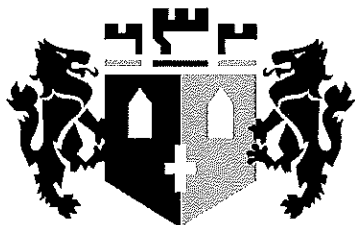




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**NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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

Draft report of findings



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NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Northampton Borough Council

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

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

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

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

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

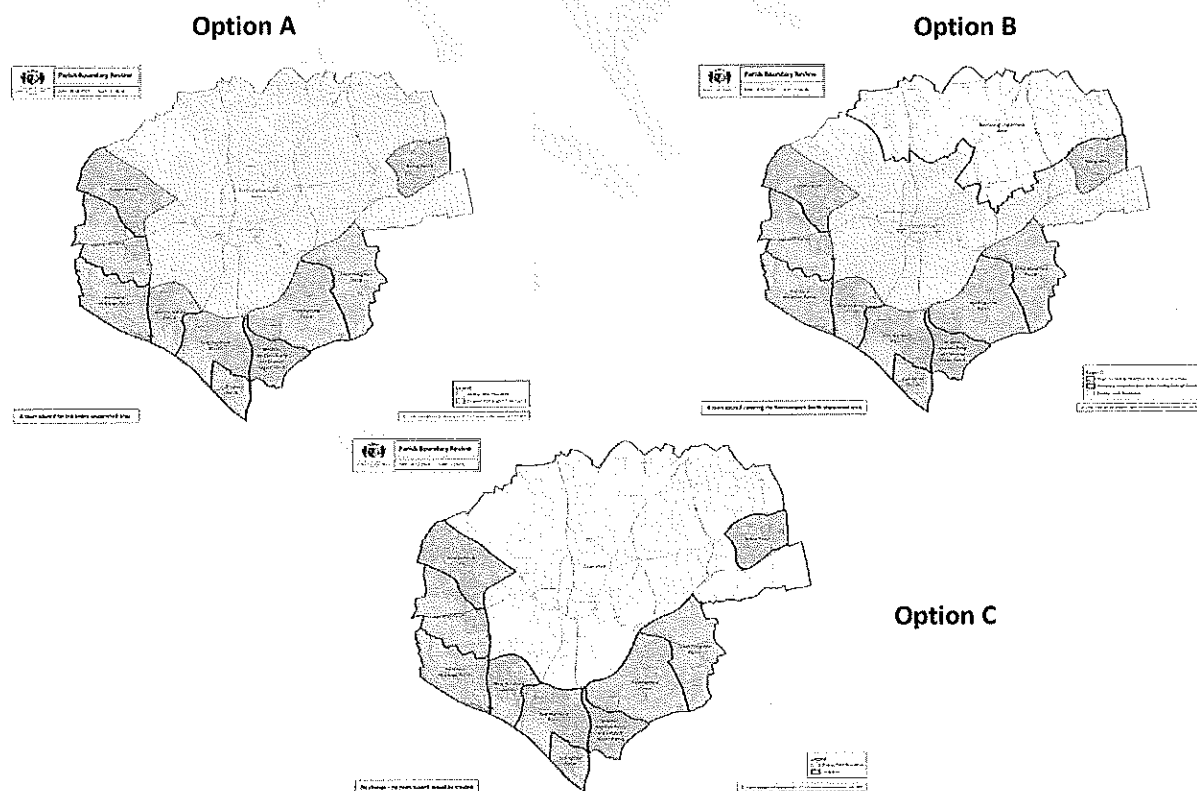
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1. Executive Summary

Summary of main findings

The engagement context

- 1.1 All District Councils, including the County Council, are currently engaged in a restructure of local government across Northamptonshire. The process is likely to result in the abolition of Northampton Borough and the other District Councils, and the creation of a new unitary authority to provide all services in the area.
- 1.2 In this context, Northampton Borough Council (NBC) is considering the benefits of creating a new Town Council for the town of Northampton to: ensure residents have a stronger voice in the provision of services and the needs of the town; preserve the town's historic identity and heritage; and promote its interests.
- 1.3 Three options have been proposed for the area a new Town Council might cover (though respondents and participants were also invited to put forth any preferred alternatives):
 - A: Create a new Town Council covering the whole of the Northampton area where no Parish/Community Councils currently exist;
 - B: Create a new Town Council for a part of Northampton including the town centre (the area covered by the Parliamentary Constituency of Northampton South)¹; or
 - C. Do not create a Town Council and leave the current unparished area as it is now.



¹ Under this option, areas of the Borough that are currently unparished and are not covered by any new Town Council could make separate proposals to create one or more parish or community councils.

The commission and consultation process

- 1.4 NBC commenced a two-stage consultation process in February 2019. The first 'engagement' phase as reported here was designed to gather views on the three options outlined above - as well as any proposed alternatives. These views will now inform the single proposal to be consulted on during the second 'formal consultation' phase to follow.
- 1.5 The engagement period started on 26th February 2019 and ended on 1st April 2019. Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - was appointed by NBC to:

Design and analyse an open consultation questionnaire (which was available via the Council's website and on paper), to which there were 210 responses from individuals and 9 responses from organisations;

Facilitate one forum with five local stakeholders and members of the business community - and another with around 25 councillors from Northampton's ten existing parish councils;

Convene and facilitate two focus groups with 15 randomly-selected members of the public (one in the northern and one in the central areas of Northampton); and

Independently report all of these elements (plus eight written submissions received from West Hunsbury Parish Council, Weston Favell Village Residents' Association; and six local residents from the Far Cotton and Delapre area).

The report

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

Main findings

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

- 1.7 Almost 9 in 10 (88%) individual respondents to the open questionnaire and all nine organisations reported they were either very aware or fairly aware of possible changes to local government in the area.

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

- 1.8 The majority of individual respondents to the open questionnaire and all nine organisations said that it is important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town (89%), preserves the town's historic identity/heritage (87%) and delivers services at a local level (85%).

- 1.9 In the focus groups and forums, it is chiefly for these reasons (promoting the interests of Northampton and its residents, preserving the town's historic identity/heritage and ensuring local service delivery) that most participants supported the *principle* of having a new Town Council, particularly within a more remote unitary local government structure.

Opinion is divided over the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished

- 1.10 Just over half (51%) of individual questionnaire respondents agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished, whilst around two fifths (41%) disagree. The organisational responses were more positive: two thirds (6 of 9) agreed.
- 1.11 As noted to some extent above, the main reasons for supporting the proposal were that a Town Council would: promote the interests of Northampton and its residents; retain decision-making at a local level; preserve the town's historic identity/heritage; and ensure local service delivery by residents with a care for their neighbourhoods. Moreover, it was suggested that a new Town Council would mitigate against the fear that as other areas of Northamptonshire are already largely parished, Northampton may not have as strong a voice as they would have within the proposed new unitary structure.
- 1.12 The most common reasons for opposition or concern were around: potentially unaffordable council tax rises for local residents; 'unnecessary bureaucracy' and the potential for damaging and divisive local politics; the demarcation of responsibility; and the availability (or lack thereof) of enough high-calibre people willing to stand as Town Councillors - especially in the less affluent areas of the town.
- 1.13 Taking the latter point above, a related concern (as raised frequently in the public focus groups) was that the creation of a new Town Council would simply be a case of 'money for old rope' if it largely comprises existing NBC councillors. This was a particular issue for public participants due to their negative perceptions of the Borough Council, fuelled by what they described as: the 'ruination' of the Queen Eleanor Cross; the 'too small and dangerous' new bus station; the 'destruction' of the old market square; the general lack of regeneration; and the 'short-sighted' rejection of IKEA (which ultimately went to Milton Keynes, bringing apparently significant benefits to the area).
- 1.14 Furthermore, the fact that many of those who would be willing to serve as councillors may not have sufficient understanding of the 'unique' needs of the businesses within Northampton town centre was raised at the stakeholder forum. To overcome this, it was suggested that NBC look to emulate other Town Councils (like Kendal) that: *"co-opt local shop owners onto their committees and so on. Not sure what they do about voting powers but they meet regularly through those connections with co-opt members"*.

Option A is preferred to Option B – but many smaller sized alternatives were proposed

- 1.15 Around half (47%) of individual questionnaire respondents felt that a new Town Council should cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst around a fifth (19%) said it should cover only part of the Borough, including the town centre (Option B). A further one in three (34%) stated they would prefer the Town Council to cover an alternative area in a different part of the Borough.
- 1.16 Three organisations felt a Town Council should cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst the same number felt it should cover only part of the Borough including the town centre (Option B). A further two organisations felt it should cover an alternative area in a different part of the Borough.

1.17 In the deliberative sessions, it was generally agreed that Option A covers too large an area and population to be properly functional and manageable - though a handful of residents favoured it as it would likely be less costly for residents, and have a stronger voice and thus more influence within an unitary structure. For most though, it was the 'least worst option' insofar as they considered Option B to be inherently unfair to those (many) residents remaining in unparished areas with no local voice - though it was acknowledged that some of these areas could and probably would take the opportunity to establish their own parish councils.

1.18 Inasmuch as neither of the two options were widely endorsed, it is unsurprising that several alternatives were proposed, the most common of which were:

A Town Council for the whole of Northampton Borough, including existing parishes;

Two town councils (one for the central and one for the northern area of the town);

More smaller parish councils;

Enlarging Northampton's existing parish councils so that they incorporate the unparished areas; and

A smaller Town Council comprising the town centre only, supported by parish councils elsewhere.

1.19 With regard to the latter suggestion, it was strongly urged though that a 'town centre council' would also have to include some residential areas, as the resident population of the central area would be too small to sustain it.

1.20 There were also comments in support of individual parish councils for Kingsthorpe, Delapre and Far Cotton (and several submissions were also received in support of parishing the latter two areas).

Opinion is divided over whether a new Town Council should minimise costs to residents or take responsibility for as many services as possible

1.21 Two thirds of questionnaire respondents provided responses that fell at the extremes of the scale provided – 37% selected 'option 9' (Town Council should minimise the cost to residents), whilst 29% chose 'option 1' (Town Council should take responsibility for as many local services as possible). A further one in ten (10%) chose the middle option – 'option 5'.

1.22 When percentages are combined, there is very little difference in respondents' preferences between options 1-4 (Town Council should take responsibility for as many local services as possible; 44%) and options 6-9 (Town Council should minimise the cost to residents; 46%). Opinion was also almost equally divided among the organisations responding.

1.23 Public focus group participants generally favoured the middle ground when asked this question. That is: *"we'd like to see a council provide as much as it can for a reasonable cost. It's a balance of cost and deliverance"*. Starting small and building from there was also suggested by a few participants, who felt that residents would not mind paying more for increased local service provision if they are able to see the Town Council achieving results from the outset.

There is a range of opinion on what services a Town Council could or should provide

1.24 Individual questionnaire respondents rated *markets and tourism* as the service that is most appropriate for a new Town Council to manage, with over three fifths (63%) selecting this option. Over half also

reported that the *upkeep of parks and open spaces* (58%), *litter and dog waste bins* (54%), *community centres* (54%) and *entertainment and the arts* (50%) should be part of a new Town Council's remit.

- 1.25 Services that less than half of questionnaire respondents thought were appropriate for a new Town Council to manage were: *volunteering/support for vulnerable sections of the community* (47%), *footpaths and maintenance* (45%), *traffic calming measures* (38%) and *village greens* (38%). Around a fifth (18%) thought that none of the services should be managed by the new Town Council.
- 1.26 Six of the nine organisations responding to the questionnaire felt that *markets and tourism* and *entertainment and the arts* were services which a new Town Council should manage. Five of nine also reported that *volunteering/support for vulnerable sections of the community*, *litter and dog waste bins*, *upkeep of parks and open spaces* and *footpaths and maintenance* should be part of any new Town Council's remit.
- 1.27 Unsurprisingly in light of the comments made about the importance of doing so, public focus group participants suggested that one of the main functions of a new Town Council should be to protect Northampton's history, heritage and culture. Other common suggestions for service provision were: arranging community events; markets and tourism; managing community centres and parks and open spaces; footpath maintenance; and simply improving perceptions of Northampton which was described as somewhat 'unsexy' and 'undynamic'. It was also considered essential that a Town Council would contribute to planning processes, chiefly to ensure the protection of important local heritage buildings and features from destruction through unsympathetic development.

Certain areas are favoured for parish or community councils regardless of whether a new Town Council is established

- 1.28 Over two fifths (41%) of questionnaire respondents felt that other parish or community councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough, as did most (7 of 9) organisations. The areas most commonly suggested were: Far Cotton, Delapre, Kingsthorpe and the Eastern District.
- 1.29 In terms of the services or facilities these parish or community councils could or should provide, the most popular suggestions were: park/recreation ground/play areas; community centres; dealing with traffic, funding, recycling/litter and planning issues; and libraries.

2. The Consultation Process

Overview of the consultation

Background to the review

- 2.1 All District Councils, including the County Council, are currently engaged in a restructure of local government across Northamptonshire. The process is likely to result in the abolition of Northampton Borough and the other District Councils, and the creation of a new unitary authority to provide all services in the area.
- 2.2 In this context, Northampton Borough Council (NBC) is considering the benefits of creating a new Town Council for the town of Northampton to: ensure residents have a stronger voice in the provision of services and the needs of the town; preserve the town's historic identity and heritage; and promote its interests.
- 2.3 Three options have been proposed for the area a new Town Council might cover (though respondents and participants were also invited to put forth any preferred alternatives):
 - A: Create a new Town Council covering the whole of the Northampton area where no Parish/Community Councils currently exist;
 - B: Create a new Town Council for a part of Northampton including the town centre (the area covered by the Parliamentary Constituency of Northampton South)²; or
 - C. Do not create a Town Council and leave the current unparished area as it is now.

The commission

- 2.4 NBC commenced a two-stage consultation process in February 2019. The first 'engagement' phase as reported here was designed to gather views on the three options outlined above - as well as any proposed alternatives. These views will now inform the single proposal to be consulted on during the second 'formal consultation' phase to follow.
- 2.5 The engagement period started on 26th February 2019 and ended on 1st April 2019. Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - was appointed by NBC to; design and analyse an open consultation questionnaire (which was available via the Council's website and on paper); facilitate one forum with local stakeholders and members of the business community - and another with councillors from Northampton's ten existing parish councils; convene and facilitate two focus groups with randomly-selected members of the public; and independently report all of these elements.

² Under this option, areas of the Borough that are currently unparished and are not covered by any new Town Council could make separate proposals to create one or more parish or community councils.

Quantitative engagement

Open consultation questionnaire

- 2.6 The open consultation questionnaire was available for anyone to complete via the Council's website and on paper and 210 responses were received from individuals and 9 from organisations. The questionnaire included questions about:

The extent to which people were aware of the proposed changes to local government in Northamptonshire;

The importance or unimportance of having an organisation that preserves the town's heritage and history, promotes its interest and delivers services at a local level;

The principle of a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished;

The three proposed options;

The services a new Town Council could or should manage; and

Whether any other parish or community councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough regardless of whether a new Town Council is created.

- 2.7 It should be noted that open questionnaires are important forms of engagement in being inclusive and giving people an opportunity to express their views; but they are not random sample surveys of a given population - so they cannot normally be expected to be representative of the general balance of opinion. For example, the young are usually under-represented while the elderly are over-represented; and the more motivated groups or areas are also typically over-represented compared with others.

Deliberative engagement

Focus groups and forums

- 2.8 A series of deliberative sessions were held in February and March 2019: one with five local stakeholders and members of the business community; one with around 25 councillors from Northampton's ten existing parish councils; and two with 15 randomly-selected members of the public (one in the northern and one in the central areas of Northampton).
- 2.9 The stakeholders, business representatives and parish councillors were invited to their respective meetings by NBC, whereas the randomly-selected members of the public were recruited by random-digit telephone dialling from ORS' Social Research Call Centre. Having been initially contacted by phone, all participants were then written to - to confirm the invitation and the arrangements; and those who agreed to come then received telephone or written reminders shortly before each meeting. Such recruitment by telephone is an effective way of ensuring that the participants are independent and broadly representative of the wider community.
- 2.10 In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors, and the venues at which the focus groups met were readily accessible. The random telephone recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria – including, for example: gender; age; ethnicity; social grade; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI). Overall, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents and, as standard good practice, were recompensed for their time and efforts in travelling and taking part.

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

Deliberative events: the agenda

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

Submissions

- 2.13 Eight written submissions were received from the following organisations and individuals: West Hunsbury Parish Council; Weston Favell Village Residents' Association; and six local residents from the Far Cotton and Delapre area.

The report

- 2.14 This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of respondents and participants on the proposals for a new Town Council and Parish and/or Community Councils for the Northampton Borough Council Area. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them - but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse any opinions but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by those taking part.

3. Open Consultation Questionnaire

Introduction

- 3.1 A consultation document outlining the issues under consideration was produced by NBC, and a corresponding consultation questionnaire was available for completion online (on the Council's website) and on paper. The questionnaire included questions about: the current political situation in Northampton; the possible role of a new organisation; the proposal to create a new Town Council; what area a Town Council should cover; priorities of the Town Council; and if any Parish Councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough. The questionnaire was available in online and paper formats between 26th February and 1st April 2019 and 219 responses were received in total.
- 3.2 Of the 219 responses, 9 were received from organisations. Responses from organisations might represent the views of large numbers of individuals or key stakeholders who might be particularly informed about the impacts on their members, or they could raise technical arguments that cannot easily be summarised. For these reasons, ORS typically reports the views of individual respondents and organisations separately.

Interpretation of the data and response profile

- 3.3 Graphics are used extensively in this report to make it as user friendly as possible. The pie charts and other graphics show the proportions (percentages) of respondents making relevant responses. Where possible, the colours of the charts have been standardised with a 'traffic light' system in which:
- Green shades represent positive responses
 - Beige shades represent neither positive nor negative responses
 - Red shades represent negative responses
- The bolder shades are used to highlight responses at the 'extremes', for example, very satisfied or very dissatisfied.
- 3.4 Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of "don't know" categories, or multiple answers.
- 3.5 The engagement questionnaire contained a number of open-ended questions and, as with most engagement of this nature, some respondents do address the specific questions asked, but some respondents choose to focus on other issues not necessarily directly related to the question asked; however, in either case we have sought to classify and quantify the number of mentions of each comment.
- 3.6 It should be noted that open questionnaires are important forms of engagement in being inclusive and giving people an opportunity to express their views; but they are not random sample surveys of a given population - so they cannot normally be expected to be representative of the general population (and, as such, results indicate the views of those who choose to respond, rather than acting as a statistically reliable guide to the general population's views).

- 3.7 For example, the table below summarising the 210 individual respondents to the questionnaire shows that very few responses were received from the very youngest and oldest residents, whereas over four fifths of respondents (81%) were aged between 35 and 74. Also 55% of responses were from individuals living in and around the town centre area that would be parished under both options.

Table 1: Open questionnaire responses by demographics and area

Characteristic	Unweighted Count	Unweighted Valid %
BY AGE		
16 to 24	3	2%
25 to 34	17	11%
35 to 44	25	16%
45 to 54	27	17%
55 to 64	40	25%
65 to 74	37	23%
75 to 84	8	5%
85 or over	1	1%
Total valid responses	158	100%
<i>Not known</i>	52	-
BY GENDER		
Male	96	61%
Female	62	39%
Total valid responses	158	100%
<i>Not known</i>	52	-
BY ETHNIC GROUP		
White	135	90%
Non-white	15	10%
Total valid responses	150	100%
<i>Not known</i>	60	-
BY WHETHER RESPONDENT HAS A DISABILITY		
Yes	30	20%
No	123	80%
Total valid responses	153	100%
<i>Not known</i>	57	-
BY PARISH		
Billing	2	1%
Duston	8	5%
Great Houghton	1	1%
Hardingstone	1	1%
Hunsbury Meadow	1	1%
Upton	4	3%
West Hunsbury	5	3%
East Hunsbury	1	1%
Wootton	3	2%
Unparished Area	121	82%
Total valid responses	147	100%
<i>Not known</i>	63	-

BY OPTION A AREAS

Existing parished area	26	18%
Rest of borough	122	82%
Total valid responses	148	100%
<i>Not known</i>	62	-

BY OPTION B AREAS

Existing parished area	26	18%
Proposed Town Council area under option B	81	55%
Area remaining unparished under option B	41	28%
Total valid responses	148	100%
<i>Not known</i>	62	-

Duplicate and Co-ordinated Responses

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

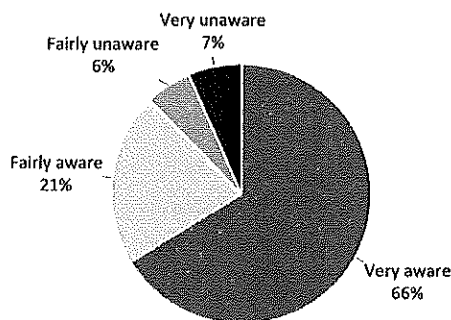
Main Findings (individuals)

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

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

3.9 Almost 9 in 10 (88%) respondents reported they were either very aware or fairly aware of the possible change to local government in the area.

Figure 1: Awareness of possible change to local government in the area
Base: All individuals (210)



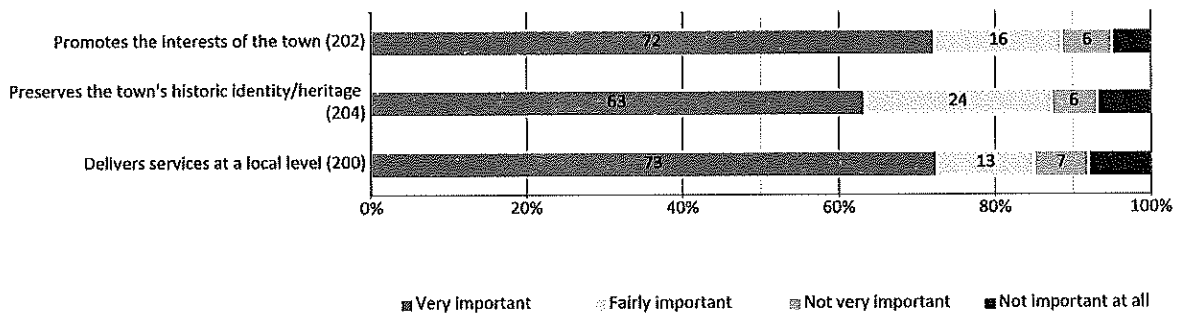
It is considered important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, preserves its historic identity/heritage and delivers services at a local level

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

- 3.10 The majority of respondents said that it is important to them to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town (89%), preserves the town’s historic identity/heritage (87%) and delivers services at a local level (85%).

Figure 2: Possible role of new organisation

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



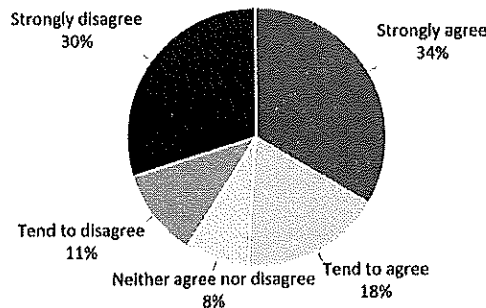
Opinion is divided over the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished

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

- 3.11 Over half (51%) of respondents agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished, whilst around two fifths (41%) disagree.

Figure 3: Agreement with proposal to create a new Town Council

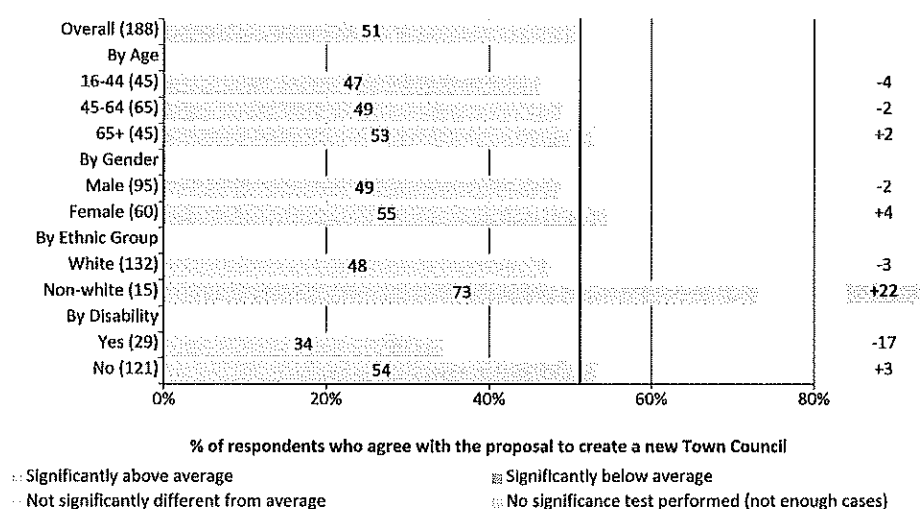
Base: All individuals (188)



Differences by demographic sub-groups

3.12 The following chart shows how views varied across different demographic subgroups of respondents who agree with the proposal to create a new Town Council. For example, you can see that female respondents were slightly more likely to agree, whilst those aged 16-44 were slightly less likely to (please note that the differences between sub-groups are indicative only).

Figure 4: Agreement with proposal to create a new Town Council: by demographic sub-group (Base: All individual respondents)



Please explain the reasons for your answer.

3.13 Respondents were given the opportunity to explain why they agreed or disagreed with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished. 154 respondents provided comments and a summary is provided below:

Figure 5: Reasons for agreeing/disagreeing with proposal to create a new Town Council
 Base: All individuals who made comments (154)

Explanation for answer	No. of comments	%	
GENERAL ACCEPTANCE / SUPPORT FOR CHANGE	Need to keep Councils local/local decision making/the interests of the area/taking into account local needs	42	27
	Need to preserve town identity/local town needs its own voice	27	18
	Generally support proposals/agree with the need for change	4	3
	More accountability with one council	1	1
CONCERN / OPPOSITION FOR CHANGE	Proposals will increase council tax/just an additional cost	22	14
	Generally disagree with proposals/don't want change	19	12
	Proposals will create added/unnecessary bureaucracy	19	12
	Won't work/make a difference/improve anything	9	6
	Need to keep Councils local/need to have the interests of the area/taking into account local needs	8	5
Need to preserve town identity/local town needs its own voice	6	4	

	Explanation for answer	No. of comments	%
ALTERNATIVE	Waste of money/won't save money	5	3
	Less accountability with one council	3	2
	Far Cotte should have its own parish	6	4
	The whole town including current parish councils	5	3
	Kingsthorpe should have its own parish	5	3
	Delapre should have its own parish	4	3
	Many smaller parishes instead	3	2
	A smaller council/only town centre	2	1
	Other alternative proposals	5	3
	OTHER COMMENTS	Need more information to make decision	4
Consultation is flawed/loaded question		2	1
Interesting comment		1	1
Other		56	36

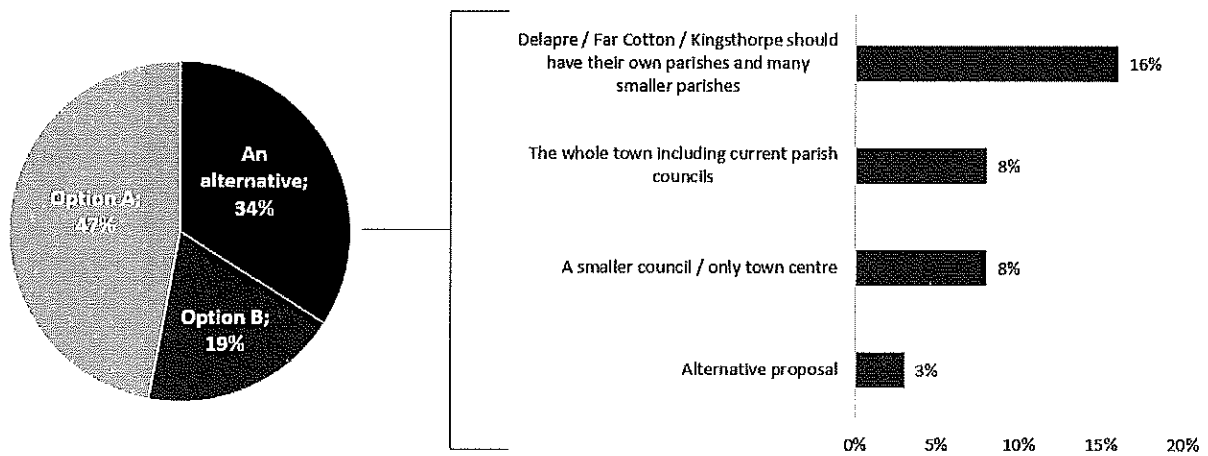
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Option A is preferred to Option B – but many smaller sized alternatives were proposed

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

- 3.14 Around half (47%) of respondents reported that a new Town Council should cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst around a fifth (19%) said it should cover only part of the Borough, including the town centre (Option B). It is worth pointing out that those currently living in the area which would remain unparished under Option B (i.e. the north of the borough), were more likely to choose Option A.
- 3.15 A further one in three (34%) stated they would prefer the Town Council to cover an alternative area in a different part of the Borough. Looking at the alternative proposals in more depth, 16% reported that Delapre / Far Cotton / Kingsthorpe should have their own parishes or there should be many smaller parishes. Less than 1 in 10 (8%) said that there should be a single Town Council covering the whole of the Borough (i.e. an 'even bigger Option A'), whilst the same proportion (8%) stated that there should be a smaller Town Council / one only covering the town centre (i.e. a 'smaller Option B'). Less than 1 in 20 (3%) provided other, alternative proposals.

Figure 6: Parts of the Borough a new Town Council should cover
 Base: All individuals (172)



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

- 3.16 Respondents were given the opportunity to expand on and outline why they supported Option A, Option B or explain any alternatives they prefer. 127 respondents provided comments and a summary is provided below:

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

Base: All individuals who made comments (127)

	Explanation for answer	No. of comments	%
GENERAL ACCEPTANCE / SUPPORT FOR CHANGE	Support option A - the whole of the Borough	13	10
	Easier to manage one area	3	2
CONCERN / OPPOSITION FOR CHANGE	Generally disagree with proposals/don't want change	24	19
	Disagree with option B - part of the Borough including the town centre	5	4
	Proposals will increase council tax	2	2
	Less accountability with one council	1	1
	Proposals spread councils too thin	1	1
ALTERNATIVE	Proposals will create added/unnecessary bureaucracy	1	1
	The whole town including current parish councils	14	11
	A smaller council/only town centre	13	10
	Far Cotton should have its own parish	11	9
	Delapre should have its own parish	11	9
	Many smaller parishes instead	3	2
	Kingsthorpe should have its own parish	2	2
Other alternative proposals	5	4	
OTHER COMMENTS	Concerns over town identity/our town needs its own voice	14	11
	Councils should be kept local/have the interests of the area/local needs	14	11
	Consultation is flawed/loaded question	3	2
	Need more information to make decision	2	2
	Other	46	36

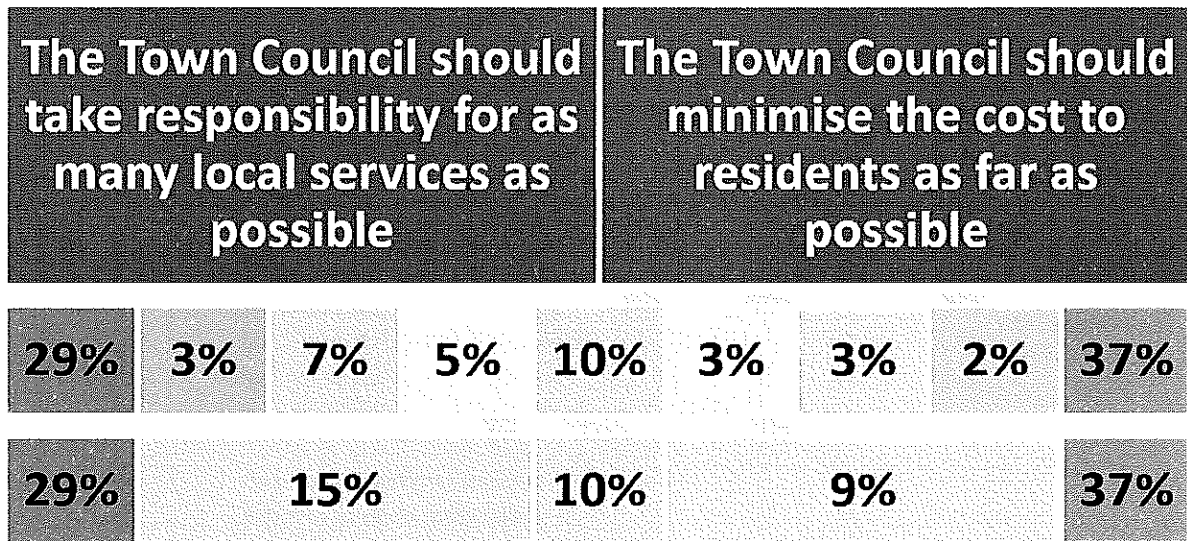
Opinion is divided over whether a new Town Council should minimise costs to residents or take responsibility for as many services as possible

How would you prioritise between the following two approaches?

- 3.17 The graphic below helps to illustrate how respondents would prioritise between having a Town Council which takes responsibility for as many local services as possible versus having a Town Council which minimises the cost to residents as far as possible.

- 3.18 Two thirds of respondents provided responses which fell at the extremes of the scale – 37% selected option 9 (Town Council should minimise the cost to residents), whilst 29% answered option 1 (Town Council should take responsibility for as many local services as possible). A further one in ten (10%) chose the middle option – option 5.
- 3.19 When percentages are combined, there is very little difference in respondents’ preferences between options 1-4 (Town Council should take responsibility for as many local services as possible; 44%) and options 6-9 (Town Council should minimise the cost to residents; 46%).

Figure 8: Taking responsibility for as many services as possible vs minimising costs for residents
 Base: All individuals (174)

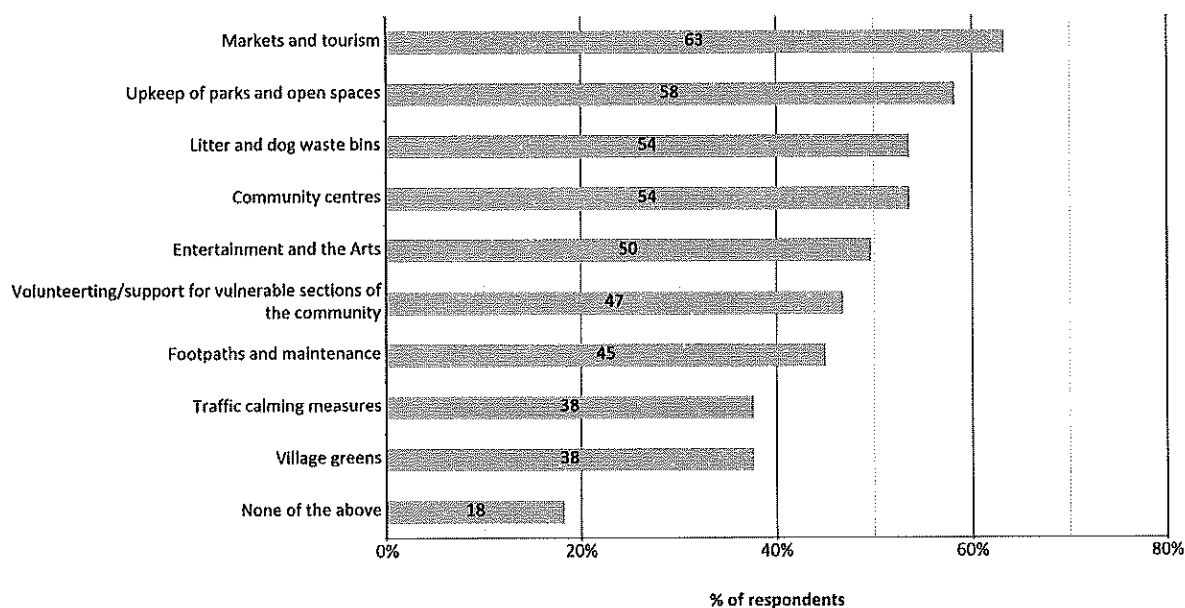


There is a range of opinion on what services a Town Council could or should provide

Which of the following, if any, do you think it would be appropriate for a new Town Council to manage?

- 3.20 Respondents rated *markets and tourism* as the service which is most appropriate for a new Town Council to manage, with over three fifths (63%) selecting this option. Over half also reported that the *upkeep of parks and open spaces* (58%), *litter and dog waste bins* (54%), *community centres* (54%) and *entertainment and the arts* (50%) should be part of a new Town Council’s remit.
- 3.21 Services which less than half of respondents thought were appropriate for a new Town Council to manage were: *volunteering/support for vulnerable sections of the community* (47%), *footpaths and maintenance* (45%), *traffic calming measures* (38%) and *village greens* (38%). Around a fifth (18%) thought that none of the services should be managed by the new Town Council.

Figure 9: Appropriate services for a new Town Council to manage
 Base: All individuals (175)

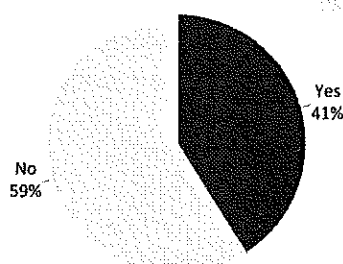


Certain areas are favoured for parish or community councils regardless of whether a new Town Council is established

Regardless of whether any new Town Council is created, do you believe any other parish or community councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough?

3.22 Over two fifths (41%) of respondents think that other parish or community councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough.

Figure 10: Whether other Parish Councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough
Base: All individuals (178)



If yes, please explain what areas they should cover, and what services they should provide.

3.23 Respondents who think that other parish/community councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough were asked to explain what areas they should cover and what services they should provide. 59 respondents provided comments and a summary is provided below:

Figure 11: Location of new Parish Councils and services they should provide
Base: All individuals who think other parish/community councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough (59)

Explanation for answer		No. of comments	%
AREA COVERED	Far Cotton area	26	44
	Delapre area	22	37
	Kingsthorpe area	9	15
	Eastern district area	4	7
	Other specific area	7	12
SERVICE PROVIDED	Park/recreation ground/play areas facilities	19	32
	Community centre facilities	11	19
	Dealing with traffic issues	7	12
	Dealing with funding issues	5	8
	Dealing with recycling/litter issues	4	7
	Dealing with planning issues	4	7
	Library facilities	4	7
	Dealing with housing issues	1	2
	Other specific service	17	29

Explanation for answer	No. of comments	%	
OTHER COMMENTS	Other	21	36

Organisations in the open engagement questionnaire

3.24 In total, 9 organisations and their representatives responded to the questionnaire, including: 3 residents associations (Far Cotton; WASPRA, Kingsthorpe; and Rectory Farm), 3 Parish Councils (Billing; Great Houghton; and Hardingstone), 1 charitable organisation (Community Spaces Northampton), 1 political party (Northamptonshire Independents) and the Northampton Business Improvement District.

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

All organisations (9 out of 9) were aware of the possible change to local government in the area;

All (9 out of 9) felt it was important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, preserves the town's historic identity/heritage and delivers services at a local level;

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

Two thirds (6 out of 9) agreed with the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished;

3 organisations felt a Town Council should cover the whole of the Borough that is currently unparished (Option A), whilst the same number felt it should cover only part of the Borough including the town centre (Option B). A further 2 organisations felt it should cover an alternative area in a different part of the Borough, whilst 1 organisation provided no response to this question.

3.27 Looking at Town Council priorities:

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

Two thirds (6 out of 9) felt that *markets and tourism* and *entertainment and the arts* were services which a new Town Council should manage. Over half (5 out of 9) also reported that *volunteering/support for vulnerable sections of the community*, *litter and dog waste bins*, *upkeep of parks and open spaces* and *footpaths and maintenance* should be part of any new Town Council's remit.

3.28 Thinking about the creation of other parish councils:

Most organisations (7 out of 9) believed other parish or community councils should be created elsewhere in the Borough (for example, WASPRA would like one to be created in the Kingsthorpe area).

Other comments by organisations

- 3.29 When asked about the proposal to create a new Town Council, a couple of organisations noted that it was important for one to be created as it would help to reflect the strong culture and preserve the rich heritage of Northampton, for example *'within the town/Borough area, there are many valuable assets that must be preserved, protected and invested in, not only for the benefit of local residents, but it is important for the heritage and history of the whole county'*.
- 3.30 In terms of the areas which a Town Council should cover, one organisation commented that *'a large council does not fulfil the needs of local communities outside the town centre'*, whilst another organisation stated that *'although we would prefer a smaller Town Council we believe this is unrealistic within the tight timescale...we believe the proposed Town Council should take over the whole unparished area with new Parish Councils created as and when this is feasible'*.
- 3.31 One organisation did have concerns however about the creation of many Parish Councils and mentioned, *'having lots of Parish Councils will create too many divisions and would weaken the Town Council'*.

DRAFT

4. Focus Groups and Forums

Introduction

- 4.1 This chapter reports the views from the deliberative sessions with randomly-recruited members of the public, stakeholders/business people and parish councillors.
- 4.2 All sessions were independently facilitated by ORS. Each meeting began with a presentation or explanation that outlined the context and background to the Review, which was followed by a series of discussions around:
- The principle of a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished;
 - The three proposed options (and any proposed alternatives); and
 - The services a new Town Council could/should manage.

- 4.3 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.

Main Findings from Focus Groups with Members of the Public

The principle of a Town Council is supported

- 4.4 Public participants generally agreed that a Town Council would be important within a more remote unitary local government structure in: representing residents, giving them a voice and enabling better information dissemination on a local level; and protecting Northampton's identity and considerable history and heritage. Some typical comments were:

"There'll be more of a distance if you do want to make a comment or complaint about anything" (North)

"I understand the argument that the parish councils at the moment have more ground level local representation, whereas we don't. If we were to have something there we would have better representation and a stronger voice that we could pass on to the larger council. If it means local people are represented and have a voice it's a good shout really" (North)

"We do want a voice and to be able to know what's going on" (North)

"It is definitely important to have a voice that's listened to" (Central)

"We might lose our identity. If they're looking across the whole area we could lose our individualism and we might get lost. What's needed for one town may not be needed for another" (Central)

"I think it's very important that we keep our history, heritage and identity" (North)

"The history of the town definitely needs protecting" (Central)

- 4.5 Participants also commented on the need to protect the interests of town centre businesses (particularly in the context of out-of-town retail parks drawing people away) - as well as the need to retain a focus on important local services (allotments for example) that may not be a priority for a unitary authority.

"There are lots of out-of-town places like Rushton Lakes that pull people away from the town centre, so it would be good to have an organisation that focuses on the town" (Central)

"Things like market gardening, allotments; the unitary authority won't be interested in things like that. That's why you need your parish councils" (Central)

- 4.6 Importantly, though, most people placed a caveat on their endorsement of a new Town Council in principle: it would have to (quickly) be seen to be delivering results for Northampton and its residents.

"I don't mind paying if I can see some changes and results" (Central)

"The council tax increase would be a lot to some people I know who are barely scraping by so we would have to see results" (Central)

"I'd like to see a council that's worth something again; that's worth voting for and that can do something" (Central)

- 4.7 Only one person was expressly opposed to the creation of a new Town Council on the basis that: *"if you have a Town Council you're back to where you were originally with the two-council system. They're recreating exactly what they've got now. It feels like exactly the same structure as you have at the moment, just called something different". (North)*

There is, though, scepticism about the implementation of a new council in practice, mainly based on negative perceptions of NBC

- 4.8 There was considerable scepticism in both groups about how well a new Town Council might work in practice, which appeared to be fuelled by poor previous experiences or negative perceptions of NBC. In giving examples, participants primarily cited: the 'ruination' of the Queen Eleanor Cross; the 'too small and dangerous' new bus station; the 'destruction' of the old market square; the general lack of regeneration; and the rejection of IKEA (which ultimately went to Milton Keynes, bringing apparently significant benefits to the area). Some of the many typical comments were as follows.

"A lot of our historic things are just sitting there rotting away. They don't have the funds to do them up because they're wasting them on useless things that residents don't want" (Central)

"I know the Borough Council doesn't have a lot of money but they do seem to procrastinate. Like with the Queen Eleanor Cross; it's falling apart and it's disgusting. We need to have pride in our town" (Central)

"When you think about the heritage and things like the Queen Eleanor Cross, nothing is done about it. And even now it is being done it's not the council, it's a heritage group that's doing it with donations" (North)

"The bus station was a folly! We had a perfectly functional one which was knocked down and moved, but the new one is too small, very impractical and clogs the traffic. They just needed to overhaul the old one, not build a new one" (North)

"It was the council that destroyed the old market square. They took away all the old cobbles and replaced it with paving and while they were doing it they took the market away. They never put it back" (North)

"They knock things down and say they're going to regenerate the area but nothing gets done. There's the old bus station, the bit down by the roundabout...it's been years and they're not doing anything and we are becoming a bit of a desolate area" (Central)

"The opportunity we had a few years ago for IKEA. We turned it down and sent it off to Milton Keynes..." (North)

There are concerns about replacing one layer of local Government with another

- 4.9 Given the somewhat negative perceptions outlined above, participants in both groups were concerned that the creation of a new Town Council would simply be a case of 'money for old rope' inasmuch as it might largely comprise existing NBC councillors:

"A lot of our councillors haven't done a very good job at all and the concern is that they'll still be there" (North)

"It would be all the same people who went to the same schools, go to the same clubs....is it really going to make a difference at the end of the day?" (North)

"I feel like it could be money for old rope if it's just a case of 'jobs for the boys' and nothing gets done" (Central)

"The principle is fine but it's all about the execution and if that's wrong we're stuck with this whole 'same thing, different day' scenario. You can't get behind something if you don't have faith in it and that's the problem really" (Central)

- 4.10 Indeed, there was a definite perception that:

"It's the people behind it and we would want to see some 'fresh faces'" (Central)

There are further concerns around costs, politics and the demarcation of responsibility

- 4.11 There was worry that a new Town Council would prove to be overly-political, particularly if comprised of ex-Borough councillors - and that the apparently frequent disagreements between NBC and Northamptonshire County Council would be replicated between the proposed new unitary authority and Town Council.

"Even with the smaller parish councils there's issues around which area gets what. There's still that politics in there" (North)

"Councils and councillors are too party political and independence is what we need. It shouldn't be overly-political" (Central)

"When it was the Borough council and the county council they would butt heads a lot of the time. What if we're just replacing one thing with another? If we're just back exactly where we were it's going to be difficult to justify the increase in council tax" (Central)

- 4.12 Furthermore, the need to ensure proper demarcation of responsibility was stressed, as was being as open and transparent as possible with residents about exactly how much a new council will cost and, importantly, why.

"There needs to be proper demarcation of responsibility between the Town Council and whatever is above it so we know what we're voting for. No duplication; demarcation" (Central)

"If we are just replacing one with the other why's there an increase in funding? There'll be a lot of 'whys' and there has to be transparency" (Central)

- 4.13 The final point is particularly important in the context of the unaffordability of council tax rises for many residents, and in light of the apparently general current perception that service provision is worsening at the same time as costs are rising.

"I know they're saying it's only £60, £70, £80 a year but that's a lot to some people. More and more people are struggling" (North)

"Things seem to be getting worse and worse and charges are going up and up. Why are we paying all this additional money if everything's just getting worse? There's just no trust right now" (Central)

Of the two options, Option A is preferred as Option B is 'unfair'

- 4.14 In both groups, Option A was the preferred option of the two despite most participants recognising that it may cover too large an area/population - chiefly as they considered Option B to be unfair in leaving a still significant area of the town unparished.

"Option A couldn't be managed properly; it's too big an area and too many people" (Central)

"I would go for A because you can't leave half of the people missing out under Option B and there's no point leaving it as it is" (North)

"It seems quite strange to leave half of the area without a voice. It doesn't strike me as overly fair. At least under Option A everyone is represented" (North)

"I don't think Option B is equitable; it doesn't seem fair" (Central)

- 4.15 Moreover, while recognising that the remaining unparished areas could develop their own proposals for parish or community councils, participants were concerned that these would not be forthcoming without the weight of NBC behind them.

"I know they say they could have their own proposals for parish councils but how long would that take without a structured plan and funding in place?" (North)

- 4.16 Only a handful of people favoured Option A for more positive reasons (that is, other than it being the 'least worst option'), which were that it would: be less costly for residents; and have a stronger voice and thus more influence within an unitary structure.

"Everyone would be represented and the council tax bill would be lower" (North)

"More people to listen to; it would have more influence" (North)

"The town centre is a deprived area. People haven't got the money there. Option A would keep the cost down for them" (North)

"Everyone would be represented and the council tax bill would be lower" (North)

4.17 Ultimately, though, the general feeling was that:

"If it was only between Option A and B it would be A as it covers everyone, even if it is on the big side. But ultimately A is too big and B is unfair" (Central)

Two Town Councils should be developed if feasible, and some more radical options were proposed

4.18 Participants could not understand why a second Town Council could not be established in the northern area of Northampton: indeed, this was their preferred alternative.

"Why not split the unparished area into two smaller Town Councils? It would be more efficient than having one big council and fairer than Option B" (North)

"Could you go with Option B, but one of the very first things that's achieved is a sub-Town Council for the other area?" (Central)

"Why can't we have two Town Councils for the two areas? You don't want one big one that's unmanageable, but you don't want to leave anyone out...so have two" (Central)

4.19 More radically, it was also suggested that NBC 'start from scratch' by redrawing all existing parish council boundaries so that they incorporate the unparished areas. It was, however, recognised that this may not be acceptable to said councils, some of which have been in place for many years and have their own history and tradition.

"I think I'd have more parish councils actually so that people can vote for people who do things in their local areas...and they should provide as many services as they can" (Central)

"If they are going to go ahead with it I'd sooner they redraw all the parish boundaries so they're all of a similar sort of size. Restructure it completely" (North)

"I don't know whether that would be accepted by some of the parish councils. How would they react to that?" (North)

"I'm not sure the existing parish councils would like that as a lot of them are historic" (Central)

One of the main functions of a new Town Council should be to protect Northampton's history, heritage and culture

- 4.20 Unsurprisingly in light of the comments made in both groups about the importance of doing so, participants suggested that one of the main functions of a new Town Council should be to protect Northampton's history, heritage and culture.

"Things like the Queen Eleanor Cross and other heritage issues; they could come under the Town Council" (North)

- 4.21 It was, however, noted that while a significant number of the area's cultural attractions (theatres, arts venues etc.) would fall under the jurisdiction of the Town Council, they are used by people from elsewhere in the Borough and beyond – which should, perhaps, be reflected in terms of the funding provided to maintain and manage them.

"Thinking about theatre and the arts etc. all of the burden on that will fall on the town council. But everyone uses them. That really ought to be considered in terms of funding" (North)

- 4.22 Other common suggestions for service provision were: arranging community events; markets and tourism; managing community centres and parks and open spaces; footpath maintenance; and simply improving perceptions of Northampton as somewhat 'unsexy' and 'undynamic'.

"We've got rid of a lot of things recently that used to bring in revenue and bring us together as a community, like the balloon festival. That was a big thing in the town and they've done away with it. We need reasons for people to come here and those sorts of events do that" (Central)

"We need more events that make the town boom" (Central)

"Markets and tourism. If you can attract people to the area they'll be spending their money here. It's about making it a desirable place to be" (Central)

"Community centres; parks and open spaces; footpath maintenance are all very important" (Central)

"Stagnation is the word I think of when I think of this town. A new council would have to focus on things to tempt people to stay here" (Central)

"We're not a thriving, dynamic town. It's completely unsexy" (Central)

- 4.23 It was also considered essential that a Town Council would contribute to planning processes, chiefly to ensure the protection of important local heritage buildings and features from destruction through unsympathetic development.

"Up by the university there was a really old wall that used to be part of Belton Park. The developers took it down and promised they would reassemble it but they never did. That's an 800 to 900-year-old wall. And there are follies dotted all round the countryside...they're a massive part of our history and there are developments cropping up all over the place and destroying them. Who is there to ensure they are protected? It's like development taking precedent over everything else at the moment" (North)

The Town Council should 'start small and build'

- 4.24 When asked whether they would prefer to see a Town Council that minimises the cost to residents or one that takes responsibility for as many local services as possible, participants generally favoured the middle ground. That is:

"Costs should be as low as possible, but the Town Council will have to provide enough services and have enough responsibilities to make it worthwhile" (North)

"We'd like to see a council provide as much as it can for a reasonable cost. It's a balance of cost and deliverance" (North)

- 4.25 Starting small and building from there was also suggested by a few participants, who felt that residents would not mind paying more for increased local service provision if they are able to see the Town Council achieving results from the outset.

"Maybe we could start with the basic service provision and then build on that? If we can see things happen then we probably won't mind paying more for more services" (Central)

"Try adding onto it incrementally. Start small and then build if it's working well" (Central)

- 4.26 It should also be noted that several comments were made along the lines of: *"it is difficult to quantify without having a breakdown of the costs"*. (North)

NBC must communicate the benefits of a new Town Council to residents

- 4.27 Finally, participants strongly urged NBC to properly communicate the benefits of a new Town Council to local residents to ensure they understand its potential importance (and, importantly, what the situation would be without it) and why they are being asked to contribute to its cost via their council tax.

"They need to show how these changes are going to make a difference to local people" (North)

"They need to convince us it's going to be different and it's going to be better" (North)

"We need to know what would happen if we didn't have this" (Central)

Main Findings from Stakeholder/Business Forum

The principle of a Town Council is supported

- 4.28 Participants at the stakeholder/business forum were largely in favour of a new Town Council (or at least some sort of locally-focused organisation) for Northampton, chiefly because it would help: ensure a strong local voice for residents within a more 'remote' unitary authority; increase access to local councillors in the absence of a Borough council; protect the town's rich history and heritage; and enhance service provision. Some typical comments were:

"It's about that local voice, someone having a say about what's going on in your local area. A local identity and a connection to it...it makes it a lot more personal"

"The concern is that the unitary will be pulled to look at Towcester, Daventry etc. and therefore there is a feeling that Northampton will lose out a bit as it won't be the focal point which it is when you have a Borough council?"

"I may have to go to Daventry to talk about a planning issue because I've got no-one local to talk to. If I've got someone local to talk to, the representative from the parish actually goes and does that for me..."

"You're not going to have the same number of councillors that you have now...in future, you'll have unitary councillors who will have so many more residents per councillor so if you want to talk to someone it's going to be more difficult. If you have a parish or Town Councillor, they will be in your area and you might even bump into them in the street. You can raise issues that way or go to a local meeting and raise your concerns there"

"One of the priorities you'd want from the Town Council is to look at the history, heritage, art and culture of the town centre"

"Daventry town centre has the same police resource as Northampton town centre because the parish council in Daventry pay for three PCSO's. That's in addition to what the police provide. There are opportunities for a Town Council in Northampton to do something like that"

- 4.29 It was also suggested that a new Town Council would mitigate against the fear that as other areas of Northamptonshire are already largely parished, Northampton may not have as strong a voice as they would have within the proposed new unitary structure - and this was considered particularly important in light of the perception that parish and Town Councils can have significant influence over decision-makers within their principal councils.

"Daventry, South Northants, Corby etc. are all parished...this area is largely unparished and the unitary will determine what gets done and spent here. There will be no organisation here which can offer something across those areas"

"Parish councils form the right networks, to get the right associations, to get the right funding"

"I would argue that parish councils are quite political in terms of the support they get from the council... This administration and the links between leader/deputy leader and cabinet members is very strong with the parish councils. Parish councils get things because of the political network"

There are concerns around people's availability and willingness to act as Town Councillors

- 4.30 The availability (or lack thereof) of enough high-calibre people willing to stand as Town Councillors - especially in the less affluent areas of the town - was a concern for participants.

"Have to make sure people will stand as councillors. Whilst you might want 10 parish councillors, you have to have enough people in the area to stand"

"We currently have 10 and if all the good people are on those 10...if you haven't got good people, what we're proposing to do would be a waste of time and ineffective"

"If you have potentially poorer areas, you haven't got so many retired folk and the types of the candidates who have time and are of the right calibre. That will be an issue"

There are concerns around a Town Council's ability to serve the needs of businesses

- 4.31 Furthermore, the fact that many of those who would be willing to serve may not have sufficient understanding of the 'unique' needs of the businesses within Northampton town centre was raised.

"What I'm thinking is businesses. In the town centre you could have a lot of residents who are part of the parish council who have no concept of business needs. The town centre is unique. There is no place like Northampton town centre in the whole of the county because of what it is in terms of work and business..."

- 4.32 To overcome this, it was suggested that NBC look to emulate other Town Councils (like Kendal) that: "co-opt local shop owners onto their committees and so on. Not sure what they do about voting powers but they meet regularly through those connections with co-opt members".

There are concerns about residents' acceptance of the cost of a new Town Council

- 4.33 That residents will question the cost of a new Town Council was anticipated, and so participants felt the council should strongly promote its benefits to justify any additional expense.

"The question will be, why would it cost more if they are not being provided by one body but by another?"

"Make it clear that if you pay more you will get more..."

"Tell them that the money that they spend in their local area stays in their local area"

The status quo is not an option

- 4.34 Participants agreed that the status quo is not an option, not least because existing structures (that is, Northampton Borough Council and Northamptonshire County Council) will no longer exist in future to ensure services are provided in the same way.

"The alternative of doing nothing is false in terms of what it's going to look like because it isn't going to stay how it is. There isn't the option of the Borough council as it's being replaced by a unitary authority. Leaving it as it is isn't an option; this message needs to get across to people. What they feel now and see now is not going to be what it's like"

- 4.35 Indeed, as alluded to in the quotation above and expanded upon in the one below, it was recommended that NBC be much more direct and forceful in explaining the implications of unitarisation to local residents - particularly with respect losing the more 'local' tier of government.

"You need to be more direct in terms of saying...in this area you had a Borough, you've now going nothing. Everything is going to unitary...to that level. There is no local interface. If you do nothing, you are actually losing a tier. You are not going to have that local Borough council supporting you with your strategic services like highways, education as there's not that remit within there. You'll be going to a central source...and not all the services you have are going to be located in Northampton..."

Option A covers too large an area

- 4.36 The general consensus was that Option A is infeasible as it covers too wide an area and large a population to be properly functional and manageable.

"This would be a parish council which is bigger than many districts which seems crazy. And unmanageable quite frankly"

"The 10 parish councils in Northampton Borough: the smallest one is 521 electors (Great Houghton) and the largest is 13,055 (Duston)"

"In current parish councils you have 96 councillors representing c.50,000 electors. In option A, how many would you need to represent the c.170,000 electors?"

Option B is unfair to those residents that remain in unparished areas

- 4.37 Option B was rejected because it was considered unfair to those (many) residents remaining in unparished areas with no local voice - though it was acknowledged that some of these areas could and probably would take the opportunity to establish their own parish councils.

"You leave at least 40% of the whole population with nothing if you do Option B. Is that fair? What happens if groups then pick up and slowly and surely over future years and there are parts which nobody is looking after? The unitary sits down and looks after the 5% of the old Northampton Borough and everyone else is looking after themselves"

"The remaining unparished area is heavily populated"

"There are a couple of areas that would absolutely go forward. Kingsthorpe would without a shadow of a doubt. Kingsthorpe is quite a big place and there are three pockets in that area. It's a very diverse area so could create a parish council there. I think we could create for or five parish councils in the unparished area"

- 4.38 Moreover, there was a sense that to be a feasible option, the area proposed in Option B would need to be expanded to encompass more (and indeed more affluent) residential properties.

"I think Option B, remembering what it looked like and the space it covered, if you're going to create a Town Council you need some residential properties in that to strengthen it. Also, the areas surrounding the town centre aren't overly affluent"

A non-political alternative is supported by some in the business community

- 4.39 The business people in attendance expressed some scepticism around the effectiveness of politically-led administrations in representing their interests and those of local residents. In light of this, they mooted the idea of an alternative in the form of an independent 'town commission' or similar.

"Is there any alternative? Anything other than a parish or Town Council? There have been suggestions of a 'town commission'. Is there a third way? There definitely needs to be something; you need a point of reference, a point of representation. I think the business community have a lack of trust and respect at local and county level. There is a degree of apathy about whether politically-led administrations actually do what the people want them to do or what they should do or ought to do?"

"This isn't doing what we're trying to achieve. Solve it with a third tier; a different type of function, not a Parish or Town but has a common purpose. I don't think any of the current options solve any of the current issues"

Other suggested alternatives include enlarging existing parish councils and a 'smaller Option B'

- 4.40 When asked to suggest other alternatives, participants proposed: enlarging Northampton's existing parish councils; and a 'smaller Option B' whereby a 'town centre body' is supported by parished areas covering the remainder of the Borough.

"Can we make some of the existing parish councils bigger?"

"Lots of parish councils are saying yes but want more information. There are opportunities around some of the boundaries to widen them"

"If I think back to where this came from, it was the concern that the unitary wouldn't be looking after the centre of the town which has unique things like history, heritage, culture etc. Is there a case for saying 'actually the Town Council is a central area, bigger than the ring road but not the whole town, but it has specific responsibilities about keeping the town as a priority for the unitary'? Basically, it's a smaller Option B"

"What the vision would be is that there is a town centre body to look after the heritage etc. and the rest of it ideally would be parished in some way...that would give continuity across the whole unitary body"

- 4.41 It was strongly urged though that a 'town centre council' would have to include some residential properties, as the resident population of the central area would be too small to sustain it.

"There's not enough people to merit a Town Council just in the centre. If you had 5,000 you'd be lucky"

"In other areas where there's a Town Council, it's a whole town like Kettering. In Northampton, it's not the whole town because it's too big and 10 parish councils already exist. Right now, you'd have a very small amount of residents council in the town centre"

"If you look at the small element that is the town centre, it is too small, and it can't sustain a parish council. Therefore, the only way of having something centred on the town is to make that slightly bigger and have more residential as part of it and having a slightly different view of what it is there to do"

NBC should look at what has worked in other areas

- 4.42 Finally, the stakeholders and business people suggested that NBC look into, consider and learn lessons from the way in which other areas have implemented similar local democratic structures.

"In terms of the number of parishes in a population of 220,000, how you support the town centre in that sort of arrangement where you have a number of parishes can't be unique. Surely there are lessons learnt? They can look at models where this works for a vibrant town centre and business community"

Main Findings from Parish Councillors' Forum

The principle of a Town Council is supported, though there are concerns around affordability and the demarcation of responsibility

- 4.43 The general feeling among the councillors was that parish and Town Councils will become increasingly significant within a unitary political structure - and that they will be of particular importance in Northampton to preserve the town's rich history and culture and ensure its voice is heard. Furthermore, the fact that services provided at a local level are typically delivered by residents with a care for their neighbourhoods was considered a strong positive feature of parish councils.

"The Unitary Authority would just be an administrative cog and that's why town and parish councils are important"

"One of the issues for us being taken over by the Unitary Authority is having a strong Northampton voice with our ability to maintain our history, culture etc and develop our assets. Over 800 years of history could be lost. Are we just going to let that happen or are we going to have an entity to take its place?"

"The only people who want to look after you are ones who live in the area. Therefore, I'm for parish councils"

- 4.44 In relation to the final point above, there was concern that Northampton's potential 'lack of voice' within the proposed unitary authority would be magnified by the fact that both Daventry and South Northants are currently parished to a far greater extent. Moreover, the widening of the gap between what were

described as the 'haves' (those in currently parished areas) and the 'have nots' (those in currently unparished areas) was also a worry for some in terms of varying service provision at a local level.

"Knowing that Daventry is parished, it does seem that any unparished areas in the Borough would be at a disadvantage"

"My biggest regret would be if we moved to a Unitary Authority and increased the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. That is, everybody who lives in Daventry and South Northants is covered by a parish council, as are Wootton, Collingtree etc. meaning their kids can go to a youth club etc. If we can't make this happen for people in the town centre this gap will just widen more"

"We have a town driven by large inequalities. Wealth in the south of the Borough, not so much in the town centre. Inequalities have got bigger and bigger recently and there needs to be some consideration about how that is addressed"

- 4.45 In terms of concerns, there were questions and comments around: affordability for residents (especially in the context of other council tax rises); the lack of funding available from principle councils when parish councils take on some of their responsibilities; possible negative impacts on the regeneration of the town centre; and who would be the arbiter of whether an asset is one that is held by the Town Council or unitary authority.

"My greatest concern is the affordability if they are new to areas which don't currently pay a parish precept"

"Borough and county councils expect parish councils to do a lot more work (take over parks, grass verges, maintenance etc.) but we get no more budget. They say we just need to up the precept. There's the same amount of money coming in but more work needing doing"

"The assets in the town – the Guildhall, theatres, car parks – who would hold these? Who would take the money from them? Who would take the profit? Would it be a Town Council or Unitary Authority responsibility?"

Option A covers too large an area, but parish and Town Councils should not be too small

- 4.46 There was little discussion of the proposed options at the meeting, though there was some feeling that "option A is too large and cumbersome to get any kind of momentum going...". On the other hand, it was agreed that town and parish councils should, in general, not be so small that they have an insufficient presence in a wider political sense.

"How do we retain a strong identity and voice in Northampton? If we have too much fragmentation into parishes which are too small we will lose that presence and voice"

Mergers with other parishes are an option for existing councils

- 4.47 One parish councillor described the 'decent' relationship their council has with another in South Northants and suggested that "if we were looking to grow as a PC, could we go together with them".

5. Submissions

Introduction

- 5.1 Eight submissions were received from the following organisations and individuals:

West Hunsbury Parish Council;

Weston Favell Village Residents' Association; and

Six local residents from the Far Cotton and Delapre area.

- 5.2 These have been summarised below.

West Hunsbury Parish Council

- 5.3 The Parish Council does not wish to see a large Town Council as it feels it would have an excessively large influence on the unitary authority in relation to the smaller parished areas like West Hunsbury.
- 5.4 The Parish Council also stresses the need to protect assets in the event of transfer to the new unitary authority, particularly the two large parks in West Hunsbury that are currently Borough assets. If these assets need to be transferred to the Parish, then there will be are huge financial implications for the residents of West Hunsbury.
- 5.5 The Parish Council says that full and detailed engagement with residents and community groups is required at the formal consultation stage - and that full dialogue is required with parish councils, particularly in relation to assets.

Weston Favell Village Residents' Association (WFVRA)

- 5.6 WFVRA writes that Weston Favell Village will experience a dramatic reduction in local representation as a result of the proposed unitarisation of local government in Northamptonshire, and is concerned that this will be magnified by the fact that most, if not all, other areas within the new authority are already parished. As such, the Association *'considers local representation at a level below the new unitary authority to be essential to provide a community voice and to enhance community cohesion and a sense of place'*.
- 5.7 The Association prefers Option A to Option B, which it describes as illogical inasmuch as it *'divides the town in a rather arbitrary way'*. It also notes that the Option B map in the engagement document divides Weston Favell in a way which suggests an error (all of Church Way and High Street are in the parliamentary constituency of Northampton South but are shown as excluded on the map).
- 5.8 WFVRA notes that NBC is open to proposals for new parishes or mergers of existing ones, but feels that *'the lack of clarity in the position of local representation below the unitary authority and the relatively short time available to respond to this consultation means that we have been unable to give this proper consideration at this time'*.

Local residents

- 5.9 Six residents wrote in support of a community council for Far Cotton and Delapre to assist in: regaining lost community spirit; developing a sense of pride in the area; and giving its residents a voice. As stated:

For too long this community has drawn the short straw in many respects and as a community we wish to be heard and make plans for our future and by creating a community council our individual voices will be heard.

- 5.10 One of the above residents said they would like to see a local council providing/managing the following services:

Community centres;
Traffic calming measures;
Footpath maintenance;
Upkeep of parks and open spaces;
Volunteering/support for vulnerable members of the community;
Village greens; and
Litter and dog bins.

- 5.11 Another resident simply stated a desire to be part of any future town, parish or community council in their area.

6. Conclusions

- Most respondents are aware of the proposed changes to local government in the area.
- It is considered important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, preserves its historic identity/heritage and delivers services at a local level.
- Opinion is divided over the proposal to create a new Town Council for all or part of the areas in Northampton Borough that remain unparished – though there is more support among participants at the deliberative events and organisations responding to the open questionnaire than among individual respondents to the latter.
- Option A is preferred to Option B – but many alternatives were proposed.
- Opinion is divided over whether a new Town Council should minimise costs to residents or take responsibility for as many services as possible.
- Certain areas (Far Cotton, Delapre, Kingsthorpe and the Eastern District) are favoured for parish or community councils regardless of whether a new Town Council is established.

- ^{6.1} While it was generally considered important to have an organisation that promotes the interests of the town, preserves its historic identity and heritage and delivers services at a local level (especially within the more remote unitary structure), there was some division as to whether a new Town Council should be created for the purpose in Northampton. It is perhaps striking though that opinion was far more favourable in the deliberative events (and indeed among those submitting written responses and questionnaire responses on behalf of organisations) than among open questionnaire respondents, suggesting that there is more acceptance of the proposal when the background to and reasons for it can be explained – and among those who may be better informed about local political structures.
- ^{6.2} There are, though, concerns even among those who support the principle of creating a new Town Council, chiefly around: potentially unaffordable council tax rises for local residents; ‘unnecessary bureaucracy’ and the potential for damaging and divisive local politics; the demarcation of responsibility; the availability (or lack thereof) of enough high-calibre people willing to stand as Town Councillors - especially in the less affluent areas of the town; and the related possibility that the creation of a new Town Council would simply be a case of ‘money for old rope’ if it largely comprises existing NBC councillors. NBC will need to address these concerns both before and during the forthcoming formal consultation phase of this Review.
- ^{6.3} NBC should also note the concern among business people that a new council and its councillors may not have sufficient understanding of the ‘unique’ needs of the businesses within Northampton town – and consider the suggestion to emulate other Town Councils (like Kendal) that: *“co-opt local shop owners onto their committees and so on. Not sure what they do about voting powers but they meet regularly through those connections with co-opt members”*.

- 6.4 As for the options, there was more support for Option A than Option B, but generally only as the 'least worst option' insofar as the latter was considered inherently unfair to those (many) residents remaining in unparished areas with no local voice. In reality, the area covered by the proposed Town Council in Option A was largely thought to cover too large an area and population to be properly functional and manageable.
- 6.5 Inasmuch as neither of the two options were widely endorsed, it is unsurprising that several alternatives were proposed that NBC will wish to consider, the most common of which were:
- A Town Council for the whole of Northampton Borough, including existing parishes;
 - Two town councils (one for the central and one for the northern area of the town);
 - More smaller parish councils;
 - Enlarging Northampton's existing parish councils so that they incorporate the unparished areas; and
 - A smaller Town Council comprising the town centre only, supported by individual parish councils elsewhere.
- 6.6 It is worth reiterating, though, that a 'town centre only' council would need to be carefully planned to ensure it includes enough of a resident population to sustain it through precepts/council tax revenue.
- 6.7 The services to be provided by a new Town Council would, of course, largely be a decision for the Council itself, but the most 'popular' across all engagement strands were: markets and tourism, upkeep of parks and open spaces, litter and dog waste bins, community centres and entertainment and the arts (including organising and/or funding community events). There was also support for volunteering/support for vulnerable sections of the community and footpaths and maintenance - and for preservation and heritage-related activities. NBC, though, may wish to consider the suggestion made in the public focus groups to 'start small and build' on the grounds that residents will not mind paying more for increased local service provision if they are able to see the Town Council achieving results from the outset.
- 6.8 Finally, consideration should be given to the creation of parish councils elsewhere in the Borough regardless of whether a new Town Council is established, and there appears to be significant support for this Far Cotton, Delapre, Kingsthorpe and the Eastern District.

