



## Appendix A

### Shape Worcestershire – focus groups write-ups

1. Bromsgrove focus group on 1 July
2. Bromsgrove focus group on 10 July
3. Malvern Hills focus group on 8 July
4. Redditch focus group on 7 July
5. Redditch focus group on 17 July
6. Worcester focus group on 9 July
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9. Wychavon focus group on 15 July
10. Wychavon VCSE focus group on 16 July
11. Wyre Forest focus group on 17 June



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Bromsgrove District Council
<b>Date</b>	Tuesday 1 July 2025
<b>Time</b>	6pm – 7.30pm
<b>Location</b>	Parkside, Market Street, Bromsgrove, B61 8DA
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	8 x residents

### How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

- Participants in the focus group were aware of the LGR, but felt that many other in the district probably were not.

### How well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire?

- The group felt that they understood the two options, however they wondered why these were fixed and that was there not a possibility for a different split? It was explained that the two options had been forwarded to the Minister and that following his reply only the two options could be considered going forward.
- The group considered that maybe an East/West split might be better, or perhaps with Droitwich in the North.
- It was asked whether pros and cons were put into the initial paper submitted to the Minister. The facilitator explained that full business cases were not submitted, the full submission will be going forward to the Minister by 28 November 2025.

### Which option do you prefer and why?

- Can't understand why we would consider a 'split'- WCC almost bankrupt, due to the costs of social care, why would we want two bureaucracies rather than one? Why false boundaries? One unitary allows for one set of Cllrs, senior management. If they are not going to look at a comprehensive review of local government finance first, creating more and more bureaucracy seems crazy?
- Option one, not only financial, with huge savings, but a reduction in Councillors
- Localism in Bromsgrove will remain with one as it is a smaller area than current district anyway.

- As County Hall no longer viable, does centre have to be in Worcester? Could we utilise existing buildings?
- Could a new team provide a new way of working? Need to look at savings so we can spend on things residents want and need, e.g. social care, schools & education
- Cost thresholds lean towards a single unitary.
- Hagley- edge of district- look to Stourbridge- don't feel supported from district- feeling under attack on housing. Couldn't really get any more remote. If you want to do things in your local area, have to do yourself. There will be ongoing fundamental lack resource whatever model we have.
- Two makes sense, Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council have already worked in partnership, lots of things were already working across the north, and the south were working together. Districts wanted to keep boundaries for due to localism and local existing locality level working e.g. Worcester City, Malvern and Wychavon already work together in partnership, as do Bromsgrove and Redditch.
- North is historically industrial, linked to South Bham; the south is more rural. Makes sense to split as north and south.
- As someone heavily engaged in community partnership working, I can't see how strength of partnership working would be maintained; don't want to see that lost, would be a detriment to residents & access to services.
- There isn't enough info about how a single unitary might look, have seen nothing that it could be achievable.
- Whilst there will be savings (e.g. CEOs) the main savings will have to be from how services are delivered, e.g. social care, waste collection?
- The unravelling of the historic Herefordshire and Worcestershire was hard, might there be another model for libraries (which are currently not along district lines)- this could be expensive?
- Concern about services getting to villages rather than Bromsgrove or Redditch- would it be even more difficult if services were Worcester based? Would this mean that Worcester based services might come out to the villages?
- It was suggested that it is just about what councillors and senior officers want and a sham consultation. They were disappointed that they we're not going to have role in voting. The councillors voting will be those with an agenda. For some who represent us, it is their only income. People aren't going to vote themselves out of existence.

Worried that the decision has been made on two councils, but some felt that this isn't what ought to happen.

- It was discussed that the government should review local government finance first- funding now and in the future, understanding the demands of social care- local government reorganisation is a wasteful exercise at this time without this. Discussed the current funding- if 80% WCC budget currently spent on social care and demand is only growing, shouldn't social care have not been reviewed first?
- Parishes- if services devolved down as they have been elsewhere, will they have to employ people to do that, as they won't get volunteers to do it? Is this just two-tier by another name as parishes will have to expand?

### **What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?**

- The main concern was in relation to Adult and Social Care and Education and Children Services, and how these will be properly funded, whether in one or two unitary councils.

### **Any other issues raised not covered above**

- Why wasn't Worcestershire County Council involved in this process?
- Would there still be a need for local 'heads' even under a one unitary model?
- A concern that there will be a large increase in council tax.

### **Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- Participants in the focus group had a reasonable awareness of the LGR
- Good general understanding of the two proposed options, although some queries over whether other options could still be put forward.
- Six of the participants were in favour of two unitary councils, with the other two firmly in favour of one.
- Participants were interested to hear views for and against and most recognised there were issues and benefits with both options.
- Concerns about the influence of political agendas / personal views.



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Bromsgrove District Council
<b>Date</b>	Thursday 10 July 2025
<b>Time</b>	6pm – 7.30pm
<b>Location</b>	Hagley
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	5 x residents

### How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

- Participants on the night were aware of the options but not of the whole devolution implications or the potential impact on parishes (that has occurred in other areas that have undergone unitarisation). Some felt that the success of the metro mayors had encouraged the whole process of reorganisation.
- Participants commented that they thought majority of English councils were already in the arrangement (population wise, not geographic size) and that across Europe, devolution to local areas was common e.g. Germany.

### Which option do you prefer and why?

- All 5 participants supported the North and South option
- Considered two unitary councils the least 'worst' of the 2 options
- Prefer that they left well alone. However, whatever option is decided upon, things need to be decided locally, such as planning, not by people who do not know the area, such as Evesham Councillors dealing with matters for Hagley or Wythall.

### What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?

- They felt that certain services could be delivered by parishes but need to understand the scope and possibilities of this.
- The cost of the social care budget was discussed, as it makes up around 80% of Worcestershire County Council spend. It was questioned why this wasn't aligned to the NHS instead. Other high-cost services of concern were school transport and SEND.

- There were concerns that it could be very disruptive to services if all council employees had to apply and compete for jobs.
- They felt that certain services could be delivered by parishes but need to understand the scope and possibilities of this.

### **Any other issues raised not covered above**

- They felt that people would not stop using cars unless there was a sea change culturally, as it is part of people's identities. The issues of local infrastructure were raised, with concerns that North Worcestershire might become a conurbation 'band', with Bromsgrove joining up to Redditch, with no green belt. The other major concern were ongoing issues surrounding the Bromsgrove Route Enhancement Programme (BREP) and the A38 and traffic across the district (and the disruption it causes) in general.
- The train infrastructure needed improvements, from location of stations to increased parking. Good quality public transport would be required, including buses, that would allow residents to 'look both ways'; north to the West Midlands and south to Worcester.
- Wider infrastructure concerns included schools, and maintaining the quality of the schooling provided.
- The 'sense of place' of the district and below district level were very important, as was maintaining local heritage and identity, particularly the ancient historical sites.
- The participants felt it was really important that local people had jurisdiction over what happened locally, with more control. They also wanted more transparency to prevent corruption or the perception of corruption.

### **Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- Considered two unitary councils the least 'worst' of the 2 options.
- However the services were delivered, that they should be delivered locally.
- Infrastructure is important within a new unitary council(s).



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Malvern Hills District Council
<b>Date</b>	Tuesday 8 <sup>th</sup> July 2025
<b>Time</b>	6pm – 7:30pm
<b>Location</b>	The Council House, Avenue Rd, Malvern WR14 3AF
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	10 x residents

### How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

This subject was only briefly touched on as things have moved on since the beginning of the focus group sessions across the districts and time was constrained.

The facilitator explained that the independent <https://shapeworcestershire.org> website would be kept up to date with information as it becomes available. He also covered the position re the reorganisation at the opening of the meeting to give some background to all attendees (see standard focus group slide deck).

Some attendees were more aware of the plans than others and some said they learned more about LGR as the session progressed, including from each other.

### How well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire?

Again, this was covered through discussion about the plans rather than as a specific question that each attendee responded to.

### Which option do you prefer and why?

This was seen to be the key discussion point for the session. The majority of the topics for discussion were covered under this one agenda point.

The attendees' views were as follows:

**Attendee 1** – had talked to friends before coming along to the focus group to find out their views so that they could be fed in. Generally, people have been saying that they are very satisfied with the services delivered by MHDC, and some asked for that to be passed on, but they are less happy with the county council's performance. These people felt that there are big differences between the north and south, which are variously rural and urban with

different economies, and therefore supported the two unitary model approach. The attendee agreed with this and feared that the one unitary model wouldn't work because there are too many differences across the county.

This attendee agrees with later discussions that local knowledge is essential. From experience in Cumbria they had learned that depth of knowledge for their area was essential, for economy, social, crime, education etc. They favour the two unitary option and knows that it worked in Cumbria, which split into two unitaries voluntarily. They feel that was the right decision for Cumbria because of the differences – the south being industrial and the north based in tourism.

**Attendee 2** – others have said the opposite, thinking that, although one area might gain from having two unitary authorities, others might lose out. A bigger area could get more, and rural and urban areas would be able to subsidise each other.

**Attendee 3** – shared experiences from Wales. They agree that the argument for one unitary about areas subsidising others works, but did raise issues with non-statutory services that may get dropped, like public loos and parks. This attendee's preference is for one unitary, but with parish and town councillors doing more.

**Attendee 4** – strongly in favour of one unitary on both economic and efficiency grounds. Splitting up the county means dividing the services that taxpayers pay the most for, and the attendee thinks they are better dealt with by one authority. It is more efficient to use the funds towards a reasonable sized authority that already exists with all the admin that goes with it.

**Attendee 5** – no preference, but can see both views, including something they hadn't thought of before this session about pooling resources better across a whole county area. However, the attendee is concerned that one unitary will create 'hinterlands' with some places, like Redditch that isn't in the core economic area. Also concerned about losing the local knowledge and understanding if it covers a much larger area which is different, but which needs local representation.

**Attendee 6** – prefers the two unitary model because they see the north as a 'different person' with different needs and wants. The attendee had worked for the county council. When Worcestershire was joined with Herefordshire some years ago, it didn't work. The cultures were too difficult and each tried to look after their own. The big council got a lot of trouble from the residents. They don't think the north would like it any more than the south.

**Attendee 7** – preference for a two unitary option as they feel that would give better political representation, for which residents are paying tax. It will be too wide in the one unitary.

**Attendee 8** – strongly supports a move to unitary authorities, and think they marginally favours the two unitary option over one because it keeps the local area's identity. They did say they take the point about the existing county council structure and the risks / costs associated with splitting those if a two unitary option were preferred. In this attendee's view, stronger parish and town councils are needed to make unitary work, which they knows from their experiences of South Gloucestershire going to unitary. Thinks a bigger strategic body is needed but feels there is more that unites two than unites one.

**Attendee 9** – prefers the two unitary option. The attendee asked colleagues in Malvern and Worcester and the majority also two with the same view that the south and north are very different. They like that it's more personal and that Malvern's treated a bit differently. Two unitaries is much preferred as feels one unitary would have less personality and thinks two would work with the bigger picture (strategic authorities).

**Attendee 10)** – works with local authorities. They see the advantages of having one large authority, which will have more money for big infrastructure projects that need lots of cash, like roads, waste disposal facilities, environmental protection etc. There's a critical mass with a bigger group of people. But they do also like the personal touch, which is one of the reasons the attendee moved to the area in the first place. Their head says 'one', their heart says 'two'. They would want to see all the detail and balance sheets before they could make a proper, informed decision.

- **What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?**

The group didn't have an opportunity to talk about specific service areas, but the following points were made:

- Lots of comments about local knowledge and understanding being key in terms of service provision and a fear that that might be lost, especially with a one unitary model.
- Concerns about non-statutory services which attendees value, like loos, parks etc 'falling through the gaps'. They wonder if there is more likelihood of things falling between the gaps in a one or two unitary structure, but also talked about parish and town councils taking on some of these services in the future.
- Some concern that local political representation would be lost within the new structure with fewer councillors. Worried that this might be 'even worse' in a one unitary model than a two.

- **Is there anything more you would like to tell us about the reorganisation?**

- Attendees raised concern about the cost of redundancies and early retirements and whether these will be captured in the business cases. It was discussed that the learning from other newly formed unitaries is that staff left the organisation anyway, prior to the change, or people were re-deployed. The intention is always to keep redundancies to a minimum. The group felt that in a lot of areas there will still be the same amount of work for the same number of people. Some roles will be different and fewer will be needed across the county.
- Whilst today's conversation was to focus on the first step to devolution, the group did discuss the ultimate aim of creating strategic authorities. Some felt this was a positive end game.
- Bigger isn't always better and one size doesn't fit all.

- **Any other issues raised not covered above**

- The group shared experiences from other areas/the past where they felt local government reorganisation had either been successful or unsuccessful. Some of these are mentioned above, but not in detail. They were:
  - **Wales** – where there was a cautionary story shared about the loss of some non-statutory services due to the council having to cover such a large area and to fund that.
  - **South Gloucestershire** – felt reorganisation had been successful, but noted the issues that had been experienced in creating a new town council, which was essential for ensuring those non-statutory services continued to be delivered
  - **Herefordshire and Worcestershire County Council** – there were such significant issues in people not accepting the change, including both staff coming together with different cultures and residents, ultimately, the two councils were split again. The attendee did not have a good experience in the joined-up authority.
  - **Cumbria** – where the split into two unitary authorities had been successful. The attendee attributed this to the significant differences between the two areas.
- The group also talked about devolution. For some, this more strongly made them feel that the two unitary authority option would work better. One, particularly, felt that merging South Worcestershire into a strategic authority with Gloucestershire could be a success.
- A number of attendees were interested in the cost of both redundancies and of the consultants that would be employed to progress these businesses cases. They were keen for reassurance that these costs would be built into costed plans that are going forward for consideration.
- Attendees asked if the final businesses cases will be published.
- Some of the group said that it was really useful to take part in the discussion and to hear different views. Some said that it had informed their final view.
- One resident, who had been unable to attend the focus group, sent in this feedback, which they asked to be shared “It would also be interesting to understand the different payback years to see what value for money we as residents can expect, along with office accessibility when we need face to face connections combined with any negative consequential impact we might see (remembering bank closures are already having an impact on our community and we wouldn't want this repeated with a government imposed 'improvement')”.

## Conclusions/key themes

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- Worries about losing localism, local knowledge and the things that make Malvern Hills special in a one unitary authority.
- Concerns about service provision, particularly non-statutory services ‘falling through the gaps’ in a new authority/ies.

- Interest in town and parish councils taking on non-statutory services to ensure they continue to be provided, although there was concern that recruitment is already an issue for these smaller councils.
- Learning from other areas / past experiences (Cumbria, South Gloucestershire, Wales, the old Herefordshire / Worcestershire divide).
- Worries about a reduction in representation at a local level with fewer councillors.
- Many of the attendees said they needed more, and detailed, information on the costs associated with the two options before being able to make a final decision on preferences, as these are based on assumptions at the moment.
- There was some mistrust about the weight this engagement process will have on the final decisions made, although it was felt better to have a say than not to.
- There was interest in strategic authorities.



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Redditch Borough Council
<b>Date</b>	Monday 7 July 2025
<b>Time</b>	6pm – 7.30pm
<b>Location</b>	Arrow Valley Countryside Centre, Battens Dr, Redditch B98 0LJ
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	11 x residents

### How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

- Some were very- one had read the white paper. Others only when they heard about it on the radio
- Communication is terrible- if not on Facebook, or not receiving a paper (that most don't) and if you avoid social media, you would not have heard about it

### How well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire?

- Discussion as to what are the assets and liabilities of each area- we need to know this to make a proper decision?
- Some lack of understanding. Feeling that this is being forced on us - how do we make the best out of a bad situation- can we determine the number of Councillors? Will Electoral Commission determine this? What will happen here when we have the government decision? This is potentially doubling current Worcestershire County Council (WCC) division.

### Which option do you prefer and why?

Comments in favour of one unitary council

- SEND- having to split this is too expensive - WCC finances are already challenged (SEND, school transport, social care)- if we are going to make savings to deliver more, one is the only way. If we split it out, there would be a competition for staff? Couldn't understand why you would want finances being split?
- Size matters for delivering services- massive issues within adult and social care and education and childrens services- always risk e.g. change in direction. Would smaller

council have council tax base to deliver for the areas of need, of which there are several?

- One person was in support of one unitary, as long as it isn't this current county council- current services & mentality are skewed towards Worcester and it is considered they have failed Redditch. This has been regardless of political representation.

#### Comments in favour of two unitary councils

- Prefer this unless we had reassurance that Redditch was going to be represented properly in one- it will be a small fish in big pond. Been to council meetings about Redditch in Worcester and clear that WCC Cllrs didn't know anything about Redditch. Support two unitary option if it means voices are heard
- One supplier, like Birmingham, increases risk- potentially more restrictive tender processes and risk of getting locked into contracts?
- Believed there was a potential to share resources across the two for resilience.
- Local knowledge of the area- people in Worcester don't have idea of what is in Redditch. Worcester population is not too different from Redditch, yet they dominate and Redditch feels too cut off from Worcester. Redditch has more in common with northern areas.
- Some people would not be able to attend meetings if they were centrally for the whole of Worcestershire as there is no public transport in evenings. A concern as to where this would be located and centralised? Also concern about the removal of current face to face services, which are important to people. Travel to services is difficult and this has already happened with county services.
- Worcestershire does not have a building big enough currently for a single unitary (County Hall not viable).
- Greater need in Redditch than in some other areas - particularly financial need. Services should be based on need. In 2010 Redditch had red flags for health outcomes and educational outcomes which are still relevant today.
- What are the assets and liabilities of each area, a number said they need to know this to make a proper decision and they were feeling very conflicted by the process.
- Number of residents that a councillor represents will increase as number of councillors decreases- will this affect ability to represent- harder to get time with them. This will be worse with a single unitary council. Feeling that this is being forced on them - how do we make the best out of a bad situation- can we determine the number of councillors? Worried that candidates in the new council will have enough time to represent the town?
- Discussion as what are considered to be failing unitaries near them- Herefordshire and Birmingham? Could they be forced into combination with them?
- Concern that some of the non statutory services may be lost, which makes it hard to decide either way.

- Locally, place based, is important, so two unitary councils would be better.
- Concerns about the finances and whether they are viable for the options? Worried that costs will just go up, especially with 80% of council tax spent on 18% of the population. How will this be accounted for in the two options?

### **What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?**

- Splits risk, better geographical areas- but will we have a say on any changes to services before they are stopped, reduced, changed, outsourced? This should be part of election considerations for the shadow authority.
- What will happen to Rubicon Leisure? Will that go into a larger pot or be sold off?

### **Any other issues raised not covered above**

- Will we have another boundary review?
- How will the rateable value be split with either of the options? Equalisation of council tax needed for different options.
- What is point of formal consultation when the decision has been made?
- How involved is the local MP in this? We should talk to our MP to try to influence/shape?
- Issue and cost of redundancies- will this be high level?

### **Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- Understanding of the reorganisation process varied from one person who had read the White Paper to others who initially had little awareness.
- There were queries over understanding the two options as a number stated that they needed more information.
- The majority were in favour of two unitary councils.
- There was concern of the identity of Redditch being lost in the reorganisation.
- There was a concern that despite reorganisation and potential savings, council tax would increase.
- A lack of local representation and that some key non statutory services would be lost.



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Redditch Borough Council
<b>Date</b>	Thursday 17 July 2025
<b>Time</b>	4.30pm – 6.30pm
<b>Location</b>	Ecumenical Centre, 6 Evesham St, Redditch B97 4EX
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	5 x tenants (a much greater number of tenants confirmed their attendance, but didn't attend)

### How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

- Some people found out by accident, others by the text from Redditch Borough Council.
- All felt that many people either did not know, or did not understand the process.

### How well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire

- See all comments

### Which option do you prefer and why?

- All 5 participants supported the North and South option
- There was a concern that a single unitary would minimise services, with the quality of services being lowered.
- There was also a feeling of natural division; with the North being more focused on industry and the South on agriculture.
- The 'sense of place' of the district and below district level were very important, as was maintaining local heritage and identity, particularly the ancient historical sites.

### What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?

- There was discussion that it was how services might change that really mattered and that maintaining high quality services for the people of Redditch was crucial.

## **Any other issues raised not covered above**

- They felt that the process itself was rushed and did not allow for true participation from the public. They also felt that the timeline for delivery meant that meaningful and inclusive change was impossible.
- They asked if government had actually looked at the benefits, challenges and risks of implemented local government reorganisation before forcing it on areas. They also discussed the historic structure of local authorities, where they were deemed too big, so certain responsibilities were removed, now they want to make them big again?
- They stated that current local authorities were in a mess and too expensive. Making things more efficient and effective was the right thing to do, but that more cannot be done by less and less people.
- A participant felt there should be a period of 5-7 years where there were no changes to service delivery following the reorganisation, so that the new authority could understand what people needed.
- They felt that the government would ultimately make their decision on cost effectiveness alone.
- The participants worried that it might be whoever had the 'loudest voice' would gain the most influence over the process.
- There were also concerns about groups within the community who could be impacted by these changes, such as people in care and vulnerable individuals, who might not be properly involved in the process and their voices might not be heard.
- There was also the feeling that there was a lot of apathy towards government from some elements of the community and a lot of anger from others and a real sense that local people do not have a say in the whole matter.
- Ideally, a local referendum on the whole process would be ideal for some.
- **Tenancy concerns** - There were concerns about the timescale of change, how they would be informed/involved going forward and what impact it might have on tenancies and rents in the longer term. The participants were proud of Redditch Borough Council holding onto their housing.

## **Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- The tenants were strongly in favour of there being no change, as they were very happy with Redditch Borough Councils' housing team overseeing their tenancies. However, if 'no change' is not an option, all participants were strongly in favour of the two unitary council option.

- Concerns that local people will not be listened too, with the council(s) becoming too large.

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## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Worcester City
<b>Date</b>	09/07/2025
<b>Time</b>	6pm
<b>Location</b>	The Guildhall, Worcester
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	6 x members of the public

### 1. How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

- All present knew about the proposals and felt well informed.
- Some participants had read the white paper.
- Some participants had watched committee meeting about reorganisation.
- What was the rationale for the initial proposal for reorganisation? Explanation provided regarding Government long term devolution plans. Greater Manchester given as an example by participant.
- Comment that some unitary councils that have been set up have not worked well – example given of Herefordshire.
- Centralisation not thought to be working well for Birmingham. ICB is linking with Warwickshire, so it's never going to match.

### 2. How well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire?

- Well informed.
- Understand the amalgamation of services, as for the Cllrs, is the idea to have them to one or two councils too?

### 3. Which option do you prefer and why?

- Definitely two, worked at two unitary councils. There was a massive breakdown in community cohesion, felt that their interests weren't represented by Cllrs in other parts of the areas.

- Would prefer smaller councils (2 unitary option). Come with a genuine open mind. Had dealings with county and district Cllrs who responded quickly. Understand split and that some things were strategic. Guided by active councillors and like the degree of proximity to both county and city Cllrs. Agnostic about what preference, politically struggle with it. Worcestershire is a one-part state (Behemoth) albeit changed recently, bad for democracy, at least with districts it shifts.
- Confusing and frustrating for resident to deal with city and county councils. Sensible to have one individual to be responsible / one point of contact. I think one day there should be one single unitary, however now isn't the time, would cause so many issues and stress for service users and staff, lack of local identity. North/South Worcestershire seems more sensible for now but longer term might be better as one.
- Somewhere in between the two options, interesting that Worcestershire is not included in this focus group. There's something more efficient about having a single rep for all districts and all of Worcestershire as well. Populous, borders the WM area helps us have a stronger voice for our neighbours and government too. Duplication so we could have efficiencies and too much overlap. Big contextual bits, funding has been decreasing for as long as I can remember more difficult, can't be ignored. Planning under resourced so the thought of a well-resourced service is tempting - needs to be resources and centralised. As long as the democratic part works and is scalable.

It's hard to separate combined authority. If Worcestershire is heading for a CA with others, there is a difference in the impact options 1 and 2 would have. Option 2 works with rural counties, but not with WM. Worcestershire could be a CA in own right.

Government advice / statements contradictory - query about population size (500k) – confirmed this is just a guide. Population point is interesting seems contradicting, Surrey put in two and government said have you thought about one?

- Thoughts are swinging – have wanted both, but more towards two – south is more rural. Birmingham huge and doesn't work although it has greater power This might be better later on in the CA.

South is so distinct from north. If you think about schools and social care how are you going to feel if the county has split, will they have to change services.... Going back and forth, or could be more restrictive.

- Unitary biggest nightmare. Districts do good stuff – local, tailored and responsive. Not county with their black hole, worried about asset stripping resources and facilities will be lost. Worried about the population number - engaging with and talking to a larger authority and cllrs would be more difficult. The ones in power might not be representing all communities. Districts have very different communities, needs, attitudes and priorities (people who don't engage with this). Can't get over how important localism is. Smaller the better. Low turnouts vitriol between differing policy views. Would rather scrap county and keep six districts! North would be strange without Worcester City as it gives a focus and identity. Really against all this passionately.
- There has been a suggestion that reorganisation will make it easier to expose expenditure budgets.
- Government agenda is fair enough, but the larger the unitary is the worst it is and people don't feel they are adequately represented.

#### **4. What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?**

- I don't think anything will be managed better. Think the vulnerable will be left behind.
- Worried about getting hold of a councillor will be enormous pressure. Demand will be greater. District Cllrs can only afford to be cllrs as their partners subsidise.
- Concerns about representation. Diversity should be considered. Survey only asked two EDI questions. Bear in mind that protected characteristics weren't asked about. Don't just want elderly white men.

#### **5. Any other issues raised not covered above?**

- Worcestershire not like other areas where strategic authorities/mayors operate.
- Is it possible that Worcester could have a town council as well?
- What if county say they want 1 and districts say 2 – two proposals will be submitted.
- If the county goes in on a power grab? Both options will still have to be considered.
- Are you able to say what the six councils want, are the six councils submitting their own?
- Who's going to agree this?
- Concerns of loss of cultural and local identify (city charter).
- Bigger councils are harder to hold to account.
- North and south not a new idea, when this has been discussed in the past the same split has always been put forward.
- Is this an attempt at cost cutting exercise?
- Do the proposals need to include costings (estimates)?
- What will the consultation look like from Government?
- What has the consensus view been across all the districts' focus group consultations?
- Can people still engage with their local councillor about the reorganisation?
- Feeling that there is not a good understanding amongst the public about the two-tier system.
- Like many of us who don't live in Victorian parts and we're not in a parish.... if we are going to have parishes, then the whole of the city should have them.
- What MPs do we have – where do they cover / represent? What is their role / involvement in this process?
- Clarification requested over the how Cllrs affected by the restructure. Would cllr salary rates go up as there would be fewer? Councillors in Birmingham are much younger.
- Who are the staff going to be, surely not all staff will go in? Would they come in to post before the others are dissolved. How will transition of service delivery happen?
- If they take a team from the shadow, will that be picked from an existing team?
- One year is too quick for an orderly transition.

- Staff may start looking elsewhere due to uncertainties. Question about the burden placed on staff working on LGR alongside delivery of services and current work.
- We're already getting an impact with the districts who are going towards this.

## **6. Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- Generally good awareness of the reorganisation process.
- Generally good understanding of the two proposed options, but some uncertainty about how the process will progress in terms of the decision making and transition.
- On balance the group didn't all start off with two unitaries as their preferred option, but after discussing amongst themselves came around to that option following their deliberations.
- Recognition that there are issues and benefits from both options.
- One unitary council:
  - Power and influence.
  - May be better placed for combined authority
  - Less confusion about who does what.
  - Potential efficiencies of scale.
  - Less accessibility and accountability
- Two unitary councils:
  - Understanding of local needs leading to loss of tailored services
  - Local identity, place and local cohesion
  - Local democracy – proximity of local cllrs.
  - Works better for north / south difference e.g. urban / rural.
  - Funding challenges?
- Concerns about impact of reorganisation on the most vulnerable people and communities.



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Worcester City Council
<b>Date</b>	16/07/25
<b>Time</b>	6.00 pm – 7.30 pm
<b>Location</b>	The Guildhall, Worcester
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	10 members of the public

### How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

- All have a general understanding of the plans and interest in local government.
- Some participants had watched committee meeting about reorganisation.
- One participant has viewed the county proposal document.

### How well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire?

- All had general understanding of the proposal.
- Some queries:
  - What will happen to parish councils? Will they stay? What will their functions be?
  - Will district council and county council cease to exist?
  - Some uncertainty about the entity of 'Worcestershire' in terms of geographic areas and councils / decision making bodies.
  - Will unitary councils stick to the existing boundaries?

### Which option do you prefer and why?

- Single unitary – 3, two unitary - 7
- From civic standpoint, short term gains but long-term losses for single unitary. From a long-term democratic view – voice would be less likely to be heard.
- No one to reach out to – democratic deficit.
- Lots of confusion with two tier system. Different democratic processes. Sometimes no agreement for issues that are across both tiers of LG. Conflict.
- Don't think single unitary are better governed. Finances can be better managed even in South & North unitary set up.

- Worcester has more in common with the south of Worcestershire.
- Processes, plans and changes already take a long time e.g. SWDP, and these would take much longer in a larger authority.
- One participant had concerns that a single unitary will be too big too soon. Another felt Worcestershire area is not that big if you compare it to other areas. Lots of people from districts work in Birmingham so south Worcestershire is connected.
- Single unitary offers more consistency and an opportunity for improvement, to look at the bigger picture for the area so it is more joined up. A chance to get things right.
- In favour of one unitary set up for opportunities that county can gain in respect to public transport, education is affected because of unreliable transport and health. Worcestershire currently failing competitively for deals. One unitary would have greater control of funding, joined up infrastructure, economic focus and integrated services. Big picture thinking. Splitting Worcestershire weakens county identity.
- Query about the possibilities of shared services. Could there be two unitary authorities, but some services (social care) delivered across the whole area?
- Recognise a single unitary has its benefits although not sure about financial situation. Take out political and look at the city and spatial planning. Planning issues are entirely different between north and south hence 2 tier is better. South districts are similar whereas Bromsgrove and Redditch have more pull to West Mids. Worcester can be a Hub for South Worcestershire. Strong case for two unitary authorities.
- Worried about loss of local knowledge in single unitary, understand financially it may benefit.
- Favour single unitary. Important for Worcestershire to have a strategic identity. From a strategic and financial perspective one unitary is stronger. Already operate strategic services across the county. Visions for district areas could work equally well in a single unitary.
- Worcestershire has a great identity in itself. Democratic deficit would not have as much impact. Basis of representation would still be heard in single authority
- Difficult decision. North and South have different characteristics and is closer to the people in those areas.
- Things that are larger tend to collapse, e.g. Birmingham - look at hospitals, and how they function when they are larger.
- One unitary won't necessarily be more efficient. A big authority is not a one size fits all, if we could do a rural vs urban that might be more effective.
- Sense of community in Worcester – could be lost. Worry about the political opportunities and representation in a unitary - massive risks that some agendas / strategies might be either pushed forwards or lost.
- Concern that some areas will not be as well supported. Example of Cardiff – lots of development in the city but the additional needs of areas in periphery of the city not met.
- Towns in north (Redditch, Bromsgrove, Kidderminster) are very different to south (Malvern, Pershore, Evesham etc). Concerns that in a single unitary, money would probably be siphoned off to the north where there is more need, bigger population. The needs and views of the south would be swamped by the north.

## **What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?**

- Meeting the needs of the local people on their doorstep. Members are accessible to people who need to make representation to them.
- Maintain strong link to local democracy / accountability.
- Clarity in systems and joined up approach.
- An agreement / alignment in strategic planning. Infrastructure needed - lots of housing planned in periphery of Worcester but no infrastructure to support.
- As a young person, housing is key, and I support building more housing. The population is growing so need to work out how to house them.
- Social care funding and education budgets. Social services need to be run better.
- Currently too much waste. There are fantastic people working across Worcestershire, but the way things are run is abysmal.
- That's a big question! We all have different priorities. Not happy that Central Government has given us a decision we didn't ask to make. Just want whatever model to work.
- More clarity so that Worcestershire has more clout.
- Services run efficiency and sustainably. Minimal waste and duplication.
- A well-run council that is involved in learning and seeing what works and dealing in a pragmatic manner.
- Focus on / support for communities. Ring fencing for council tax to support communities. Sense of community.
- Important that Worcester City has identity.
- So many political agendas – huge opportunity for positive change but concerns it won't work because of all the personal /political views. This is the time to try and get it right.

## **Any other issues raised not covered above**

- Is this happening nationally?
- Is the Government going to stick to the base population for areas? There is movement towards a base of 500k etc but unclear how that will work.
- Are those the only options?
- What happens if different councils support different option?
- What will happen to the SWDP if we go to one unitary as this is well established?
- Concern that this has been foisted on local councils.
- High risk it could go wrong but opportunity if it does go right.
- Doesn't seem to be enough engagement with the general populace, so concern about lack of awareness and that decisions may not be representative.
- What are other counties doing? Do we know? Are there others we can learn from?

- Will debt be carried over into the new authority?
- Big differences and financial responsibility on county vs district councils e.g. 20 million vs 400 million. Interesting difference of scale and how they can be integrated.
- Query what will happen to council assets e.g. Guildhall. Where will the 'hubs' be?
- Some concerns that the process is too quick. Other participant queries why it needs to take so long.
- Is this consultation process being repeated across all the districts?
- Do county not want to want to participate in the consultation?
- What has county based their proposal on? Comment that is we very biased.
- Will there be job losses?
- Comment that it will be the same people who work in district councils who will work in the unitary councils.
- Points for accountability valid. So much waste in system. Less accountability in commissioned services - duplication and inefficiency.

## **Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- Generally good awareness of the reorganisation process.
- Good general understanding of the two proposed options, although some queries over the technicalities.
- Majority in favour of two unitary council.
- Participants were interested to hear views for and against and most recognised there were issues are benefits with both options.
- Noted the differences between north and south of the county in terms of the geography and needs of the communities. Most participants felt there was more commonality between Worcester, Malvern and Wychavon than with Bromsgrove, Redditch and Wyre Forest.
- In favour of two unitary authorities – more local focus to support different local needs. More accessible / responsive. Local knowledge, identify and sense of community.
- In favour of one unitary authority – stronger voice, greater control of funding, joined up infrastructure, consistency and 'Big picture thinking'.
- Concerns about the influence of political agendas / personal views.
- Priorities – local needs, support for communities, local democracy and accountability, strategic, joined up approach that will work.



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Wychavon District Council
<b>Date</b>	25 June 2025
<b>Time</b>	6.15pm
<b>Location</b>	Wychavon Civic Centre, Pershore, WR10 1PT
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	4 residents

### How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

- Mixed levels of awareness.
- Not aware until the survey came out.
- The County Council asking for a postponement of their elections brought it to the fore.

### How well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire?

- Didn't get a feel or full awareness of the two options until this was sent out as part of the survey which highlighted the website.

### Which option do you prefer and why?

**Attendee 1:** stated could be persuaded one way or the other but doesn't have enough facts to choose an option. Ultimately comes down to quality and value. Would know what good would look like if shown to them. Would probably choose one unitary from a business/economic perspective – opportunity to reduce duplication and rationalise / make savings. Feels that by bringing budgets together could use more wisely in the areas that need it most. There's always going to be pressures on some services and needs, but a with a bigger budget there's more room to manoeuvre.

**Attendee 2:** reason the Government wants to do this is to bring in devolution, so they want to bring in power and decisions to local areas, local people know what the big issues are for them. Concerned that one unitary council would not be that efficient and about impact on small villages, particularly when joining up to form larger strategic authorities. Are we going to join with Birmingham or Gloucestershire? Also concerned by the suggestion villages and parishes will have to do more. Other than clerks most parish/town council members are volunteers. Where will the funding come from to take on services from Wychavon? Are the parishes going to become districts in another name? Even though

more expensive and not financially efficient, thinks the two unitary option is the better one. Concerns that Wychavon will struggle later to offer all its services whilst going through reorganisation.

**Attendee 3:** also concerned about what happens to parishes. Leaning towards two unitaries. Very different demographics and differences between more industrial north and more rural south. Not sure one unitary would represent both well and be able to oversee all of that. Concerned about the amount of extra work that one unitary would be taking on, on top of what the county council already does. Where will the attention to detail be in child services, in safeguarding and in adult social care? It's a push now. It's already difficult to find out from the county council who the social workers are. Worries about inequalities in adult and social care in one unitary council. Had experience that a single hourly rate across a county with rural and urban areas didn't work, as the cost of travelling around the rural areas was greater and so the hourly rate was not enough so service provision was less.

**Attendee 4:** when they first became aware of the plans the narrative from government was about localism – wanting local people to have more control over what happens in their area. Feels that the way they're going to do that is by taking away the most effective tier of local authority, the district councils to whom people can relate, who are in our area and who know us, and replace it with something which is much bigger. That was a non sequitur for this person, didn't make sense to want localism and then take away the local tier. Also concerned about political motivations, because elected mayors tend to stand on a political label. There could be conflict between, for example, a Conservative mayor and a Labour government, or vice versa. Frustrated with the concept of devolution. Feels the two unitaries option maintains more of a degree of localism than one, so would tend to go with that. Considers it difficult for Worcester City council, would they become in effect a town council in order to take on services from the unitary council(s).

### **What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?**

- Bin collections.
- Worried that in pulling all the current separate services together, efficient services may be lost.
- Council tax costs to fund future services. A concern that despite promises of more efficient services costs will still rise, especially considering the precepts that may be applied for police and other services. Would lower council tax areas presently have to subsidise high tax areas.
- How will planning be managed when brought into one council. A worry that the government agenda will override local planning concerns.
- A desire for 'person centredness', having a council representative who is accessible and approachable.

### **Is there anything more you would like to tell us about the reorganisation?**

- A hope that in the future that services will all be considered in an effective overall strategy and that services don't get siloed.
- Infrastructure is considered properly and not piecemeal.

- A worry about future funding.

## **Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- There were mixed levels of awareness of the reorganisation.
- Participants had a better understanding of the two options following the survey.
- Finance and costs were key issues.
- Localism was important, and a concern that Parishes would not be able to take on extra responsibilities if needed following the reorganisation. Dichotomy in the government wanting localism, but taking the local tier away in the reorganisation.
- Worries about inequalities in adult and social care with Worcestershire having a rural south and more urban north.
- Concerns about increasing costs and council tax.
- Concerns over future planning and infrastructure considerations.
- Lack of local representation following reorganisation.



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Wychavon District Council
<b>Date</b>	15 July 2025
<b>Time</b>	6.15pm
<b>Location</b>	Wychavon Civic Centre, Pershore, WR10 1PT
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	16 residents

### How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire?

- Positive response on the survey figures to date – the group recognised that 4000+ responses was a good result.
- The group felt that the newspaper wraps and surveys were effective in raising awareness along with the other efforts to engage.
- Mixed answers to the question but generally low awareness derived mostly from some national news headlines but otherwise not very aware generally.

### How well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire?

- Skipped this question as the group felt that the presentation prior to the discussion had given a good overview of the two options for the county

### Which option do you prefer and why?

- Two authorities, the VCS are already stepping up to provide services that should be filled by the county council and fear that this would be worse with a larger single authority. Need is also growing in our local community.
- Concern over lack of awareness of local issues in the case of a single large authority – we will be forced to deal with people with no knowledge of the local area.
- In a single authority money funnelled up to the north of the county – fear of loss of funding therefore voting for two authority option.
- Big is definitely not better – the smaller the better. Had moved from MBC in Sandwell area to a village. Better services in this area and don't want to go through what Birmingham is currently going through so two authorities would be better

- One - we will get better representation on a single unitary and the buying power is potentially better. Makes more financial sense.
- Concerns over mismanagement of services in the current set up and feels there could be some additional streamlining of services but still would want two authorities
- WCC is very remote – never engage with us either at officer or councillor level and there will be no difference with the single authority option
- Villages will be forgotten in a single authority as the urban areas will dominate so would prefer two authorities.
- Had personal experience of restructures in both the private and public sectors and this is going to be very expensive and not deliver what the government wants. The complications of restructuring large private sector companies are huge but are nevertheless much less complicated than what is being proposed. Prefer two unitaries.
- How do you improve services whilst this is going on? There will be a huge impact whilst services change and embed so the disruption will be massive for residents. Prefer the north/south option as this is likely to be less disruptive for residents.
- Culture is important, Redditch and Wyre Forest have different cultures to Wychavon and all areas need have their own culture. The two-authority option helps preserve this.
- One unitary is too big so two authorities is my choice.
- Started the evening thinking that a single authority would be best based on the idea that economies of scale area priority so single authority should be better. However, hearing the other arguments I've changed my mind and would want two authorities now.
- Democratic deficit may result as a result of single unitary. There are going to be too few cllrs for such a large population and this will mean a lack of voice for the people. The further we devolve the more remote we will be from being able to have a say.
- Opting for the two authorities option as track record is important. There is a proven track record of good service delivery and financial management in WDC and MHDC and the two unitary option is more likely to see that continue.
- Voting for the single authority option as there are financial savings and it reduces duplication although I am concerned about redundancies.
- I like the single authority option – although I can see the issues, it's down to strong management to make this work
- Don't really know the detail until we see the finances and understand what is happening at a local community level such as the impact on parish and town councils.
- Single authority option would be my choice - getting the strategy right is important and the single authority will put resources in the right area.
- The level of change from seven to one is massive and there will be huge focus on changing structures rather than delivering services. Therefore, opting for the two authorities.

A breakdown of the preferences at this focus group is as follows:

Single Unitary – 4 people

Two Unitaries – 12 people

### **What matters most to you about how councils are run and council services?**

- Concern about the impact on the quality of services in larger authority
- A lot of positive feedback on district services and concern about losing the understanding of the local areas.

### **Is there anything more you would like to tell us about the reorganisation?**

- What's happening to Parish Councils? Question tackled in the meeting.
- Dorset example discussed regarding the impact on smaller services.
- Wychavon should take a leadership role in whatever structures come out of the reorganisation.

### **Any other issues raised not covered above**

- Why were options not considered such as Worcester City as a separate unitary authority? Issue tackled in the meeting.
- Are we as residents able to influence our county councillors to share our concerns, thoughts and opinions. County cllrs, as with all councillors, should be accessible and the group were encouraged to engage on an individual basis.
- On what basis will the district cllrs be making decisions on this? Will it be political or what is best for the local residents? Responded that the District Councillors will all make their own decision and this process will help inform their decision-making process.
- Possible issue with bin collection and road services – will be picked up outside the meeting.

### **Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- Generally limited understanding of the proposals prior to the meeting but very positive response from the group and they thanked WDC for taking the time to engage
- 75% of the group (12 out of 16) preferred the two unitary option with the remaining 4 preferring the single authority option
- General feeling that it was difficult to make informed choices without the financial information to accompany the discussion.
- Real concerns from those preferring two unitaries about loss of voice for communities and residents in a single authority along with concerns about future quality of services.
- Acknowledgement of the generally high-quality provision of services in Wychavon and concern this might change in the future with a unitary authority.

- Those preferring a single unitary option felt strongly that the potential financial savings and opportunities for economies of scale outweighed the concerns of a large single authority.



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Wychavon District Council
<b>Date</b>	16 July 2025
<b>Time</b>	1.00pm
<b>Location</b>	Wychavon Civic Centre, Pershore, WR10 1PT
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	8 representatives of VCSE organisations who work with and/or are based in Wychavon

- **How aware are you of plans for reorganising local councils in Worcestershire and how well do you understand each of the two proposed options for Worcestershire?**
- Generally participants were pretty well informed about the LGR process, particularly those with good links to cllrs and officers, both at district and county level
- Smaller VCS organisations were not as aware of the timetable or the detail of the options being considered.
- **How do you feel reorganising local councils in Worcestershire will affect your organisation and the services you provide? What opportunities and challenges could it offer?**
- We don't know for certain how LGR is going to affect us exactly, but we are aware that it will have an impact.
- Relationship between WDC and VCS is good, particularly for smaller local organisations, but not so strong with the county.
- Worried about example of loss of service – this refers to the reference in the Town and Parish Council focus group to the transfer of the services from local authority (county and district) to Town council level and then, eventually onto the VCS.
- More demand will be placed on VCS and this will mean a drop off in quality of service provision, assuming that additional resource will not be coming with it.
- Smaller organisations will not figure or have the agency – county wide or national VCS will have more ability to access any funding / commissioning streams
- Limited team is a struggle to access the many

- In a single unitary the population numbers are really big and are growing – how realistic will it be to support communities
  - Increased expectation on volunteers – expecting too much
  - Loss of local relationships and local knowledge
  - Feels like a done deal – need to have locality hubs to retain the local knowledge and understanding of an area.
  - Worried about the potential impact of the north on rural funding
  - In the case of a single unitary the challenge of a large area in decision making is greater with politicians in the south making decisions on the north of the county
- 
- **Which of the two options for Worcestershire do you/your organisation prefer and why?**
  - From a professional perspective a one unitary would suit us better as we operate across the county
  - Single unitary would make partnership better but from a local perspective it will be worse
  - Some voluntary organisations are not in receipt of funding from county or district so it will have little or no impact
  - Providing equitable service across the county is a struggle currently as there are seven different authorities all with different priorities and funding. This means multiple monitoring regimes and contact points at council level. A single authority approach would be easier for county wide VCS organisations.
  - A single authority approach would be more efficient and would free up funding for additional VCS service provision and reduce wastage.
- 
- **Is there anything more you would like to tell us about the reorganisation?**
  - How does this link into the development of the strategic authority? Tackled in this meeting
  - Many unknowns currently – particularly around the finance and until we know this it's difficult to make a decision
  - Worth revisiting the historical reorganisations to learn from them
  - Our responsibility as a sector is to change the way we work together better regardless of which option is chosen
- 
- **Any other issues raised not covered above**
  - Would a decision to go to two unitaries change anybody's area of operation? - Too early to answer that question until we see the details but would mainly be relevant for the county wide VCS

## **Conclusions/key themes**

The following key themes emerged during the session:

- Generally good understanding of LGR and the timescales and options
- Division in preferences between VCS orgs with county wide remit (preference for single authority) and smaller local VCS organisations (preference for two authorities)
- Concern, regardless of the size of organisation, that LGR could see additional burdens being put on the VCS which will not be able to be realised with additional resource.
- Recognition that there are real pros and cons with both options
- Much more detail required before a proper understanding of the impact of LGR on the VCS can be made



## Focus group write-up

<b>Borough/city/district</b>	Wyre Forest District Council
<b>Date</b>	17 June 2025
<b>Time</b>	6.30pm
<b>Location</b>	Wyre Forest House, Kidderminster, DY11 7WF
<b>Number and type/s of participants</b>	8 x residents

### 1. Awareness of reorganisation plans

- Mixed levels of awareness
  - Some participants were well-informed due to their roles in politics or local government.
  - Others became aware via the news and their interest due to their jobs.
  - Other only recently via council communications or personal curiosity.
- It was the non-politically affiliated participants who expressed confusion and had only partial awareness until the survey or meeting prompted further engagement.

### 2. Understanding of the proposed options

- General understanding existed and grew after explanations during the session.
- Participants grasped the core differences of the two options for Worcestershire.
- Some participants initially struggled with details, especially around financial implications and long-term strategic alignment.
- Concerns were raised about how future mergers or devolution (e.g. joining larger strategic authorities) might impact whichever structure is chosen.

### 3. Preferences and reasons for preferred option

Option 1 – Single unitary authority:

- Seen as the “safer” and simpler option.
- May ensure more financial stability due to larger population base.

- Maintains Worcestershire identity.
- Avoids risks of competition between a poorer North and wealthier South.

#### **Option 2 – Two unitary authorities (North/South):**

- Supported for reasons of better service delivery tailored to regional needs.
- Recognises significant demographic and economic differences between North and South Worcestershire.
- Some felt North Worcestershire had been overlooked and underfunded under the current system.
- Alignment with West Midlands Combined Authority more feasible for North.
- Offers opportunity for focused development, especially in towns like Kidderminster and Redditch.

#### **4. What matters most about council operations and services**

- Efficient service delivery (especially adult social care, children's services, planning and waste collection).
- Accountability and scrutiny — concern about lack of oversight and ineffective structures.
- Local representation — strong concern about losing local councillors under a unitary model.
- Preservation of effective tools, e.g. "My Wyre Forest" app.
- Strategic planning and infrastructure development, especially in economically deprived or rural areas.
- Value for money — willing to pay more council tax if it leads to better services.
- Emphasis on quality over cost-saving; concerns that budget-driven streamlining can harm service quality.
- Desire for modern, tech-enabled councils that are responsive and efficient.

#### **5. Other issues / main points raised**

- Scepticism about central government understanding local needs.
- Worries about future mergers and creation of strategic authorities with elected mayors.
- Challenges aligning with regional services (e.g. police, fire) due to mismatched boundaries.
- SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) provision was flagged as severely lacking.
- Need for clarity on funding, especially the viability of smaller authorities.
- Interest in giving town and parish councils more responsibility in a reorganised structure.

## **6. Conclusions / key themes**

- Strong engagement and thoughtful reflection from participants, indicating concern and investment in the process.
- Mixed preferences - there were four in favour of Option 1, three Option 2 and one undecided. Option one for efficiencies and savings, Option 2 for localised service quality and identity.
- Shared values around accountability, local representation, and efficient services emerged across views.
- There is real concern about how any model will be implemented, and whether efficiencies will lead to better or worse outcomes.
- Recognition that the final decision lies with central government, though participants hoped for their feedback to be influential.