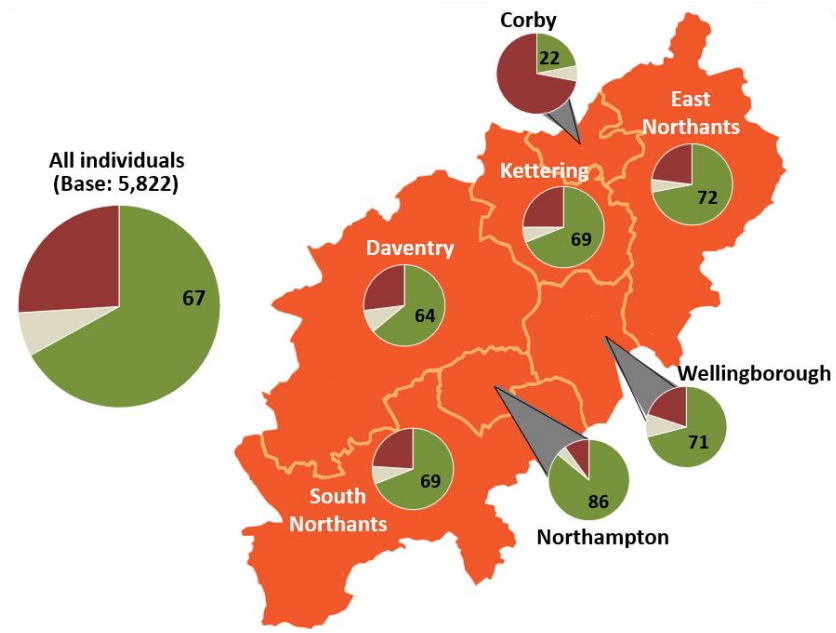


Figure 7: INDIVIDUAL OPEN QUESTIONNAIRE responses to the question about whether there is a need to reduce the number of councils, overall and by district



Unitary councils in principle

To what extent do you agree or disagree that a number of unitary councils should be introduced in Northamptonshire?

3.26 Three-quarters of residents agreed with the introduction of an unspecified number of unitary councils, and there was widespread agreement in both the proposed North Northants (72%) and West Northants (79%) (see Figure 8). Two-thirds of open questionnaire respondents also agreed, but levels of agreement again varied widely across by district. Only a fifth of Corby respondents agreed, compared with two-thirds (Daventry and South Northamptonshire) or more in each of the remaining six districts (see Figure 9).

Figure 8: RESIDENTS' SURVEY responses to the question about whether a number of unitary councils should be introduced, overall and by proposed unitary area

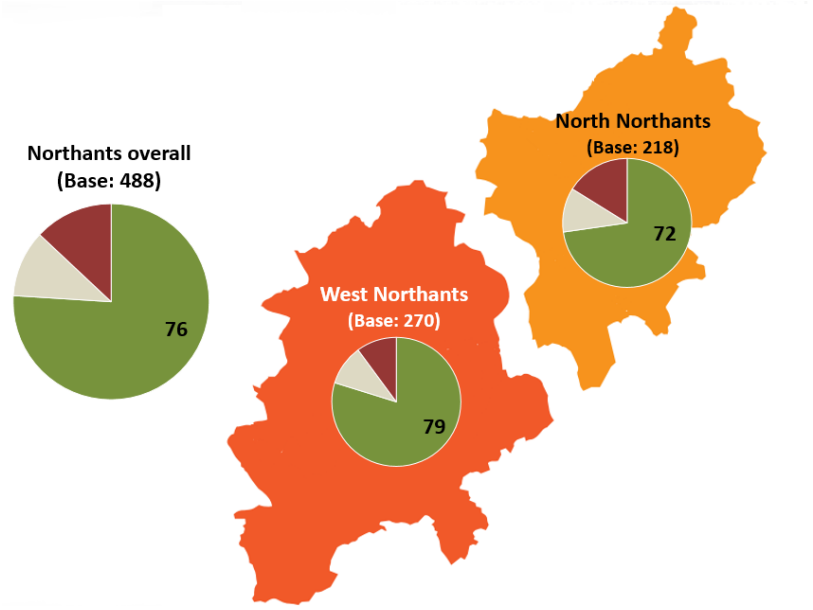
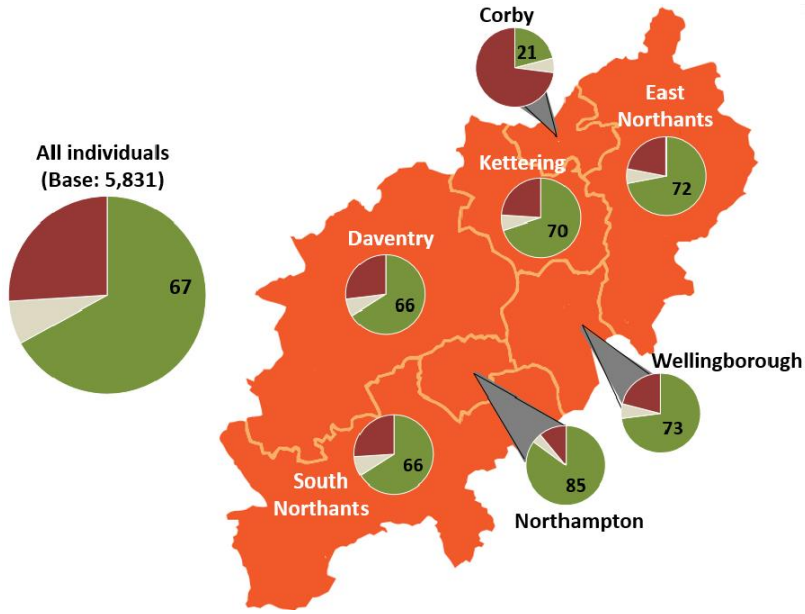


Figure 9: INDIVIDUAL OPEN QUESTIONNAIRE responses to the question about whether a number of unitary councils should be introduced, overall and by district



Proposal for two unitary councils

> *To what extent do you agree with the specific proposal [above/that I've just mentioned], to replace the existing councils with two new councils: North Northants and West Northants?*

3.27 Overall, three-quarters of residents agreed with the proposal (North 70% and West 77%) (see Figure 10). However, only 37% of individual open questionnaire respondents agreed, while 59% disagreed. In the open questionnaire, three districts had large absolute majorities of individuals agreeing with the proposal (East Northants, 61%; Kettering, 68%; and Wellingborough, 63%); but minorities agreed in Northampton (37%), South Northants (39%), Daventry (44%) and, above all, in Corby (18%) (see Figure 11).

Figure 10: RESIDENTS' SURVEY responses to the question asking for views on the proposal for North Northants and West Northants, overall and by proposed unitary area

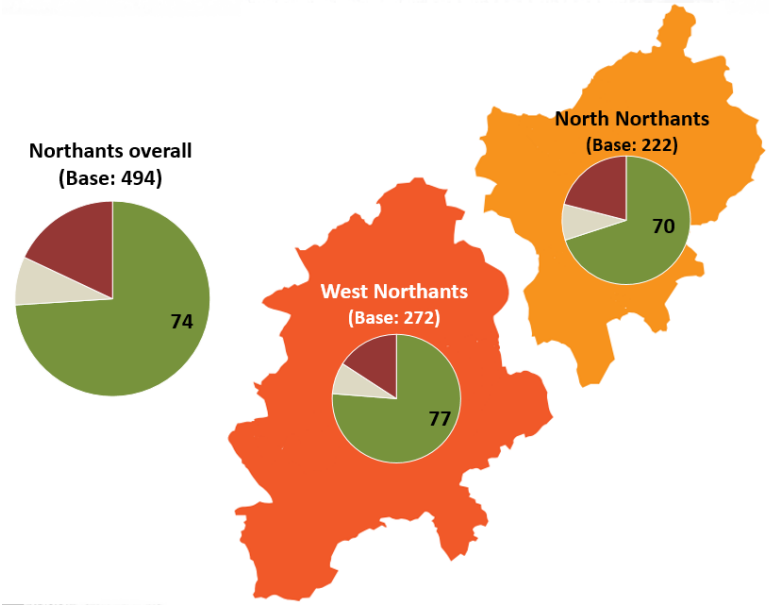
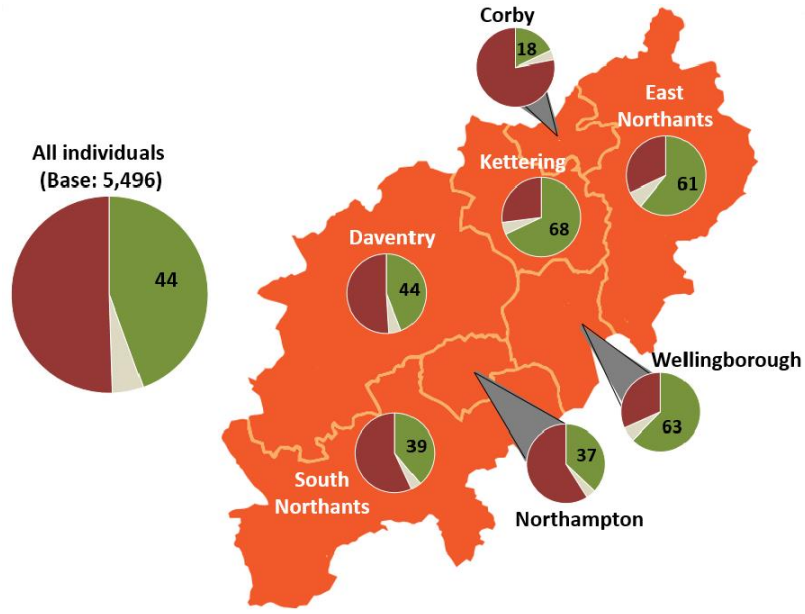


Figure 11: INDIVIDUAL OPEN QUESTIONNAIRE responses to the question asking for views on the proposal for North Northants and West Northants, overall and by district



Criteria for local government reform (open questionnaire only)

Please rate how important you think each of these factors is using a whole number between 0 and 10, where 10 means that it is critically important and 0 means that it is of no importance.

3.28 As Figure 12 shows, respondents clearly attached high levels of importance to *all five* of the possible criteria. Nonetheless, there were slightly higher mean scores for 'quality of services' and 'accountability', followed by 'access'. 'Local identity' and 'value for money' attracted slightly lower mean scores.

Figure 12: Average score of the importance of criteria (individuals)

Criterion	Overall average score (out of 10)	Rank	Base
Accountability	9.4	2	5,158
Quality	9.5	1	5,151
Local identity	8.6	4	5,144
Access	8.9	3	5,138
Value for money	8.3	5	5,149

Organisations in the open questionnaire

3.29 Of the 116 organisations submitting questionnaires, 70 identified themselves as parish or town councils and the remaining 46 represented a range of sectors. Collectively the town and parish councils expressed some distinctive views, so their opinions have been reported separately to those of other organisations[4].

3.30 In summary:

Substantial majorities (91% of town and parish councils; 80% of other organisations) agreed with the need to make changes to respond to the challenges

There was widespread agreement with both reducing the number of councils (71% of parish and town councils; 62% of other organisations) and the principle of introducing unitary councils (77% of parish and town councils; 60% of other organisations)

Organisations were more divided on the proposal for two unitaries: only 27% of the town and parish councils agreed, whereas the other organisations were more or less split, with 43% agreeing and 38% disagreeing.

Open-text comments

3.31 All responses provided to the open-ended questions in the open questionnaire have been classified (coded) using a standardised code frame. This approach helps ensure consistency in identifying common themes. The main themes are summarised below, but for a full breakdown of responses readers are encouraged to refer to **Appendix B** (which gives the percentages of the individuals, town and parish

[4] A full list of organisations who participated in the consultation (mostly via a questionnaire, though occasionally through a written submission or letter) is provided in Appendix A

councils, and other organisations that made each type of comment, and provides some short summaries of the more detailed responses from other organisations).

Comments about the proposal

3.32 Respondents were provided with an opportunity to comment **on the proposals**, or to state any alternatives, and around half of all respondents did so. Other than comments expressing general concern or disagreement, the most commonly raised themes were:

- Concerns about amalgamating urban and rural areas under one authority (plus, more specifically, numerous concerns about Daventry and South Northamptonshire joining with Northampton)
- Scepticism that the changing the structure of local government will solve the problems, or that the proposals will save any money
- Concerns that reorganisation would be less democratic than the status quo – for example, because it would concentrate decision-making in the hands of too few councils or individuals.

3.33 A county-wide unitary authority was the single most frequently suggested alternative option in the open questionnaires, albeit there was also a significant number of comments supportive of Northampton standing alone as a unitary (as part of various different configurations, but mainly with two or three unitary authorities – and occasionally with suggestions that its boundaries should be expanded to increase its population). Others made the point that Northampton's population is growing and is expected to continue to do so. Overall, numerous different configurations of boroughs and districts were suggested – generally as part of two or three unitaries, but occasionally four or more.

3.34 There was also criticism of the consultation, specifically: that minds have already been made up, the government's criteria are too restrictive and preclude alternatives, or that the process is otherwise unfair. Others bemoaned a lack of funding from central government (and demanded that the councils challenge the ongoing 'cuts') while others criticised the County Council and its leadership for mismanagement. Some opposed the 'breaking up' of the historical, traditional county of Northamptonshire into two separate administrative units.

3.35 The same question was asked in the residents' telephone survey, where the text responses also covered a diverse range of themes. While the survey supported the proposal, some textual comments supported the status quo or were concerned about an increased demand on the new councils. Some respondents discussed existing councils or services, and various alternatives were also suggested.

Other comments about alternatives

3.36 Other, less frequently mentioned alternatives included closer partnership working or sharing of services between Northamptonshire's districts (either with or without the County Council), with a couple of suggestions that these could lead to more formal mergers over time. A small number suggested that the two-tier system should continue with a reduced number of districts, and a couple of individuals even proposed dividing Northampton in half and allocating it between the proposed North and West unitaries.

3.37 Most of the various suggested configurations for reorganisation only included the seven districts in Northamptonshire. However, a small number of respondents mentioned cross border arrangements – which variously covered formal mergers in new unitary councils and the sharing of services along the lines of arrangements previously employed between South Northamptonshire and Cherwell.

3.38 Some fifty-five respondents commented favourably on the cross-border collaboration between South Northamptonshire and Cherwell (and/or expressed dismay that this arrangement was coming to end). More than a handful of these were supportive of South Northamptonshire and Cherwell formalising their existing links by forming a new unitary council. A much smaller number also suggested Daventry and/or Aylesbury Vale joining them in a bigger unitary to combine four districts that could contribute to the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor Growth Area. One respondent noted that South Northamptonshire is already in discussions with Aylesbury Vale (and Milton Keynes) over a Joint Strategic Plan, while another felt it could sensibly be moved into the Thames Valley policing area.

3.39 Milton Keynes was put forward by a couple of respondents as an appropriate partner for both Northampton (because of shared 'urban challenges') and South Northamptonshire (because parts of the Milton Keynes local authority are rural).

3.40 A few others suggested that the more rural districts of the proposed West Northants unitary (particularly Daventry) might align better with districts in Warwickshire (such as Stratford-Upon-Avon or Rugby), rather than with Northampton. One respondent also mentioned possible 'synergies' between East Northamptonshire and Bedford.

3.41 A couple of respondents directly challenged the notion that pre-existing local authority and Police force boundaries prevented cross-border re-organisation. It was argued that if any proposal involving neighbouring authorities was found to be the most sensible long-term option, government could and should pass legislation quickly to enable this.

3.42 There were also suggestions that particular parishes, wards, villages or towns should 'break away' from Northamptonshire and join neighbouring authorities, although these were again few in number (particularly when taking into account the total response to the question).

3.43 There were a few suggestions for creating new town councils or 'parishing' urban areas, to ensure a local voice under the proposed unitary councils.

Comments about equalities

3.44 The open questionnaire also contained an open-text question on **equalities**: specifically, whether there were any particular groups with protected characteristics under the Equalities Act who would be affected by the proposal, and whose needs should therefore be considered. Just under forty per cent of respondents answered the question. Of those who responded, a sizeable proportion felt that everyone would be affected equally, and/or that everyone should be treated equally.

3.45 In terms of specific groups who might be particularly impacted, the elderly and those with disabilities were the most widely identified; however, a range of groups were mentioned, including vulnerable people, children, families and pregnant women. A significant proportion of town and parish councils who responded felt that those living in rural areas might be negatively impacted.

4. Deliberative Consultation

Introduction

4.1 This chapter reports a range of deliberative meetings with members of the public, business people, town and parish councillors and members of the Health and Wellbeing Board drawn from across Northamptonshire. Each section below details the meetings held with different groups, but in summary the programme included:

Seven focus groups with randomly selected members of the public, one in each local authority area (with 82 participants);

Two forums with business people (with a total of 49 participants)

Two forums with parish and town councils (with a total of 117 participants)

Short session with the Health and Wellbeing Board (and 5 follow-up telephone interviews).

Seven focus groups with members of the public

Introduction

4.2 Seven two to two-and-a-half hour deliberative forums were held with a total of 82 randomly selected Northamptonshire residents to discuss the possible reorganisation of local government in the county (with one workshop taking place in each of the districts or boroughs). The schedule of meetings and attendance levels were as shown below.

WORKSHOP LOCATION	DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
East Northamptonshire (Thrapston)	**4th July 2018**	**11**
Wellingborough	**5th July 2018**	**11**
Daventry	**9th July 2018**	**12**
South Northamptonshire (Towcester)	**12th July 2018**	**9**
Northampton	**16th July 2018**	**14**
Corby	**17th July 2018**	**13**
Kettering	**18th July 2018**	**12**

4.3 The meetings were facilitated independently by ORS with no officers or members present. Each session began with the ORS presentation (to ensure that standardised information was provided to each one) which outlined the current two-tier system; the current case for change; and the consultation proposal and their implications (for example, the reduction in councillors, staff and council offices). Participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout and the meetings were thorough and thoughtful in listening to and responding openly to a wide range of evidence and issues.

4.4 Before the explanatory presentation and discussions, the participants were asked briefly about their:

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

Initial (or immediate) general view about local government reorganisation: not counting parish and town councils, Should the number of Northamptonshire councils be reduced significantly?

4.5 The point of the questions was to indicate residents' 'ordinary understanding' of local government structures while also allowing a comparison between their 'immediate, off-the-cuff' impressions with their more considered judgements following two hours or more of discussions.

Main Findings

Awareness of current local government structures

4.6 Some participants in all seven workshops were relatively well informed about the structure of their local government since they knew that there are eight councils in Northamptonshire (not counting parish and town councils); but there was a wide range of estimates by those who were less aware (from two to thirty-two councils), with many not even wanting to hazard a guess. Many people seemed to know about their part of the county but had little idea of the overall county-wide structure.

4.7 Most were also aware that, although they pay their council tax to their boroughs or districts, it is Northamptonshire County Council that spends most of the money raised. While they knew this in general terms, many (perhaps most) were unaware of 73% proportion spent by the County Council. However, while many people were aware that adult and children's social services, and education, are costly services to run, few were aware of just how costly they are.

4.8 Following the initial awareness questions, the facilitator's presentation explained the current two-tier structure and the proposal for change in Northamptonshire, to ensure that everyone had a common level of understanding as the basis for the detailed discussions. There was considerable interest in these issues and people had no difficulty in understanding both the background and nature of the proposal.

Awareness of the 'case for change' (and its effects)

4.9 Many participants were aware of some of the factors leading to the current proposal to reorganise local government (though fewer were aware of the proposal itself); but awareness levels varied greatly. For example, in East Northamptonshire just over half were aware of the financial background and reorganisation proposal before attending the meeting; in South Northamptonshire eight out of nine said they had been aware of the current debate; but 11 out of 12 participants in Daventry did not know, *"Which council has had the most financial problems recently?"*.

4.10 Overall, though, people were at least vaguely aware of some the County Council's difficulties, even if nearly everyone was unaware of the Best Value Inspection Report. Once they became more fully aware of the long-term financial issues, many residents were so indignant by what they said was a lack of accountability by managers, members and auditors that their strong feelings were sometimes a barrier to considering the proposal for change.

4.11 Their anger was sometimes such that some people even preferred the prolongation of the independent Commissioners rather than return local government to "the same old team" in whatever structure. The realisation that public sector finances could go so badly wrong also prompted a sense of apprehension that the proposed unitary councils could not be guaranteed to work well; in other words, an understanding of recent events led to a heightened sense of risk that the residents had not experienced

before. In a couple of groups, it was hard to get beyond this apprehension to a consideration of the merits or otherwise of two unitary councils. The following sections will show further evidence of this sense of risk.

Criteria for assessing local government structures

4.12 After all the discussions, the forums were asked to score the relative importance of five potential criteria (as cited in the consultation document) in guiding local government reorganisation. In the scoring, 0 indicated very low importance, while 10 meant 'extremely important'. The primary purpose of this exercise was to give some guidance to the new councils (if they are created) about residents' priorities; but the criteria scores also indicate the background assumptions guiding residents' judgements on the proposals for two new unitary.

4.13 Perhaps surprisingly for some, the idea that local government structures should reflect 'local identity' was the lowest-rated of the criteria. While the forums' discussions of the proposal for two new unitary councils often showed people's attachment to their district/borough councils, the criteria scores demonstrate that in general councils do not have to be immediately 'local' to meet citizens' more important expectations for accountability, quality, value for money and access.

4.14 The aggregate scores (across all the groups) for each of the criteria are shown in the next table.

CRITERIA	AVERAGE SCORE
Accountability	**9.3**
Quality of Services	**8.9**
Local Identity	**6.9**
Access	**7.9**
Value for Money	**8.9**

4.15 Overall, the scores reflect the emphasis of the focus group discussions, for accountability repeatedly stressed, indicating the participants' indignation with the position of the County Council.

4.16 After accountability, service quality and value for money were the next most important, significantly ahead of access. It seems that people want excellence and efficiency to deliver value for money (which is not necessarily 'cheapness'); and while they might appreciate having a local office, they seemed to accept that many interactions can be done online or by phone.

4.17 There was a surprising consistency in the criteria scores, and in putting local identity at the bottom, with only small variations in the aggregate rankings. For example:

> In Wellingborough, Northampton and Corby the different discussion groups considered accountability most important, followed by value for money and quality of services
>
> In East Northamptonshire, Daventry and Kettering, value for money and quality were most important, followed by accountability
>
> Local identity was considered the least important of the five criteria in all seven sessions.

Initial and final opinions

4.18 Before any of the explanatory presentation, participants in the workshops were asked for their initial or immediate views on whether the number of councils (not counting parish and town councils) in Northamptonshire should be reduced substantially (but by an unspecified number). It is striking that, even before hearing about the councils' case for change, in most meetings substantial proportions of the participants favoured simplifying local government in Northamptonshire by reducing the number of councils.

4.19 Much later in the meetings, following detailed discussions, the forums were asked specifically if the eight existing two-tier councils should be abolished and replaced with the proposed two unitary authorities. (They were also told that they should not feel 'bound' by their initial views, which were only indicative.)

4.20 People's initial reactions and their final judgements are summarised in the table below. For the sake of simplicity, the table shows the number of workshop participants who favoured change at different stages of the meetings as a proportion of all those who responded, including don't knows.

AREA	INITIAL VIEWS Proportion (%) favouring reducing number of councils	FINAL JUDGEMENTS Proportion (%) favouring two new Unitary Councils
East Northamptonshire	**80% (8/10)**	**64% (7/11)**
Wellingborough	**45% (5/11)**	**27% (3/11)**
Daventry	**75% (9/12)**	**92% (11/12)**
South Northamptonshire	**67% (6/9)**	**56% (5/9)**
Northampton	**46% (6/13)**	**79% (11/14)**
Corby	**70% (7/10)**	**69% (9/13)**
Kettering	**17% (2/12)**	**58% (7/12)**
All-Northamptonshire aggregated	**56% (43/77)** **(+5 did not respond to the question)**	**65% (53/82)**

4.21 The initial opinions demonstrate that many people are not wedded to the continuation of the current structures: in many cases, unprompted and without the presentation of any evidence, the participants inclined towards the simplification of local government. For example, in all cases except one (Kettering, 2/12), the initial views showed either a majority for reducing the number of councils, or opinions that were about equally divided (Northampton, 6/13) and Wellingborough, 5/11). The aggregate of all seven focus groups shows an absolute majority for reducing the number of councils. Although five people gave no answer, it is striking that, even without detailed discussion, so many residents favoured reducing the number of councils significantly.

4.23 Following the presentation and detailed discussions, the balance of overall opinion was more emphatically in favour of abolishing the two-tier system and creating two new unitary councils, with the initial all-Northamptonshire aggregate of 56% growing to almost two-thirds of the total participants.

4.24 In Kettering, three of the initial six 'no opinions' joined with two others in making the final-judgment a seven-to-two majority for the two-unitary model (a big increase from the original two-in-twelve in favour of reducing the number of councils); in Northampton, the initial six in favour of cutting the number of councils, grew to 11 for the proposal; and in Corby the initial seven in favour of reducing the number of councils increased to nine for the proposal.

4.25 In East Northamptonshire, Wellingborough and South Northamptonshire, though, slightly fewer supported two unitary councils than had supported a reduction in the number of councils initially.

4.26 Nonetheless, in six of the seven districts/boroughs, the focus groups' final judgements showed majorities in favour of the two-unitary model; Wellingborough was the single exception, with only a quarter in favour.

4.27 It should not be assumed that all those who were not supporters of two councils were necessarily opponents of unitary local government. For example, in South Northamptonshire eight out of nine participants favoured a single unitary council, even though only five out of nine supported the proposal for two unitaries.

Reasons for simplifying local government

4.28 Many of those supporting two unitary councils (and those favouring other options) were influenced by the financial evidence to conclude that reorganisation is both necessary and desirable to make savings, reduce duplication, increase accountability, and address the financial problems. Some typical quotations from across the eight workshops were:

> *It's going to save a lot of money. If it saves £12 million a year, I'll go with it. It's the only way to save* (Daventry)
>
> *It should sweep away the old guard. There's an entrenched way of doing things, and it needs somebody to come in and start again. It will cost more originally, but it will save in the future* (Daventry)
>
> *We should go with two unitaries as there's so much duplication of effort* (South Northamptonshire)
>
> *At the moment, it's not working but we can't hold anybody to account. But with the two unitaries, we'll know who it is and can hold them to account* (Northampton)
>
> *There has to be a change. There definitely has to be a totally new structure so people are accountable. Before they were never accountable* (Corby)
>
> *It could work well. If it's managed better, there will be more efficiency to reduce the debt.* [But] *if there are two councils they shouldn't stop talking to each other – it is still a county!* (Kettering)

4.29 There was also an acceptance that creating two unitary councils would:

> Make modest but valuable savings by reducing the number of managers, staff, offices and councillors to achieve better value for money

Mitigate against service reductions

Simplify and make clearer to the public the structure of local government

Enhance democratic accountability by making clearer who is responsible for which decisions

Provide more sustainable council units – while recognising that their success is not automatic

Provide a "fresh start" – providing the "same old people are not in charge"

Allow the new authorities to attract well-qualified new staff, in a way the current County Council cannot

Provide for sensible and acceptable groupings of the current district council areas

Recognise the reciprocity between urban and rural areas.

4.30 Regarding the inter-dependence of urban and rural areas, there were some frank comments:

> *If it's a small unitary you won't have enough money coming in* (Northampton)
>
> *Presumably town costs and rural costs are different. Presumably it would be fairer to spread the costs* (Northampton)
>
> *If you want a monthly bus ticket to Northampton, you have to get a megarider that includes Warwickshire and Oxfordshire. That's £100 a month. That could be an argument for the new structure* (Daventry)

4.31 In the context of these ideas, people asked questions, exchanged viewpoints, and (with considerable interest) discussed a wide range of important issues – for example:

Why the County Council's difficulties were not recognised and addressed earlier

> *Didn't they have anybody in control of finances?* (Northampton)
>
> *How could it get to that without some sort of safety net; how could it get so bad and nothing be done about it before?* (South Northamptonshire)
>
> *Am I wrong in saying that the problems with Northamptonshire County Council go back a long time and they are structural? I can remember 1999, the road budget was syphoned off to pay for social services.* (Daventry)

Why officers and members and auditors have not been held to account for their mis-doings

> *Those people who are responsible for why we're here today; nothing happened to them, they are just left. The same people know nothing is going to happen to them* (Northampton)
>
> *The thing is the people who have got us into this mess, I don't know how many, are getting away with it* (South Northamptonshire)
>
> *They were never audited, and they could spend and spend to get into this difficulty; they need to be properly audited.* (Corby)

Whether the external commissioners could continue in their roles over a longer period

The relative costs of unitary versus two-tier structures

Whether the 300,000 population threshold is justifiable

> *Is this 300,000 sacrosanct?* (Daventry)
>
> *It seems to be strict conditions that the government has set – but would it be open to a lower target than 300,000, and following existing boundaries?* (East Northamptonshire)

The relative success or otherwise of the 55 unitary councils in England

> *What is the most successfully unitary? Can you give an example of a successful unitary?* (East Northamptonshire)
>
> *Are there any case studies available of unitaries?* (East Northamptonshire)

How many councillors there would be for the two unitaries

The size of each ward and whether there would be large wards with two or three members

How long council tax harmonisation would take

The implications of the rising demand for costly of social care

> *It's frightening to think of the aging population in a few years' time. We're going to need nursing homes and we're not going to be able to afford it all* (Daventry)
>
> *I'm worried if you split to two, the needs of one council may be greater than the other as in social care* (Daventry)
>
> *So how will child services work if they were split? Corby has a high level of children in care. Obviously, that doesn't come cheap.* (Corby)

How the two new councils would interact

> *Reduce the bureaucracy – have fewer working closer together with the same principles in view* (Wellingborough)
>
> *How would they structure the services that are run centrally from Northampton now? My personal experience is in the education area. They are seriously having major upheavals* (Kettering)
>
> *We'd get identical problems in each area* (Wellingborough)
>
> *Are the councils expected to work in a more agile way? Co-location is a huge thing for agile in the private sector. Is that what's expected?* (East Northamptonshire)

What financial relief the government might give the new authorities

How financial liabilities would be apportioned between the new councils?

> *Will they inherit the debt, and will the larger area inherit the larger debt?* (Kettering)

It should be set according to the asset base – so the larger asset base has the larger debt (Kettering)

My concern is that North Northampton is more in debt than West Northampton based on population by services. We'll have to repay that debt. But if we have more older people than the south, then the split doesn't work fairly as we have fewer Council Tax payers. (Corby)

Hopes, fears and risks

4.32 While most accepted the two-unitary proposal readily, many people wanted assurances (from the new councils) that things really would get better: they wanted assurances that:

The new councils really would make a difference

Council services would be maintained

Inherited liabilities would be managed effectively

New senior staff would be appointed; some people wanted new senior staff to be from outside the county

Those responsible for the financial problems would not be re-employed or hold senior office in the new councils.

4.33 Those considerations were not cited as objections or criticisms of the proposal, but as concerns to be addressed; and, given the background to the proposals, it is not surprising that many focused on the apportionment and management of debt as a key risk, too:

This proposal is coming from government. Will the debt be written off? (South Northamptonshire)

If you're looking at debt, you're better off consolidating the debt – putting it in one place or two places. Otherwise it's less manageable, with too many different organisations involved. (East Northamptonshire)

Once you're in debt it takes years to get rid of it. Do you know the size of the debt? How many years are we talking about? Council Tax is creeping up, [but] when will we start benefiting and get something back? (East Northamptonshire)

Would the unitary councils have an obligation to each other? If the sums don't work and North Northants or West Northants still have problems, what will happen? (Corby)

4.34 Every group stressed concerns about the risks of not ensuring accountability and sound management under the new structure:

Is it a given that the people from the County Council who have caused the problem will not be reappointed to run the new council/s? (Daventry)

You've got to get the right people (Daventry)

The people who are responsible should not be allowed near any position of power (Kettering)

An important part of this is the restructuring. It allows them to get rid of the people who did this. If we don't do this, it will take years to get rid of them (East Northamptonshire)

4.35 The risk of failing to maintain the quality of services was also a concern:

We need economies of scale while maintaining the quality of services (Wellingborough)

I think it's the right plan of action. What concerns me is the quality of services is very important and, as soon as you bring the whole thing into two ships, you need a bigger staff to supply the services to the general public (East Northamptonshire)

I worry that the transition of power will disrupt services. (Kettering)

4.36 Those who accepted the prospect of the unitary councils wanted the councils to maintain a local presence in the rural areas to ensure ease of access, especially for vulnerable residents:

Why can't they carry on with what they're doing – in East Northants they run council sessions from libraries. They want to keep the libraries going (East Northamptonshire)

The building could be a shop or something like that. That would do it – cheap to run and satisfying the need. (Kettering)

4.37 Overall, though, the biggest and most general risks identified across the seven forums were about whether the new authorities would succeed or fail:

The risk is that in five years' time and the savings have not been made (and loans have not been repaid) and we're in a worse place than we are now (Corby)

4.38 Closely associated with this worry was that the estimated time and costs for transition to the new structure is not feasible:

There are eight systems for IT and everything! The whole process could overrun and it's very rare that change is ever delivered on budget! Are the legacy systems big enough for the two councils? There are a lot of costs associated with change. (Kettering)

The status quo

4.39 Because they either opposed unitary councils on principle or were unconvinced that they could solve the historical problems, a minority of participants wanted to retain the current eight councils. Many of them supposed that making savings and renegotiating the debts (with the government) are feasible without making radical changes to the well-established structure of local democracy – for example:

The savings can be made anyway if the councils co-operate (Wellingborough)

I think a massive change could be achieved by removing the officers and replacing them with a transformation team (South Northamptonshire)

It seems to me there is a government sweetener. If the government could help the new councils later on, why can't they do it now? (South Northamptonshire).

4.40 There were also concerns about democratic accountability – namely, that two unitary councils would be too remote geographically and socially remote from residents. For many this issue was a matter of concern (which they hoped the new councils would address), but for some it was reason enough to reject the two-council proposal in favour of keeping the existing structure. Comments from people holding one or other of these viewpoints included:

The County Council needs to go. If two unitaries replace it, I'm very concerned at the number of councillors. It's been mooted that there might be 45 for each one, but that's not enough. Anyway, it will be a full-time job, they will be full time councillors; and the only people who can do that would be retired or not need to work – so they wouldn't be representative (Kettering)

I'd like to see an appropriate benchmark of councillors to people (Kettering)

It's all about having a council that knows the area. If the council is based in Daventry, they won't know this area (Wellingborough)

If it's just the two unitaries then they would be less in touch with the local population than the districts (East Northamptonshire)

4.41 The rural geography of Northamptonshire was a concern in terms of access to services for older residents, for those in rural areas, and for those favouring face-to-face contact over online interaction:

If they replace the council with a unitary council, the feeling of personal contact with services would go. I think there could be savings, but I disagree with losing the local council. I'd think twice before going all the way to Corby. (Wellingborough)

I have concerns over accessibility. It's hard enough for full-time workers to see the district council now, and with a reduction it will make things more difficult for (Daventry)

The rural areas will suffer more than in Northampton town centre – like with buses (South Northamptonshire)

I'd rather be face-to-face than on the phone. You can express yourself and get proper answers. On the phone you can get fobbed-off. (Wellingborough)

4.42 Other significant reasons for wishing to retain existing structures (or for accepting the need for change while objecting to the unitary proposal) were that:

Service quality and resilience may reduce with fewer people available to deliver services to an increasing population

Staff redundancies will negatively impact on those who lose their jobs and those who remain with larger workloads

The interests of the urban centres would take precedence over those of the rural areas, due to the relative proportions of their populations and councillor representation

Very different areas would be subsumed under a single council

Council tax harmonisation may be contentious within areas with lower levels currently and higher predicted future increases

Council tax increases could be a burden to many.

Other options

4.43 All seven of the groups were invited to consider any other options they might favour, but none of the options raised found any general support following consideration in wide-ranging discussions.

4.44 For example, in the Northampton group two out of 14 supported a single county wide unitary; and the same number supported a 'doughnut structure' with Northampton as a unitary council surrounded by a large rural second unitary. In South Northamptonshire there was considerable support for a single unitary, but no support for Northampton as a separate unitary. Elsewhere, an elongated two-fold division of the county with a diagonal line from the south-west to the north-east was advocated, but by only one person.

4.45 There was some curiosity across about why the single unitary option had been excluded from formal consultation, but it was generally readily accepted that it would perpetuate the County Council in another form.

4.46 Similarly, while some protested that the 300,000 population threshold was arbitrary, most could accept it as reasonable in the context of the geography of Northamptonshire and the need for viable council incomes from council tax and business rates (eventually).

4.47 Finally, the idea of a separate Northampton unitary within a total of a three-unitary model was dear to some, but not taken up by the great majority of participants.

More information

4.48 Finally, it should be noted that some people could neither support nor oppose two unitary authorities because they wanted more information on which to base their decision. Indeed, some of those who rejected the proposal said that lack of information was a factor in their decision – and they especially regretted that a "full financial or business case" was unavailable; and some of those who supported the proposal felt they would have liked more information – for example:

> *I feel we're being forced into a very rushed decision. There are no clear facts* (Corby)
>
> *We should have a business case before making a decision* (Daventry)
>
> *It would be very nice to have information on all the councils – on how their finances work and what social care needs they have* (Daventry)
>
> *The model could work. I'm still undecided because we need more facts.* (Kettering)

4.49 In Northampton, the group felt it was important to share more widely the same information they had reviewed about the proposal:

> *There are 14 of us here, but how many people in the county are going to have this clear explanation…It's good that you've explained the history and what's going to happen, but how are other people going to know?*
>
> *It's not just a focus group that needs to be told about this, it's the whole county because if they don't understand what's going on they won't support it.*

Corby Footnote

4.50 Perhaps more than any other group, the Corby residents were keen that the information they had reviewed (and more besides) should be available to everyone – for example:

> *There's a lot of misinformation. Without coming here and being told these things you don't know what the proposal involves or even how it works now.*

4.51 In the Corby focus group, the residents were not asked about their council's own consultation, but some comments were made spontaneously; some (but not all) of these thought the information given had been critical of the proposal:

> *I think the districts are already fighting against it. There's a letter from Corby council saying they didn't want it to happen.*
>
> *I didn't interpret it that way at all.*

4.52 The first of the two residents quoted said that *"since voting"* in Corby's own consultation he had changed his mind (now to favour the proposal) after receiving more information through the focus group.

Business Community

Introduction

4.53 Two important business forums were held on successive days, the first arranged by the Chamber of Commerce and the second arranged by the Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland Federation of Small Businesses. In total, 49 senior business people attended the meetings. The sub-headings in the following report are not 'standardised' but vary between the two forums, to better reflect the nature of the discussions in each one.

4.54 However senior the business people were in their organisations, they spoke as individual business men and women, rather than as delegates stating the position of their organisations.

Chamber of Commerce forum

Attendance

4.55 Seventeen senior business people from a wide range of private sector organisations attended a forum organised by the Chamber and took part actively in wide-ranging discussion lasting over one-and-a-half hours. The meeting was almost equally split between men and women.

Accountability

4.56 The business people said they had been shocked by the seriousness and long-term nature of the County Council's financial problems – and their main comment was that local government evidently lacks sufficient accountability mechanisms to hold the relevant people responsible. They were indignant that senior councillors, the top financial managers, and the independent auditors had all apparently failed to identify and rectify the problems at a much earlier stage. They criticised the failure to hold people responsible for their conduct in office.

4.57 In this context, their main theme was that the senior financial managers should be dismissed (rather than receive *beneficial pay-offs*) and the *same old councillors and managers* should not just transfer to run the new unitary councils. They said that a *complete culture change* is required, with new senior staff brought in to make the necessary clean break with the past, with more effective councillors, and with more effective and critical independent auditing. Only by making a fresh start, they said, could the required new direction be taken.

Government criteria

4.58 Above all the business people wanted the new councils to be sustainable and effective in running services and delivering value for money. In this context, they felt that the government's population and other criteria are entirely reasonable and should be accepted by the existing councils. For example, they said:

> *Northampton does not want to be include in West Northants, and many there don't want to be joined with it; but the proposal is sensible, and the government needs the right to impose a solution if it's not accepted!*
>
> *The councils should accept the criteria and make it work!*

Something has to be done to improve things – so make the change: get on with it!

Change Management

4.59 The sense of urgency evident in the quotations above was not just impatience or impetuosity, and it was balanced by a realisation that the success of the new organisations was not guaranteed but will have to be worked for over time. While the process of change should begin, it should not be rushed "all at once", and the new councils need to be 'agile' in order to improve the efficiency of local government.

Savings

4.60 It was recognised that the potential savings of £12 million per year from the new structure was only a contribution – not a sufficient to redeem the finances of Northants local government; and there was some scepticism that the new authorities could transform their ways of working to yield very much greater savings (for example, through the reorganisation of social care); but the projected savings were nonetheless valued. As one senior HR manager said:

We can't pay-off the full debts, but the £22 million transitional costs are reasonable (for the public sector); and £12 million for ten years is £120 million – and that's how we have to think – to get things right over the long-term.

Options

4.61 While most participants accepted the proposal for two unitary councils, one outlined a so-called 'doughnut scenario' in which Northampton could become a third unitary council in its own right by increasing its population by 'annexing' areas of housing and business developments surrounding its current boundaries – such as Grange Park in the south-east and Moleton in the north. It was noted that this approach could create either a three-unitary structure (by splitting what would otherwise be West Northants) or an alternative two-unitary 'doughnut structure', with Northampton surrounded by a large rural unitary area comprised of all the other authorities.

4.62 However, others quickly pointed out that Northampton's gain would diminish Daventry and South Northants, making them unsustainable as a small (third) unitary council area. The participants also rejected the so-called doughnut structure of two unitaries based on Northampton and the rest. In relation to both these alternatives, the participants readily agreed that the current proposal for a West Northants council took account of the many links and 'overlaps' between the three constituent areas. They felt it would be artificial and undesirable to separate Northampton from the surrounding areas.

4.63 There was no support at all for a single, all-county unitary council because people agreed that it would not be a break with the past.

Effective representation

4.64 The business people were not disquieted by the projected reduction in the total number of councillor positions from the current 321 to possibly 180 under the proposal. Indeed, many of them thought there were advantages in selecting only the best councillors for the new authorities – saying, for example:

We don't just want 50% of the same ineffective types!

We need better councillors to manage finances in the new structure – we need normal people!

A unitary council doesn't need more than 90 councillors since it can embrace the new technology and improve communications and links like that.

4.65 Two important observations were that:

Wards with two or three elected members are too large for the councillors to be known locally

To be successful the proposed structure will require better links to be developed between the unitary councils and their parish and town councils.

Balance of opinion

4.66 Overall, the Chamber of Commerce forum showed emphatic support for the proposal for two unitary councils – as the best chance of re-ordering local government effectively and sustainable. The participants did not think the enterprise of change was risk-free – particularly considering what they said was a lack of clear and consistent accountability in local government – but they felt it was worthwhile, and the best available option.

4.67 Therefore, 15 of the 17 participants supported the proposal, with only one opposed and one 'don't know'. The meeting unanimously rejected the option for a single unitary council (which was seen as the past resurrected in a frightening guise); and only two people supported the alternative two-unitary 'doughnut structure' based on Northampton and the rest.

Federation of Small Businesses forum

Attendance

4.68 A wide range of 32 senior business people from small and medium size enterprises attended a forum organised by the Federation to participate in wide-ranging discussions lasting nearly two hours.

Federation's priorities

4.69 While this is not the place to review Federation's general priorities to facilitate an effective 'enterprise culture' for small and medium size businesses, it should be noted that the Federation has recently published its *Best in Class* report featuring 77 ways for local government to support local enterprises – with the key priorities encompassing procurement, parking, rates, planning, town centres, tourism, regulation, digital, business support, and skills. The Federation trusts that the new unitary councils will take full account of its 77 recommendations to ensure a truly enterprising culture. In this context, the participants were clear that any new structure should priorities businesses and be seen to make a difference.

Accountability

4.70 The 32 participants stressed the demonstrable lack of effective accountability in local government's financial affairs – and they felt that new structures, by themselves, would not ensure either better management or sufficient accountability. The participants emphasised repeatedly that the public had been badly let down by the County Council's managers, councillors and auditors – and they concluded that:

Proper governance is the crucial issue!

The new structure won't work if it's just the same old people running things!

Efficiency and value for money

4.71 There was considerable interest in the size of unitary authorities, and in this context Rutland was cited enthusiastically for being effective and business-like in buying-in services from a range of surrounding local authorities. Some felt that Rutland's effectiveness in doing this could be a template for the new authorities, and they said that Northamptonshire's Social Services are particularly badly managed.

Government criteria and one proposal

4.72 While they were all appalled by what had gone wrong in Northamptonshire's local government, some of the participants resented the fact that only one proposal was on the table, and they wanted more information about the source of, and basis for, the 300,000 population threshold for unitary status. A number were clearly interested in having more information on the performance of various unitary councils across England and Wales, in order better to assess the influence of size on the sustainability of unitary councils. While there was absolute majority support for the two proposed unitary councils, a third of those present wanted more information before reaching a conclusion.

Associated risks

4.73 One area of doubt identified by some participants was about the councils' ability to integrate different IT systems effectively. While not an objection to the specific proposal, this risk was seen as a potential threat to any kind of organisational merger or amalgamation of services between formerly separate authorities. Some apparently well-informed IT experts present in the forum suggested that the £22 million transitional costs could multiply by a factor of ten if the new authorities had to commission new IT systems. There was considerable doubt about the capacity of the existing staff to manage the IT changes required to make any new structure efficient and cost-effective.

Balance of opinion

4.74 Overall, the Federation's forum showed emphatic support for the proposal for two unitary councils as the best way forward. Of the 32 people present, an absolute majority of 17 supported the proposal for two unitary councils, with only two opposing. It should be noted, though, that a third of those present wanted further information (particularly on the effects of population size on sustainability) before making up their minds – so they were classified as 'don't knows'.

Conclusions

4.75 Both the business forums showed overwhelming absolute majority support for the proposal for two unitary councils. Both meetings unanimously rejected a single unitary council and an alternative two-unitary 'doughnut structure' based on Northampton and the rest.

4.76 A third of the small business people wanted more information before making up their minds. Overall, there were anxieties about the councils' capacity to manage the change and achieve the successful new start required.

4.77 Governance and the need for effective accountability were emphasised as important requirements; and IT challenges and associated costs were identified as real risks.

Parish and Town Councils

Introduction

4.78 The Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (NCALC) helpfully organised two well-attended forums for parish and town councillors, and some clerks, from across Northamptonshire. In total, 117 people attended, many of whom seemed to have considered the issues and formed strong opinions before attending the workshops. Therefore, they focused intently on the main issues and raised and interesting range of relevant arguments and considerations.

Main Findings

Attachment to the status quo

4.79 Although the councillors were aware that the government has excluded the continuation of a two-tier system from consideration, there were some who supported its retention – for a range of reasons, including possible adverse implications of unitary authorities for parish and town councils' services and budgets – partly because they believe they have a 'closer relationship' with their district councils. There were also concerns about local democratic accountability, with some feeling that unitary councils would be too geographically and socially remote from their residents – for example:

> *How many parishes are within each of the unitary authorities? In the unitary authorities, I can just see the small parishes being ignored. It is difficult now to get district planners to come out to parishes – and the unitaries will be even worse. You could have planners not even knowing where the parish is!*

4.80 A recurring theme was that the different needs of urban and rural areas are difficulty to balance fairly within unitary councils, which are likely to be dominated (it was said) by urban councillors. Many of those voicing such concerns feared that urban issues (especially but not only housing) would dominate over rural issues – for example, some said:

> *The issues for East Northants will be lost in relation to Wellingborough Corby, and Northampton issues*
>
> *In South Northants we have a massive issue over HS2. We are in constant meetings with HS2 and the contractors and consultants. Northampton is not concerned over HS2. If we lose the contacts through the district, then it could be problematic getting our concerns heard*
>
> *In Northampton we have completely different priorities to South Northamptonshire. We're concerned about road noise, not HS2. Under two unitaries local issues will disappear*
>
> *There are rural/urban issues. Four parishes have put money in to maintain bus routes into Northampton.*

4.81 The other main reason for wishing to retain existing structures (or for feeling apprehensive about change) was that accessibility, service quality and resilience might all reduce with fewer council staff and offices available to deliver services:

> *It's also accessibility though. A lot of people locally have to go into Northampton to access services*
>
> *What about the standard of services? You have redundancy costs and the savings are only £12 million. Will this lead to loss of services?*

4.82 Apart from some who were positively loyal to the two-tier structure, there were others who neither supported nor opposed nor unitary authorities – because they wanted more information on which to base their decision. They felt unsure of future prospects and doubted the necessity for the governments apparently strict size criterion. For example:

> *There is a lack of transparency on the benefits and disadvantages – on how the changes will impact on the services and their delivery, for instance*
>
> *We're being consulted on unitaries with the 300,000 population figure, but we have not been given any information about why that's so necessary.*

Unitary councils in principle

4.83 Nonetheless, while some councillors wished to retain the status quo, but there were many more who supported a change to unitary authorities, and a range of reasons were cited – for example:

> *Putting aside the number, I agree with the broad principle of unitary councils*
>
> *I'm mandated by my parish council. We're not against unitary councils, and the two rural parts* [of the proposed West Northants] *fit together; but Northampton doesn't fit with them*
>
> *A lot of recent development around Northampton has been in Daventry and South Northants – for which Northampton provides the services while Daventry and South Northants get the council tax!*

4.84 In other words, some felt that unitary councils are good in principle, while others had more pragmatic reasons for favouring the proposal – including that district and borough areas are inter-dependent, and that the proposal is an opportunity for a fresh start. There were some councillors who supported the proposal mainly on the basis that reorganisation is necessary to make savings and efficiencies by eliminating duplication and escaping the past. They did not necessarily support unitary authorities in principle, but thought the proposal is necessary in the current circumstances – for example:

> *We could make a difference here. If we can bring in people who think in a modern way, rather than the same people who think in an old-fashioned way, it might make the difference.*

4.85 Overall, for the range of reasons indicated, there was emphatic absolute majority support for the principle of unitary authorities: 35 out of the 51 attendees in West Northamptonshire, and an overwhelming majority (in a ratio of about nine to one) in North Northamptonshire supported the principle of unitary authorities.

Two unitary councils

4.86 However, while the principle of unitary authorities found favour, many people in western Northants recoiled at the prospect of there being just two. In particular, many objected to the proposed union of Northampton with Daventry and South Northants, mainly because they feared the interests of the former would dominate those of the two more rural areas. A particular concern was that housing development would be shifted from the more urban areas into the countryside.

> *South Northants and Daventry have managed their land supply well. Northampton town has little land supply. Under the new unitary they will have access to new land, intruding onto the countryside.*

4.87 Therefore, for such reasons, there was a clear contrast in the views of the two forums. Although not everyone expressed an opinion, in western Northamptonshire there was a big absolute majority against

reducing to two unitary councils, while in northern Northamptonshire there was a majority in favour of two unitary councils. The contrast is summarised in the following table (please note, numbers in the table exclude abstentions).

AREA	PROPORTION (%) FAVOURING 2 UNITARIES	PROPORTION (%) AGAINST 2 UNITARIES
West Northamptonshire	**2% (1/41)**	**98% (40/41)**
North Northamptonshire	**53% (17/32)**	**47% (15/32)**

4.88 The numbers are important only insofar as they suggest there is a spread of opinion on the issue, not because they define the respective majorities and minorities absolutely. The real point is that there is a dilemma: there is overwhelming support for unitary authorities in principle, but there are worries about urban and rural areas being combined unsympathetically in a two-unitary structure. Therefore, the questions that arise are: what alternative structure(s) might be preferable and how might the councillors' worries be mitigated if the new authorities are created?

Other options

4.89 The prospect of a single unitary council was mentioned, but it was not seriously proposed, and the idea had very little support indeed – which, of course, is compatible with the very definite support for unitary authorities in principle.

4.90 Due to the worries about rural interests being neglected, in western Northamptonshire there was a big majority for Northampton to form a third unitary council, but only a third supported the same idea in northern Northamptonshire. The potential impact of Northampton's unitary status on the finances and sustainability of union of Daventry and South Northamptonshire (within a small unitary council) was acknowledged, but not discussed in any detail. People were not always convinced of the need for a 300,000 population (but the two rural authorities would have a population of only about 170,000 in round figures).

4.91 A two-unitary 'doughnut option' with Northampton as a unitary within a large rural unitary was mentioned as a 'theoretical option', but no one proposed it.

Mitigating the urban/rural divide

4.92 For all the parish and town councillors it would be important, if the two unitary councils are created, for the new authorities to work to mitigate the sense of imbalance between urban and rural interests – particularly in terms of the financing and allocation of housing, infrastructure, public transport and public services.

Other considerations

4.93 As in so many of the other deliberative meetings, the parish and town councillors were extremely indignant that so much could have gone wrong within the County Council – and they stressed with some emphasis that the leadership and management teams in any new councils should not include anyone responsible for the financial debacle. Such was the strength of feeling that some suggested that those responsible for the current problems should be prevented from standing for election or being employed if the new councils were created.

4.94 There were also pleas for the government to support localism with positive action:

> *The government sees parish councils as the local voice and there are some towns which will not have that local voice. Can the government assist in creating town councils where they don't exist and helping local parishes, especially smaller parishes group together, to have a voice?*

Health and Wellbeing Board

Introduction

4.95 While obviously very important, the Health and Wellbeing Board meeting that discussed the proposal is difficult to report properly – partly because only 45 minutes were available within the board's busy schedule, and partly because the board members were reluctant to declare their views. While encouraged by the researcher to give their personal opinions (based on their considerable professional experience), the predominant view was that they should speak as 'delegates' to express their organisations' points of view; but most then felt unable to do that. In some cases, the organisations are so diverse that it is hard to see how a dominant view might emerge; and in other cases, it was said that an official position had not yet been formulated. Therefore, the opinions reported here are in an important sense 'provisional' or 'tentative' because they are not based on clearly stated positions regarding the proposal.

4.96 In total, 20 people were present at the board meeting, including four representatives from Northamptonshire County Council and one from a Northants district council – as well as representatives from clinical commissioning groups, health trusts, the police, the university and the voluntary sector.

Main findings

Financial realities

4.97 While the relative allocation of council tax income between the police, county and districts was evidently news to some participants, others focused on finances, by pointing out that central government funding was likely to continue to reduce and that there is limited scope for council tax increases to boost total local authority income substantially. (It was said that, *A 1% increase in council tax yields only £3 million.*)

Position statements

4.98 The only organisation present that expressed clear opinions on the proposal was Northamptonshire Police, who support the proposal but would prefer a single all-county unitary council. The representative said:

> *Northamptonshire Police support the proposal, but we prefer a single unitary council for the sake of overall co-ordination of partnerships. This is an opportunity, but there are some risks with two unitaries.*

4.99 In other words, the police do not oppose the proposal: they support it; but it is their second-best solution.

4.100 In contrast to the police, the Health Watch representative could not express a preference because there are different views within the organisation; but the person added that:

> *Effectiveness is the most important consideration; and two unitary councils are likely to be more costly than a single one. So, some people will be worse off.*

Caution

4.101 There was considerable caution about the proposed change. The need for sustainable organisations was stressed; but there was uncertainty about the effects of the changes. Some typical points made were:

> A county-wide perspective is needed to understand the impact [of the proposal] on health and wellbeing
>
> There could be discontinuities as current county-wide functions are split between two new authorities
>
> New local government structures will not automatically achieve better integration of health and social care services

4.102 Some typical quotations were

> *We should look at the Irish model where there are unitaries but without health and social care, which have gone to the NHS in Ireland*
>
> *The proposal will not address health inequalities – two unitary authorities won't improve them*
>
> *We need a more sophisticated analysis based on the health and wellbeing needs of the population*
>
> *We need to re-set how we work with communities*
>
> *One single unitary council would be best, but I understand why it's been discarded*
>
> *We do need to change. This is a big opportunity, but there are major worries about delivery*
>
> *Transformation of services could follow – that's the aim of the proposal. The proposal makes sense but it's not clear how services will be improved – it could happen but it's not certain*
>
> *Transitions like this have risks – they can cost money. And structural reform in health care has been unhelpful*
>
> *This won't reduce hospital waiting lists – it could make things worse!*

Follow-up telephone interviews

4.103 To get more insight about opinions of the proposal, ORS was asked urgently to contact some attendees (and representatives of other relevant organisations) for short telephone interviews, five of which were completed – with the Police and Crime Commissioner; representatives of Northamptonshire Healthcare Foundation Trust, Northampton General Hospital Acute Hospital, and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Foundation Trust (whose responsibilities extend to a couple of GP surgeries in East Northamptonshire); and with one other stakeholder who wished to remain anonymous.

4.104 In the interviews, the stakeholders identified many areas of interaction between their organisations and local government (e.g. adult social care, children's services, community mental health, and Health and Wellbeing). One health organisations felt that working with fewer authorities would be preferable and easier, noting that (although most of their interactions are with the County) they need to work with districts in relation to supported living, housing adaptations and social housing etc.

4.105 More widely, reorganisation was seen as offering a significant opportunity to join up areas like health, housing and social care, as well as to improve governance. Specifically, stakeholders saw an opportunity to 'recalibrate' partnership working across the county, enabling innovative forward planning with more emphasis on intervention and prevention (benefiting residents while also being more cost effective long term).

4.106 However, stakeholders were clear that this would require partners to work together in a consistent way, and most felt this would be more achievable with just one unitary council. Specifically, there were concerns that fragmentation and disjointed approaches would follow from two Health and Wellbeing Boards, two Children's and Adult Safeguarding Boards, and two sets of executives – all with potentially differing priorities. Another widely perceived disadvantage was greater inefficiency (for both councils and partners) leading to 'more duplication, not less'.

4.107 The possible splitting up of county-wide services prompted other concerns. The PCC, for example, saw a risk in police officers from a single force abiding by two different sets of operational procedures (e.g. different criteria for referrals to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub or for Public Protection Notices). In was noted that there are already a number of serious case reviews underway in Northants and splitting services might pose further risks in areas such as vulnerability and prevention.

4.108 On the health side, it was noted that there are currently three GP federations and one 'super practice' serving different populations across the county, and it was unclear what barriers, duplication or division might occur if these were split across two unitary councils. Another question was around how the existing resources would be divided between the two new structures, particularly in the context of there being significant pockets of deprivation in both proposed council areas.

4.109 One suggestion for mitigating the risks was for the two authorities to deliver services through a 'joint vehicle'; another was to have an 'overarching operating model' not bound by the two-council structure (perhaps using cross-boundary 'alliance boards' offer unity at the strategic level). One stakeholder queried whether the new councils could jointly commission certain functions with health services. Similarly, another called for strategic commissioning to be integrated with health but suggested this might be achieved via a separate commissioning function sitting outside of the two councils (i.e. not subdivided).

4.110 There were different perspectives on staffing issues. One stakeholder foresaw a threat to staff retention if the future remains uncertain; however, an alternative view was that many of the more unsettled staff have already probably left, and the priority should be engaging with those who remained (to make them feel valued during any transition process).

Conclusions

4.111 Overall, the Health and Wellbeing Board meeting neither supported nor opposed the proposal for two unitary councils. Some saw the change as a positive opportunity, but (following the additional interviews) the dominant mood is best described as uncertainty and even scepticism about the ability of structural change to improve services and co-ordination while mitigating the risks of splitting current county-wide functions.

5. Submissions

Introduction

5.1 During the formal consultation process 31 written submissions were received. The table below shows the breakdown of contributors by type.

TYPE OF CORRESPONDENT	NO. RESPONSES	NAME OF ORGANISATION
NHS/Health	**2**	**Healthwatch Northamptonshire** **Northamptonshire Healthcare Foundation Trust**
Local authorities	**7** **(but representing 11 different authorities in total)**	**Bedford Borough Council** **Cherwell District Council** **Harborough District Council** **Leicestershire County Council** **Oxfordshire County Council** **Single submission from Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council** **Joint submission from the CEOs of Aylesbury, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe district councils**
Other statutory partners	**1**	**The Police and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire**
Charitable or other organisations	**6**	**Campaign to Protect Rural England: Northamptonshire** **Kettering Council Tenants Forum** **Northamptonshire Family History Society** **Northamptonshire Gardens Trust** **Save Brackley Library** **Voluntary Impact Northamptonshire**
District councillors	**2**	**Councillor S Hollowell** **Councillor J Walia**
Town and Parish Councils	**8**	**Crick PC** **Hackleton PC** **Hemington, Luddington and Thurning PC** **Little Houghton PC** **Middleton Cheney PC** **Stowe Nine Churches PC** **Welford PC** **Yardley Hastings PC**
Local Residents	**5**	
TOTAL	**31**	

5.2 ORS has read all the written submissions and reported them in this chapter; none have been disregarded even if they are not expressed in a "formal" way. All consultation submissions have also been reviewed by Northamptonshire's councils, and any submissions that present technical arguments or require more detailed consideration have been evaluated by appropriate members of the project team.

5.3 Readers are encouraged to consult the remainder of the chapter below for an account of the views expressed. Submissions that have presented unique or distinctive arguments, or that refer to different evidence, have been summarised individually. Where multiple submissions present the same or similar arguments, or refer to the same evidence or assumptions, they have been summarised collectively (by type) without undue repetition. This will ensure that the councils are able to consider important issues identified.

Please note that the following pages report the views expressed by submission contributors. In some cases, the opinions may or may not be supported by the available evidence. ORS has not sought to highlight or correct those that make 'incorrect' statements, for we are not auditors of opinions. This should be borne in mind when considering the submissions.

Summary of main findings

The case for change and unitary councils

5.4 Many of the written responses actively supported the case for changing local government in Northamptonshire. Even those that did not explicitly support a change seemed implicitly to accept (or at least did not directly challenge the idea).

5.5 A majority of submissions from larger stakeholders and statutory organisations (e.g. healthcare, the police and crime commissioner, and other local authorities) supported the principle of reducing councils and introducing unitary local government, even if some had reservations about the specific proposal for two unitary authorities (because services that are currently provided across the whole of the county would be split up). For example, some welcomed an opportunity to increase clarity for the public, simplify partnership working, and pursue opportunities for greater integration. All of this was deemed crucial when public services have to deal with the increasing challenges of an older population within the constraints of limited public funds.

5.6 Nonetheless, there was some scepticism around the benefits of introducing unitary councils, mostly expressed in responses from councillors, town and parish councillors, and residents. Many of these made the point that they understood the County Council's problems to be due to mismanagement and 'incompetence', rather than being a consequence of two tier structure. It was, therefore, less clear to these respondents how a change to a unitary structure might solve the problems. Another concern was that future councils might not be financially viable if required to take on the debt and liabilities of the County Council.

5.7 Only one parish council said that the County Council might be 'reformed and set on a proper footing', as an alternative to introducing unitary councils. However, even this response did not dismiss the idea of reducing the overall number of councils, suggesting instead that some of the districts be merged together.

Views on the proposal

5.8 As indicated above, most of the larger, statutory stakeholder organisations supported a reduction in the number of councils, as well the introduction of unitary government. Therefore, to quote one of these stakeholders, most seemed generally supportive of the general *"direction of travel*" represented by the proposal.

5.9 Nonetheless, many of the same stakeholders had some concerns, leading some of them to doubt whether the proposal for two unitary councils was the optimal solution for Northamptonshire. These responses emphasised the importance of achieving the best value and sustaining high quality services, and many queried whether the proposal was the best way of achieving these ambitions (compared to a single unitary, for example). In particular, there were concerns about the future delivery of council services that are currently delivered on a county-wide basis (see below).

5.10 Responses from town and parish councils were generally critical of the proposal for two unitary councils, with many favouring a three unitary solution (for the reasons outlined below, under 'Alternatives').

5.11 It is important that some responses simply outlined the issues they felt ought to be borne in mind if the proposed two unitary councils were created – without saying if this would be their preferred number or configuration of councils.

Concerns about future service delivery under two councils

5.12 The key concerns expressed by a number of organisations, was around the potential breaking up of countywide council services (particularly adult social care and children's services) into two structures. These concerns were expressed particularly strongly by Northamptonshire Healthcare Foundation Trust, Healthwatch Northamptonshire and the Police and Crime Commissioner, and were also noted by Oxfordshire County Council. All these organisations sought reassurances in terms of how any risks would be mitigated or avoided. Specific concerns raised by the organisations were around:

- How any statutory services which get 'broken up' would then align or integrate with partner services that continue to operate countywide (particularly health and policing).
- The financial implications arising from transitional costs, duplication, and reduced economies of scale
- The implications for future planning and commissioning arrangements
- The impacts on partnership organisations, many of whom are already operating with reduced budgets or resources. For example: being required to attend two sets of Board meetings, maintain offices in two locations, or respond to different strategic priorities between council areas.
- Effects on staffing as a result of the uncertainty (with associated short-term impacts on service delivery)
- An enhanced risk of unequal healthcare outcomes and variability of service quality across the county (for all of the reasons above), with further concerns that this would particularly impact vulnerable or deprived residents.

5.13 The implications of dividing county-wide services was also raised in relation to the Archives and Heritage service. The Northamptonshire Family History Society, Northamptonshire Gardens Trust, and two residents all felt these services should remain undivided, suggesting (for example) the continuation of a single county archive/records office serving the whole of Northamptonshire, jointly funded by the two new councils.

Alternatives

Support for one unitary

5.14 A few key organisations expressed support for a single unitary council, typically on the grounds that this would maximise efficiencies and prevent the breaking up of services that are currently delivered county-wide. The Northamptonshire Healthcare Foundation Trust, Leicestershire County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire all advocated a single unitary (the latter of these claiming there had been a '*lack of objective consideration*' of this option. In addition, Oxfordshire County Council noted that a single unitary had not been provided as an option, but acknowledged this was due to the contents of the Government's invitation.

Support for three unitary councils

5.15 A three-unitary model was widely supported by the town and parish councils who provided their own written submissions. One councillor suggests that a three-unitary solution might be made more viable through the use of S113 shared working agreements (a suggestion that was seen and endorsed by two of the parish councils who provided written submissions).

5.16 Responses advocating three unitary councils tended to focus on the distinctiveness of town and county needs and priorities, claiming that these should justify Northampton standing alone as a single unitary. A couple of responses went further by claiming that the proposed West Northants fails the government's criterion for a 'credible geography', because of the extremely diverse character of the areas within its boundary. These responses also tended to reject the population threshold of 300,000 outlined in the invitation letter, for being arbitrary and for failing to take future planned housing growth into account.

Others

5.17 Only one parish council supported a 'doughnut' arrangement, with Northampton forming one unitary and the remaining districts forming a second (with the imbalance in populations to be addressed through sustainable urban extensions and minor boundary tweaks).

5.18 As previously noted, only one response advocated a continuation of the existing two-tier system, following a suitable reform of the County Council – but with fewer districts making up the lower tier.

5.19 A joint submission from the chief executives of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe district councils argued that the Northants authorities have prematurely dismissed other options from consideration – including Daventry and Northampton merging into a single unitary while South Northamptonshire partners with authorities across the Northants border.

Consultation process

5.20 The main criticisms of the consultation process were around the lack of choice imposed by the Government's criteria, amounting to a '*diktat*' in the words of one parish council. As noted above, a number of responses (particularly those from parish councils) challenged the basis of the requirement for a minimum population size in excess of 300,000.

5.21 The chief executives of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe district councils said that the Northants councils have not complied with the Gunning principles, and have not balanced the government's criteria appropriately.

5.22 More than one parish council criticised the duration and timing of the consultation and one felt it ought to have been better publicised (for example, with a mailout to all households). The consultation document and other sources of information were criticised by a few for lacking:

> Clarity about *how* the proposals would actually deliver the improvements outlined in the consultation document
>
> Comparative information on how well unitary councils are performing elsewhere
>
> Any reference to the Deloitte report commissioned by the districts (and which recommended three unitary councils).

5.23 One parish council objected that the open questionnaire invited respondents to suggest alternatives "that meets the government's criteria" – which would have discouraged them from suggesting three unitaries as an alternative (even though this was known to be a popular alternative among many of the town and parish councils).

5.24 One campaign group felt that the questionnaire did not provide enough opportunity for residents to express concerns about service provision.

Local authority submissions

Bedford Borough Council

5.25 BBC supports the two unitary proposal for Northamptonshire.

Cherwell District Council

5.26 CDC reflects on the 'huge, immediate and potentially long lasting' impacts (loss of economies of scale, increased overheads, and breaking up of effective teams) which will result from the end of its partnership with South Northants District Council. CDC asks that there is some acknowledgement of these negative financial impacts in Northamptonshire's councils' submission to the Secretary of State. Nonetheless, CDC hopes to 'bounce back' by working creatively to find solutions e.g. by entering into a new agreement with Oxfordshire County Council. Beyond this, it has little to say about the proposed structure in Northants, partly because it is felt that the criteria limit opportunities for real choice.

Harborough District Council

5.27 HDC can see advantages in the two unitary proposal, noting that the proposed councils appear to be "large enough to deliver economies of scale but still able to deliver services locally". It is suggested that opportunities to transform the service delivery model will enable more efficiencies to be made.

Leicestershire County Council

5.28 LCC understands why a single unitary option was excluded. However, it cannot support a two unitary solution, because both the financial benefits of a single unitary 'far outweigh' those of two unitary councils. Given the current financial situation of Northamptonshire County Council, it feels these comparative disadvantages of the proposal for two unitaries must be made clear to the public.

Oxfordshire County Council

5.29 As a neighbouring authority, OCC has been concerned about the impact of NCC's difficulties on residents, especially those moving between the counties. It is supportive of the principle of unitary councils. It notes that a single unitary is not being proposed as an option but recognises this was effectively excluded by the invitation from Government. Although it declines to comment on the precise geography for any new councils, OCC agrees with the other criteria laid down by Government and feels it to be essential that Max Caller's recommendations are implemented in Northants. Its main concerns are in relation to any unforeseen circumstances resulting from the break-up of particular services (e.g. adults social care and children's services) across two smaller structures. Any new bid must therefore set out a financial case, be scrutinised, identify opportunities for improvements, and have clear outcomes to assess delivery.

Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council (joint response)

5.30 Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council provided their joint response via the open questionnaire; however, for simplicity's sake it is summarised here (alongside the written responses from other local authorities).

5.31 While CCC and PCC agree that changes need to be made to respond to the financial challenges, they have seen insufficient evidence that two unitary authorities is the best solution. It is noted that current local government best practice emphasises a place-based approach: the proposal would therefore benefit from showing more consideration to local demands and communities within Northamptonshire. It is also suggested that the options appraisal could have benefited from closer consideration of options for wider public sector reform, informed by 'impressive' previous examples in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. PCC and CCC would be prepared to support the councils in thinking more about opportunities for public sector reform in Northamptonshire.

5.32 Both PCC and CCC feel the £12 million annual savings associated with reorganisation do not justify the considerable disruption involved, and that comparable savings could be achieved through joint working and collaboration. For example, PCC and CCC share a Chief Executive, Director of Public Health, and People and Communities Directorates Management Team, and are also pursuing shared or fully integrated services in various areas. PCC also shares some services with Fenland District Council and Rutland County Council, and both councils have 'strong' joint commissioning arrangements with health partners.

The Chief Executives of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe district councils

5.33 Citing the Gunning principles, the chief executives question whether sufficient consultation has been undertaken before the any proposal is made. Specifically, they say that the consultation materials ***do not***:

> Describe the unitary proposal clearly enough
>
> Address housing and growth issues, including the relevance of the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford corridor
>
> Fully reflect the government's three criteria, and fail to balance with a solution which best meets all three

5.34 On these grounds, the submission questions whether the proposal complies with the government's invitation and the requirements for proper consultation on the full range of options available. It argues that if Daventry and Northampton were to join as a unitary authority (with a population of 310,695) then

that "would allow South Northants to partner with other authorities outside the [Northants] boundary". The submission says mergers with authorities (outside Northamptonshire) have been unfairly dismissed by the Northants councils as options, even though they were permissible in the government's invitation.

NHS/Health submissions

Healthwatch Northamptonshire

HWN declines to state a preferred number of unitary councils, though it agrees with a reduction in the number of local authorities and feels a unitary structure is appropriate. Nonetheless, HWN's very strong view is that countywide statutory services should not be divided.

5.35 HWN notes that the police, health and emergency services are crucial to the smooth running of children's and adults' services, and these tend to be organised at a county level. In particular, HWN suggests:

> Social care, children's services, Public Health etc. should also be aligned with the Northamptonshire Health and Care Partnership (NHCP)
>
> Safeguarding vulnerable adults and children should be countywide to align with partners e.g. the Police.
>
> Early years' intervention and the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub should also be aligned countywide to ensure that vulnerable children do not fall between the gaps in service provision.

5.36 Therefore, HWN feels it "would be wasteful and counterproductive to duplicate existing county-wide structures within a two unitary structure". If any new structures are created, it is essential that there is county-wide integration of planning and service design, whilst ensuring easy access to services. Joint commissioning arrangements ought to be 'embedded', to avoid duplication of back office functions and variability in the quality of service provision. Another concern is a further dilution of resources if budgets get divided in two – diminishing quality, offering poor value for money, and posing risks to the vulnerable.

5.37 HWN suggests the proposals lack detail on how partner organisations might be affected. These impacts might include being required to attend two sets of board meetings in future (e.g. two Health and Wellbeing Boards), or possibly being expected to maintain offices in two locations.

5.38 In the event of the proposed changes taking place, HWN further notes: the importance of ensuring financial accountability (due to public concerns around how funding is allocated to statutory services), ensuring services are accessible when needed (e.g. through single points of contact and clear communications), and raising the profile of new councillors (to make sure people can raise issues when needed).

Northamptonshire Healthcare Foundation Trust

NHFT supports change and a reduction in the current number of councils, but retains concerns that two unitary councils (as opposed to one) may cause unwanted duplication and health inequalities.

5.39 NHFT agrees with a change in order to secure a sustainable future for services and welcomes an opportunity to transform health and social care services. However, whilst generally supportive of the

Government's criteria, NHFT is unsure about the proposal for two councils. It foresees duplication and a risk of increased costs for several statutory functions of the council (e.g. increased management overheads due to each council requiring its own Director of Adult Social Services and Health and Wellbeing Board) and therefore believes a single unitary council would deliver better value for money. Reflecting on 'factors for the councils to consider', NHFT sees quality and value for money as the two most significant.

5.40 Another concern is that two unitary councils would risk increasing health inequalities, owing to a 'more complicated interface' with healthcare and voluntary services and an increase in boundaries for countywide services. In particular, NHFT is concerned this would adversely affect vulnerable members of the population (e.g. older people and looked after children) and those with protected characterises.

Other statutory submissions

Northamptonshire Police and Crime Commissioner

The PCC feels that although attempts have been made justify two or three authorities, a single county unitary would be the most cost effective, efficient and accountable. The PCC has concerns about the possible division of services like social care, and in particular how these would align with related services that continue to operate countywide.

5.41 The PCC feels the creation of unitary authorities would bring about clarity for the public and present opportunities for greater co-ordination, realisation of efficiencies, and simpler partnership working. However, there are concerns about the 'lack of objective consideration' given to a single unitary model, which is felt to have been discounted too quickly. Given the financial imperatives across the public sector, the superior value for money of a single unitary should, the PCC argues, have been afforded greater importance (over and above factors like political accountability, for example).

5.42 It is suggested that there needs to be a greater acknowledgment of the costs and other impacts associated with breaking up countywide statutory services such as Children's Services and Adult Social Care (for example, costs associated with the transition process, and reduced economies of scale). It is also unclear to the PCC how the proposals will address longstanding performance issues in these service areas, as well as how they would integrate with the wider public sector (e.g. policing, health, probation). A further concern is that the instability may affect the recruitment and retention of staff (with associated implications for service delivery).

5.43 Claims about the financial viability of the new councils are felt to be tenuous, and there has been little assessment of the longer term need to 'reshape services towards preventative delivery'. There would be a risk of duplication in strategic partnership working (e.g. Safeguarding Boards) if organisations could not work collaboratively across Northants, and a 'flexible approach' would be needed to ensure that countywide agencies are not responding to different strategic priorities in different parts of the county.

Charitable and other organisations' submissions

Campaign to Protect Rural England Northamptonshire (CPREN)

CPRE considers the countryside to be important for people's health and wellbeing, agriculture and food production, and for tourism. Its submission therefore considers the possible impacts of reorganisation on rural Northamptonshire.

5.44 CPREN acknowledges that the areas covered by the two proposed authorities already have 'established and effective' joint planning arrangements, and hopes these continue. Equally, effective county-based policies must not be lost and it will be important to consider new cross-boundary issues e.g. ensuring development in one authority does not impact on the level of flood risk in the other.

5.45 There is concern that both proposed authorities could be dominated by the interests of their urban population centres (further exacerbated in the West by having the main centre of population on the very edge of the authority). This needs to be considered in the allocation of councillors, to ensure suitable rural representation.

5.46 Particular care must be taken to preserve the countryside, given that Northamptonshire has no Green Belt and no Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Therefore, where urban districts join with other areas, it's important these are not seen as 'contiguous and continuous built up areas'. Local Plans must be maintained and kept up to date, and local characteristics must be considered. Transition is also important, specifically: making sure that any issues that get neglected do not become established by default and making efforts to draw together the local plans of the previous authorities.

5.47 CPREN hopes that any new structure will allow for the continuation of cross-country bus services serving rural areas, particularly as poor public transport most affects the poor and vulnerable (and this has associated impacts on welfare, health and support services).

Voluntary Impact Northamptonshire

5.48 The submission, entitled 'Doing More With Less', suggests the proposals present an opportunity for both new unitary councils to engage the capacity offered by the community sector, through a shared strategy: "*achieving more reach and impact than either Unitary can achieve with their budgets alone".*

5.49 The response outlines the size of the voluntary sector in Northants: an estimated income of £300m p/a for community based groups and up to 200,000 people volunteering once a month, before suggesting various ways in which this capacity can be engaged, namely through: a jointly developed shared vision; a framework of shared measures for impacts and outcomes (for example using Public Health outcomes developed by the Community Foundation); weighting contracts using the Social Act to give opportunities to local organisations (that can add value through volunteering and drawing in other sources of income); outsourcing (using the community sector as a lower cost option); and, finally, investment (small grants to help deliver services and support the shared vision).

5.50 Finally, community organisations need to be engaged in the development process for any new council structure so that they can develop and prepare their organisations for the impacts of reorganisation.

Others

5.51 The responses of Northamptonshire Family History and Northamptonshire Gardens Trust both focused on the need for the Archives and Heritage service 'umbrella' (including, for example, the Record Office, Chester Farm and Local Studies collection) to remain intact under any new structure and to be jointly funded by any new unitary councils.

5.52 Kettering Council tenants who attended a forum on 19th July all agreed with the need for change, and all but one agreed with the proposal for two unitary councils. It was felt that fewer councils might enable better joined up working between health and social care services, combined with a stronger strategic outlook. Other suggested advantages were less 'passing of the buck' between councils, and larger councils having more 'clout' and an ability to negotiate better value services. However, tenants also raised concerns about the proposals, specifically: how well they would address the underlying problems, whether they could increase the risk of housing stock being sold off in future, and whether they would result in a loss of local identity with fewer offices and reduced accessibility. Tenants said that they valued KBC's 'public face' locally with good engagement structures and responsive staff; as such many opposed the 'digital push' and expressed reservations about being tenants of a larger, more 'impersonal' structure.

5.53 Save Brackley Library had numerous concerns about the possible selling off of important community assets, particularly if any new councils were forced to take on the County's debt. It queried whether enough had been done to date to explore options to mitigate or write off this debt. Save Brackley Library also felt the questionnaire did not provide enough opportunity to provide views on current services and also claimed there is no mandate for the proposals because the extent of the problems was not publicly known at the time of the most recent County Council elections.

District councillors' submissions

5.54 One response proposed that internal delegation authorities be set up for any new councils to provide monthly or quarterly reports to external commissioners, to ensure that the new organisations are run economically and sustainably. It was also proposed that the new councils adopt a Committee, rather than a Cabinet, system.

5.55 Another response criticised the consultation process, stating that little account had been taken of planned growth in West Northamptonshire. A question was posed about the lack of reference to particular information in the consultation document: "So, what happened… to warrant burying the Deloitte report and with it, the option of a three unitary model?"

5.56 Assessing the two unitary proposal against the Government's criteria, the response claims the proposal lacks a 'good deal of local support' and is not based on a 'credible geography', due to Northampton being "a completely different district" to the more rural Daventry and South Northamptonshire. While it is accepted that the 300,000 population figure "has some merit" (as authorities with smaller populations may be restricted in some respects by having smaller council tax receipts), the response suggests that opportunities to reduce revenue costs through shared working (under s. 113 of the Local Government Act 1972) ought to be more closely considered. Three unitary councils might share the same CEO, directorate, and some services (particularly 'back office' functions), creating economies of scale while also enabling opportunities for a 'more joined up' approach. This would then allow a three unitary council configuration to become viable.

Parish and town councils' submissions

5.57 Many of the points raised by parish and town councils have been documented above, namely:

> Scepticism about the Government's criteria (especially the population test since smaller unitary authorities are currently operating sustainably elsewhere)
>
> Concerns that rural needs will be subsumed by the urban interest in the proposed new authorities, on the basis that urban areas would have larger populations and more councillors.

5.58 There was support for Northampton standing alone in a three-unitary configuration since this would better reflect the differences between urban and rural areas. Other specific reasons:

> Suggestions that Daventry and South Northamptonshire District Councils have been run more prudently than Northampton Borough (and will therefore be penalised by the proposal);
>
> Concerns about over-development of the countryside as a result of Northampton being short of its five-year land supply requirement.

5.59 One specific alternative suggested, was for Wellingborough to join with Daventry and South Northamptonshire (in place of Northampton). Another parish council preferred a three-unitary configuration based on (i) Northampton, (ii) Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough and (iii) a 'rural' council based on East Northants, South Northants and Daventry District Councils – while accepting this would mean East Northants would be geographically separate to the rest of the authority.

5.60 Support for three unitaries was not quite unanimous: one parish preferred the 'doughnut' configuration of two councils and another suggested that the two-tier system should continue, albeit with fewer districts and a reformed County Council. Another suggestion was for a 'Rural Interests Committee' to be setup to ensure the preservation of rural interests.

5.61 More general concerns raised were around a lack of information (including comparative information on the performance of unitary councils elsewhere) and the timing and duration of the consultation. One parish council noted that the proposals seemed too rushed – an "imposition of change as a response to a crisis" and "not an effective way to reform local government".

5.62 One parish council wrote that at the Parish and Town Council forum in Towcester on 3rd July participants were told that they propose a three-unitary solution by using the text box in the open questionnaire. However, the questionnaire said suggestions for alternative proposals should "meet the government's criteria" - which has caused concern that the results would not reflect the true level of support for three unitary councils (as all those not attending the forum would have been discouraged from stating that preference (since it failed the population test).

Summaries of residents' submissions

5.63 Residents' submissions highlighted issues of personal concern and covered a diverse range of issues. Some of the concerns echoed those expressed by the organisations above (for example, about heritage and archive services remaining intact). Others were concerned about access to council offices, urban/rural matters, planning issues (streamlining of Local Plans) and the safeguarding of local assets. One resident was particularly concerned that population demographics should be taken into account as part of any reorganisation, so that the adult social care burden be fairly split between any new authorities.

6. Petitions and social media

Petitions

6.1 Although not submitted to ORS during the consultation period, we are aware of a petition entitled *'Make Daventry District Council (DDC) into a Unitary Authority'*, which was made available via the petitions section of the parliament.uk website.

6.2 The petition states the following: *Under the proposed arrangements, decisions in the District will be taken by a council of which a majority of members represent the urban areas of Northampton. Let DDC become a unitary authority: keep democracy local.* It also contained a hyperlink to the Best Value Report and references to various news articles on the current problems in Northamptonshire. This petition had received 324 signatures at the time of writing (03/08/2018).

Social media

Introduction

6.3 Throughout the consultation period, the www.futurenorthants.couk was publicised by the eight councils via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Some of their posts attracted comments from members of the public, and in some cases the councils then encouraged these individuals to share their feedback via the open questionnaire.

6.4 After the consultation had ended, members of the councils' communications teams provided ORS with examples of social media interactions. ORS has also made reasonable efforts to locate further examples of views expressed on social media during the consultation period, using search terms that include words like 'Northants', 'Northamptonshire', 'unitary' and so on. While accepting that it is difficult to locate all examples of relevant comments, the following summary is intended to give a flavour of the main points raised.

Summary of views

6.5 The majority of social media feedback was negative, with criticism of the County Council and the consultation process both widespread – based on the perception that the districts and their residents were being 'punished' for the financial crisis at the County Council.

6.6 There was also scepticism that the proposals would make a positive difference. Specifically, many claimed any new councils would be run by the same councillors and senior staff whose actions had caused the current crisis, which would reward failure and prevent improvements taking place.

6.7 Some pointed out that the failing County Council is conservative-led and that the invitation for reform had been issued by the conservative government. This prompted some accusations of political 'gerrymandering', and suggestions that the proposals for fewer councils and councillors would amount to a conservative 'take over' of local government in Northamptonshire.

6.8 To mitigate the various concerns above, there were a few calls for any new councils to have councillors elected using proportional representation (to allay fears of a political 'closed shop' and encourage a more effective opposition), or to adopt a more 'transparent' committee (as opposed to cabinet) system.

6.9 Elsewhere, many of the themes were common to those seen across other elements of the consultation, namely: challenges to the government criteria, particularly the population requirement; concerns about new authorities being less 'local'; and a focus on differences between rural and urban areas. Some users of social media wanted more information, for example, about council tax or future civic arrangements for the larger towns.

6.10 Elsewhere, there were a few comments which were more supportive of unitary councils, albeit with some suggestion that a single unitary would be better for maximising savings.

6.11 A few alternatives were suggested, with (for example) Labour Party members in Northampton posting images of their campaign for the town to be a unitary council (this suggestion was also endorsed by the town's Liberal Democrats).

Theme	Example Comments
Criticism of consultation process	*Hardly counts as consultation when the outcome was decided in a room deep in Whitehall months ago* (Comment on Northampton BC Facebook) *This is a Central Government forced electoral reform without proper electoral remit and it all seems rather rushed* (Comment on South Northants DC Facebook) *My favourite [part of the consultation document] is when they present 5 options which aren't really options* (Comment on 'Corby Says No to Unitary' Facebook Group) *Join the debate? How can you debate with only one proposal, no meaningful information about consequences and alternatives, and four weeks to do it in. Government is treating us like fools.* (Comment on Twitter)
Challenging the criteria	*I would like to know where this magical 300,000 people minimum per unitary [comes from]. It's this number which leaves no options other than the one dictated.* (Comment on Daventry DC Facebook) *If Rutland can be a unitary authority with a population of less than 40,000 why can't Corby be one as the fastest growing UK borough with a population about to top 70,000?* (Comment on 'Corby Says No to Unitary' Facebook Group)
Proposals will reward failure / won't effect real change	*The same incompetents [who caused the current crisis] will be running, managing and in-charge of the new unitary authorities* (Daventry Express) *I don't think that any cabinet member since 2006 should be allowed to hold public office again* (Comment on Northamptonshire County Facebook page)

Theme	Example Comments
Amounts to a Conservative 'take over'	*If the suggested unitary authorities are implemented Northants will be a secure Conservative county with no chance of change… All a further blow to our services.* (Comment on Twitter) *Too many Tories, too much of a closed shop. Too dangerous to consider this at all.* (Comment on Northampton BC Facebook)
Punishes the well-run councils	*Wellingborough have always struck me as very prudent with their finances, and run a pretty tight ship… Corby has had several investigations into their affairs and Kettering seem hell bent on ruining their own borough* (Comment on East Northamptonshire DC Facebook) *DDC is a very well run, financially stable and responsible council (with faults) …. There are winners and losers in this proposal – Daventry area would be a huge loser.* (Comment on Daventry DC Facebook) *[South Northamptonshire District Council] has been unfairly caught up in the financial difficulties encountered by Northamptonshire County Council. Will be really sorry to see it replaced if this goes ahead - I fear that local connections, knowledge and accountability will be lost.* (Comment on South Northamptonshire DC Facebook) *We should not be forced to take on someone's debt because they were incompetent* (Comment on 'Corby Chats Back' Facebook)
Less locally sensitive	*I am also concerned with people from outside the immediate area being able to make decisions on things that don't affect them.* (Comment on East Northamptonshire DC Facebook) *Personally, if I was ever a councillor … I would feel uncomfortable voting upon issues that I have little knowledge on. Yes, one can read up on an issue but to know absolutely the right way to go, you need to live and know the community.* (Comment on Northampton BC Facebook)
Urban vs rural needs	*[The proposal] locks out any hope of progress unless for rural constituencies. Countryside alliance and hunting proponents would be running rampant, to the detriment of the towns* (Comment on Northampton BC Facebook) *The country toffs do not want decisions being made for them by the riff-raff in Northampton.* (Comment on Northampton BC Facebook) *I'd urge people living in rural communities to read these proposals very carefully…Our voice could become weakened with a bias towards urban areas and needs* (Comment on Northamptonshire County Facebook page)

Theme	Example Comments
Support for the principle of moving to unitary councils	*Nearly 20 years ago the CEO of NCC devised a plan for a unitary council offering massive savings and far greater efficiency... Nobody listened and we carried on seeing yet more new council offices being built around the county and now we are all paying the price...The issue is not that our many councils are themselves inefficient but that the whole structure is much bigger than is needed.* (Comment on Daventry DC Facebook) *That sums up need to have [a] unitary authority. You say NCC [is] responsible for museums, not NBC. How many residents know which council is responsible for which service?* (Comment on Twitter)
Suggestions and alternatives	*A unitary for Northampton would be larger than most existing unitaries, would make Daventry and Towcester happy and would be really no more unviable (given local gov't underfunding) than W. Northants option.* (Comment on Twitter – Northampton Lib Dems) *Let Wellingborough and the Northamptons merge, they already have councillors on each other's councils. This leaves East Northants District Council and Kettering and Corby to merge – this would be my optimal result and that of many of my friends and fellow ratepayers.* (Comment on East Northamptonshire DC Facebook) *If worst comes to worst is vital that proud towns like Corby (and others) [have] parish/town councils with real responsibilities.* (Comment on Twitter)
More information needed	*What will happen to the local planning committee? Will you have to travel to Northampton to voice your opinion about a planning application? No one knows.* (Comment on Daventry DC Facebook) *We need more information on how the new councils will be formed and who will Be in charge….? Please can you guarantee the residents that more assets will not be sold to repay the debt? Also how much will council tax be going up by?* (Comment on Northampton BC Facebook) *All the District/Borough Councils have separate/different Waste and recycling and Grounds Maintenance arrangements...and somehow we have to try and bring this absolute shambles to some sort of happy medium?* (Comment on Northamptonshire County Facebook page) *Will the Northampton Borough Council be replaced by a Town Council and Mayor under the proposed Unitary Authorities? This will allow the ceremonial duties like Remembrance Sunday and granting of the Town Freedom…to be continued, and also other historic duties* (Comment on Northampton BC Facebook)

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Appendix A: Organisations Submitting a Consultation Response

Town and Parish Councils	
Abthorpe PC	Irchester PC
Aston le Walls and Appletree PC	Islip PC
Badby PC	King's Sutton PC
Barnwell PC	Litchborough PC
Boughton PC	Little Addington PC
Brackley TC	Little Houghton PC
Braybrooke PC	Maidwell and Draughton PC
Brington PC	Middleton Cheney PC
Bugbrooke PC	Moulton PC
Burton Latimer TC	Old Stratford PC
Cogenhoe & Whiston PC	Oundle TC
Cold Higham PC	Overstone PC
Cosgrove PC	Paulerspury PC
Crick PC	Pilton, Stoke Doyle and Wadenhoe PC
Culworth PC	Quinton PC
Daventry TC	Roade PC
Desborough TC	Rothersthorpe PC
Duston PC	Rothwell TC
Evenley PC	Spratton PC
Eydon PC	Stanwick PC
Farthinghoe PC	Stoke Bruerne PC
Farthingstone PC	Stowe Nine Churches PC
Finedon PC	Syresham PC
Flore PC	Sywell PC
Geddington, Newton & Little Oakley PC	Thrapston TC
Glapthorn PC	Walgrave PC
Greatworth PC	Weedon Bec PC
Grendon PC	Welford PC
Gretton PC	West Haddon PC
Hackleton PC	West Hunsbury PC
Hargrave PC	Wicken PC
Harpole PC	Wilbarston PC
Harrington PC	Woodford Cum Membris PC
Hartwell Village PC	Woodnewton PC
Hermington, Luddington & Thurning PC	Yardley Gobion PC
Higham Ferrers TC	Yardley Hastings PC

Other organisations	
Bedford Borough Council	Irthlingborough Historical Society
Brackley Food Bank	Kettering Constituency Labour Party
Bridge Substance Misuse Programme Ltd.	Kettering Council Tenants Forum
Brington History Society	Leicestershire County Council
Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) and Peterborough City Council (PCC) (joint response)	Nenescape Landscape Partnership Board
Campaign to Protect Rural England: Northamptonshire	Northamptonshire Archaeological Society (NAS)
Cherwell District Council	Northamptonshire Community Voices
Community Landscape Archaeology Survey Project (CLASP)	Northamptonshire Depression Support
Daventry Area Community Transport (DACT)	Northamptonshire Family History Society
Daventry District Local Strategic Partnership	Northamptonshire Gardens Trust
Daventry Liberal Democrats	Northamptonshire Healthcare Foundation Trust
Deafconnect	Northamptonshire Heritage Forum
Delapre Abbey Preservation Trust	Oxfordshire County Council
Desborough Labour Party	Pitsford Thursday Club
Destination Nene Valley Partnership	The Police and Crime Commissioner
Electric Corby CIC	Power to People - Save our Bus Services
Franklin Silencers Ltd	Rushden Mind
Freeman of England & Wales Association	Save Brackley Library
Friends of Northampton Castle	Small business representative (unnamed) x2
Friends of Oundle Library Committee	South Northamptonshire District Council Conservative Group
Fusion21, Construction Futures	Spring Boroughs Neighbourhood Voice Forum
Harborough District Council	Tennyson Road Infant School
Healthwatch Northamptonshire	Unknown family group
Hinton-in-the-Hedges Parish Meeting	Voluntary Impact Northamptonshire
Historic England, East Midlands Office	Volunteer Action: a community car scheme for North East Northants.
Home Instead East Northants	Wellingborough Homes
Home Start Daventry & South Northants	Wellingborough Trains and Models

Appendix B: Open questionnaire comments

Comments made by individuals, town and parish councils and other organisations

The tables on the following pages provide a summary of all the comments made in response to the questions below. **Please note:** percentages are included as a proportion of *all respondents who commented/answered the question*, rather than of all respondents who responded to the questionnaire (base numbers are provided in the column headings).

Comments about the proposals (grouped by theme)

If you have views on the proposal or any further comments, please tell us. If there is any alternative option which meets the government's criteria) that you think we should consider, please explain the alternative option and tell us why you think this would be better.

Theme	Comment	Individuals (3,092)	ORGANISATIONS	
			T&P Councils (55)	Other orgs (21)
		%	%	%
General acceptance / Support for change	Generally agree with proposals/a good idea	4.7	7.3	9.1
	Proposed changes will lead to a better service	0.3	-	-
	Agree change is needed/money must be saved	3.4	9.1	6.1
	Change is long overdue/needs implementing quickly	1.1	1.8	3.0
	Support for joined up working/more cost effective/cuts out wastage	2.7	5.5	3.0
Concern / Opposition towards change	Generally disagree with two unitary proposals	29.5	23.6	18.2
	Keep existing councils/maintain current arrangement	3.5	5.5	6.1
	Won't work/structural changes won't make difference	22.0	16.4	6.1
	Won't result in savings/will waste money	21.8	7.3	-
	Less accountability/less direct involvement for public	2.2	3.6	3.0
	Loss of local identity/links with communities	11.3	23.6	21.2
	Keep urban/rural areas separate due to different needs	35.0	52.7	21.2
	Access concerns/loss of local services: distance, public transport	4.5	7.3	9.1
	Maintain frontline services/face-to-face access etc.	1.6	1.8	-
	Less democratic/in the hands of too few councils	20.3	3.6	-
	Councils will be spread too thin/area is too large	2.5	3.6	-
	Smaller councils more able to deal with local issues/bigger not better	3.0	3.6	3.0
	Being penalised for NCC management/NCC is to blame	13.0	9.1	15.2
	Will lead to lesser quality councils and services	1.6	-	
	Will lead to job losses/redundancies	1.3	-	
	No proof that proposals will work/don't believe things will improve	1.8	5.5	3.0
	Shouldn't force well performing councils to merge with bad ones	3.7	-	-
	Two councils is not enough	0.5	-	-

Theme	Comment	Individuals (3,092)	ORGANISATIONS	
			T&P Councils (55)	Other orgs (21)
		%	%	%
	Don't want Daventry joined with Northampton	22.3	5.5	-
	Don't want S Northants joined with Northampton	22.3	10.9	-
	Population threshold too high/arbitrary (smaller councils elsewhere)	7.0	38.2	9.1
	Don't want districts' reserves being used to bail out other councils	2.5	-	-
	Political/Conservative gerrymandering	1.0	-	-
	Daventry being overlooked/losing its say	1.1	3.6	3.0
	Will affect Northants' historical status/adverse effect on historic county	17.7	3.6	6.1
	No need for change, improve the County Council	1.3	1.8	3.0
	Funding in West Northants will all go to Northampton, not the smaller towns/villages	3.1	-	-
	Splitting county activities will negate any other savings	0.1	-	-
	Splitting the county will negatively affect poorer areas e.g. in North	0.3	-	-
	Smaller towns in North will be ignored in favour of the larger ones	0.2	3.6	-
	Northampton could be overlooked in favour of wealthier rural areas within West Northants	0.6	-	-
	Will impact on future expansion for Northampton/make it difficult for new homes to be built in Northampton	0.2	-	-
	Will negatively affect social care	1.0	1.8	-
	Don't want Wellingborough joined with Corby	0.3	-	-
	Proposals will cause wastage/more duplication	1.3	-	-
	Proposals will take too long to implement	0.1	-	-
	Proposals rushed/not though through/a better strategy is needed	1.1	3.6	6.1
	Don't want E Northants joined with North or West	0.3	-	-
	Proposals are about making money/should not be about money	0.2	-	-
	South Northants will be overlooked/will lose say	0.8	3.6	-
	Will reduce representation for residents	2.2	9.1	3.0
	Concerns about urban sprawl/new housing estates	0.6	3.6	-
Positives of the current situation	Positives about specific councils	3.0	7.3	3.0
	Corby BC doing good job, should be kept as it is	3.4	-	-
	Daventry DC doing good job, should be kept as it is	1.8	1.8	3.0
	South Northants DC doing good job, should be kept as it is	1.8	3.6	-
	South Northants has good links with Cherwell DC; shares services well	1.7	3.6	-
	East Northants DC doing good job, should be kept as it is	0.8	-	-
	Current councils working well with neighbours to join up services	0.4	1.8	3.0
Negatives of the current situation	Negative comments about councils	4.6	1.8	6.1
	Services not in good state/situation is a mess	2.3	3.6	-
	Negative comments about current councillors	1.9	1.8	6.1
Council Tax	Concern about Council Tax rising as a result of the proposed changes	3.7	5.5	3.0
	Do not want to pay more for a lesser service	1.7	1.8	3.0
	Should raise Council Tax/happy to pay more	0.4	-	-
	Council Tax too high/should be reduced	0.5	-	-
	Urban and rural areas should not pay same Council Tax/not same level of service	0.6	3.6	3.0
Alternatives	Savings should be made elsewhere	0.6	1.8	-
	Keep the current Councils but join up some services/more joined up working instead to save money	0.9	1.8	-
	Get rid of unnecessary managers/councillors/staff/save money by getting rid of non-essential staff	2.8	-	3.0

Theme	Comment	Individuals (3,092)	ORGANISATIONS	
			T&P Councils (55)	Other orgs (21)
		%	%	%
	Reduce high salaries; managers and councillors should take pay cuts/pension cuts/have lower expenses	1.1	-	-
	Boundaries should change due to proposals/boundaries need to be changed in light of current considerations	2.3	3.6	-
	One large unitary authority wanted	21.6	-	9.1
	Any alternatives involving Northampton as a unitary on its own	13.9	34.5	12.1
	Any alternatives involving other districts/towns becoming unitaries on their own	2.1	-	-
	Other specific configurations	0.3	-	-
	Other partial configurations	1.2	1.8	-
	Other: two unitary authorities: (non specific)	0.2	-	3.0
	Other: two unitary authorities: East/West split	0.2	-	-
	Other: two unitary authorities: Rural area/Urban area split	0.9	3.6	-
	Other: three unitary authorities (non-specific)	5.1	23.6	3.0
	Other: three unitary authorities: Rural area/Urban area/Unspecified	0.1	1.8	-
	Other: four unitary authorities (non-specific)	0.5	-	-
	Villages/small towns/Parish councils should be given more autonomy/decision making capacity	1.5	12.7	6.1
	NCC responsibilities should be given to District Councils	0.6	-	-
	Central government should take direct control of Northamptonshire	0.2	-	-
	There should be a vote/referendum to decide	0.3	-	-
	Other comments about alternatives (includes cross-border suggestion)	4.5	14.5	9.1
Other	Minds made up/just a paper exercise	20.7	7.3	3.0
	Consultation flawed/criteria make it impossible to state alternatives	7.3	10.9	3.0
	Other criticism of consultation	19.4	5.5	3.0
	Need to be kept informed/need more information to make decision	5.6	10.9	12.1
	Need more funding/stop the cuts instead of just complying with Gov	20.8	3.6	9.1
	Uncertain impact of Brexit	0.1	-	-
	Previous councillors/officers should not work for new authorities	1.6	7.3	3.0
	Comments about specific services being affected by proposals	1.2	3.6	6.1
	General comments about council services e.g. bins, recycling	2.7	7.3	9.1
	Negative impact on elderly/ageing population	0.5	-	-
	Figures/stats used are misleading	0.4	-	-
	Local views and opinions must be heard/taken into account	4.0	14.5	6.1
	Money wasted/Councils overspending	2.9	3.6	3.0
	Criticism of Conservative party/councillors	19.6	-	3.0
	Need to cut down on bureaucracy/red tape	0.7	-	6.1
	More transparency from Councils needed/Need to be more open	1.0	1.8	-
	Better communication with residents needed	0.3	1.8	-
	Criticism of proposed unitary names e.g. prefer East/West or North/South	1.2	-	-
	Staff/councillors responsible for situation should be held accountable	4.1	1.8	6.1
	Northampton has a large population/is expected to grow	20.0	12.7	3.0
	Opposition to LGSS/other service provider involvement in Northants	0.3	-	-
	Some services must be retained countywide e.g. heritage/archives	1.1	3.6	9.1
	Proposals will have a negative impact on disabled people	0.2	-	-

Theme	Comment	Individuals (3,092)	ORGANISATIONS	
			T&P Councils (55)	Other orgs (21)
		%	%	%
	Funds should be raised by selling Council assets e.g. buildings	0.1	-	-
	Proposals will have a negative impact on underprivileged people	0.4	-	-
	Want a chance to elect/re-elect local government representatives	0.6	-	-
	Dissolve/abolish the County Council	0.8	-	-
	Need for a better skilled/more innovative workforce	1.2	-	-
	Social services/care should be moved under NHS control	0.2	-	-
	Other	17.1	38.2	36.4

Comments about equalities issues

Are there any groups protected under the Equality Act 2010 who you believe will be positively or negatively affected by our proposed changes? If so, what could we do to enhance positive or reduce negative impacts?

Comment	Individuals (1,966)	ORGANISATIONS	
		T&P Councils (28)	Other orgs (21)
	%	%	%
Everyone will be affected equally/treat everyone equally regardless of circumstances	38.5	14.3	14.3
Poor access/fewer local offices will cause negative impacts (on those with protected characteristics or no transport/access to public transport etc)	17.9	21.4	14.3
Negative impact on the elderly/the ageing population	16.7	25.0	19.0
Negative impact on the disabled	17.1	10.7	19.0
Negative impact on the vulnerable people	5.2	3.6	28.6
Negative impact on people in deprived areas/people on low income	2.6	-	4.8
Negative impact on people living in rural areas	6.3	42.9	9.5
Negative impact on families/pregnant women	1.4	-	-
Negative impact on children	4.6	3.6	9.5
Negative impact on social care services	3.3	3.6	-
Negative impact on people in minority groups	1.5	-	-
Negative impact on people with protected characteristics (not specific)	2.1	3.6	4.8
Concerns about homeless people / need to help homeless people	0.4	-	-
Negative impact on people who cannot use or access technology/the internet	3.7	-	4.8
Equalities concerns not related to proposed council reorganisation	0.4	-	-
Concerns that a reduced number of councils won't provide the same standard of service	1.1	-	-
People with protected characteristics will not be affected by the changes	4.0	3.6	4.8
Criticisms of current equality practice in place by current council(s)	1.7	-	14.3
General comments about services not relevant to equality concerns e.g. bins/recycling	2.0	-	-
Other	28.6	32.1	57.1

Other comments made by organisations

Some organisations submitted lengthier, more technical or more unusual responses that did not lend themselves easily to a quantitative summary. The paragraphs below provide some overview of the key points raised by these bodies.

Voluntary/community interest groups

Home Start Daventry & South Northants supports the two unitary proposal in principle but feels reform must maximise the opportunities for the whole public sector to work together. Any new structure should provide support for the voluntary sector, which provides value for money and plays a vital role in helping the vulnerable (stepping in where the County has failed, often with no funding). There must also be acknowledgement that travel costs across the area are high, and rural poverty and isolation are common, exacerbated by closures of Children's Centres and libraries. Another priority is that cross-border access to health services (e.g. in Oxfordshire) is maintained where relevant after any organisation.

Northamptonshire Community Voices organised forums to give people the opportunity to voice opinions on the proposals. The dominant view from these was that the two unitary proposal is not suitable, and that better options would be a change of management and structure using the current councils, or a different number and configuration of unitary councils. Concerns included: a loss of identity (both at local and county level), differences between urban and rural needs (e.g. conflicting spending priorities), the 'unfairness' of the government's population criteria, the consultation response not being 'meaningful', the implications if new authorities take on the County's debts, the sale of local assets, and too much outsourcing of services. There were uncertainties around what would happen to existing contracts between the various councils and external suppliers, and about the proposed future role for the voluntary sector and town and parish councils. The proposals were also seen as benefiting one particular political party and therefore politically motivated.

Spring Boroughs Neighbourhood Forum is concerned about planning decisions being made by councillors who are further removed from the areas that are affected (specifically, there are concerns that rural councillors on planning committees will not understand the needs of inner Northampton).

Political groups

Daventry Liberal Democrats object to the proposal, feeling that too drastic a reduction in councillors will lead to an ineffective political opposition on any new councils (it is noted that multi member wards are a good way of achieving an effective opposition). The group rejects the proposed West Northants and believes there is justification for Northampton forming a unitary on its own.

Kettering Labour feels the timetable for change is unrealistic and is concerned the number of councillors is not yet agreed. If there are as few as 45 per district, then the councillor role risks becoming a 'full time job', meaning only the retired and wealthy are able to serve. Other concerns include the risks to local assets if the new councils take on the debt; the possible burdens on parish and town councils (if required to take on new responsibilities they have not been equipped to deal with); negative impacts on those with protected characteristics; and a lack of focus on preventative services, fuelling demand for critical services which are already struggling.

While **South Northamptonshire Conservative Group** does not necessarily believe the two unitary proposal is best, it will continue to be actively be involved in the current two unitary submission as it feels this option is most likely to succeed, and being involved offers more scope to influence the final outcome.

However, it anticipates the consultation feedback will show widespread support for three unitary councils.

Heritage organisations

Questionnaire responses were received from a number of organisations expressing a specific interest in heritage and conservation. A few of the more detailed are summarised here:

Historic England's (East Midlands) view is that Northamptonshire's historic environment would benefit from having fewer authorities and a single tier. The proposals offer an opportunity for shared resources and better incorporation of highways into planning. A few issues are highlighted: ensuring adequate provision of conservation advice; continuation of archaeological advice, tied to the Historic Environment Record (which should not be split up); and consideration for listed buildings/scheduled monuments owned by the eight authorities (with a proper disposals strategy if these are to be 'rationalised').

Northamptonshire Archaeological Society feels reorganisation must not be used as an excuse to close facilities or historical collections. It identifies eight key services that it feels must be safeguarded, namely: the County Record Office; the Historic Environment Record; the proposed County Archaeological Store at Chester Farm; Archaeological Planning Advisors (to ensure sites are properly assessed prior to issuing of planning consent); the Portable Antiquities Scheme and Finds Liaison Officer; monuments in the care of local authorities; museums and libraries; and Adult Education, which has helped increase numbers of skilled volunteers.

Concerns of other heritage groups included: not wishing to divide historical records and continuing to offer various services on a county-wide basis. **Community Landscape Archaeology Survey Project** accepted that future countywide delivery may require a separate standalone body or structure, to 'enable heritage and historical disciplines to work together to focus their efforts into one point of reference for the wider community'. **Brington History Society** supported a single county unitary with 'area offices' (effectively district councils in a much-reduced form).

Other

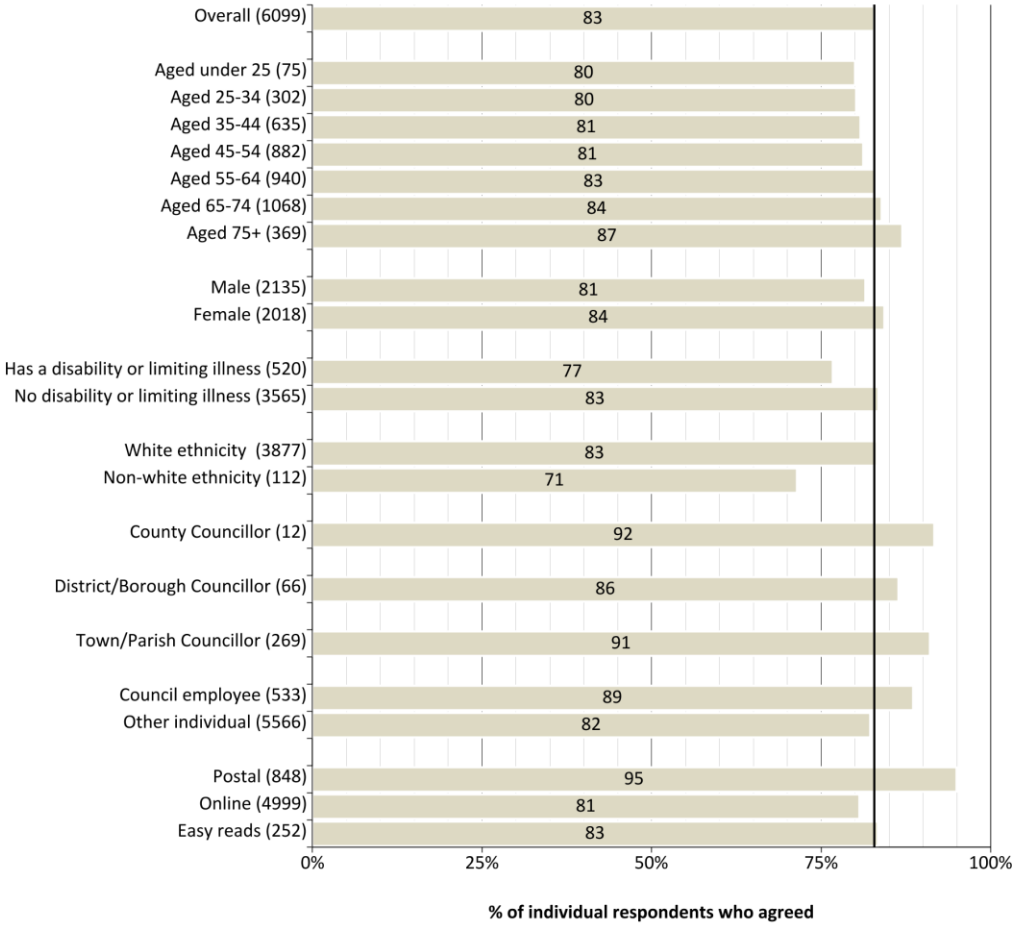
Fusion 21, Construction Futures works closely with Local Authority Planning Departments across Northamptonshire to secure Social Value through the planning system, and feels it important that the proposed unitary authorities adopt a strategic approach to securing social value: by adopting planning policy that supports and further develops integration, resulting in better employment and skills outcomes.

Appendix C: Open questionnaire results profiled

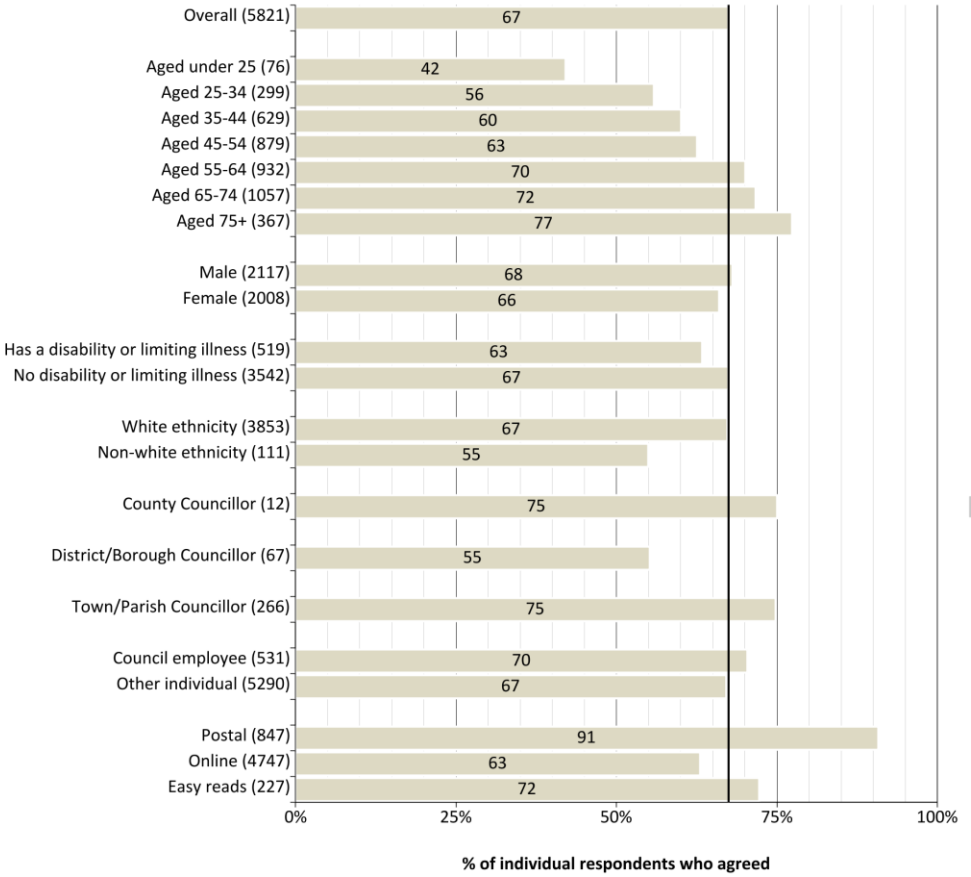
The following pages show results to the four key questions in the open questionnaire by some key demographics and other profile information.

Noticeably fewer respondents in the youngest age group (under 25) agreed with reducing the number of councils, introducing unitaries, and with the proposal for North and West Northants. Across all four core questions, respondents who identified as white were more likely to agree compared to those of other ethnicities. However, it should be borne in mind that the open questionnaire was not a controlled survey with a randomly selected group of respondents; as such any differences between sub-groups should be viewed as indicative rather than as statistically reliable estimates of views.

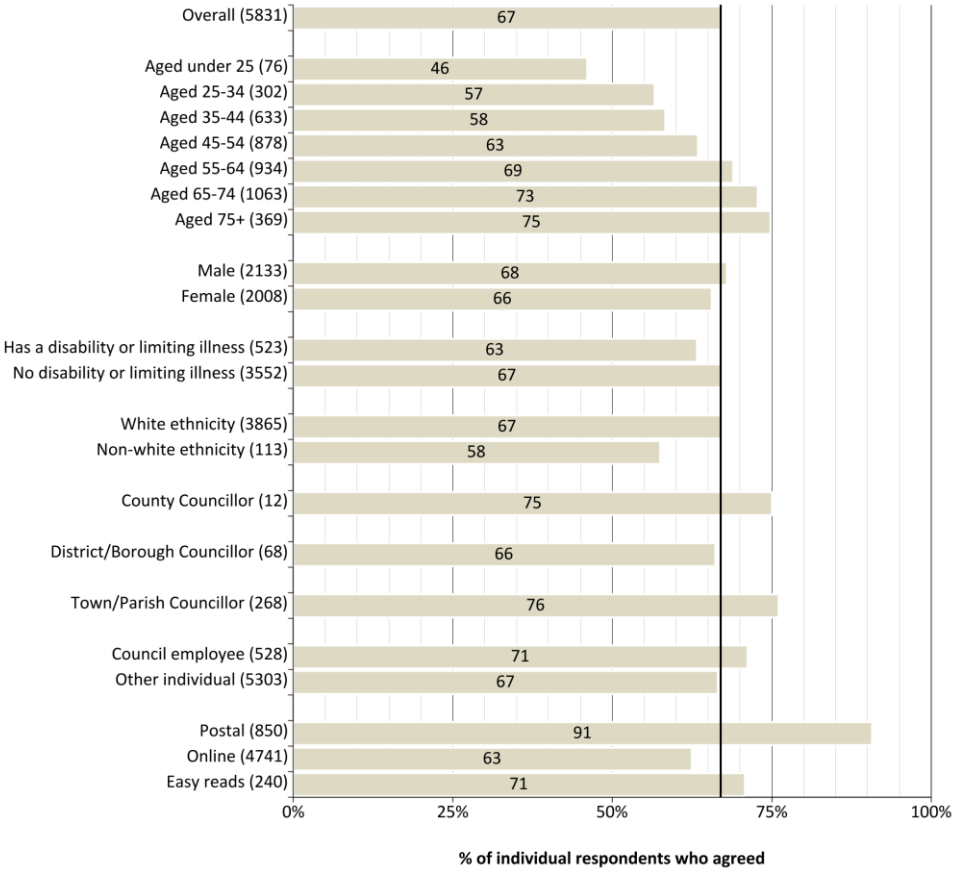
To what extent do you agree or disagree that we need to make changes to respond to these challenges?
Base: All individual respondents (number of respondents shown in brackets)



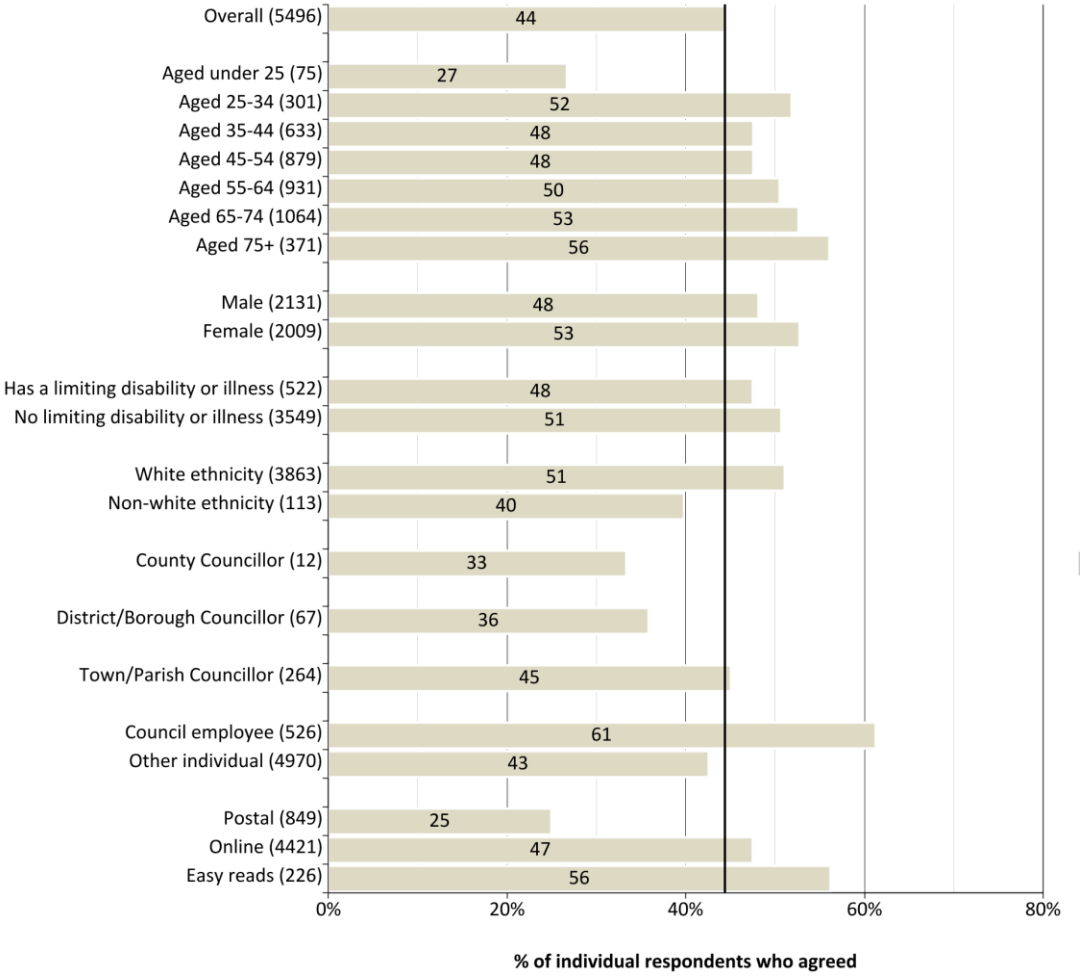
To what extent do you agree or disagree that there is a need to reduce the number of councils in Northamptonshire?
Base: All individual respondents (number of respondents shown in brackets)



To what extent do you agree or disagree that a number of unitary councils should be introduced in Northamptonshire?
Base: All individual respondents (number of respondents shown in brackets)



To what extent do you agree or disagree with the specific proposal above, to replace the existing councils with two, new unitary councils: North Northants and West Northants?
Base: All individual respondents (number of respondents shown in brackets)



Appendix D: Full questionnaire preambles and main questions

There are currently eight local authorities providing council services across Northamptonshire in a 'two-tier' structure, in which services are divided between the County Council and seven borough or district councils.

Unfortunately, the County Council has over-spent its budget in previous years and faces significant on-going budget deficits, as a result of which the government has taken the unusual step of appointing external Commissioners to take over many of the County Council's functions. Furthermore, the government has now written to all eight councils inviting them to urgently co-operate in putting forward proposals by the end of August to restructure local government in Northamptonshire.

Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we need to make changes to respond to these challenges? [5]

In response, the councils are considering a proposal that the number of councils (the county council and seven boroughs or districts) should be reduced.

Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that there is a need to reduce the number of councils in Northamptonshire?[6]

The government has defined a set of criteria, and suggested that instead of the current arrangement where a county council and a number of district councils run different services, a number of unitary (or 'single tier') councils would be appropriate for Northamptonshire. This is where one local authority runs all the council services in a given area.

Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that a number of unitary councils should be introduced in Northamptonshire? [7]

[5] **Easy Read:** *There are 8 councils in Northamptonshire. Some services are run by the County Council and others are run by district and borough councils. The County Council has problems with the way it is run and problems paying for the services it provides. The government says things have to change and so it has asked the councils to find a new way of working.* Do you agree or disagree that the councils need to make a change?

[6] **Easy Read:** *To solve the problems the councils think that in future there might need to be less councils than there are now.* Do you agree or disagree that there need to be less councils?

[7] **Easy Read:** *The government says that there should be unitary councils in Northamptonshire. Unitary councils run all the services in an area.* Do you agree or disagree with this?

From the options that meet the government's criteria (please see page 4 of the consultation document), all eight Northamptonshire councils are considering a proposal that the current two-tier system of eight councils should be abolished, and be replaced ***by two new single-tier or unitary councils****:*

- ***North Northants:*** *which would comprise the areas of East Northamptonshire, Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough councils*
- ***West Northants:*** *which would comprise the areas of Daventry, Northampton and South Northamptonshire councils*

The proposal for two unitary councils is intended to treat all parts of the county fairly, simplify local government and make efficiency savings more achievable, aiming to deliver services in a sustainable way.

Q4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the specific proposal above, to replace the existing councils with two, new unitary councils: North Northants and West Northants?[8]

Response options (for all 4 questions):[9]

PLEASE TICK ✓ ONE BOX ONLY

Strongly agree	**Tend to agree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Tend to disagree**	**Strongly disagree**	Don't know
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

[8] **Easy Read:** The councils have a possible plan to set up 2 new unitary councils. One to cover districts and boroughs in the west (Daventry, Northampton and South Northamptonshire) and one for the districts and boroughs in the north (Corby, East Northamptonshire, Kettering and Wellingborough). Do you agree or disagree with this?

[9] **Easy Read:** I really agree with this/I sort of agree with this/I do not agree or disagree/I sort of disagree with this/I really disagree with this/Don't know