



**A SINGLE DISTRICT-LEVEL
COUNCIL FOR WEST SUFFOLK:
AN INDEPENDENT SURVEY OF
RESIDENTS**

AUGUST 2017

Forest Heath & St Edmundsbury councils

West Suffolk
working together

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METHODOLOGY NOTE



Objectives

The key aims of this research are to understand the views of adults in the Forest Heath District and St Edmundsbury Borough Council areas about:

- The proposal to create a new single District-level Council for both areas;
- Current concerns and perceived benefits of the proposed creation of a new single District-level Council for West Suffolk; and
- Residents' priorities and objectives for local government in their area.



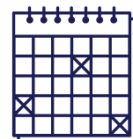
Method

ComRes interviewed 1,001 adults aged 18+ living in West Suffolk by telephone. All respondents were eligible to vote in Council elections in either Forest Heath District Council or St Edmundsbury Borough Council areas.

ComRes set quotas by Council area and surveyed 400 adults in Forest Heath and 600 in St Edmundsbury, in line with the relative electorate sizes of the two areas.

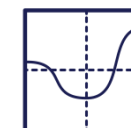
Findings marked with an asterisk () indicates a low base size of less than 100. These results are indicative of the group tested, rather than representative, and should be treated with caution. This includes results on age and ethnic minority groups (BAME), and some filtered responses.*

With an electorate size of c. 123,000 across both Council areas, the margin of error on results at a 95% confidence level is ± 3.09 . Differences of less than this should be treated as indicative.



Fieldwork dates

Fieldwork was conducted between 30th June and 24th July 2017.



Interpretation

Data have been weighted to be representative of adults across West Suffolk living in Forest Heath District and St Edmundsbury Borough Councils by:

- Age
- Gender
- Council area (FHDC/SEBC)
- Ward
- Socio-economic grade (SEG)
- Ethnicity

Quotas were also set to ensure a good spread of responses by working status (economically active vs economically inactive).

Data were weighted using ONS census data and council electoral register and ward-level data.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A MAJORITY OF ADULTS IN WEST SUFFOLK ARE FAVOURABLE TOWARDS THE PROPOSAL TO CREATE A NEW SINGLE DISTRICT-LEVEL COUNCIL

Half (50%) of adults in West Suffolk say they have heard of the proposal to create a new single District-level Council for West Suffolk. While awareness is somewhat mixed, when provided with brief information about the proposal, a majority of local adults say they are favourable towards it – more than three times the proportion who say they are unfavourable (65% v 19%). When provided with further information on the proposal and its impact, residents are marginally more likely to be both favourable and unfavourable than before (70% and 22% respectively). These results show that a majority of adults in West Suffolk are favourable towards the proposal, although there remains a small proportion who are unfavourable.

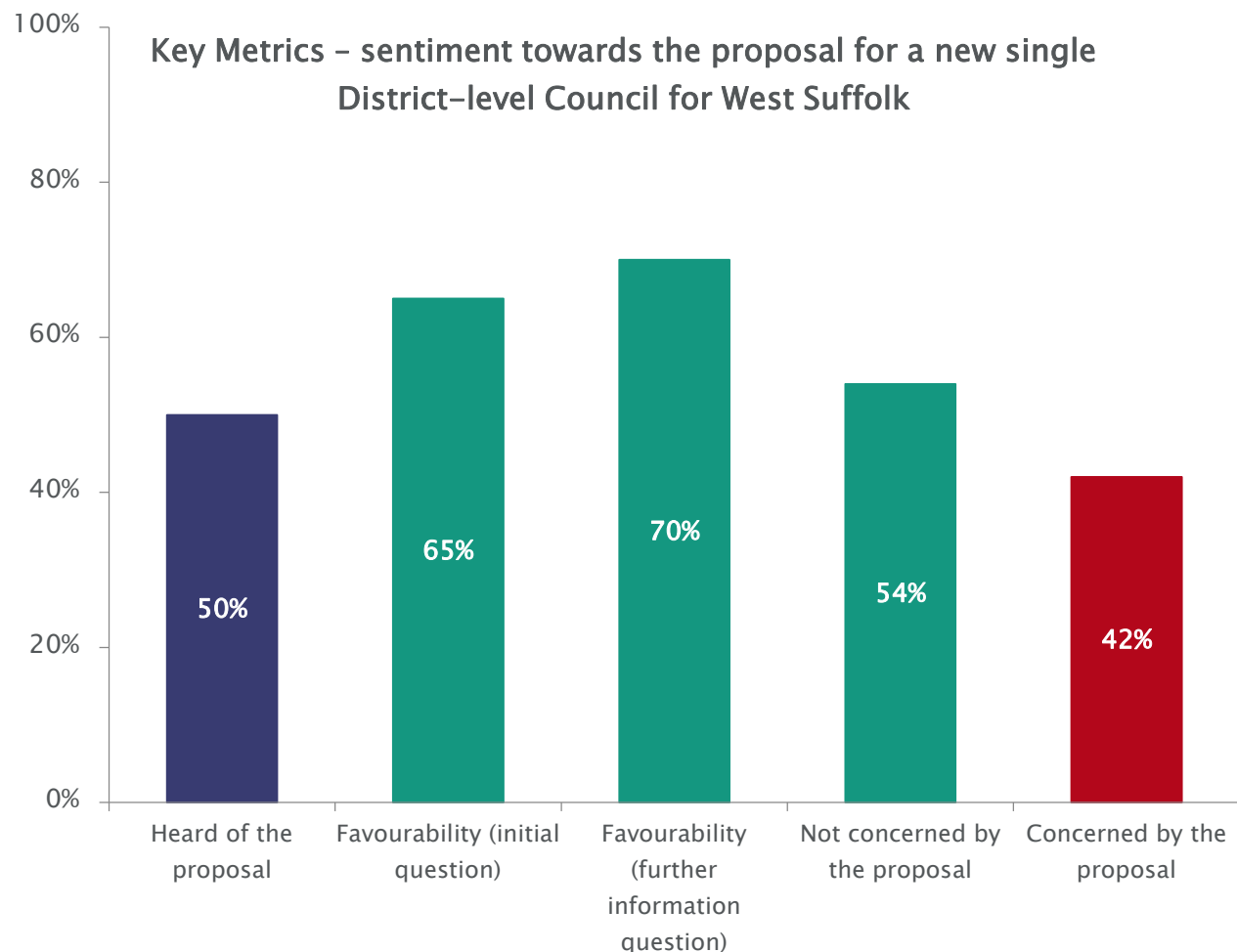
CONTINUING THE DELIVERY OF IMPORTANT SERVICES TO LOCAL PEOPLE IS SEEN TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT OBJECTIVE FOR THE NEW COUNCIL

Almost all residents (97%) surveyed say it will be important for the new single District-level Council to continue the delivery of important services to local people, with around nine in ten (88%) saying this is very important – the most of any objective tested. While a large majority say each objective listed is important to them, local adults are least likely to say that delivering further efficiency savings to the Councils' budget of around £800,000 a year is important. These differences provide useful insight into the strategic priorities for the Councils, with the delivery of services and Council planning seen to be more important to local residents than improvements to efficiency and political decision-making, although it should be noted that these factors are inherently linked.

A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF COUNCILLORS IS NOT SEEN TO BE CONTROVERSIAL

A majority of adults in West Suffolk say they are not concerned with the proposal to create a new single District-level Council (54%). Around two in five express concerns with it (42%). Of those who say they are concerned, these tend to centre around a loss of 'local voices' being heard, a perceived lack of political accountability, and the perception that the delivery of services that are already stretched will be negatively affected.

KEY FINDINGS DASHBOARD



Importance of the Council achieving its stated strategic objectives for a new Council *Percentage selecting 'Important'*

Continue the delivery of important services to local people (97%)

Allow the Council to better plan for the future, including a long-term plan for improving the local economy and housing (93%)

Ensure the new Council is better equipped to meet the future challenges facing local government, such as an ageing population, and a reduction in funding from central government in Westminster (90%)

Strengthen West Suffolk's political voice in the region and nationally, while remaining small enough to support local people (87%)

Simplify Council decision-making while still keeping offices across both areas (85%)

Deliver further efficiency savings in the Councils' budget of around eight-hundred thousand pounds a year (81%)

Main concerns about the proposal (among those who express concerns)

1. Loss of local voices and priorities: Less personal and connected with local areas, including rural areas
2. Stretched services not being delivered: The Council taking on too much, harder to access services
3. Loss of political accountability: Power becoming too centralised
4. Lack of understanding of the area: Less personal engagement from the Council and knowledge of local concerns

**AWARENESS AND
SENTIMENT TOWARDS A
NEW SINGLE DISTRICT-
LEVEL COUNCIL**

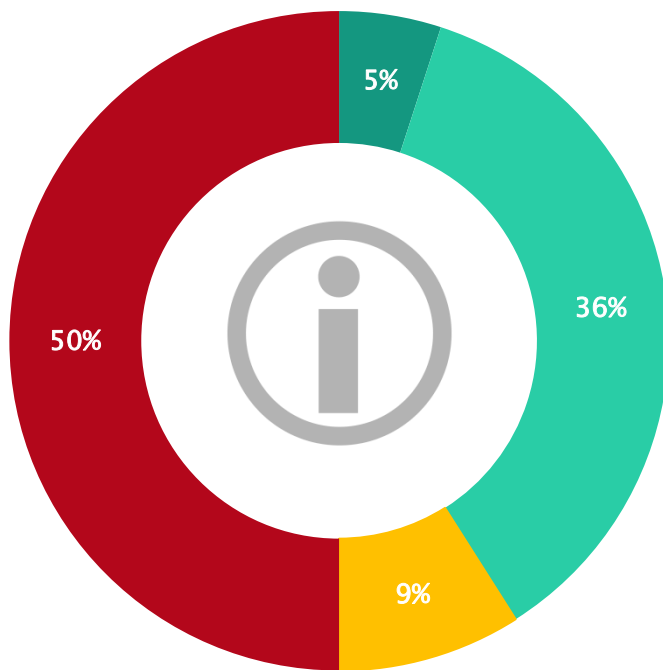


HALF OF ALL RESIDENTS IN WEST SUFFOLK SAY THEY HAVE HEARD OF THE PROPOSAL TO CREATE A SINGLE DISTRICT-LEVEL COUNCIL FOR WEST SUFFOLK

Awareness of proposed creation of a single District-level Council for West Suffolk

Showing % aware of proposal

- Heard of and know a lot about it
- Heard of and know a little about it
- Heard of but know nothing about it
- Never heard of it



<p>NET: No knowledge 59%</p>	<p>NET: Heard of 50%</p>	<p>NET: Knowledge of 41%</p>
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Half of all residents living in West Suffolk say they have heard of the proposal to create a single District-level Council for West Suffolk (50%), and 50% say they have never heard of it.

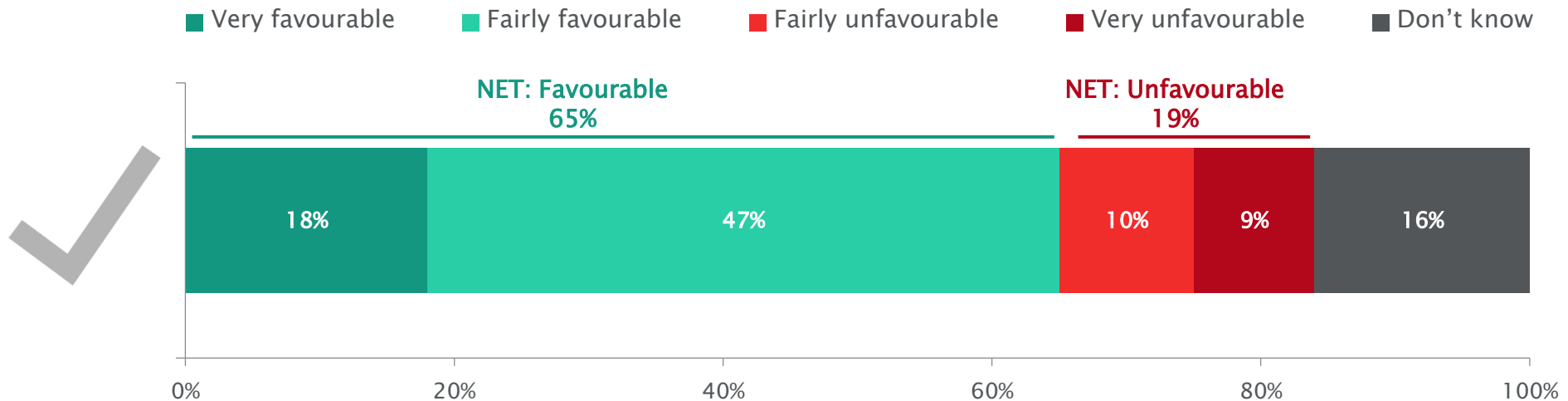
Two in five (41%) residents say they have heard of and know at least a little about the proposals, with 5% saying they know a lot about it.

Levels of knowledge vary among particular sub-groups:

- Older residents aged 55+ (51%) are significantly more likely to report knowledge of the proposals than those aged 18-34 and 35-54 (32% and 38% respectively).
- Adults from social grades ABC1 are more likely to report knowledge of the proposals than those in the C2DE grades (46% v 36%).

TWO THIRDS OF ADULTS ARE FAVOURABLE TOWARDS THE PROPOSED CREATION OF A SINGLE DISTRICT-LEVEL COUNCIL FOR WEST SUFFOLK

Favourability towards the proposed creation of a single District-level Council for West Suffolk



When provided with some brief information about the proposed creation of a new single District-level Council for West Suffolk, a majority of adults say they are favourable towards the proposal (65%) – more than three times the proportion who say they are unfavourable (19%). At the same time, similar proportions of residents say they are very favourable as say they are unfavourable overall (18% v 19%).

While a majority say they are favourable towards the proposal (65%), one in five local adults (19%) say they are unfavourable, and a further 16% say they don't know how they feel towards it.

Favourability does not differ significantly by sub-group, with at least three in five adults in each demographic (age, gender, social grade, ethnicity and working status) saying they are favourable towards the proposal.

Awareness of the proposal is not linked to favourability; a similar proportion of those who have heard of, and never heard of it, say they are favourable towards it (66% and 63% respectively). As such, initial impressions of the proposed creation of a new single District-level Council for West Suffolk are largely positive, no matter the level of knowledge local residents have of it.

IMPACT OF THE CHANGES TO THE DISTRICT COUNCILS

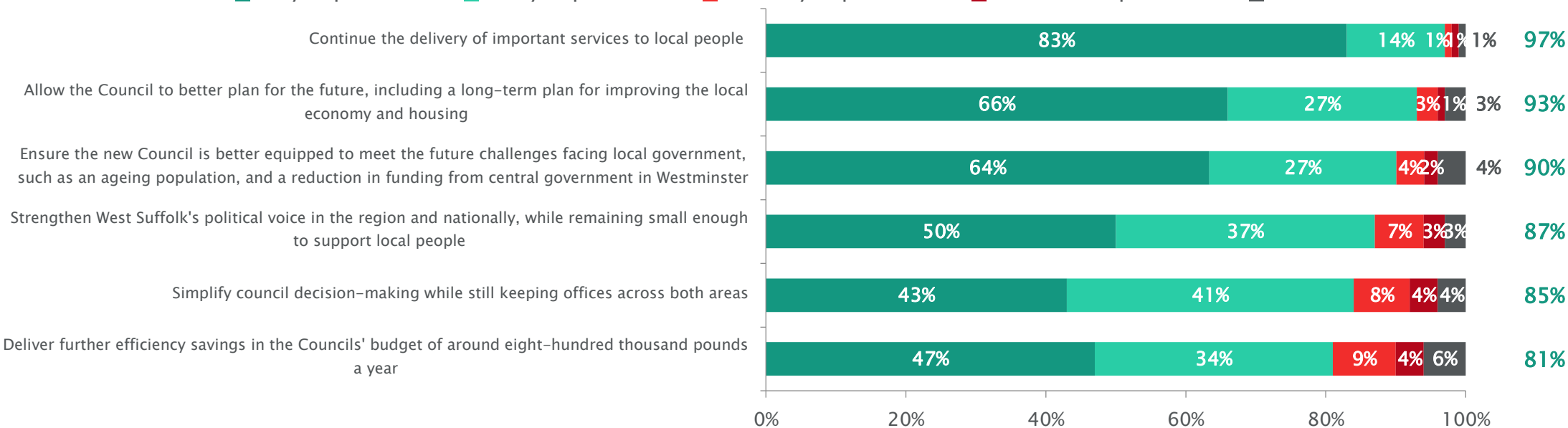


CONTINUING THE DELIVERY OF IMPORTANT SERVICES TO LOCALS IS SEEN TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT OBJECTIVE FOR THE NEW SINGLE DISTRICT-LEVEL COUNCIL

Importance of achieving set objectives through the creation of a single District-level Council

Very important Fairly important Not very important Not at all important Don't know

NET:
Important



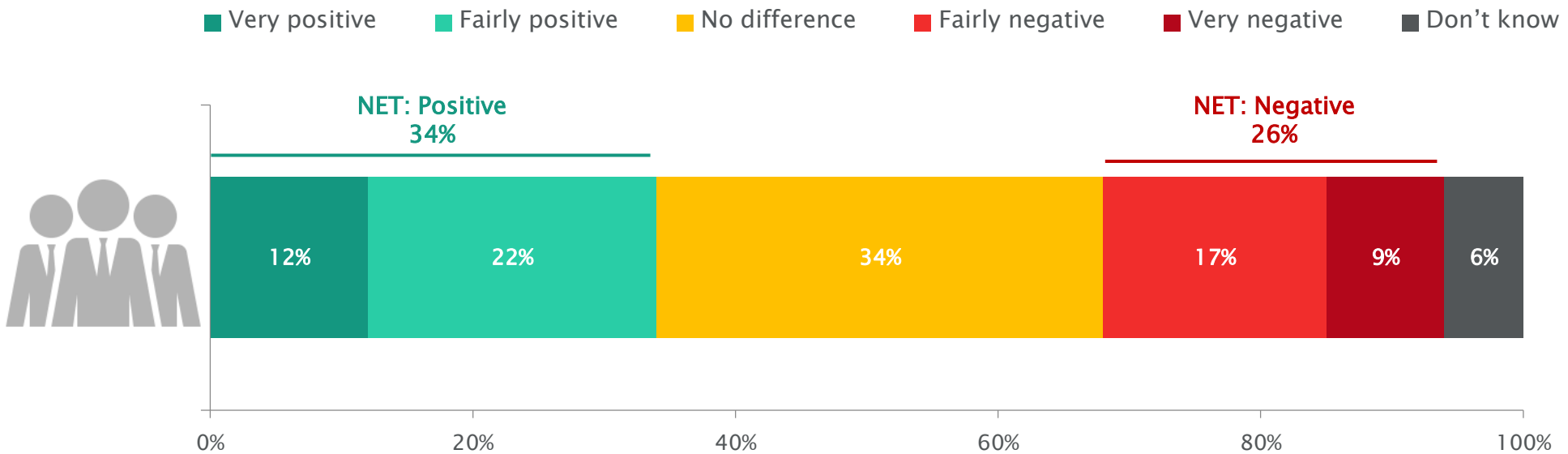
At least four in five adults say that it will be important for the new single District-level Council to meet each of the listed objectives. Nearly all adults in West Suffolk say that it is important that the new Council continues the delivery of important services to local people (97%). Indeed, more than four in five say this is very important (83%).

At least nine in ten adults say that allowing the council to better plan for the future, or ensuring the new council is better equipped to meet the future challenges facing local government is an important objective for it to achieve (93% and 90% say this respectively). Almost nine in ten (87%) residents say that strengthening West Suffolk's political voice in the region and nationally is an important objective to achieve – particularly relevant given central government focus on devolution over the past few years. Despite four in five adults saying that delivering further efficiency savings in the budget of around £800,000 per year is important (81%), it is rated the lowest of all the objectives listed. In fact, 13% say this is not important. However, efficiency and the savings they may produce are generally linked to Council's ability to deliver services, as more money or capacity tends to become available in the Council.

While all of the objectives tested are seen as important, there is a slight delineation between those that focus on the planning and delivery of Council services, and those focusing on efficiency and political decision-making, which are less likely to be seen as very important. These results provide a useful outline for priorities for the Councils.

A MAJORITY OF LOCAL ADULTS THINK THAT A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF COUNCILLORS WILL HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT OR MAKE NO DIFFERENCE TO HOW THE NEW COUNCIL IS RUN

Positivity/negativity relating to a reduction in the number of Councillors

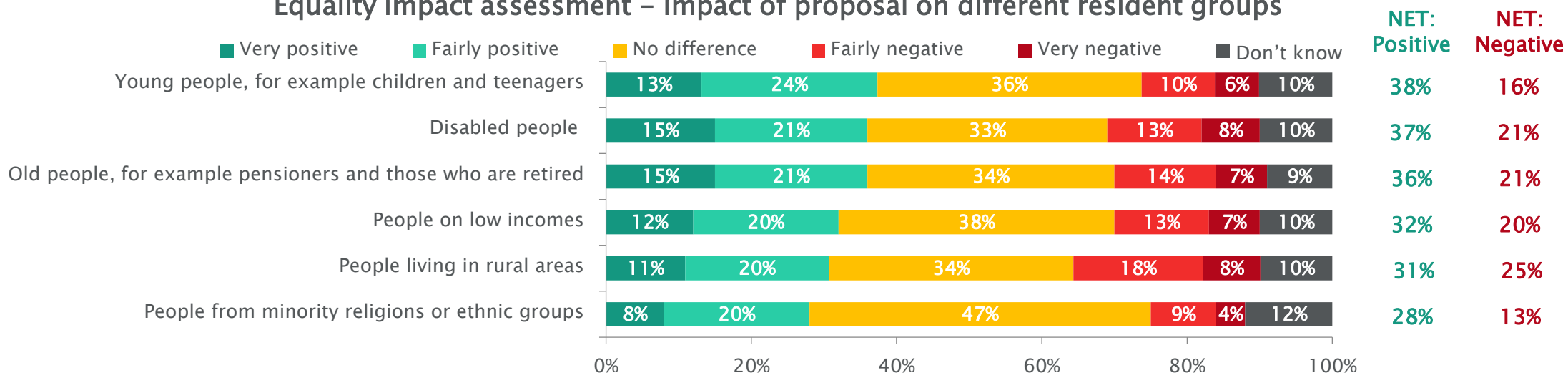


When asked what impact they think a reduction in the overall number of Councillors will have on how the new single Council is run, local residents appear to be divided. Similar proportions say it will make no difference or say it will have a positive impact (34% each), and a slightly lower proportion say it will have a negative impact (26%).

Residents who say they are initially favourable (when first asked) towards the proposal are significantly more likely to be positive towards this reduction in councillors than those who say they are unfavourable (39% v 19%). Indeed, those who are unfavourable are far more likely to say this will have a negative impact (51% v 19%).

THE PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE COUNCIL ARE GENERALLY SEEN AS HAVING A POSITIVE OR NEUTRAL IMPACT ON EACH GROUP TESTED

Equality impact assessment – impact of proposal on different resident groups



When asked about the impact a new Council would have on particular demographic groups, local adults are more likely to say this would be positive than negative upon each. In addition, at least a third say that the impact of the proposal will no difference to any of the demographic groups tested. These results suggest that the changes to the Council are generally seen to have a largely positive or neutral impact on these different demographic groups.

There are no significant differences by demographic sub-group, with similar proportions of young and old people alike saying that the impact of the proposed changes will be positive on each. For example, 41% each of 18–34 year olds and those aged 55+ say the impact of the changes will be positive for young people.

A majority of residents say that the proposal will not have a negative impact on any of the groups tested (63% say none of the groups tested will be negatively impacted by the creation of a single District-level Council for West Suffolk). However, it should also be noted that just less than half say the same about the proposal having a positive impact (at least 45% say each of the groups tested will not be positively impacted by the creation of a single District-level Council for West Suffolk).

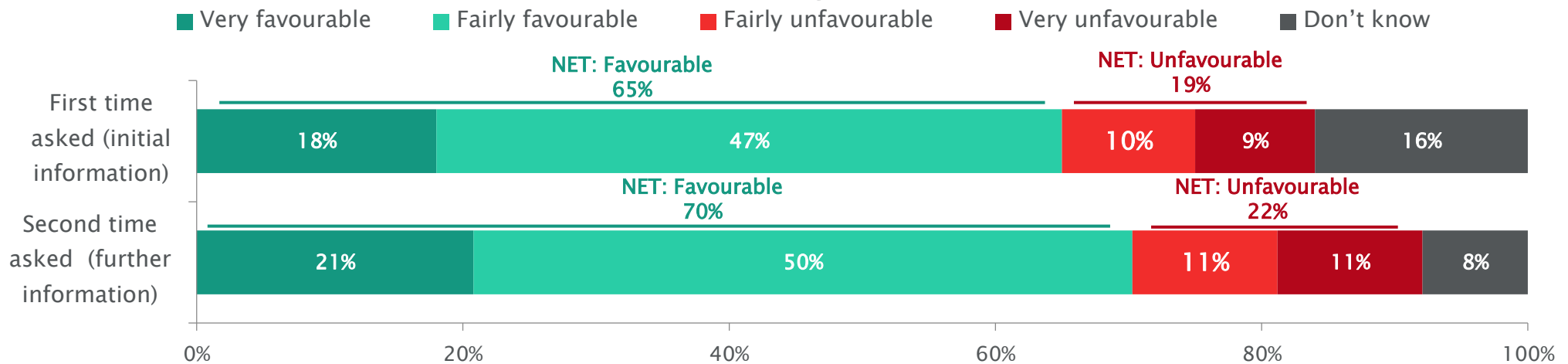
Three in ten adults say that people living in rural areas will be positively impacted by the proposed creation of a single District-level Council for West Suffolk (31%), with a further third saying this will make no difference (34%). However, a quarter (25%) say that people living in rural areas will be negatively impacted by this – the highest negative rating of all groups tested. Despite this, there are no significant differences between adults in each respective Council area, with the exception of references to disabled people, where residents in Forest Heath are marginally more likely than those in St Edmundsbury to say the changes will have a negative impact on this group (25% v 19%).

**SENTIMENT TOWARDS A
NEW SINGLE DISTRICT-
LEVEL COUNCIL: FURTHER
INFORMATION QUESTION**



RESIDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO SAY THEY ARE FAVOURABLE TOWARDS THE PROPOSALS WHEN ASKED AGAIN; AN INCREASE OF 5 PERCENTAGE POINTS, FROM 65% TO 70%

Favourability towards the proposed creation of a single District Council for West Suffolk – revisited



As part of this telephone research, respondents were provided with an overview of the proposal to create a new single District-level Council for West Suffolk, and were asked to share their views. Having been given further information on the strategic objectives, impact, and potential benefits and drawbacks of the new Council, respondents were asked to share their views towards the proposal again.

After being provided with further information, overall favourability increases by 5 percentage points to 70%. However, the proportion saying they are unfavourable also increases slightly by 3 percentage points to 22%. Proportionately, the numbers saying they are favourable and unfavourable have increased by a similar amount, as fewer adults say they don't know.

However, half of those who said they didn't know how they felt towards the proposal when asked initially, say they are favourable when asked again (51%), compared to 15% of those who said they didn't know and then say they are unfavourable. A third continue to be unsure and say they don't know when asked again (34%).

In addition, almost all respondents who said they were favourable towards the proposal when asked earlier in the survey remain favourable (90%), with one in five who were unfavourable saying they are favourable when asked again (20%). In comparison, three quarters who said they were unfavourable remain sure in their sentiment (77% say unfavourable when asked again).

Proportionately, the number of residents saying they are favourable and unfavourable has increased by the same amount in both Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury. Favourability increases by 5 points and 6 points respectively (to 65% and 74%), and the proportion saying they are unfavourable increases by 2 points each (to 26% in Forest Heath and 19% in St Edmundsbury).

Q4/9. In general/ Based on everything we have discussed so far today and having heard the various benefits and concerns, to what extent are you favourable or unfavourable towards the proposed creation of a single District Council for West Suffolk? Base: all respondents (n=1,001). *Full wording of the information provided in the survey is included in the questionnaire.

SENTIMENT AND
PRIORITIES GOING
FORWARD

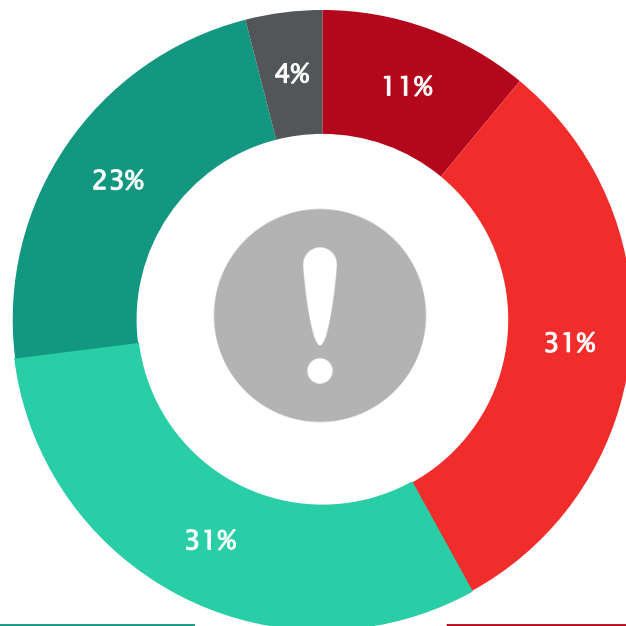


A MAJORITY OF ADULTS SAY THEY ARE NOT CONCERNED ABOUT THE PROPOSAL TO CREATE A SINGLE DISTRICT-LEVEL COUNCIL FOR WEST SUFFOLK

Concern about the proposal to create a single District-level Council for West Suffolk

Showing % concern about proposal

■ Very concerned ■ Fairly concerned ■ Not very concerned
■ Not at all concerned ■ Don't know



NET: Not concerned
54%

NET: Concerned
42%

A majority (54%) of local residents in West Suffolk say they are not concerned about the proposal to create a new single District-level Council (31% say they are not very concerned and 23% say they are not at all concerned).

However, two in five residents in West Suffolk say they are concerned about the proposal (42%), with one in nine (11%) saying they are very concerned.

There is a difference between age groups in their level of concern over the proposal. Among 18–34 and 35–54 year olds, more than half say they are not concerned about the creation of a single district-level council (57% and 58% respectively).

OF THOSE WHO EXPRESS SOME CONCERNS, THESE CONCERNS RELATE TO MEASURES WHICH WOULD REDUCE THE NUMBER OF COUNCILLORS AND THE LOSS OF 'LOCAL VOICES'

Unprompted concerns about the proposed creation of a single District-level Council for West Suffolk



Loss of local voices and priorities

"Fewer councillors in a bigger area of governance will mean it's less personal and there are fewer people for local issues. They might be less able to maintain a connection with the localities."

"You'll lose the local voice as the area will be bigger."



Stretched services not being delivered

"I think the main thing is that the resources continue to be stretched. Also the decision-making people might not have an idea of issues in the area, as both areas are drastically different. Public transport is a big issue and is dire now."

"I think the main thing is that the resources continue to be stretched."



The loss of political accountability

"That it becomes too big and doesn't listen to the smaller communities or people in rural areas. They need to remain accountable."

"I'm worried about people with little political power – it'll be harder getting their voices heard. There will be less accountability."



Councillors not understanding area

"How can you deal with individual people if you are not in the area?"

"It will take away the localness of the councils and their local knowledge of the area."

Of those residents who say they are concerned about the creation of a single district-level council for West Suffolk, the most common response related to a concern for the lack of a 'local' voice amongst councillors and was cited by a large proportion. Some residents see the centralisation of services and a reduction in councillors as worrying, owing to the fact they think that very local concerns would no longer be a priority. This concern about a reduction in council capacity is further demonstrated with some of these residents showing apparent unease with their belief that already stretched services may not be delivered efficiently.

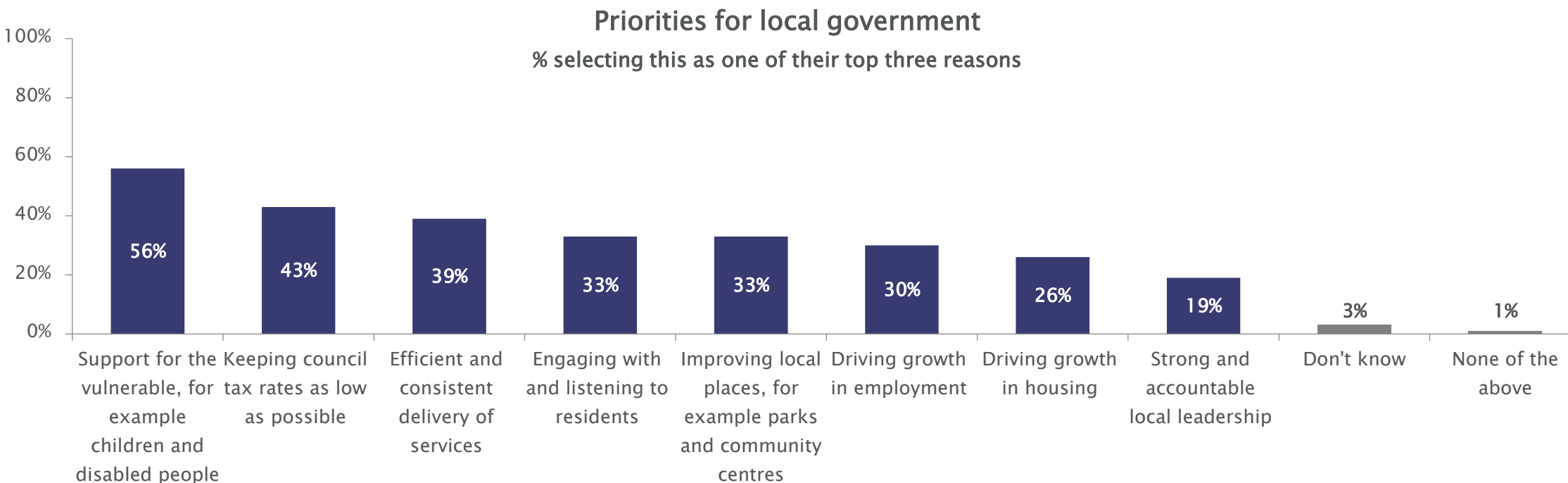
Similarly, some respondents express concern over a loss of accountability if the new single district-level council loses its 'local voice'. This reflects on the first point of the concern that the council will centralise too much and move away from truly 'local' decision making. However, this was not seen as being as primary a concern compared to the perceived centralisation of services.

Additionally, residents continue the theme of locality with perceived worries over how any new councillors will be able to deal with issues arising many miles away from the areas they represent. Similarly to the point raised about the potential loss of a 'voice' at a very local level, some residents say they do not understand how a councillor from one area may be able to address concerns in another Council area.

**PRIORITIES FOR LOCAL
GOVERNMENT IN WEST
SUFFOLK**



SUPPORTING VULNERABLE RESIDENTS AND LOW COUNCIL TAX ARE MOST LIKELY TO BE SEEN AS IMPORTANT PRIORITIES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT



Supporting the vulnerable and keeping the rate of council tax low are seen as the most important priorities for local government more generally (56% & 43% respectively). The least most supported option is strong and accountable local leadership (19%) – suggesting that for residents of Forest Heath District and St Edmundsbury Borough Councils, measures that directly influence service provision are seen as most important.

Engagement with and listening to residents is significantly more important to older residents than it is to their younger counterparts; 38% of those aged 55+ say this, compared to 30% & 31% aged 18–34 & 35–54 respectively. This priority amongst older residents may also help to explain the fact there are higher levels of concern over the creation of a single district-level council (48% among 55+ v 39% 18–34s and 38% 35–54s).

For those in social groups C2 & DE, keeping the council tax rate as low as possible is seen as much more of a priority than for those in groups AB & C1 (50% vs 37%), this could be due to the fact any change in the tax rate will have more impact on those on lower incomes.

A MAJORITY OF RESIDENTS ARE POSITIVE TOWARDS THEIR LOCAL AREA, WITH VERY FEW CITING ANY DISLIKES ABOUT THEIR AREA

Most common likes – unprompted



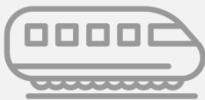
Quiet/
community
driven



Amenities



Safe / low crime
rates



Good regional
transport links

Most common dislikes – unprompted

When asked what they like least about living in their local area, a majority of residents say they are broadly happy and have no negative feedback at this question.



Traffic



Local transport/
infrastructure



Upkeep of area /
waste
management

“Quiet, nice, not too busy – nice community.”

“The park, the library, the doctor’s surgery. There are various local amenities and they’re well looked after.”

“It’s comfortable, nice countryside, main roads to go to London, it’s a convenient place, there isn’t a lot of crime and it’s clean.”

“I have been here for years. It is friendly and has good transport links. It was good for schooling when my children were young.”

When residents in Forest Heath District Council and St. Edmundsbury Borough Council are asked about what they like most about living in their local area, many reflect positively on the peaceful aspects of living where they do, as well as the active community. This is in addition to positive opinions of well-serviced local amenities, low crime rates and the good transport links the area has to other places – particularly Bury and Cambridge.

Contrasting this, when residents are asked what they least like, many residents state they are broadly happy where they live and don’t dislike anything, and do not provide a response. Where residents do have issues, these are related more towards issues with local infrastructure and transport, or relate to areas not within the remit of the Borough or District Councils; including a lack of area upkeep in conjunction with waste collection, poor road networks and issues with traffic in the towns. These issues are in some cases reflected in concern over large housing developments within the area.

“At the moment, there are no shops – the town centre is not up to scratch. St Edmundsbury gets all the perks, not Haverhill (where I live). I would like the town centre to be made better, as we go out to shop.”

“Traffic and too many roadworks. The infrastructure of the town. No regular buses.”

“Lack of transport and lack of good Wi-Fi and infrastructure.”

“They need to work on the upkeep of the play areas. Recycling is always a mess at the supermarket so we have to go to the tip.”

FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS



LEAFLETS OR NEWSPAPERS PROVE TO BE THE MOST POPULAR COMMUNICATIONS METHOD ACROSS ALL AGE GROUPS

How would you like to hear from the two Councils about the proposal?

STATEMENT		PERCENTAGE (%)
Leaflet or flyer		57%
Local newspaper		51%
Email		29%
Social media		27%
Public event		26%
Telephone		8%
Don't know		1%
None of the above		4%

When asked about how they would like to hear about the proposals going forward, around six in ten (57%) and half (51%) of respondents in Forest Heath District and St Edmundsbury Borough Council areas say they would like to hear about the proposals to create a new single District-level Council by leaflet or local newspaper – choosing these over email (29%) or social media (27%).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, younger residents are significantly more likely than those in older age groups to say they would prefer to hear about the proposals via social media (44%* of 18–24 year olds say this v 30% and fewer for older groups).

Telephone proves to be the least popular option for residents, with only one in ten (8%) saying they would like this method used for communication of information.

WHEN ASKED WHAT FURTHER INFORMATION THEY WOULD LIKE GOING FORWARD, RESIDENTS SAY THEY WOULD LIKE TO CONTINUE TO BE INFORMED WITH GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROPOSALS

What further information would you like to see from the two councils about the proposed changes going forward? – Unprompted responses



Any information at all/general overview

“An information booklet...they should outline the proposals, the perceived benefits, and give a contact number for further information.”

“It would be nice to have a letter about what is changing and the effects it will have.”

The Councils also wanted to know that if the proposals were to go forward, what further information local residents would like to receive, and a majority say they want more general information overall.



Impact on service delivery

“How it will directly affect services; if they are cutting councillors down there will be fewer people to sort out the day to day running. It's not always about saving money; it is about making sure the services they run do not fall below the standard.”

“Details – agenda, costings, savings, where additional money will be spent, what differences it would make to local economy, services and vulnerable people. I would like to see more detail – I'd like to see a proposal document”

Of those residents who show an interest in what they wanted to know specifically from the councils, they express a desire to know about the effects the creation of a new single District-level council would have on service delivery, and impact on local people in terms of budgets.



Cost savings and economies of scale

“If there are going to be cost savings then what the cost savings are. Equally, having it in one building. If you're going to have one joint district council then why not have it in one building and save on rent, energy ,etcetera?”

“Reassurance that it's not going to cost too much – that it's affordable. It would presumably have some impact on council tax.”

Finally, residents show interest in hearing more on the economies of scale that will be generated from the creation of a new council, as well as the savings that will be made from the budget. This finding reflects on the fact that many who want to know more want headline figures on the savings that will be delivered by the proposed changes.

APPENDIX



DEMOGRAPHICS (1 / 2)

Respondents from each Council area	Total
Forest Heath District	N=401
St Edmundsbury Borough	N=600

S1. Can I start by checking whether your main residence is in the Forest Heath District Council area, the St Edmundsbury Borough Council area, or somewhere else? Base: all respondents (n=1,001)

Economic Status	Total
Economically active	N=569
Economically inactive	N=404

Male	Female
N=504	N=497

D2. Gender. Base: all respondents (n=1,000)

Age	Total
18-24	N=82*
25-34	N=184
35-44	N=189
45-54	N=165
55-64	N=155
65+	N=226
NET: 18-34	N=266
NET: 35-54	N=354
NET: 55+	N=381

D1. Which of the following age groups do you fall into? Base: all respondents (n=1,001)

DEMOGRAPHICS (2/2)

Social Grade	Percentage (%)
AB	N=205
C1	N=252
C2	N=244
DE	N=300
NET: ABC1	N=457
NET: C2DE	N=544

D3. Which of the following best describes the employment status of the Chief Income Earner in your household? Base: all respondents (n=1,001).
 D4. Does the Chief Income Earner have a private pension or allowance? Base: all retired respondents (n=285).
 D5. What is/was the profession of the Chief Income Earner in your household? Base: all respondents who are employed or have a pension (n=827)

Ethnicity	Percentage (%)
White	N=957
Non-white/BAME	N=33*
Refused	N=10

D6. And to which of the following ethnic groups do you consider you belong? Please say the ethnic group that you feel most closely matches yours. Base: all respondents (n=1,001)

NOTES ON THE PUBLIC USE OF COMRES DATA

Guidelines for the public use of survey results:

ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules (www.britishpollingCouncil.org). This commits us to the highest standards of transparency. The BPC's rules state that all data and research findings made on the basis of surveys conducted by member organisations that enter the public domain must include reference to the following:

- The company conducting the research (ComRes)
- The client commissioning the survey
- Dates of interviewing
- Method of obtaining the interviews (e.g. in-person, post, telephone, internet)
- The universe effectively represented (all adults, voters etc.)
- The percentages upon which conclusions are based
- Size of the sample and geographic coverage.

Published references (such as a press release) should also show a web address where full data tables may be viewed, and they should also show the complete wording of questions upon which any data that has entered the public domain are based.

All press releases or other publications must be checked with ComRes before use. ComRes requires 48 hours to check a press release unless otherwise agreed.



**FOR MORE INFORMATION,
PLEASE CONTACT:**

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