



South Warwickshire Together

Consultation on Proposals to Create a South Warwickshire Council

Final Report

Opinion Research Services
November 2021



South Warwickshire *Together*

Consultation on Proposals to Create a South Warwickshire Council

Opinion Research Services

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1. Introduction

Overview of the consultation programme

Background to the consultation

- 1.1 Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils face a very uncertain financial future. It is estimated that both Councils will have a shortfall of around £4-6m each year by 2025/26, and across the two Councils this means that £10m of annual savings are needed over the next five years to address this shortfall and help preserve services. This level of annual reduction is about one-third of the combined costs of the Councils.
- 1.2 Faced with this financial pressure, and not wanting to see reductions in the current level of services, both Councils have been exploring a number of ways to work together to tackle this shortfall and reduce the impact on residents and service users. Both Councils agreed the ambition earlier this year to create a South Warwickshire District Council, and for this Council to be financially sustainable. This consultation was run to help them understand levels of support or otherwise for the proposal.
- 1.3 If after consultation, the Councils do decide to submit a proposal to Government, it must comply with some key requirements – namely, that future 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 command a *“good deal of local support as assessed in the round across the whole area of the proposal”*.

The consultation programme

Introduction

- 1.4 The Councils appointed ORS (Opinion Research Services) to conduct and report an extensive consultation programme to examine people’s views on the proposal for a new South Warwickshire District Council.
- 1.5 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 Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire).
- 1.6 The formal consultation period ran from September 6th to October 24th 2021 and during this period, residents, staff and stakeholders were invited to provide feedback through a wide range of routes, which included all the following:

An open consultation questionnaire for residents, stakeholders and organisations: the questionnaire was available online and paper questionnaires were widely available on request and yielded 1,633 responses;

A representative telephone survey of 613 residents (by random digit telephone dialling) to provide an accurate profile of opinions from the general population across Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts;

Four deliberative¹ online focus groups with members of the public (two in each district);
Two focus groups with staff across the two Councils (one for managers and one for non-managers);
A deliberative online focus group with town and parish councillors;
A deliberative online focus group with voluntary and community sector representatives; and
Written submissions (18).

- 1.7 A focus group for business representatives was also originally planned, but despite the Councils sending out extensive invitations and reminders, no interest was expressed and so the session was cancelled. In-depth 30 minute interviews were also offered, but again there was no interest from businesses.
- 1.8 As well as the 12-page consultation document, a dedicated website was set up containing an introductory video from the Council Leaders, details of Council meetings where the merger was debated, a number of background documents and a question/answer section. The Consultation Institute were also involved acting as a 'critical friend' in the set-up of the consultation.

Quantitative consultation

Introduction

- 1.9 Based on the informative 12-page consultation document, ORS (with support from the Councils) designed an open questionnaire and telephone survey, both of which featured the same core questions around: awareness of local government structures; involvement in decision-making locally; whether change is needed; whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the proposal for a new South Warwickshire District Council; and views on possible councillor reductions. Respondents were also invited to rank five possible criteria that the Councils should consider when considering the future structure of local government; and in both versions there were sections inviting them to offer alternatives and potential equalities impacts, make further comments, and to profile those responding.
- 1.10 Please note that 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 residents).

Open consultation questionnaire

- 1.11 The open questionnaire was available for anyone to complete online, and paper versions were readily available on request. The questionnaire could be completed by individuals and on behalf of organisations and, in total, 1,633 responses were received, including 1,602 from individuals and 31 on behalf of organisations.

¹ Deliberative research gathers people's views after they have been presented with the opportunity to 'deliberate' the issues under consideration. Moderators present a range of information and encourage differing points of view to be debated, before considered final decisions are sought.

- 1.12 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.
- 1.13 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.

Residents’ telephone survey

- 1.14 A residents’ survey was undertaken to ensure that a representative profile of opinions across Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts was achieved. To capture the views of the general population, 613 residents took part in structured telephone interviews with ORS interviewers during the consultation period. A survey approach was used because, with a population of almost 275,000 residents, it would have been neither practical nor cost-effective to do a postal census of all households or residents.
- 1.15 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 proposal. Residents were provided with summary information by the interviewer before being asked for their views.
- 1.16 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.
- 1.17 In order to better understand how views differ between the two local authorities areas, equal numbers of interviews were targeted in each District; this was taken into account in the weighting process, to give each district a proportional influence on the overall result relative to the size of its population. The remaining quotas (i.e. those for age, gender and working status) were designed to be representative of the overall population of Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts, based on the most recent available secondary data.
- 1.18 The achieved sample was compared against secondary data for the District, interlocked age and gender, working status, disability and tenure, and subsequently weighted by tenure, working status, disability, and interlocked age and gender. Weights were capped at five with the remainder apportioned across all cases, and a final district weight was applied. As a result of this process, the survey estimates should be broadly representative of the overall population of Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts to within around +/- 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 survey estimates. 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.

Deliberative consultation

Introduction

1.19 The consultation programme included a wide range of meetings with members of the public, Council staff, town and parish councillors and voluntary and community sector representatives.

1.20 In summary, ORS independently facilitated/undertook:

Four focus groups with randomly selected members of the public, two in each local authority area (with a total of 35 participants);

Two online focus groups with members of staff from across the two Councils, one with managers (9 participants) and one with non-managers (6 participants);

An online focus group with 26 town and parish councillors from across Stratford and Warwick District Council areas; and

An online focus group with 12 voluntary and community sector representatives from across Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Council areas.

1.21 The focus groups with members of the public, town and parish councillors and voluntary and community sector representatives were held on the videoconferencing platform Zoom. All meetings began with a presentation by ORS to provide standardised information about the current structure of local government in Warwickshire, the case for change and the rationale for the proposal to create a new South Warwickshire District Council. Participants' views were then captured through discussions and a series of interactive 'polls'. They 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.

1.22 The staff sessions were run on Microsoft Teams and had a slightly different emphasis, focusing on: the opportunities presented by the proposal and any concerns around it; office accommodation (particularly in relation to location and size); organisational culture and partnership working; and ways in which staff and managers could be involved in developing and shaping a new Council - be it fully merged or operationally merged.

Focus groups with members of the public

1.23 The online focus groups reported here used a 'deliberative' approach to encourage members of the public to reflect in depth about the case for change and the Councils' proposal, while both receiving and questioning background information and discussing their ideas in detail. The meetings lasted for two hours and were held and attended as overleaf.

AREA/DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Warwick 1 (Tuesday 5 th October)	8
Warwick 2 (Wednesday 6 th October)	8
Stratford-on-Avon 1 (Tuesday 19 th October)	10
Stratford-on-Avon 2 (Wednesday 20 th October)	9

- 1.24 Participants were recruited by Acumen Field, a specialist recruitment agency, who initially sent out a screening questionnaire as an online survey to a database of contacts and, more widely, on social media platforms. They then collated the responses to establish a pool of potential recruits, which was 'sifted' to establish a contact list. People were then contacted by telephone, asked to complete a more detailed screening questionnaire and either recruited or not to match the required quotas. Those recruited were sent all the necessary details in a confirmation email and telephoned a day or two before the events to confirm their attendance. The desired attendance was at least eight participants in each group
- 1.25 In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors. The recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria (including, for example: gender; age; ethnic group; working status; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI)). As standard good practice, people were recompensed for giving up their time to take part with a £50 gift voucher. Overall, as shown in the table below, participants represented a broad cross-section of residents across the county.

GENDER	AGE	WORKING STATUS	ETHNIC GROUP	LIMITING ILLNESS OR DISABILITY
Male: 17 Female: 18	16-30: 5 31-44: 13 35:54: 10 55+: 7	Working full- or part-time: 29 Not working/retired: 6	White British: 31 BAME: 4	5

- 1.26 Although, like all other forms of qualitative engagement, deliberative focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the four 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.

Focus groups with staff

- 1.27 All members of staff across the two Councils were invited to one of two focus groups: the first for managers on the afternoon of 20th October and the second for non-managers on the morning of 21st October. 24 responses were received from those wishing to attend, though other commitments meant that some were unable to do so on the day. Ultimately, nine managers and six non-managers attended the sessions.

Focus group with town and parish councils

- 1.28 The Councils liaised with the Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC) to invite its members to a two-hour online focus group on the evening of Thursday 7th October 2021. A total of 26 councillors and clerks attended the session: they took an active interest in the issues and asked many questions. Most of

them were familiar with the debate, and many had formed opinions on the proposal before attending the group.

Focus group with voluntary and community sector representatives

- 1.29 Representatives from the voluntary and community sector were invited by the Councils to attend a two-hour online focus group on the afternoon of Thursday 30th October 2021. 12 people attended the session.

Written submissions

- 1.30 Stakeholders were also encouraged to make written representations about any aspects of the proposal for ORS to analyse and report. In total, 18 submissions were received, all of which have been summarised in this report.

Nature of engagement

Accountability

- 1.31 Accountability means that public authorities should give an account of their plans and take into account public views: they should conduct fair and accessible engagement while reporting the outcomes openly and considering them fully.
- 1.32 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.

Proportional and fair

- 1.33 The key good practice requirements for proper engagement programmes (as with formal engagement programmes) are that they should:

Be conducted at a formative stage, before decisions are taken;

Allow sufficient time for people to participate and respond;

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

Be properly taken into consideration before decisions are finally taken.

- 1.34 As a well-established and specialist social research practice with wide-ranging experience of controversial statutory consultations and engagement processes across the UK, ORS considered view is that the process undertaken by the Councils meets these standards. The consultation has been conscientious in eliciting the informed opinions of stakeholders and members of the general public; 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.

- 1.35 Finally, while no one consultation is ever identical to another (especially one based on a different topic or in a different area of the country), it is worth noting that

- » (a) the general findings from this consultation are not dissimilar to those from other recent district council mergers (such as that in East Suffolk), and
- » (b) various aspects (for example the contrasting results from the consultation questionnaire and the residents' survey) are reflected in other consultations, such as those that have been undertaken around the possible introduction of unitary authorities.

^{1.36} These similarities potentially provide a certain level of assurance that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils' consultation process as reported here represents a reasonable effort to understand the views of the general public and other key stakeholders.

The report

^{1.37} 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' either way for the proposal.

2. Executive Summary

Key insights and considerations

The Councils' research questions

- 2.1 This chapter summarises the consultation outcomes to highlight the overall balance of opinion in relation to the proposed merger of Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils into a new South Warwickshire District Council. It primarily seeks to address the following research questions:

To what extent is there awareness and understanding of current local government structures and service provision?

To what extent is there recognition of and support for the Council's case for change, and what are the most important criteria to consider as part of any change?

To what extent is there support for the proposed merger of the two District Councils?

If a single new Council was created, with fewer councillors overall, how might any challenges be mitigated?

- 2.2 ORS' approach is therefore to summarise the findings from the various consultation strands in relation to these key questions. The remaining chapters of this report will, by contrast, present more detailed findings arranged according to the specific topics covered and questions asked during the consultation programme. It considers the feedback from each element of the consultation in turn because it is important that the full report provides a full evidence-base for those considering the findings. We trust that both this summary and full report will be helpful to all concerned.

Understanding approaches to local government structures²

- 2.3 Reported awareness of the current structure was high in both the consultation questionnaire and the representative residents' survey.
- 2.4 More than four fifths (86%) of individuals responding to the **consultation questionnaire** stated that they were aware that the County Council and their local District Council each provide separate services in their area, while around a tenth or so (11%) claimed to know some of the details.
- 2.5 Fewer, although still around 7 in 10 (71%) **residents in the survey**, stated that they were aware of the current structure, while just over a tenth (12%) claimed to know something, but not all the details.
- 2.6 However, while very few consultation questionnaire respondents stated that they were *not* aware (3%), close to a fifth of those participating in the representative survey (17%) reported that they were not aware of the current structure of local government in Warwickshire.

² Please note that these questions were asked only of members of the public, as it was expected that levels of awareness among other audiences would be good.

- 2.7 On the other hand, the findings of the **residents' focus groups** suggested that levels of awareness and understanding were far from comprehensive. Many participants were unsure of the responsibilities and services provided by each level of council, and voting exercise demonstrated that there was clearly some confusion around which councils provide various services, most notably libraries, council housing and benefits, and waste disposal.

The case for changing local government structures in Warwickshire

- 2.8 There was generally widespread acceptance of a need to change, in both the consultation questionnaire and the residents' survey.
- 2.9 Around 7 in 10 of the individual respondents to the **consultation questionnaire** agreed that the Councils need to make changes to respond to the challenges (70%), although, perhaps surprisingly, close to a fifth disagreed (18%). In the representative **residents' survey**, over 8 in 10 (82%) agreed with the case for change, while fewer than a tenth disagreed (8%).
- 2.10 Most **town and parish councillors** participating in the focus group agreed that there is a case for changing the way local government is provided across South Warwickshire, based on a recognition of the need for financial savings and the benefits of joint working.
- 2.11 Many **VCS representatives** understood the need for change based on evident monetary challenges; however, there was some scepticism in terms of whether any significant financial savings would really be possible.
- 2.12 Among those responding via **written submissions**, there was a generally widespread recognition of the need for change to meet financial challenges and protect services.

The criteria that must be considered as part of any proposed change

- 2.13 Those responding to the *quantitative elements* of the consultation (i.e. the questionnaire or survey) were invited to *score* five criteria against a 0 to 10 scale (where 10 signified highest importance), while those taking part in the deliberative elements (i.e. the focus groups) were encouraged to *rank* them in order of relative importance.
- 2.14 The five criteria (in the order they were presented in the questionnaire/survey and the focus group material) were: 'local public services', 'cost savings', 'value for money', 'stronger/accountable local leadership' and 'medium/long-term sustainability'.
- 2.15 Individuals responding to the **consultation questionnaire** attached most importance to '*local public services*', followed by '*stronger and accountable local leadership*', and lowest importance to '*cost savings*' (albeit this still achieved a reasonably strong average score).
- 2.16 Participants in the **residents' survey** attached most importance to '*sustainability*' and '*local public services*' and least to '*cost savings*' (however, it should be emphasised that the mean scores attached to each of the criteria were largely very similar across the board).
- 2.17 Overall, '*local public services*' was ranked as being of most importance to residents in the **residents' focus groups**, closely followed by '*stronger/accountable local leadership*'. '*Value for money*' and '*cost savings*' ranked lowest – however a range of rankings were given for each of the criteria.

- 2.18 To the **town and parish councillors** participating in the focus group, the most important of the five criteria was '*stronger/accountable local leadership*', however all five criteria were ranked strongly and widely considered to be vital for decision-making around future local government structures.
- 2.19 Some participants tended to focus on what was missing from the list: for example: a few participants queried a lack of reference to service quality and improvements in the list of criteria. Some **VCS focus group participants** felt the criteria were budget-driven, demonstrating a lack of consideration for residents and communities and emphasising the councils' financial challenges in order present the merger as necessary.
- 2.20 Across all the consultation activities involving residents (i.e. the questionnaire, survey and residents' focus groups) the two lower ranked criteria tended to be 'value for money' and 'cost savings'. This perhaps suggests that financial arguments for changing future local government structures do not tend to resonate quite as strongly with residents.

The proposal for a merger between the two District Councils

- 2.21 Around a third (35%) of individuals responding to the **consultation questionnaire** agreed with the proposal for a merger, while more than half (58%) disagreed³. In the results to the **residents' survey**, these proportions were more-or-less reversed i.e. over half (57%) agreed with the proposal⁴, while close to a third (31%) disagreed.
- 2.22 The views expressed in the **residents' focus groups** were fairly divided, with similar numbers agreeing and disagreeing with the proposal. There was therefore some support for the proposed merger, on the basis this would provide an opportunity to safeguard service provision in the face of financial challenges, reduce duplication and result in a stronger and/or more influential authority. However, several concerns were also expressed, although sometimes by those that supported the merger i.e. they were not always stated as a reason not to proceed.
- 2.23 Concerns expressed **across the various consultation activities** included: negative impacts on staffing, such as potential for job losses across the councils, de-skilling and/or demotivation of the workforce, and a resulting decline in service quality; perceptions that a larger council may be 'remote', bureaucratic and inefficient; and a democratic 'deficit' resulting from a reduction in the number of District Councillors, which (it was suggested) might lead to a loss of local knowledge and have an isolating effect on some smaller communities in particular. Some also doubted whether the proposal would achieve the required level of savings and efficiencies.
- 2.24 Participants across the consultation activities also expressed concerns around differences between the districts (e.g. in terms of levels of prosperity, urban/rural character, political complexion, etc) and whether all areas would be treated fairly in terms of an allocation of resources. There were also some concerns around the process of council tax equalisation (for example, whether some areas might end up 'paying more for less') and other aspects of the transition process. A few saw the proposal as more or less a 'fait accompli' and doubted the sincerity of the consultation process.
- 2.25 Among those responding via **written submissions**, the status quo was generally considered unsustainable and there was widespread (but certainly not unanimous) support for the proposal. Ten submissions were in

³ It is worth noting that agreement was somewhat lower in Warwick (30%) than in Stratford-on-Avon, where the majority agreed (48%)

⁴ More than half agreed in both districts: 60% in Stratford-on-Avon, 55% in Warwick

- support of the proposed merger (Rugby Borough Council, four town and parish councils, Shakespeare's England, South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust, Stonewater, The Stratford Society, and University of Warwick). Three submissions (all from parish councils) were opposed to the proposed merger, and five submissions (North Warwickshire Borough Council, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council; Warwickshire County Council; Royal Leamington Spa Town Council; Stratford-on-Avon Town Council) were neutral or non-committal.
- 2.26 While they perceived that the proposal might potentially lead to opportunities (e.g. in terms of sustainable and more consistent service provision), **members of staff** participating in two focus groups also had specific concerns around timescales and the operational challenges associated with a merger; potential obstacles to providing a uniform service, given demographic challenges and differences; and the impacts of stress and uncertainty on the workforce.
- 2.27 **Town and parish councillors** participating in a focus group expressed similar concerns to the above, although a number were supportive of the potential for improved economies of scale and a 'stronger' local authority. While some welcomed the proposal as potentially offering scope for town and parish councils to take on an enhanced role, others were concerned about the potential extra burden this might entail, particularly if the changes were not supported by improved levels of funding at this tier of local government.
- 2.28 A few of these town and parish councillors dismissed suggestions that the proposal might result in greater involvement in planning, decision-making and delivering local services as simply "sweeteners" rather than fully-formed proposals, while some were sceptical about how successfully any transition process might be managed and the extent of any savings that might be achieved.
- 2.29 Specific concerns raised by **VCS representatives** participating in a focus group included: perceived differences in ethos and ways of working between the two District Councils (which, it was suggested, might impact on the likely success of any merger); the potential loss of positive working relationships between existing councillors, staff and the voluntary sector if the proposal goes ahead; and a lack of clarity around the possible role that might be played by the VCS within any new structure.
- 2.30 The topic of unitarisation came up from time to time across the various consultation activities. Small numbers focus group participants supported the districts' proposal because they disapproved of unitarisation and hoped that a merger might stave off any possible future moves towards a single-tier structure. On the other hand, several individuals participating in the focus groups or responding to the questionnaire felt that unitarisation was the only realistic and viable long-term solution to the challenges facing local government. Some implied that the proposed merger between the two districts was therefore futile and/or unnecessary; however, others interpreted the proposal more in terms of a precursor or a stepping-stone to a further or more far-reaching reorganisation process in the years ahead.

Other considerations and mitigations

Possible alternatives to the proposal

- 2.31 One of the main suggested alternatives to the proposal was for a unitary council covering the whole of Warwickshire (occasionally with an additional suggestion for Area Committees based on the existing districts), although some also suggested that the area covered by the proposed new 'South Warwickshire' District Council should in fact be a unitary authority.

- 2.32 The other main alternative put forward was for more sharing of services and/or staff and greater collaboration between the two districts but stopping short of a full merger. A few of the town and parish council focus group participants asked that more be done to consider potential alternatives, for example, sharing of back-office functions with other, different Councils, both within (i.e. working with the remaining three districts and/or the County) and outside Warwickshire (e.g. with Coventry or another area).
- 2.33 Specific suggestions made by very small numbers of respondents or participants included: consideration of mergers with councils outside Warwickshire; fully restructuring the existing Councils, before pursuing any mergers; a more-or-less complete operational (but not political) merger between the two Districts; having the County Council take on some services currently provided by the District Councils, to alleviate some of the financial pressures; and pursuing some kind of more far-ranging, regional-level (e.g. pan-West Midlands) reorganisation.

Possible areas to mitigate

- 2.34 Nearly half of individuals responding to the questionnaire (45%) and around a quarter of residents in the survey (27%) stated that they had been in contact with a district councillor over the previous year. In the event of a single district council being created, with a reduced number of Councillors, most individuals responding to the questionnaire (70%), and just over half of survey residents (55%), indicated that they would be very or fairly concerned about being able to contact a District Councillor. Older questionnaire and survey respondents were somewhat more likely to express a concern. Concerns about a so-called 'democratic deficit' were also frequently expressed in relation to smaller and/or rural communities, which were felt to be at greatest risk of becoming 'marginalised'.
- 2.35 Some respondents asked that the impact on certain groups be considered e.g. the elderly and/or vulnerable, families with low incomes and/or limited IT access, and people with disabilities. Specific concerns centred around: loss of access to services due to these being spread over a wider area, impacts of council tax rises (e.g. as part of the equalisation process), and the loss of a 'personal touch' and/or of existing, productive relationships with local Councillors.
- 2.36 There was some support for town and parish councils taking on enhanced role to maintain engagement and ensure voices would be heard at a local level, in the event of the proposal going ahead (this was also suggested by those advocating a move to unitary local government) – however, as explained above, there were also concerns around a lack of specific detail about what this might entail, and whether sufficient resources could be put in place to achieve it. It was suggested (e.g. by staff participating in focus groups) that those preferring or needing face-to-face contact must be accounted for – either via smaller offices in more locations or a smaller central 'hub' in each district, or possibly regular 'surgeries' in town centres.
- 2.37 In the event of the proposal going ahead, it was widely felt that communication would be very important. For example, **VCS representatives** felt it was crucial that any merger should not be viewed (either internally or externally) as one council 'taking over' the other.
- 2.38 **Members of staff** who participated in the focus groups suggested that a 'bottom up' process (i.e. involving staff of the two districts in the implementation of the proposal), rather than an overly 'top down' process imposed from above, would be far more likely to alleviate any concerns among the workforce.
- 2.39 Most of those attendees could see the logic behind and need for the proposed merger, but felt they would benefit from more and/or better information, communication and engagement to allay their concerns – a view that was frequently echoed across the various consultation activities.

Conclusions

- ^{2.40} Based on the findings from the residents' survey, an absolute majority of the general public across the two districts (and of organisations responding via the questionnaire) agreed with the proposal, which would therefore evidence a 'good deal of support' for the merger. The views of some other stakeholders, especially respondents to the consultation questionnaire and participants at the residents' focus groups, were somewhat more divided; though equally, there was also no overwhelming consensus *against* the proposal, with a number of respondents/participants being in favour. Similarly, there was widespread agreement with the case for change across the consultation activities, and many participants in the other focus groups (involving local authority staff, town and parish councillors, and voluntary sector representatives) foresaw potential opportunities as part of any merger, indicating some support for the proposal. Finally, more of those providing a written submission were in favour of the proposal than were against it.
- ^{2.41} While there is therefore certainly some evidence to suggest a good deal of support for the proposal, it is also apparent that a number of concerns exist. In particular, it is evident that many members of the public who responded to the questionnaire (from both districts, but particularly in Warwick) disagreed or had reservations, and it is evident that clear and specific concerns exist, for example:
- Contacting a Councillor and a possible 'democratic deficit' i.e. in the event of Councillor numbers being reduced (although at this stage the actual level of reduction is unknown);
 - Maintaining access to council services;
 - Taking account of differences between areas, and treating them equitably;
 - The complexity of the transition process;
 - The future role of town and parish councils, voluntary sector bodies, etc;
- ^{2.42} *If* any new Council were to be created, these kinds of concerns would therefore need to be addressed and/or mitigated as far as possible, in order to ensure a successful, well-supported transition.

3. Open consultation questionnaire

Introduction

- 3.1 The consultation programme included an open questionnaire based on the main themes in the Councils' information document – to offer an inclusive opportunity for anyone (residents, organisations and any other stakeholder, both inside and outside the county) to give their views on the issues and options. The questionnaire was available in online and paper formats between 6th September and 24th October 2021 and 1,633 responses were received in total.
- 3.2 Of the 1,633 responses, 31 were received from organisations. Responses from organisations might represent the views of large numbers of individuals or key stakeholders who might be particularly informed about the impacts on their members, or they could raise technical arguments that cannot easily be summarised. For these reasons, ORS typically reports the views of individual respondents and organisations separately.

Respondent profile (individuals)

- 3.3 The table below profiles the 1,602 individual respondents to the engagement questionnaire. Figures may not always sum to 100% due to rounding.
- 3.4 The engagement questionnaire was publicised and made freely available to any individual or group who wished to express their views about options for the future of local government in Warwick and Stratford-on-Avon Districts. This means that the response profile is not necessarily representative of the Warwick and Stratford-on-Avon adult populations, for example, younger people aged under 35 are underrepresented in the responses to the questionnaire, relative to their incidence in the overall population. The open questionnaire findings should be considered in this context; nonetheless they are important and should be taken seriously alongside the deliberative results and other evidence.

Table 1: Consultation questionnaire individual respondents by demographic characteristics

Characteristic	Count	% Valid responses	Warwick & Stratford-on-Avon Population (18+)
BY AGE			
Under 35	157	11%	27%
35-44	175	13%	14%
45-54	270	20%	17%
55-64	298	22%	16%
65-74	338	25%	14%
75+	138	10%	13%
Total valid responses	1,376	100%	100%
<i>Not known</i>	226	-	-
BY GENDER			
Male	613	45%	49%
Female	737	54%	51%

Other ⁵	11	1%	-
Total valid responses	1,361	100%	100%
<i>Not known</i>	241	-	-
BY ETHNIC GROUP			
BAME	50	4%	6%
White	1,264	96%	94%
Total valid responses	1,314	100%	100%
<i>Not known</i>	288	-	-
BY WHETHER RESPONDENT HAS A DISABILITY			
Yes	141	10%	18%
No	1,221	90%	82%
Total valid responses	1,362	100%	100%
<i>Not known</i>	240	-	-

- 3.5 Individual responses by local authority and by ward (for those respondents who provided a valid postcode) are summarised on Table 2 and Table 3 below (Table 3 continues overleaf).

Table 2: Individual responses by area, compared to the combined Stratford and Warwick population aged 18+

Area	Count	% Valid responses	Combined population 18+
Stratford-on-Avon	482	36%	48%
Warwick	869	64%	52%
Total responses in Stratford-on-Avon/Warwick	1,351	100%	100%
<i>Outside Stratford-on-Avon/Warwick</i>	9	-	-
<i>Not known</i>	242	-	-

Table 3: Individual questionnaire responses by ward

Area	Count	% Valid responses
WARDS IN STRATFORD-ON-AVON		
Alcester Town	12	1%
Alcester & Rural	19	1%
Avenue	8	1%
Bidford East	10	1%
Bidford West & Salford	7	1%
Bishop's Itchington	15	1%
Bishopton	13	1%
Brailes & Compton	28	2%
Bridgetown	15	1%
Clopton	9	1%
Ettington	28	2%
Guildhall	13	1%
Harbury	10	1%
Hathaway	4	*
Henley-in-Arden	6	*
Kineton	10	1%

⁵ Please note, no suitable secondary data is currently available for 'other'; therefore the population data above is based on male and female only.

Kinwarton	17	1%
Long Itchington & Stockton	10	1%
Napton & Fenny Compton	13	1%
Quinton	11	1%
Red Horse	13	1%
Shipston North	14	1%
Shipston South	11	1%
Shottery	15	1%
Snitterfield	21	2%
Southam North	12	1%
Southam South	19	1%
Studley with Mappleborough Green	11	1%
Studley with Sambourne	9	1%
Tanworth-in-Arden	3	*
Tiddington	9	1%
Welcombe	13	1%
Welford-on-Avon	23	2%
Wellesbourne East	29	2%
Wellesbourne West	13	1%
Wootton Wawen	9	1%
WARDS IN WARWICK		
Bishop's Tachbrook	38	3%
Budbrooke	50	4%
Cubbington & Leek Wootton	15	1%
Kenilworth Abbey & Arden	39	3%
Kenilworth Park Hill	44	3%
Kenilworth St John's	38	3%
Leamington Brunswick	33	2%
Leamington Clarendon	106	8%
Leamington Lillington	64	5%
Leamington Milverton	94	7%
Leamington Willes	82	6%
Radford Semele	14	1%
Warwick All Saints & Woodloes	60	4%
Warwick Aylesford	52	4%
Warwick Myton & Heathcote	52	4%
Warwick Saltisford	49	4%
Whitnash	39	3%
Total responses in Stratford-on-Avon/Warwick		
	1,351	100%
<i>Outside Stratford-on-Avon/Warwick</i>	9	-
<i>Not known</i>	242	-

- 3.6 Of the 1,602 individual respondents, 80 (6%) said that they were Councillors (County, District and/or Town/Parish) – around two-thirds of these lived in Stratford-on-Avon.
- 3.7 Ninety-seven respondents (7% of individuals responding to the questionnaire) were local authority staff, of whom over half worked for Warwick District Council.

Table 4: Individual questionnaire responses by County, District and/or Town/Parish Councillor and Local Authority Employee

Area	Count	% Valid responses
BY WHETHER A COUNCILLOR		
County, District and/or Town/Parish Councillor	80	6%
Not a Councillor	1,361	94%
Total valid responses	1,441	100%
<i>Not known</i>	161	-
BY WHETHER A LOCAL AUTHORITY EMPLOYEE		
Local authority employee	97	7%
Not a local authority employee	1,318	93%
Total valid responses	1,415	100%
<i>Not known</i>	187	-

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).
- 3.9 After careful analysis of the raw dataset, ORS did not find any responses that appeared to be attempting to systematically skew results. A handful of responses were not included in the final analysis, on the basis of having been identified as a partially completed duplicate of response that was subsequently submitted in full.

Responses from organisations

- 3.10 Respondents had the option of responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation. Overall, 31 respondents said that they were responding on behalf of organisations; most of these responses were on behalf of town and parish councils. Respondents acting on behalf of organisations were informed that, where feedback is from representatives of organisations or someone acting in an official capacity, it may be attributed to them.
- 3.11 The named organisations who responded to the consultation questionnaire are shown in Table 5, and their feedback is reported separately from that of individuals, in a dedicated section at the end of this chapter.

Table 5: Organisational responses to the consultation questionnaire.

Organisation	
Town and Parish Councils, and Parish Meetings: Admington Parish Council Alcester Town Council Alderminster Parish Council Baginton Parish Council Burmington Parish Meeting Butlers Marston Parish Council Cherington and Stourton Parish Council Chesterton & Kingston Parish Meeting Farnborough Parish Council Fenny Compton Parish Council Great Alne Parish Council Little Wolford Parish Meeting Long Compton Parish Council Mappleborough Green Parish Council Marston Sicca Parish Council Norton Lindsey Parish Council Radford Semele Parish Council Upper Lighthorne Parish Council Warmington and Arlescote Parish Council Wellesbourne and Walton Parish Council	Others: Coventry Cyrenians Local consultancy business Local planning business Other local business (no details specified) P3 charity Packmores Community Centre Outreach/local residents' group Shakespeare's England Warwickshire Police (corporate response)

Interpretation of the data

- 3.12 For simplicity, the results for the open engagement questionnaire are presented in a largely graphical format, where the numbers on pie or bar charts indicate the percentage or proportion giving a particular view. Grouped percentages are used e.g. to show overall levels of agreement and disagreement. Where possible, the colours of the charts have been standardised with a 'traffic light' system in which green shades represent positive responses (such as 'agree'), red shades represent negative responses (such as 'disagree'), and beige or purple shades represent neither positive nor negative responses. Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of "don't know" categories, or multiple answers. An asterisk (*) denotes any value less than half of one per cent.
- 3.13 All open-ended responses have been read and classified (coded) using a standardised approach (code frame). This approach helps ensure consistency when classifying different comments and the resulting codes represent themes that have been repeatedly mentioned.
- 3.14 Where results are shown based on District, these are based on individual respondents' postcodes (where the information was provided).

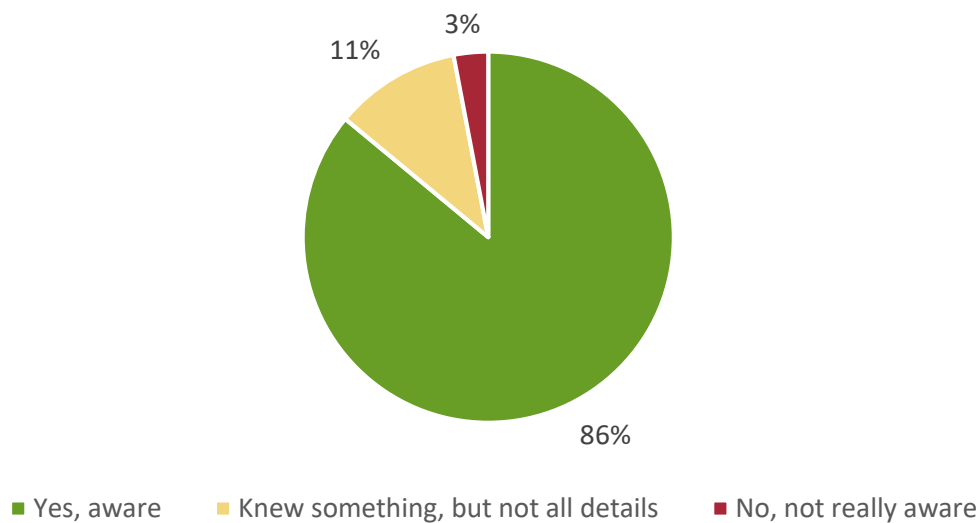
Main findings (individuals)

Awareness of current local government structures and services provided

Before this consultation, were you aware that Warwickshire County Council and your District Council each provide separate services in your area?

- 3.15 A substantial majority (86%) of individual respondents said that they were aware of the separate Council provisions in their area, whilst only 3% said that they were not aware.
- 3.16 Around 1 in 10 (11%) said that they knew something, but not all of the details.
- 3.17 Perhaps unsurprisingly, awareness was particularly high among individuals who work for a local authority (with 95% of these respondents answering 'yes, aware').

Figure 1: Before this consultation, were you aware that Warwickshire County Council and your District Council each provide separate services in your area? (Individual Responses). Base: 1,592

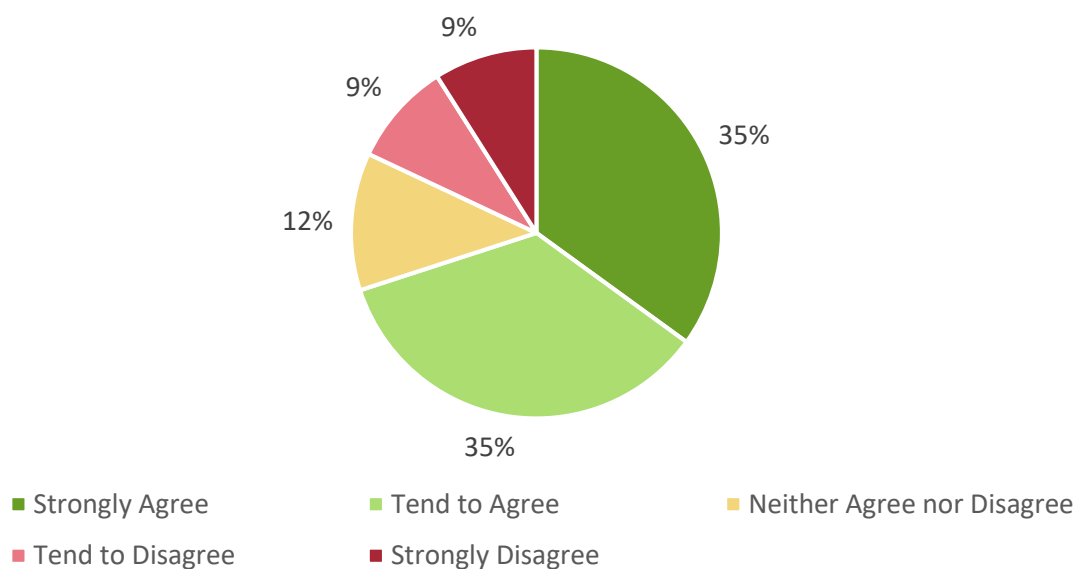


The case for change

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils need to consider changes to respond to these challenges?

^{3.18} Seven-in-ten (70%) individual respondents agreed that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils need to consider changes to respond to the challenges, while almost a fifth (18%) of individual respondents disagreed.

Figure 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils need to consider changes to respond to these challenges? (Individual Responses). Base: 1,581

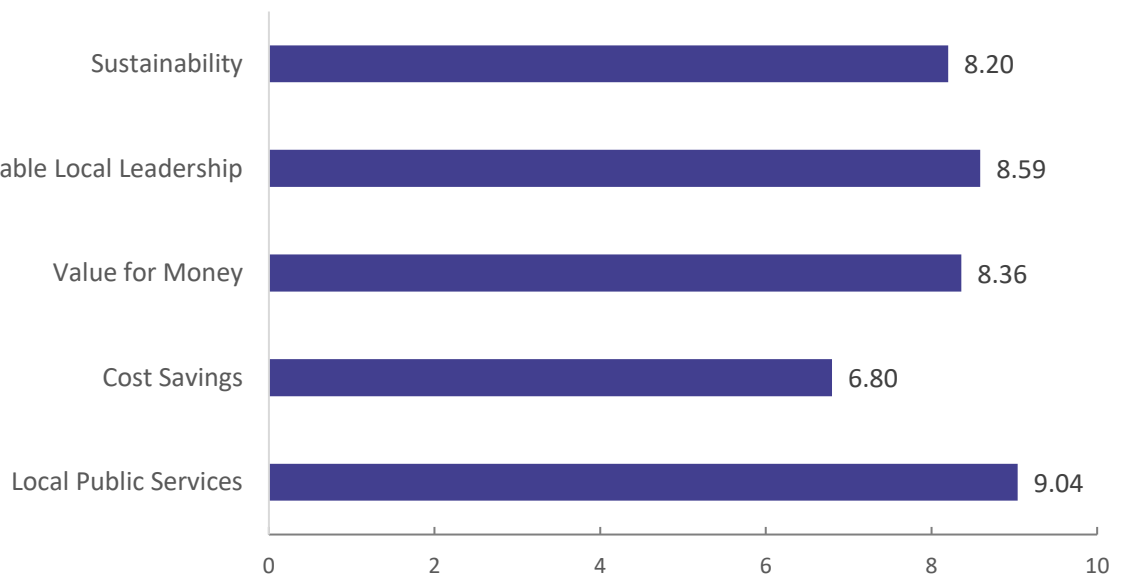


Importance of criteria

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

- ^{3.19} Respondents were presented with a list of five criteria that may be important to consider as part of any proposal for change, and were invited to give each one a score out of 10 (with 10 indicating that the criterion is critically important, and 0 indicating that it is of no importance).
- ^{3.20} Each of the criteria had a mean score of more than six out of ten, showing that individual respondents rated each criterion at least fairly highly. Local public services were rated the highest (9.04); followed by stronger and accountable local leadership (8.59); and then value for money (8.36) and sustainability (8.20).
- ^{3.21} Cost savings scored somewhat lower than the other criteria, though still achieved a moderately high mean score (6.80).

Figure 3: Please rate how important you think each of these criteria are using a whole number between 0 and 10, where 10 means that the criteria is critically important and 0 means the criteria is of no importance (Individual Responses)
Base: 1,547

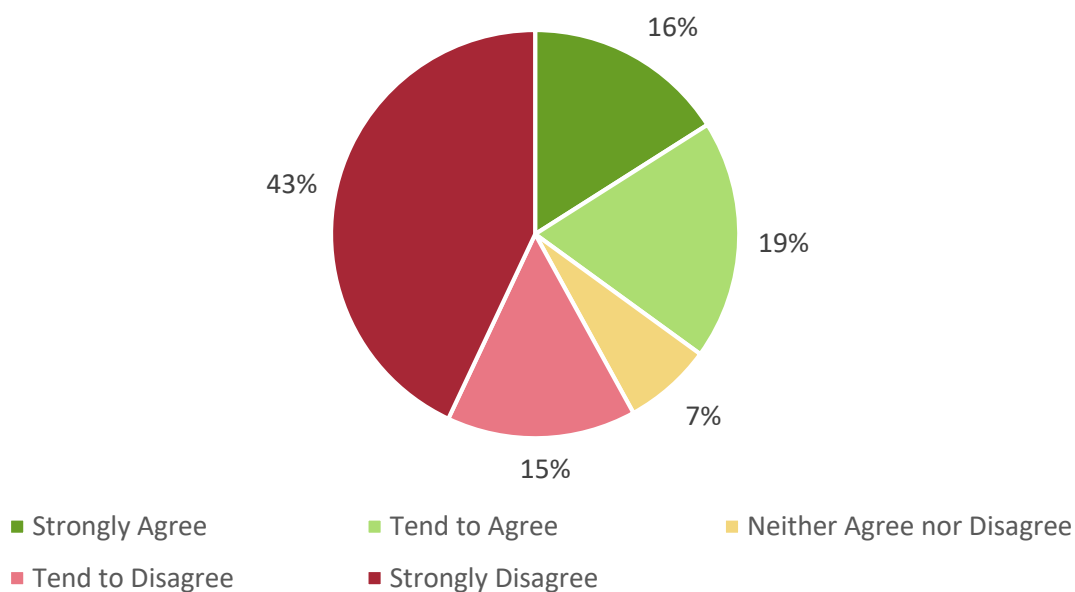


The proposal to merge Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with one new council to provide all district council services across South Warwickshire?

3.22 Around a third (35%) of individual respondents agreed with the proposal that the District Councils should merge, while over half (58%) disagreed.

Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with one new Council to provide all District Council services across South Warwickshire? (Individual Responses). Base: 1,536



3.23 Figure 5 overleaf provides an overview of how the views of individual respondents varied by district, and illustrates there was somewhat more support among questionnaire respondents in Stratford (48% agreeing with the proposal), compared with Warwick (30% agreeing).

3.24 Figure 6 overleaf shows levels of agreement by other respondent characteristics (including demographics, and whether respondents work for a local authority, or as a councillor). It can be seen that more than half (55%) of local authority employees said that they agreed with the proposals.

Figure 5: Views on the proposal by district (base numbers shown in brackets)

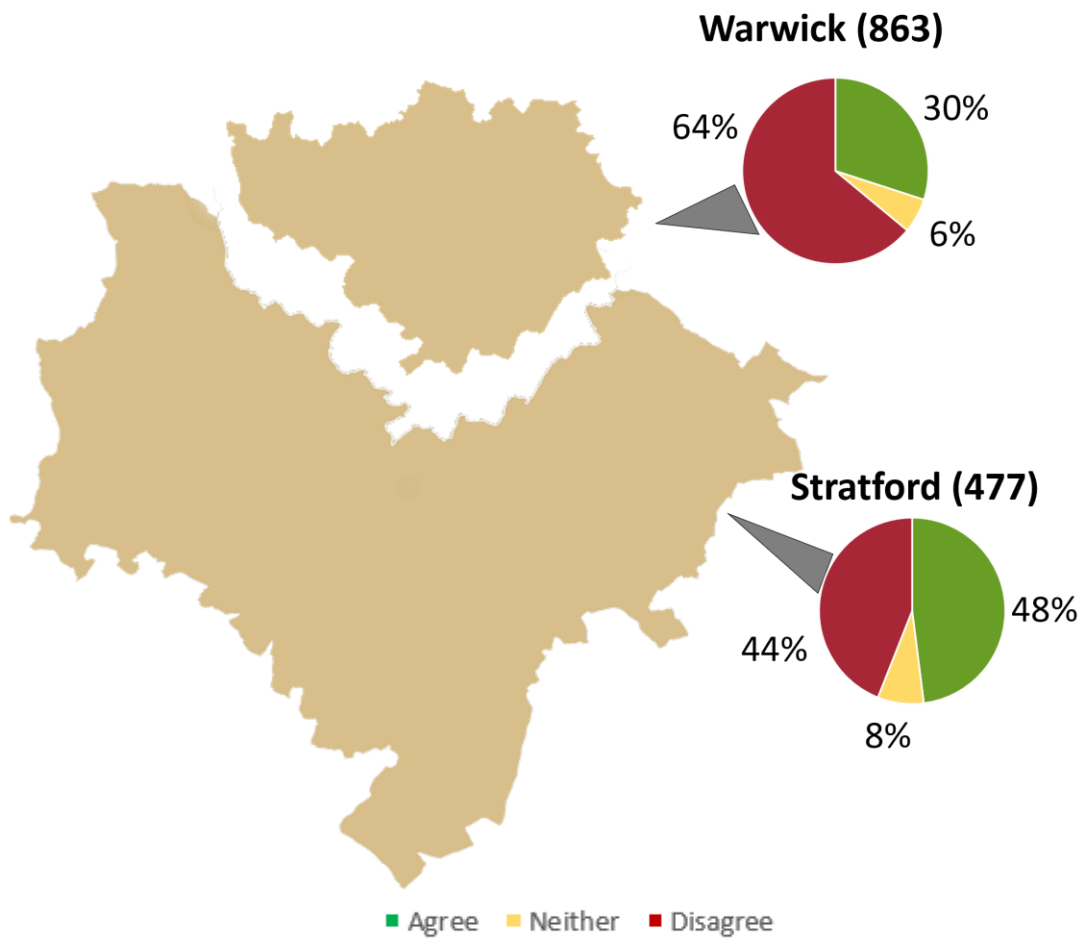
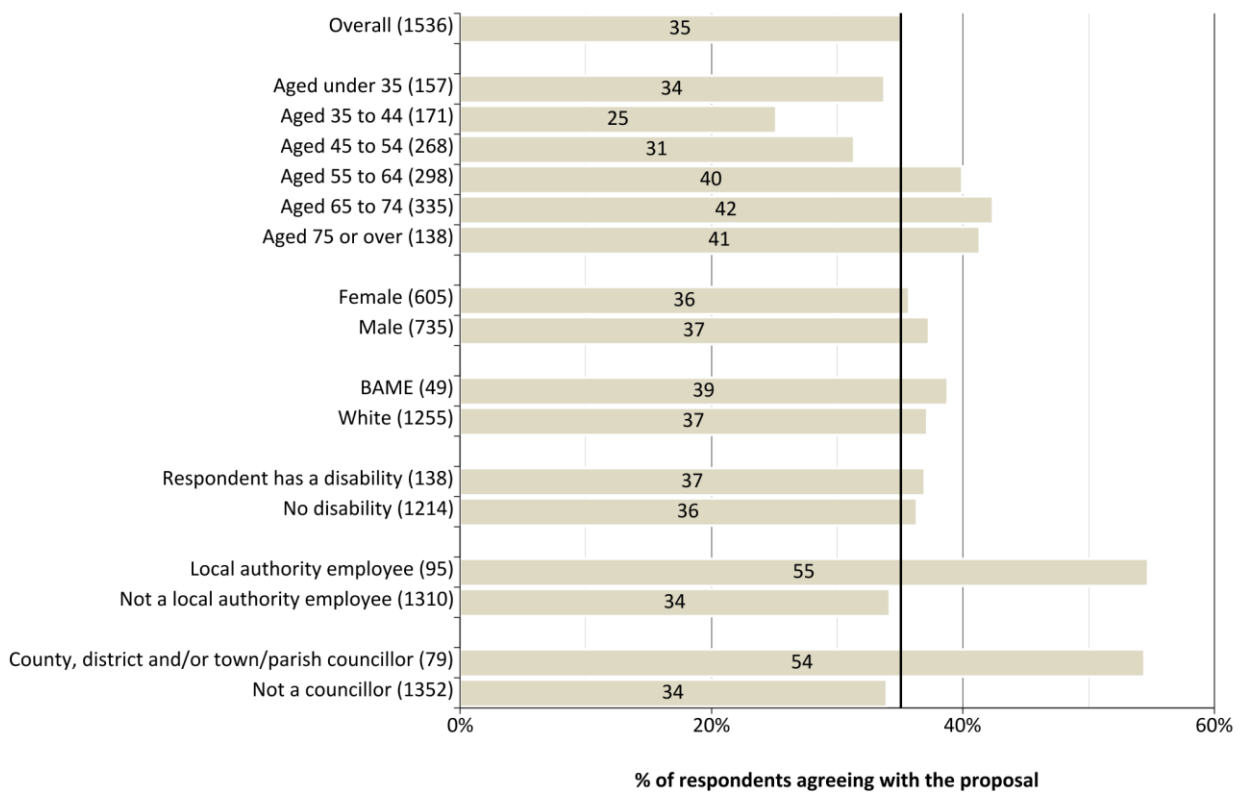


Figure 6: Levels of agreement with the proposal, by other respondent characteristics (base numbers shown in brackets)

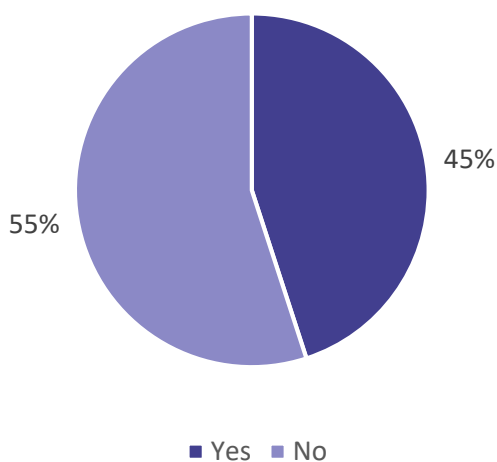


Contact with District Councillors and involvement in decisions

Have you contacted a local district councillor in the last 12 months?

3.26 Just under half (45%) of individual respondents said that they had not contacted their local District Councillor in the last twelve months.

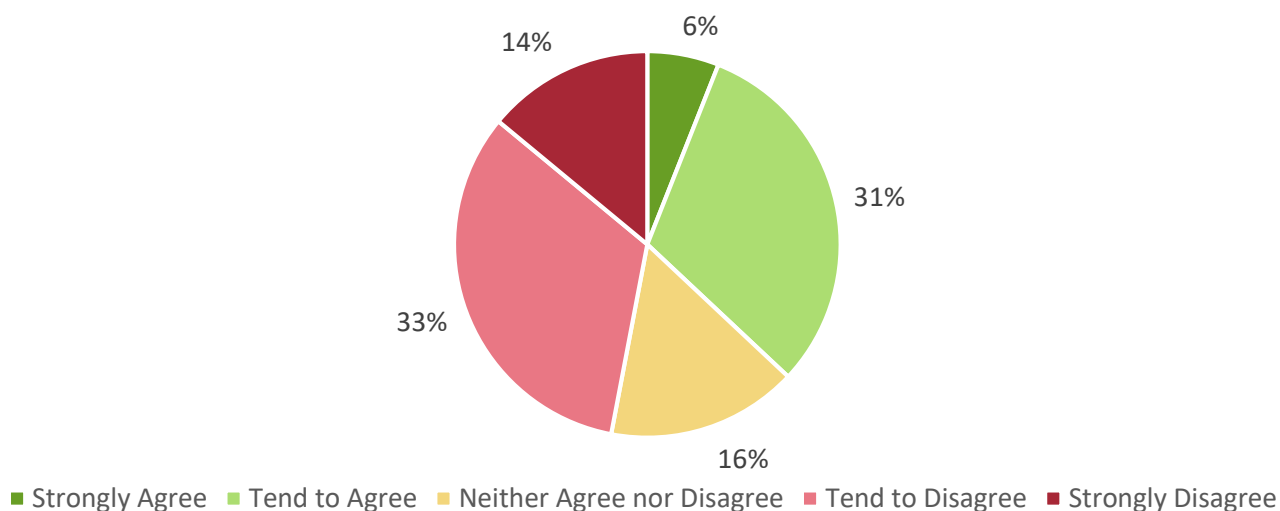
Figure 7: Have you contacted a local District Councillor in the last 12 months? (Individual Responses) Base: 1,520



To what extent do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area?

3.27 Over a third (37%) of individual respondents agreed that they can influence decisions affecting their local area, whereas nearly half (46%) disagreed.

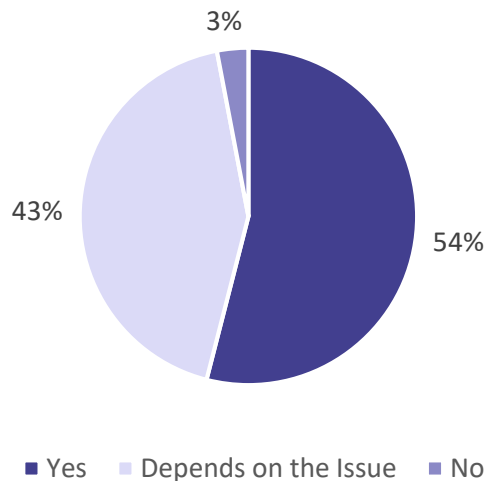
Figure 8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area? (Individual Responses). Base: 1,582



Generally speaking, would you like to be more involved in the decisions that affect your local area?

- 3.28 Over half (54%) of individual respondents said that they would like to have more involvement in decisions that affect their local area, whilst only 3% would not, and 43% said that it would depend on the issue.

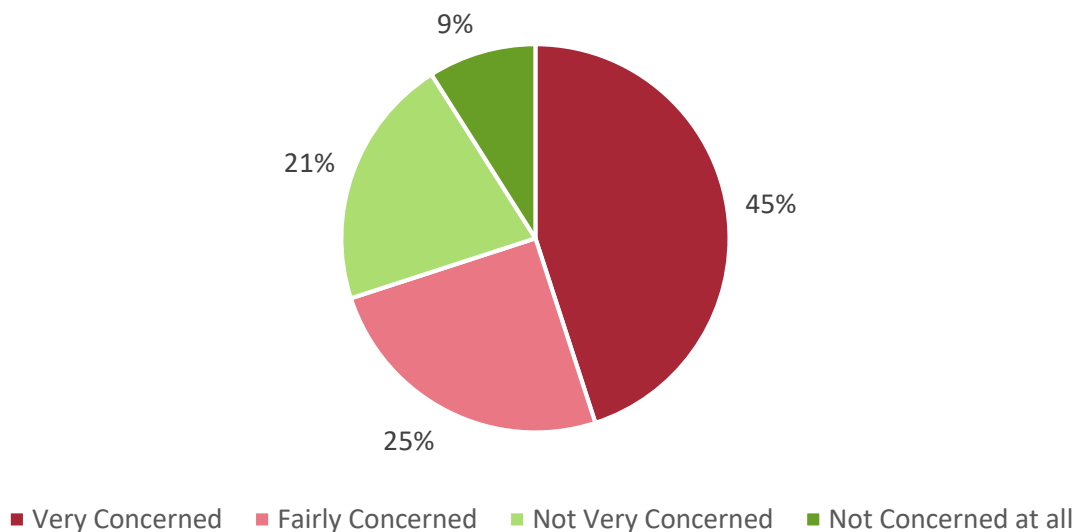
Figure 9: Generally speaking, would you like to be more involved in the decisions that affect your local area? (Individual Responses). Base: 1,513



If a new single council was created, with fewer Councillors overall, how concerned would you be about being able to contact a District Councillor if you had an issue to raise?

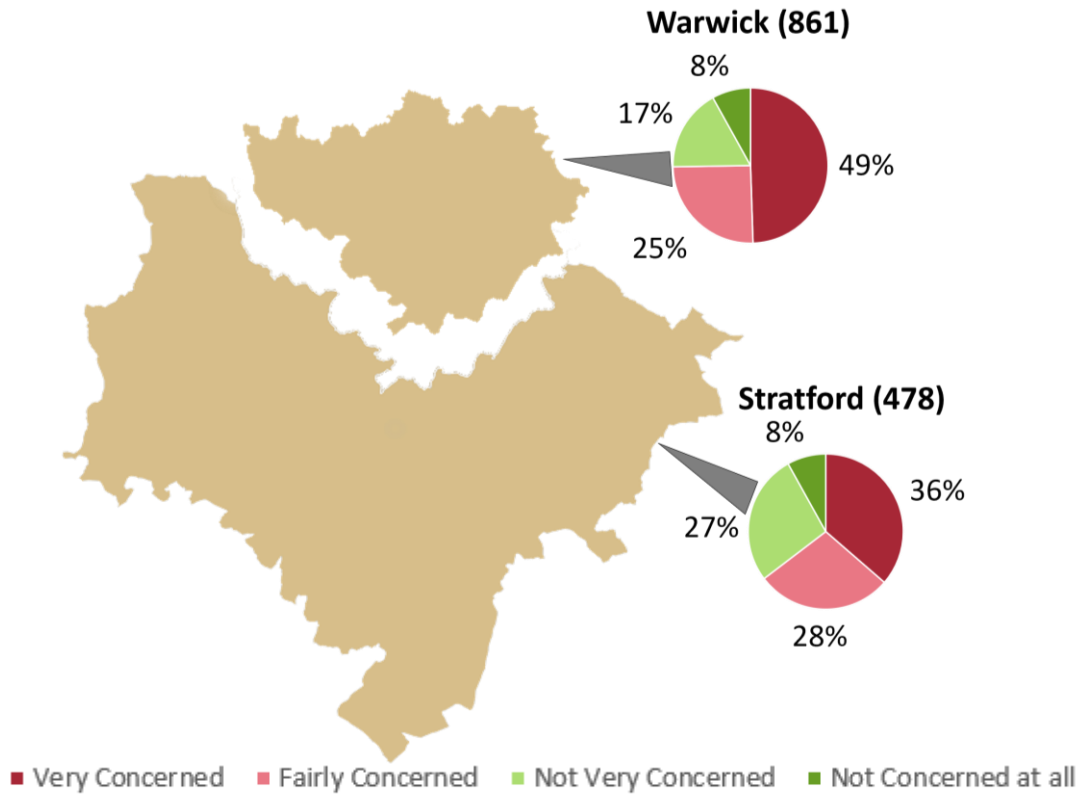
- 3.29 Seven-in-ten (70%) individual respondents said that they would be either very or fairly concerned about being able to contact a District Councillor, in the event of the proposal going ahead. On the other hand, three-in-ten (30%) said that they would be either not very concerned, or not concerned at all.

Figure 10: If a new single council was created, with fewer Councillors overall, how concerned would you be about being able to contact a District Councillor if you had an issue to raise? (Individual Responses). Base: 1,506



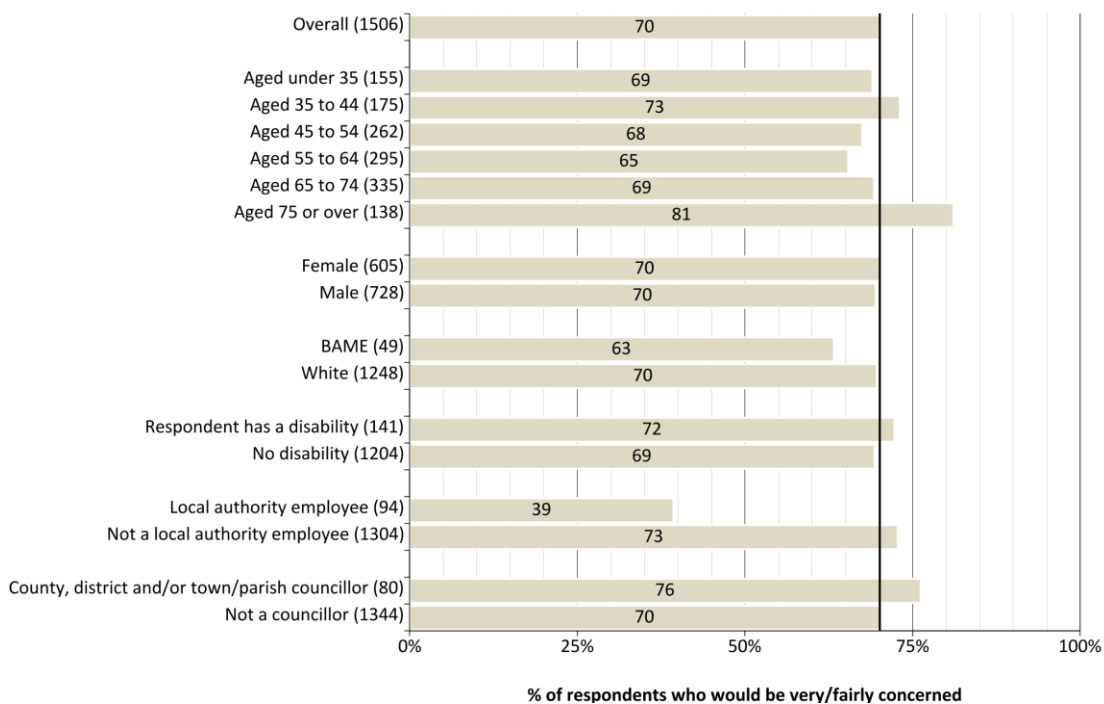
3.30 A somewhat higher proportion of respondents from Warwick reported that they would be concerned about contacting a councillor (75%), compared with Stratford-on-Avon (64%) (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Levels of concern about being able to contact a District Councillor if the proposal was to proceed, by district (base numbers shown in brackets)



3.31 Respondents aged 75 or above were somewhat more likely to express concerns about being able to contact a Councillor, compared with other groups (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Levels of concern about being able to contact a District Councillor if the proposal was to proceed, by other respondent characteristics (base numbers shown in brackets)



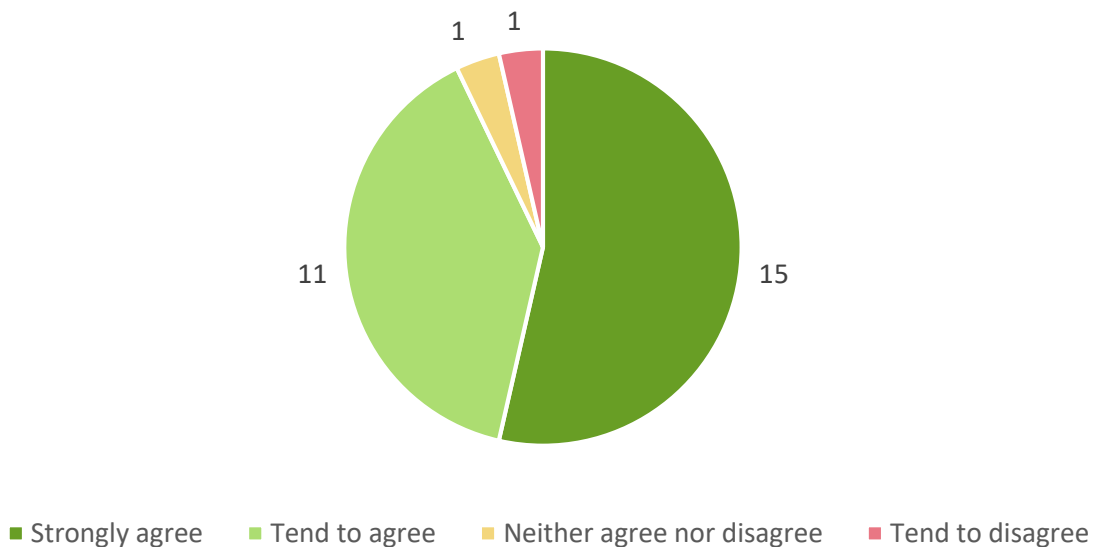
Organisations in the consultation questionnaire

- 3.32 Figures 11, 12 and 13 (below and overleaf) provide a summary of views of organisation and business representatives responding to the consultation questionnaire, around three of the main questions (i.e. views on the case for change, views on the specific proposal for a merger between the two districts, and the extent to which respondents would be concerned about contacting a District Councillor in the event of the proposal going ahead).
- 3.33 The pie charts display counts rather than percentages; this is simply due to the low numbers of organisations responding.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils need to consider changes to respond to these challenges?

- 3.34 The overwhelming majority of organisations that responded (26 out of 28) said that they agreed that the District Councils need to consider changes to respond to their challenges. Only 1 organisation disagreed.

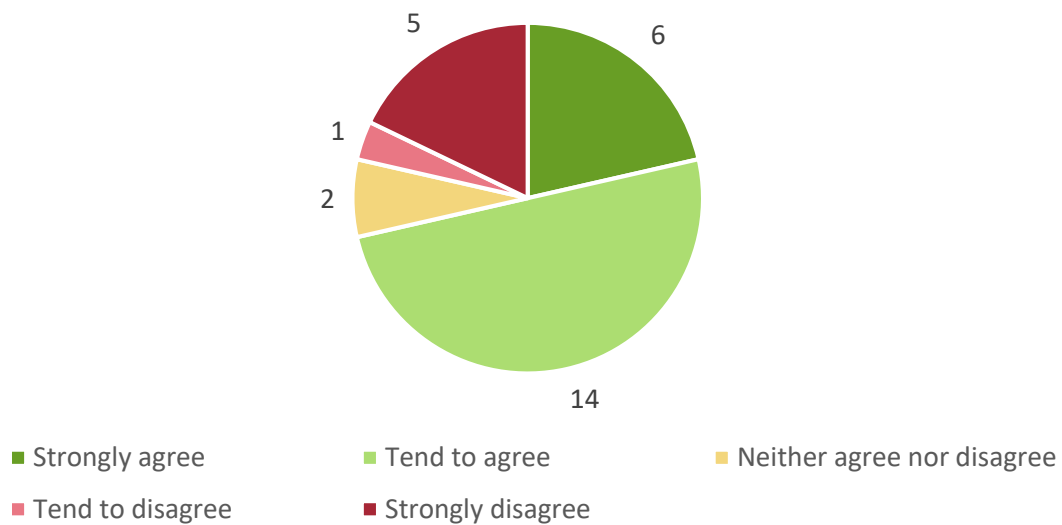
Figure 13: To what extent do you agree or disagree that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils need to consider changes to respond to these challenges? (Organisation Responses)



To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with one new council to provide all district council services across South Warwickshire?

- 3.35 Almost three quarters of organisations that responded (20 out of 28) agreed with the proposals to merge the District Councils. However, 6 of the organisations disagreed (of whom, 5 disagreed strongly).

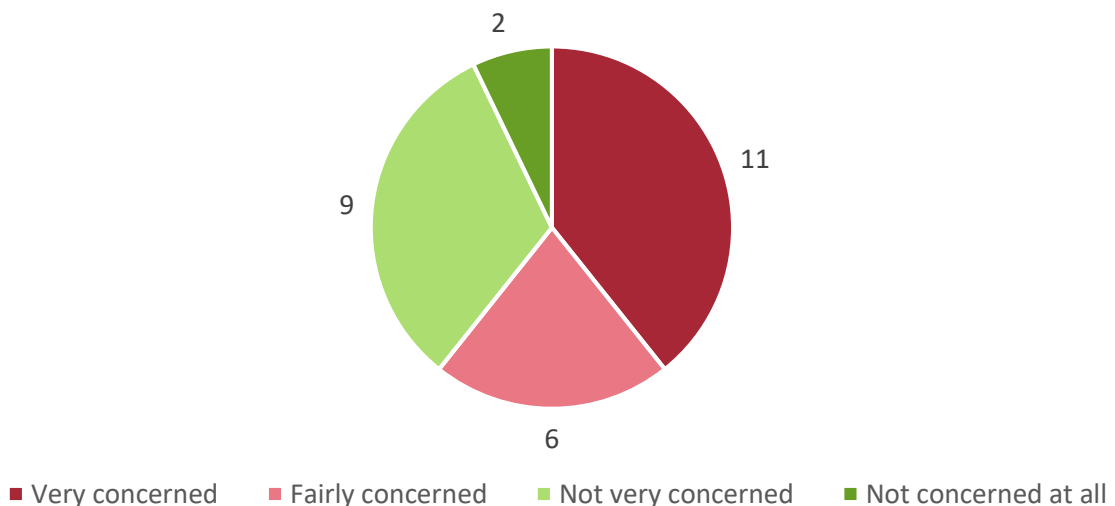
Figure 14: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with one new Council to provide all District Council services across South Warwickshire? (Organisation Responses)



If a new single Council was created, with fewer Councillors overall, how concerned would you be about being able to contact a District Councillor if you had an issue to raise?

- 3.36 A majority of the organisations that responded (17 out of 28) indicated that they would be either very or fairly concerned about being able to contact a District Councillor in the event of the proposal going ahead.

Figure 15: If a new single council was created, with fewer Councillors overall, how concerned would you be about being able to contact a District Councillor if you had an issue to raise? (Organisation Responses)



- 3.37 A number of text responses from organisations were in support of the merger: on the basis of similarities and synergies between the areas, improved value for money, and the opportunity to create a more 'powerful' authority with a wider strategic outlook, for addressing issues such as climate change and sustainable development:

It was agreed [at the Council meeting] that the two Councils face shared challenges and the combined area had a credible economic geography. It was noted that many residents live in one council area and work in another. It was hoped that the merger would enable the combined authority to take a leading role within the County. Councillors agreed that it was vital that the merger provided value for money for all residents" (Town/Parish Council response)

"Clearly the impending financial crisis facing the two Councils needs dealing with and the merging will allow for better planning across the key services and ought to help develop a much better response to climate change... A reset with a new and more powerful authority should be able to ensure that [CO2 reduction] is addressed properly with co-operation and mutual working. We also consider that the merger would allow for the development pressures facing the districts to be planned in a much more sustainable way, as it would allow for a much better strategic overview of where development should go based on the development pattern and available infrastructure over a much larger and more logical area" (Local business response)

"A combined South Warwickshire DISTRICT Council, if managed properly, would have extra capacity to deliver services more economically and provide a proper balance to the ambit of Warwickshire County Council" (Town/Parish Council response)

- 3.38 However, many organisations voiced reservations about the merger, with one response called for all other options to be considered and consulted upon to the same degree as the current proposal. There was some scepticism about the extent of any savings or efficiencies that might be achieved. One Parish Council supported the proposal but did so only grudgingly (i.e. as the 'least worst' option in the face of the challenges); another was neutral:

"Yes, we agree that these are matters that need to be addressed, but there are other options that may or may not be better - it would be better if all of the options were discussed in the same consultation in the round. Any Consultation should be followed by a referendum held in both current districts... We would be concerned that a reduction in the number of councillors would reduce local accountability and access to elected representatives. We also think that the concept of potentially having to build/lease new offices to hold the 'merged' council staff would be a waste of resources" (Town/Parish Council response)

"The reduction in quality of services from SDC & WCC is a major issue currently and there is concern that services will continue to reduce with the merger ... Overall, we as a Parish will not be voting in favour with enthusiasm but as the best of a number of bad options" (Town/Parish Council response)

We accept that that the merger will generate savings that are required to reduce forecast deficits. We are concerned, however, that (a) these savings will require job losses which will require redundancies, (b) there are further risks and potential disbenefits (clearly outlined in the Deloitte report), and (c) further savings need to be found over and above those arising from the merger. On balance, then, we take the neutral position. (Town/Parish Council response)

- 3.39 Some responses disagreed with the merger because they were concerned that certain types of community (e.g. rural, isolated and/or more deprived areas) would lose out, either because a single District Council being 'remote' and/or because focus would shift to larger, more urban areas.

"Finance and red tape wise, there is value. However, there is such a difference between Nuneaton and rural Stratford villages, how can single priorities and funding be fair?" (Community Outreach Centre)

I am concerned that small and remote parishes... may suffer degradation of services such as planning if the full merger goes ahead. At the moment the planning service that this parish receives from Stratford Council is poor and may become worse under a larger and geographically more distant single council" (Town/Parish Council response)

- 3.40 A couple of responses supported the proposal, but in the context of it functioning as a stepping stone towards a unitary council covering the same area as the proposed new District:

"The districts are naturally congruous with no logical boundary between. There should be improved efficiency and cost-effectiveness. It could be the initial stage in the development of a South Warwickshire unitary authority" (Town/Parish Council response)

"I think that these plans need to go further and create a single Unitary Council for south Warwickshire. WCC is dysfunctional and slow to respond to infrastructure proposals, failing to show a clear vision for the economic requirements of a growing area. We also need a stronger response to the climate emergency. New schools aren't being built fast enough, roads aren't being built fast enough and our rail network is woeful compared to other areas of the West Midlands. A new South Warwickshire Unitary Council, as part of the West Midlands Combined Authority would give us real local muscle to get things done, being both big enough yet still very much local. South Warwickshire has a clear sense of identity and place, unlike the whole of the county. (Local business response)

- 3.41 It should also be noted that a response was received on behalf of senior stakeholders at Warwickshire Police, including the Chief Officer Group. While this response did not state an outright position vis-à-vis the proposal, it stressed the organisation's willingness to engage and collaborate with any new authority that might end up being put in place:

Of primary importance to Warwickshire Police is our ability to continue to build upon and strengthen our partnership arrangements with whatever new structures are put in place, with the ultimate aim of maximizing the protection from crime and harm for the communities of South Warwickshire. Partnership working can be challenging and complex, so we would be keen that any changes enhance that partnership landscape and in the fullness of time we would be keen to know the detail of any changes and map those across to our own operating structures and processes, to ensure we can optimize those partnership arrangements. In terms of Community Safety Partnerships, strong relationships, structures and working practices already exists and we would be keen to maintain and strengthen those approaches moving forwards. (Corporate response from Warwickshire Police)

- 3.42 One concern was expressed around whether the views of those without internet access had been considered as part of the consultation.
- 3.43 The views of Shakespeare's England are covered in detail in the written submissions chapter, so have not been repeated here.

Other open-ended comments in the consultation questionnaire (all respondents)

- 3.44 Table 6 overleaf summarises the comments given by respondents when asked for provide a reason for their view on the proposal.
- 3.45 Table 7 summarises the comments made in response to a second open-ended question asking respondents to provide any further comments, for example, about alternatives, equalities impacts, or anything else related to the proposal.
- 3.46 In general, similar themes were broached across both questions. A proportion of respondents used the question(s) to express approval for the proposal, e.g. on the basis of offering an opportunity for savings and efficiencies. However, numerous concerns were also expressed, for example around: a reduction in local democracy and accountability; reduced representation due to the proposed change in councillor numbers; scepticism about whether the proposal will save money, or may actually increase costs; services being reduced and/or moving further away or becoming less accessible; and the difficulties associated with reconciling the needs of different types of area within a single authority (e.g. due to differences in demographics, prosperity/deprivation, rural/urban nature, and political affiliations, and so on).
- 3.47 There were also some concerns about the transition process, job losses (due to redundancies), a Conservative political 'power grab', and a fair allocation of funding and resources (e.g. some suspected that one area might end up subsidising the other, such that some residents could end up paying more for a lesser service). Some sensed that the two Districts actually had more in common with other neighbouring authorities than they did with each other.
- 3.48 A few respondents suggested alternatives: some were in favour of some form of unitary local government, mainly on the basis of achieving greater savings. Some supported a single council covering the whole of Warwickshire, although some felt the area of the proposed South Warwickshire District would be a suitable basis for a new unitary council, perhaps with a North Warwickshire counterpart.

3.49 However, many respondents were in favour of exploring further options for the sharing of services, but stopping short of a full merger.

Table 6: Summary of text comments made in response to the first open-ended question asking respondents to provide reasons for their views on the main proposal. Base: All respondents providing comments (1,369)

Summary of Comments		Number of respondents	%
Positive Comments	Saves money/cuts down on duplicate services/economies of scale	238	17%
	Generally agree with proposal (non-specific)	88	6%
	Similarities between the districts/councils make this a sensible proposal	35	3%
	Proposal will ensure local accountability	21	2%
	The benefits of the proposal that have been outlined make this a good idea	18	1%
Concerns About the Proposals	Need to keep local identity and representation; different areas have different needs; merging will leave both areas worse off	332	24%
	Concern/opposition to change; proposal undermines local democracy and accountability/less direct involvement for public/more disenfranchisement	206	15%
	Fewer councillors/offices means less representation and accessibility for everyone	137	10%
	This isn't cost effective/ a waste of money; this will increase costs to the public	114	8%
	Need to keep local identity and representation; different areas have different needs; merging will leave both areas worse off	67	5%
	Smaller councils are better able to deal with local issues/bigger is not always better	65	5%
	Proposal will make it harder and more time consuming to access services/loss of accessibility; need to make sure services are maintained for everyone	57	4%
	Proposals are politically motivated e.g. Tory 'power grab'	53	4%
	Concern about differing political representation in different areas/difficult to merge areas with different political affiliations	41	3%
	Worries about job losses from merger i.e. redundancies	35	3%
	Generally disagree with proposal (non-specific)	28	2%
	Previous attempts have failed/won't improve/work	26	2%
	The two councils work very differently and will not merge well	24	2%
	Funding will not be divided fairly between areas e.g. rural, urban, tourist etc.	21	2%
	Areas are not well matched - have closer ties with other neighbouring councils or areas - e.g. Stratford with Cotswolds (rural), Warwick with Coventry (urban)	18	1%
	Warwick will lose out/will end up subsidising Stratford/More money will be spent in Stratford	14	1%
	Stratford will lose out/will end up subsidising Warwick; more money will be spent in Warwick areas	14	1%
	Merging district councils will cause confusion/won't be well organised.	14	1%
	Concerns about lack of representation/voice of vulnerable people/lack of I.T access	12	1%
	This is just a money saving/making scheme	3	*
This is a land/power grab/asset strip/vanity project	1	*	
Alternatives	Should have a unitary council for the whole of Warwickshire	77	6%
	Share services/more collaboration without merging completely	27	2%
	Should have a unitary council for South Warwickshire	17	1%
	Other alternative/suggestion	40	3%
	Not enough information provided	40	3%

Criticism of the consultation	Questionnaire is flawed/biased/has leading questions	13	1%
	Minds are already made up/consultation is just a 'tick box' exercise	11	1%
	This consultation is a waste of money/Money is better spent elsewhere	3	*
	Other criticism of consultation	5	1%
Other	Need more information to decide/need to be kept informed	42	3%
	Savings can be made without merger	38	3%
	There should be a referendum/should be put to a vote or Citizens' Assembly	26	2%
	Keep as it is/don't see the need for change	23	2%
	Negative view of Warwick District Council	22	2%
	Negative view of Stratford-on-Avon District Council	18	1%
	Need more funding from central government	17	1%
	COVID-related comment	14	1%
	Equalities-related comment	13	1%
	More online services and use of modern technology would be beneficial	7	1%
	Warwickshire is likely to become a unitary authority anyway	3	*
	Other	55	4%

Table 7: Summary of text comments made in response to the second open-ended question asking respondents to provide any further comments, for example, about alternatives, equalities impacts, or anything else related to the proposal. Base: All respondents providing comments (872)

Summary of Comments		Number of respondents	%
Positive Comments	Generally agree with proposal (non-specific)	35	4%
	Saves money/cuts down on duplicate services/economies of scale	19	2%
	The benefits of the proposal that have been outlined make this a good idea	10	1%
	Proposal will ensure local accountability	6	1%
Concerns About the Proposals	Need to keep local identity and representation; different areas have different needs; merging will leave both areas worse off	88	10%
	Concern/opposition to change; proposal undermines local democracy and accountability/less direct involvement for public/more disenfranchisement	70	8%
	Fewer councillors/offices means less representation and accessibility for everyone	64	7%
	This isn't cost effective/ a waste of money; this will increase costs to the public	50	6%
	Smaller councils are better able to deal with local issues/bigger is not always better	29	3%
	Proposal will make it harder and more time consuming to access services/loss of accessibility; need to make sure services are maintained for everyone	25	3%
	Generally disagree with proposal (non-specific)	24	3%
	May lead to a loss of service/service reductions	21	2%
	Worries about refuse/bin collection - increased cost/inferior service	19	2%
	This is just a money saving/making scheme	15	2%
	Concerns about lack of representation/voice of vulnerable people/lack of I.T access	15	2%
	Worries about job losses from merger i.e. redundancies	14	2%
	Proposals are politically motivated e.g. Tory 'power grab'	14	2%
	Concern about differing political representation in different areas/difficult to merge areas with different political affiliations	12	1%
Areas are not well matched - have closer ties with other neighbouring councils or areas - e.g. Stratford with Cotswolds (rural), Warwick with Coventry (urban)	10	1%	

	Funding will not be divided fairly between areas e.g. rural, urban, tourist etc.	9	1%
	The two councils work very differently and will not merge well	8	1%
	Previous attempts have failed/won't improve/work	7	1%
	Warwick will lose out/will end up subsidising Stratford/More money will be spent in Stratford	4	*
	Stratford will lose out/will end up subsidising Warwick; more money will be spent in Warwick areas	4	*
	Merging district councils will cause confusion/won't be well organised.	3	*
Alternatives	Should have a unitary council for the whole of Warwickshire	91	10%
	Share services/more collaboration without merging completely	88	10%
	Find alternative ways of saving money/streamlining/better options available	70	8%
	Should have a unitary council for South Warwickshire	6	1%
	Other alternative/suggestion	89	10%
Criticism of the consultation	Not enough information provided	27	3%
	Minds are already made up/consultation is just a 'tick box' exercise	20	2%
	Questionnaire is flawed/biased/has leading questions	11	1%
	Minds are already made up/consultation is just a 'tick box' exercise	11	1%
	This is a land/power grab, asset strip, vanity project etc	7	1%
	This consultation is a waste of money/Money is better spent elsewhere	5	1%
	Other criticism of consultation	23	3%
Other	Keep as it is/don't see the need for change	36	4%
	Need more funding from central government	36	4%
	Need more information to decide/need to be kept informed	31	4%
	There should be a referendum/should be put to a vote or Citizens' Assembly	27	3%
	COVID-related comment	16	2%
	Learn from other councils' experiences of merging or sharing services	10	1%
	Equalities-related comment	10	1%
	Negative view of Warwick District Council	7	1%
	Warwickshire is likely to become a unitary authority anyway	4	*
	More online services and use of modern technology would be beneficial	4	*
	Elections and reviews of current policy will be needed if merger takes place	3	*
	Negative view of Stratford-on-Avon District Council	3	*
	Negative view of Warwickshire County Council	3	*
	Other	128	15%

3.50 As shown in the tables, small numbers of respondents favoured some variation or other alternative. Suggestions included:

Introducing a unitary council(s)/getting rid of District Councils altogether, but with empowered town and parish councils to ensure a suitable local presence;

Greater sharing of services but involving all five Districts (i.e. centralising back-office functions at a county-wide level);

Consideration of mergers with other areas e.g. Coventry, Solihull;

Leaving the District Councils as they are but with the County taking on some additional responsibilities (e.g. waste collection) to alleviate some of their financial burdens;

Fully merging both Districts' staff via the SSA (Shared Staff Arrangement) – the respondent cited the example of Richmond and Wandsworth Councils in London, which utilise such an arrangement while remaining separate authorities;

Having both councils work out of same building with shared administrative staff, but continuing as separate entities;

Having a single unitary for Warwickshire but with Area Committees based on the existing Districts;

Merging nearly all functions, but keeping planning devolved at the Stratford/Warwick District level as this is most likely to be locally contentious;

Undertaking a full restructure of the existing councils before considering a merger;

Considering more radical, regional-level change e.g. West Midlands regional assembly/'parliament'.

3.51 Specific suggestions for the ways in which the districts might be able to raise revenue or make further savings (i.e. as ways to potentially avoid to merger) included:

Recalculating council tax bands (with claims that these are 'out of date' etc) and/or increasing council tax for the highest banded properties;

Making sure the longer-term Covid impact has been factored into considerations: e.g. considering whether there is now less of a need for to have as many council buildings over the longer term due to home working etc;

Finding new suppliers of services to deliver at a more reasonable price; introducing competitive tender processes, with the two councils working jointly together to negotiate better deals, etc;

Reducing wards and councillor numbers within the existing Councils;

Introducing 'profit ceilings'/windfall tax for council suppliers;

Introducing a local/visitor tax to raise money;

Using unpaid volunteers to help deliver some services.

3.52 If a merger is to go ahead, then it was suggested that that the following be considered:

Giving an enhanced role to parish and town councils;

Ensuring the new authority joins the West Midlands Combined Authority;

Establishing a working committee with involvement from residents, with the powers to shape any reorganisation;

Having residents' 'surgeries' in towns/villages so that the council does not feel remote;

Limiting or curtailing the extent of any rebranding exercise (signage etc) in order to maximise savings.

3.53 There were a number of comments about potential negative equalities impacts, and/or concerns expressed about how certain groups might be affected. These comments mainly concerned groups such as the elderly, vulnerable and those with disabilities. The main equalities concerns centred around:

Possible loss of access to services, services moving further away etc;

Uncertainty around changes to council tax, and how these might impact those on low incomes, pensioners, etc;

The loss of a 'personal touch' as a result of services becoming more remote;

The impact on those without IT skills or access if services are physically less accessible;

Specific concerns about vulnerable groups in rural areas – e.g. in terms of the bigger towns ‘sucking in’ funding and resources, resulting in fewer improvements being made locally e.g. fewer improvements to infrastructure and access to help those with disabilities etc;

Concerns for those without IT access/skills if services move further away;

Concern about homeless families, e.g. whether they would be expected to accept accommodation across a wider area, and potentially be moved further away from their support network;

Similar concern as above (i.e. for homeless), but in relation to elderly people needing residential care;

Possible impacts on social tenants due to differences between the areas e.g. Warwick having Council housing, but not Stratford;

One concern about whether a merger would lead to delays in planning decisions concerning Gypsy and Traveller sites and thereby disadvantage these groups.

- 3.54 There were general concerns about a reduction in councillors resulting in less of a ‘voice’ for the vulnerable, with the following quotation as an example:

“I have a child with severe learning and physical disabilities and had to access support from my local councillor around issues about which school he was going to attend. I found my local councillor to be extremely knowledgeable on local provision and issues, extremely responsive, and ultimately extremely supportive and helpful. I do not think I would have been able to access the same support, or had the same outcome, from a much bigger and more distant organisation”.

- 3.55 Finally, there was one concern expressed about whether inclusivity/diversity issues will generally be seen as lower priority in a streamlined, cost-cutting climate.

4. Residents' survey

Introduction

- 4.1 The purpose of the telephone survey was to achieve a broadly representative sample of telephone interviews with residents of Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts aged 18 and over. The survey was conducted using a quota sampling approach with targets set on the numbers of interviews required by age, gender, working status and district (more details on these targets is provided below).
- 4.2 ORS targeted 600 interviews (i.e. roughly 300 per District) with residents in September and October 2021, using a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) methodology, with interviews undertaken by ORS's social research call centre. The survey used primarily random-digit dialling, supplemented by purchased mobile sample.
- 4.3 A short summary of background information was included to be 'read out' for each question within the survey, for the benefit of allowing respondents to answer them from an informed perspective.
- 4.4 In total, ORS undertook 613 interviews between 13th September and 26th October 2021.

Respondent profile

- 4.5 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, as 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.
- 4.6 In order to better understand how views differ between areas, roughly equal numbers of interviews were targeted in both of the districts; this was taken into account in the weighting process, to give each district a proportional influence on the overall result relative to the size of its population. The remaining quotas (i.e. those for age, gender, working status) were designed to be representative of the overall population of the districts.
- 4.7 The achieved sample was compared against secondary data⁶ for District, interlocked age and gender, working status, ethnicity, disability and tenure, and subsequently weighted by tenure, interlocked age and gender, working status and ethnic group, before a final District weight was applied. Weights were capped at 5, with the remainder apportioned across all cases. As a result of this process, the survey results should be broadly representative of the overall population of Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick, to within around +/- 5 percentage points.
- 4.8 The table on the following page shows both the unweighted and weighted profile of respondents to the survey, compared with the resident population aged 18+ (i.e. the combined population of the two Districts).

⁶ ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates (2020) for district, age and gender; Annual Population Survey 2020/21 for working status; and 2011 Census for ethnic group, disability and tenure.

Table 8: Residents' survey respondent characteristics

Characteristic	Unweighted count	Unweighted %	Weighted %	Combined Population (18+)
BY AGE				
Aged 18 to 24	21	3%	9%	11%
Aged 25 to 34	74	12%	15%	15%
Aged 35 to 44	122	20%	15%	14%
Aged 45 to 54	112	18%	16%	17%
Aged 55 to 64	117	19%	17%	16%
Aged 65 to 74	102	17%	14%	14%
Aged 75 or over	65	11%	13%	13%
Total valid responses	613	100%	100%	100%
BY GENDER				
Male	259	42%	49%	49%
Female	353	58%	51%	51%
Other ⁷	1	*	*	-
Total valid responses	613	100%	100%	100%
BY WORKING STATUS				
Working	379	62%	67%	66%
Retired	159	26%	25%	25%
Otherwise not working	75	12%	8%	8%
Total valid responses	613	100%	100%	100%
BY HOUSEHOLD TENURE				
Owned with mortgage / Shared ownership	285	49%	37%	38%
Own Outright	203	35%	37%	35%
Social Rent	63	11%	10%	11%
Private Rent	34	6%	16%	16%
Total valid responses	585	100%	100%	100%
<i>Not known</i>	28	-	-	-
BY WHETHER RESPONDENT HAS A DISABILITY OR LIMITING ILLNESS				
Yes, day-to-day activities limited a lot	55	9%	9%	7%
Yes, day-to-day activities limited a little	51	8%	8%	11%
No	496	82%	84%	82%
Total valid responses	602	100%	100%	100%
<i>Not known</i>	11	-	-	-
BY ETHNIC GROUP				
BAME	32	5%	7%	6%
White	566	95%	93%	94%
Total valid responses	598	100%	100%	100%
<i>Not known</i>	15	-	-	-
BY DISTRICT				
Stratford-on-Avon	323	53%	48%	48%
Warwick	290	47%	52%	52%
Total valid responses	613	100%	100%	100%

⁷ NB, as no suitable secondary data is currently available for 'other', population data is based on male/female only.

Interpretation of the data

- 4.9 The results of the residents' survey are presented in a largely graphical format. The pie and bar charts (and other graphics) show the proportions (percentages) of residents making responses. Where possible, the colours of the charts have been standardised with a 'traffic light' system in which:
- » Green shades represent positive responses
 - » Beige and purple/blue shades represent neither positive nor negative responses
 - » Red shades represent negative responses
 - » The bolder shades are used to highlight responses at the 'extremes', for example, strongly agree or strongly disagree
- 4.10 Where percentages do not sum to 100, this may be due to computer rounding, the exclusion of 'don't know' categories, or multiple answers. Throughout the chapter an asterisk (*) denotes any value less than half of one per cent.
- 4.11 The number of valid responses recorded for each question (base size), are reported throughout. As not all respondents answered every question, these base sizes vary between questions. Every response to every question has been taken into consideration.

Main findings

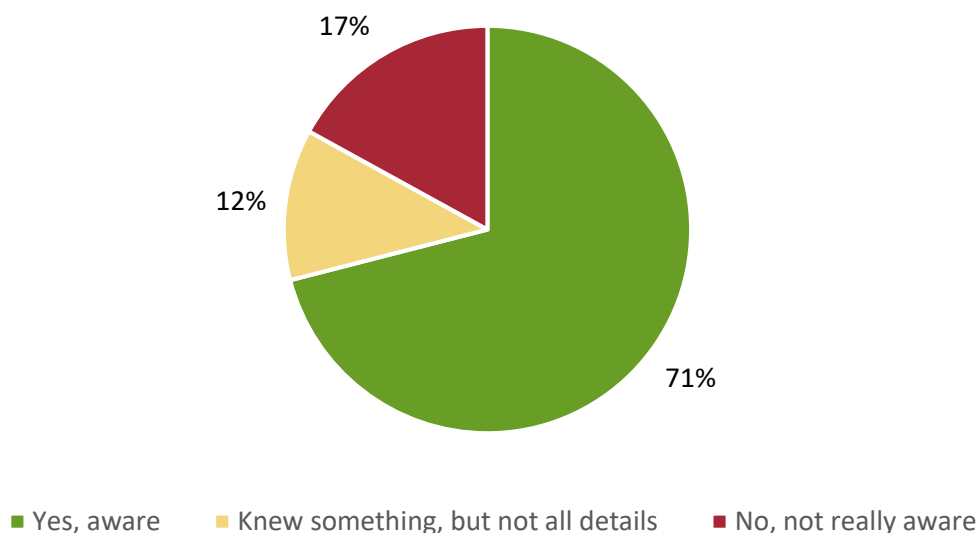
Awareness of current local government structure and services provided

There are currently separate Councils providing services across Warwickshire in a 'three-tier' structure. Warwickshire County Council provides services for residents across the whole of the county, including education, social care for children and adults, and highways. Depending on where you live, Stratford-on-Avon District Council or Warwick District Council, provide local services for residents and businesses in their areas, including housing, planning, refuse and recycling collection, revenues and benefits, parks and open spaces, and leisure services. In addition, the town and parish councils across Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts provide even more local services; these vary slightly between the two areas, but include events, litter, parks, cemeteries, community centres etc.

Before this consultation, were you aware that Warwickshire County Council and your District Council each provide separate services in your area?

- 4.12 Nearly three quarters (71%) of residents claimed that they were aware of the local government structure and service provision across Warwickshire and its separate Districts, whilst just over 1 in 10 (12%) felt that they knew something, but not all of the details.
- 4.13 The remaining 17% of residents said that they were not particularly aware of the local government and service provisions.

Figure 16: Before this consultation, were you aware that Warwickshire County Council and your District Council each provide separate services in your area? Base: 612



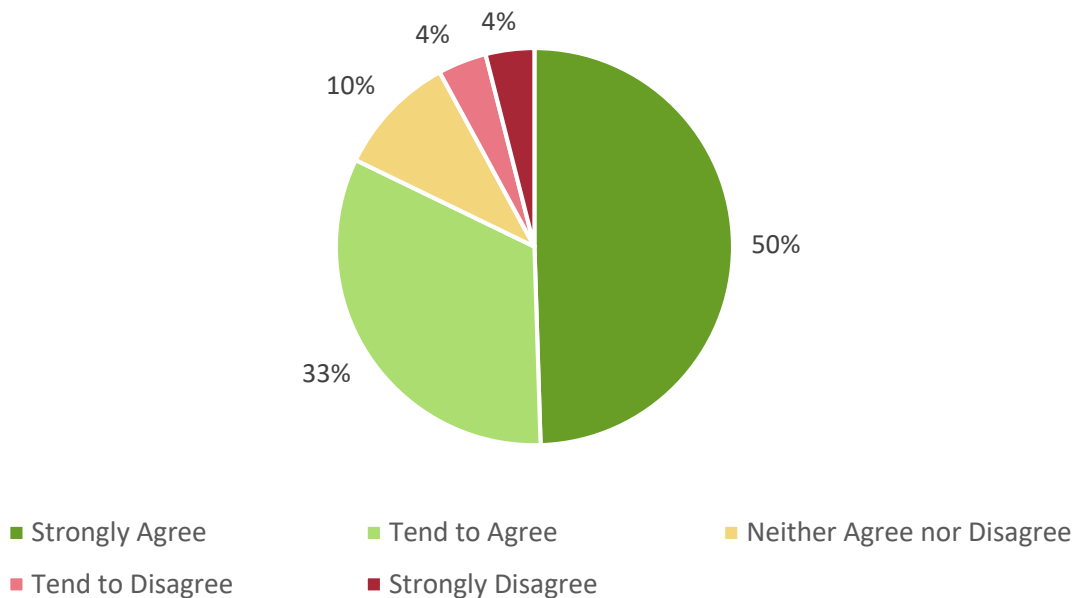
The case for change

Like many other Councils, Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils are both facing increasing financial pressures on services due to reduced funding from government and increasing costs. Across the two Councils annual savings increasing to around £10m each year will be needed by 2025/26. The Councils also believe there is duplication of back-office and management functions, buildings, and offices.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils need to consider changes to respond to these challenges?

- 4.14 Over 8 in 10 (82%) residents agreed with the case for change, with half of all residents (50%) strongly agreeing, while fewer than a tenth disagreed (8%).

Figure 17: To what extent do you agree or disagree that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils need to consider changes to respond to these challenges? Base: 598



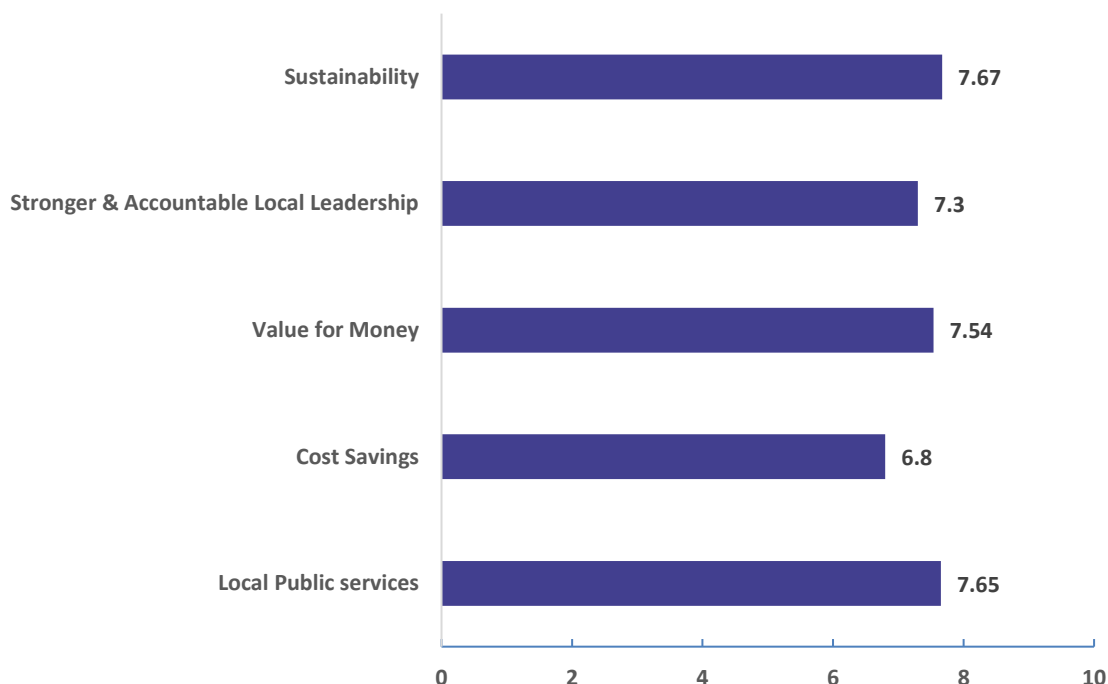
Importance of criteria

Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils recognise that there are many different criteria to consider when thinking about the future of local government in the area. They believe that it is important for any future arrangements to provide: Local public services, cost savings, value for money, stronger and accountable local leadership, and long-term sustainability of services.

Please rate how important you think each of these criteria are using a whole number between 0 and 10, where “10” means that the criteria is critically important and “0” means the criteria is of no importance.

- 4.15 When asked to score the importance of different criteria between 0 (of no importance) and 10 (critically important), the mean scores were fairly similar, ranging between 6.8 and approximately 7.7.
- 4.16 Sustainability scored the highest (7.67), with local public services being an extremely close second (7.65). Value for money had the third highest average (7.54), followed by stronger and accountable leadership (7.30), with cost savings obtaining the lowest average score (6.8).

Figure 18: Please rate how important you think each of these criteria are using a whole number between 0 and 10, where “10” means that the criteria is critically important and “0” means the criteria is of no importance. Base: 599-611



The proposal to merge Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils

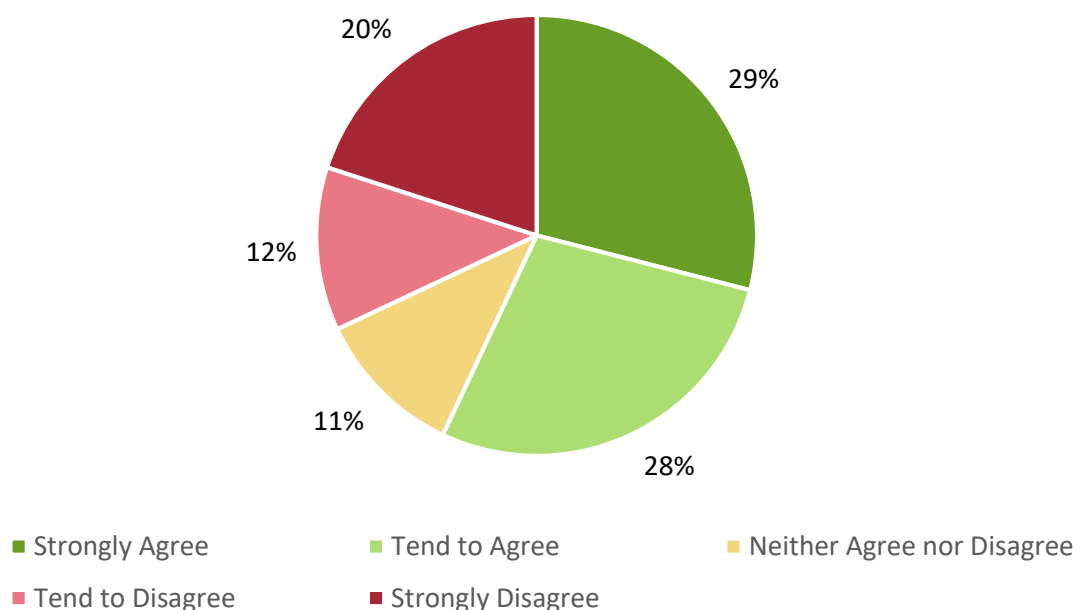
Faced with this financial pressure, and with a determination not to reduce the current level of services, Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils are therefore considering a proposal to merge, in which case a new district council would be established covering the whole of South Warwickshire (the areas currently covered by Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils).

The Councils believe there are a number of savings that a full merger would deliver, including through having fewer Councillors, reduced offices and public buildings, reduced costs of managing finances, and having single priorities across a wider area.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with one new council to provide all district council services across South Warwickshire?

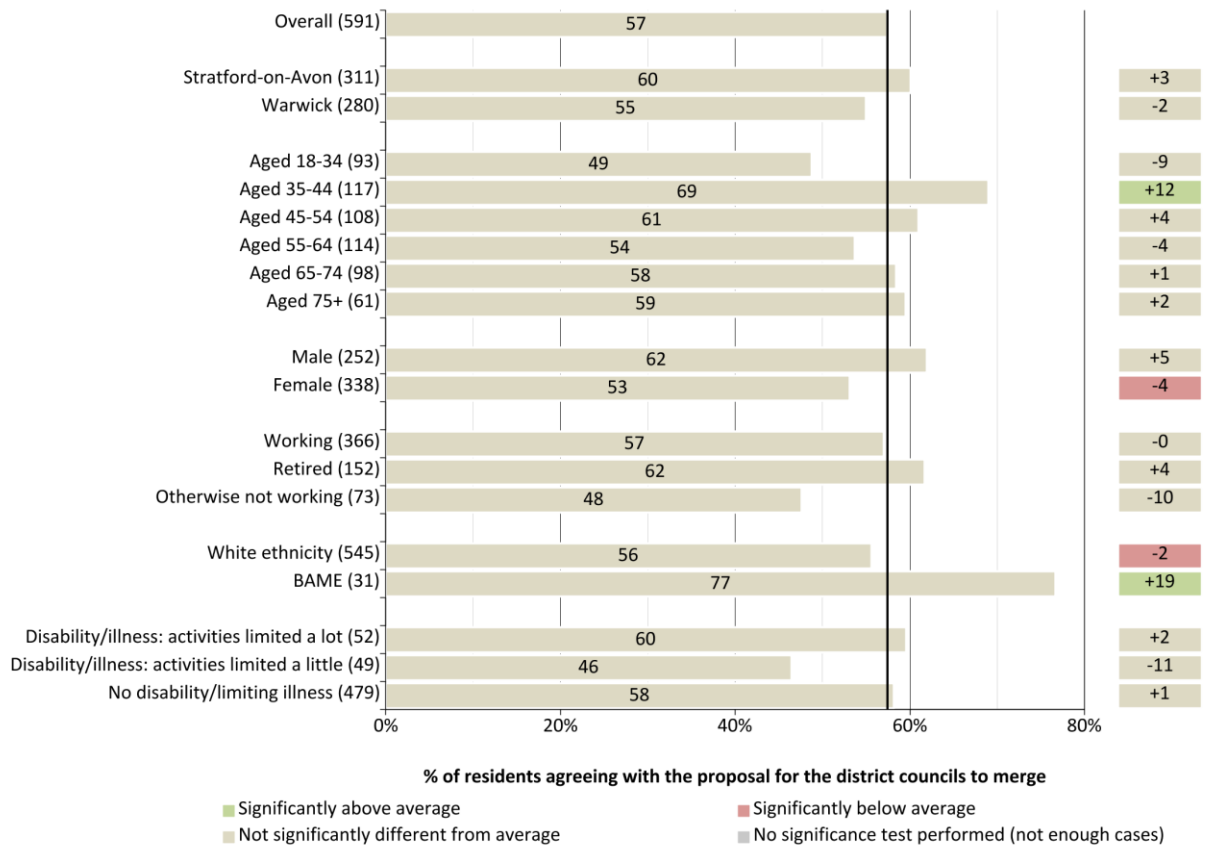
- 4.17 Overall, nearly three-in-five residents (57%) either strongly agreed or tended to agree with the proposal. However, nearly a third (31%) of respondents disagreed.

Figure 19: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with one new council to provide all District Council services across South Warwickshire? Base: 591



- 4.18 Figure 20 below shows how levels of agreement with the proposal varied by District and demographic sub-groups (sub-groups significantly more likely to agree, compared with the overall result, are highlighted in green; those significantly less likely to agree compared with the overall result are highlighted red).
- 4.19 In both Districts, an absolute majority of residents agreed with the proposal (60% in Stratford-on-Avon and 55% in Warwick).

Figure 20: Residents’ views on the proposal to replace the existing district councils with a new council, by respondent demographics

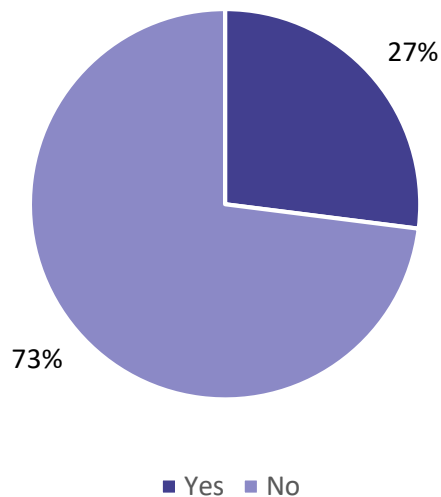


Contact with District Councillors and involvement in decisions

Have you contacted a local district councillor in the last 12 months?

- 4.20 A little over a quarter (27%) of respondents said that they had been in contact with a local District Councillor in the previous 12 months.

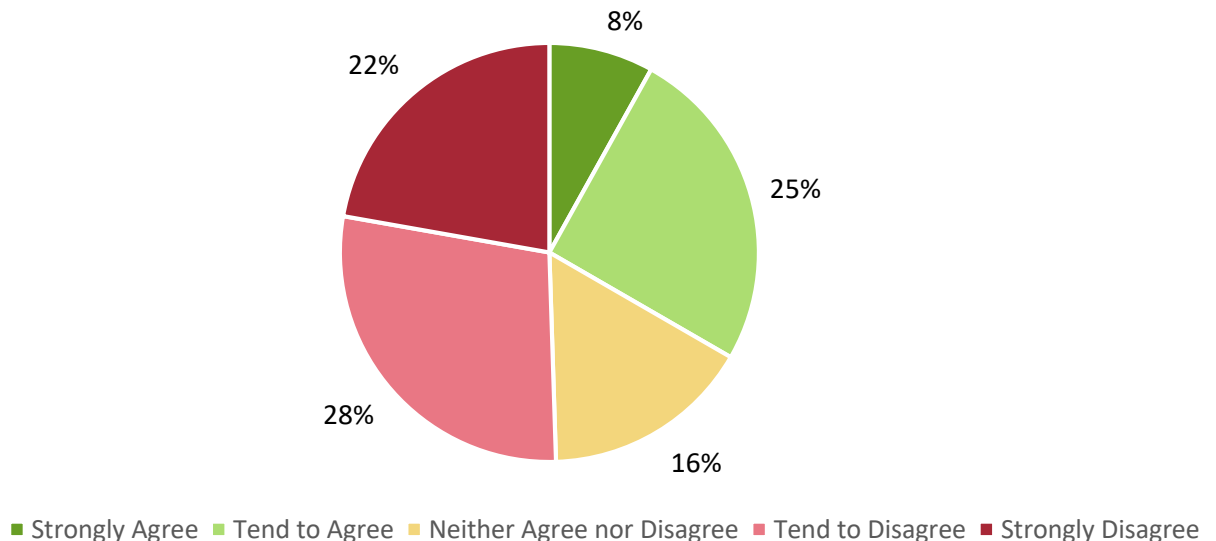
Figure 21: Have you contacted a local District Councillor in the last 12 months? Base: 612



Now thinking about your local area ... To what extent do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area?

- 4.21 Overall, around a third (34%) of respondents agreed that they can influence decisions affecting their local area, while half (50%) disagreed.

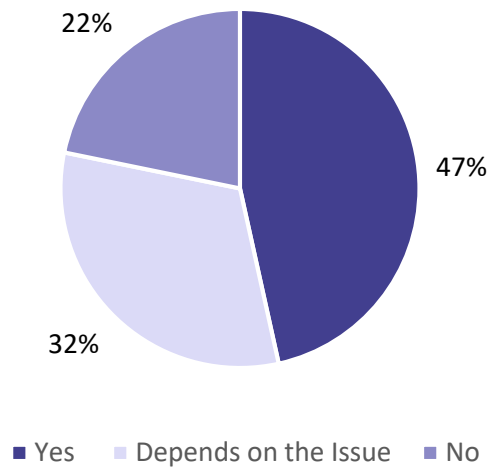
Figure 22: To what extent do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area? Base: 595



Generally speaking, would you like to be more involved in the decisions that affect your local area?

- 4.22 When asked whether or not they would like to be more involved in the decisions that affect their local area, almost half (47%) of residents said yes, whilst almost a third (32%) said that it would depend on the issue.

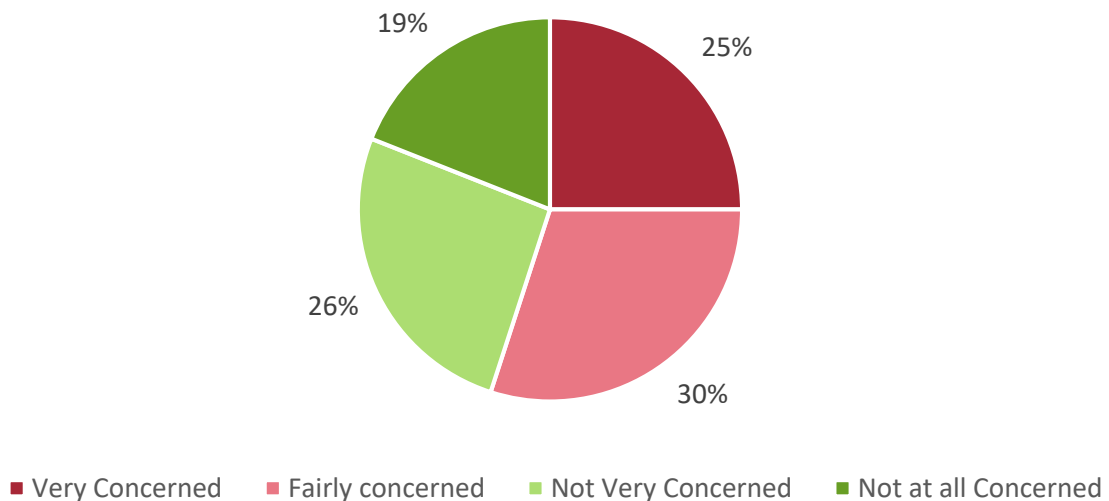
Figure 23: Generally speaking, would you like to be more involved in the decisions that affect your local area? Base: 607



If a new single Council was created, with fewer Councillors overall, how concerned would you be about being able to contact a District Councillor if you had an issue to raise?

- 4.23 Over half (55%) of residents stated that they would be concerned (either very or fairly) about being able to contact a District Councillor in the event of a single council being created. Slightly fewer than half (45%) stated that they would either not be concerned at all, or not be very concerned.

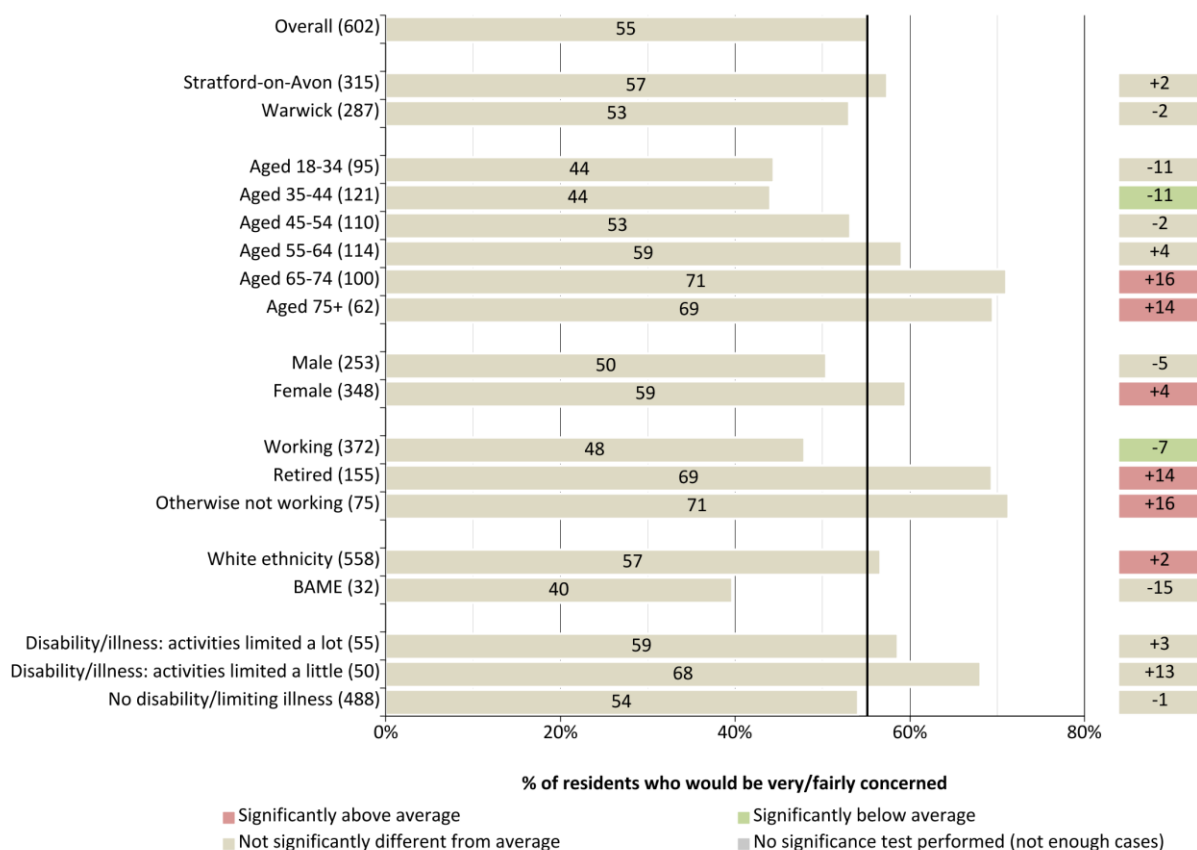
Figure 24: If a new single council was created, with fewer Councillors overall, how concerned would you be about being able to contact a District Councillor if you had an issue to raise? Base: 602



4.24 Figure 25 shows how levels of concern about being able to contact a Councillor (in the event of the District Councils’ proposal going ahead) varied by District and demographic sub-groups (sub-groups significantly more likely to be very/fairly concerned, compared with the overall result, are highlighted in red; those significantly less likely to be concerned compared with the overall result are highlighted green).

4.25 Residents in older age groups, and those who are not working (either due to retirement, or for another reason) were among those significantly more likely than average to express a concern.

Figure 25: Residents’ levels of concern about being able to contact a District Councillor in the event of the proposal going ahead, by respondent demographics



Text comments in the survey

Please let us know if there are any alternative options that address the identified challenges, any potential equalities impacts, or if you have any other comments relating to the possible merger of District Councils in South Warwickshire.

4.26 Participants in the telephone residents’ survey were provided with an opportunity to provide further comments around the proposal. In general, the comments covered very similar themes to those mentioned by respondents to the consultation questionnaire (see Table 6 and Table 7 above).

4.27 Overall, 338 respondents made comments. The main themes (raised by at least 5% of survey residents who commented) were as follows:

Comments expressing general support for the proposal, but without going into much further detail (i.e. 'non-specific' comments) – 16% of those commenting;

Comments agreeing with the suggestion the proposal should save money/cut duplication – 10%;

Comments expressing concerns about fewer Councillors and/or fewer offices as potentially reducing representation and accessibility – 9%;

Comments expressing concern about the need to keep local identity and representation, and about differences between the areas – 8%;

Comments expressing concern that the proposal undermines local democracy and accountability, and would lead to less involvement, greater disenfranchisement etc – 6%;

Comments expressing concern about services becoming more inaccessible – 6%, and/or, services being reduced or lost altogether – also 6%;

Comments expressing concerns about there being less of a 'voice' for the vulnerable, such as elderly people with little or no IT skills/access – 6%;

Concerns that 'bigger is not always better' and smaller councils may be more effective – 5%.

5. Residents' focus groups

Main findings from four focus groups with residents

Introduction

- 5.1 This chapter reports the views from four online focus groups⁸ with members of the public across the Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Council areas. The events took place in early October 2021 and 10 people were recruited to each, although a small number did not attend on three evenings.

Table 9: Resident focus groups by area, date, and attendance level

AREA/DATE	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
Warwick 1 (Tuesday 5 th October)	8
Warwick 2 (Wednesday 6 th October)	8
Stratford-on-Avon 1 (Tuesday 19 th October)	10
Stratford-on-Avon 2 (Wednesday 20 th October)	9

- 5.2 The focus groups were independently facilitated by ORS. Each session had two co-hosts: a main facilitator and a secondary host who was able to observe the session as well as address any technical issues arising from the online format.
- 5.3 The meeting format followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under consultation. A series of information slides were shared at set points during the sessions, which ensured that participants had sufficient background information to actively deliberate on the engagement issues.
- 5.4 In order to quantify views on some key questions, a series of 'quick polls' were undertaken during the groups. Responses to these were captured and are reported in this chapter, but it is important to note that this was a qualitative research exercise and the numerical findings from the polls are not statistically valid.

⁸ These meetings were undertaken on Zoom – as this has become a fairly familiar tool for the general public during 2020-21. Participant familiarity with the software varied and, depending on the platform (i.e. laptop, tablet or mobile phone), some participants struggled to take part in the online voting tasks.

Main Findings

Setting the Scene

- 5.5 As an 'ice-breaking' exercise, participants were initially asked to reflect on how attached they felt to their respective district areas.
- 5.6 Most participants in the two Warwick District focus groups said that they felt attached to the area and particularly appreciated the mix of attractive, historic, safe, well-resourced towns set within attractive countryside.

"You can either move a couple miles or whatever and you're in a busy town or go in the opposite direction and you're in rural [areas]. So, you can literally have the best of both worlds" (Warwick)

"This is home, this is where I know. It's a lovely area: nice towns and nice countryside. Yeah, I'm very attached and very happy to live in Warwick district" (Warwick)

"I am by St Nicholas Park ... a lovely area where they have sometimes music in the park and obviously the castle as well, so I do feel very attached to it" (Warwick)

"I like Warwick ... it's got nice buildings, nice shops, nice cafes, places to eat. It's got a little bit of something for everybody ... I'm certainly attached to where I live now" (Warwick)

- 5.7 Several also mentioned ease of connectivity to other areas via the motorway network.

"I quite like living here. It's a really nice town and, you know, you're close to many different motorway networks, and you can get around the country and that. So yeah, in the five or six years I've lived here, I've grown attached to it" (Warwick)

"I feel really connected. I actually work in Oxfordshire, but I like to live in Warwick because of the ease ... I find myself gloating to my colleagues quite a lot about just how much nicer it is up here!" (Warwick)

- 5.8 Only one participant who had lived in the District for two years did not feel attached to the area, explaining this in terms of the anti-social behaviour experienced on their estate.

"We've had robberies, arson, car and house fires ... It's one of the new builds out by Warwick Gateway so I wouldn't say I'm attached. I will be moving within the next five years. When I have kids, I will be moving" (Warwick)

- 5.9 Participants in the Stratford-on-Avon groups mostly felt attached to their area, also citing the attractive town and rurality of the District, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and activities for families and having family and friends living locally.

"I'm Stratford born and bred. I love Stratford, I feel great attachment to it" (Stratford)

"I've got a lot of friends and family around obviously being here so long, so I do feel attached to Stratford in that way ... I feel that we are very lucky in respect as to what Stratford offers as we've got the RSC, and we have a lot of things on at the weekend that are especially for families" (Stratford)

"I like Shipston. I like Stratford. I like the area. I like the facilities we've got. I like the Cotswold feel we've got, but also the places in Stratford and the facilities we have there ... I do feel quite attached to it. I consider Warwickshire to absolutely be my home" (Stratford)

- 5.10 Two issues of concern were raised by Stratford-on-Avon residents however: the unaffordability of housing, especially for young people; and traffic congestion (which, it was felt, will worsen with increased house building in the area).

"Well, it's a lovely pretty town ... I mean it's a lovely place to live. It's just a bit of a pain getting into town at times because of the traffic and congestion can get really bad around here" (Stratford)

"It's a lovely place ... it's somewhere I'm proud to live ... but I don't think they should be allowed to build another building or have any more events until they fix the roads" (Stratford)

"I just find my main issue is that I'm priced out ... it's more and more expensive" (Stratford)

Awareness of current local government structure in Warwickshire

- 5.11 When asked, only one participant across all four groups knew the exact number of councils in Warwickshire: one County Council and five District Councils. Most acknowledged they were guessing when giving their answers and the numbers suggested varied widely.
- 5.12 At this point a slide was shown to explain the existing structure and provide the names of the various local Councils including the town and parish councils. Participants were asked questions to gather their understanding of the responsibilities of the County, District and parish/town councils. Whilst most were uncertain, a few were confident about the structure and the services provided at each level, either because of having worked in or with local government or having had experience of navigating Council information to source services.

3-tier local government in Warwickshire



+ town/parish councils
110 in Stratford and 35 in Warwick
Many responsible for some local services
Most charge council tax 'precept' (extra to county/district councils, police, Fire and Rescue)

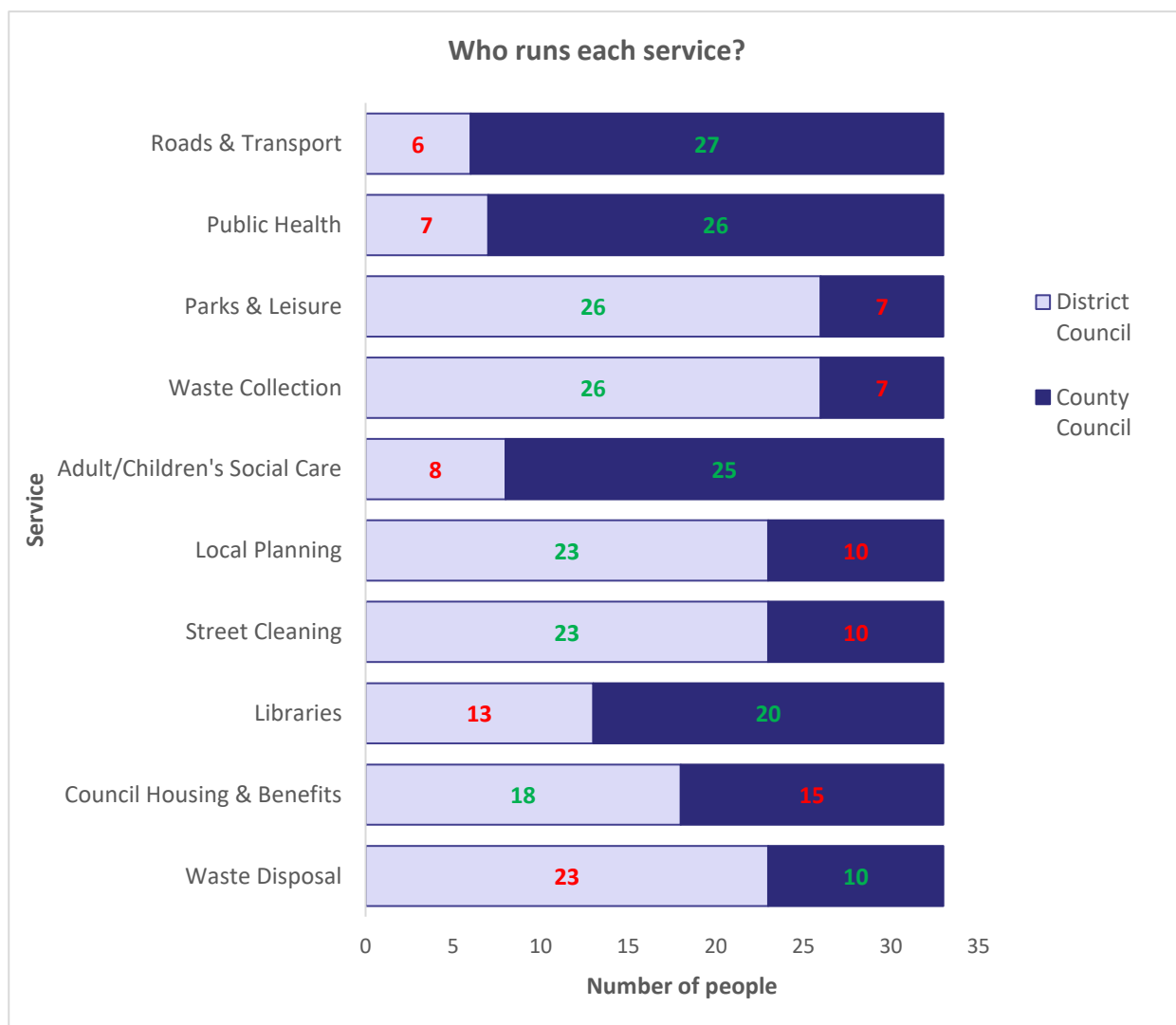
5.13 A further slide was then shown to explain the existing structure and the services provided by Warwickshire County Council, Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils and the town and parish councils. Participants were asked how well-informed they felt about the services provided by particular councils.

5.14 There was a mixed response with some feeling that they were fairly well informed and others saying they were not well informed at all.

“I’d say I’m very ill informed because I don’t know any of this... not a clue (Warwick)
“You only need to know something when you need to know it” (Warwick)

5.15 In order to explore the level of awareness in a little more depth, participants were asked to identify which level of government delivers each of 10 different services. Thirty-three people took part in the voting – some had trouble accessing the polls and some chose not to take part. Their answers are shown in Figure 26 below (correct answers are highlighted in green, incorrect ones in red).

Figure 26: Which council provides which service?



5.16 This exercise demonstrated that there is clear confusion around the services provided by each council. While there was good awareness that the County Council provides Roads & Transport, Public Health and Adult/Children’s Social Care and that district councils provide Waste Collection and Parks & Leisure

services, there was greater division of opinion around responsibility for Libraries and Council Housing & Benefits. The main area of confusion, though, is Waste Disposal, with only 10 of the 33 participants correctly identifying it as a County Council service.

Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts – similar or different?

- 5.17 The presentation continued with another slide showing the similarities between the two District Council areas in terms of their respective budgets, population size and issues of concern. It also highlighted the existing joint working practices already in place between the two Councils. Participants were asked to comment on these slides and particularly about whether the two areas are as similar as stated.
- 5.18 Several similarities were identified in terms of budget and the fact that both areas seem to have a high demographic of older residents.
- 5.19 However, some differences were also highlighted. Some said that Stratford-on-Avon is more ‘spread out’ and rural than Warwick and that although there are, indeed, common challenges, there are also different issues of concern between the two authorities. Public transport and social care needs as a result of different demographics were mentioned in particular.

“From a budget perspective, yes, I’d probably agree, but geographically they are not the same. What I would say also is the issues that affect adult and children’s social care are different ... the needs are different, and the allocation of funds are different. Different populations, absolutely. Different demographics, spread out” (Stratford)

“Stratford is a lot more rural, and the issues tend to be around transport and being able to attend different services ... in Warwick the demographic of the population is much more diverse than the population you tend to find in Stratford. Therefore, the issues that come up are very different as well because you have a different demographic of people” (Stratford)

“On your slides the Councils say they have common challenges, but there’s also these distinct challenges which they don’t seem to have addressed there” (Stratford)

- 5.20 Political and social differences were also mentioned, with Stratford being identified as a consistently Conservative area and one with a wealthier and older population than Warwick, although there does seem to have been some levelling up in terms of prosperity between the two areas over recent times.

“Stratford is quite Tory, whereas Warwick is more Labour or more Liberal” (Stratford)

“Stratford has probably got a higher proportion of millionaires, whereas you go out to Leamington and it’s less so. So, that’s going to have a reflection on the services required” (Stratford)

“In times past, I would have said that Stratford was slightly more affluent than Warwick, but I think Warwick District has caught up to a very similar standard now with a lot of the commerce and industry that’s being put into the retail parks around here. There is an awful lot of head offices ... house prices in the Warwick CV34 postcode have come up on a par with the CV37 postcode ... over a period of time Leamington and Warwick have come to catch-up Stratford a little bit” (Warwick)

- 5.21 Some participants said that there is a lot of cross-border travel in terms of residents seeking out leisure and amenities and commuting to schools in both District areas, for instance. However, there was some scepticism about the motives behind the proposals at this stage in the consultation and in particular the apparently simple solutions to the highlighted problems as identified in the presentation.

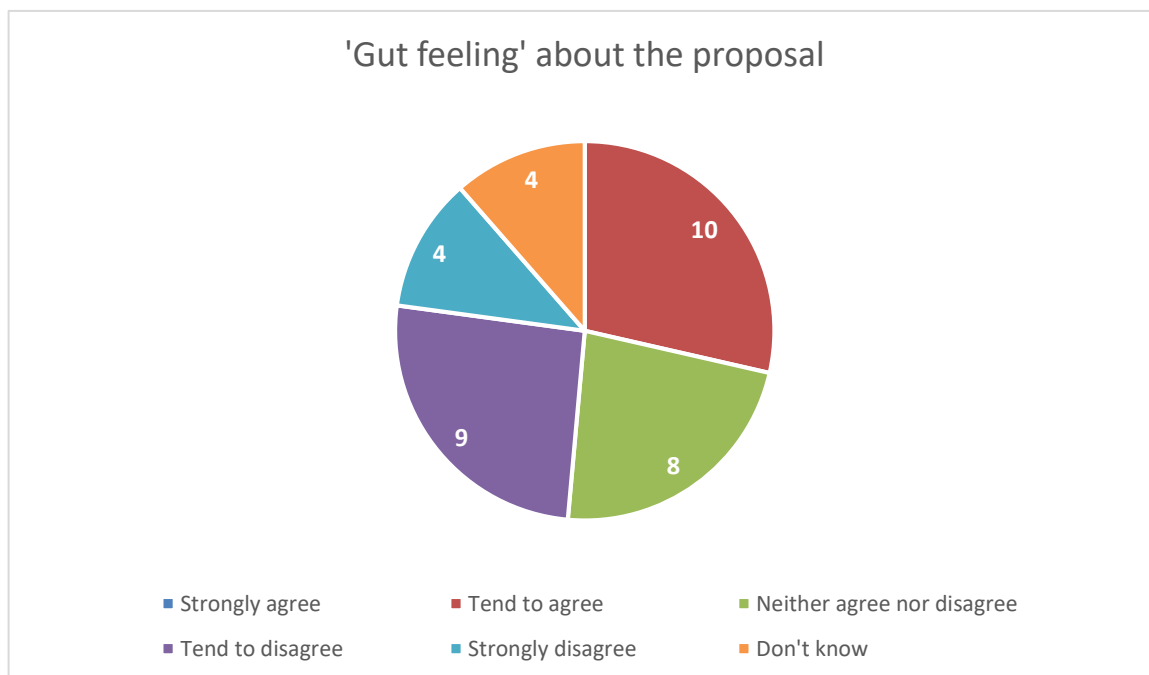
“Some of the information presented is a bit misleading because doing a strategic procurement exercise where the two areas get together and we develop a strategic partnership and there’s economies of scale, that’s great. But mopping up the demographics of two different areas and assuming they’re going to behave the same as ‘let’s get together to have one person empty the bins’, it doesn’t work like that ... ”
(Warwick)

“It just seems to be like an odd kind of merge if I’m honest. It’s not obvious ... I would say Stratford doesn’t come in anywhere close to Leamington really” (Warwick)

Initial views on the proposed merger

- 5.22 Before being presented with the case for change, participants were asked for their ‘gut feelings’ about the proposal to merge the two authorities. None of the participants across the four groups strongly agreed with the proposal but nearly a third (10 of the 35 participants) tended to agree with it. Whilst there was an equal balance between those agreeing and disagreeing in Stratford-on-Avon, twice as many participants from Warwick disagreed with the proposals.
- 5.23 It is also worth noting that 12 participants either chose ‘neither agree nor disagree’ or ‘don’t know’ at this stage, mainly as they felt they did not have sufficient knowledge to make a judgement.

Figure 27: At this stage, what is your 'gut feeling' about the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with one new Council to provide all district council services across South Warwickshire?



Based on responses from 35 people within the focus group

- 5.24 A few participants explained why they tended to agree with the proposals at this early stage. One highlighted the need to make savings in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and felt that the proposal is an inevitable consequence of that. Another could see the benefit of reducing duplication, and another agreed on the proviso that any savings would be used to support service improvements.

“As long as we’re not trying to combine very different types of area, which I can see posing problems, it seems quite a sensible thing just to get rid of some of these levels of council” (Warwick)

“In theory, the merger would be great if they can then save money and share resources and pool resources - as long as those resources are then used in the correct way. So, for example ... there needs to be more for children and youth services which have been massively cut, and implement better transport systems ... As long as they pool their resources in a way that’s best for the communities” (Stratford)

“Primarily it’s a money saving exercise ... we’re just coming out of a pandemic and money is short and the Councils are having to deliver more for the fixed amounts they’re given. So that’s why I tend to agree ... it’s just inevitable” (Stratford)

- 5.25 Those disagreeing with the proposal typically expressed concern over a greater disconnect between the public and service providers; cuts to services, especially if there are no corresponding efficiency savings made; staff wellbeing (in relation to retained staff having to cover the work of two people); funds being diverted from Stratford-on-Avon in favour of Warwick; and Conservative political dominance.

"I suspect this is motivated by cost saving and will ultimately lead to a bigger disconnect between service users and service providers ... You might save some money, but I think you'll lose a lot of value ... I also wonder about the politics ... I don't know if it would mean that you would just end up with a Conservative leadership all the time" (Warwick)

"I'm sure this will happen: Warwick and Stratford will combine and then in five years' time that super council will combine with another super council. And one day you'll have a Midlands council ... There's going to be more distance between service users and service providers and there's going to be fewer people providing services. But what can you do if the Government are starving local government of funding ...? Nobody should kid themselves that there's going to be any positives from this other than short-term savings ... (Warwick)

"If we've got two people doing the same job and two salaries are being paid, under the current climate then fair enough because in the private sector that's exactly what would happen. But what we don't want to happen is for there to be cuts in services, yet the staff bill remains the same so there's no benefit from the amalgamation" (Warwick)

"You might look at it and say, 'there's a guy in Stratford and one in Warwick doing the same job, so let's sack one and the other can do both'... but then that person is doing more work and you're actually losing a lot of value ..." (Warwick)

"So, what's the purpose of this? Is it just to reduce buildings; is it to reallocate spend to Warwick? It makes sense ... but I do think that in my experience it doesn't tend to work ... and I think you'll find less service provision in Stratford in the future than you currently get now" (Stratford)

- 5.26 One person who voted neither agree or disagree doubted that public opinion in these consultations counted for anything and two participants were unable to express an opinion either way because they felt they as yet had insufficient information about the proposals.

"I've only recently heard about it. I've not heard enough to say that I agree ... I don't feel like there's been enough information put out about it" (Warwick)

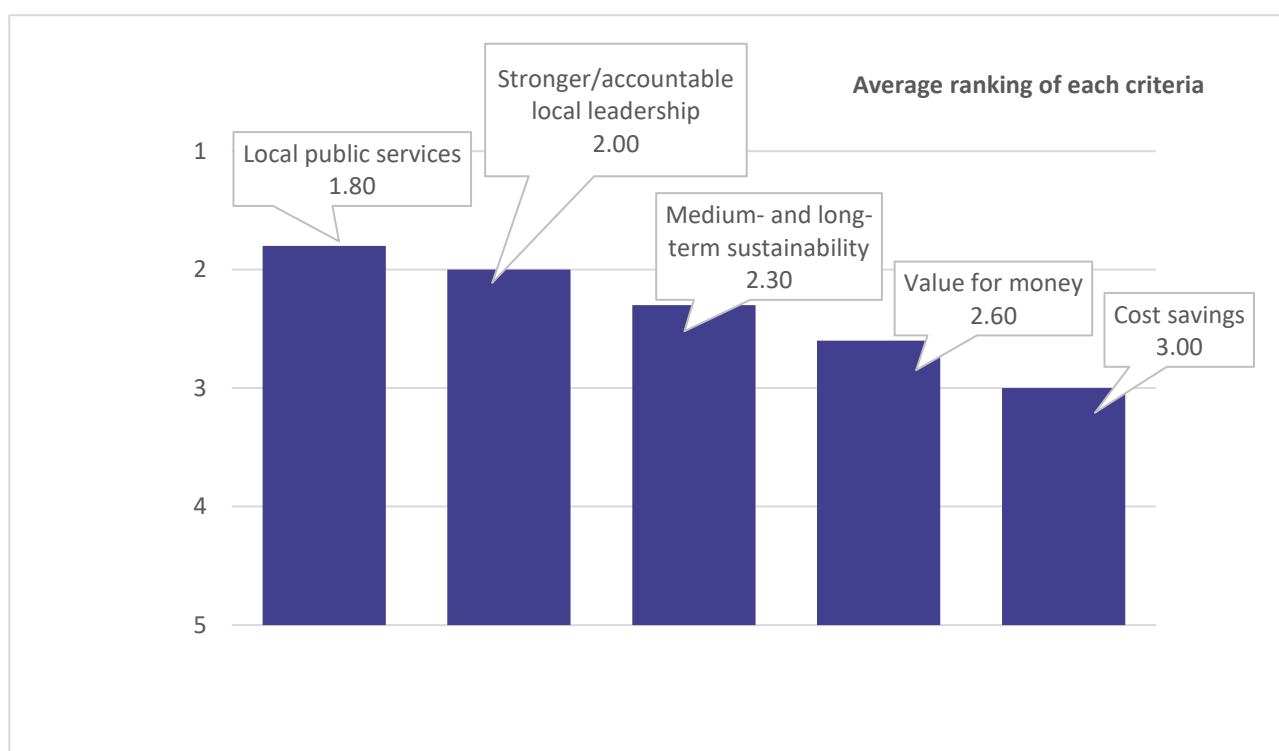
"You can't make an educated decision if you don't know anything ... " (Warwick)

Which criteria are key to evaluating the restructuring options?

- 5.27 Residents were given the following criteria and asked which they considered to be most important.
- *Local public services:* keeping services as local as possible for as many residents as possible
 - *Cost savings:* delivering savings to support the overall council budget
 - *Value for money:* cutting duplication, increasing economies of scale and improving efficiency
 - *Stronger/accountable local leadership:* ensuring residents can/know how to influence decision-making and raise issues with their local councillor, and have a say on how services are delivered
 - *Medium- and long-term sustainability:* ensuring frontline services are sustainable in the medium- and long-term.

- 5.28 Participants were asked to put these five key criteria in order of importance, with one being the most important and five the least important. The average rankings are shown in Figure 28. There was a wide range of ranking scores for all the criteria – which were often being put in first place and fifth place by a similar number of people.
- 5.29 Local public services were most important to residents, with an average rank of 1.8 – and this was closely followed by stronger/accountable local leadership (2), and medium- and long-term sustainability (2.3). The two lower ranked criteria were value for money and cost savings, suggesting perhaps that financial arguments for changing future local government structures to not overly-resonate with local residents.

Figure 28: Average ranking of evaluation criteria



Based on responses from 26 people within focus groups (the poll failed to launch in one of the focus groups)

- 5.30 In a brief discussion on the criteria, a couple of participants remarked on the lack of reference to service quality and possible improvements as a result of the proposed merger.

“Quality of service perhaps should be on there as well ... it’s not just all about paying the smallest amount of money out” (Warwick)

“They’re not saying what the improvements might be ... ” (Stratford)

A new South Warwickshire District Council?

After hearing all the background information, there was some explicit support for the proposed merger

- 5.31 Providing it is implemented in a way that minimises disruption as much as possible, there was some support for the proposed merger on the grounds of safeguarding service provision in the face of financial challenges, reducing duplication, streamlining, and introducing consistency across two broadly similar areas. Some typical comments are below.

“The merger is necessary because the alternatives of not going ahead with it look less appealing frankly. The financial situation is clear for me, and I think yes, it’s a necessary step” (Warwick)

“There have been cuts ... the pot has been getting smaller and smaller for local authorities. That will continue to happen ... so local authorities will have to make more and more cuts and have to adapt to different ways to make sure they can still provide the services they are legally required to provide. This is a step in the right direction ... in terms of making a cost saving. IF the figures that are presented are correct ... there are cost savings to be made by getting rid of buildings and infrastructure and amalgamation ... ” (Stratford)

“All in all, it shouldn’t be too difficult. We are very similar. Services should all be pretty similar. There is no reason why it can’t work, and ... by the looks of it, it would solve perhaps some of the bigger problems. To have it all as one consistent plan across the area might be easier for everybody” (Stratford)

“You’ve described what a sort of mishmash these councils are, and a lot of our money is probably going to duplication and waste that’s generated by it. So, as long as we’re not trying to combine very different types of area ... it seems quite a sensible thing just to get rid of some of these levels of council” (Warwick)

“I think it needs to be streamlined ... You look at the costings of most councils as opposed to the private sector and it’s a lot different ...” (Warwick)

“In the long term, I think it would be a lot better if there is one. It’s not the biggest area in the world; it’s not the biggest population ... It’s very rural and lots of villages. You’ve got areas that border each other, and it would bring it all together on a parity getting the same consistent services hopefully ... I think it’s very achievable to have a single Council for South Warwickshire ... I think South Warwickshire is quite similar across the board, similar types of villages, similar types of towns (nice tourist towns) and it would bring it all together ...” (Warwick)

- 5.32 Several participants were keen to stress, though, that their support for the merger was conditional on any savings made as a result of it being used to protect services and benefit communities.

“In theory, the merger would be great if they can save money and pool resources, as long as those resources are then used in the correct way ... in a way that’s best for the communities” (Stratford)

There was worry that job losses would lead to poorer service quality

- 5.33 The main concern across the four resident groups was the proposed merger would lead to significant job losses across the two Councils, and reduced service quality and accessibility due to staff having higher workloads and lower morale. Indeed, the potential negative impact of the proposed merger on employee wellbeing was also raised in all sessions.

"If the cost savings required are so great, they are going to have to strip out a lot of posts and a lot of people are going to be unemployed" (Stratford)

"I worry that this might just be an opportunity to cut some jobs and people actually have double the workload and things don't become more efficient. It happened all the time in the company I used to work for ... mergers happened, everything on paper looked like it would work, and it would become more streamlined ... but in reality, that's not what happened" (Warwick)

"There is an element there where you have to be able to provide somewhere for people to go to and having dealt with the Council myself sometimes, you do get kind of passed from pillar to post ... It's all very well taking out people and making it more streamlined ... but will there be access?" (Warwick)

"Organisations say they're going to streamline, and the service is going to be the same, but if you've got half the workforce, it just can't be. It's also about looking after people's wellbeing: you can't put two jobs on one person and expect them to be happy ... "
(Warwick)

- 5.34 Related to this was a worry about a de-skilled workforce as older and/or experienced members of staff either take voluntary redundancy or seek employment elsewhere due to the destabilising effect of the proposed merger.

"I'm concerned about whether ... the services will suffer from deskilling because a lot of people leave during a period of restructuring. So, there might be a lot of skills lost with the loss of older, experienced members of staff ... services will be run by people who will be under stress because of the uncertainties about their jobs, so some of them will be leaving and jumping ship before they have to, and you could end up with a skills shortage in those key areas ... It may settle down in five years' time, but I think the initial few years are going to be quite tricky while people are managing the change rather than managing the services" (Stratford)

"What's going to happen is when they merge, the older people are going to be offered voluntary redundancy. The people that have the knowledge are going to be pushed out and the people that don't have any knowledge are going to be put in ... "
(Stratford)

- 5.35 The 'hidden' costs of reorganisation were also raised in the context of job losses, with one participant suggesting that not only does making people redundant have direct costs of its own, but also societal impacts in terms of heavier usage of local services such as health and social care.

"There's a cost associated with redundancies. There's also a cost related to those people being unemployed and having a greater requirement for access to local services. There's some statistics ... to show that people who've been made redundant visit the GP more frequently, have bigger requirements for more social care, have mental health issues, and the true cost is never reflected in any analysis you'll ever see ... "
(Stratford)

A larger Council could, it was felt, be too unwieldy and remote

- 5.36 Councils were described as “*bureaucratic jungles*” in one of the Stratford-on-Avon sessions, where some participants felt that merging the two existing organisations into a larger entity would magnify this.

“Councils are typically known as being bureaucratic jungles, so if you merge the two together aren’t they going to become even more bureaucratic and even less efficient? Is the whole thing going to end up costing even more money because it takes longer to sort things out, or because it takes longer for things to be solved?” (Stratford)

Democratic deficit may be an issue in the event of fewer Councillor numbers

- 5.37 Another frequently stated reason for disagreeing with the proposed merger was the potential for democratic deficit as a result of fewer District Councillors across the area. Residents were worried that decisions about their local areas would be made by those with little knowledge of their needs, and that access to Councillors, if they are covering a much larger area, would become even more difficult than some said it is currently. Some typical comments were as below.

“You need local officials to be in your area. You don’t need somebody that’s not understanding how you live and how you are feeling and what happens in your area ... You need someone that’s going to be looking at it from your point of view ... ” (Warwick)

“Will we lose that local level access to councillors that we get? Because if you hold a position higher up in the authority, you’re less accountable, you’re less available, you’re less likely to listen to people ...” (Stratford)

“I’ve had issues trying to get in contact with my local councillor and it’s difficult as it is already, so if they’re cutting them ... it’s going to be twice as hard” (Warwick)

“Where will your local councillor be? Will they be down the road in Stratford, or will they be halfway to Warwick? The further away they are ... the representation gets diluted” (Stratford)

- 5.38 This was an especially problematic issue for some Stratford-on-Avon residents, who anticipated that they would end up paying ‘more for less’ given the need for council tax equalisation and the fact their precept is currently lower than that of Warwick residents.

“As a Stratford resident, I find it nearly impossible to get in touch with our councillor. So, the thought of paying more money to be able to have to contact someone even more times than we do already to not get a response because they are going to be so stretched ... Why on earth would we want to do that?” (Stratford)

“So, essentially the proposition is the same as Suffolk’s. They went from 90 councillors to 55 which is almost a 40% decrease in their councillor staff ... and they are also suggesting us paying more council tax with less councillors and putting those councillors under a much larger jurisdiction and a lot more stress load” (Stratford)

- 5.39 There was also a sense that decision-making could be perceived as remote and somewhat unfair by residents in those areas without very local representation.

"[My concern is] that we're going to be so far away from things when we do need help. At the moment, councillors also live in the local area ... they're going to be getting the road repaired because they drive on it. It's a priority for them. But the person who lives in Stratford who has nothing to do with Warwick ... and has never been there and doesn't realise that the roads are absolutely ruined, is going to prioritise his bit of it, rather than ours" (Warwick)

- 5.40 It should be noted, though, that several participants (especially in the Stratford-on-Avon groups) felt the councillor reduction would make little difference to them in practice given they either had little direct experience of seeking support from their local representative or had found them ineffective when they had. Moreover, others suggested that councillor numbers are over-inflated currently and that provision would still be adequate in the event of a reduction, and that even a large reduction would be acceptable if the cohort that remains is as diverse as possible.

"It doesn't concern me at all. I'm sure there's more than enough decision-makers already ... I think we'll still have local decision making or local enough in my eyes for it to be workable and manageable ... " (Warwick)

"I think I would be OK with a reduction so long as the breadth is still there ... I'd rather have 55 from a wide variety of different backgrounds and places than 97 from the same background and place if that makes sense" (Warwick)

Council Tax increases were a concern in Stratford-on-Avon, as was the prospect of being the 'poor relation' within a larger Council.

- 5.41 The requirement for Council Tax harmonisation was explained at the session, and so participants were informed of the difference between the District Councils' precepts currently (£149 per month for an average Band D property in Stratford-on-Avon, and £177 per month in Warwick). This led to considerable concern (and in some cases anger) among Stratford-on-Avon residents, as they anticipated that rather than Warwick's charge reducing to match theirs, theirs would increase to match Warwick's.

"The one thing that I hadn't realised was the disparity between what we are paying in council tax and what they are paying in Warwick. So, in a drive for efficiencies to save money, we will be paying more and receiving less" (Stratford)

- 5.42 Indeed, it would be fair to say that it was this information that led some Stratford-on-Avon residents to view the proposed merger more negatively at the end of the session than they had at the outset.
- 5.43 Related to this, there was some feeling that Stratford-on-Avon, as the generally wealthier District, would be the "poor relation" within the proposed new structure as the needs of Warwick residents would be prioritised. Concern around this was particularly acute for those in peripheral rural areas, who said that they feel somewhat neglected even now.

"Money you make from a cost saving should be invested in providing better services for people. We're lucky that we live in Stratford and it's great ... I'd [hate] to think that we then become a poor relation to the needs in Warwick" (Stratford)

“I’ve worked on a number of mergers ... and they’ve all turned out to be not fantastic. Because what you tend to find is two organisations get together to become a large amorphous organisation and money that was originally allocated to the one tends to be moved to prop up the one where needs are greater. So, a potential scenario would be that funds are reduced for Stratford and sent to Warwick ...” (Stratford)

“It does worry me, that we’re going to be poor relations. I live in a little village ... and we don’t get a lot. Our neighbours are on the parish council, and they fight all the time for stuff. I know the battles they go through even now” (Stratford)

There were concerns about the implications of the merger for the third sector

- 5.44 Two participants - one in Stratford-on-Avon and one in Warwick – work in the third sector and sought clarification on funding arrangements within the proposed new structure. They were chiefly worried that the redistribution of funds into one single ‘pot’ covering a much larger area will ultimately reduce Council funding for organisations supporting very vulnerable people.

“Places like Citizen’s Advice, Age UK ... get joint funding from Warwick District and Stratford District. Now if you merge them ... it’s likely that the money that goes into those charity organisations will be slightly reduced because they’re one rather than two separate councils. So as much as I’m hopeful that they won’t, from experience, when things change and move forward, those vital services that really vulnerable people really need ... their finances and the income they receive are cut, cut, cut” (Stratford)

“I work in the charity sector, and I get a lot of funding from the local Council ... My concern is that that would be diluted because it’s going to be spread over such a massive area ... that accessing funding that’s going to really benefit local communities is going to be really difficult” (Warwick)

Opinion remained divided on the merger at the end of the session

- 5.45 Ultimately, when asked again at the end of the session (having heard all the background information) whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with a new South Warwickshire District Council, opinion was still divided among the 33 residents remaining: 14 agreed (though only two strongly), two neither agreed nor disagreed, 15 disagreed (six strongly) and there was one ‘don’t know’.
- 5.46 The dominant feeling among all participants at the end of the session, though, was that the merger is an inevitable consequence of financial pressures for both Councils, and while it was viewed as an opportunity for positive change by some (providing the transition is managed effectively), for others it is simply a ‘necessary evil’.

“The inevitability is that this will go ahead whether we like it or not because there’s not sufficient funds to support two different districts in the way that they currently are ... But it might bring an opportunity in that we get this super, fantastic, really slick, well-run, highly efficient organisation” (Stratford)

"I have worked in the public sector for a long time, and I have been through restructuring processes myself. I think my main concern with this proposal is how the transition is managed because ... it's a fairly done deal that this merger is going to go ahead. With the financial constraints that they've got on both sides, I don't see any other way that they are going to do that" (Stratford)

"It's something that's got to happen because there's no money. You can't do anything with no money ..." (Warwick)

"I think they are going to have to do it. I don't see how they can recoup money any other way, but I don't agree with it" (Stratford)

"I'm as hostile to it as before, but I'm resigned to it. It's going to happen" (Warwick)

- 5.47 On a final note, a couple of participants questioned whether there were any contingency plans in place for de-coupling; that is, separating back into two separate Councils should the merger not prove successful in its ambitions.

"Saying this goes through and we end up with this one organisation, are they actually doing a scoping study into if it goes wrong and will they then work out how much it's going to cost in terms of separating the two again? I've seen mergers go through and it's been pear shaped, and then it's cost a phenomenal amount of money to separate them again and it just ends up a bit of a mess" (Stratford)

Summary of key points

- **Overall support for or opposition to the proposed merger**
 - Opinion from the residents' groups was divided between those in support and those opposed to the merger of the two Councils
 - General recognition of the inevitability of the need for change to meet financial challenges, protect services and benefit communities
 - Regarded by some as an opportunity for positive change and by others as a 'necessary evil'
 - A question over whether there were any contingency plans in place for reversing the merger should it not prove successful in its ambitions
- **Main reasons for supporting the proposed merger**
 - Recognition of the financial and operational challenges faced by the District Councils in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic
 - Benefits to be gained in reducing duplication and introducing consistency across two broadly similar areas
 - Savings could be used to support service improvements
 - A reduction in elected members could be supported as long as the cohort remains as diverse as possible
- **Main reasons for opposing the proposed merger (also raised as concerns by several of those generally in support of it)**
 - A greater disconnect between the public and service providers
 - Cuts to services and poorer access to services

- Negative impacts on staff wellbeing and morale caused by job losses and fewer staff taking on greater responsibilities
- Fewer staff overall resulting in poorer service quality and reduced accessibility to services and generally poorer outcomes for residents
- Fear of de-skilling the Council workforce – more mature, experienced staff being replaced by less experienced, younger, less expensive staff – resulting in poorer service quality
- Undue consideration within the proposals for the unseen costs of redundancies and reorganisation
- Funds being diverted from Stratford-on-Avon in favour of Warwick where needs are perceived to be higher
- Stratford-on-Avon residents paying more to achieve council tax and precept equalisation with Warwick
- The new Council having Conservative political dominance
- Fewer Councillors would lead to reduced local autonomy and democratic representation/accountability particularly in the most rural and marginal communities
- Concern that Council funding to third sector organisations would reduce following merger.

6. Staff focus groups

Introduction

- 6.1 This section reports the views from two online focus groups⁹ with members of staff from across Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts: the first for managers on the afternoon of 20th October 2021 and the second for non-managers on the morning of 21st October 2021. Nine managers and six non-managers attended the sessions.
- 6.2 The sessions were independently facilitated by ORS using a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under consultation. The focus was on the opportunities presented by and concerns around the Councils' vision to *"create a single statutory South Warwickshire Council covering all of the activities currently carried out by Stratford-on-Avon District Council and Warwick District Councils by 1 April 2024"*.

Main findings

Background to the proposed merger

- 6.3 In contrast to, for example, the residents' focus groups, staff members from Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils came to the groups already highly aware of local government structures and services in South Warwickshire. The focus of the sessions reported here, therefore, quickly shifted to discussion around the opportunities that a merger might present, concerns about its potential impacts and implications, and other in-depth discussions about particular aspects of the proposals.

Opportunities presented by the vision for a single South Warwickshire District Council

Staff members recognised that the proposed merger could present opportunities to maintain and improve service provision, and to address key challenges

- 6.4 There was a view among some participants that the proposal for a single Council could help ensure the future sustainability of local council provision. One manager raised the potential implications of *not* making changes in the face of financial challenges and felt that the vision is a viable way to protect important services.

⁹ Both groups were undertaken on Microsoft Teams.

"I think on paper, it is hard to argue ... as in the benefits are obviously heavily financial ... and there is a lot of talk about what would happen if we did not do this; that we would have to cut services and we would have to drop things and make drastic changes, which obviously as far as us as providers of services to our communities, that is not what we want to do. So, I think that is definitely the positive ... there is the ability to maintain all the services and potentially do them for a lower price" (Manager)

- 6.5 This view was echoed by non-managers, who agreed that the proposed merger would help ensure the future viability of the Councils; one participant gave the example of potential opportunities to consolidate council offices onto fewer sites as a means to reduce costs.

"From a global perspective in terms of the two councils merging the biggest thing is obviously going to be cost savings and the viability of councils going forward ..." (Non-manager)

"Obviously the other positive is maybe one building that we can all work in which will save ultimately ..." (Non-manager)

- 6.6 As well as the potential to consolidate infrastructure, staff members also noted opportunities for improving service provision, and for savings to be realised, through merging staff teams. For some, the opportunity to achieve economies of scale and deliver services consistently across the two Districts was particularly attractive.

"When you are talking about support services like mine, effectively you can achieve better economies of scale by working across borders ... but at the moment, the political structure makes it very difficult to do that. It does not apply to all service areas, but definitely for support services I think it tends to be the bit that gets squished a lot so you can only benefit from working on a broader space ..." (Manager)

- 6.7 For other participants, the proposed merger could improve service provision through the sharing of expertise and resources, which could then pave the way for innovation and better ways of working.

"I do see that certainly within the team I work in and the customers that we support, there is opportunity ... if we could work together there is more opportunity to share resources and do more joint commissioning, and also, good networking with a wider team ..." (Non-manager)

"I really would enjoy working with other colleagues both across Stratford and across Warwick. I think it is really beneficial to all of us to get to know each other and to find different ways of doing things and we can all really learn from each other" (Non-manager)

"I would say the opportunity to share resources, expertise, to share ways of working, certainly in planning departments ..." (Manager)

- 6.8 Providing the best practices of each existing Council would be retained as the basis for any new single entity, then the vision was seen by some participants as an opportunity to deliver services more consistently across South Warwickshire, to the benefit of residents, businesses and other stakeholders.

“There will be consistency across the two Districts so from a resident’s point of view I can see there is lots of advantages. Outside the cost of it, the actual logistics of putting the two councils together, I can see advantages ...” (Non-manager)

“I know through hearsay that the planning departments in Stratford and Warwick are run quite differently in terms of the way they are structured, the way applications are handled, how successful they are in some respects in terms of meeting the government’s standards. Each is different and those opportunities for learning there, but whether you end up at halfway house between the two or the best of best of both worlds or the worst of all worlds is the question ...” (Manager)

- 6.9 Moreover, one manager held the view that mergers of local government organisations that deliver a range of different services may simply become the norm in the context of a global marketplace.

“I think this merger is kind of inevitable and it is going to be the direction of travel for all councils going forward. We have to be able to work within a global market. Organisations are joining, they are becoming bigger so they can operate in that way. So, it is almost like you have got to be a bigger organisation or you have got to be niche, and district councils are neither ... we need to join together so that we can still come to the table in the marketplace ...” (Manager)

- 6.10 There was, however, a note of caution; while the vision for a single district council for South Warwickshire could, it was felt, be beneficial, challenges were anticipated in managing the cost and complexity of merging the two existing organisations if the proposal were to go ahead.

“There are opportunities to merge systems, but there’s a ridiculous amount of cost involved in merging systems across the councils ...” (Non-manager)

“I think there could be an opportunity with any restructure if you are looking at teams and services and how they are delivered and ... doing it better. There is always an opportunity to improve things isn’t there? But I think in this case because of the timescale and because of the focus on reducing costs ... it is not going to happen in the way they think it is. I think that that opportunity will be lost. It could be such a great opportunity for people to come together across both councils with years of experience, knowledge of how things work and how things don’t work and how to put services together in a way that is much better and more efficient ...” (Non-manager)

A single District Council for South Warwickshire could address staffing issues, and even provide opportunities for career development and advancement for employees

- 6.11 One staff member raised the possibility that the vision for a single Council, which would have the advantage of allowing staff to work together across a larger area, could help mitigate against persistent staff recruitment issues.

“In my area ... there is a shortage of staff out there at the moment within the industry, it might be quite good to share people so that we can compensate for shortfalls ... So, that is a positive” (Non-manager)

- 6.12 Staff members with previous experience of local government reorganisations recounted examples of the opportunities that arose for staff to develop new skills and experience as a direct result of merging systems and aligning working practices. This led, according to one staff member, to improvements in their team’s ability to deal with challenges.

“We found we managed to share skills ... we learnt new things that we hadn’t learnt before because it was different ways of working, different systems that we had to learn. So, in hindsight we learnt, gained quite a bit from previously. But also, as a more general thing, people’s experiences were improved, and they could deal with difficult situations better. So, a lot of learning went on between the different councils ...” (Non-manager)

- 6.13 Merging Councils, based on participants’ past experiences, could also lead to departmental reorganisations that present opportunities for career advancement in the form of more responsibility and promotion.

“When departments merge ... there is the option for career progression. So, you can move up potentially with promotion, but it depends on the restructures. We went through a process where we had a restructure of the whole department, so it incorporated Cherwell and South Northampton at the same time. And we had to spread the resources across the whole three councils ... the Stratford team is pretty small, and we did actually get an extra few members of staff and there were promotion opportunities for people within the department as well because we were covering such a massive area ...” (Non-manager)

Concerns about the vision for a single South Warwickshire District Council

While there was little in the way of outright opposition to the proposed merger, staff members raised many concerns about its practicality and potential impacts

- 6.14 For most staff members, the simple fact of bringing together two different District Councils, while attractive in terms of potential financial and operational efficiencies, would not be a simple process due to the differences between the existing organisations.

“I think it is a very simplistic view to say, we are very small authorities in comparison to a lot, if you bring small authorities together you are going to get economies of scale, more efficient working, you can reduce your staffing. It all sounds brilliant, but it is not that simple and we all know it is not that simple ...” (Manager)

“You then also have the processes as well ... the Councils do all their work in different ways. So, even though you have got the same system it is still not the same process ...” (Non-manager)

- 6.15 As an example, one staff member noted the geographical differences between the two Districts, with Stratford-on-Avon being much more rural than Warwick with its major centres of population. This contrast, they felt, means that uniform service delivery might be challenging.

“We are very different. Stratford is very rural, so the way that services are delivered will be different across the two areas. Warwick and Leamington are basically joined anyway, and other towns are not too far away, whereas getting across our district takes a good old time ...” (Non-manager)

- 6.16 A few participants felt that the challenges of merging two District Councils have not been fully considered, with one citing the substantial amount of careful research and planning that would be required to ensure success.

“It’s probably a bit like Fiat suddenly deciding they are going to enter the Formula 1 circuit and deciding six months before, ‘Well, we make cars so let us just get together with someone else and we can get a car that will be ready to race in the big races in six months.’ But they wouldn’t do that, would they? They would research it for months and years and spend money out to get to that position where they then say, ‘Here you go. We can now compete’” (Manager)

- 6.17 Similarly, several managers felt that the merger of two different systems across many different service areas would prove to be slow and complex, and the practical reality would be that old and new systems would have to be used in tandem, potentially adversely affecting service provision.

“Ideally, in our service area, we would have a new system for South Warwickshire District Council. All the data would be put into it. It would be tested for months. Everything would be migrated. It would be run alongside the existing database systems that we use until go-live day, and we just switch over. That is not going to happen ... we are going to have to just kind of get by with the systems we have got to start with. And that is just one area ... these sort of things are obviously going to affect planning, building control, housing. So, it is going to affect everybody ...” (Manager)

- 6.18 There was widespread concern across both groups that the proposed timeframe for implementing the proposed merger is overambitious, given the time that would likely be required to ensure that the vision for a single Council could be realised successfully.

“It’s going to be a long, slow process to get it right ... But we are trying to do it much too quickly because somewhere along the line, it suits it to be done within this timeframe. It is almost like what we have done is we have said, ‘We need this to be done by 2024 come what may and we want the answer to the question to be a new district council.’ So, how do we get there?” (Manager)

“I think other councils have already said that you need between five and seven years to do this, but yet we seem to think we can do it in two” (Manager)

- 6.19 A key question was exactly what is meant by a merger being completed by 2024, with participants urging that the (complex) process of merging operationally should not be rushed in an attempt to meet an arbitrary political deadline.

"I was just going back to the definition of what a merger means really. I mean, if there isn't the pressure to get everything sorted by that 2024 deadline ... Let us do it naturally ... If there is not a time pressure and it makes natural sense to join things up ... let's do it and involve everybody rather than shoehorning everything into a 2024 deadline ..."
(Non-manager)

"It is the timing really; it is just an incredibly short time scale ... operationally you just think of IT systems. And we are so slow at moving things around ... we are still going to be evolving years after 2024. So, it depends on what they mean, South Warwickshire Council by 2024. It depends on the definition really ..." (Non-manager)

- 6.20 Several staff echoed these concerns and drew on their personal experience of similar operational council mergers in the past to highlight the time required to establish joint teams and services and get them working smoothly.

"We joined some of services like legal, finance, HR and IT with Cherwell and South Northants as a shared service. And we know for a fact that it took at least two years to even get the finance system joined up ... So, if we are taking that one system, obviously there is lots of different systems across the council" (Non-manager)

"It probably took us 18 months to two years to get a very, very small team set up. And even now, ten years down the line, we are still getting issues in procedures. We both use the same system but there are different ways of accessing Stratford and Warwick. Yes, still major issues and that is one tiny little area" (Manager)

"I have been through the restructuring process a few times and even in organisations that are used to this process I would say it would still take a good two to three years for all of the processes, all of the customers, all of the staff, the model that they are changing to deliver, to actually embed. So, the current timeframes ... I just think it is naïve. Overambitious and naïve ..." (Non-manager)

- 6.21 Staff members also felt that unless senior leaders within the Councils are prepared to listen to staff members with relevant experience, mistakes will likely be made and opportunities for improvements as a result of local government restructuring might be missed.

"I do see restructure of any sort, and even if it is a merger, to be a great opportunity ... If it wasn't being done top-down then it is probably much more likely to work and to be successful ... they have not got the experience of the people on the ground. And if management are making decisions without any sort of consultation on the ground it is just going to fail, isn't it? They are going to make the same mistakes, they are going to think things are possible or quicker than they really are ..." (Non-manager)

- 6.22 Participants in both groups feared that a merger would become a 'top-down' process in which staff members have changes imposed upon them, rather than being an integral part of the decision-making and implementation process. One staff member stated that an 'authoritarian' process would almost guarantee that the proposed merger would be unsuccessful.

"It would work I think, if there is a sense from management that it was going to be a bottom-up restructure rather than a top-down one. And I just get the sense that it seems the same ... looking at things from a top-down version of management, imposing structures on us, imposing ideas. They are telling us we have got to save costs in this, that, and the other area without any sense of where these costs can be saved. Without any sort of recourse to the officers who are actually doing the job and asking them what could be working better" (Non-manager)

"It feels like there is no intention from top down to get in touch with people on the ground and to take advice and to work from the bottom up ... it is totally authoritarian. Every decision that is made is top down and it's doomed to failure because of it" (Non-manager)

The proposals were considered unrealistic in terms of opportunities for cost savings

- 6.23 Two staff members, while agreeing that a merger could provide significant opportunities for improvement in principle, were sceptical about the claimed opportunities for real-terms savings and questioned the feasibility of the vision in the face of extensive up-front costs.

"Restructuring councils, merging, costs a huge amount up front. If you look at the costs that have been incurred in the other councils that have merged it is just not going to happen the way they think. And if any of you have looked at the Deloitte report which looked at where the savings could be made, it is just ridiculous. It is all pie in the sky and they have plucked numbers out of thin air. They are working on a pipe dream, and it is just not feasible, it is not reasonable. So, I think it is a great opportunity that is going to be completely wasted and end up costing money in the end" (Non-manager)

"The sums do not add up and I worry that although this is inevitable, and this is the right direction of travel ... It has not been properly thought out and it has been on the premise that there is going to be all these savings that I do not think are ever going to come to fruition. There is not going to be a saving from this. If anything, there is going to be a price tag to it ..." (Manager)

- 6.24 Other participants raised similar concerns, with one staff member again noting their previous experience and the 'hidden' or unaccounted-for costs attached to estates and infrastructure changes. Furthermore, a manager felt that salary costs might actually rise if people are required to take on more responsibilities, and so questioned the extent to which staffing savings might be possible.

“In regard to accommodation, we know there is £1.2 million in both buildings at the moment ... And they are talking about building a new place in-between ... Again, we have got experience of this; when we did it with Cherwell and South Northants they built a brand new building ... and there were loads of un-thought about costs ... there is lots of things to think about with a new building. To put an actual whole new infrastructure in there like the IT equipment and stuff, it was close to half a million anyway, so you are not making any savings. Likewise with the systems you will end up joining, you are not going to make any savings at all at any point ...” (Non-manager)

“You have then got to take into account the moment you become a bigger authority, salary expectations rise ... you are going to be expected to pay more in line with Warwickshire County Council than a district council ... And where are the staff savings going to come from? Are you expecting one manager to manage a team that is twice the size of what it was before?” (Manager)

- 6.25 This theme was expanded on, with one staff member arguing that the customer-facing nature of many District Council services means that substantial savings as a result of teams being merged, and fewer staff being required, were unlikely to be desirable or achievable. Their view was that the only area in which cost reductions would be attainable is estates, if fewer buildings are required.

“What they are proposing in savings etc., it just doesn’t stack up ... We always say when it comes to services, there is no opportunity to save because ultimately, services rely on people and people cost money. So, if you look at the Council itself, the majority of the services are customer-facing services, therefore they are people-based. Joining two councils together is not going to reduce the amount of people you need to do the work because you are still responding to the same amount of people out there in the public ... There is no way to make a saving from there other than potentially maybe a Chief Exec or a head of service, but those are quite small savings really. And then the other area you potentially could save is in support services, but as [these] have been squished to death by councils over the last ten years, there is very little fat on the bone there already ... So ultimately, their proposed savings, the only area is bricks and mortar” (Manager)

- 6.26 There was also concern and scepticism around the suggestion that both savings and improvements can be made, and one manager felt that much more detail is required to make a convincing case for substantial savings being feasible as a result of the proposed changes.

“We are told to look at the Deloitte report and read that, and it is all mother’s milk and apple pie. It tells us that we are going to be able to make massive savings and at the same time we are going to have an urban designer and a transport officer, which would be wonderful, but it does not go hand in glove with making savings” (Manager)

“One of the things I struggle with a bit ... is they talk about one of the biggest drivers is savings and we see these figures for the amount of savings, but I have no idea really how those savings have come about. We get the words economies of scale, sharing services, but there is nothing in black and white which is easy, unless you are an accountant, to understand ... There is nothing to actually give the nitty gritty, how those savings are going to be made which makes you not trust it” (Manager)

Some other concerns were raised around the deliverability of the proposed merger

- 6.27 For a few staff members, there was an underlying concern about the success rate of council mergers and the extent to which due diligence may or may not have been completed to date in preparing the proposals.

“There is plenty of other evidence that suggests that mergers by and large are not successful, that there have been real problems. So, all the opportunities come with a big asterisk next to them.” (Manager)

“A reasonable case has been put forward to say that there are financial benefits that could be accrued, but I do not get the impression that there has been masses of due diligence, that they have spent time talking to councils where it has gone horribly wrong ... In an ideal world when they are talking about something as big as this, what you want to see is that as soon as they think about it, they start doing the investigation, the due diligence, start going away and really looking at what else has happened ... speak to lots of people, do a lot of investigative work and then produce a really detailed plan ...” (Manager)

- 6.28 Others were worried that the differences between the current District Councils could present significant barriers and jeopardise any attempt to successfully create a new District Council for South Warwickshire. Indeed, one manager suggested that a situation might arise in which operations are merged, but at a political level there would continue to be separate priorities and policies – leaving staff members somewhat ‘trapped’ in the middle.

“I can see it going the opposite way of we are going to merge all the staff and then the politicians will back out of it at the end of the day. It will end up as two lots of policies and it will be Warwick politicians saying staff have got to do it this way and Stratford politicians saying staff have got to do it a different way, and the staff are going to be left in the middle not knowing which way to turn ...” (Manager)

Possible impacts of the proposed merger

The potential for additional pressures and negative impacts on staff members (and the services they deliver) was a significant worry

- 6.29 There was significant concern that the proposed merger would place additional pressure on council officers and managers, and particularly that it will mean increased levels of responsibility for those already carrying a significant workload.

"I report to a Head of Service, and you can see the strain of having to wear that hat for two councils is really taking its toll, and the strain is going to go down the ranks from there ..." (Manager)

"I think you see 18 months of merging two services and it is perceived as telling people that perhaps they have not got a job any more or telling managers that that person who has just left, we are not going to backfill their role. Every officer is going to be taking on more work. That is the expectation" (Manager)

- 6.30 There was also the potential for stress arising from, for example, uncertainty about the way things might work in the future, from specific tasks or projects, to staff members' overall roles.

"On a personal level it is quite a long period of turmoil of not really knowing what is going to happen. Whether you are going to have to complete for a job or not and where you are going to be and what that timescale is, because it is different for different services. So, it could be an extended period of uncertainty for specific jobs ..." (Non-manager)

"You are not going to be anywhere near as productive if you have got that hanging over you ... If you are worrying about what your job is going to be in six- or seven-months' time you are going to have stress ... that is obviously going to impact your family life as well, because it is not just about us generally, it is also about families ..." (Non-manager)

- 6.31 Insecurity and lack of agency were also raised as concerns by several participants; one felt that staff members might feel driven to take on more and more responsibility to prove their worth, while another was concerned that the lack of control felt by staff might have negative implications for their mental health.

"I think there is the other fear that if you know your job is at risk you are going to do your utmost ... to try and show how important your role is. So, potentially you could be working longer hours or making sure that you have got a role around you to protect you, if you like. So, that is another anxiety that people may have ... that they feel insecure so they are saying, 'Oh, yeah, I can do this, this, this and this,' taking too much on ..." (Non-manager)

"We have got no control over our situation at all, no control over how our job effectively transforms at all. And that is really bad for mental health to feel like you are just a whim of other people's decision making ..." (Non-manager)

- 6.32 One manager felt that there was therefore potential for negative impacts on staff members who might remain in post following any restructuring, as well as on those who might have to move elsewhere or seek new roles.

"It has an impact on whichever one of us does not have a job for whatever reason. It has an impact on whoever stays because clearly whilst the work is the same, the level of work doubles. So, the impact is on both people, is it not?" (Manager)

- 6.33 Several participants were concerned that these pressures and potential frustrations might lead to staff members looking for roles elsewhere rather than remaining to work through a complex and potentially stressful merger – resulting in a ‘skills drain’.

“For so long people have been put under more and more pressure in certain services ... and they are all at breaking point really. So, with this on top of it no wonder people are looking elsewhere ...” (Non-manager)

“I think over the past six to nine months, I have heard more people talk about looking at jobs outside, applying for jobs outside, even just talking about early redundancy ... that those people were not talking about before. So that shows you the impact that it is having on people” (Manager)

“The people I work with, all the people I manage, are highly educated ... The job that they do is the same job that is required in Warwick, and it is required in Kenilworth and it is required everywhere in the country. There is no reason for them to do it at Stratford other than it is geographically local to where they live ... this will mean that they just look elsewhere and they will have no trouble finding jobs elsewhere” (Manager)

- 6.34 There was a view, and some frustration and anger, among some participants that the timing of the proposal, coming after an extended period of challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, is not ideal. They questioned the extent to which colleagues might reasonably be expected to engage with discussions on far-reaching decisions at this time.

“I think the supreme irony with all of this is that probably for all of us with the pandemic ... I have never had to work so hard as I have had to work in the last 18 months in terms of workloads and pressures and expectations, and we are being expected to now launch these discussions around merging different teams together ...” (Manager)

“Everybody has been going through a traumatic time for the last 18 months ... and now we have all been told potentially we are going to lose our jobs ... and there has been no kind of reassurance really. It just seems to me this is a really bad time to be doing something like this for all sorts of reasons ... It is on the back of the whole pandemic trauma, we are in a new world, we don’t really know what that world is going to look like ... and maybe in a couple of years’ time, we will be able to see this is probably the worst possible moment to be making really big momentous decisions.” (Manager)

- 6.35 One manager was particularly critical of what they perceived as shortcomings in the way senior leaders have communicated the potential implications of a merger, and the lack of reassurance about the long-term impacts, should the proposal go ahead.

“Coming out of COVID, the recruitment freeze and we are now moving towards this merger ... you could not design it any worse to be just the most continually disruptive period of time in anybody’s working life ... and the way they have gone about it, the management can offer no crumb of comfort for managers or staff as nobody can stand in front of anybody and say, ‘Look, none of you are going to lose your jobs ...’” (Manager)

- 6.36 One way to mitigate staff concerns, one participant felt, would be to ensure sufficient accessible information is made available to enable employees to weigh up the implications of the proposals for them as individuals.

“Having access to information means that people feel like they know what is potentially happening and they can review their options for themselves. I know we have talked about loss of skills, but for each individual person they will need to consider whether it fits with them going forward ... But not having access to the information makes that more difficult and makes it more uncertain and does push people potentially to look at alternative options ...” (Non-manager)

- 6.37 Moreover, one manager felt there needs to be recognition of the extent to which the proposed changes rely on the commitment of those who have served the communities of South Warwickshire for many years; failing to understand that personal investment and the working culture people may be used to could, it was said, lead people to question whether they wish to remain in their roles.

“They are wholly relying on the commitment of staff that have been at both organisations for a very long time to get through this and I think they are completely missing the mark about how people are really feeling ... people work at both councils because of their investment in the council, because of the culture that you have got used to working in, and that is why you stick around. And if that is gone, it does make you ask the question, ‘Is that a place I want to stay working at?’” (Manager)

- 6.38 On a related note, working for their local District Council was a source of great pride for participants who are also resident in the area; as such, they did not welcome the prospect of working for a larger, cross-border organisation.

“I feel incredibly proud to work for Stratford-on-Avon District Council and I don’t have a desire to work for Warwick. I wanted to work for Stratford-on-Avon District Council because it is where I am born, it is where my heritage is ... And I think I do have a sadness that that will be going, and I don’t think I will be on my own with that ...” (Non-manager)

“No disrespect to Warwick, but I love working for Stratford District Council, and to lose that identity is really quite disappointing, upsetting, potentially ...” (Manager)

- 6.39 Moreover, several staff members suggested that the loss of their District Council could negatively affect many residents’ sense of identity, with one manager suggesting that it will take some time to overcome that *“mindset of how people think about themselves regionally.”* In Stratford-on-Avon in particular, there was also concern that the current focus of the District Council on Shakespeare-related tourism will be lost, to the detriment of the town.

“For Stratford town and Shakespeare and its associations, that is the whole focus of the District Council ... That’s where the tourists come. What sort of damage are we doing to our identity if Stratford as the name of the Council disappears? We become just another district council that is named after a geographical area of the country ...” (Manager)

The potential impacts of the proposed merger on service provision and access were also concerning

- 6.40 The possible loss of experienced staff (as a result of the merger itself or the ongoing uncertainty around it) could, it was felt, result in a loss of local knowledge and a subsequent detrimental effect on service delivery.

“The other thing is people who are potentially reaching that time where they are thinking about retiring, are people going to choose to leave earlier? And taking the information and the knowledge that they have in their particular area ...” (Non-manager)

“Both councils have a wealth of local experience specific to their areas and that is across lots of different services, and there’s just a concern that you do not want to lose that local knowledge because that will obviously have an impact on the residents and services that get delivered.” (Non-manager)

- 6.41 The same was thought to apply to the anticipated reduction in Councillor numbers; democratic deficit was a worry in terms of Councillor accessibility, and there was a sense that:

“You will lose that diversity of geographic opinion as well ...” (Non-manager)

- 6.42 Specifically, more remote decision-making in planning was thought to contravene the localism principle, which states that decision-making should be done at the most local possible level to reassure residents that applications are being considered by Councillors with knowledge and understanding of their area. There was a strong feeling that the aforementioned democratic deficit will be most keenly felt in this service area.

“... Under these new arrangements, there will be fewer councillors, they will have larger areas to consider, and it is very probable that decision-making ... would be made somewhat distant to where the actual development would occur. That is going to be uncomfortable for people ... It will feel as though there is a democratic deficit in that respect” (Non-manager)

- 6.43 Customer service was also said to be better within smaller organisations, as is the ability to mobilise services quickly - the importance of which has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, there was a sense that a larger organisation would have been too unwieldy to be as effective as the District Councils have been in similar circumstances.

“The local size is interesting because it is a bit like if you buy a product from Amazon, you will get it cheaper than maybe if you bought it from a local small shop, but if something goes wrong, you will probably get a better and more efficient service in the local shop ... the bigger you get, customer service really does start to go out the window” (Manager)

“... It has been proven over the last 18 months just how important that ability to mobilise local services quickly has been. And I am not saying that will not be possible as a larger organisation, but if I do have concerns, they are around that” (Manager)

Practical considerations

There were differing opinions on council headquarters in the event of a merger

- 6.44 In the final section of the focus groups, discussions focused on where council offices might be located if the proposed merger were to go ahead.
- 6.45 In the event of a new South Warwickshire District Council, there was some support for a ‘fresh start’ by means of new headquarters but no consensus as to where it might be located. The main stated issues in relation to location were around accessibility (for residents and staff) and perception, as highlighted below.

“Can we find somewhere else halfway between the two councils? Well, that is going to have an impact to staff ... What happens if people live in Stratford because they work in Stratford? They might not drive. How are they going to get to, say, Wellesbourne, for instance?” (Manager)

“I think it would be helpful if we knew where we were going to be based and whether there were going to be more local service centres ... for accessibility services. Our district is so big, if you live in the very south of the district ... and then you find you have to go to Leamington ... that is like an hour’s journey, and how do you do it on public transport? Because it doesn’t exist in Stratford district; we are so poorly connected by public transport it is untrue. So, for anybody who relies on public transport to get around ... they are going to find it very difficult to access the main office” (Non-manager)

“Having a new combined building for a new combined authority seems sensible, although where that would be is the question. If it was in Stratford district area, how are the Warwick people going to feel about it and vice versa?” (Manager)

- 6.46 Others, though, were concerned about the cost of a new building, while also acknowledging the impracticality of continuing to use one or other of the existing headquarters – both of which were considered inefficient, expensive to run and ‘too big’ considering the likely continuance of homeworking.

“Stratford headquarters’ office is too big now because of what they have done with COVID and moving us all to working from home. And also the building itself needs a lot of work doing to it to upgrade it. It is not sustainable in terms of its energy efficiency ... it is quite an old building now.” (Non-manager)

“Realistically, how many people are going to be going back into the office full time? And what does that mean? I still work from home. My day that I am not working from home I work at Stratford Leisure Centre, so I am not even in the office. So, how many other people will mostly be working from home? So, it could be a tie up between Elizabeth House and Riverside House, but are they still going to be too big” (Non-manager)

“The council building in Stratford ... it is an expensive building to run and obviously it is mostly empty at the moment, so I can see that doing something around buildings is key to this. And on the back of the pandemic, we have demonstrated that actually, we do not need to be in the office for a fair amount of the work that we do and we can do it as effectively from home...” (Manager)

- 6.47 The move toward online service provision was also thought to negate the need for large council offices, albeit it was recognised that some people will always prefer or need face-to-face contact and that they must be accounted for to some degree – perhaps via much smaller offices, but in more locations.

“I don’t know how many times people need to go into a council ... what demand is there to go into a council office, particularly with things moving more online?” (Non-manager)

“I guess there are still people out there who are not happy to use online systems though, so we have still got to accommodate people who can’t get access to the internet or are more comfortable with speaking to somebody in person” (Non-manager)

“I think ... this is an opportunity to think a bit more out the box. Why do we not think about more small, localised offices rather than one large building? Places where not only we can work but visitors, customers can have easy access to us as well?” (Manager)

- 6.48 A minority, though, suggested that residents would prefer an identifiable ‘hub’ within a central location rather than a series of smaller satellite offices, preferably one in each district – and one member of support staff was strongly of the view that their department would benefit from some space within a central location in future, as they have experienced difficulties in properly supporting all other services remotely.

“I think the fact that we have an Elizabeth House turns on the point that people want to have a council they can go to at the heart of their district ... because as much as we might be able to work remotely, there is still a need to have a customer-facing service. That people can associate with a place and with a building is valuable in and of itself ...” (Manager)

“I probably have a slightly different take being a support service and therefore you are there for all of the other services in the council. It has been quite difficult doing some of that remotely so I would say for support services specifically, potentially a central place where they are located and people know where they are and they can go to, that is probably still important ...” (Manager)

Any new or refurbished council offices need not be large enough for full council meetings

- 6.49 Both groups agreed that external premises could be hired for full Council sessions, or that they could continue to be held virtually.

“It does seem silly to pay for a big building for it to be for just for council meetings which are of varying sizes. Surely it would be cheaper if you could hire a venue or try and do it virtually, than the expense of a large building.” (Non-manager)

“They would just hire somewhere for those four meetings or five meetings, whatever it is ...” (Manager)

Other comments and suggestions

Staff involvement/engagement is essential in ensuring the success of any merger

- 6.50 Participants in both sessions were surprised at how few members of staff had signed up for the focus groups reported here, taking this as a sign of general apathy among the Councils' workforces and the fact that many employees see the merger as something of a fair accompli.

"... I was really flabbergasted to find out how small the number was who had signed up and I think that is just a real sign that people are maybe feeling apathetic ..." (Non-manager)

"I feel like it is a fait accompli. We are being asked to come to a consultation about the merger of two authorities where the answer is yes ... It is not a consultation in good faith. It probably tells you what you need to know that you have only nine managers here ..." (Manager)

- 6.51 It was not considered too late to get staff on board with the process though, if it is decided to proceed with the merger. Indeed, it would be fair to say that most attendees at both groups could see the logic behind and need for it, but felt that they require more and better information, communication and engagement to allay the many concerns they raised and ensure they feel properly involved in the implementation process.

"There is no reason why you wouldn't want to try and improve the way you are providing services and systems and so on and so forth. I think staff if they were informed and given more information about what their responsibilities will be ... they would be willing to make positive changes" (Non-manager)

"Everything needs to be laid out for us about what is being decided, what hasn't been decided and how they view this process is going to work going forward. They need to basically enable us to determine how the services are going to look in the future because we are the ones who are going to have to do the work on the ground, and we are the ones that know what works and what doesn't. So, they really need to change their cultural mindset about it which seems to be very directive" (Non-manager)

- 6.52 Indeed, beginning this process as soon as possible (if the merger is approved) was urged so that commonalities, differences and ways of introducing conformity can be identified at the very outset.

"If we start looking at the way we do stuff and try and get some conformity across the two authorities as soon as possible, and then at least that will help us move forward ..." (Manager)

Summary of key points

- **Overall support for or opposition to the proposed merger**
 - Rather than expressing 'support' or 'opposition', staff members focused on the potential opportunities that the creation of a single District Council for South Warwickshire might present, as well as concerns and impacts that would need to be considered and addressed if the proposed merger were to go ahead
- **Opportunities arising from the proposed merger**
 - Protecting and ensuring the future sustainability of local Council services
 - Improved service provision through the consolidation of expertise and resources, and staff developing new skills and experience
 - More consistent service provision across the two areas
 - A larger pool of staff mitigating against recruitment issues in certain service areas
 - Departmental reorganisations presenting opportunities for career advancement through more responsibility and promotion
- **Main concerns around the proposed merger**
 - The proposed timeframe is overambitious given the likely complexity of the process (due to the differences between the two Councils and their systems)
 - Geographical differences between the districts could be a barrier to uniform service delivery
 - The projected savings are unrealistic given the significance of 'upfront' and likely 'hidden' or 'unaccounted for' costs – and because the customer-facing nature of many district council services means that current staffing levels will need to be maintained
 - Many staffing impacts were raised, mainly: additional pressure on remaining staff due to increased workloads; stress and anxiety as a result of ongoing uncertainty; and a loss of skills and local knowledge as a result of staff being made redundant, seeking employment elsewhere or taking early retirement
 - The potential for 'democratic deficit' and more remote decision-making by fewer councillors
 - A loss of identity within the two Districts
- **Other issues**
 - No consensus on whether any new Council should have a new headquarters, or whether one or both of the existing buildings should be used – but there was a general feeling that the latter are inefficient, expensive and 'too big' in light of continuing homeworking and the move to more online service provision
 - Those preferring or needing face-to-face contact must be accounted for – either via smaller offices in more locations or a smaller central 'hub' in each district
 - External premises could be hired for full council sessions, or they could continue to be virtual
- **Future considerations**
 - Clarification is required as to what exactly is meant by 'a merger by 2024'
 - Any merger should be a 'bottom up' process whereby staff members play an integral part in the decision-making and implementation process: employees want to be involved in and input into any implementation process to ensure their experience drives success
 - Most attendees could see the logic behind and need for the proposed merger, but require more and better information, communication and engagement to allay their concerns and ensure they feel properly involved in the implementation process

7. Stakeholder focus groups

Main findings from stakeholder focus groups

Town and Parish Councils

Introduction

- 7.1 This section reports the views from an online focus group¹⁰ with town and parish councillors from across Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts. The event took place on the evening of 7th October 2021 and was attended by 26 Councillors.
- 7.2 The session was independently facilitated by ORS using two co-hosts: a main facilitator and a secondary host who was able to observe the session as well as address any technical issues arising from the online format. The group followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under consultation. A series of information slides were shared at set points during the sessions, which ensured that participants had sufficient background information to actively deliberate on the proposals.
- 7.3 In order to quantify views on some key questions, a series of 'quick polls' were undertaken during the session. Responses to these were captured and are reported in this chapter, but it is important to note that this was a qualitative research exercise and the numerical findings from the polls are not statistically valid.

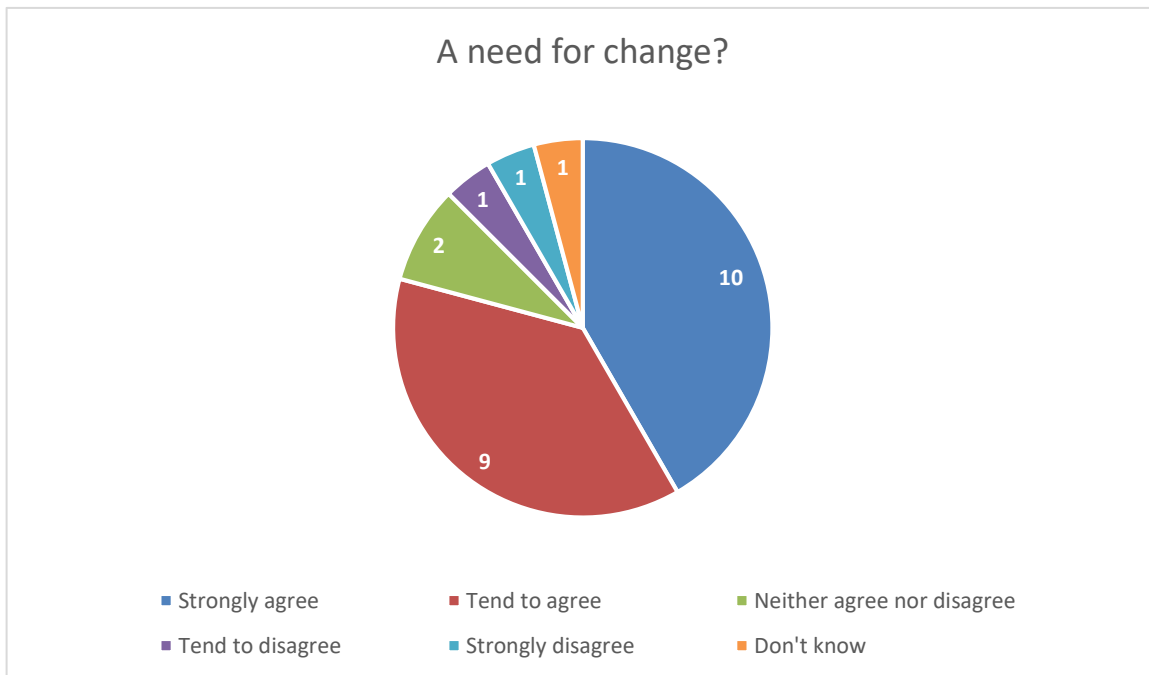
Main findings

The case for change

- 7.4 When asked (via a Zoom Poll) whether they agreed or disagreed that there is a case for changing the way local government is provided across South Warwickshire, the chart overleaf shows that most town and parish councillors agreed.

¹⁰ All the groups reported in this chapter were undertaken on Zoom – as this has become a fairly familiar tool for the general public during 2020-21. Participant familiarity with the software varied and, depending on the platform, some participants struggled to take part in the online voting tasks.

Figure 29: To what extent do you agree or disagree that there is a case for changing the way local government is provided across South Warwickshire?



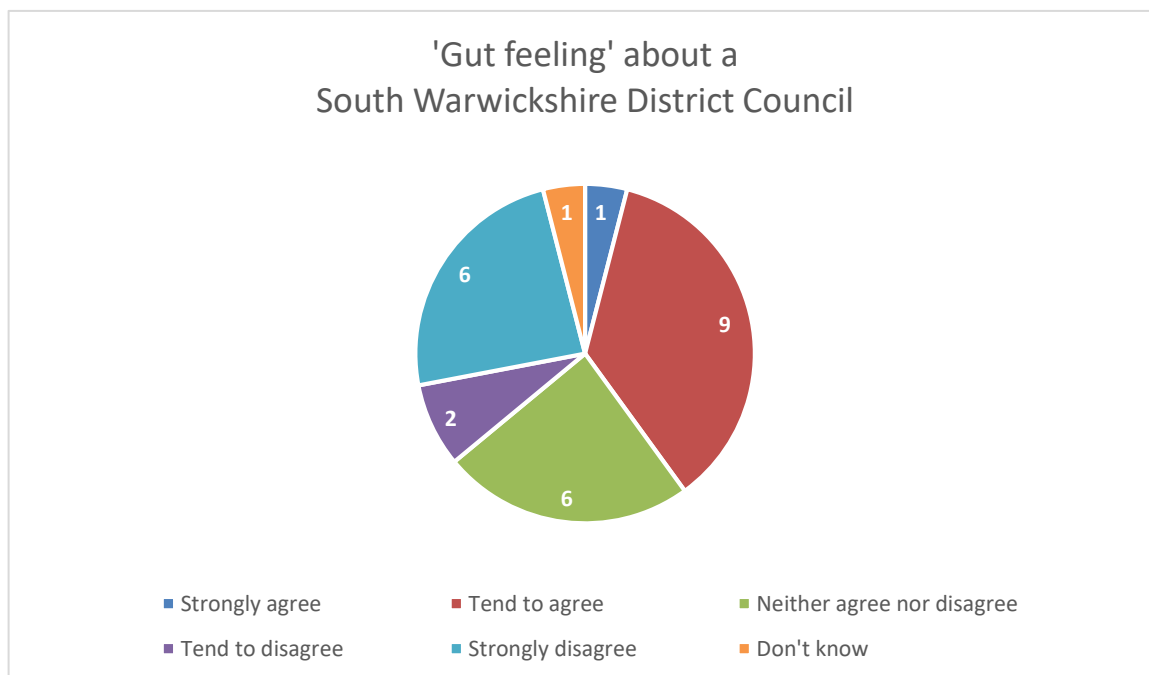
Based on responses from 24 people within the focus group

7.5 In discussion, those who agreed did so chiefly on the grounds that financial savings must be made, and that joint working would be beneficial in many areas.

“There will be savings and other benefits from joint working”
“The combining of two councils reduces costs”

7.6 However, opinion was more divided in response to the second poll, which asked about people’s ‘gut feeling’ about the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with a new South Warwickshire District Council. The chart overleaf shows that of the 25 participants that responded, 10 agreed and eight disagreed (the remainder neither agreed nor disagreed or could not answer at this stage), suggesting that while most recognised the need for change, there was some concern about the proposed means of achieving it.

Figure 30: At this stage, what is your 'gut feeling' about the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with one new Council to provide all district council services across South Warwickshire?



Based on responses from 25 people within the focus group

Which criteria are key to evaluating the restructuring options?

- 7.7 Councillors were given the following criteria and asked which they considered to be most important.
- *Local public services*: keeping services as local as possible for as many residents as possible
 - *Cost savings*: delivering savings to support the overall Council budget
 - *Value for money*: cutting duplication, increasing economies of scale and improving efficiency
 - *Stronger/accountable local leadership*: ensuring residents can/know how to influence decision-making and raise issues with their local Councillor, and have a say on how services are delivered
 - *Medium- and long-term sustainability*: ensuring frontline services are sustainable in the medium- and long-term.
- 7.8 Stronger and accountable local leadership was most important to the town and parish councillors, with an average rank of 1.9 – and this was closely followed by local public services (2), value for money (2.4), medium- and long-term sustainability (2.4) and cost savings (2.5). Indeed, the fact that all five criteria received an average rank of under three suggests that they are all considered vital in decision-making around future local government structures.

Figure 31: Average ranking of evaluation criteria



Based on responses from 21 people within the focus group

A new South Warwickshire District Council?

There was some explicit support for the proposed merger

- 7.9 There was some feeling among participants that a merger could yield economies of scale and efficiencies – and potentially more “clout” for town and parish councils.

“I think town and parish councillors might get a bit more clout. As a town council, we don’t actually have much to do and we’ve been told that if the merger does go through, we’ll have more to do in terms of parks, cemeteries etc. That jobs will start coming down to us more ... so that’s why I’m thinking more clout and I think that would be a good thing”

- 7.10 Moreover, one participant supported the proposed merger as they felt it would stave off the potential unitarisation the whole of Warwickshire – and another supported the merger as a ‘steppingstone’ to a unitary council for South Warwickshire in future (but only if this were the end goal).

“I would only reluctantly support the merger so long as it was seen as the first step towards a full unitary council. If this was seen as the end result, I would strongly oppose it”

“The main driver for merger is, I believe, political: a desire to prevent the formation of a ‘whole of Warwickshire’ unitary authority. Since I feel residents of the southern tip of the county have little in common with residents of Warwick District Council (or Stratford, for that matter), a whole-of-county unitary authority would be a disaster for rural areas. For that reason alone, I would support the South Warwickshire merger”

- 7.11 Indeed, several others appeared to support the prospect of a unitary council in South Warwickshire for reasons of efficiency and simplicity, and so disagreed with the proposed merger as it does not go far enough.

“No point in stopping at merger; go to full unitary council”

“We are only talking of two councils merging so there will still be four sets of duplication in Warwickshire”

“Benefits would accrue from a full South Warks unitary council plus even more savings”

The main concern was the prospect of services being devolved to town and parish councils without associated resource

- 7.12 Although one participant was keen to see more power and service provision devolved to town and parish councils, most others were concerned about the burden this would place on them (as volunteers) and were sceptical over whether the requisite funding would follow.

“The District Councils have not identified the impact on parish and town councils; they will have to pick up the slack when the services deteriorate which they inevitably will; with no money attached, presumably”

“Devolution sounds wonderful, more clout sounds wonderful, but all of those things happen without finance ... what’s happening is that we’re doing more and more and more and we’re doing it cheaper and cheaper. And we’re relying on volunteers who are very close to burnout after Covid ... exhausted people who are doing more and more with no resources to back it up”

- 7.13 Moreover, a lack of funding was not the only concern, for one participant noted that Parish Councillors in particular will have neither the time nor the expertise to provide certain services at a local level.

“There’s talk about handing powers down to parish councils which is all well and good, but there’s nothing coming with it ... so do we want it? We can’t cope with it; we don’t have the time for it or the resources or the expertise”

- 7.14 It was also argued that using the prospect for greater involvement in planning decision-making and delivering local services as “sweeteners” to gain support for the merger among town and parish councils is “not a valid proposal [because] this could easily be delivered under the current arrangements”.

Democratic deficit may be an issue in the event of fewer councillor numbers

- 7.15 Another frequently stated reason for disagreeing with the proposed merger was the potential for democratic deficit as a result of fewer District Councillors across the area. The main fear was that decisions about particular areas would be made by those with little knowledge of local needs, and that access to Councillors would be diluted if they are covering a much larger area.

"I'm concerned about ... decisions being taken by councillors currently in Warwick seats"
"The proposals would see our district councillor covering an area 17 miles long!"
"I'm concerned about the reduction in district councillors. It's a very small saving in cash terms, for a much larger loss of resource"

Communities that already feel isolated may feel even more so within a larger Council

- 7.16 Representatives of rural parishes on the periphery of the two Districts (and especially in Stratford-on-Avon) said they already feel somewhat neglected and removed from the seat of decision-making. This feeling, it was said, will become even more acute in the event of further centralisation.

"Peripheral rural areas like Long Compton are already poorly served and neglected. This will become worse if the organisation becomes even more remote and urban"
"Most of us come from small local villages in Stratford District on the border of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire ... and we feel like we're the poor man of Warwickshire anyway. If things move further away, we're going to get less of everything ..."

There was scepticism that the stated cost savings would be achieved

- 7.17 While recognising the Councils' need to make financial savings, participants were sceptical about the achievability of the savings proposed and concerned about a lack of accountability if they are not delivered.

"I am concerned that the proposed cost savings may not be delivered ..."
"I remain unconvinced of the financial upside ... and there will be no accountability if the financial savings are not delivered"

- 7.18 There was also a view that £600,000 will be insufficient to support change management, particularly given the Councils' lack of expertise in this area.

"£600k seems too low an estimate"
"No experience of change management is provided. We are being expected to trust these people to get it right first time. I struggle with this ..."

Opinion remained divided on the merger at the end of the session

- 7.19 Ultimately, when asked again at the end of the session (having heard all the background information) whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposal to replace Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils with a new South Warwickshire District Council, opinion was still divided among the 17 Town and

Parish councillors remaining: six agreed (though only one strongly), three neither agreed nor disagreed, seven disagreed (two strongly) and there was one 'don't know'.

- 7.20 There was, though, a sense that the merger is something of a *fait accompli* despite the results of the consultation, and that it is up to town and parish councils to prepare for it as best they can.

"It doesn't really matter ... ultimately this will go through whether we like it or not and it's about how we prepare for it and what the impact might be ..."

Alternatives?

- 7.21 Several shared the view that the Councils have not given due consideration to the other options on their short-list in favour of pursuing an *"easy win"* in the form of a merger.

"I don't think they've thought about the other options. This is an easy win that doesn't shake the boat too much ..."

- 7.22 They were particularly keen to see further exploration of shared back-office services with a wider range of Councils, both within and outside Warwickshire.

"Over the course of the evening, I've changed my view from a tend to agree to a tend to disagree. The conversations have highlighted a lot of opportunities that haven't been explored. Thinking about shared services and back-office functions in particular, which seems to be the main savings generator, I'm surprised Deloitte didn't consider that Rugby also has back-office teams as do all of the other councils, including Warwickshire County Council. And so perhaps we should be consolidating all back-office teams into one ... centralise those services that don't have any direct connection with the population"

"There's an opportunity for many local authorities to share services as opposed to merging councils. I understand the need for cost savings, but why stop at Warwick and Stratford, why not widen the contracts and sharing opportunities beyond that?"

Summary of key points

- **Overall support for or opposition to the proposed merger**
 - Opinion was divided on the merger amongst town and parish councillors
 - Undue consideration had been given to the other options
 - More exploration is needed of the potential sharing of back-office services with a wider range of councils both within and outside Warwickshire
 - There was a belief, though, that the merger is inevitable despite the results of the consultation and that town and parish councillors should prepare for it as best they can.
- **Main reasons for supporting the proposed merger**
 - A merger could support economies of scale and efficiencies
 - More service responsibilities for town and parish councils within local government

- Would stave off the potential unitarisation of the whole of Warwickshire and a step towards a unitary authority for South Warwickshire which would be preferred

- **Main reasons for opposing the proposed merger**
 - Scepticism that the cost savings would be achieved and concern that there would be no accountability if savings were not delivered
 - The funds allocated for change management (£600,000) is considered to be insufficient particularly since the Councils lack expertise in this area
 - The proposal does not go far enough. Would prefer a unitary authority for South Warwickshire which would create more savings
 - Strong concern over the proposed extra burden upon town and parish councillors (volunteers) who do not necessarily have the resources nor expertise to cope
 - Scepticism over whether funding would be made available to support any extra responsibilities expected of town and parish councils
 - Fears over democratic deficit arising from fewer District Councillors – decision makers with limited local knowledge and poorer access to Councillors
 - Rural and peripheral communities which already feel marginalised and neglected believe they will become more so within a larger District Council structure

Voluntary and community sector representatives

Introduction

- 7.23 This section reports the views from an online focus group with voluntary and community sector (VCS) representatives from across Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts. The event took place on the afternoon of 30th September 2021 and was attended by 12 people.
- 7.24 The session was independently facilitated by ORS using two co-hosts: a main facilitator and a secondary host who was able to observe the session as well as address any technical issues arising from the online format. The group followed a pre-determined topic guide which allowed space for a general discussion of the key questions under consultation. A series of information slides were shared at set points during the sessions, which ensured that participants had sufficient background information to actively deliberate on the proposals.

Main findings

The case for change

- 7.25 VCS representatives understood the need for change, suggesting that local authorities' monetary challenges have been evident for many years (even pre-COVID) and that some form of change is inevitable in addressing these challenges.

"It's probably being done for financial reasons, and they don't really have much of a choice, so it's about how to do it in the right possible way ..."

- 7.26 However, some questioned the projected cost savings from restructuring, stating that they had seen little evidence that duplication could be eliminated to such a level that the projected savings would be possible (especially without radical reductions in staffing and service levels). Others were concerned that the cost of consultation, planning and implementing any changes would negate any savings made.

“I was looking in the Deloitte presentation about reducing areas of duplication and ... there wasn’t a huge amount of evidence that duplication can be eliminated ... So, I can’t see how coming together necessarily automatically enables those savings to happen”

“I’m concerned that cost savings so far will show £400k per year; how are they going to make the rest of the savings without loss of personnel and cuts to the sector and services?”

“There’s a big cost to reorganisation too, and that isn’t really taken account of when it is carried out”

Which criteria are key to evaluating the restructuring options?

- 7.27 Participants were informed that Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils recognise there are many different criteria to consider when thinking about the future of local government in the area, and believe it is important for any future arrangements to provide the following:

Local public services: keeping services as local as possible for as many residents as possible

Cost savings: delivering savings to support the overall council budget

Value for money: cutting duplication, increasing economies of scale and improving efficiency

Stronger/accountable local leadership: ensuring residents can/know how to influence decision-making and raise issues with their local councillor, and have a say on how services are delivered

Medium- and long-term sustainability: ensuring frontline services are sustainable in the medium- and long-term.

- 7.28 They were then asked which they considered to be most important but tended to focus instead on what was missing from the list. The general feeling was that the criteria are too budget-driven and statutory, demonstrating a lack of consideration for residents and communities in not referring to improving (or at least maintaining) service quality, effectiveness and outcomes.

“My thought would be outcomes and impact. In terms of outcomes for people, surely that’s what the whole thing is about?”

“It’s so difficult to measure, and that’s probably why it’s not on that matrix, but it’s the effectiveness of the delivery. Not the efficiency, but the effectiveness”

“Instead of ‘improving efficiency’ it would be nice to see ‘improving quality’ or something recognising that we want services to be better than they are now ... As you look at that list, it’s difficult to get excited about any of that ... ‘Ensuring front-line services can be maintained’, I mean, really? Is that the best we’re hoping for? Aren’t we hoping we can do better for people?”

- 7.29 Moreover, it was said that the inclusion of something around tackling inequality and empowering and developing resilient communities would have been prudent in light of pandemic recovery.

“I don’t think there’s anything that speaks about communities. So, nothing about resilience or empowering, or supporting local places and tackling inequalities ... I think that actually there’s a lot – especially off the back of COVID – about local places and empowering them and building resilience and that kind of agenda ...”

- 7.30 Ultimately, there was a sense that the criteria were chosen to emphasise the Councils’ financial challenges and support the need for a merger as opposed to being used to determine that it would indeed be the most appropriate and desirable way forward.

“It doesn’t sound like they’re looking into whether this is right, but they’re doing a ‘this is why we are doing this’”

“It’s not about communities or change or empowering people. That’s ‘this is what we’re trying to do to protect our two Councils, and the only way we can do that is to merge our two Councils together’”

“There’s nothing on there that stands out as ‘why’s it going to be better?’”

A new South Warwickshire District Council?

- 7.31 There was some recognition among VCS representatives that a merger could yield economies of scale and efficiencies – and potentially simplify channels of communication for those working in the sector across the two areas.

“It might reduce the multiple communication levels that we have and our needs to be very flexible and different in approaches”

“There are definite differences from the perspective of an organisation that covers the whole of Warwickshire, having fewer organisations that we have to work with ... would make it easier for us”

- 7.32 However, there were many more issues of concern raised during the group, particularly around:

The differences between the two Districts, and how to reconcile them

The potential for the dilution of service provision within a larger Council

Democratic deficit and isolation as a result of less local representation

The importance of strong relationships between Council staff and the VCS

The wellbeing of frontline staff

Council engagement with the VCS throughout the decision-making process.

Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts (and District Councils) are more different than stated

- 7.33 Taking each of these issues in turn, participants were firstly of the view that Warwick and Stratford are not as similar as is outlined in the Councils’ consultation document, neither demographically nor geographically

(with Stratford-on-Avon being much more rural and dispersed). Moreover, there is apparently a different ethos and varying ways of working within the Councils themselves, driven by a need to consider different population issues and needs.

"We'd also say that on top of the geography and demographics that a significant difference would be the population dispersal ... The needs are very different in Stratford district because of how much it costs us to meet people as opposed to meeting people who live closer together in urban settings. But also, the urban settings can generate different issues, so in a way they're almost impossible to compare ..."

"I think the ethos of the Councils is different, the issues they talk about are different, the areas of need and types of need are slightly different, and the service provision is definitely different ... they look the same on paper, but I was thinking my experience is quite different"

- 7.34 In light of this, there was a definite feeling that a merger would not be as straightforward as it may seem 'on paper'.

"I don't mean to say that bringing them together would necessarily be a bad thing ... what I'm saying is there are significant differences that might make their alignment rather difficult to negotiate"

"If people start moving around there will be a bumpy period ... we're talking about multiple departments, multiple officers, and multiple teams all coming together ... It's not going to be a simple roll-out"

The VCS has positive relationships with existing Councils and officers, and there is concern these will be lost

- 7.35 Coupled with concerns around the potential dilution of priorities and services was worry around the loss of positive relationships between existing district council officers and the VCS, and the need for proper handover of knowledge and information in the event of a merger to avoid adverse impacts on services and communities.

"... we really value the relationships that we have with our community officers and their expertise. So, whilst there's going to be cuts ... there's that recognition of the expertise that they bring, and the relationship work that they do"

"... we've worked and created really strong relationships within our areas ... I'm not saying I'm averse to [a merger] but ... having worked in two-tier council structures, relationships are quite strong, and I think people are concerned because when relationships change services can be impacted and communities can be impacted, and particular groups can be impacted ..."

"What tends to get lost is the handover of little things ... it's the knowledge that gets lost because not enough time or money is spent to make sure that handovers are correct ..."

- 7.36 Indeed, one participant with knowledge of an operational Council merger elsewhere was of the view that service provision can become less effective as officers' local knowledge and understanding becomes diluted.

“Officers have often only ever worked in one area and now they’re working in two and their knowledge base is very much based on one of those areas. So, depending on which officer ends up in post ... it really depends on that knowledge base. From our perspective it can be quite difficult to work with someone who has no idea about the area they’re working with”

- 7.37 This was echoed by several others, who offered their own experiences of service dilution as a result of centralisation.

“I think it’s really important that we think about the dilution of service. I was working ... 25-30 years ago in Stratford District Council in a small office ... and we were extremely local. We knew our area and our area knew us. Then, those small local offices closed, and everything was brought into a central area in Stratford, and people complained that they weren’t getting the service that they had been getting. I think that we were less efficient ... our communities didn’t know us, and we didn’t know our communities. This is just going to dilute everything a lot more. Having been in that situation on a much smaller scale, I worry about this merger for the communities”

“One of the things that we’ve experienced is that as you start to consolidate staff into taking on different roles ... we start to lose the specialism that some staff have ...”

“Despite some of the rhetoric that comes out with good intentions ... the reality is that services have shrivelled away back to the centre, so the tentacles aren’t in the community ... and it’s harder and harder for the most vulnerable people to get the support that they need ...”

- 7.38 Related to this, there was a fear that if job roles are combined within a new Council, the retained officers’ unconscious bias toward their own District would mean organisations in the other District would be *“battling”* for recognition and resource.

“Let’s say if it goes ahead and the retained officer represents both areas ... if that retained officer’s knowledge is of one area, then it will be a steep learning curve to understand the needs of the other area ... And our job will be almost battling or fighting for profile for the area that might lose out”

“We don’t want ... resourcing disappearing or going into single pots where decisions are made from what can be perceived as a lack of knowledge”

Communities that already feel isolated may feel even more so within a larger Council

- 7.39 It was said that Stratford-on-Avon’s more peripheral communities already feel somewhat isolated and remote from the seat of decision-making, and that this feeling would likely be magnified in the event of a merger. Indeed, there are apparently already rumours that services will be provided from Warwick in the main, and so a strong communication strategy was thought to be needed to alleviate concerns on this front.

“I think some of the communities do feel quite isolated already, especially in the south. I don’t think they really feel a part of Stratford. So, I think there are going to be some concerns ... there’s a little bit of scaremongering that all services are going to end up in Warwick, so there’s definitely work that needs to be done on sharing the communication. It’s very typical of rural areas where they think things are going to be taken further away from them because they already don’t have access or more difficult access anyway”

- 7.40 Similarly, participants felt that communities and groups currently identified as priority by existing Councils should remain so for any new authority to ensure that those in greatest need continue to receive Council services. It is also important, though, to be mindful that disadvantage can happen anywhere and so no area should be forgotten and left behind.

“In terms of areas that are identified as a priority for each of the local authorities ... would that become diluted once they come together? So, I can see that there might be certain places in each of the districts that are prioritised in terms of where they put their resources, but when that comes together, and they have to re-jig that, will those priorities remain?”

“There are areas of greatest need, or priority neighbourhoods, groups of people who essentially need additional support ... but we have to make sure that focusing on the areas where you can have the most impact doesn’t mean that other people are left without anything”

The wellbeing of frontline staff must be considered

- 7.41 The wellbeing of frontline staff was another issue of significant concern for the group, particularly with respect to increased workloads and subsequent burnout in the event of combining roles. This, it was felt, would ultimately lead to reduced community outcomes as a result of staff not working at their best.

“... One of the savings, potentially, is a reduction in staff ... [and] avoiding duplication. The danger I think with that is: does the work decrease? You’ve got the same level of work but half the resource to deal with it. I think that leads to burnout and what that leads to is the impact on the wellbeing of staff ...”

“Ultimately, it’s about the outcome to the community, isn’t it? And is that going to be diminished if the resources are less?”

- 7.42 One particular issue in relation to staff wellbeing was the expectation that a merger would mean additional travel: this has apparently been a driver for people leaving in other areas that have merged (politically and/or operationally). Indeed, those with experiences of such mergers highlighted the adverse impact they have had on staff wellbeing.

“I’ve seen some real angst in staff from the Council in Redditch and Bromsgrove and it’s not a position you’d want to put anybody in ...”

- 7.43 There was a strong sense that these 'hidden' costs of reorganisation (that is, the impact of change on motivation, mental health and wellbeing) have been somewhat ignored as a result of the focus on making financial reductions.

"It needs to be solved ... But what it does need to include is those hidden costs; personal and financial, motivation of staff, increased impact on mental health and wellbeing ... hidden costs in terms of service delivery and service quality"

The VCS should not be put under undue pressure as a result of any merger

- 7.44 There was considerable disappointment among participants that there was no mention of the VCS and its potential role within any new structure in the consultation document, and it was stressed that the VCS should not be expected to 'pick up the slack' of service provision given that it is already under considerable financial and resource pressures itself.

"I think that the voluntary sector does a significant amount of work ... we are a professional workforce that cuts across economy, housing, communities and health and wellbeing. So for us not to be recognised as part of the strategic work that's happening in the local authority probably shows that it was an accountant who wrote the documentation in terms of value"

"The assumption that the voluntary sector can just automatically pick up more and more of the heavy lifting ... that this can continue to be expanded and expanded needs to be seriously challenged"

"The pushing downstream of responsibility to the third sector will inevitably put pressure on all the things that we try to do so admirably"

- 7.45 If increasing responsibilities for providing services are to be expected of the sector then participants argue for the sector's involvement in decision-making and ongoing discussions moving forward and for proper resources to support the sector's activities on behalf of a newly formed Council.

"A strong voluntary sector brings hundreds of thousands, if not millions, into our area. So, if you're looking to save money then making sure that we're in a great place to help your residents is a great starting point. To do that, we need really good partnerships ... we need to be involved in the conversation to make the biggest difference"

"Part of me thinks that it would be really good to see leadership from the sector having a key role in this reorganisation at a senior level in terms of representing and reflecting the services in the sector. I suppose it's also about resources as it can't be done on the cheap. If the voluntary and community sector needs to play a bigger role then there's an issue about resourcing that to the satisfactory level"

- 7.46 Indeed, co-production was suggested by several participants as a means of ensuring the voluntary and community and statutory sectors can develop suitable solutions to existing and future challenges.

“Talk to the voluntary sector first and we can say ‘actually, we can help you do that better if you do this and this’. So, if they’ve got a proposal, let’s look at it together ... The only way we’re going to move forward on this and make it sustainable is by working together and communicating ...”

“There’s something about co-production in terms of having an influence at the top table, not just having it decided at the top and handed down ... making sure local knowledge and expertise, [and] understanding of the communities is fed into that process”

Positive communication is essential

- 7.47 One participant stressed that, should the merger go ahead, it will be essential that it is seen as just that - a merger - rather than a takeover of one council by the other. This, it was said, would send out a clear message that the proposed new organisation is being established to work together for the benefit of residents, and hopefully alleviate any potential resentment from the area perceived to be being taken over.

“I’ve seen it happen and it takes a long time to work through in terms of resentment and ways of working other things. That increases your hidden costs and diminishes quality of service etc. So, it’s an important consideration and sends the right message”

Alternatives?

- 7.48 Participants sought assurance that the Councils have indeed explored all avenues for operational efficiency prior to settling on a merger and its associated disruption as their preferred option.

“Before you actually work through that merger ... work through all that waste and become more efficient before you come together. If you find it produces the savings you want as an entity then you don’t have all the downsides as in additional costs, impact on staff and all the hidden costs, which are quite considerable ...”

“A lot of the things like cutting duplication, joint commissioning of services is already happening so why not bare down on those before you actually join together”

- 7.49 Indeed, when referring to the criteria discussed earlier (local public services, cost savings, value for money, stronger/accountable local leadership and medium and long-term sustainability), one participant suggested that all of these are achievable within existing structures and that:

“Presumably other councils throughout the country are doing that as we speak; not all are joining together”

Summary of key points - Voluntary and Community Sector

- **Overall support for or opposition to the proposed merger**
 - Acceptance of the need for change owing to local authorities' financial challenges
 - Not convinced of the benefits of full merger: reassurance is needed that all possible avenues have been explored for operational efficiency prior to instigating it and its associated disruption
- **Main reasons for supporting the proposed merger**
 - A merger could yield economies of scale and efficiencies
 - Could simplify communication channels between local authorities and community/voluntary sector organisations
- **Main reasons for opposing the proposed merger (also mentioned by stakeholders in support of the merger)**
 - Insufficient evidence that duplication would be eliminated to provide the level of savings proposed without radical reductions in staffing and service levels
 - The costs of reorganisation have not been accounted for in the Deloitte presentation. Neither had the 'hidden' costs of reorganisation been mentioned – the impact of change on motivation, mental health and wellbeing of staff
 - A merger would not be as straightforward as envisioned since Warwick and Stratford are not as similar as outlined in the consultation document. The geographical and demographic differences and differing local issues and needs have shaped the ethos and different ways of working between the two Councils
 - VCS should not be expected to 'pick up the slack' of any service provision given the financial and resource pressures under which they currently operate
 - Concern over a potential loss of positive working relationships with existing council officers and the VCS
 - Fear that service provision would become less effective with the dilution of officers' local knowledge and understanding or that retained officers would be unconsciously biased towards their own district
 - Communities that already feel isolated would feel more so under a larger council
 - Concern over the wellbeing of frontline staff and increased workload arising from combining roles. This would lead to reduced community outcomes
- **Suggestions**
 - A proper handover of knowledge and information at merger to avoid adverse impacts on services and communities
 - A strong communication strategy to:
 - allay residents' fears and dispel their rumours and concerns that a merger would increase their remoteness and isolation from the centre of decision making
 - provide reassurance that it would be a merger rather than a takeover and designed for the benefit of residents
 - Communities and groups currently identified as priority by existing councils should remain so under any new authority to ensure those in greatest need continue to receive council services and support
 - If more is to be expected of the VCS under the new structure, then the sector should be involved in decision making and ongoing discussions going forward. It should also receive resources to properly support its activities on behalf of the newly formed council.

8. Submissions

Introduction

- 8.1 During the formal consultation process 18 written submissions were received. The table below shows the breakdown of contributors by type.

Table 10: Summary of written submissions received

TYPE OF CORRESPONDENT	NO. RESPONSES	NAME OF ORGANISATION
Local authorities	4	North Warwickshire Borough Council Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council Rugby Borough Council Warwickshire County Council
Town and Parish Councils	9	Bishop's Tachbrook Parish Council Great Wolford Parish Council Harbury Parish Council Kenilworth Town Council Kineton Parish Council Napton on the Hill Parish Council Royal Leamington Spa Town Council Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council Tysoe Parish Council
Other organisations	5	Shakespeare's England South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust Stonewater The Stratford Society University of Warwick
TOTAL	18	

- 8.2 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. Readers are encouraged to consult the remainder of the chapter below for an account of the views expressed.

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.

Local authority submissions

North Warwickshire Borough Council

- 8.3 North Warwickshire Borough Council (NWBC)'s view is that the proposal is primarily a matter for the Elected Members and residents of Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts. It is content with the proposal given that it has been approved by Councillors at the respective Councils, but does make the following comments:

The proposal is seemingly wholly driven by the need to save money rather than as being the governance model of choice, and it would prefer local government to be funded appropriately so that such decisions are not driven by financial necessity;

It deeply values the roles of District/Borough Councils in representing meaningful places and therefore would not, in general, support larger Council arrangements. It acknowledges, however, that South Warwickshire is a definable, coherent place and that the proposal works hard to ensure the resultant Council will stay close to residents;

There is no reason why this proposal should be regarded as contrary to Government policy. The expected measures will ensure the two-tier county can work together and with Government for *“an exciting, transformative county deal which will help the county ‘Level Up’ in general but in particular help bring all areas ... closer together, given the very marked differences between South Warwickshire and North Warwickshire, Nuneaton and Bedworth and Rugby”*; and

It considers it appropriate to reflect in detail on the risks and exit strategy should councillors wish to reverse this decision.

Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council

- 8.4 Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council feels that the merits, or otherwise, of forming a South Warwickshire District Council is a matter for the elected members and residents of Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick Districts to decide upon, so long as it is strictly limited to reform at a District council level only. Hence, it makes no comment either in support of or against the proposals.

Rugby Borough Council

- 8.5 Rugby Borough Council (RBC) notes that the Councils' financial pressures and the impact of Covid have driven their elected members to pursue this option. For that reason, it considers this as a matter primarily for the elected members and residents of both districts.
- 8.6 RBC also notes that both Councils recognise the value of the role district/borough councils play at place level, including serving the local population to meet health and wellbeing needs and supporting local economic growth – and delivering on the Government's levelling up priorities. Therefore, it does not consider the proposals for a South Warwickshire District Council to be contrary to supporting the national agenda, nor does it consider the proposal to be a driver for local government reform within Warwickshire.
- 8.7 Overall, RBC confirms its support for the proposal and looks forward to working with all tiers of local government across Warwickshire and wider partners on a County Levelling Up deal.

Warwickshire County Council

- 8.8 Warwickshire County Council feels that once a submission about the merger is made to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, this will lead the Secretary of State to trigger a review of local government structures across the whole of Warwickshire. Consequently, it fully expects the Secretary of State to initiate a consultation on local government reform in Warwickshire. As such, it is considered more appropriate for Warwickshire County Council to engage when the Secretary of State consults with it following Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick's proposals for merger.

Town and Parish Council submissions

Bishop's Tachbrook Parish Council

- 8.9 Bishop's Tachbrook Parish Council (BTPC) accepts the reasoning behind the financial need for closer working between Stratford-on-Avon District Council (SDC) and Warwick District Council (WDC) from both a financial and an efficiency perspective. In addition, it accepts that, given notable inflationary pressures, the status quo is unlikely to be sustainable without both efficiency savings and increased funding to councils.
- 8.10 BTPC also notes references to further empowerment and dedicated support for parish and town councils which, it feels, may be welcomed. However, it also says that *"further detail would need to be provided and safeguards put in place to ensure that anything promised is actually delivered"*.
- 8.11 As both Councils will have different stand-out specialist officers, BTPC suggests that there is operational benefit to those specialists *"being deployed with a wider remit in a leveraged model"*. This, it is hoped, will deliver a better service for the taxpayer – for example by reducing planning permission lead times.
- 8.12 However, BTPC does not support the merger at the political level, as it believes this will result in reduced local autonomy and democratic representation, which *"is critical to the wellbeing and prosperity of an area"*. The Council says that Bishop's Tachbrook has experienced first-hand the implications of having the decisions for their community made by representatives living on the other side of the District, which has *"resulted in some poor planning decisions and a woeful level of investment in infrastructure ..."*.
- 8.13 BTPC also believes that the proposed political merger will reduce the power of residents across both Districts as the voice of their individual ward Councillors will be diluted. It says that the proposed South Warwickshire Council will not be a 'local council' which will lead to a loss of democratic accountability.
- 8.14 Ultimately, whilst BTPC feels the financial benefits of the merger are clear, it believes that such synergies could be realised through greater co-operation (and potentially integration) between both Councils at the operational level, whilst still remaining separate politically. It also says that while the benefits of working together are already being borne out in some areas and the forecast cost savings from this should be applauded, the Councils should consider how they can achieve these benefits *"whilst ensuring and enshrining the preservation of local democratic accountability for the coming decades"*.
- 8.15 Finally, BTPC notes that SDC has been under the control of one political party for most of its existence; but that WDC is presently under no overall control. It is thus considered important that the decision to merge considers the political ramifications (both short and long term) and is seen to deliver a result that does not favour any party.

Harbury Parish Council

- 8.16 Harbury Parish Council is broadly supportive of the move to merge SDC and WDC as the two areas share a similar demographic and both are characterised by a small number of larger settlements amidst a mainly rural district. Merging the two authorities will, it is said, *“encourage a more strategic and holistic approach to policy making”*. It does, though, urge that any efficiency savings made are directed towards maintaining or enhancing service provision *“and not towards tax cutting”*.

Great Wolford Parish Council

- 8.17 Great Wolford Parish Council recognises that there are advantages to combining the two Councils to deliver economies of scale and reduce duplicated costs across a wide range of services. The Council recognises and supports moves that have already been made to work together to reduce costs.
- 8.18 However, the Parish Council finds itself unable to give the proposal its full support because council tax in Stratford-on-Avon could well rise to match the levels in Warwick with no corresponding improvement in Council services. Being a rural parish some distance from the centres of population, Great Wolford is *“even less likely to see any improvements in services in our immediate area, even if council tax does rise”*.
- 8.19 The Council also feels that the projected savings of up to 3.9% of existing costs after five years seem very small and that there is a risk they may not materialise, and notes that the number of District Councillors will be reducing.

Kenilworth Town Council

- 8.20 Kenilworth Town Council (KTC) welcomes the intention that the merger "will ... make our local government more resilient and better able to help local communities tackle challenges such as the climate emergency or a future pandemic, while also continuing to improve our current services by ... enhancing local democracy by creating tailored services to support and strengthen the work of parish and town councils."
- 8.21 The Town Council says it has benefitted from support provided by WDC, and that as the scope of its obligations has expanded in recent years, the need for ongoing support from District Council officers is likely to increase. It would, therefore, like to hear more about the new *“tailored services”* which will *“strengthen the work of parish and town councils”* as set out in the case for the merger, and to receive assurances that the current level of support received will be continued under the new South Warwickshire District Council.
- 8.22 KTC also understands that there is an opportunity to consider whether some local services currently provided to Kenilworth by the District Council might be devolved, together with the funding, to the Town Council. If the merger is agreed, it would *“want to open a dialogue with both Councils to review the current range of services and look at which, if any, might be suitable for devolution”*.

Kineton Parish Council

- 8.23 Kineton Parish Council (KPC) fully understands the urgent need for both District Councils to reduce an imbalance between income and expenditure and supports the inevitable financial benefits of joint working. However, it is unable to give unreserved support to the proposal because there is limited detail available to indicate why the benefits forecast from the existing joint working arrangements will be enhanced by a total amalgamation of both District Councils. It is also far from convinced that a full merger will achieve all the financial savings forecast without a reduction in benefits and services at a town and parish council level.

- 8.24 KPC feels the consultation has been silent on the differences between the two Council areas and how they could be addressed. While the recommendation to merge is being presented as a joining of equals with each needing to make a similar level of savings, KPC says that the savings and benefits will fall disproportionately on the individual Councils. For example, if Warwick District Council (WDC)'s costs are 9% of total council tax paid compared to 8% for Stratford, then WDC's cost base is 12.5% higher – a consideration further supported by the Band D council tax charges of £149 for Stratford-on-Avon District Council and £177 for WDC.
- 8.25 Democratically, the Councils are said to be mismatched, with 110 town and parish councils in SDC but only 35 in WDC. KPC questions how the proposed new District Council would relate to and link with the disparity.
- 8.26 KPC suggests that insufficient information has been provided on the way new development needs will change and the impact of this on local communities. KPC was the first Main Rural Centre in the SDC area to establish a "made" Neighbourhood Development Plan and KPC is concerned that the policies established by this Plan will be *"significantly eroded if the merger takes place, and before any Local Plan is formally established"*.
- 8.27 In relation to planning matters, KPC notes the suggestion that merging could ensure closer working between planning officers and parish and town councils, with the potential for increased decision-making powers for those councils. It argues that such powers could be introduced without a merger and that there is no detail to explain how the costs of providing the necessary additional skills at local level would be funded and met.
- 8.28 Finally, KPC has concerns about the potential for a reduction in local services as a result of a merger and a reduction in District Council costs. It notes that the option for town and parish councils to take on the delivery of more services has been presented as a potential advantage, but with no detail to explain which services might be affected in this way or, again, how the costs of providing the necessary additional skills at local level will be funded and met.

Napton-on-the Hill Parish Council

- 8.29 Napton on the Hill Parish Council:

Can see the sense in trying to combine some services but would want to see satellite provision spread across the District in the form of 'one stop shops' or information hubs in some towns and larger villages to ensure the public still has access to information about services;

Would only support a merger if the discretionary services it is designed to protect are maintained;

Is reluctant to take on additional services as it has neither the expertise nor the staff to deliver them;

Is concerned that devolving services to parish councils would inevitably result in a precept increase shifting the financial burden of provision from central government onto council taxpayers;

Is against the idea of merging parish councils as it would result in a loss of local representation; and

Is not against the proposed merger provided it results in better services for communities.

Royal Leamington Spa Town Council

8.30 Royal Leamington Spa Town Council:

Recognises the financial and operational challenges being faced by the existing District Councils and the potential implications for service delivery;

Acknowledges that there may be benefits from a new Council operating at a larger scale, but emphasises the need to maintain local dialogue and capacity to engage at the local level;

Welcomes the recognition of the importance of engaging with town and parish councils, both in the lead up to any new Council being created and subsequently;

Requests that capacity to deliver events and projects in Leamington Spa is considered and maintained;

Requests that the implications of a potential reduction in the number of District Councillors is considered carefully, including through dialogue with town and parish councils;

Requests that local governance and decision-making processes are considered, to support partnership working and engagement of local organisations and communities;

Would welcome further dialogue to explore the opportunities for services to be passed down to the Town Council, subject to adequate funding being made available.

Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council

8.31 Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council:

Supports cost-saving by sharing jobs and sees merit in sharing services;

Feels there would be a democratic deficiency if wards were increased, impacting negatively on localism;

Questions what additional costs and responsibilities, if any, will be handed down to town and parish councils;

Suggests that one unitary council for Warwickshire would be far too large and would impact on local democracy, but that splitting the area into two - with a southern and northern unitary authority - may address this imbalance, *“which would do away with the need for district councils”*; and

Feels that unitary authorities remain ‘the elephant in the room’ and that *“a merger to get a super district on the way to perhaps getting something else (unitary) is not the answer”*

8.32 Overall, the Town Council finds *“the consultation lacks clarity, is confusing and there is concern over the transparency of its compilation”*. It also feels that if the status-quo is not on the table, any merger should safeguard local democracy at its grassroots.

Tysoe Parish Council

8.33 Tysoe Parish Council (TPC) very reluctantly supports the proposed merger but only as a steppingstone to a unitary council for South Warwickshire. TPC finds the forecast savings of £10 million per annum to be non-credible, especially at a cost of only £600,000 over three years. Its view is that these savings will not be realised and that only by progressing to a unitary council will substantial savings be made.

- 8.34 TPC is also very concerned by the likely reduction in District Councillor numbers as a result of the merger, which will lead to diluted representation for residents. TPC also believes that some services will be delegated to town and parish councils, who are *“ill-equipped to carry out such services”*. It also says that *“by making the town and parish councils service providers they will eventually become politicised; a step that ... must be avoided”*.
- 8.35 TPC’s reluctant support of the merger is driven by its belief that a ‘do nothing’ option does not exist and that *“if no action is taken one or both of the District Councils will become insolvent, something that must be avoided”*.

Other organisations’ submissions

Shakespeare’s England

- 8.36 Shakespeare’s England fully supports the proposed South Warwickshire District Council from its *“unique position”* of, to all intents and purposes, having worked with both SDC and WDC as if they were one body since 2011.
- 8.37 Close collaboration between the District Councils and Shakespeare’s England has meant that decisions pertaining to South Warwickshire’s visitor economy have been taken with the whole of South Warwickshire in mind, as opposed to one geographical area *“trying to out-do another in attracting visitors”*. It is said that visitors have no concern for boundaries, and that *“it makes the job ... far easier if [we] can ... suggest products based on the client’s needs and not have to be restricted by boundaries on a map”*.
- 8.38 Shakespeare’s England says that it has achieved this successfully over the last few years and pre-pandemic were attracting 10.6m visitors to South Warwickshire. However, it also says there will always be slightly varying priorities when dealing with two separate authorities, even in close partnership – and that bringing the two together will *“only ever be seen as a positive move”*.
- 8.39 Finally, Shakespeare’s England feels there will be many challenges ahead post-pandemic, one of which will be offering a sustainable carbon neutral product, as well as one that is accessible to all. Both of these are apparently high on the agendas of SDC and WDC currently and *“working together as a single unitary can only make the delivery of these goals more achievable in a shorter time frame”*.

South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust

- 8.40 South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust (SWFT) says that as NHS legislative changes progress through Parliament it, in its work to align NHS Organisations into Place-based working, has *“benefited from strong engagement and guidance from Warwick and Stratford-on-Avon District Councils acting as one voice”*. This has given the Trust *“insight into how a South Warwickshire Council would operate in connecting with and delivering deeper NHS connections within South Warwickshire Place”*.
- 8.41 For SWFT, this is an important development as it is working on a planning assumption that 80% of NHS services will be planned and delivered locally in South Warwickshire by NHS Trusts and Primary Care. It feels that the proposal to merge and create a South Warwickshire District Council demonstrates evidence of a credible geography and aligns with the Trust objective of *“serving our communities and working collaboratively with partners to improve Health and Wellbeing of our South Warwickshire population”*. The Trust also sees this move as an opportunity for even closer alignment with colleagues at Warwickshire County Council.

8.42 In conclusion, SWFT recognises the drivers for change and supports a formal merger.

Stonewater

8.43 Stonewater (which manages and owns 329 homes in Stratford-on-Avon District and 828 homes in Warwick District) supports the proposal to merge the two Councils and understands the rationale. It feels that *“the demographics and geography of both districts are similar enough that this would be sensible”*.

8.44 Stonewater does raise a couple of issues of concern though, as follows:

When advertising properties in Stratford-on-Avon District, it is currently only provided with one nomination at a time rather than the entire shortlist. If this nomination fails, the team then has to wait for the next one to come through which can cause delays in filling vacant homes. In Warwick it receives the full list, but often it can take a while to come through. Letting properties in a timely manner is a significant KPI for Stonewater and so its housing management team would welcome the opportunity to work with the Councils' housing teams both before and after any merger to find a positive solution to ensuring that homes can be filled quickly; and

There are a small number of schemes in Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick that have anti-social behaviour issues, and Stonewater would like to understand how the merger would affect the working of the Community Safety and Domestic Abuse services within the area and would like to work closely with the Councils' teams to make sure the transition is seamless.

The Stratford Society

8.45 The Stratford Society recognises that financial pressures have become so strong that a merger needs to be considered as an essential means to protect and support local services. It also feels there might be other benefits given the geographical cohesion of the two authorities and their common interest in the business, cultural and tourist economy. It is said that *“South Warwickshire as a unit has a defensible identity and a sound basis for future administrative reform”*.

8.46 However, though the Society considers the principle to be a good one, it is not without consequences – for example:

Will local interests, discrete to individual towns or localities, be prejudiced, particularly in the context of planning?

Have the Councils looked at how they are to be protected by the administrative and decision-making systems they will set up?

Have the financial consequences of a merger been fully researched and explored, as *“there have been too many examples of reform in different areas of public life based on financial assumptions which prove not to be accurate”*.

8.47 The Society concludes that though the principle of merging is endorsed, it should be pursued only after all possible issues have been fully explored. However, it feels that the consultation gives no indication that they have or will be inasmuch as *“a decision to proceed is to be taken in December only after a consultation that closed at the end of October, which leaves scant time for this critical exercise to be done”*.

University of Warwick

8.48 The University of Warwick sees a unified South Warwickshire as hugely advantageous to the people and communities of the area and to the interests of the University. It is very happy to support the preferred approach to create a new single District Council for South Warwickshire because:

Its estates and wide-ranging activities span the length of both Districts;

Both Districts perform extremely well in terms of Gross Value Added and are home to many innovative firms – and there is an extremely strong cultural offer and a high quality of life. Taken together, this *“presents a strong narrative to celebrate the combined area”*;

The proposed Council would be one of the largest in the country in terms of population and economy and cover many of the cultural strengths of the region, which would amplify its influence for the benefit of both districts;

Activities such as the Local Plan and Economic Strategy are already under joint development; and

In light of the significant financial challenges facing local councils and the potential for shared activities, it recognises the opportunity to increase efficiency.

8.49 The University says it will continue to offer support through its research, innovation and skills offers; through business support and encouraging start-ups; and through cultural engagement. At the same time, it feels there are opportunities to align further, such as tackling the climate emergency and health and social inequalities – issues that benefit from working in close partnership.

Summary of key points

➤ Overall support for or opposition to the proposed merger

- General recognition of the need for change to meet financial challenges and protect services
- Status quo generally considered unsustainable
- Ten submissions were in support of the proposed merger (Rugby Borough Council; Harbury Parish Council; Kenilworth Town Council; Napton-on-the-Hill Parish Council; Tysoe Parish Council; Shakespeare's England; South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust; Stonewater; The Stratford Society; University of Warwick)
- Three submissions were opposed to the proposed merger (Bishop's Tachbrook Parish Council [though it was supportive of a merger at an operational level], Great Wolford Parish Council; Kineton Parish Council)
- Five submissions were neutral or non-committal about the proposed merger (North Warwickshire Borough Council, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council; Warwickshire County Council; Royal Leamington Spa Town Council; Stratford-Upon-Avon Town Council)

➤ Main reasons for supporting the proposed merger

- Recognition of the financial and operational challenges faced by the District Councils and the potential implications for service delivery
- Protection of local services (the support of some was conditional on this)
- Economies of scale and reduced duplication
- More resilient local government
- South Warwickshire is a definable, coherent place and the two Districts share a similar demographic and geography
- A more strategic approach to policy making and working with partners in e.g., health and tourism
- Does not undermine the 'levelling-up' agenda
- Potentially enhanced role for town and parish councils (providing it is accompanied by adequate support and resource)
- Larger Council would have greater influence regionally and nationally
- Supported ONLY as a steppingstone to a unitary council for South Warwickshire by one contributor

➤ Main reasons for opposing the proposed merger (also raised as concerns by several of those generally in support of it)

- Reduced local autonomy and democratic representation/accountability
- More remote governance and decision-making processes
- Potential political ramifications (i.e., Stratford is a stable Conservative area, whereas Warwick is more liable to change)
- Potential for council tax rises in Stratford-on-Avon District (with no corresponding improvement in council services)
- Scepticism that forecast savings are achievable
- Many stated benefits can be achieved without full political merger
- Lack of detail on the support that might be offered to town and parish councils in the event of service devolution (which in itself is not desired by some)

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