



Appendix 4

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
countywide survey results



LGR Qualitative Research 2025

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Introduction and methodology

Methodology

This report presents findings from qualitative focus group research conducted across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough between July and August 2025. Online focus groups tend to be slightly smaller to manage online but this creates more depth of insight. Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 38 residents across six locations: Cambridge City (5 participants), East Cambridgeshire (6 participants), Fenland (7 participants), Huntingdonshire (6 participants), Peterborough (5 participants) and South Cambridgeshire (9 participants).

Participants were recruited through the online surveys to ensure demographic and geographic diversity. The sample represented a range of ages from 18-24 to 75+, with balanced gender representation (19 female, 19 male participants). Length of residence varied from recent arrivals to lifelong residents, providing perspectives across different levels of community connection and council service usage.

Each focus group session lasted 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured discussion guide covering current service experiences, delivery preferences, local identity, development priorities, and reorganisation concerns. All sessions were conducted online via video conferencing, recorded with consent, and transcribed using Otter AI. Analysis followed thematic coding principles, with direct quotations selected to illustrate key themes while maintaining participant anonymity through demographic categorisation.

The focus groups build on the survey findings and elucidate the key points made in the free text responses found in the public survey.

Participant Demographics

The research engaged 38 residents across the study area with the following demographic profile:

Gender Distribution: Female: 19 participants (50%), Male: 19 participants (50%)

Age Range Distribution: 18-24: 1 participant (3%), 25-34: 5 participants (13%), 35-44: 5 participants (13%), 45-54: 12 participants (32%), 55-64: 7 participants (18%), 65-74: 4 participants (11%), 75+: 3 participants (8%)

Geographic Distribution: Cambridge City: 5 participants, East Cambridgeshire: 6 participants, Fenland: 7 participants, Huntingdonshire: 6 participants, Peterborough: 5 participants, South Cambridgeshire: 9 participants

Participants included both frequent users of council services and those with minimal contact, providing perspectives across the spectrum of resident engagement. Length of residence ranged from recent arrivals to lifelong residents, with many participants having lived in their areas for 15+ years.

Interpreting findings

It is important to note that qualitative research is used to explore people's views and experiences, rather than to estimate or quantify how many people hold those views. Such research is intended to be illustrative rather than statistically representative of a wider population. When interpreting the findings from this research, it should be remembered that the results are based on a small number of people who have discussed the relevant issues in-depth; the views stated here are not facts, rather they are the participants' perceptions and the truth as they see it. Equally, participants are typically more critical about an issue because they are being asked to focus on it.

Executive Summary

Service Access and Navigation

The complexity of navigating multiple council structures emerged as one of residents' most significant challenge with their interactions with local government. Participants consistently reported confusion about service responsibilities across parish, district, or county council, with many describing lengthy trial-and-error processes to identify the correct authority for their needs. This multi-tier confusion was particularly acute when issues crossed jurisdictional boundaries or when residents moved within the same area.

While the concept of a one-stop-shop approach held strong appeal in principle, residents expressed significant concerns about whether larger unitary authorities would maintain the responsiveness and local knowledge valued in smaller councils. Participants wanted assurance that simplification would enhance rather than compromise service quality, seeking streamlined access without losing the personal relationships and local understanding that made some current services effective.

The evidence reveals a fundamental tension between the desire for simplified access and fears about losing the human-scale governance that residents value, highlighting the challenge of delivering organisational efficiency while preserving local accountability and responsiveness.

Service Quality vs Cost

Residents demonstrated profound scepticism about claims that reorganisation would deliver cost savings, viewing such promises with cynicism based on previous experiences of public sector transformation. This disbelief was rooted in observations of NHS reorganisations, police restructuring, and other public sector changes, and their own experience of their work being merged, that had promised efficiency savings but delivered increased costs and service disruption, especially during transition.

The concept of value for money was central to residents' thinking, with participants demanding concrete evidence that reorganisation would deliver genuine benefits justifying the disruption and cost. The challenge for reorganisation proponents lies in overcoming deep-seated public disbelief about efficiency savings while demonstrating that structural change can deliver measurable improvements in service quality and value for taxpayers.

Digital Transformation and Accessibility

Digital transformation revealed fundamental tensions between potential service improvements and serious accessibility concerns. While residents appreciated well-functioning digital services for simple transactions, they consistently emphasised the need for human contact and alternative channels, a 'human in the loop' particularly for complex issues requiring judgement, discretion, or detailed explanation.

Significant barriers to digital adoption emerged, including age-related issues, infrastructure limitations, accessibility needs for people with disabilities, and varying levels of digital literacy. Rural connectivity problems and reliance on mobile devices rather than computers created additional barriers that could prevent effective use of digital services even among willing users.

The evidence strongly supports a "channel choice" approach rather than "digital by default," with participants emphasising that digital services should complement rather than replace traditional channels. Successful digital transformation requires not just technological change but fundamental attention to user needs, accessibility requirements, and the maintenance of human contact for those who cannot or choose not to use digital services.

Place Identity and Community Connection

Place identity and geographic affinity emerged as fundamental considerations shaping residents' views about reorganisation arrangements. Particularly striking was the strong positive identification expressed by residents with Cambridge, contrasted with opposition to association with Peterborough based on perceptions of fundamental differences in character, priorities, and community needs. The more rural districts were concerned that the greater demands in urban areas would mean that they would lose out on services.

These geographic preferences reflected practical daily connections through transport, employment, shopping, healthcare, and cultural activities that create natural communities of interest extending across current administrative boundaries. The ease of travel to Cambridge for many compared to difficulty reaching Peterborough reinforced broader patterns of economic and social connection that residents see as appropriate foundations for governance arrangements. The conclusion drawn by participants is that they would like new unitary councils to be located in areas where they find it easier to get to.

The evidence demonstrates that successful reorganisation must work with rather than against the grain of natural patterns of connection and opposition, creating governance arrangements that reflect genuine community networks rather than administrative convenience. Forced associations that cut across fundamental differences in character and priorities risk undermining the place-based identities that residents value and depend upon.

Local Knowledge vs Professional Capacity

A fundamental tension emerged between valuing intimate local understanding and requiring technical expertise for effective service delivery. Residents highly valued local knowledge – geographical understanding, social awareness, historical perspective, and cultural sensitivity – seeing this as irreplaceable for effective governance and democratic legitimacy.

However, participants also recognised significant limitations in relying solely on local knowledge without adequate professional capacity, particularly for complex technical issues, legal compliance, strategic planning, and resource-intensive services. Smaller councils were seen as often lacking specialist expertise needed for modern governance challenges.

The challenge lies in designing structures that harness both local knowledge and professional capacity effectively. Residents want assurance that larger authorities will maintain local connection and understanding while providing technical expertise and resources needed for effective modern service delivery, requiring innovative approaches that preserve community knowledge while building professional capability. In this respect, participants, when thinking about a large authority, are thinking of Cambridgeshire County Council. While opinions of county services are mixed, there are examples of both positive and negative experiences, the concern is with them being seen as bureaucratic and utilitarian, and whether policies can be adjusted at local discretion.

Scale and Geography

Concerns about optimal authority size revealed nuanced understanding that effectiveness requires appropriate balance rather than simply maximising scale. While very small authorities might lack resources and expertise, very large authorities could become unwieldy, bureaucratic, and disconnected from communities, suggesting optimal efficiency at moderate rather than maximum scale.

Geographic accessibility emerged as a fundamental equity issue, with residents recognising that distance, travel time, and transport availability create real barriers particularly affecting elderly people, those without private transport, or families with limited resources. Rural-urban differences in service needs and delivery challenges required flexible approaches rather than standardised urban-focused models. Again, the perception and concern is that the unitary authority will not have the bandwidth to have one policy in one area and one policy in another, which might be more appropriate, but instead has an urban-based policy focus.

Democratic representation challenges were seen as fundamental threats when geographic scale becomes excessive, with participants emphasising that effective representation requires genuine local knowledge, regular community contact, and practical accessibility to constituents.

Democratic Representation and Accountability

It is important to recognise that the majority of people have limited direct contact with elected councillors. Rather than engaging through democratic channels, residents overwhelmingly experienced local government through service delivery, with accountability operating primarily through service performance rather than representative relationships. But while the majority may be council service users, there are a minority who are more active citizens and from the focus group discussions, there do not appear to be any current 'voice of the customer' mechanisms or forums they can be part of as regular residents. These mechanisms will become doubly important with the new unitary councils.

This service-focused experience suggests that for many residents, changes to democratic structures may be less significant than impacts on service quality, accessibility, and responsiveness.

The implications for reorganisation are significant; the public do want local representation – they want councillors who know their 'local patch'. But it will be service performance that will be judged on and that, as we know from the public survey, depends on a backbone of public trust.

Trust and Confidence

Trust emerged as a fundamental prerequisite for effective governance, with development pressure and planning failures identified as major sources of distrust, particularly in areas experiencing rapid growth. Perceptions of poor planning decisions, inadequate infrastructure provision, and lack of perceived community engagement and consultation have created lasting damage to public confidence in local governance.

Leadership and accountability failures were perceived and identified as fundamental barriers to trust, with residents expressing frustration about unclear responsibility structures and ineffective accountability mechanisms in the current system. Distance from decision-making centres exacerbated trust problems, particularly when decisions affecting local communities were made without adequate local understanding.

The evidence demonstrates that public trust operates as both prerequisite for and outcome of effective governance, requiring continuous attention to transparency, accountability, competence, and fairness. In areas experiencing substantial development, maintaining trust requires particularly rigorous standards as the scale and complexity of decisions increase creating multiple opportunities for confidence to be undermined.

Transition Concerns and Opportunities

Residents demonstrated acute awareness that reorganisation represents significant undertaking with substantial implications for service delivery, democratic accountability, staff retention, and system integration. Primary concerns focused on managing transition risks and ensuring that change processes did not undermine service quality, accessibility, or continuity.

Service disruption during transition emerged as the most immediate concern, with anxiety about essential services being compromised while councils focused on reorganisation rather than delivery.

Despite concerns, participants recognised opportunities for improvement through well-managed reorganisation, particularly improving coordination of services. However, these opportunities were seen as dependent on effective implementation and careful preservation of existing strengths while addressing current weaknesses.

Concluding Remarks

This comprehensive qualitative research reveals a sophisticated and nuanced public understanding of the complexities surrounding local government reorganisation. Residents demonstrated clear awareness that structural change involves fundamental trade-offs between competing values and objectives, rather than simple technical adjustments that will automatically improve governance effectiveness.

Key Tensions and Trade-offs

The evidence identifies several fundamental tensions that reorganisation must address:

- **Simplification vs Responsiveness:** While residents desire simplified access through one-stop-shop approaches, they fear losing the local knowledge, personal relationships, and responsive service that characterise effective smaller-scale governance.
- **Professional Capacity vs Local Connection:** There is clear recognition that modern governance requires technical expertise and resources, but deep concern that larger authorities may become disconnected from local communities and lose the intimate understanding that enables effective problem-solving.
- **Efficiency vs Accessibility:** Although participants understand the logic of economies of scale, they are acutely aware that centralisation can create barriers to access, particularly for vulnerable groups, rural communities, and those without private transport.

- **Democratic Accountability vs Service Focus:** The research reveals that residents experience local government primarily through service delivery rather than democratic representation, suggesting that reorganisation success may depend more on maintaining service quality and instituting some kind of mechanism for local voices to be heard.

The Geography of Community Life

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns the importance of natural geographic connections and community networks in shaping residents' preferences for governance arrangements.

This suggests that successful reorganisation from a resident's perspective must respect the practical geography of community life: how people live, work, shop, and access services, rather than imposing arrangements based purely on administrative convenience or theoretical efficiency models. The evidence strongly indicates that governance arrangements work best when they are built upon rather than cut across established networks of community life and economic relationships.

Trust as the Foundation of Legitimacy

The research highlights trust and confidence as fundamental prerequisites for effective local governance, particularly in areas experiencing rapid development and change. The distrust expressed by some residents, based on perceived planning failures and accountability deficits, demonstrates how governance failures can create lasting damage to the social contract between councils and communities.

This has particular significance for reorganisation processes, which inevitably create periods of uncertainty, disruption, and potentially reduced accountability. The evidence suggests that maintaining public trust during transition may be as important as achieving the long-term benefits of structural change, requiring exceptional attention to transparency, communication, service continuity, and accountability during reorganisation processes.

Implications for Reorganisation Design

The findings suggest several critical requirements for successful reorganisation:

1. **Preserve Local Connection:** Larger authorities must find innovative ways to maintain local presence, knowledge, and accountability while gaining the benefits of increased scale and professional capacity.
2. **Respect Natural Boundaries:** Geographic arrangements should reflect established patterns of community connection and economic relationship rather than administrative convenience or population targets.
3. **Maintain Service Focus:** Given that residents experience local government primarily through services, reorganisation should prioritise service continuity, quality, and accessibility over structural considerations. This said, a mechanism of geographical voice of the customer will help with feedback on services.
4. **Manage Transition Risks:** Success requires exceptional attention to change management, communication, service protection, customer support centre and accountability during transition periods that may extend over several years.
5. **Build Rather Than Assume Trust:** Public scepticism about reorganisation benefits means that trust must be earned through demonstrated competence rather than assumed based on the theoretical advantages of larger authorities and to be seen by the public clear investment and improvements to essential services would be a good place to start.

The Challenge Ahead

This research reveals that residents approach reorganisation proposals with informed scepticism based on realistic assessment of the complexities involved and observation of previous transformation exercises. Their concerns are not rooted in resistance to change but in understanding how difficult it is to achieve the promised benefits of structural reform while avoiding the disruption and service degradation that often accompany major organisational change.

The challenge for reorganisation proponents lies not in overcoming uninformed opposition. The public are not opposed to change, they see the benefit of simpler accountable government, but their support is conditional on seeing improvements in services. But, instead, the proponents of reorganization should demonstrate that they have adequate understanding of these complexities and sufficient commitment to managing transition risks to justify the disruption that reorganization is perceived as bringing. This requires moving beyond simple assertions about the benefits of larger authorities to detailed evidence of how reorganisation will address the specific concerns and priorities identified by residents while preserving the aspects of current arrangements that work effectively.

Ultimately, the success of local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will depend not just on the theoretical advantages of unitary authorities but on the practical demonstration that larger authorities can deliver the local knowledge, responsive service, investment in services, democratic accountability, and community connection that residents value while providing the professional capacity, strategic capability, and service resilience that modern governance requires.

The evidence from the LGR research package provides a clear framework for understanding what residents expect and need from reorganisation, offering valuable guidance for designing and implementing structural changes that genuinely improve rather than compromise the relationship between local government and the communities it serves.

Service access and navigation

The complexity of navigating multiple council structures emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing residents across all five focus group locations. This complexity manifested in confusion about service responsibilities, difficulty identifying correct contacts, and frustration with being passed between different levels of government. The multi-tier system created particular confusion, with residents often unsure whether to contact district, county, or parish councils for different issues.

"I deal with the council quite a bit, actually, at the moment, on all three levels. And it really frustrates me that everything is so disparate. You know, you've got parish council, got East Cambridge Council, you've got Cambridge City, Cambridge County Council. It's quite difficult to find out exactly who you need to talk to get something done, and sometimes the councillors are astride more than one council, right? It's a bit of a mess at the moment, and I think it does need sorting out."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

This confusion was particularly acute for residents dealing with issues that crossed jurisdictional lines or when moving house within the same area. The process of identifying the correct authority often involved lengthy trial and error, with residents being redirected multiple times before reaching the appropriate department.

"In regard to my contact with the council on a regular basis, it doesn't happen, but I do contact them regarding things like we had to have a tree [removed] which was oversized...because we've moved within Ely, I had to sort out the Council Tax. Who did I call? I have no idea, because I got put through to one person through to another. So, I definitely think there are some improvements that could happen within the system."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

Even when participants knew which council to contact, finding the appropriate department or individual proved challenging. The system appeared to lack integration, with different departments operating in isolation even within the same building, creating additional barriers to effective service delivery.

"Finding out who provides a service can be quite tricky. Actually, getting hold of somebody in any of the councils can be a positive nightmare. It can take weeks sometimes to find a person who deals with the issue. Once you've found somebody, normally it gets resolved. But that initial trying to find somebody or phone the council and excuse me on the phone for an hour just trying to go through hoops to find out who's supposed to be dealing with your particular need, particularly when we're split over three different councils, depending on the service you're looking for."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

When participants successfully navigated to the correct service, experiences varied dramatically. Some described exemplary service delivery that demonstrated the potential for effective council response, characterised by quick response times, clear communication, and proactive updates on progress.

"My positive experience a years ago near my home due to drought...that was the explanation given - there was severe deformities on the pavement, like dangerously severe for people who use mobility aids, or actually parents with the prams. I reported the problem, and I was really pleasantly surprised to see first thing, there were markings around the place - be aware that there is a problem. Those appeared like two days later, and after a week the situation was sorted, and I even received emails updating me on the progress that was to my opinion a stellar performance."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

However, these positive experiences contrasted sharply with other participants' encounters with prolonged delays, poor communication, and repeated unfulfilled promises. These negative experiences often involved more complex issues or situations where responsibility was disputed between different authorities.

"I'm paying Council Tax, therefore I'm expecting for them to deal with the fact that I have one brown garden bin outside my house that hasn't been used in at least seven years. And I've asked them, I don't want to say wrong thing, three or four times during those seven years, to finally take that bin away, because it's taking space, like literally taking space. And guess what, this summer, we finally managed to get that bin in the car and taken to the recycling centre, because they promised me to take it away every time. And as you figured out, they never did."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

Given these navigation challenges and the inconsistency in service delivery, participants generally found the concept of a one-stop-shop approach appealing in principle. The idea of having a single point of contact for all council services resonated with all focus

groups, with many seeing this as a potential solution to the current system's complexity. This appeal was evident across different locations and age groups.

"The divisions between responsibilities for various things are not quite as easy to understand as you would think, which makes me think that having one neutral council, where there was one place, one phone number, one set of offices, might make things easier."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

"So, if you look at something like Northstowe, that was a complete cock up of a road project, because you had some roads being done by the County Council, some roads being done by whichever District Council. It was neither of them talking to each other, and a complete mess was made. So in some ways, in centralizing all of that functionality would make good sense... the more you can combine into one authority, the more joined up you think some of those transport discussions would be, it does create difficulties having a local planning authority that is at district council level and an infrastructure authority at County Council level that deals with"

Male, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

However, while participants welcomed the prospect of simplified access, they also expressed significant concerns about whether larger unitary authorities would maintain the responsiveness and local knowledge that some valued in smaller councils. These concerns were rooted in experiences with existing large authorities and fears about losing personal relationships and local understanding, especially when participants made comparisons to the county council. The county council can appear remote and utilitarian in its outlook and key not taking responsibility for its decisions. Policies tailored to work for the majority of people can seem odd to those that they do not work for, especially where there is local context for difference. This is a key concern of residents with larger authorities.

"My issue is with Cambridgeshire County Council, which it's the sort of size that we seem to be heading to. Oh, well, it's going to be half the size, very difficult. They are very bureaucratic. I think they're so large it's very difficult to find someone who will take responsibility for anything. And they pass you from pillar to post."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

Participants worried that larger authorities might become more impersonal and less responsive to individual concerns, potentially losing the local knowledge and personal relationships that made some current services effective.

"I think in the scenario where I had contact with the local councilor, it does make a difference, because they actually knew local services. Not that it ended up being successful, covid, various other factors contributed, but so they knew some local facilities that were potentially coming on board that might have assisted the situation. So, they knew local networks that they could tap us into to support what the issue was. And I think you would lose that knowledge."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

The challenge for reorganisation will be delivering the benefits of streamlined access while preserving service quality and local accountability. Participants wanted assurance that simplification would not come at the expense of responsiveness, blanket policies or local understanding but would genuinely improve their ability to access appropriate help when needed. The concern here is about a loss of discretion with local differences.

These navigation challenges were evident across participants' experiences, demonstrating both the frustrations and occasional successes that characterise current service access arrangements. These accounts reinforce the complexity of the current system whilst highlighting the importance of personal intervention in resolving service failures.

"Firstly, I've tried to put in planning permission. Yeah, and the service I got was appalling, no communications. After five months, I actually went to the council village councillor, I immediately get a response."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"I've only had positive experiences recently, though. Just last week I phoned up South Cambridgeshire, and I just phoned the standard number, and the woman was very, very helpful."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

Local Knowledge vs Professional Capacity

The tension between local knowledge and professional capacity emerged as one of the most fundamental and complex considerations in participants' discussions about local government reorganisation. This theme encapsulates a core dilemma facing modern local governance: whether to prioritise the intimate understanding that comes from lived experience within a community, or the technical expertise and institutional resources that enable sophisticated service delivery. Far from being a simple either-or choice, participants' discussions revealed this as a multifaceted challenge requiring careful balance and innovative solutions.

The value participants placed on local knowledge was deeply rooted in their experiences of effective local representation and service delivery. This is also observed in both the surveys of residents and stakeholders. Local knowledge manifested in multiple dimensions: geographical understanding of local infrastructure, environmental challenges, and community assets; social awareness of community dynamics, informal networks, and local leadership; historical perspective on previous decisions, ongoing issues, and community development; and cultural sensitivity to local values, priorities, and ways of working. This knowledge was seen as irreplaceable and fundamental to effective local governance.

"I think in this particular instance, a larger authority feels like a worse idea, because the problem was a lack of understanding of the local context. We do nationally need a lot more houses. I'd like to have my own house one day. So would everyone I know. But you can't just build houses anywhere and say, well, good job."

Female, 18-24, Huntingdonshire

Participants provided numerous examples of how local knowledge translated into more effective problem-solving and service delivery. Councillors and council staff who lived locally were seen as having immediate understanding of issues, knowing the right people to contact, and being able to navigate local networks effectively. This local embeddedness was valued not just for its practical benefits, but also for the democratic legitimacy it provided.

"I think in the scenario where I had contact with the local councilor, it does make a difference, because they actually knew local services. They actually not that it ended up being successful, covid, various other factors contributed, but so they knew some local facilities that were potentially coming on board that might have assisted the situation. So they knew local networks that they could tap us into to support what the issue was."

Female, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

The importance of historical and contextual knowledge was particularly emphasised by longer-term residents who had witnessed multiple attempts to address local issues. This institutional memory was seen as crucial for avoiding repeated mistakes and building on previous successes. There is also an accountability dimension to this. If you've got somebody that knows and understands your community and is representing them directly, it is much easier then to hold them to account for what they do and don't do. If you've got somebody who's representing a very large area, then individual communities lose their voice in that process.

"If you've got somebody that knows and understands your community and is representing them directly, it is much easier then to hold them to account for what they do and don't do. If you've got somebody who's representing a very large amorphous area, then individual communities lose their voice in that process."

Male, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

However, participants also recognised significant limitations in relying solely on local knowledge without adequate professional capacity. These limitations were most apparent in complex technical issues, legal compliance requirements, strategic planning challenges, and resource-intensive service delivery. Smaller councils were seen as often lacking the specialist expertise needed for modern governance challenges.

"[The problem]... you need a large body or a guiding mind in order to fight for things like that, the parish council can't organize the transport system across the whole of the county."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Participants recognised that good intentions and local knowledge were insufficient when dealing with complex regulatory frameworks or technical challenges that required specialist expertise. Conversely, participants' experiences with larger authorities highlighted both the benefits and limitations of professional capacity without local knowledge. While larger councils were recognised as having greater resources, specialist staff, and technical capabilities, they were also seen as potentially disconnected from local realities and community needs. This disconnection could result in technically sound but practically inappropriate solutions.

"Unless you've got really commercially savvy people and you have good lawyers that know how to wrap stuff up really well in a contract. And, you know, have good payment mechanisms and good, you know, really, really, really hold them to their feet to the fire, you will fail. And that's, you know, Birmingham, through and through."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

Participants also recognised that the relative importance of local knowledge versus professional capacity might vary depending on the type of service or issue involved. Some services were seen as benefiting more from local understanding and personal relationships, while others required technical expertise and professional systems. The challenge was determining which approach was most appropriate for different functions.

The risk of losing local knowledge through reorganisation was a significant concern for many participants. There was worry that larger authorities would inevitably become more bureaucratic and less responsive, with professional staff who lacked local connection and understanding. This concern was particularly acute among participants who had positive experiences with local representatives.

. But I think part of the challenges here is that if you say to someone at Cambridgeshire [County] Council, I live in Fenland, they look at you and go, okay, and you tell them the village you live in, they go, okay. They're not going to care, right? Because they believe that their Council's the centre of the universe."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

The challenge for reorganisation lies in designing structures that can harness both local knowledge and professional capacity effectively. Participants wanted assurance that larger authorities would find innovative ways to maintain local connection and understanding while also providing the technical expertise and resources needed for effective modern service delivery.

Participants echoed these concerns about maintaining local representation and connection within larger authority structures. Their perspectives revealed particular anxiety about the loss of accessible local representatives and the risk of creating governance arrangements that are neither truly local nor effectively national in scope.

"I would like to be able to have a representative who I have voted for, who can help me talk to the right person in the council to get whatever issue is resolved."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"At the moment, the county council is in Alconbury, which, okay, it might be more central. It used to be at Castle Hill in Cambridge, which was brilliant for people in Cambridge."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"My concern is we're supposed to have central government to do things for the nation and local government to do things for where I live."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"You're going to end up with governments in the middle. And I've neither got stuff accountable at a national level, nor stuff accountable at a local level, just a bunch of people in the middle who are not really close to anyone."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

The success of reorganisation may ultimately depend on how well this fundamental tension can be resolved, ensuring that the benefits of professional capacity do not come at the expense of the local knowledge and community connection that residents value so highly.

Service Quality vs Cost

The relationship between service quality and cost emerged as a central concern for participants across all focus groups, revealing not only sophisticated understanding about public sector finance but also profound scepticism about promises that reorganisation would deliver cost savings. This scepticism represents perhaps the most significant challenge facing proponents of local government transformation, as participants consistently expressed disbelief that structural changes would result in genuine financial benefits for residents or improved value for money.

The most striking finding was participants' widespread disbelief in claims that transformation would save money. This scepticism was rooted in previous experiences of public sector reorganisation, observations of other transformation exercises, and a general cynicism about promises of efficiency savings. Participants had heard similar promises before and remained unconvinced that reorganisation would deliver the financial benefits being claimed by its proponents.

"I think what worries me there is that they think there will be [savings], but in reality, there will be so much disruption and disturbance that they actually will need to employ more people Yeah, and the service will be worse as well. So, it's going to cost more, and the service will be nowhere near as efficient as it is now."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"I think there's, there's pros and cons to it, but I would say that actually we, my team, covered all of Cambridgeshire, sort of the wider team. But actually, we then had our little teams geographically. So, although you get the kind of big overarching, whatever the unitary authorities may or may not look like, you're going to need to have those local, localized teams within it. And then you wonder, are we going to make things bigger and then make them smaller? Again, I know that's happened in health many times, where you get these giant super trusts, and then, actually, they split them up again, and then they put them back together again. And that goes on a bit of a cycle so many, many years ago, when I worked down in London, we had a smaller authority, and then it linked up to bigger bits, and some bits were included, and some bits works, and then it all changes again, and you get all of the costs associated with all these changes and the upheaval, and then it all gets to get put together in a different kind of format again. So, I think, I think there's benefits in terms of scale. So, within our wider team, when I think prior to my time, there had been separate teams within the Cambridgeshire side, the sector of Cambridge side and the Huntingdonshire side. And the benefits of coming together were that we could make sure there was less of a postcode lottery in terms of the services that people got."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

This scepticism extended to specific claims about efficiency savings and economies of scale. While participants could understand the theoretical logic of larger organisations

achieving better value through bulk purchasing or reduced duplication, they remained unconvinced that these theoretical benefits would materialise in practice or be passed on to residents in the form of lower costs or better services.

" They start off with this idea of what the system is going to do. It's going to do X, Y and Z, and everyone goes, Yeah, marvelous. It's going to take us four years to do that. So, by the time you've gone through that whole four-year period, the need is different. The outputs [that] are required are different. And therefore, it starts to become a situation that that it just grows out of all control. And that's where you have things reported in the in the press, I believe, like HS2, where they're saying, Oh, it's over budget by squillion pounds because but we've changed what we actually said we wanted in the first place. So we start off with this, this thing that we want, and it becomes this thing that everyone suddenly decides they need. And that's why we never appear to get value for money from these massive projects."

Male, 55-64, Huntingdonshire

Participants were particularly sceptical about the costs of transformation itself, recognising that reorganisation exercises typically required substantial upfront investment in new systems, redundancy payments, consultancy fees, and management time. Many questioned whether these transition costs would ever be recovered through subsequent efficiency savings, viewing transformation as an expensive exercise that ultimately increased rather than reduced public spending.

"I didn't see a huge amount of benefit. Yes, we were allowed to draw on resources from outside of Cambridgeshire to deal with problems, but at the end of the day, it was all about saving money. And I think if someone tries to package this up as differently, that we are going to get better service, we're all fairly sort of wise here. We're not going to get a better service. If anything, we're going to get a worse service."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

The scepticism was reinforced by participants' observations of previous reorganisation exercises in other sectors or areas. Many could cite examples of transformations that had promised savings but delivered increased costs, leading to a general cynicism about the motives and competence of those promoting reorganisation. This historical perspective created a significant credibility gap that proponents of change would need to address.

"It hasn't really reduced workforce in any of the past examples we've seen. So, I'm not as convinced that we're going to make any saving on in that respect. But all that changes really is that you lose the diversity of strategies."

Male, 25-34, Fenland

Despite this scepticism about cost savings, participants demonstrated sophisticated understanding of the relationship between investment and service quality.

However, this frustration with current arrangements where costs appeared to be rising while service quality remained static or declined. Participants expressed particular concern about situations where Council Tax increases were not matched by visible improvements in service delivery, creating a cycle of declining trust in public sector efficiency.

"It's a bit like, for instance, in Cambridge. Now Parkside police station has closed. So although you can go to the police station, there's a telephone on the wall and you can pick it up and speak to someone who may or may not be actually behind the wall in Parkside, I think there's something in a community that, for me, I want my community to have things that you can go into and speak to people. I want within my community to go into a police station. I want to go into the local council I want to go into the local library. And although I get this idea that if you go bigger, some of those things might go I think we don't necessarily need to go to go big."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

The concept of value for money was central to participants' thinking, but their scepticism about transformation savings meant they approached promises of improved efficiency with considerable caution. Rather than simply accepting claims about economies of scale or reduced duplication, participants wanted concrete evidence that reorganisation would deliver genuine benefits that justified the disruption and cost involved.

Participants recognised that some apparent inefficiencies in current arrangements might actually serve important purposes and were concerned that reorganisation might eliminate these without understanding their value. This nuanced understanding of organisational complexity made them more sceptical of simple claims about efficiency gains through structural change.

"So I just worry that, you know, if they can't balance the books, they can't get it right for Peterborough, they don't recognize how infrastructure and basic facilities are critical, how they're going to do it for a larger area, the only good thing I would see, though, having dealt with all these different levels, is that cutting out the layers of bureaucracy, I'm hoping there'll be some money released and put in at grassroots so we will get more money invested in the infrastructure we need, rather than paying multiple layers of people doing the same job. I can't believe the wastage I've seen."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

The importance of transparency and accountability in spending decisions was emphasised throughout discussions, with participants wanting clear evidence that any investment in reorganisation would deliver genuine benefits. The scepticism about transformation savings meant that proponents would need to provide compelling evidence and robust accountability mechanisms to gain public support.

"All I want is transparency. We all know that this is probably going to happen. We all know this is really to save money. We all know stuff is going to get a little bit rubbish before it's going to get better. Please don't treat us as a naive group... But just be transparent with us from the outset, and don't try and package this some way that we are not, you know, [we are] not a stupid bunch of people. We understand that it's going to be difficult, and we're probably willing to deal with those difficult times as long as we know what's coming in the next or two years."

Male, 54-64, East Cambridgeshire

Participants demonstrated similar scepticism about council spending priorities and efficiency, with particular concern about waste in current arrangements. However, their perspectives also revealed a more nuanced understanding of the need to balance service priorities and costs.

"I think my, one of my biggest concerns of local government and national government is they're trying to do too much, that they're doing things they don't need to do, and they waste vast about amounts of money."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"Just recently, in the news, they had this thing about this sewage treatment plant north of Cambridge, which they've now mothballed and wasted 80 million pounds."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

The challenge for reorganisation proponents lies in overcoming this deep-seated scepticism about transformation savings. Participants' disbelief was not based on ignorance or resistance to change, but on informed observation of previous reorganisation exercises and realistic assessment of the costs and complexities involved. Success would require not just promises of efficiency gains, but concrete evidence that transformation could deliver genuine value for money without compromising service quality or accessibility. Most fundamentally, it would require acknowledgement that the public simply do not believe that transformation saves money, and that this scepticism needs management and represents a major barrier to gaining support for reorganisation proposals.

Digital Transformation and Accessibility

Digital transformation in local government emerged as one of the most complex and contentious themes across all focus groups, revealing fundamental tensions between the potential benefits of online service delivery and serious concerns about accessibility, usability, and digital exclusion through the reorganisation. The discussions revealed that participants' preferences for service delivery channels varied significantly depending on the type of service, the complexity of their needs, and their personal circumstances. Rather than a simple preference for either digital or traditional channels, participants demonstrated an understanding of when different approaches were most appropriate, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach to digital transformation that recognises the diversity of residents' needs and service requirements.

The quality and usability of existing digital services was a major source of frustration across all locations, with participants reporting significant problems with council websites, online portals, and digital processes. These negative experiences had created considerable scepticism about the potential for digital transformation to improve service delivery, with many participants expressing preference for traditional channels despite recognising the theoretical benefits of online access. The contrast between successful and unsuccessful digital experiences highlighted the critical importance of user-centred design and robust technical implementation.

"It's interesting, because before Council Tax, East Cambridgeshire has got this Anglia Revenue Partnership thing, which is a bit similar to what is proposed for the unitary thing. I think it's East Cambridgeshire, Fenland and I think there are some councils in Norfolk and Suffolk, basically. And they all got together. And if you want to, like, check your Council Tax, you have to go on that portal, this Anglia Revenue thing. You have to log in. It's not very good. It's like, all I want is get a PDF of my Council Tax, and you have to go to a website that's really complicated. You never know what your login is, and it's not very good. I just wish they sent me an email with PDF attached, because that's all I want."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

"Reflecting on that I'd absolutely agree -the Council Tax element - never faced anything like that in the Peterborough Council. But then, as soon as I moved here, all of a sudden, as you mentioned, there's this portal - so many different councils to reach out to. Eventually, I just gave up on the portal and ended up calling."

Female, 55-64, Fenland

However, where digital services worked well, participants were highly appreciative of their convenience and efficiency. The most successful digital interactions were characterised by simplicity, reliability, and clear outcomes, particularly for straightforward transactional services such as reporting environmental issues or accessing basic information.

"I actually have had really positive experiences with Fenland, really happy with them. I've reported fly tipping twice on my lane, and they literally picked it up within 24 hours. I reported to the county council of an overgrown footpath where I wanted to walk my dogs, and again, they organised for that to be all cut back within a reasonably short space of time. It's so easy online now, and actually, I reported it online. I've never actually had to speak to anybody, so everything that I've needed to contact them about, I haven't actually spoken to anybody. I've just filled in online, and it's just been dealt with."

Female, 55-64, Fenland

The preference for telephone and face-to-face services emerged strongly across all focus groups, particularly for complex issues, when problems arose with digital services, or when participants needed reassurance and human interaction. Participants valued the ability to speak to knowledgeable staff who could understand their specific circumstances and provide tailored advice or solutions. The importance of human contact was emphasised not just for practical reasons, but also for the reassurance and confidence it provided.

"I rang the council up. The bin was delivered within a week. I'd spoke to someone on the telephone. Had been perfect, but you just want there to be someone at the end of the phone, email or whatever when you need them. And I think the worry is that there won't be that person to speak to anymore. It will be like - we'll get back to you in five to 10 days, or whatever, and it might be a different person speaking to you each time."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

"I'm standing by their ability to avoid any sort of personal contact. You have to go to a website. You go to a form. You're sitting there going - is there anybody there? You know, press button one, press button two. They just try. And the councils are going the same way, you know, they just try to avoid any sort of human contact."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Service complexity emerged as a crucial factor determining channel preference. Participants consistently distinguished between simple, transactional services that could work well online and complex issues requiring human judgement, discretion, or detailed explanation. Simple services such as bin collection requests, basic information queries, or routine payments were generally considered suitable for digital delivery, provided the systems worked reliably.

"I just need a simple system. I just need to know who I am to contact with that problem. I'm probably really naive, but I really don't understand the purpose of parish councils, and I'm sorry if someone sits on a parish council, I don't really know their function. I just want that if I have a problem, or my family has a

problem, I need to contact that person, and at the end of the day, I can contact them by email, Instagram, Facebook, in person. I really don't care, as long as I can speak to someone via that digitally or in person or by phone."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"Digital services are fine for simple things, but for anything complicated, you need to speak to a real person who understands your situation. Online services should be an option, not the only option. There should always be a way to speak to someone if you need to."

Female, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

Complex services involving social care, planning applications, licensing, or other issues requiring professional judgement were consistently identified as requiring human interaction. Participants emphasised that these services involved nuanced circumstances that could not be adequately addressed through automated systems or standard online forms.

"When we moved up from London, that was partially because of our kids...we have two adopted kids, just struggled with London, and so have a number of challenges. So, we wanted a slightly more manageable place to live, so I had to deal very quickly with social services and other things. So interestingly, it was relatively straightforward to work out who to talk to. So social services, family support, adoptions - Cambridge County Council, then stuff to do with the house and those practical things Fenland. But I guess the one sort of experience I had with everything was people change jobs quite frequently in all of the councils, the minute that happens, you start from scratch."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

"We want to do some minor works. We live in a listed property [so contacted] the conservation officer. They changed. So it was like rebooting...we had went through three social workers in three and a half weeks at Cambridge with the adoption support. And to be fair, that's not unique to here, [same in] London. I went through six social workers in eight weeks, and it was always the same thing -there was just no continuity."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

The importance of continuity and relationship-building was highlighted particularly in relation to complex services. Participants valued having consistent contact with the same staff members who understood their circumstances and could provide continuity of service and not having to endlessly repeat the details of their case. This was seen as particularly important for ongoing cases or where trust and rapport were essential.

"So, I deal with licensing, because I have a shop, so we've got a premises' license. I've got a license, basically. So, I deal with their licensing department at East Cambridgeshire District Council. So, I actually just paid them my annual fee today. Actually, they sent me my premises license invoice today. I called them up and I paid by card over the phone. They're all right, but yeah, it is nice because it's a small department. And there's one lady that deals with me every year. Basically, she comes in, does the inspections, and, yeah, we've got a rapport. Basically, she knows the shop, she knows me, etc, so it's nice to have the same person to deal with."

Male, 25-34, Fenland

Digital exclusion emerged as a central concern, with participants highlighting multiple barriers to digital access and use. Age-related digital confidence was frequently mentioned, but participants also identified infrastructure limitations, device constraints, accessibility needs, and varying levels of digital literacy as significant barriers that could exclude substantial portions of the population from digital-first services.

"I do contact them digitally. But it is, it's a major problem, because in Fenland, in March anyway, there are huge numbers of retired people, quite old, who are not digitally aware or not on the internet. And I feel for them if they want some contact and services, they can't just do their report online because they don't use online things."

Male, 75-84, Fenland

"Yes, I think that is a problem that you will find when you move to unitary councils, is everyone assumes that you've got a smartphone, everyone assumes that you've got access to email. And those assumptions are dangerous, because not everybody does."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

The generational divide in digital comfort was acknowledged, but participants emphasised that this should not lead to services that excluded older residents. There was strong feeling that digital transformation should enhance rather than replace traditional service channels, ensuring that all residents could access services regardless of their digital confidence or capabilities.

"I do know people who can't use computers, who still need to use the telephone or have someone walk them through things, and that the council is meant to be accessible to everybody, not just us."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

Infrastructure and access barriers were highlighted as significant constraints on digital service delivery. Rural connectivity issues, reliance on mobile devices rather than computers, and varying levels of internet access were identified as practical barriers that could prevent effective use of digital services even by those willing and able to use them.

"The council needs to remember that not everyone has good internet access. In rural areas, the connection can be really slow or unreliable. I don't have a computer at home, just my phone. Some of these websites don't work properly on a phone, so I can't use them."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Accessibility for people with disabilities and learning difficulties was raised as a crucial consideration often overlooked in digital service design. Participants highlighted the need for digital services to accommodate different needs and abilities, including visual impairments, learning difficulties, and other conditions that might affect ability to use standard online interfaces.

"I work for a charity that supports housing for people with disabilities. So, you know, we cannot, you know, just do things digitally. We have to have a range of options, and we have to tailor them. The whole point is that the stuff that is absolutely for the bulk of people who can do things, we want to be efficient effective in digital so that actually we have the resources. And the council should do the same thing, and that's why I'm broadly supportive of this"

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

The importance of user experience design was emphasised throughout discussions, with participants calling for digital services that were intuitive, well-tested, and designed with real users in mind. Poor website design, complicated forms, and unclear navigation were identified as major barriers to effective digital service use, even among digitally confident users.

"But frankly, if you don't work or understand local authority, it's a bit like the crystal maze trying to find stuff on the website, and I fully appreciate that. But how do we make it easier?"

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

Participants provided additional insight into the practical realities of contact centre operations and innovative service delivery approaches. Users highlighted the tired messages when it takes time to deal with a call.

"So, I did ring up the council, this week actually - the South Cambridge [number] - about a situation. And I know a bit about contact centres, and I would guarantee I could do that every day of the week. We'd make that phone call, and they would have that response that we're busier than normal."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

Reliability and availability of digital services were identified as crucial factors in building confidence and encouraging adoption. Participants emphasised that digital services needed to work consistently and be available when needed, with adequate backup support when technical problems occurred. The concept of channel choice emerged as a key principle, with participants emphasising that digital services should be complemented rather than replace traditional channels. The idea of "digital by default, human by exception" was acceptable only if the exception was genuinely available and accessible when needed.

"The problem is that when you phone them, they often just tell you to go online anyway. So, you're stuck in a loop. I don't mind using online services, but they need to be simple and straightforward. Some of these forms are ridiculously complicated."

Male, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

Navigation and service identification emerged as particular challenges in the current system, with participants struggling to understand which council was responsible for which services. Digital transformation was seen as potentially helpful in addressing this confusion, but only if it genuinely simplified rather than complicated the process of finding and accessing appropriate services.

"I find it took me a long time, years when I moved here, to get my head around which part of the council does what. I mean, there's a town in March. It's a town council, which, as far as I can see, doesn't need to exist. I work out and find who to report concerns or issues to amongst the three, and [but the issue] remains with loads of residents in March - they don't know whether the county council or district council, or even the town council."

Male, 75-84, Fenland

"I've not had any issue finding out which Council does which, because you just google your problem, really,"

Male, 25-34, Fenland

Local provision and face-to-face access emerged as important values that participants wanted to preserve in any digital transformation. The preference for local services was not simply about convenience, but reflected deeper values about community connection, accountability, and the importance of human relationships in public service delivery.

"I would rather shop locally and have that contact with the person that's serving me; know that I have a good service and know that the money is being used in a good way, whereas I would prefer not to shop on Amazon if I can, because of the ethics behind the company. And I think that's kind of the same thing I think the [council] service[s] should be like. So have someone at the end of a phone that you can speak to if you need to be listened to."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

The comparison with private sector digital transformation, particularly in banking, provided important context for participants' expectations and concerns. While participants recognised that digital transformation was inevitable, they were sceptical about claims that it would improve service quality, based on their experience of bank branch closures and reduced personal service in other sectors.

"What we've had at the moment in Ely is all the banks are saying, right, we're going to close our branches, we're going to save money, we're going to go online. Santander is one of our banks. They now only open three days a week rather than five days a week. So, trying to cut costs, which you understand why they're doing it, but it's how it's packaged to you, so that they're honest. They're saying they're going to cut costs."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

The relationship between local knowledge and digital service delivery was identified as a particular concern in the context of unitary authority development. Participants worried that larger, more centralised authorities would lose the local knowledge and relationships that enabled effective problem-solving, particularly for complex or unusual circumstances that did not fit standard digital processes.

"It seems very much you need an enabler, or politely, a fixer, to fix your problems to get you to where you need to get to. And certainly, the thing that I will say within Fenland Council, and I might be speaking out of turn here is, if you know the right fixer, your problem disappears very quickly. The problem, I can see us, when you move to a unitary council, when you base it out of somewhere, you're going to lose, well, to some extent, the brown bag sort of approach is going to disappear, which is good, but also you're going to get a disconnect with your local connections."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

The challenge for digital transformation in local government lies in balancing the potential efficiency and convenience benefits of online services with the imperative to maintain accessibility, choice, and human contact for all residents. Participants' experiences and concerns highlighted that successful digital transformation requires not just technological change, but fundamental attention to user needs, service complexity, accessibility requirements, and the maintenance of alternative channels for those who cannot or choose not to use digital services. The goal should be digital enhancement rather than digital replacement, ensuring that technology improves rather than restricts access to public services. Most importantly, the evidence suggests that different services require different approaches, and that a one-size-fits-all digital strategy would fail to meet the diverse needs of residents and the varying complexity of local government services. The preference for local provision and human contact, particularly for complex services, represents a fundamental challenge to digital-first approaches that must be addressed if transformation is to gain public support and deliver genuine improvements in service quality and accessibility.

Place Identity and Community Connection

Place identity and community connection emerged as fundamental concerns across all focus groups, revealing not only deep attachments to local character and distinctiveness, but also strong patterns of geographic affinity and explicit opposition that shaped participants' views about potential reorganisation arrangements. The discussions revealed that residents' place identities operated at multiple scales simultaneously, encompassing both immediate local attachments and broader regional connections that created clear preferences for association with some areas and emphatic rejection of others. Most significantly, participants from East Cambridgeshire expressed strong positive identification with Cambridge while demonstrating profound opposition to any association with Peterborough, based on perceptions of fundamental differences in character, priorities, safety, and community needs.

The opposition to Peterborough was not simply a matter of administrative preference but reflected deep-seated perceptions of fundamental differences in community character, safety, and priorities. Participants with direct experience of working across the region were particularly emphatic about these differences, arguing that Peterborough represented a completely different type of place with different challenges, community dynamics, and approaches to local issues. Equally, residents make the point that these demands will call on public resources and this will be to their detriment.

"So, I've worked in Peterborough, Huntingdon, Fenland, East Cambridgeshire, Cambridge City. I'm out of the world, brilliant. So, I've worked the whole district, yeah in my previous occupation. Peterborough, and I'm really sorry if you come from Peterborough, is a completely different beast to Ely and Cambridge City. The residents, the communities are completely different...the groups of communities are completely different...their priorities are going to be completely different, to how East Cambridgeshire sort of approach their communities. It can be a really unsafe place as well, Peterborough. Ely, I consider a really safe place at the moment. So, I do have concerns. If we're going to be sort of lumped in, then I think it's probably going to hurt Ely more so than if we were to going to be lumped in with sort of Fenland or Cambridge City."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

This opposition was reinforced by practical considerations about distance, accessibility, and natural patterns of connection. Participants emphasised that the practical difficulties of travelling to Peterborough compared to the ease of reaching Cambridge reflected deeper patterns of economic and social connection that should inform governance arrangements.

"But if we go, if we go with Peterborough, which is, I think, is one of the favoured options. So, Peterborough is a long way away, and they have very different priorities from around here. I think I want us to go anywhere [but] Peterborough."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"Try and drive from Ely to Peterborough, then drive from Ely to Cambridge. Yeah, get a drive from Ely to Cambridge. Get a train from Ely to Peterborough. Another World."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Participants demonstrated strong attachment to their local communities whilst also valuing connectivity to broader regional areas. Their perspectives illustrated how place identity encompasses both local distinctiveness and regional connectivity.

"I think I like living in Impington because it has all the amenities, Histon and Impington together, but it's very close to the city, so it's just very convenient in and out of the city."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"I'm very keen on open spaces, and in particular, where I live [we have good], communications - A10, A14. I can get to anywhere in East Anglia in an hour, and there's big blue skies."

Male, 75-84, South Cambridgeshire

The differences in community needs and priorities between areas were seen as fundamental barriers to effective joint governance. Participants working in education and social services were particularly clear about the different levels of need and different approaches required in different areas, arguing that combining areas with very different socio-economic profiles would inevitably lead to inappropriate prioritisation and resource allocation. This is a key insight into residents' reservations about going with Peterborough as they think Peterborough will absorb all the resources. They do not consider that there will be a mechanism to preserve budget allocations to different localities.

"So, I work within the education sector... the needs of the people are completely different. So, in Peterborough, there's high level of unemployment, there's low-income households, there's high level of social needs. In like Cambridge centre, like East Cambridgeshire, all of these places, the level of need is different. So, for example, in Peterborough at the moment, they will be prioritising feeding children over the six weeks' holiday because the families can't afford to feed their children. In East Cambridgeshire, there's loads of activities that [are] being put on to support families for supporting their children during the holidays, and when you look at the two places, obviously, if you were merged together, you would prioritise feeding children over providing them with nice activities. But why should we have to go without to support another area?"

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

"It's not just about the total number; it's about the fact that the needs in Peterborough are totally different to the needs in Cambridgeshire. So, putting them both together, you actually cause a lot of disruption. It's difficult to actually offer this the same service to two different types of customer."

Male, 75-84, East Cambridgeshire

Concerns about resource allocation and competing priorities were central to opposition to association with areas perceived as having greater needs. Participants worried that the resources and quality of services they currently enjoyed would be diverted to areas with higher levels of deprivation, threatening the community assets and quality of life that had attracted them to their current locations.

"What I see is there is a lot of money being put into Fenland and Peterborough. A lot of money. And if that has to continue, then where's that money come from? Is that then coming out of like East Cambridgeshire's budget? Are we then going to have to take a step back to allow that money to continue to be ploughed into Fenland and Peterborough? It makes me feel a little bit uncomfortable."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"So, myself I am expecting my first child the end of the year. The reason I live in Ely is because it has all of these resources around me, and the worry is, is that by having areas with higher levels of needs that that will be taken away from us, and it doesn't seem fair, we've not done anything."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

In contrast to the opposition to Peterborough, participants from East Cambridgeshire expressed strong positive identification with Cambridge, describing themselves as feeling "part of Cambridge" and "at home there" despite living outside the city boundaries. This connection was not simply about convenience or transport links but reflected a deeper sense of shared identity and belonging that extended across administrative boundaries.

"I find it quite friendly. I find it a comfortable size, and yes, I feel part of Cambridge. I feel part of the city because we're so close to Cambridge, which is the sort of I mean, when I go to Cambridge, I do feel very much at home there, but I really like living in Ely."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

The practical connections to Cambridge through commuting, transport links, and daily life patterns reinforced this sense of shared identity. Participants described choosing their current locations specifically because of the balance they offered between rural or small-town character and easy access to Cambridge for work, services, and cultural activities.

"Before me and my husband bought our first home, he lived in the centre of Cambridge, I lived in a tiny village, which doesn't even have a village shop. And we kind of wanted something in between the two, and we found Ely was perfect with the train. It's great for commuting into [Cambridge] for working [in] Cambridge."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

The perceived quality and prestige associated with Cambridge was also seen as an important factor, with participants noting that the university presence and international profile of Cambridge created expectations and standards that benefited the broader area. This was contrasted with perceptions of other areas that were seen as lacking them.

"That I wonder if the fact that Cambridge is supported quite heavily by the university as well. You know, Cambridge is a little bit more prestige because it does have the university. And I think, you know, from my experiences, from family, you know, services in Cambridge, you know, such as those things we've talked about earlier, like grass cutting, that there doesn't ever seem to be an issue with those kind of things... because I don't know Peterborough that well, but I certainly think you know from here and family talk that that is not an issue. And I think the fact that we have the university, there has to be a level of keeping Cambridge that little bit nicer."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

Local shopping and service preferences also reflected broader values about community connection and local accountability. Participants expressed preferences for local businesses and personal contact that mirrored their broader concerns about maintaining human-scale governance and community connection in any reorganisation arrangements.

Within Cambridge City itself, participants' broader geographic connections reflected patterns of movement and migration that had brought them to the area from other parts of Cambridgeshire and beyond. These movement patterns created communities of people who had actively chosen Cambridge for particular reasons, strengthening attachment to local character and the broader Cambridge-centred region.

"I lived in South Cambridgeshire in Bar Hill for 13 or 14 years before that. Having moved from Suffolk originally, my local community, I think the local businesses, the diversity in local businesses [is what I like about the area]."

Female, 35-44, Cambridge City

"We moved here from London, where we lived for six years previously. What I like about the local area is that it's very active and it's very multicultural. It sort of punches way above its weight with regards to that, or to being metropolitan and cosmopolitan compared to the city size."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

Family connections and life course considerations also shaped geographic identities and connections to the Cambridge area. Participants described how family considerations, educational opportunities, and quality of life factors had influenced their choice of location and their ongoing connections to the Cambridge-centred region.

"I moved here from London, which is where I was born and pretty much lived until I moved here. So, I do have some family here that have lived here a bit longer than I have, probably maybe six years now, and they moved here because I got a little brother. He's 11, and my mum wanted to kind of bring him to a place that was safer and maybe had better quality of schools."

Female, 25-34, Cambridge City

Within immediate local areas, the importance of long-term community connections and local knowledge was consistently emphasised. Long-term residents spoke about the evolution of their communities while highlighting the enduring importance of local connections and the human-scale character that made their places distinctive and livable.

"I live on Arbury Road in Cambridge, which is technically West Chesterton, but which feels like Arbury. I was born in Cambridge. I've always lived here, so I've kind of been aware of the council for 40 plus years. Having lived here a long time, it's still small enough that you can know people. It feels a lot bigger than it used to, a lot more transient families, but there's still a core of people who have known each other since way back."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

"I live in Cambridge City. I've lived here for 40 years. About the community, I value the beauty of the area, and I worry about that being altered by overuse, over traffic and that sort of thing. So, the smallness and the historic importance of it, I value."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

The rural character and agricultural heritage of areas like Fenland and East Cambridgeshire were seen as fundamental to local identity and community connection. Participants emphasised the importance of connection to the land, traditional ways of life, and the distinctive character that distinguished rural areas from urban centres.

"I live in March town and have done for 20 years. What I value about this area is the rural character. We're surrounded by farmland, and that gives the place its identity. People here have a strong connection to the land and to traditional ways of life."

Male, 75-84, Fenland

"I live in Burwell, and I've been here for 39 years. It's a proper village community. Everyone knows everyone, and people look out for each other. The village has its own character and identity, and that's something we really value and want to preserve."

Male, 75-84, East Cambridgeshire

Across all locations, participants expressed deep concerns about the potential for reorganisation to threaten local identity and community connection. There was widespread worry that larger authorities would not understand or value local distinctiveness, leading to standardised approaches that failed to recognise what made each place special and meaningful to residents.

"[What worries me about reorganisation] I think they just need to know what the kind of area is. And you know when they think about, like investing and stuff, you know what they're properly investing in, and who they're trying to help and who their cohort people are. I think, yeah, I just think it's just about having that local knowledge. You know that when you're ringing the council and having those conversations, they know where it is, they know what you're talking about. And you know, I'd like to think that majority of the people that probably work at East Cambridgeshire are local. So if there's a tree outside my house and or a lamp post or whatever, they know exactly where it is, whereas if I'm talking to somebody I don't know in Peterborough, maybe they don't know the area, they don't know, you know, that kind of thing, I think they just need to have a bit of open my worry as well, with all of that is there's going to be job cuts as well."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"So, things like development Wisbeach is not the same as March. It's certainly not the same as Peterborough, Cambridge. And so, you need to come here. I don't think you need to live here and be here all the time, but you have to get away out from behind your desk and understand the impact of those activities."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

Even within Peterborough itself, participants recognised the distinctive character of their city and its difference from surrounding rural areas. The urban, multicultural character of Peterborough was valued by its residents, but this very distinctiveness reinforced the arguments of rural participants that different types of places required different approaches to governance and service delivery.

"I live in the Wistow area of Peterborough, been here for 15 years. What I value about Peterborough is its diversity. We've got people from all over the world living here, and that creates a really vibrant, multicultural community."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"I live in the Paston area, been here for 12 years. It's difficult to say what's my favorite part about the city. Is it might be a bit strange, but I like that the city looks very different depending on the area you're in. I like to see how culture impacts city. I know that in some areas it's not always a good thing, but still, you can see different cultural impacts on that area. I find it fascinating."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

The evidence from all focus groups demonstrates that place identity and community connection are not simply matters of local attachment, but encompass complex patterns of regional affinity, explicit opposition, and practical connection that shape residents' understanding of community and their preferences for governance arrangements. The strong identification with Cambridge among East Cambridgeshire residents, combined with their emphatic rejection of association with Peterborough, reflects deep-seated perceptions of shared identity, common interests, and natural patterns of social and economic connection that extend across current administrative boundaries. These patterns are reinforced by practical considerations about travel, accessibility, service quality, and resource allocation that create clear preferences for association with some areas and explicit opposition to others.

The challenge for local government reorganisation lies in recognising and respecting these multi-layered place identities and patterns of connection, ensuring that new arrangements build upon rather than cut across the geographic affinities and oppositions that residents have developed. This requires understanding not just what makes each local area distinctive, but also how different places relate to each other and the broader regional networks of connection and opposition that shape residents' sense of community and belonging. Successful reorganisation must therefore work with rather than against these natural patterns of connection and opposition, creating governance arrangements that reflect and strengthen the geographic identities and affinities that residents value while avoiding forced associations that cut across fundamental differences in character, priorities, and community needs.

The practical patterns of daily life - transport, shopping, work, healthcare, education, and social activities - provide compelling evidence of the natural geographic connections that shape residents' sense of community and belonging. These everyday connections create powerful bonds that extend across administrative boundaries while reinforcing opposition to forced associations that cut across natural patterns of movement and activity. The evidence from focus group discussions reveals that residents' preferences for governance arrangements are deeply rooted in the practical realities of how they live, work, shop, and access services, creating clear patterns of connection and opposition that reflect genuine community networks rather than administrative convenience.

Transport infrastructure and accessibility patterns create fundamental connections that shape community identity and governance preferences. The ease of travel to Cambridge compared to the difficulty of reaching Peterborough reflects and reinforces broader patterns of economic and social connection that participants see as natural and appropriate foundations for governance arrangements.

"Personally, from St Ives point of view, I think Cambridge, strong links to Cambridge, and really such weak links to Peterborough or nothing against Peterborough, but there are no links to be true. Everybody goes to Cambridge for pretty much everything. It'd be pretty ridiculous if we ended up being thrown in with Peterborough, even if I see the press places in I think the journey might make more sense. But for us, it would be ridiculous for us to be linked to Peterborough."

Male, 55-64, Huntingdonshire

"He lived in the centre of Cambridge, I lived in a tiny village, which doesn't even have a village shop. And we kind of wanted something in between the two, and we found Ely was perfect with the train. It's great for commuting into working to Cambridge. So, yeah, we really like living there."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

Shopping and retail patterns provide clear evidence of the natural catchment areas and service connections that bind communities together. Participants consistently described Cambridge as their natural destination for major shopping, specialist services, and retail activities, creating economic connections that reinforce broader community identity and belonging.

"I think it's very true for a lot of people. Little to do with Huntingdon? Great to do with Cambridge."

Female, 18-24, Huntingdonshire

Employment and commuting patterns create some of the strongest connections between communities, with many residents describing their work lives as centred on Cambridge despite living outside the city boundaries. These economic connections create shared interests and common concerns that participants see as natural foundations for governance arrangements.

"I feel geographically part of Cambridge more than I do even Huntingdon. To be honest."

Male, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

"I think most of East Cambridge should focus on Cambridge. Yeah, if they go shopping, an awful lot of people work in Cambridge."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

Healthcare and specialist service connections provide another layer of practical connection that reinforces broader community identity. The role of Cambridge as a centre for specialist healthcare, professional services, and expert advice creates dependencies and connections that participants see as fundamental to their quality of life and community wellbeing.

"East Cambridge is much more like South Cambridgeshire. I mean, both are focused on Cambridge City as being the employment hotspots, the shopping, you know where we go shopping, where we go for other services get, you know where we go to hospital, for example, we get to work."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

Cultural and social connections create emotional and identity bonds that extend beyond practical necessity to encompass lifestyle, values, and community belonging. Participants described Cambridge as their cultural centre, the place they turn to for entertainment, social activities, and cultural enrichment, creating connections that are central to their quality of life and sense of community.

Educational connections and aspirations create intergenerational bonds that shape long-term community identity and planning. The role of Cambridge as an educational centre creates pathways and opportunities that bind families and communities to the broader Cambridge region, influencing decisions about where to live, work, and invest in community life. Property markets and housing patterns reflect and reinforce broader economic and social connections, with participants describing their local housing market as fundamentally connected to Cambridge's economy and attractiveness. These economic connections create shared interests in maintaining and enhancing the Cambridge region's prosperity and quality of life. Business and economic networks create professional and commercial connections that bind communities together through shared economic interests and mutual dependencies. The role of Cambridge as an

economic engine creates ripple effects that extend throughout the surrounding area, creating natural economic regions that participants see as appropriate foundations for governance.

The absence of practical connections to Peterborough provides equally compelling evidence of the boundaries of natural community networks. Participants struggled to identify any practical reasons for connection to Peterborough, describing it as outside their natural area of activity and connection, reinforcing their opposition to governance arrangements that would force association with areas outside their practical community networks.

From the perspective of Cambridge City residents, the role of Cambridge as a regional centre serving a much wider area than the city boundaries were clearly recognised and valued. This perspective reinforced the arguments of surrounding area residents that Cambridge represents a natural centre for regional governance that reflects genuine patterns of connection and dependency.

" And like three of the people on my team of 12, or something like that last job, lived in Ely or stuff like that. You just get a lot of people who commute into Cambridge."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

The comprehensive evidence of practical daily connections - from transport and shopping to work and culture - demonstrates that residents' preferences for governance arrangements are not based on abstract administrative considerations but on the lived reality of community networks, economic dependencies, and social connections that shape their daily lives. These patterns of connection create natural regions and communities of interest that extend across current administrative boundaries while creating clear boundaries of opposition and rejection. The challenge for local government reorganisation lies in recognising and respecting these natural patterns of connection and opposition, ensuring that new governance arrangements are built upon rather than cut across the practical networks of community life. This requires understanding not just where people live, but how they live - where they work, shop, access services, seek entertainment, and build social connections. Successful reorganisation must therefore reflect the geography of daily life rather than the convenience of administrative tidiness, creating governance arrangements that strengthen rather than weaken the practical connections that bind communities together and respecting the boundaries of opposition that reflect genuine differences in community networks, economic interests, and social connections.

Scale and Geography

The question of optimal scale and appropriate geographic boundaries emerged as one of the more contentious issues across all focus groups, revealing an understanding of the intricate relationships between authority size, geographic coverage, democratic representation, and service delivery effectiveness. Participants demonstrated clear awareness that decisions about scale and geography are not neutral technical considerations but fundamental choices that will determine whether reorganised authorities can effectively serve diverse communities across varied landscapes, settlement patterns, and socio-economic contexts. The discussions revealed deep scepticism about simplistic assumptions that larger authorities automatically deliver better outcomes, with participants identifying multiple ways in which inappropriate scale and geographic arrangements could undermine rather than enhance local government effectiveness, democratic accountability, and community connection.

Concerns about optimal authority size reflected nuanced understanding of organisational dynamics and the complex relationship between scale and effectiveness. Participants recognised that while very small authorities might lack resources and professional capacity, very large authorities could become unwieldy, bureaucratic, and disconnected from the communities they serve, suggesting that effective local government requires finding an appropriate balance rather than simply maximising size.

" Not more about competency, competency and accountability than size, Because I'm always I don't disagree. There's a sweet spot. But you know, having lived in Lambeth, which is doesn't have a great reputation. And having lived in here, it's just you can't really compare them. But actually, I don't try, but I do look at sort of a calibre of decision making should be similar. You should hire accountable people."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

" Yes, now there is a there is a happy medium there somewhere. But if you make them too big, they become less efficient."

Female, 65-74, Huntingdonshire

Geographic accessibility emerged as a fundamental equity issue that would determine whether reorganised authorities could serve all their communities fairly and effectively. Participants were acutely aware that distance, travel time, and transport availability create real barriers to access that disproportionately affect elderly people, those without private transport, people with disabilities, and families with limited financial resources, raising serious questions about the social justice implications of centralised service delivery models.

"I've got old parents, and I have to stop working on social care, then I obviously would want a personal service around that. Special Needs Education is a real issue. You know, all of us with young children, you know, we all have to think about it all the time, even if isn't an issue for us at the moment, they're very few of us who can say we've got children who we sure won't ever need any help of that nature over the course of their time at school. So I think we I'd want to make sure that that's prioritized, and I'd have someone I could speak to, and somebody one you know, ideally, someone who knows the community and like you know, knows it, can talk to me in that much more specific way, rather than just someone generic, 60 miles away, who really just focused on Huntingdon or something."

Male, 35-44, South Cambridgeshire

The fundamental differences between rural and urban areas were consistently highlighted by creating distinct service needs, delivery challenges, and governance requirements that could not be addressed through standardised approaches designed primarily for urban contexts. Participants from rural areas expressed particular concern that their voices and needs would be systematically marginalised in authorities dominated by urban populations and urban priorities.

"The culture of Peterborough is totally different to any of the districts in Cambridgeshire, and what would worry me is that the priorities would be extremely different to East Cambridgeshire, and therefore the resources would be changed, and it would detract from their current level of service. So, I think linking us with Peterborough would be an absolute. [we would lose] influence."

Male, 75-84, East Cambridgeshire

"I think local accountability is also really important. If you've got somebody that knows and understands your community and is representing them directly, it is much easier than to hold them to account for what they do and don't do. If you've got somebody who's representing a very large amorphous area, then individual communities lose their voice in that process. I think."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

Distance and travel considerations were seen as creating fundamental barriers to effective democratic representation and community engagement across large geographic areas. Participants questioned how councillors could maintain meaningful contact with and understanding of communities across very large authorities, particularly given poor public transport connections and the time and cost implications of extensive travel for both representatives and residents.

Participants articulated an understanding of how geographic and economic connections should inform governance arrangements. Their perspectives highlighted the importance of recognising natural patterns of connection and service delivery requirements that vary significantly across different areas.

"I would be very happy if it was like, you know, Cambridge, South Cambridgeshire and Huntingdon say; if that was the split rather than the whole of Cambridgeshire, because roads [feel] very different in Fenland than they do in Cambridge."

Male, 55-64, South Cambridgeshire

"I don't think there are any sensible solutions which separate Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire, because so much of what happens, sort of, in the ring of the donut, is affected by Cambridge."

Male, 55-64, South Cambridgeshire

"Yes, and we would naturally look to Cambridge. I work in Cambridge. I'm sure others have various reasons going in and things like that."

Male, 55-64, South Cambridgeshire

The importance of maintaining local presence and accessibility was emphasised as essential for both service delivery and democratic accountability. Participants argued that local offices and service points were not merely conveniences but fundamental requirements for ensuring that all communities could access services and that councillors and officers remained connected to and accountable to the communities that they serve. Community transport was mentioned in relation to this point.

"So, it's for people who, for example, can't drive anymore or can't use public transport because, normally, because of a long-term illness or disability. And then, normally, a village, or a combination of villages, there'll be volunteers who offer up their time to give people lifts using their own cars, and they just charge for the petrol. But because a lot of these groups under a lot of pressure... a lot of them are restricted to just medical trips, though they used to be able to offer a lot more."

Female, 35-44, Cambridge City

Democratic representation challenges were seen as fundamental threats to local democracy that would result from excessive geographic scale and population size. Participants emphasised that effective representation requires councillors to have genuine local knowledge, regular community contact, and practical accessibility to constituents, all of which would be compromised by very large wards covering diverse communities across extensive geographic areas.

"It was just that I would like to be able to have a representative who I have voted for, who can help me talk to the right person in the council to get whatever issue is resolved, and I would perhaps like to be able to meet them, either locally, or have somewhere where I can go. But now I suspect very few people actually go

to the county council buildings. So, I think, you know, whatever the new unitary authority is, that should be partitioned so that there are local representatives."

Female, 55-64, South Cambridgeshire

Natural boundaries and community connections were consistently emphasised as more important than administrative convenience in determining appropriate geographic coverage for local authorities. Participants argued that successful governance arrangements must respect and build upon existing patterns of community connection, economic relationship, transport links, and geographic logic rather than imposing artificial boundaries that cut across established networks of local life.

"Administrative boundaries should follow natural patterns - how people travel, where they work, where they shop, where they go to school. Not just be drawn on a map for administrative convenience."

Male, 45-54, Cambridge City

Service delivery complexity across large and diverse areas was recognised as requiring sophisticated understanding of local needs, community characteristics, and geographic constraints.

Organisational capacity and infrastructure concerns reflected practical understanding of the enormous challenges involved in merging different authorities with different systems, cultures, processes, and ways of working. Participants questioned whether the necessary infrastructure, systems, and management capacity existed to support much larger authorities without significant disruption to service delivery and democratic processes during potentially lengthy transition periods.

"Do they have the systems and infrastructure to support a much larger organisation? Different councils use different IT systems, different processes. Merging all that is a massive undertaking."

Male, 55-64, Huntingdonshire

"If it's a merging of the districts, and it's obviously multiple opinions and, like, diverse thinking, I'm all for that, but again, don't make decisions based on what's best for the council, because it this has proven in Peterborough, it doesn't lead to good quality of life."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

Communication and engagement challenges were seen as becoming exponentially more difficult across large geographic areas with diverse communities and varied communication needs. Participants questioned how larger authorities could maintain effective democratic engagement, ensure meaningful consultation, and provide accessible communication channels that reached all communities and enabled genuine participation in local governance and decision-making processes.

" Why would the unitary authority engage? Because it's bigger. Are you telling me that they would? They would stop engaging if Cambridgeshire County Council and East Cambridgeshire don't engage with us that way? Why would the new authority engage with us that way?"

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

" I can't even remember what it was for but on the county council, I get bulletins when things are happening. And if you know, if you sort of sign up for your bins and all this sort of thing, you know, where you can complain to the council online, you can also ask for a newsletter. And I get emails from them telling me this, do I want to fill in this form? Do I want to fill in this questionnaire? What do I think about this? A lot of them, I look at them and it takes me two seconds to go, No, that's nothing to do with me. That's quite out of my area. Something to do with Burwell. Oh, what's that about? You know, and I will then fill it in "

Male, 75-84, East Cambridgeshire

Economic efficiency assumptions were challenged by participants who recognised that larger organisations could experience diseconomies of scale that offset theoretical efficiency gains. This reflected an understanding of organisational dynamics and recognition that optimal efficiency might be achieved at moderate rather than maximum scale, particularly when considering the full costs of democratic engagement, community consultation, and responsive service delivery.

" I found my deal is with Cambridgeshire County Council, which is this sort of size that we seem to be heading to. Oh, well, it's going to be half the sides, very difficult. They are very bureaucratic. I think they're so large it's very difficult to find someone who will take responsibility for anything. And they'll pass you from pillar to post."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"And then the rest of the councils are just too small to do anything other than have a big, a bigger plan, because they just don't have the funding available based on the population, which is why fenlands council tax is higher, just because the services are slow, spread out."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

Population density and representation concerns reflected understanding that democratic representation requires more than simple population-based calculations and must account for geographic, economic, and community diversity. Participants from rural and smaller urban areas were particularly concerned that their voices would be systematically overwhelmed by larger urban populations, leading to governance arrangements that reflect urban priorities while marginalising rural and small-town needs and perspectives.

Comprehensive evidence from all focus groups demonstrates that scale and geography are fundamental determinants of local government effectiveness, democratic accountability, and community connection that cannot be treated as technical details or administrative conveniences.

Participants showed an understanding of the complex relationships between authority size, geographic coverage, service delivery, democratic representation, and community engagement, recognising that these factors interact in ways that can either enhance or undermine the core purposes of local government. Their concerns about inappropriate scale and geographic boundaries reflect genuine understanding of how these factors shape the practical reality of local governance and its impact on community life, democratic participation, and social equity.

The challenge for local government reorganisation lies in finding optimal arrangements that balance the potential benefits of larger scale - increased resources, professional capacity, strategic capability, and service resilience - with the fundamental requirements of effective local governance - accessibility, responsiveness, local knowledge, democratic accountability, and community connection. This requires careful consideration of natural boundaries, community networks, transport infrastructure, service delivery requirements, and democratic representation needs rather than simple application of population targets, administrative convenience, or theoretical efficiency models.

Successful reorganisation must therefore respect the geography of community life while building sufficient scale and capacity to deliver effective services and strategic leadership, potentially requiring innovative governance approaches that combine larger strategic authorities with strong local delivery mechanisms, democratic structures that ensure effective representation across diverse geographic and community contexts, and service delivery models that balance efficiency with accessibility and local responsiveness.

Democratic Representation and Accountability

One of the most significant findings across all focus groups was the limited direct contact that most participants had with their elected councillors. Rather than engaging with local government primarily through democratic channels and representative relationships, participants overwhelmingly described experiencing local government through service delivery, with councillors playing little or no role in their day-to-day interactions with local authorities. This finding has profound implications for understanding public attitudes toward local government reorganisation, as it suggests that for many residents, changes to democratic structures and representative arrangements may be less significant than impacts on service quality, accessibility, and responsiveness. The evidence reveals that accountability operates primarily through service performance rather than through traditional democratic mechanisms, with residents judging councils based on whether services work effectively rather than on the quality of democratic representation or the accessibility of elected representatives.

The extent of limited councillor contact was striking across all focus groups, with many participants unable to name their councillors or describe any direct interaction with elected representatives. This disconnect between residents and their elected representatives suggests that the traditional model of local democratic accountability through regular councillor-constituent contact may not reflect the reality of how most people experience local government.

Participants provided stark illustration of this democratic disconnect, with some expressing complete disengagement from electoral processes due to perceived lack of councillor engagement.

"I generally won't vote. My view on life's really simple. If you want me to vote for you, you've got to at least make enough effort to engage with me...I have never voted for anything, any, any election at all. I've never met a parish councillor, district councillor, town councillor, county councillor."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"I think the link between what councils do and [what] Council Tax is paid to who has to be made more clear and more kind of transparent and accountable."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"I've never, ever spoken to my councilor. I'm not really sure what they what they do to benefit me personally, because I'm very I don't demand a lot of anyone really just want a peaceful life. But clearly people do demand off them, and it seems to be he who shouts the loudest will get their voice heard, I suppose."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

Instead of engaging with local government through democratic representatives, participants consistently described a service-focused experience where their primary concern was whether council services functioned effectively rather than who was making political decisions or how democratic processes operated. This service-centric view of local government suggests that for many residents, the quality and accessibility of service delivery is far more important than the structure or accessibility of democratic representation.

"I think critically, a good Council will provide good quality services. And we know there's a whole host of services that councils need to provide, from basic infrastructure through to all sorts of things like housing for the homeless and stuff like that. That's imposed by legislation, but a good Council will provide all of those services. It will do so in a cost-effective manner that provides value for money, because ultimately what they are spending is taxpayers' money, so it shouldn't be profligate. It should be properly spent. And I know that every council tries really hard to do that."

Male, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

"Local government's not about politics. It's about doing things for the greater good and making everyone's life better."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"I'm also very mindful that I'm becoming mature in age, and my needs are going to need to be met in a probably a few years' time, and I want to make sure that the right services are there, and that the other thing, I think, for me as well, is about, you know, I don't have a lot of contact with council, which is a really positive thing, and I'd like it to continue that way."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

Accountability mechanisms appeared to operate primarily through service performance rather than through traditional democratic channels, with participants describing how they held councils accountable through their experience of service quality,

responsiveness, and value for money rather than through engagement with elected representatives or democratic processes.

" They need to be held accountable. We, there are lots of examples of where councils haven't been held accountable. And, you know, actually, I've heard, yeah, that's fact, right? Everybody can probably understand a scenario like that. So, I think it needs to be very clear what their scope is, what they can get themselves involved with. And I think they need to be accountable."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

" And then there's nobody kind of holding them accountable then for the fact that all these houses have gone up in an absolute shoddy condition. There's not enough schools there. There's no GPs being built. Everybody's already struggling for appointments, like nationwide, yeah, and they're doing absolutely nothing to kind of help."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

The disconnect between democratic representation and service delivery experience was consistently highlighted, with participants describing councillors and council services as operating in separate spheres with little connection between political structures and day-to-day service delivery. This separation suggests that reorganisation debates focused primarily on democratic structures may miss the aspects of local government that most directly affect residents' lives and satisfaction.

"I went to the open meetings. I spoke to the different people that were there. It was really quite a whitewash. And there I met district councilors. I was very impressed with many other politicians from roundabout, but my own particular one was sitting nicely on a fence about things, and nobody would listen and take the voice of the community. I think that was the most disappointing thing. When I turned round to get a voice of support to change a consultation program that was immensely flawed and was likely to do damage to our community in terms of public health and there was nobody, there was nobody to go to in the end."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"[The democratic side of local government feels quite remote from everyday life.] As a council taxpayer, that most of the things that concern me are, do my bins get collected? And I don't think it matters whether it is a county council, a district council or a unitary authority doing that, as long as it happens in a way, bin collection is a good example, because the bigger you make the council, the more efficiently that can be done"

Male, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

When participants expressed expectations about democratic representation, these were generally focused on ensuring effective service delivery rather than on traditional concepts of democratic engagement or political representation. Councillors were seen as having a role in ensuring services functioned properly rather than as primary channels for democratic participation or community voice, suggesting a more managerial than political view of local democratic representation.

The implications of this service-focused experience for local government reorganisation were significant, with participants suggesting that changes to democratic structures might have limited impact on their experience of local government as long as service delivery remained effective. This pragmatic approach to reorganisation prioritised service continuity and quality over democratic representation concerns, reflecting the reality that most residents experience local government through services rather than through democratic engagement.

“And actually, most of these people, they're just, they're just names. They don't know the local community. They're not part of the local community. They're often people who they've been on a committee of sorts for the whole of their lives, and that's what they enjoy doing. But never make my life better.”

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

“I am worried very much that we are just going to notice a real drop off in the level of service we receive.”

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

“Actually, what a typical resident wants is quite similar. I don't really have contact with the Council on a regular basis. Like, a good example is when I moved into my new house two weeks ago, and the wheelie bins there wasn't any there. We only get, well, we don't get black wheelie bins where we live. We get a green and a blue one. I rang the council up. The bin was delivered within a week. I'd spoke to someone on the telephone. Had been perfect, but you just want there to be someone at the end of the phone, email or whatever when you need them. I think that's my worry. I don't think the system we have is perfect, yeah, but I'm worried that it could be worse than it currently is.”

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

The majority of residents primarily experience local government as a service provider. As well as this group, there is a second smaller minority of active citizens who do interact with councillors. Both groups want good services and both groups want accountability. Any changes to democratic representation have much more of an effect on the active citizens than on the wider public. The challenge for reorganisation is therefore to ensure that changes to democratic structures enhance rather than undermine service delivery effectiveness, recognising that democratic legitimacy may depend more on delivering effective services. One of the frustrations for the active citizens is that there does not appear to be anywhere for them to have a voice. A role for the active citizens in the transition and beyond is what the active citizens are looking for and provides instant feedback on how services are performing.

“Have a people’s voice in setting a medium-term strategy with Peterborough...I know it’s hard, but make people feel that they’re really involved in the direction of the city. And I don’t know, there probably is a medium-term plan for Peterborough. I don’t know whether it’s being shared with the public. No idea you’d have to go and find it. We [want to] make it really so people feel that this is our city, and we have a say.”

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

“I think that was, what was the most disappointing thing. When I turned round to get a voice of support to change a consultation program that was immensely flawed and was likely to do damage to our community in terms of public health, for example, and there was nobody, there was nobody to go to in the end.”

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

If this reorganisation is compared to the last one in 1972, the real change in terms of the public are these active citizens. In 1972, these people might have joined parish councils or become councillors; instead, they feel they occupy a middle role feeding back on the particular interests they have. A participative element to the reorganisation if done correctly can help build trust and improve services.

Trust and Confidence

Trust and confidence in local government emerged as fundamental prerequisites for effective governance and democratic legitimacy, with participants demonstrating acute awareness of how transparency, accountability, competence, and responsiveness shape public attitudes toward local authorities and their capacity to secure support for major policy initiatives.

The discussions revealed that trust is not simply a desirable outcome but an essential foundation for effective local governance, particularly in contexts of significant change such as local government reorganisation or major development programmes. Participants consistently emphasised that trust must be earned through demonstrated competence, maintained through transparent communication and fair decision-making, and can be easily damaged by poor service delivery, lack of accountability, or perceived unfairness in resource allocation and policy implementation. The evidence suggests that in areas experiencing substantial development and change, such as Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the maintenance of public trust requires particularly high standards of transparency and accountability, as the scale and pace of change can create opportunities for decisions to be made without adequate public scrutiny, potentially engendering distrust that undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of local governance.

Development pressure and planning failures emerged as major sources of distrust across multiple locations, with participants expressing profound concerns about the quality of decision-making, the transparency of planning processes, and the apparent disconnect between development decisions and community needs. These concerns were particularly acute in areas experiencing rapid growth and development pressure, where participants questioned whether planning decisions were being made in the public interest or were unduly influenced by commercial considerations.

The evidence suggests that development-related decisions represent a critical test of local government credibility, with poor planning decisions, inadequate infrastructure provision, and lack of community consultation creating lasting damage to public trust and confidence in local governance. In Peterborough particularly, participants provided extensive evidence of how planning failures, questionable investment decisions, and lack of accountability had fundamentally undermined their confidence in local government.

"I have got very little faith in Peterborough City Council. As a resident of Peterborough City Council, I see different ventures entered...there's back handers going on here, because there's no common sense in the decisions that are made."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"The planners don't enforce any of this stuff. So, you know...it's so contradictory, they're never following through. They never hold themselves to account, and they've always got an excuse."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"They had a consultation about going to a four-day week. They never published the data. They never showed what people's views were. They just said, Oh, it's perfect. It's making everything better."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"They had the money to make capital investment in that hotel that has cost millions and millions, and that makes me boil, because that's capital that's tax money that's gone into a Hilton Hotel."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

The scale of distrust expressed by Peterborough participants was particularly striking, with detailed accounts of planning enforcement failures, questionable capital investments, and poor-quality development that had fundamentally altered their relationship with their local authority. These concerns extended beyond individual planning decisions to broader questions about governance competence, financial management, and democratic accountability.

"When you grant planning permission for like, 1100 houses, like, actually look at the people that are going to live there, and when you're making that decision, ensure the fact that they have to build a school in there, at least plan those into it, so they're not putting up thousands and thousands of houses putting increased demand on the limited services we already have available."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

"Some of the houses, especially over, like, in Paston, and then ones like that, like they're rushed up and things as well. And it then just kind of gets handed, or in this case, especially with like Cardia, not handed over to the council. And then there's nobody kind of holding them accountable then for the fact that all these houses have gone up in an absolute shoddy condition."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

"They allow a lot of companies into Peterborough to build warehouses, but then those companies don't integrate themselves with the community. So, you know, they don't necessarily, they just slap up the warehouse, fill it with people doing a job, but they then don't integrate into that community."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

The disconnect between planning promises and delivery without community infrastructure emerged as a particularly corrosive factor in undermining public trust, with participants describing repeated experiences of development proposals that failed to deliver promised infrastructure, community facilities, or quality standards. This pattern of broken promises in the planning system appeared to create broader cynicism about local government commitments and competence, with implications extending far beyond planning policy to general confidence in local governance.

"If you go and read all the planning applications, boring enough...you read the plan and what's promised, it's never delivered."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

The physical deterioration of local environments emerged as a visible manifestation of governance failures that had profound impacts on residents' trust and confidence in their local authority. Participants described how the transformation of their local area through inappropriate development, loss of green space, and proliferation of warehouses had fundamentally altered their perception of their council's priorities and competence.

"The deterioration over the 31 years since I've lived here, I can't tell you how different it is. Peterborough was fabulous. It was green, you know, it was vibrant. It is full of warehouses now. It's monstrous. It's awful. It's horrendous."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"They do not think about infrastructure. And you know, I've lived here for 15 years. I want to be proud of where I live, but when it ranks in the top three for obesity, the top three for the least favourite place in the country to live, all these really negative things, you've got to really look to the council and think, what are you doing?"

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"You have to ask, like, who's actually making those decisions? And thinking, yeah, this will be great for the residents. The library is massively underfunded. From a resident's point of view, you can't argue with the fact that we've lost the showground. We've lost the regional pool."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

Leadership and accountability failures were identified as fundamental barriers to public trust, with participants expressing frustration about the apparent lack of clear responsibility and accountability within local government structures. The evidence suggests that trust requires clear lines of responsibility and accountability, with identifiable individuals who can be held responsible for decisions and their consequences. When accountability structures are unclear or ineffective, public trust is undermined and cynicism about local government increases.

"What does the chief executive actually do? Because when you write to him, he passes it down to the department you've been struggling to deal with for 18 months. He then won't take any responsibility. He doesn't seem to have any control over the council leaders."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"They put an email out going, oh, look at our budget. We're filling the gap. Going to our interactive piece. And you know, you help us. Well, you go in there and you go, geez, if you're spending that on certain things, it's just shocking. They don't manage their budget like a commercial business."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

Fenland participants highlighted how distance from decision-making centres can exacerbate trust problems, particularly when decisions affecting local communities are made by people with limited understanding of local conditions and needs. Their concerns about being marginalised within larger authorities reflected broader anxieties about whether reorganisation might further distance decision-makers from the communities they serve, potentially undermining the local knowledge and accountability that participants valued in smaller councils.

"I think it could, in many respects, be disastrous. And I can give you some examples around here where decisions are taken in Cambridgeshire about stuff that's happening in Fenland. Just locally, we have drainage ditches which become full of water, blocked, overflowing because of Fenland surface water. But it took ages for the councillors to try and sort out who's responsible, Cambridgeshire County Council or Fenland."

Male, 75-84, Fenland

"If you say to someone at Cambridgeshire County Council, I live in Fenland, they look at you and go, okay, and you tell them the village you live in, they go, okay. They're not going to care, right? Because they believe that their council's the centre of the universe."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

"Things like development - Wisbech is not the same as March. It's certainly not the same as Peterborough or Cambridge. And so, you need to come here. I don't think you need to live here and be here all the time, but you have to get away out from behind your desk and understand the impact of those activities."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

Comprehensive evidence demonstrates that trust and confidence are not peripheral concerns but central requirements for effective local governance, particularly in contexts of significant change and development pressure.

The findings reveal that public trust operates as both a prerequisite for and an outcome of effective governance, requiring continuous attention to transparency, accountability, competence, and fairness in decision-making and service delivery.

In areas experiencing substantial development, such as Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the maintenance of public trust requires particularly rigorous standards of scrutiny and accountability, as the scale and complexity of development decisions create multiple opportunities for public confidence to be undermined by perceptions of unfair influence, inadequate consultation, or decisions made without proper consideration of community impacts.

The challenge for local government reorganisation lies in ensuring that structural changes enhance rather than undermine the foundations of public trust, recognising that trust damaged during reorganisation processes may take years to rebuild and that loss of public confidence can fundamentally compromise the effectiveness and legitimacy of local governance. This requires careful attention to maintaining service quality during transition periods, ensuring transparent communication about reorganisation processes and objectives, demonstrating genuine commitment to public consultation and engagement, and establishing robust accountability mechanisms that can maintain public confidence in the integrity of decision-making processes.

The evidence suggests that successful reorganisation must therefore prioritise trust-building and trust-maintenance as central objectives rather than treating public confidence as a secondary consideration, recognising that without public trust, even technically sound reorganisation initiatives may fail to deliver their intended benefits and may actually undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of local governance.

The particular challenge in areas experiencing rapid development and change is that the disinfecting light of accountability and transparency becomes even more crucial when the scale and pace of change creates opportunities for decisions to be made without adequate scrutiny, potentially engendering the kind of profound distrust that can take generations to repair and that fundamentally undermines the social contract between local government and the communities it serves.

Transition Concerns and Opportunities

Transition concerns and opportunities emerged as central considerations in participants' evaluation of local government reorganisation proposals.

Participants demonstrated acute awareness that reorganisation represents a significant undertaking with substantial implications for service delivery, democratic accountability, staff retention, system integration, and community relationships, requiring careful planning, realistic timescales, and robust safeguards to protect essential services during periods of institutional change.

The evidence suggests that while participants recognised potential opportunities for improvement through reorganisation, their primary concerns focused on managing transition risks and ensuring that the process of change did not undermine the quality, accessibility, or continuity of services that communities depend upon. These concerns were expressed by observations of previous reorganisation exercises in local government and other public services, with participants drawing on experiences of NHS reorganisations, council mergers, and business restructuring to inform their expectations about the challenges and opportunities associated with major institutional change.

"I worked at Slough Borough Council, which was part of Berkshire and Berkshire County was abolished, and five unitary councils were made as a consequence of that, that being abolished, and the chaos that ensued was unbelievable. I can't tell you how, how awful it was. People had no understanding of what so going from a strict council to being a unitary authority means you suddenly have responsibility for a lot of things that you didn't know about before, the biggest one being, of course, social services, but, but not only, not only that, if you look back 25 years to when they were set up, at least three of those unitary authorities have failed OK."

Female, 65-74, Huntingdonshire

Service disruption during transition periods emerged as the most immediate and pressing concern, with participants expressing anxiety about the potential for essential services to be compromised while councils focused on reorganisation processes rather than service delivery. These concerns reflected understanding that major organisational change inevitably creates periods of uncertainty, confusion, and reduced effectiveness as new systems are implemented, staff adapt to new roles and procedures, and institutional relationships are reconfigured. Participants were particularly concerned about the impact on vulnerable service users who depend on consistent, reliable access to social care, housing support, and other essential services that cannot be easily interrupted or delayed without serious consequences for individual wellbeing.

"Yes, it could be a huge bit of work to merge authorities. People have mentioned the difficulties of perhaps splitting them out, but I think emerging authorities is also a very difficult job. They all have their own policies. There are different ways of doing it, different systems. If you said, if study Cambridgeshire is responsible

for planning whatever, it's going to have all these different planning systems, different policies, different ways of doing things, to merge them together. There's actually a really big bit of work. And I imagine government has no concept of how big a bit of work that is, because they are just optimists. They think things just happen, don't they?"

Male, 55-64, Huntingdonshire

" It's ridiculously complicated, and all the rest of it, but it could, with modern technologies, be much, much more straightforward to make those communications. What tends to happen with local authorities is this, this defense barrier of the call center, okay, and it's very difficult then to get through to the people that you actually need to speak to. That'll be even worse if there's less local accountability, and you have one larger authority, quite possibly."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

Staff retention and knowledge preservation emerged as critical challenges requiring careful management during reorganisation processes, with participants recognising that experienced staff represent valuable repositories of local knowledge, procedural expertise, and community relationships that could be lost if reorganisation creates uncertainty, redundancy, or career disruption for existing employees. This evidence suggests that participants understood the importance of retaining institutional memory and local expertise while also recognising that reorganisation inevitably creates anxiety and uncertainty for staff that may lead to departures of experienced personnel at precisely the time when their knowledge and skills are most needed to ensure continuity of service delivery.

" I think it could, in many respects, be disastrous for the Council. And I can give you some examples around here where decisions are taken in Cambridgeshire [County] about stuff that's happening in Fenland. Just locally, we have drainage dishes ditches which become full of water. Block overflowing... It took ages for the councilors to try and sort out who's responsible, Cambridge County Council or Fenland, and it was just batted between them for ages and ages until it was sorted out. There's still an ongoing problem with the fences on the highways bordering the riverbanks. In March, the fences are damaged. They can't work out whether this Cambridge County Council, who's responsible, Fenland District Council, or the third who I haven't mentioned the third organization, middle level commissioners, and that's still ongoing. Okay, it's been ongoing for years. You know, if that was handed to a unitary authority, you know, going for centuries, would it? Yes, I think so, because you need to have some people, local people on the ground, where the problems are."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

"Whether it's going to save them money, or lower the staff, lower the hours it needs to be done in the best interest of the constituents and the people that they're representing, because otherwise they're doing us absolutely no favors, and especially if it's Peterborough that are going to be at the helm of it, like If it's a merging of the districts, and it's obviously multiple opinions and, like, diverse thinking, I'm all for that, but again, don't make decisions based on what's best for the council, because it this has proven in Peterborough, it doesn't lead for good quality of life."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

"And I think you would lose that knowledge. If you lost that layer, I think you would, I just don't, don't think you'd get the detail."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

System integration challenges were recognised as significant technical and operational obstacles that could create substantial disruption if not properly managed, with participants drawing on experiences of technology failures, data migration problems, and procedural incompatibilities in other organisational mergers to inform their expectations about the complexity of bringing together different councils with different systems, procedures, and ways of working. These concerns reflected understanding that the technical aspects of reorganisation are often more complex and time-consuming than political discussions suggest, with potential for significant service disruption if integration processes are poorly planned or inadequately resourced.

"And I guess that with becoming a unitary or maybe bringing such, you know, bigger, bigger population together, then that is one of the concerns, is that is there going to be even longer of a way of to try and get hold, you know, try and become in contact with services, just because population is going to be, I guess, growing bigger, but combining. Could it be even more difficult to get what you need, as far as social services or, you know, other things like that."

Female, 25-34, Cambridge City

" There will be an enormous amount of work involved in merge. This is about emerging, rather than separating. If you've got to merge, yes, these systems from one councils into one, that is, I mean, it kept me busy for 29 years doing this kind of thing. And if you've got all these councils doing the same time, it's just going to be a real strain on the software to actually do that if you might find it's impossible. Councils could carry on having different systems for different parts of their new council, but actually trying to combine the systems is an enormous task."

Male, 55-64, Huntingdonshire

Cost and resource implications of reorganisation were viewed with considerable scepticism, with participants expressing doubt about official estimates of transition costs and timescales based on their observations of previous reorganisation exercises that had exceeded budgets and taken longer than planned. These concerns reflected broader scepticism about the financial benefits of reorganisation and anxiety that resources devoted to reorganisation processes would reduce funding available for service delivery during periods when budgets are already under pressure and service demands are increasing.

"I think what worries me there is that they think there will be cuts, but in reality, there will be so much disruption and disturbance that they actually will need to employ more people."

Male, 75-84, East Cambridgeshire

"I went through something similar in my previous employment, where we combined with Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire and we were Cambridgeshire. It was always thought that we were going to be sort of the poor relation, because Hertfordshire is massive and Bedfordshire is massive, and we're going to sort of almost get the scraps. And so, it was immensely disruptive."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"Oh, do you know what? This would be a good idea. We could reduce costs. Doge hasn't worked out too well for the Americans. You know, we've done something we've done something similar with Oh, do you know what? We'll collapse some councils and save some money. You know, we'll get rid of some of those big 100k sort of price tags. But equally, if you collapse them, and you get the best of what you believe is the best, the best to run those, those services, it's not going to happen."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

"I don't think that district councils and banging them together or is necessarily going to prepare them for what the onslaught of what is going to happen...I feel that there are a number of councils in Cambridge here that are cash rich..and that this is a way for the government to unlock those reserves and spread them across Cambridgeshire. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that's a wrong thing to do. But I think, I do think they've not been necessarily as honest as they might be when they are suggesting that this is what they want to do."

Female, 65-74, Huntingdonshire

Democratic accountability during transition periods was identified as a particular concern, with participants recognising that reorganisation processes can create confusion about roles, responsibilities, and lines of accountability that may leave communities without clear channels for raising concerns, seeking help, or holding decision-makers accountable for service performance. These concerns reflected understanding that democratic processes require clarity about who is responsible for what, and that reorganisation can create periods where these relationships are unclear or in flux, potentially leaving residents without effective recourse when services fail or problems arise.

"But you can see things that fall through the net. And I know social care has come up before in the discussions, and I do think there are risks if that's not managed properly, and it's not really, some of it's not managed terribly well at the minute, but then it potentially is going to get worse and not better."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

"In my experience of mergers, that's not what happens, right? You have the problem. The thing is, is that Peterborough is a particularly strong Council. You've got Cambridge City, which is growing with a whole host of investment. And then you've got the [district] councils, and I'll be blunt about it, because we I've seen this in other councils, where I grew up, in South London, you have good councils with strong councilors and strong executives. They will not be second fiddle, right? And I think that's the I think the unitary Council turns into the Hunger Games."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

Despite these concerns, participants also recognised significant opportunities for improvement through well-managed reorganisation, particularly in terms of modernising and improving coordination between services. These opportunities were seen as potentially valuable but dependent on effective implementation and careful attention to preserving existing strengths while addressing current weaknesses in local government provision.

"I think whatever decision they make, I think it has to be for the best interests of, I guess the residents, and they really need to do an impact assessment of what that's going to mean, you know, for the services, for the local community, and also, is it going to change? Is it going to change the community itself, like every city is very tight knit, and are we really going to be able to, I guess, keep that feel keep that, yeah, keep that going."

Female, 25-34, Cambridge City

Preserving existing strengths and effective practices was identified as a crucial requirement for successful reorganisation, with participants emphasising that change should build on what works well rather than disrupting effective services for the sake of standardisation or administrative convenience. This reflected understanding that different councils may have developed different approaches that work well for their particular circumstances and communities, and that reorganisation should seek to preserve and spread good practice rather than imposing uniform approaches that may be less effective in particular contexts.

“But what the point I want to make really, is what changes when you have a single unitary Council is that you don't have different ways of doing things. It's just one way. And that could be good, because maybe you have some current local council that do things wrongly, or it could be bad.”

Male, 25-34, Fenland

“And so you get to meet [the councillors], you get to talk to them, and you find out that actually they're in the same boat, but they made a profession out of it, they're trying to get things done as well, and coming across all sorts of problems because of the complexity of the system that they're working with at the moment. Okay, and which is why I think that something a little bit simpler, yeah, would work.”

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Communication and engagement during transition periods were identified as essential requirements for maintaining public confidence and ensuring that reorganisation processes do not undermine community relationships or democratic accountability. Participants emphasised that uncertainty and lack of information create anxiety and reduce public confidence, making clear, regular, and honest communication about progress, problems, and timescales essential for maintaining public support and ensuring that communities can continue to access help and support during periods of institutional change.

“So, in unitary, though, does that mean that we're not going to find out what's going on in our area? Does it then mean that actually we don't know what's going [on]... You know, if we join a bigger Council, how are we then going to find out information? God, get that information now. Well, we won't.”

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"I think the [reorganisation], I can see it for financial reasons, economy reasons, and all the rest of it and cost cutting, but there's nothing written into it that says, and we will work more closely with our public, the people we represent. And so, yes, it's complicated. It's ridiculously complicated, and all the rest of it, but it could, with modern technologies, be much, much more straightforward to make those communications."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"This reflects the lack of communication with us, the lack of transparency that actually, most people don't know what's going on and haven't, you know, aren't being consulted."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

The comprehensive evidence demonstrates that participants approached reorganisation proposals with sophisticated understanding of both the potential benefits and the substantial risks associated with major institutional change, recognising that successful reorganisation requires careful planning, realistic timescales, robust safeguards for essential services, effective communication, and genuine commitment to learning from previous experiences of structural change in local government and other public services.

The challenge for reorganisation proponents lies in demonstrating that they have adequate understanding of these complexities and sufficient commitment to managing transition risks to justify the disruption and uncertainty that reorganisation inevitably creates. This requires moving beyond simple assertions about the benefits of larger authorities to detailed planning for transition management, service protection, staff retention, system integration, and democratic accountability during periods of institutional change.

The evidence suggests that public support for reorganisation may depend as much on confidence in transition management as on belief in the long-term benefits of structural change, requiring reorganisation advocates to demonstrate competence in change management as well as vision for improved local governance. Without such demonstration, reorganisation proposals may be viewed as creating unnecessary risk and disruption for uncertain benefits, potentially undermining public confidence in local government and democratic processes more broadly.

Executive Summary: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Government Reform Public Survey

Survey Overview

This public survey on local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough achieved 3,174 responses during the four-week collection period (19 June - 20 July 2025), comprising 2,407 public responses and 767 council worker responses.

Key Findings

Trust and Satisfaction with Current Services

Public trust in council decision-making represents a fundamental challenge, with residents showing a net negative score (-4) compared to council workers' positive assessment (+31). This 35-point gap constitutes the largest divergence between public and professional perspectives across all measures.

Current service satisfaction reveals similar patterns, with the public recording a modest positive net score (+10) compared to council workers' substantially more optimistic view (+44). East Cambridgeshire consistently outperforms other districts across multiple measures, whilst Peterborough, despite already operating as a unitary authority, records the lowest satisfaction levels at 30%.

Support for Change

Despite trust deficits, public support for structural change is overwhelmingly positive (net +77), conditional on service improvements. This strong endorsement crosses all demographic and geographic boundaries, with agreement ranging from 76% in Fenland to 88% in Cambridge and Peterborough. The conditional nature of this support emphasises that residents prioritise tangible service improvements over structural change for its own sake.

Reorganisation Concerns

Concern about areas being overlooked during reorganisation is substantial across both public (net +56) and council workers (net +53). This convergence masks significant geographical variation: rural districts including East Cambridgeshire and Fenland show 81% agreement with this concern, compared to 54% in Cambridge. This 27-point difference highlights fundamental anxieties about representation and resource allocation in any new structure.

Current Performance Assessments

Performance assessments reveal systematic patterns across service areas. Councils perform relatively well on digital service delivery (public net +44) and having councillors who know their area (public net +43). However, significant weaknesses emerge in accountability and

transparency (public net -45), service investment (public net -32), and reducing complexity (public net -46).

The assessment of single-point council contact reveals the current two-tier system's limitations, with negative perceptions across most districts except Peterborough, where 43% rate this positively compared to Cambridge's 9%. This demonstrates the practical advantages of unitary structures in simplifying citizen access to services.

Priorities for New Unitaries

Residents identify three top priorities for new unitary councils: **investing in council services**, **improving response capabilities**, and **ensuring councillors possess local area knowledge**. For future development, residents prioritise investment in health infrastructure, transport networks, and community facilities. The emphasis on maintaining local knowledge whilst improving service delivery presents a key challenge for larger unitary structures.

Unitary Size Preferences

Public preference centres on unitary authorities serving 400,000-500,000 residents, with 500,000 being the single most selected option. Council workers demonstrate stronger preference for the larger 500,000 population scale. Fenland shows 62% preference for authorities under 400,000, whilst South Cambridgeshire shows 48% support for authorities over 500,000. This 18-point difference reflects different perspectives on the balance between efficiency and local representation.

Community Belonging and Cultural Alignment

Community belonging shows generally positive sentiment (public net +43), though Peterborough records significantly weaker belonging at 47% compared to East Cambridgeshire's 76%. Perceptions of whether council decisions reflect cultural values are more mixed (public net +9), with council workers more optimistic (net +29). Younger residents consistently report weaker community connections across all districts.

Demographic Variations

Age-related patterns emerge consistently: younger residents (under 35) express lower satisfaction with services, weaker community belonging, and greater frustration with council complexity. Conversely, residents over 75 show higher trust in councils and stronger community connections. Gender differences appear primarily in reorganisation concerns, with women expressing greater anxiety about areas being overlooked.

Implications for Reorganisation

The findings reveal several critical considerations for developing unitary proposals:

1. **The trust deficit between public and council perspectives requires attention during transition planning.**

2. **Geographic variations in satisfaction, community connection, and size preferences necessitate careful consideration of boundaries** to ensure new authorities can maintain local identity whilst achieving efficiency gains.
3. **Movement patterns demonstrate that functional economic and service geographies already transcend current boundaries**, with some districts showing stronger connections to neighbouring areas than internal cohesion.
4. **The emphasis on maintaining councillor local knowledge whilst creating larger authorities** presents a key challenge requiring innovative approaches to democratic representation.
5. **Rural districts' heightened concerns about being overlooked** require specific safeguards and communication strategies to maintain confidence during transition.
6. **The conditional nature of public support** demands that proposals clearly demonstrate how reorganisation will deliver tangible service improvements rather than merely promising efficiency savings.
7. **Voice of the customer** many of the challenges arise from the fragmentary nature of government in the region and the lack of a robust consultative mechanism to tap into public attitudes which will become doubly important in the new unitary set up and the transition to get there

The research provides robust evidence that whilst residents are open to change, success will depend on addressing fundamental concerns about democratic representation, service quality, and local identity within new structures. The significant variations between districts in satisfaction, trust, and preferences indicate that a differentiated approach may be necessary, recognising that one size may not fit all communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Introduction and Methodology: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Government Reform Public Survey

Introduction

The Government has mandated that all county and district councils in England will be abolished in April 2028 and replaced with unitary authorities. This directive affects Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, where the current two-tier system of seven authorities comprising of:

- Cambridgeshire County Council
- Cambridge City Council
- East Cambridgeshire District Council
- Fenland District Council
- Huntingdonshire District Council
- Peterborough City Council
- South Cambridgeshire District Council.

Peterborough City Council already operates as a unitary authority, the only authority to do so, but will be included in the reorganisation process. These councils will be restructured into one or more unitary authorities serving the area's residents. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority will remain unchanged. Town and parish councils are not currently required to change under the Government directive.

The Government has established key criteria that proposals for new unitary structures must address. These criteria require that:

- proposals should achieve better outcomes and local service delivery for the whole area
- ensure unitary local government is the right size to achieve efficiencies and improve capacity
- prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services
- demonstrate how councils have worked together to meet local needs informed by local views, support devolution arrangements
- enable stronger community engagement with genuine opportunities for neighbourhood empowerment.

Additionally, this report considers issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance.

This reorganisation represents a fundamental shift in local governance arrangements that have served the area for decades. The current system provides different services through different

tiers, with residents accessing county council services for education, social care, and highways, while district and city councils provide housing, planning, environmental services, along with waste and recycling. The proposed unitary structure will consolidate these functions under single authorities, potentially simplifying access to services while creating larger administrative units.

The Government has indicated that financial savings are expected through the process of reducing the number of councils, while also supporting improvements in service delivery through bringing services together. This creates a complex challenge of achieving efficiency gains while maintaining or improving service quality and democratic representation across diverse communities ranging from the urban centres of Cambridge and Peterborough to extensive rural areas.

The area's population is projected to grow to over one million residents within the next fifteen years, adding demographic pressure to the reorganisation challenge. The Government's guiding principle, not a target, is that unitary authorities should serve populations of approximately 500,000; and smaller where appropriate, which would indicate the creation of at least two unitary authorities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, though the final structure remains to be determined through evidence supporting proposals, and central government will make the final decision.

Methodology

The research employed an online survey methodology to gather public perspectives on local government reorganisation across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The survey was designed as an engagement exercise rather than a formal consultation, with the purpose of providing qualitative and quantitative data to inform the development of proposals for submission to Government by November 2025. The survey was also made available in paper versions to ensure that everyone could potentially take part and these were in libraries and various outlets across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

This public survey served as a companion piece to a parallel businesses and stakeholder survey that asked many of the same questions, enabling comparison between general public and stakeholder perspectives on reorganisation priorities and concerns. The dual survey approach recognised that members of the public who use local government services may have different insights and priorities compared to stakeholders who regularly engage with local government, while ensuring comprehensive coverage of community views across different levels of engagement with local government services. Council workers were also a key constituent group and their responses to the public survey have been extracted and presented separately in this report.

Survey Design and Implementation

The survey instrument was developed collaboratively by the seven affected councils working with Archangel to ensure comprehensive coverage of the Government's criteria for unitary authority proposals. The survey design prioritised brevity and accessibility, limiting the questionnaire to a smaller number of core questions to maximise response rates while gathering essential data on public priorities and preferences regarding local government reorganisation.

While designed as an engagement exercise rather than formal consultation, the approach went above and beyond standard engagement requirements by voluntarily aligning with the Gunning principles for fair consultation. This demonstrated a commitment to best practice standards, ensuring that the public were consulted at a time when proposals were still at a formative stage, sufficient information was provided to enable informed responses, and time was allowed for consideration and response.

No maps or visual representations of potential boundary options were included in the survey design, in accordance with the engagement rather than consultation approach adopted for this research. This neutral approach was particularly important for the public survey to ensure that residents could express their views without being influenced by specific boundary proposals that had not yet been finalised.

Public Engagement Strategy

The online survey was supported by comprehensive communications to residents across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough through established communication channels managed by the communications teams from the seven authorities. This multi-channel approach was designed to ensure broad public awareness and participation across the diverse communities within Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This was further supported by digital marketing provided by CAN.

The communication strategy utilised existing council communication channels including websites, social media platforms, direct communication with residents but also offline channels such as newsletters, posters and flyers. Awareness was also raised through news articles, a video, and CAN boosted response through targeted programmatic online advertising reacting in real time to survey response levels. The heads of communications coordinated their efforts to ensure consistent messaging while leveraging the unique reach and audience characteristics of each authority's communication channels. This collaborative approach maximised the potential reach to residents across all areas while maintaining message consistency and professional standards.

The engagement strategy recognised the importance of reaching residents who might not typically participate in local government consultations but whose perspectives are essential for understanding community needs and priorities. Particular attention was paid to ensuring that communications reached residents across different demographic groups, geographical areas,

and levels of engagement with local government services. CAN's marketing strategy was designed to leverage these harder-to-reach groups.

Communications emphasised that the survey was open to all residents of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, regardless of their current level of engagement with local government services. The messaging highlighted that local government reorganisation would affect all residents through changes to service delivery, democratic representation, and local identity, making broad public participation essential for informing the proposals process.

Data Collection Period and Procedures

The survey was conducted from 19th June 2025 to 20th July 2025, providing a concentrated four-week period for public participation while meeting the tight timescales required for proposals development. The online survey platform maintained a hard stop at midnight on the final day of the survey period, ensuring clear closure for the data collection period and enabling timely analysis for proposals development.

While the online survey closed at midnight on 20th July 2025, paper survey responses continued to be processed for the following week to ensure accessibility for residents who preferred paper survey participation methods or who had obtained paper copies during the survey period but required additional time to complete and return them. This approach balanced the need for timely data collection with accessibility considerations for residents who might face barriers to online participation.

The timing was coordinated with broader communications and engagement activities around local government reorganisation to maximise awareness and participation. The four-week period provided sufficient time for residents to become aware of the survey, consider the information provided, and formulate their responses, while meeting the constraints imposed by Government timescales for proposals submission.

The data collection procedures incorporated robust quality assurance measures to ensure data integrity and prevent duplicate responses. The online platform included validation checks and security measures to maintain the reliability of the data while protecting respondent privacy and confidentiality.

Response Profile and Participation

The survey achieved substantial participation from residents along with council workers across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, representing diverse demographic groups, geographical areas, and levels of engagement with local government services. The response profile demonstrated broad public and council worker interest in local government reorganisation and willingness to participate in the engagement process. In just four weeks, there were 3,174 responses in total. This comprised of 2,407 responses from residents and 767 responses from council workers. These are healthy responses and mean that the public response, when weighted to the population, is in excess of 1000 which is the gold standard in market research. There is high engagement among council workers and so the survey results specifically include them in comparisons.

The public survey attracted participation from residents across all seven local authority areas, with representation from urban centres, market towns, and rural communities. This geographical distribution provided insights into how local government reorganisation might affect different types of communities and enabled analysis of potential variations in priorities and concerns across different areas. Further information on this can be found in the sample profile.

Demographic analysis of the response profile revealed participation across different age groups, gender categories, and other relevant characteristics, though as with all voluntary surveys, certain demographic groups were more likely to participate than others. This participation pattern necessitated the implementation of weighting procedures to ensure that the analysis appropriately reflected the demographic composition of the broader population.

The response profile included residents with varying levels of current engagement with local government services, from those who regularly interact with councils through to those who have minimal or no direct contact. This diversity of experience provided valuable insights into how reorganisation might affect different types of service users and enabled analysis of priorities across different levels of current engagement.

Analytical Approach and Statistical Framework

The analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine public responses across the range of survey questions. Quantitative analysis focused on response distributions and patterns across different demographic groups and geographical areas, while qualitative analysis examined open-ended responses and comments to identify key themes and concerns expressed by residents.

Particular attention was paid to identifying differences in perspectives between different demographic groups and geographical areas, recognising that residents in different circumstances may have different priorities and concerns regarding reorganisation. Statistical analysis was conducted where sample sizes permitted reliable comparison between groups, with appropriate confidence intervals calculated to support interpretation of findings.

The methodology incorporated weighting procedures to adjust for demographic differences between the survey sample and the broader population of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This weighting approach ensured that the analysis appropriately reflected the demographic composition of the area while acknowledging the voluntary nature of survey participation.

The analytical framework recognised both the strengths and limitations of the public survey approach. The substantial sample size provided statistically robust insights with calculable margins of error and confidence intervals. The broad geographical and demographic representation enabled analysis of variations in perspectives across different communities and population groups.

However, several limitations were acknowledged in the analytical approach. As a self-selecting sample, the survey may over-represent more engaged residents who actively choose to participate in local government processes, potentially under-representing less engaged residents.

Despite these limitations, the substantial sample size, systematic sampling approach, and broad representation across demographic groups and geographical areas provided confidence that the findings offered statistically valid and representative insights into public perspectives on local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Weighting Methodology

To ensure that the survey findings accurately reflected the demographic composition of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, weighting procedures were applied to adjust for differences between the survey sample and the broader population. The weighting approach addressed three key demographic dimensions: gender, age, and geographical location. Population benchmarks for weighting were derived from the most recent Office for National Statistics census data and mid-year population estimates for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, providing reliable demographic profiles against which the survey sample could be calibrated.

The weighting procedures were implemented using iterative proportional fitting techniques to simultaneously balance the sample across all three demographic dimensions. This approach ensured that the weighted sample matched the population benchmarks for gender, age, and location while maintaining the integrity of individual response patterns. While weighting procedures enhanced the representativeness of the survey findings, certain limitations were acknowledged, including that weighting can only adjust for measured demographic characteristics and cannot correct for other potential sources of bias such as differences in political engagement or attitudes toward local government.

In addition, weighting reduces the effective sample size as we take primary research sample to match the population. The public, after weighting, have an effective sample size of 1,411. This gives a margin of error of $\pm 3\%$ on the sample results at the 95% confidence level making the results highly accurate. This means that if a survey response is 50% the true population answer will lie between 47% and 53%.

For council workers, it is difficult to weight on demographic profile as this information is unknown so the only weighting adjustment was made for district location on the basis of population levels. This levelled out under and over representation of council workers by district. The effective sample size for council workers is 642. The consequent margin of error is $\pm 3.9\%$ on the sample results at the 95% confidence level.

In comparing differences between the general public and council workers on any issue, then it is necessary to calculate the difference between the two samples. On this measure, to be significant, the critical threshold is five per cent difference (4.7%).

Presentation of data

The following analysis presents findings from the survey data collected, with results presented both as individual response percentages and as net scores to provide a clear summary of overall opinion. The data has been weighted to ensure representativeness of the target population, and all percentages have been rounded to whole numbers for clarity of presentation.

Charts and tables throughout this section display the full distribution of responses to allow readers to understand the complete picture of opinion. Significant differences between demographic groups and other key variables are highlighted where they emerge from the data.

In survey, there were single code, single response questions and multicode, multiple response questions. For example, a multicode question would be a select up to three question and a single code question would be how much do you agree or disagree with something. Questions are classified as either single code (where respondents can select only one answer) or multicode (where respondents can select multiple answers). For multicode questions, percentages will not sum to 100% as respondents may give more than one response. Additionally, where figures do not sum to exactly 100%, this may be due to computer rounding of percentages, which can occasionally result in totals of 99% or 101%.

All charts show weighted data but bases are given unweighted.

Net Score Calculation

Net scores are calculated to provide a single summary measure of the balance of opinion on each topic. The net score represents the difference between positive and negative responses, excluding neutral or undecided responses from the calculation.

The net score formula used throughout this analysis is: $\text{Net Score} = (\text{Strongly Agree} + \text{Agree}) - (\text{Disagree} + \text{Strongly Disagree})$. For satisfaction measures, the calculation follows the same principle: $\text{Net Satisfaction} = (\text{Very Satisfied} + \text{Satisfied}) - (\text{Dissatisfied} + \text{Very Dissatisfied})$.

A positive net score indicates that positive responses outweigh negative responses, whilst a negative net score indicates the reverse. A net score of zero suggests opinion is evenly balanced between positive and negative views. Net scores can range from +100 (where all respondents give positive responses) to -100 (where all respondents give negative responses).

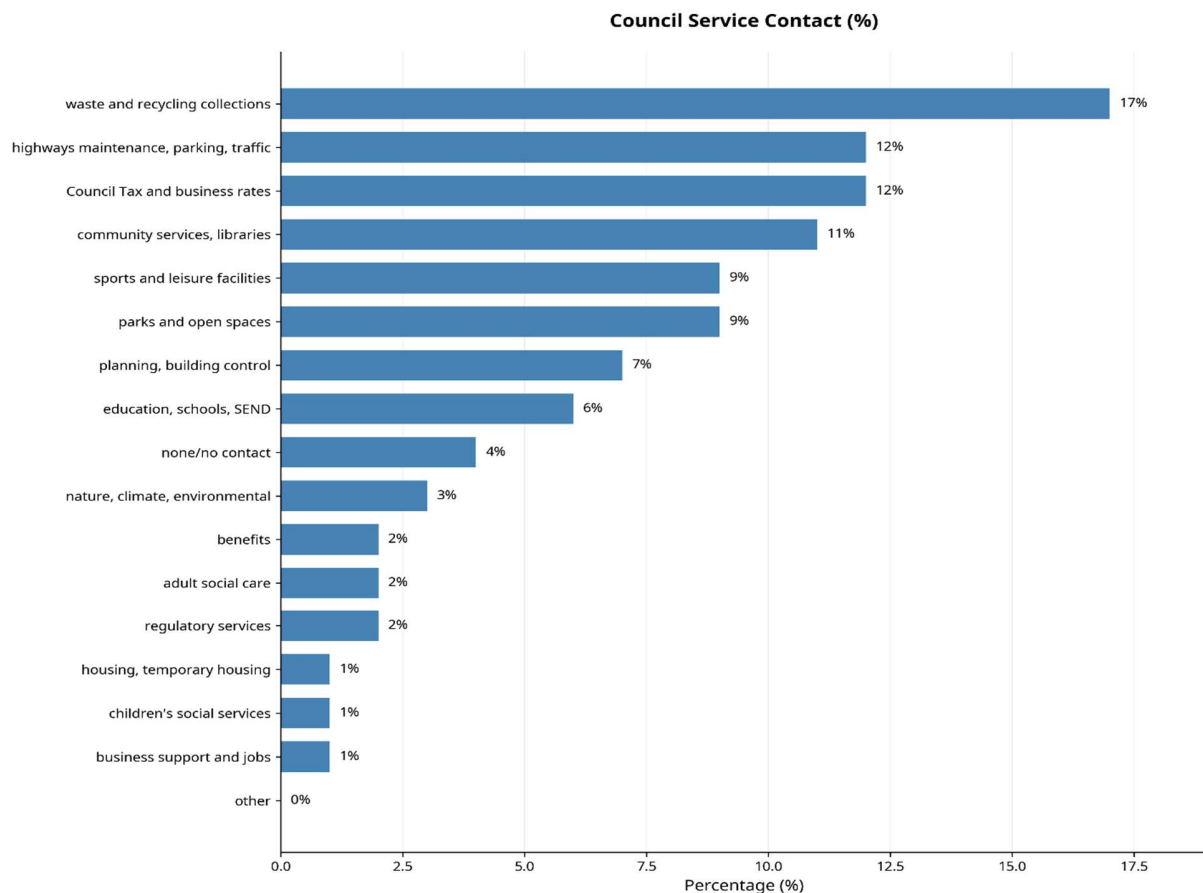
Net scores are particularly useful for comparing performance across different areas, identifying areas of strength and concern, tracking changes in opinion over time, and providing a clear summary statistic. They offer a single figure that encapsulates the overall direction and strength of opinion on any given measure. All net scores presented in the charts are clearly labelled and the underlying data showing the full response distribution is provided to ensure transparency in the calculation method.

Survey Findings

Council Service Contact

In terms of public responses, the survey reveals that waste and recycling collections represent the most frequently contacted council service, with 17% of all service interactions across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This reflects the universal nature of waste services and their visibility to residents, as every household engages with these services on a regular basis. The prominence of waste services in contact patterns demonstrates their fundamental role in daily life and the importance residents place on reliable collection schedules and recycling facilities.

Highways maintenance, parking, traffic management and street lighting account for 12% of contacts, indicating significant public engagement with transport infrastructure issues. This substantial level of interaction reflects the critical importance of road networks and traffic systems to residents' daily mobility and economic activity. The frequency of contact in this area suggests ongoing concerns about road conditions, parking availability, potholes and traffic flow management across the region.

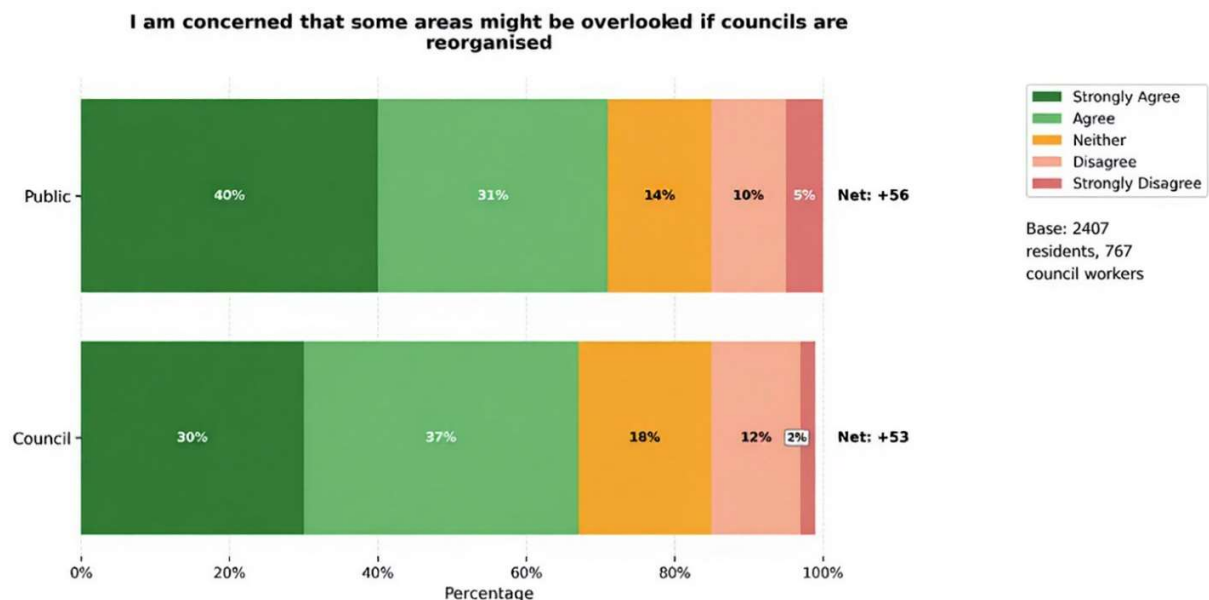


Council Tax and business rates generate 12% of service contacts, whilst community services such as libraries and community centres also account for 11%. These findings suggest that both administrative functions and community-facing services maintain substantial public interaction levels. The equal weighting between financial administration and community services indicates a balanced demand for both regulatory compliance support and access to cultural and social facilities.

Sports and leisure facilities attract 9% of contacts from the public. This uniformity suggests that recreational services maintain broad appeal regardless of employment sector, reflecting their role in community wellbeing and social cohesion. Parks and open spaces generate 9% of public contacts suggesting greater public utilisation of recreational spaces or potentially different awareness levels of available facilities.

Concern about reorganisation: I am concerned that some areas might be overlooked if councils are reorganised

The Professional Divide



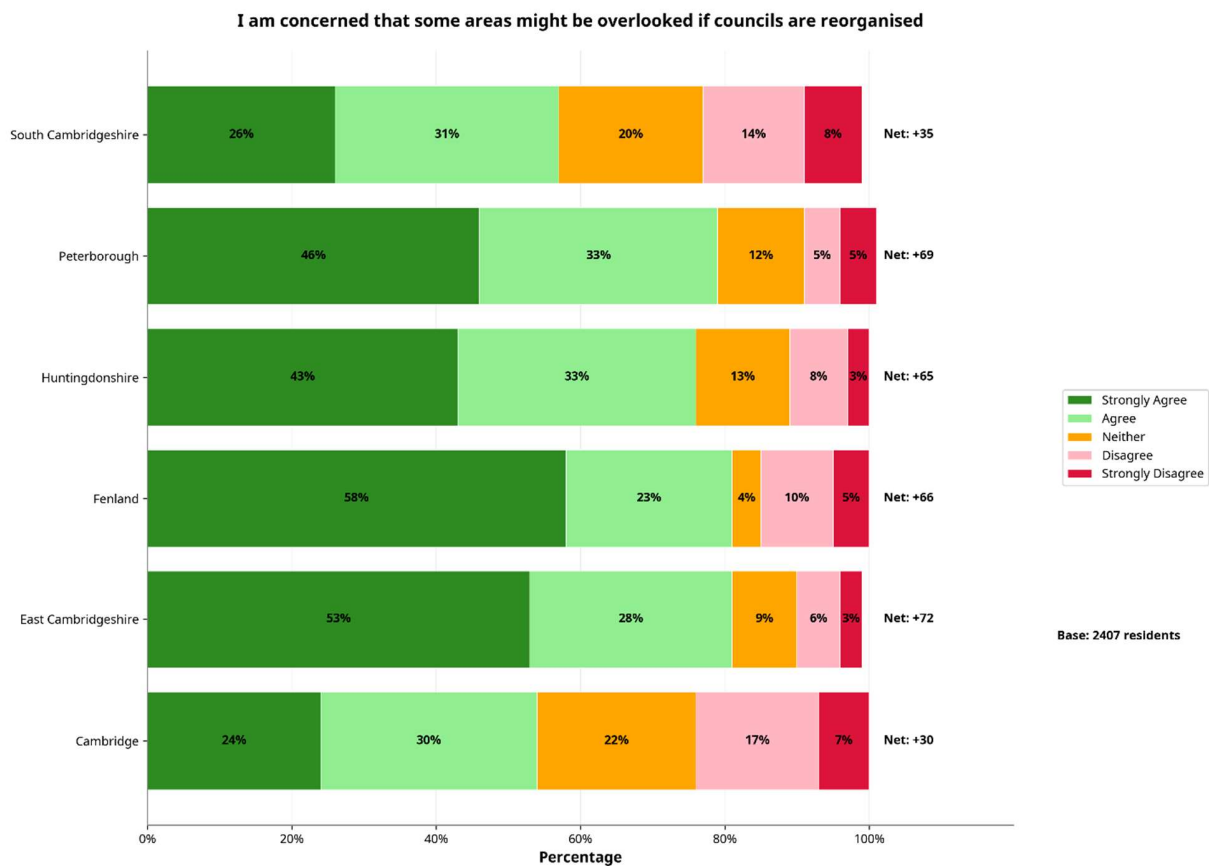
The analysis reveals remarkable convergence between public and professional perspectives on this attitudinal dimension, with public respondents recording a net score of +56 and council workers +53. Both the public and council workers' viewpoints are broadly aligned on their concern that some areas may get overlooked and there is substantial agreement with the statement.

Such convergence indicates that this concern about areas being overlooked indicates both groups sharing similar concerns and expectations about the proposed changes. This alignment provides a solid foundation for building consensus around reorganisation planning.

Geographical Perspectives

Concerns about areas being overlooked in council reorganisation show significant district-level variation. East Cambridgeshire and Fenland express the strongest concerns, with 81% agreement in both districts, compared to Huntingdonshire's 76%, Peterborough's 79%, South Cambridgeshire's 57%, and Cambridge's 54%. The 27-point gap between East Cambridgeshire/Fenland and Cambridge exceeds statistical significance thresholds.

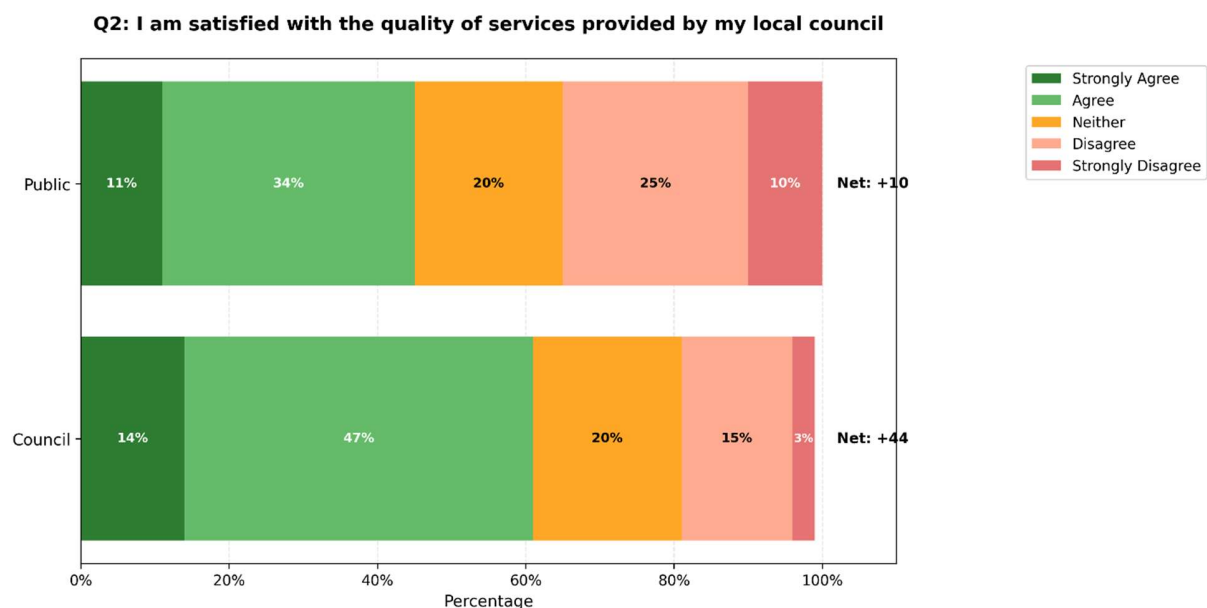
Disagreement remains minimal across all districts, ranging from 10% in Peterborough to 24% in Cambridge. The "neither" category varies from 4% in Fenland to 22% in Cambridge. These findings reveal anxiety in rural districts about potential marginalisation under reorganisation, with East Cambridgeshire and Fenland residents expressing near-universal concern about being overlooked. The notably lower concern in Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire suggests urban and peri-urban residents feel more confident about maintaining influence in any restructured arrangements.



Those aged 75+ tend to be more concerned about areas being overlooked (Net +57). Females tend to show more concern than males (Net +51).

Council satisfaction: I am satisfied with the quality of services provided by my local council

The Professional Divide

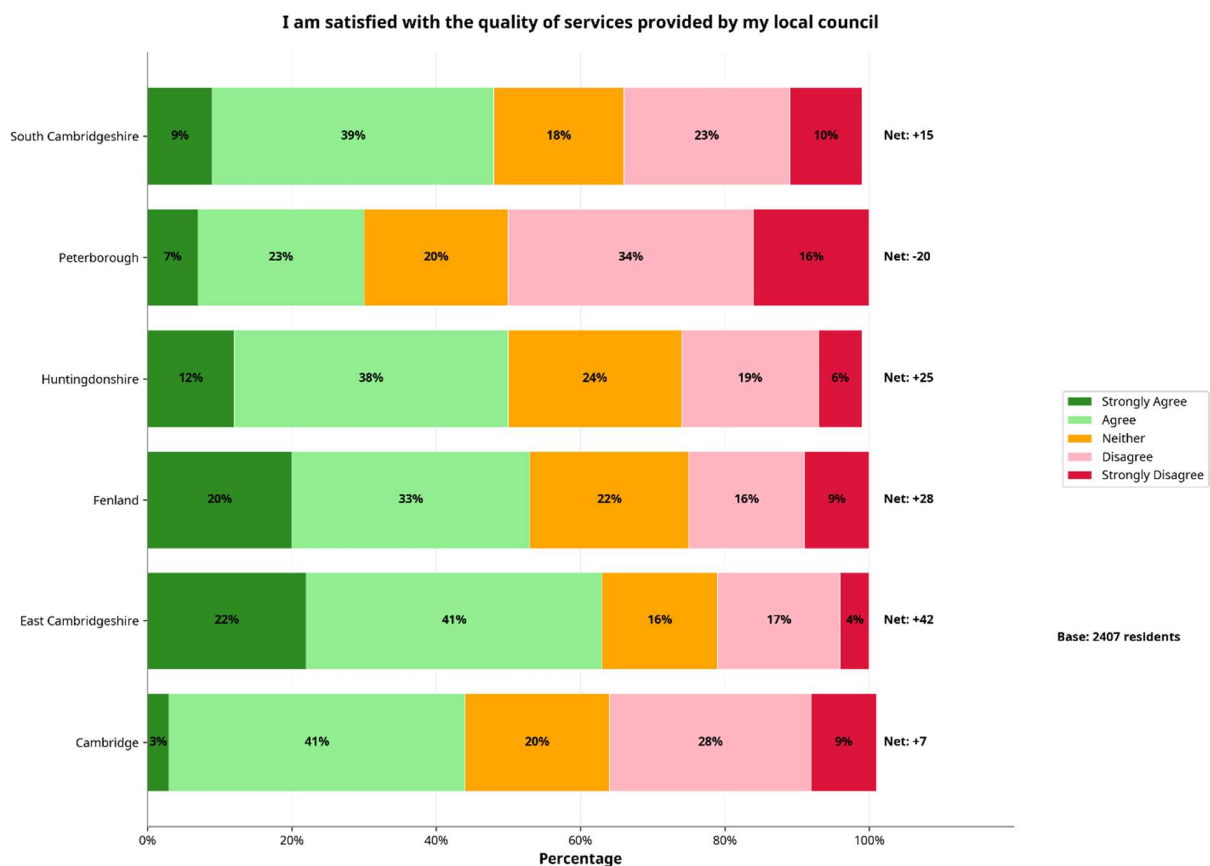


The analysis reveals a significant professional divide on this attitudinal dimension, with council workers expressing notably more positive sentiment (net score +44) compared to public respondents (net score +10). This 34-point gap suggests that professional experience within local government shapes perspectives on reorganisation in meaningful ways.

Council workers' more optimistic outlook may reflect their direct experience with current governance structures and their professional understanding of potential improvements that reorganisation could bring. The public's more cautious stance reflects the natural uncertainty that accompanies significant institutional change, particularly when it affects services and representation that communities rely upon.

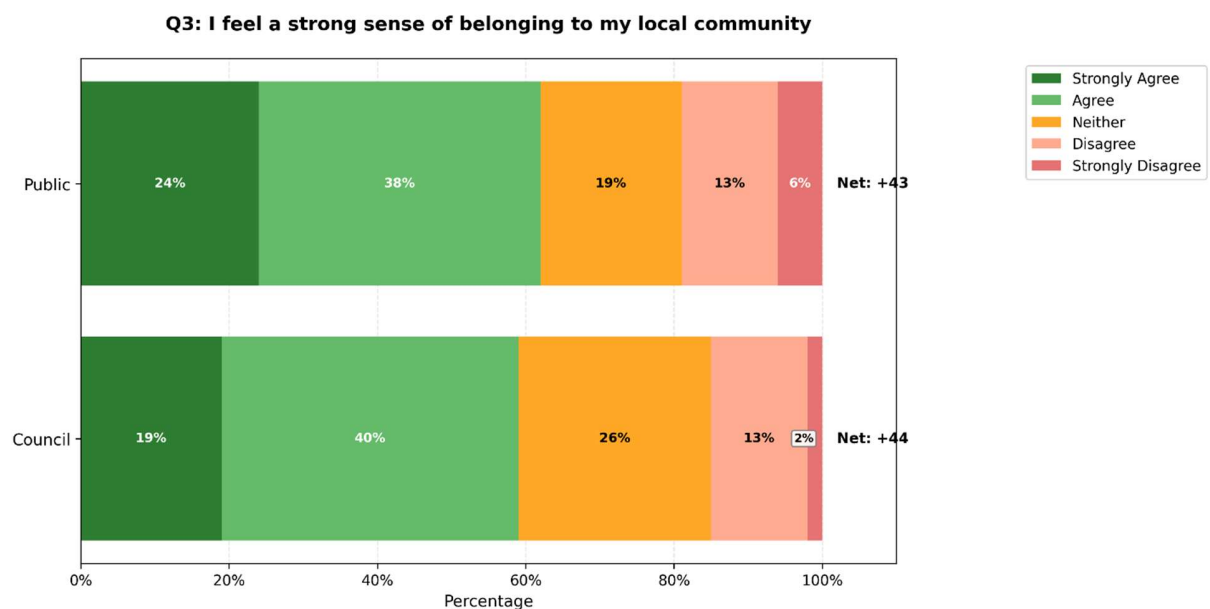
Geographical Perspectives

Satisfaction with local council service quality shows significant district-level variation. East Cambridgeshire demonstrates the highest satisfaction at 63%, followed by Fenland at 53%, Huntingdonshire at 50%, Cambridge at 45%, South Cambridgeshire at 48%, and Peterborough at 30%. The 33-point gap between East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Dissatisfaction shows Peterborough at 50%, Cambridge at 37%, South Cambridgeshire at 33%, Fenland and Huntingdonshire at 25%, and East Cambridgeshire at 21%. The 29-point difference between Peterborough and East Cambridgeshire in dissatisfaction is statistically significant. These findings reveal a clear performance divide, with East Cambridgeshire residents consistently reporting higher satisfaction across multiple measures,...



Community feeling: I feel a strong sense of belonging to my local community

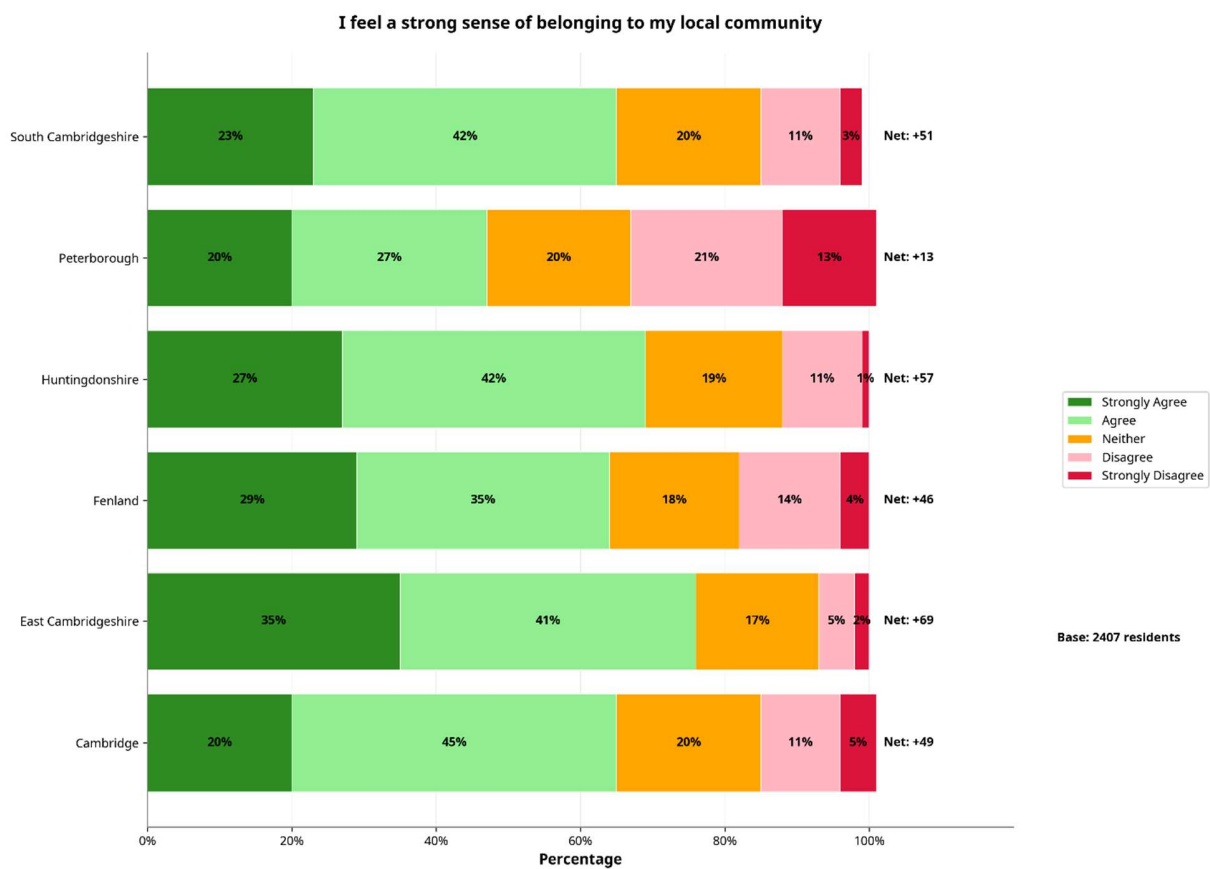
The Professional Divide



The analysis reveals remarkable convergence between public and professional perspectives on this attitudinal dimension, with public respondents recording a net score of +43 and council workers +44. This close alignment suggests that both citizen and practitioner viewpoints are broadly aligned on this aspect of local government reorganisation.

Geographical Perspectives

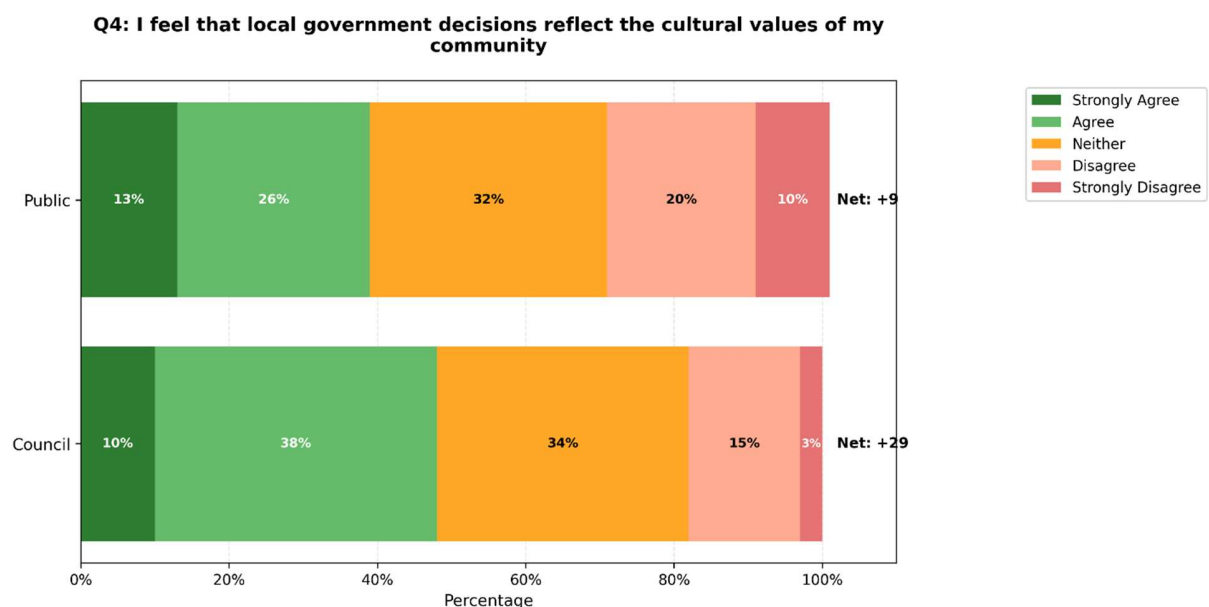
East Cambridgeshire demonstrates the highest belonging at 76%, followed by Huntingdonshire at 69%, Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire at 65%, Fenland at 64%, and Peterborough at 47%. The 29-point gap between East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Negative responses show Peterborough at 34%, Fenland at 18%, Cambridge at 16%, Huntingdonshire at 12%, South Cambridgeshire at 13%, and East Cambridgeshire at 10%. The 24-point difference between Peterborough and East Cambridgeshire is statistically significant.



Younger people are less likely to agree with feeling a sense of belonging to the local community (net +25).

Government reflecting values: I feel that local government decisions reflect the cultural values of my community

The Professional Divide

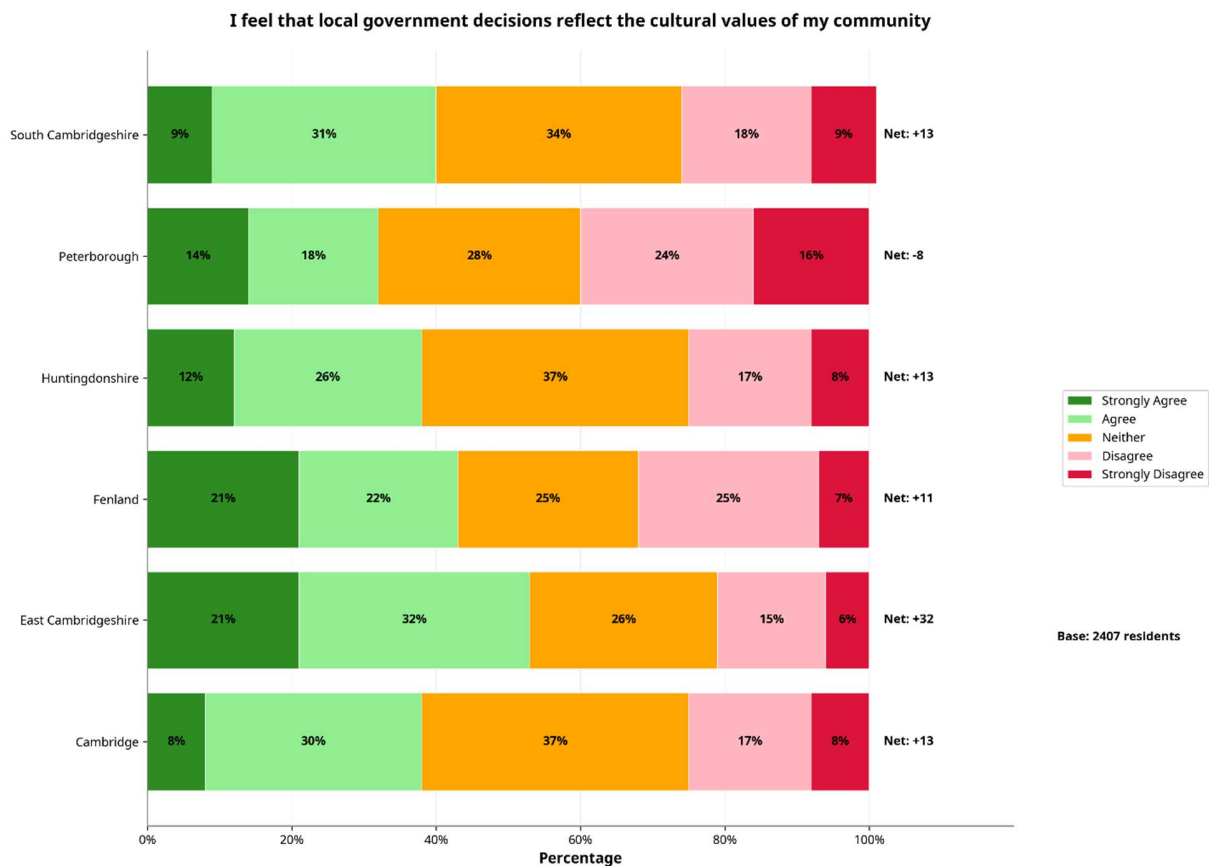


The analysis reveals a significant professional divide on this attitudinal dimension, with council workers expressing notably more positive sentiment (net score +29) compared to public respondents (net score +9). This 20-point gap suggests that professional experience within local government shapes perspectives on reorganisation in meaningful ways.

Council workers' more optimistic outlook may reflect their direct experience with current governance structures and their professional understanding of potential improvements that reorganisation could bring. The public's more cautious stance reflects the natural uncertainty that accompanies significant institutional change, particularly when it affects services and representation that communities rely upon.

Geographical Perspectives

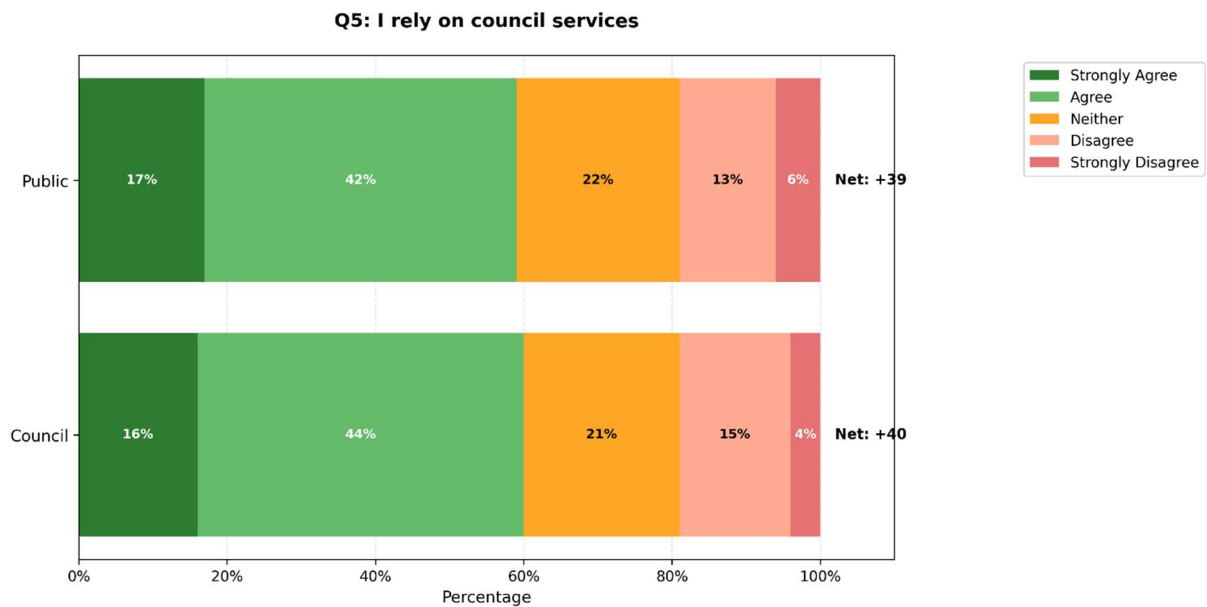
Perceptions of whether local government decisions reflect community cultural values show limited significant variation across districts. East Cambridgeshire shows the highest agreement at 53%, followed by Fenland at 43%, South Cambridgeshire at 40%, Huntingdonshire and Cambridge at 38%, and Peterborough at 32%. The 21-point difference between East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough approaches but does not clearly exceed significance thresholds given the confidence intervals. Disagreement ranges from 20% in East Cambridgeshire to 40% in Peterborough. The "neither" category shows considerable variation from 25% in Fenland to 37% in both Huntingdonshire and Cambridge. These patterns suggest moderate alignment between governance and cultural values across most districts, with no dramatic disparities.



Here, the under 35s and the 55-64s clearly feel a disconnect, though all the net figures are low (Net +4 and Net +4 respectively).

Council reliance: I rely on council services

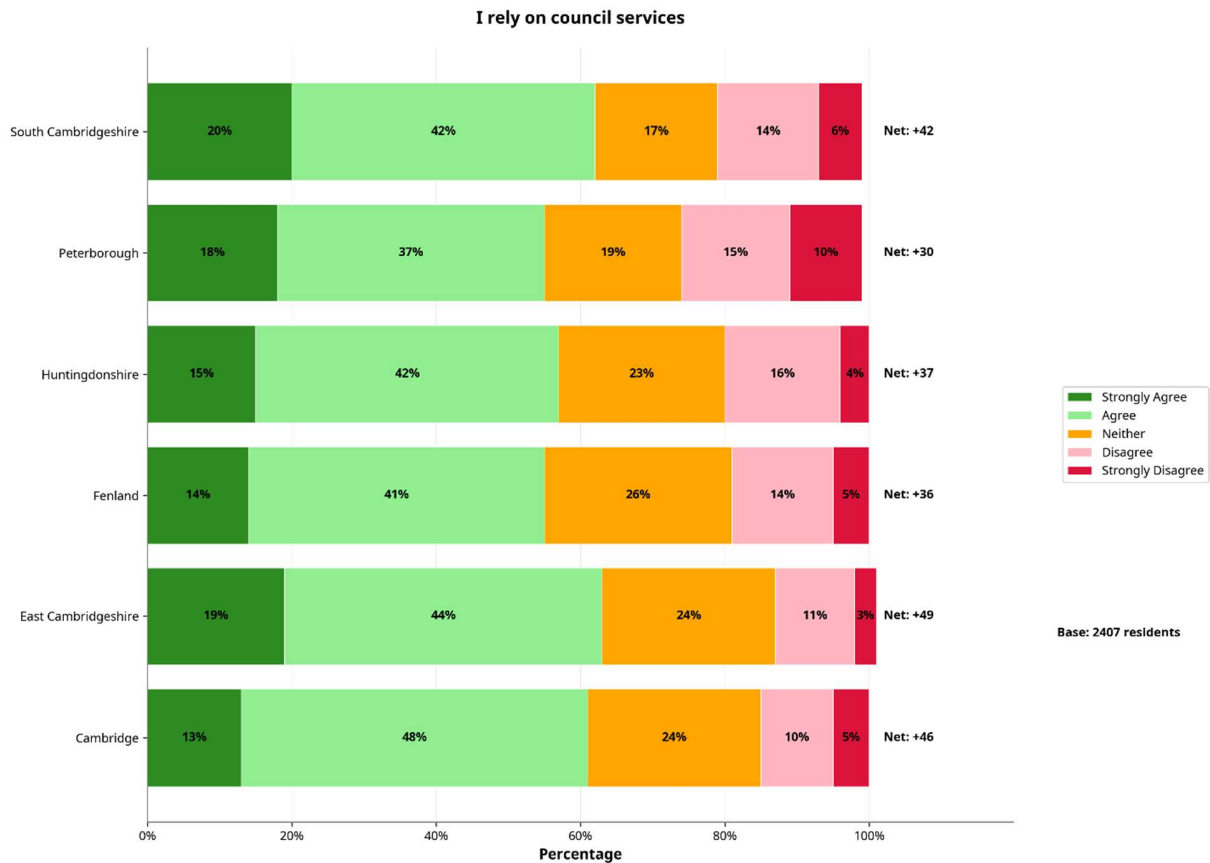
The Professional Divide



The analysis reveals convergence between public and professional perspectives on this attitudinal dimension, with public respondents recording a net score of +39 and council workers +40.

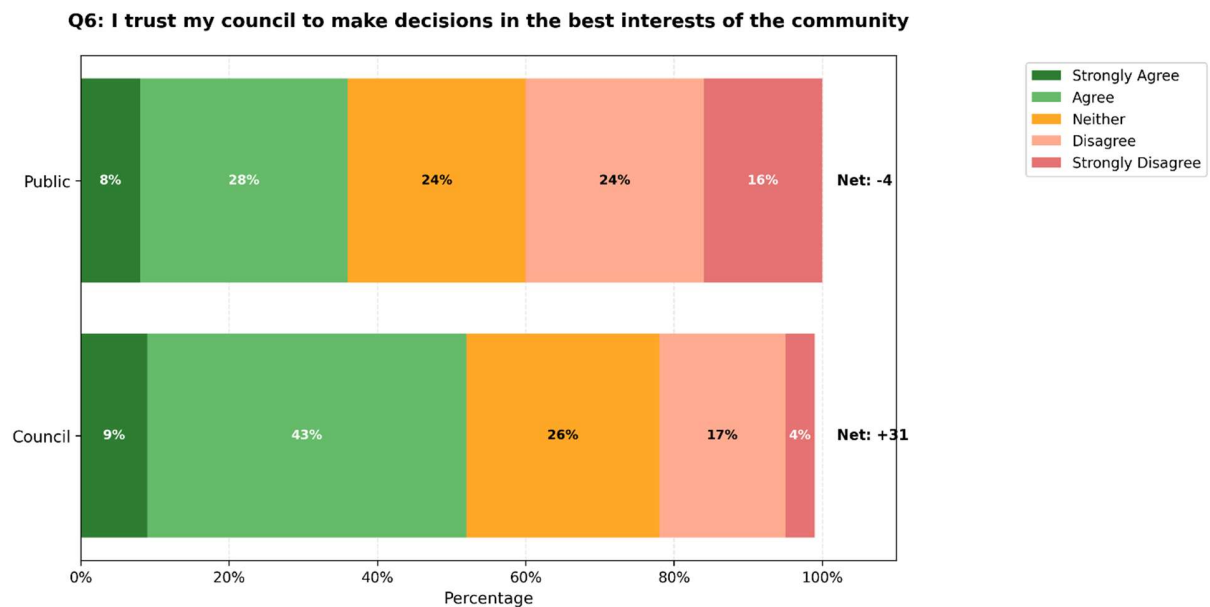
Geographical Perspectives

For the council services reliance question shown, there are no statistically significant differences between districts. All observed variations fall within the confidence intervals when properly accounting for sample sizes.



Trust in councils: I trust my council to make decisions in the best interests of the community

The Professional Divide

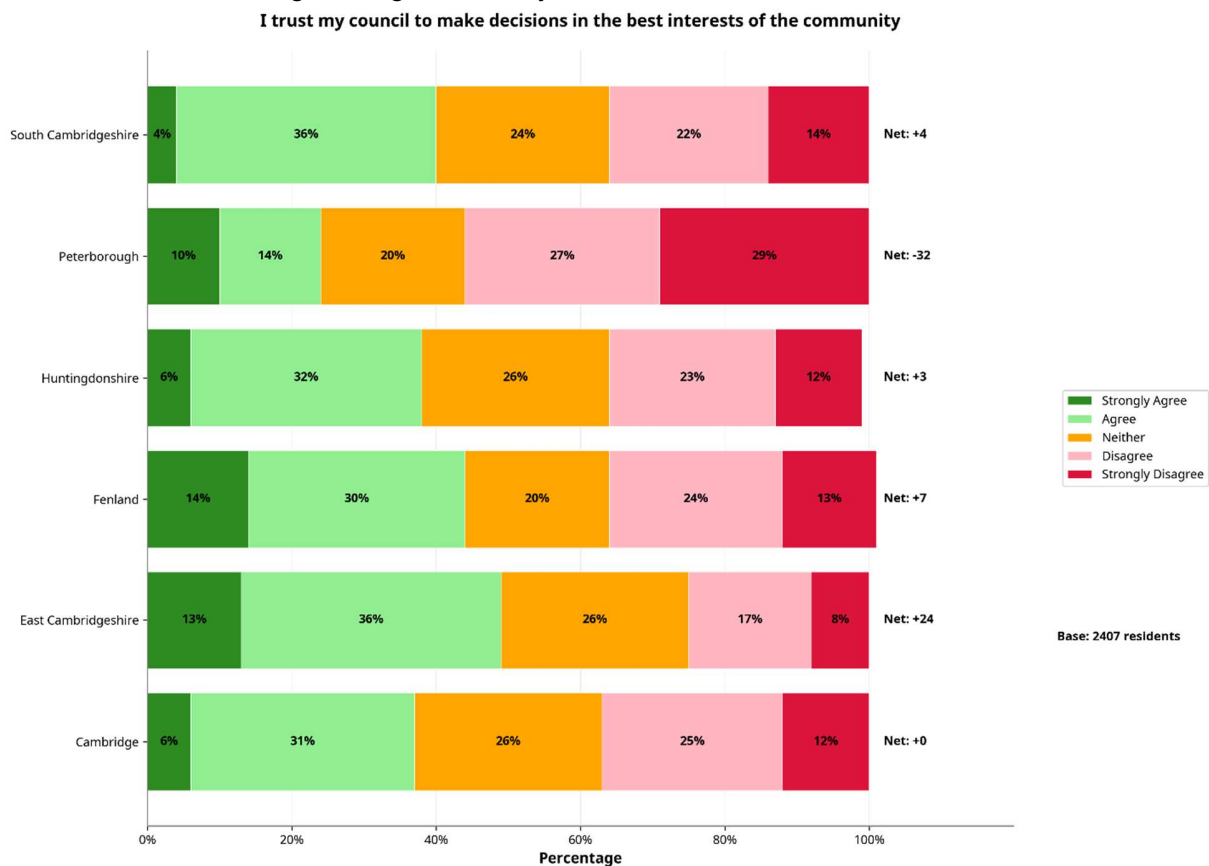


The analysis reveals a significant professional divide on this attitudinal dimension, with council workers expressing notably more positive sentiment (net score +31) compared to public respondents (net score -4). This 35-point gap suggests that professional experience a real disjunct on the issue of trust.

It is notably that on the matter of trust, a key factor for councils, the public are net negative.

Geographical Perspectives

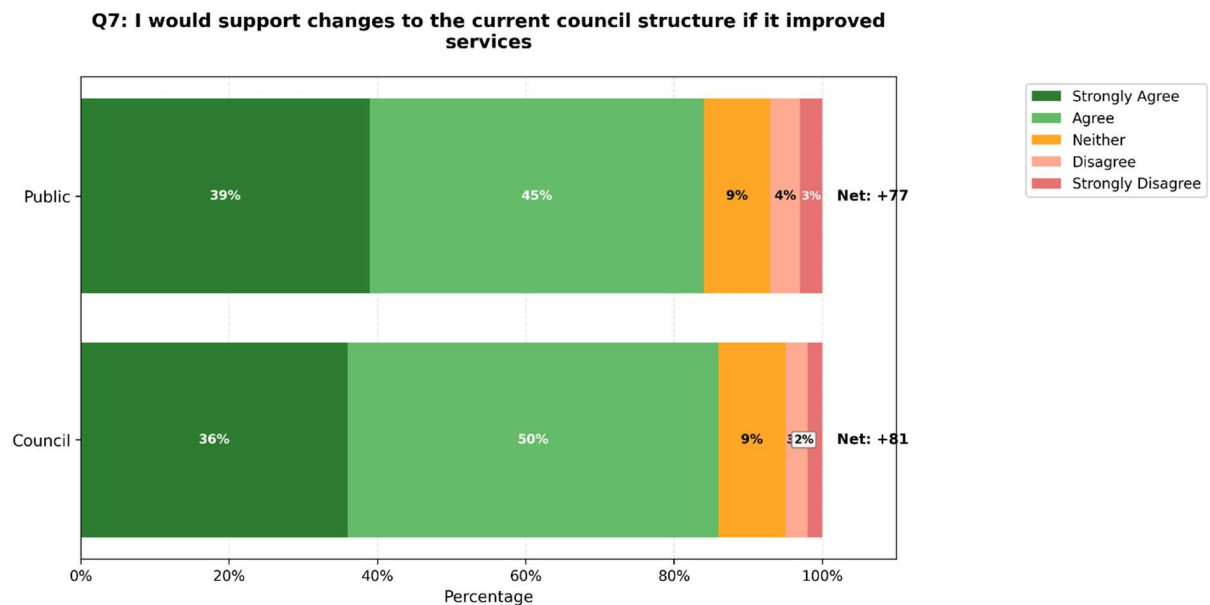
Trust in council decision-making varies significantly across the region. Peterborough shows 56% disagreement that their council acts in the community's best interests, compared to 37% in Cambridge and 35% in Huntingdonshire—differences of 19-21 percentage points that exceed statistical significance thresholds. At the other end, Fenland records 44% agreement versus Peterborough's 24%, a significant 20-point difference. The distinction appears most pronounced in the "strongly disagree" category, where Peterborough's 29% contrasts with South Cambridgeshire's 14%. These patterns indicate substantial geographic variation in council trust, with Peterborough residents expressing the lowest confidence levels whilst Fenland shows the highest agreement rates. Cambridge and Huntingdonshire occupy intermediate positions, though both still show more residents disagreeing than agreeing with the statement about council decision-making serving community interests.



Interestingly, it is 35-54s who are the most negative in terms of trust and the over 75s who are the most positive. Males show less trust in council decision making. The pattern for ethnicity is broadly similar.

Positive change: I would support changes to the current council structure if it improved services

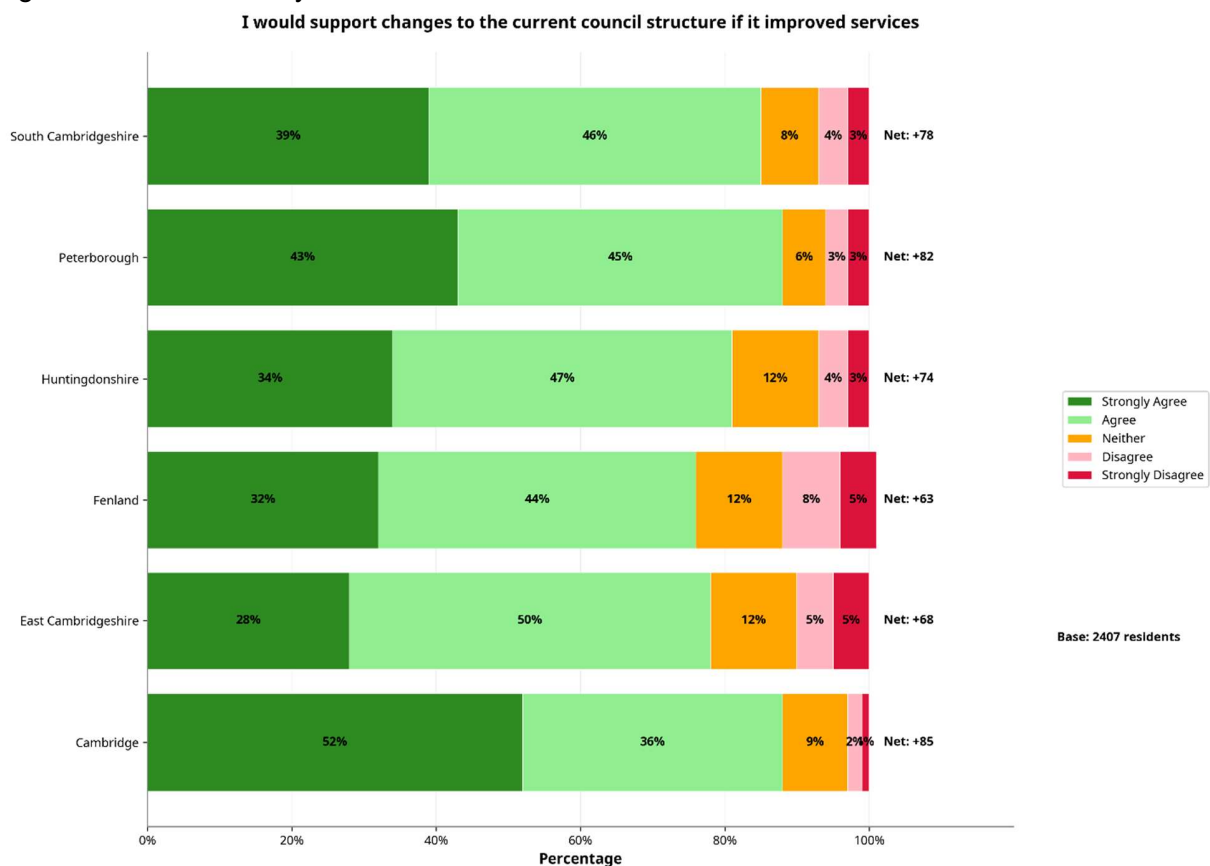
The Professional Divide



The analysis reveals both the public and council workers are responsive to change if it will improve services, with public respondents recording a net score of +77 and council workers +81. This close alignment suggests that both citizen and practitioner viewpoints are broadly aligned on wanting change conditional on improved services.

Geographical Perspectives

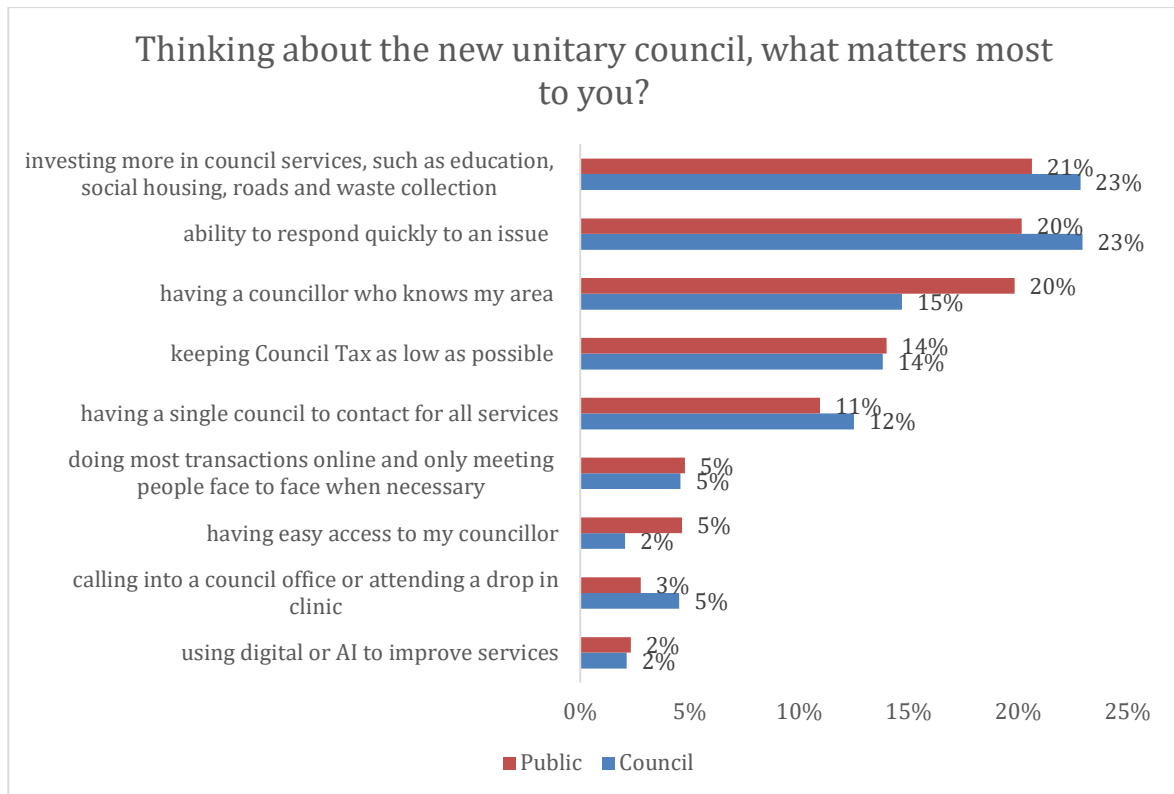
Support for council restructuring contingent on service improvement shows remarkable consensus across the region, with no statistically significant differences between districts. Combined agreement ranges from 76% in Fenland to 88% in Cambridge and Peterborough, whilst combined disagreement remains minimal at 3-7% across all areas. The "strongly agree" category varies from 28% in East Cambridgeshire to 52% in Cambridge, approaching but not exceeding significance thresholds given the sample sizes and confidence intervals. This uniformity suggests widespread openness to structural reform across all districts, provided it delivers tangible service improvements. The minimal disagreement and low neutral responses further emphasise this consensus, marking this as one of the few areas of genuine regional agreement in the survey.



The generational analysis shows broad positive agreement with 35-44s showing significantly less willingness to change. Ethnic minorities are more positive in terms of change.

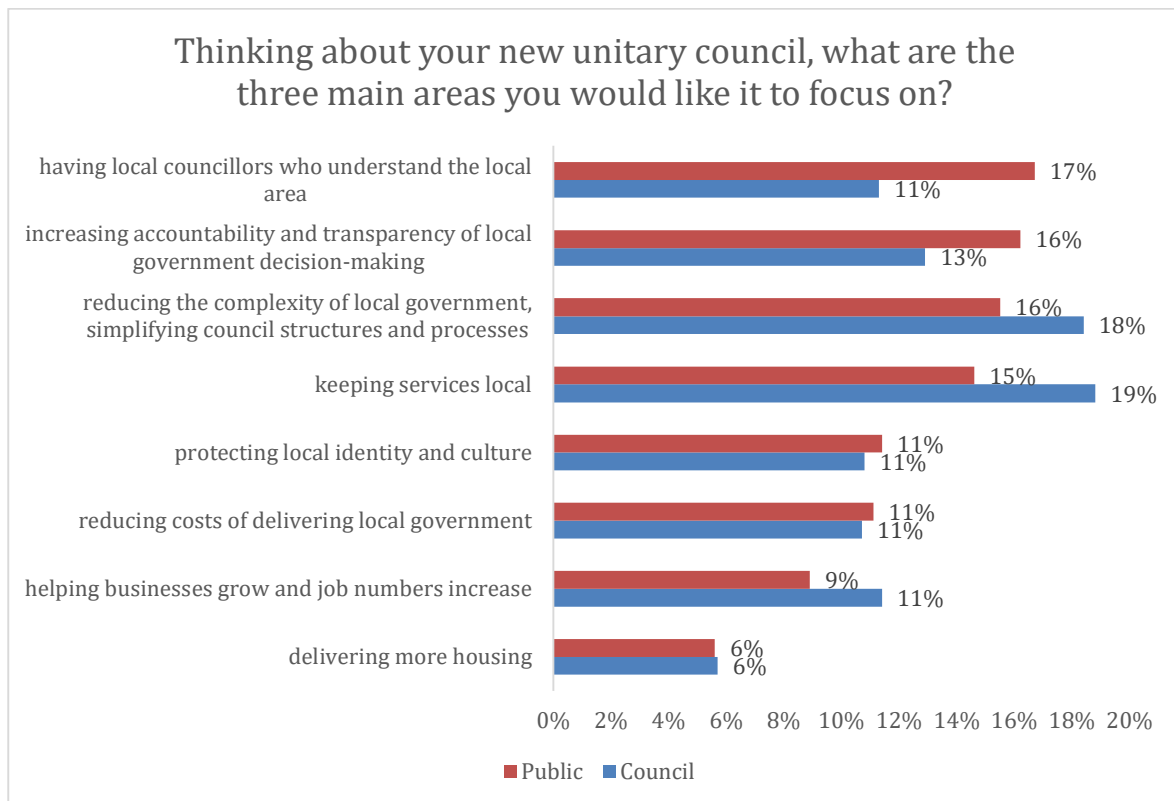
Unitary matters

The top three priorities for the new unitary council are investing in council services, ability to respond quickly and having a councillor that know the area.



The main areas of focus for new unitary councils

The public would like to see the new unitaries have councillors with local knowledge, increasing the accountability and transparency of local government decision-making and reducing the complexity of local decision-making.

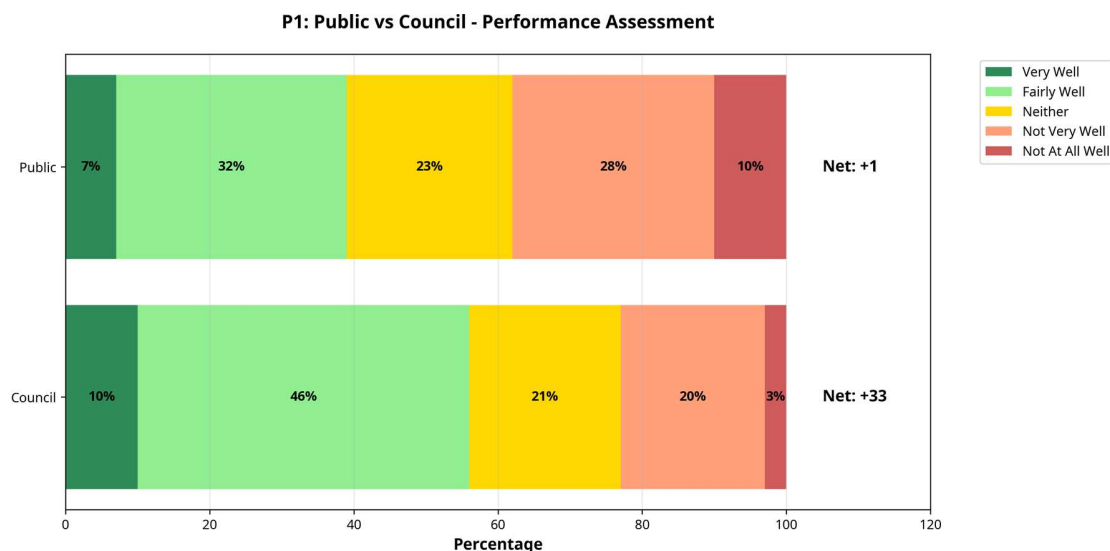


Current Performance

Next survey respondents were asked to rate their councils on a range of factors thought to be critical for unitary, indeed, all councils.

Responsive councils: Ability to respond quickly to an issue

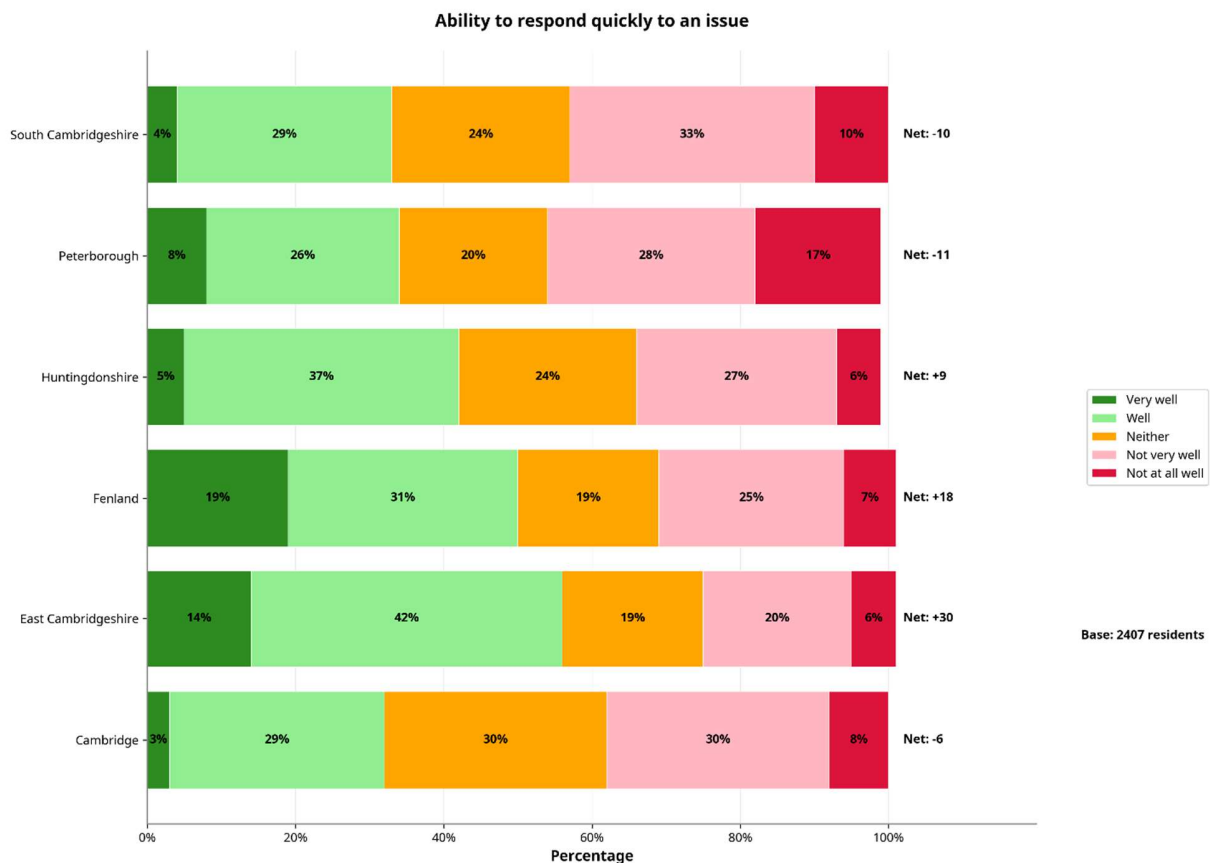
The Professional Assessment



The performance assessment reveals a significant professional divide, with council workers expressing notably more confidence in council performance (net score +33) compared to public expectations (net score +1). This 32-point gap suggests that professional experience shapes performance expectations in meaningful ways. There is a perception gap in terms of being a responsive council.

Geographical Performance Expectations

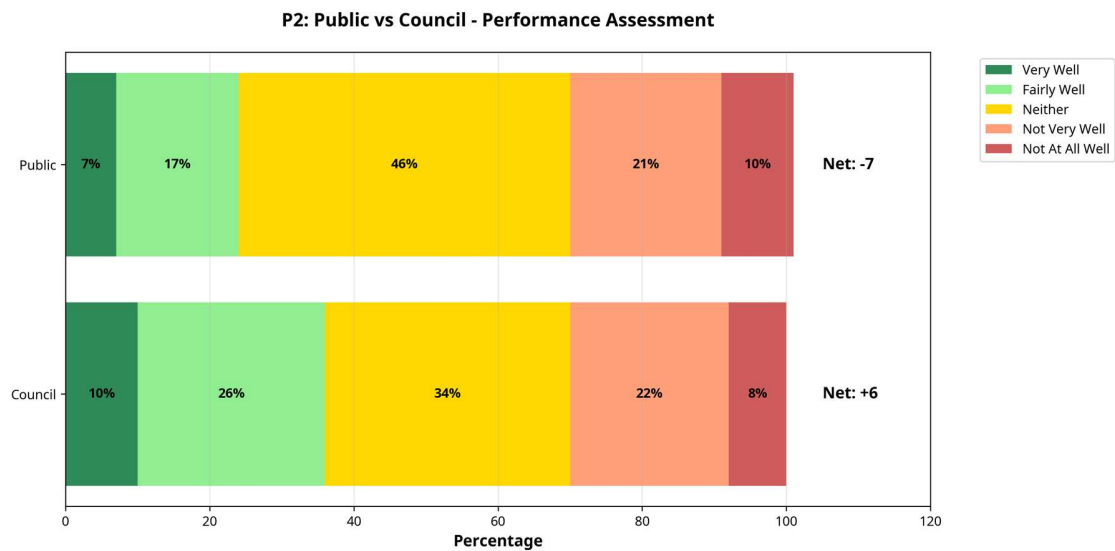
Perceptions of councils' ability to respond quickly to issues reveal significant district-level differences. East Cambridgeshire shows the highest confidence with 56% believing their council responds well or very well, compared to Fenland's 50%, Huntingdonshire's 42%, and Cambridge's 32%. The 24-point gap between East Cambridgeshire and Cambridge exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Conversely, combined negative responses (not very well/not at all well) show Cambridge at 38% versus East Cambridgeshire's 26%, a 12-point difference approaching significance. Peterborough occupies a middle position with 34% positive and 45% negative responses. The "neither" category remains relatively consistent at 19-30% across districts, suggesting widespread uncertainty about council responsiveness. These variations indicate that residents' experiences of council responsiveness differ substantially by district, with East Cambridgeshire and Fenland residents reporting notably better experiences than those in Cambridge.



From a generational perspective, all ages have similar views and this is broadly low. Males and minorities score councils negatively on council responsiveness.

Council sites: Calling into a council office or attending a drop in clinic

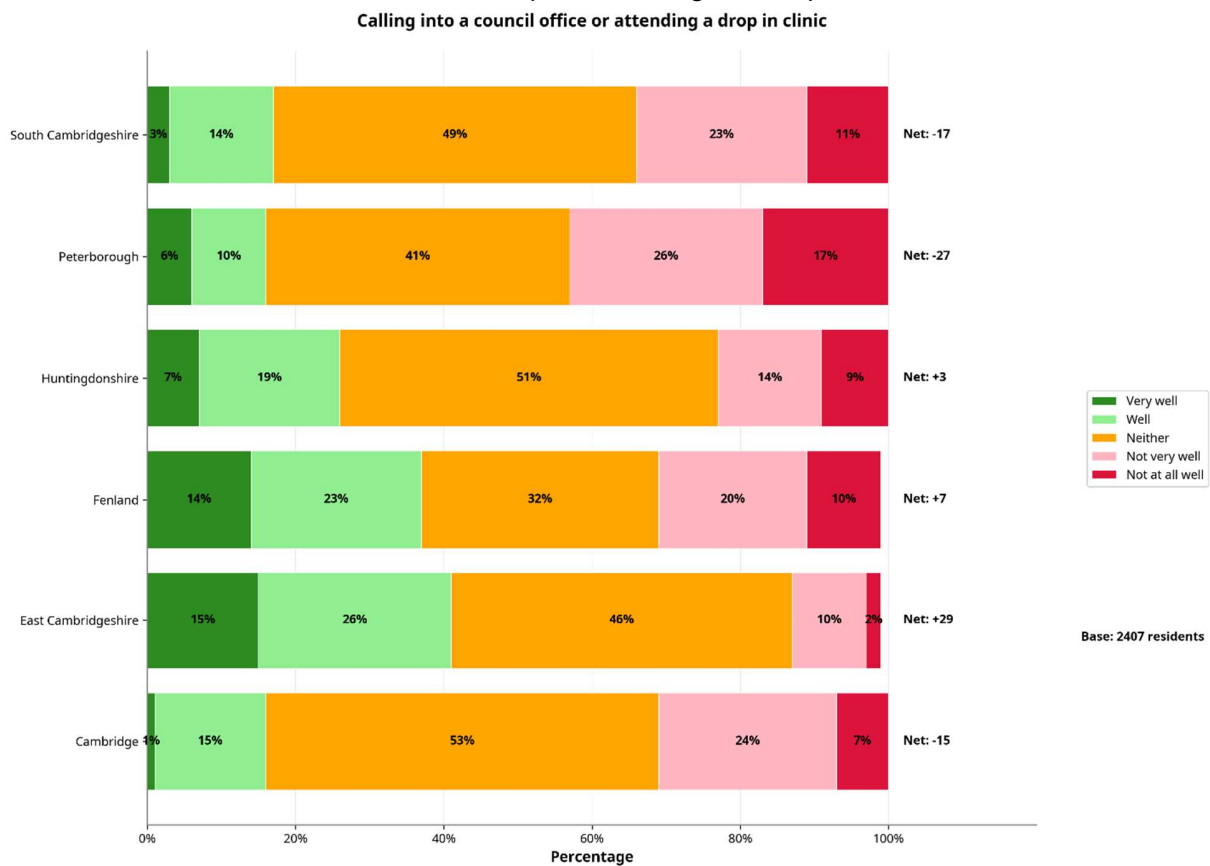
The Professional Assessment



The performance assessment reveals a significant professional divide, with council workers expressing notably more confidence in unitary council performance (net score +6) compared to public expectations which are negative (net score -7). This 13-point gap suggests that professional experience shapes performance expectations in meaningful ways.

Geographical Performance Expectations

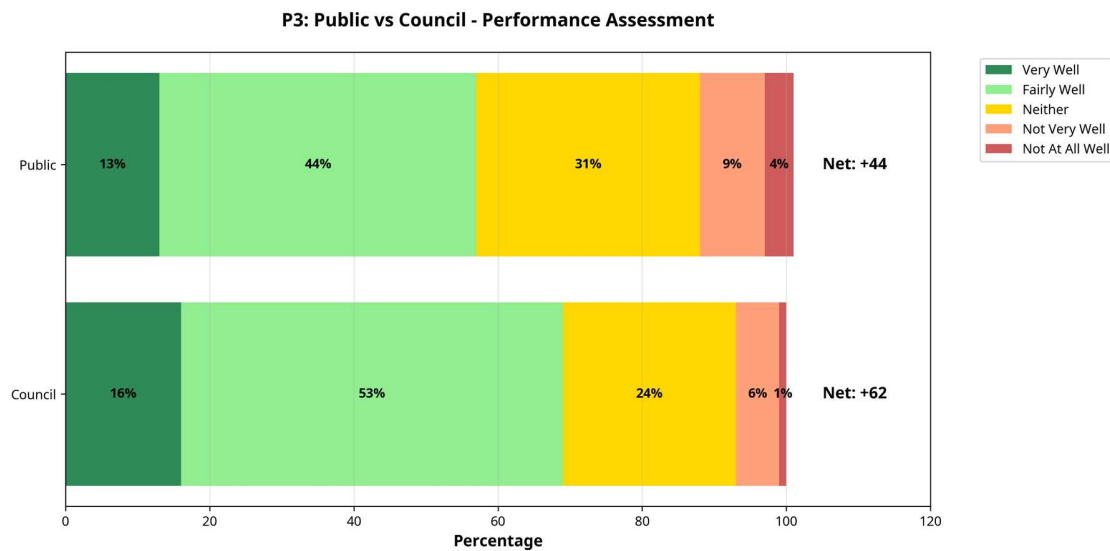
Satisfaction with calling council offices or attending drop-in clinics shows limited significant variation across districts. The most notable finding is the high proportion selecting "neither" across all areas, ranging from 32% in Fenland to 53% in Cambridge. Combined positive responses (very well/well) range from 16% in Cambridge and Peterborough to 41% in East Cambridgeshire, with Fenland at 37% and Huntingdonshire at 26%. The 25-point difference between East Cambridgeshire and Cambridge/Peterborough exceeds significance thresholds. Negative responses remain relatively consistent at 12-43% across districts. The dominance of "neither" responses, particularly in Cambridge where over half of residents appear not to have engaged with these services, indicates that direct contact methods may be underutilised across the region. East Cambridgeshire again shows the highest satisfaction among those who have used these services, consistent with their positive ratings on responsiveness.



For the public of all ages, the current performance on this measure is low. Ethnic minorities tend to be more negative on this measure (-7 net).

Digital Councils: Doing most transactions online and only meeting people face to face when necessary

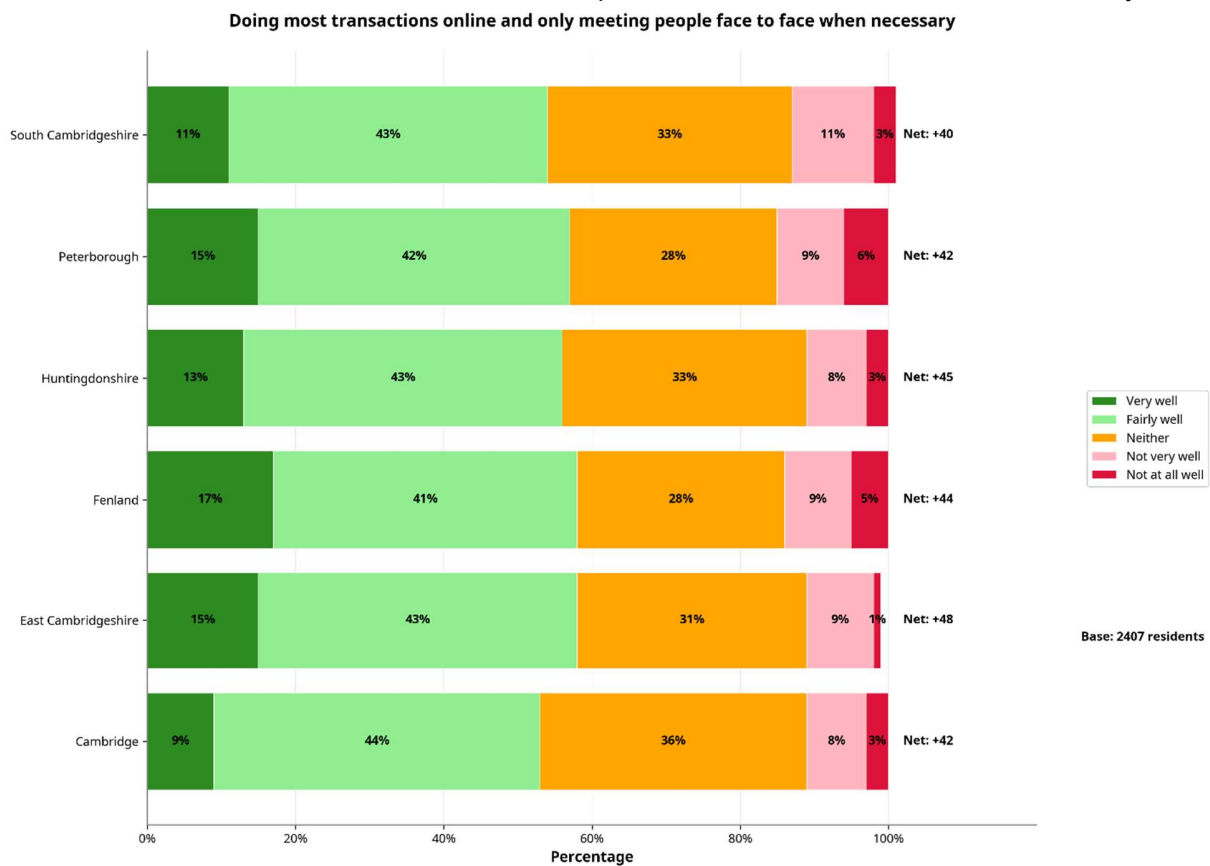
The Professional Assessment



The performance assessment reveals a significant professional divide, with council workers expressing notably more confidence in council performance (net score +62) compared to public expectations (net score +44). This 18-point gap suggests more work is needed on this .

Geographical Performance Expectations

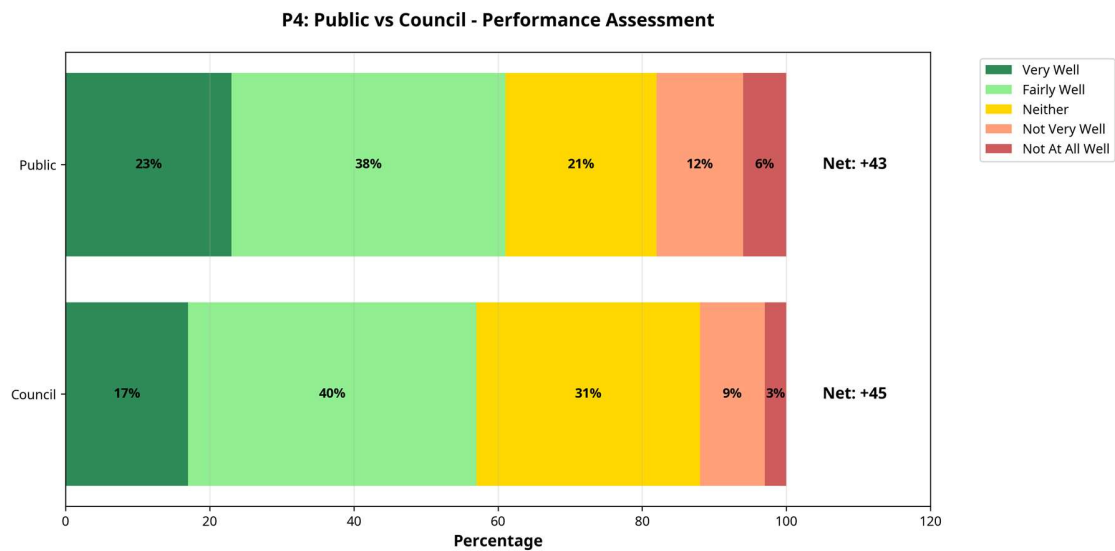
Performance for online transactions versus face-to-face contact show minimal significant variation across districts. Combined positive responses (very well/fairly well) range from 53% in Cambridge to 58% in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, whilst negative responses vary from 10% in Cambridge and East Cambridgeshire to 15% in Peterborough. These differences fall within confidence intervals and do not reach statistical significance. The "neither" category shows consistency at 28-36% across all districts. The uniformity, with roughly half of residents across all areas supporting online-first approaches whilst maintaining face-to-face options when necessary. This consensus around digital transformation indicates that service delivery preferences are shaped more by individual circumstances and capabilities than geographic location. The substantial neutral responses may reflect mixed experiences or ambivalence about the trade-offs between convenience and personal contact in council service delivery.



There is a greater willingness to transact digitally by all groups except the over 75s (Net +23).

Local Councillors: Having a councillor who knows my area

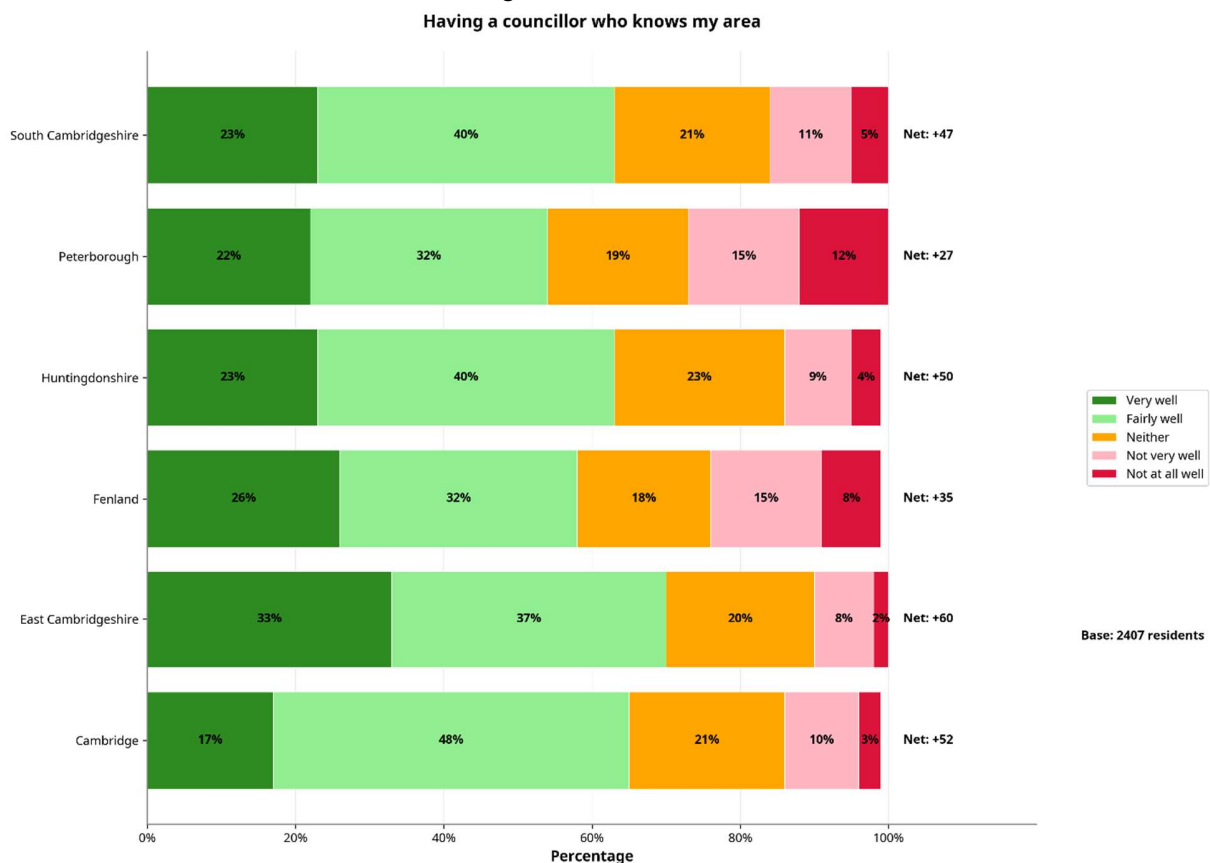
The Professional Assessment



The performance assessment reveals remarkable convergence between public expectations and professional assessments, with public respondents recording a net score of +43 and council workers +45.

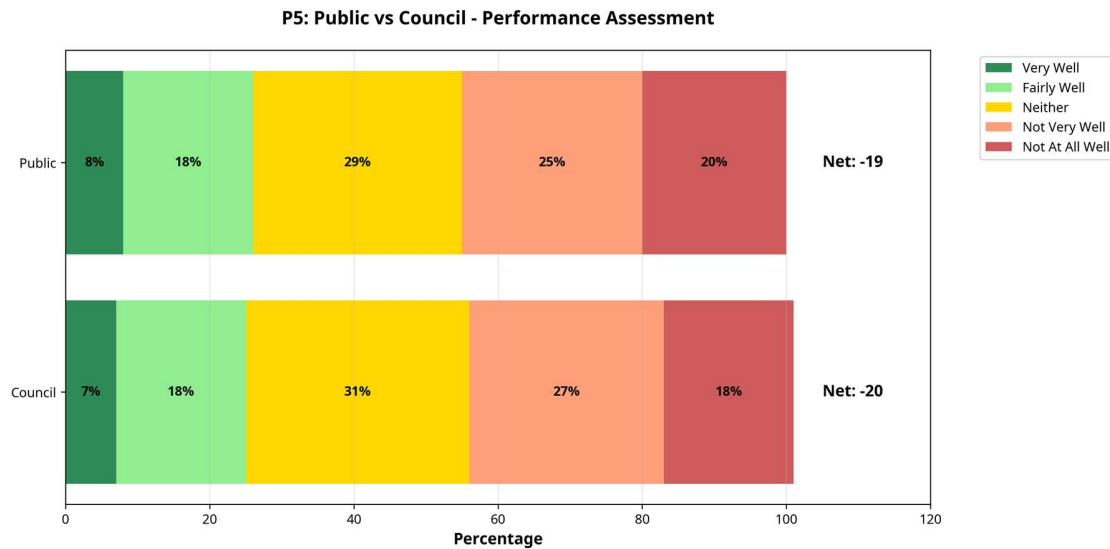
Geographical Performance Expectations

The performance of 'having a councillor who knows their area' shows notable variation across districts. East Cambridgeshire demonstrates the strongest support with 70% rating this as very well or fairly well, compared to Cambridge's 65%, South Cambridgeshire's 63%, Huntingdonshire's 61%, Fenland's 58%, and Peterborough's 54%. The 16-point difference between East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough approaches but does not clearly exceed significance thresholds given the confidence intervals. Negative responses remain consistently low at 10-27% across all districts. The "neither" category varies from 18% in Fenland to 23% in Huntingdonshire. These results indicate broad consensus that local knowledge matters in councillor effectiveness, with over half of residents in every district valuing area familiarity. The slightly higher support in rural districts like East Cambridgeshire may reflect the particular importance of local knowledge in dispersed communities with distinct village identities, though differences remain within statistical margins of error.



Unitary Council: Having a single council to contact for all services

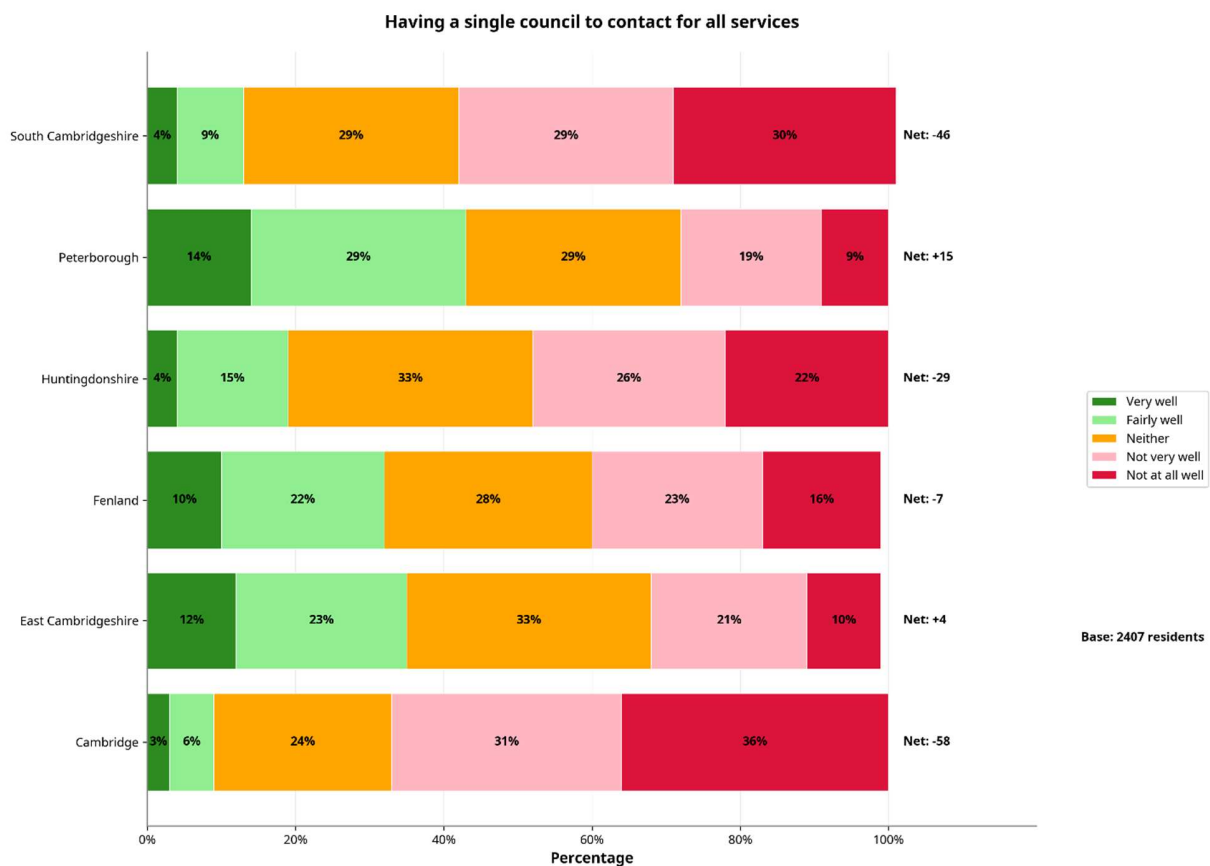
The Professional Assessment



On this both residents and council workers are negative but it is important to understand that this is about the current performance and both feel that councils are not acting as one stop shops which they are not except for Peterborough.

Geographical Performance Expectations

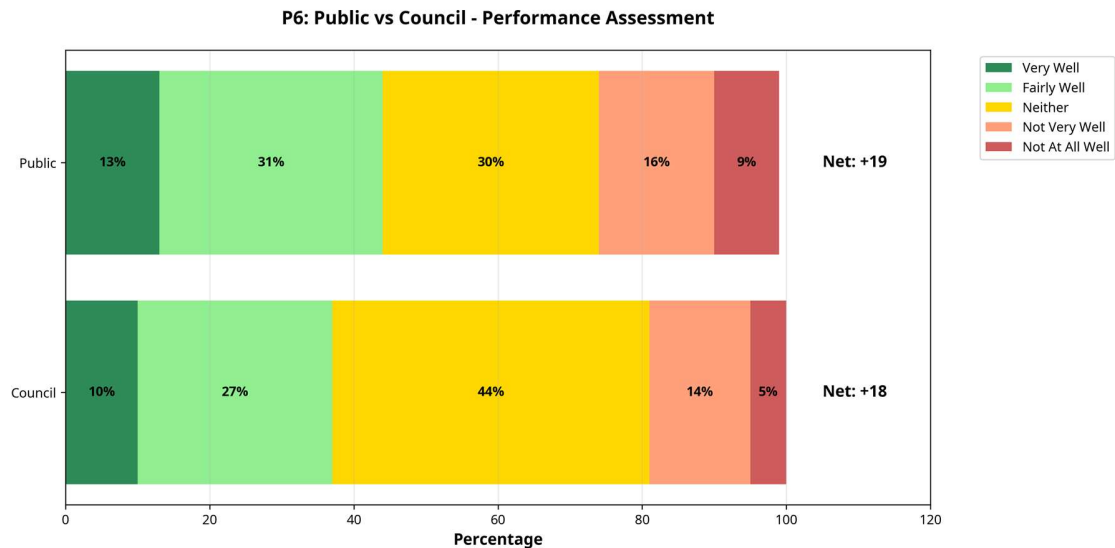
Peterborough is the only unitary council so this is an interesting question to see how all the councils are perceived in terms of being 'joined-up'. South Cambridgeshire shows the highest opposition with 59% rating this poorly (not very well/not at all well), compared to Huntingdonshire's 48%, Cambridge's 42%, Fenland's 39%, East Cambridgeshire's 31%, and Peterborough's 28%. The 31-point gap between South Cambridgeshire and Peterborough exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Conversely, Peterborough shows 43% support versus South Cambridgeshire's 13%, a significant 30-point difference shows one of the benefits of being a unitary council. Cambridge occupies an unusual position with only 9% positive responses but 24% neutral, the lowest support recorded suggesting complexity in interacting with it.



Here we observe the benefits of unitary government as Peterborough comes out on top in contrast to Cambridge which may have issues with people knowing which service to go to and who runs what. Again, we observe that younger residents tend to express more frustration with their council services not being a one stop shop (Under 35s Net -21 compared to 55-74 Net - 11). Males are also more negative (Net-15).

Councillor?: Having easy access to my councillor

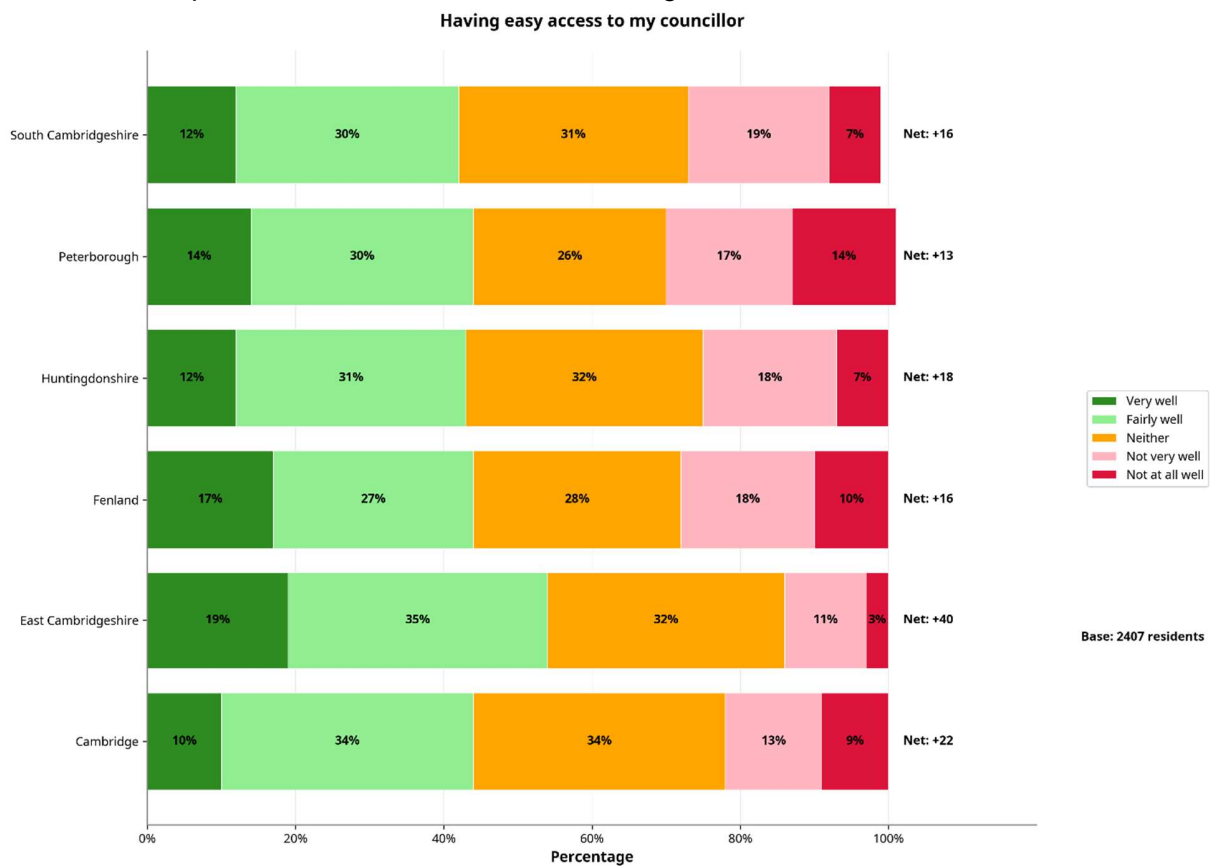
The Professional Assessment



The performance assessment reveals similarity between public expectations and professional assessments, with public respondents recording a net score of +19 and council workers +18. This close alignment suggests that both citizen and practitioner perspectives are broadly aligned on expected unitary council performance in this area.

Geographical Performance Expectations

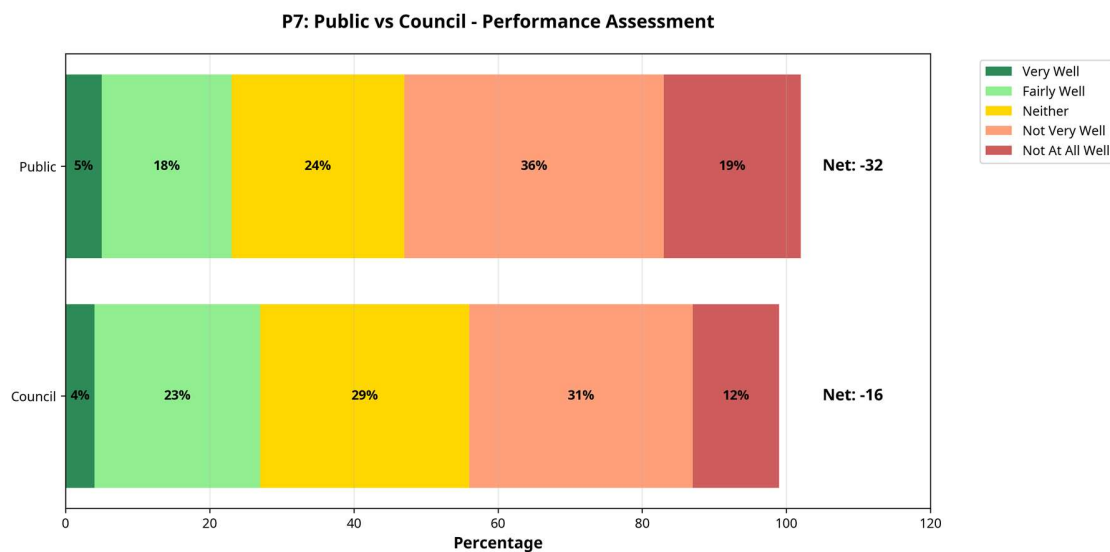
The performance on this 'easy councillor access' show limited significant variation across districts. Combined positive responses range from 42% in South Cambridgeshire to 54% in East Cambridgeshire, with Cambridge and Fenland at 44%, Peterborough at 44%, and Huntingdonshire at 43%. These differences fall within confidence intervals and do not reach statistical significance. Negative responses vary from 13% in East Cambridgeshire to 31% in Peterborough, whilst the "neither" category ranges from 26% in Peterborough to 34% in Cambridge. The relatively uniform distribution suggests that councillor accessibility challenges transcend district boundaries, with roughly half of residents across all areas reporting satisfactory access whilst significant minorities experience difficulties. The substantial neutral responses, particularly in Cambridge and East Cambridgeshire, may indicate many residents have not attempted to contact their councillor, making evaluation difficult.



Older people are much more likely to say they have easy access to a councillor (55-74 Net +28 compared to Under 35s Net +8). White British residents say they are more likely to have easy access to a councillor (Net +28 compared to ethnic minorities Net +7) .

Council Investment: Investing more in council services, such as education, social housing, roads and waste collection

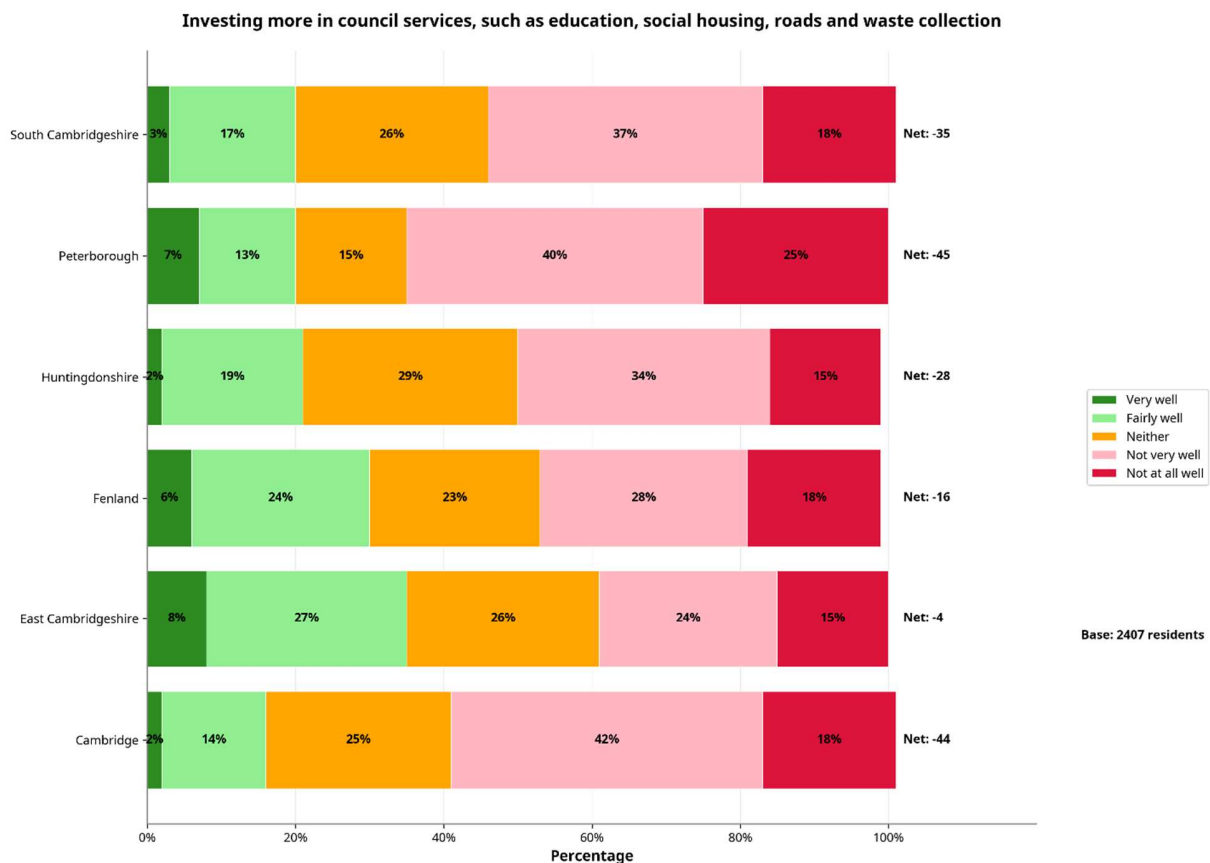
The Professional Assessment



The performance assessment reveals a significant professional divide, with council workers expressing notably more confidence in unitary council performance (net score -16) compared to public expectations (net score -32). This 16-point gap suggests that the public feel that more investment is required in key services.

Geographical Performance Expectations

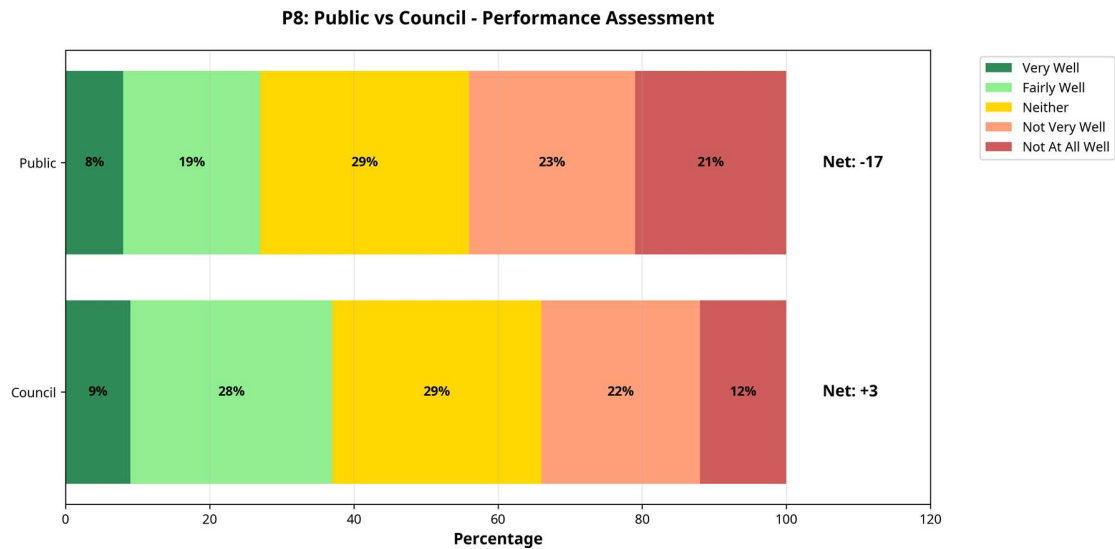
Residents' ratings of current council performance on service investment reveal significant district-level variation. Cambridge residents give the poorest ratings with 60% assessing current investment performance as not very well or not at all well, followed by Peterborough at 65%, South Cambridgeshire at 55%, Huntingdonshire at 49%, Fenland at 44%, and East Cambridgeshire at 39%. The 26-point gap between Peterborough's negative assessment and East Cambridgeshire's represents a statistically significant difference. Positive ratings remain consistently low, ranging from 16% in Cambridge to 35% in East Cambridgeshire. The widespread dissatisfaction with current investment levels across core services suggests systemic underfunding concerns, with urban areas showing particularly more dissatisfaction. These patterns indicate residents across the region perceive significant underinvestment in essential services, though the intensity of this perception varies considerably by district.



The working middle are most likely to be negative on this issue (Net -36).

Low Council Tax?: Keeping Council Tax as low as possible

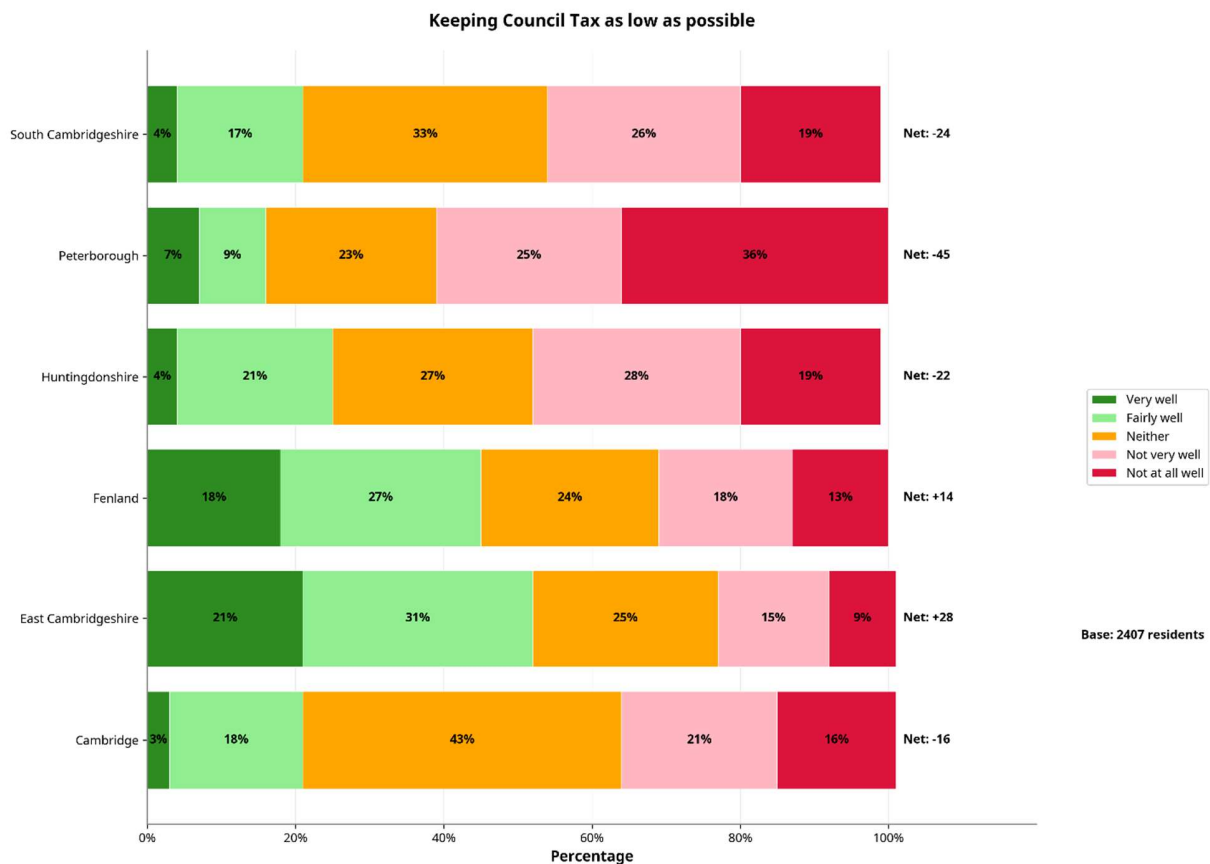
The Professional Assessment



The performance assessment reveals a significant professional divide, with council workers expressing notably more confidence in council performance (net score +3) compared to public expectations (net score -17).

Geographical Performance Expectations

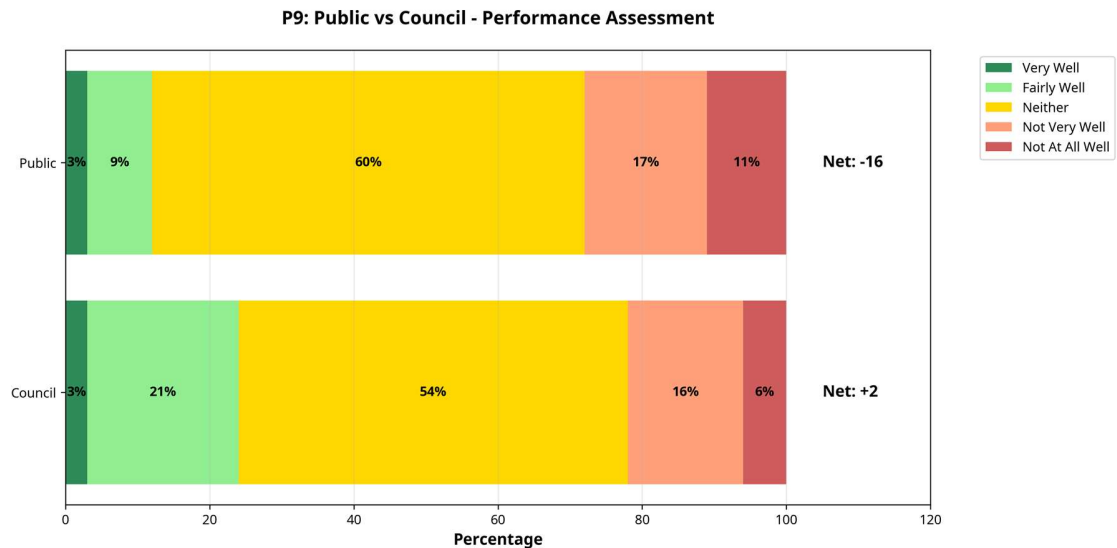
Residents' assessment of councils' performance on keeping council tax low reveals significant variation across districts. Peterborough residents rate their council most poorly, with 61% saying it performs not very well or not at all well, compared to Cambridge's 37%, South Cambridgeshire's 39%, Fenland's 31%, East Cambridgeshire's 24%, and Huntingdonshire's 47%. The 37-point gap between Peterborough and East Cambridgeshire exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Positive ratings show East Cambridgeshire at 52%, Fenland at 45%, Huntingdonshire at 25%, Cambridge at 21%, South Cambridgeshire at 21%, and Peterborough at 16%. The 36-point difference between East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough in positive ratings is statistically significant. These patterns reveal a significant divide in perceptions of fiscal management, with East Cambridgeshire and Fenland residents viewing their councils as relatively effective, whilst Peterborough residents express strong dissatisfaction with their council's tax performance, consistent with their broader distrust of council decision-making and service investment concerns.



Younger people tend to think that council tax is not kept as low as possible (under 35s Net -25). Ethnic minorities also tend to disagree with keeping council tax as low as possible (Net -20).

Using digital or AI to improve services

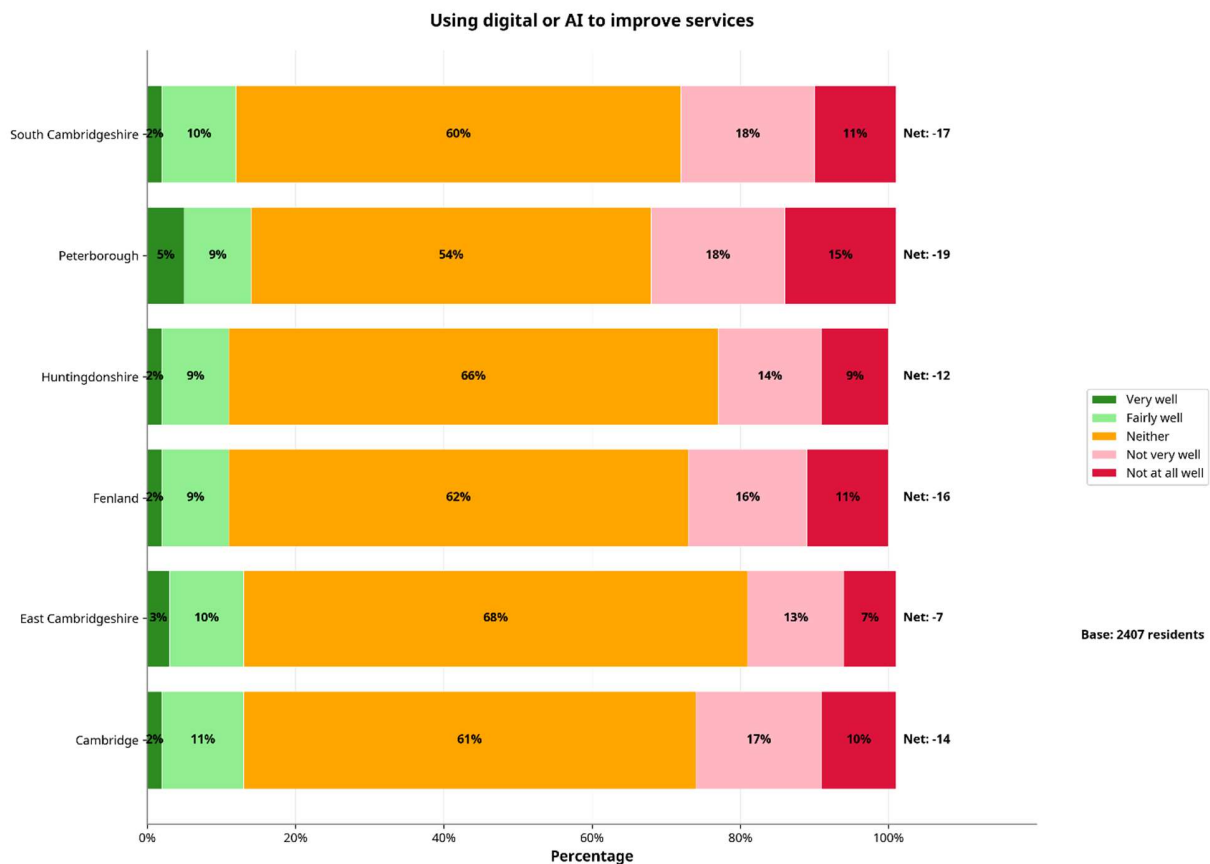
The Professional Assessment



The performance assessment reveals a significant professional divide, with council workers expressing notably more confidence in council performance (net score +2) compared to public expectations (net score -16). This 18-point gap that the public think councils have a way to go using digital.

Geographical Performance Expectations

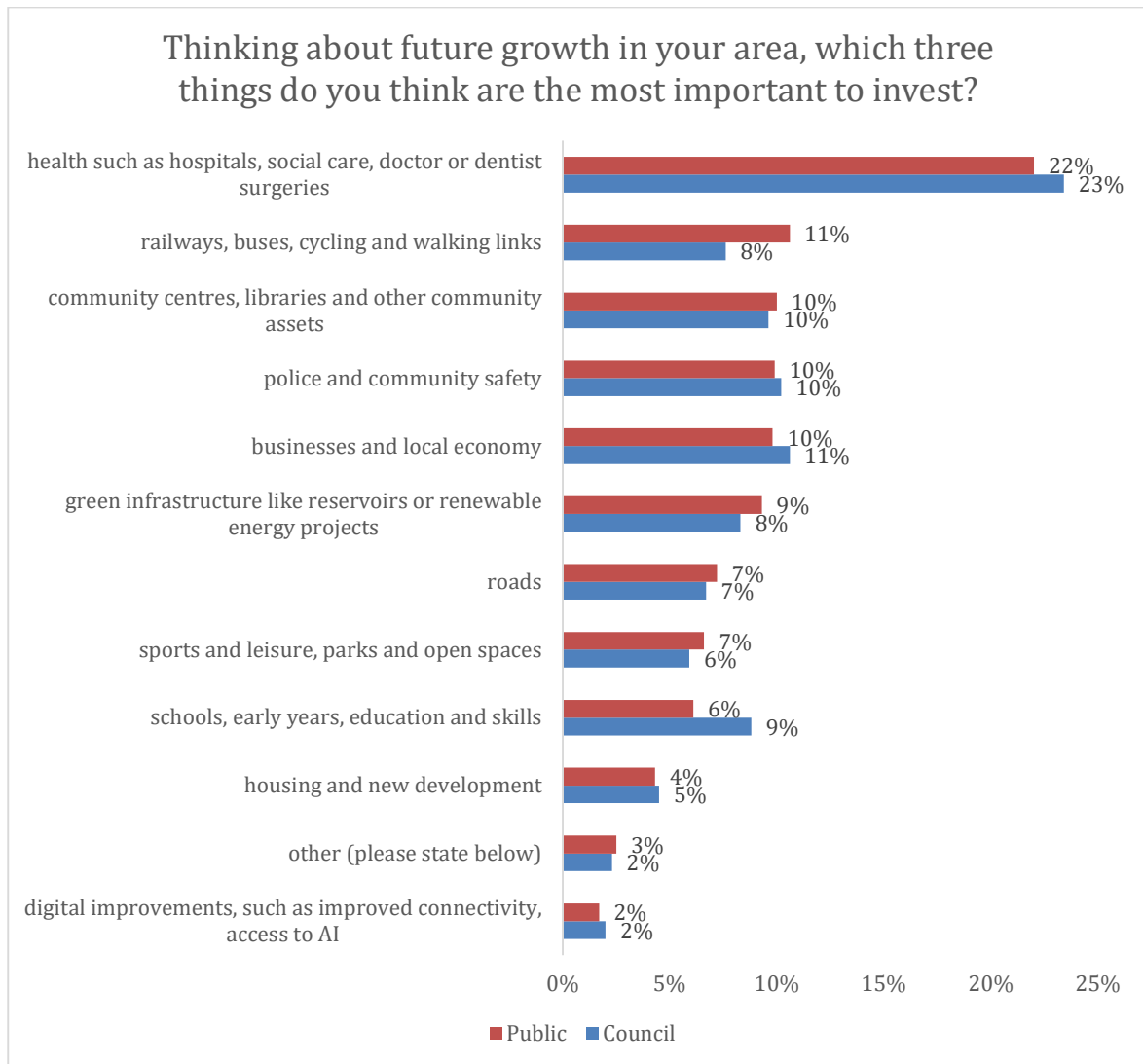
Residents' assessment of councils' performance on using digital technology and AI to improve services shows minimal significant variation across districts. The dominant response across all areas is "neither," ranging from 54% in Peterborough to 68% in East Cambridgeshire, suggesting widespread uncertainty about or unfamiliarity with councils' digital initiatives. Positive ratings remain consistently low, from 11% in South Cambridgeshire and Fenland to 14% in Cambridge and Peterborough, whilst negative responses range from 20% in East Cambridgeshire to 33% in Peterborough. These differences fall within confidence intervals and do not reach statistical significance. The overwhelming neutral response indicates that digital transformation efforts either remain largely invisible to residents or have yet to demonstrate tangible service improvements. This pattern suggests councils across the region face similar challenges in implementing and communicating digital innovation, with residents unable to assess performance in an area where they may have limited direct experience or awareness of behind-the-scenes technological changes.



The 35-54s are most negative about the current performance in this area (Net -24).

Future growth

Residents would most like to see investment in health, transport and community infrastructure.



Housing Delivery

Again, respondents were asked to rate their councils on several different measures. On housing delivery, council staff are substantially more positive than residents.

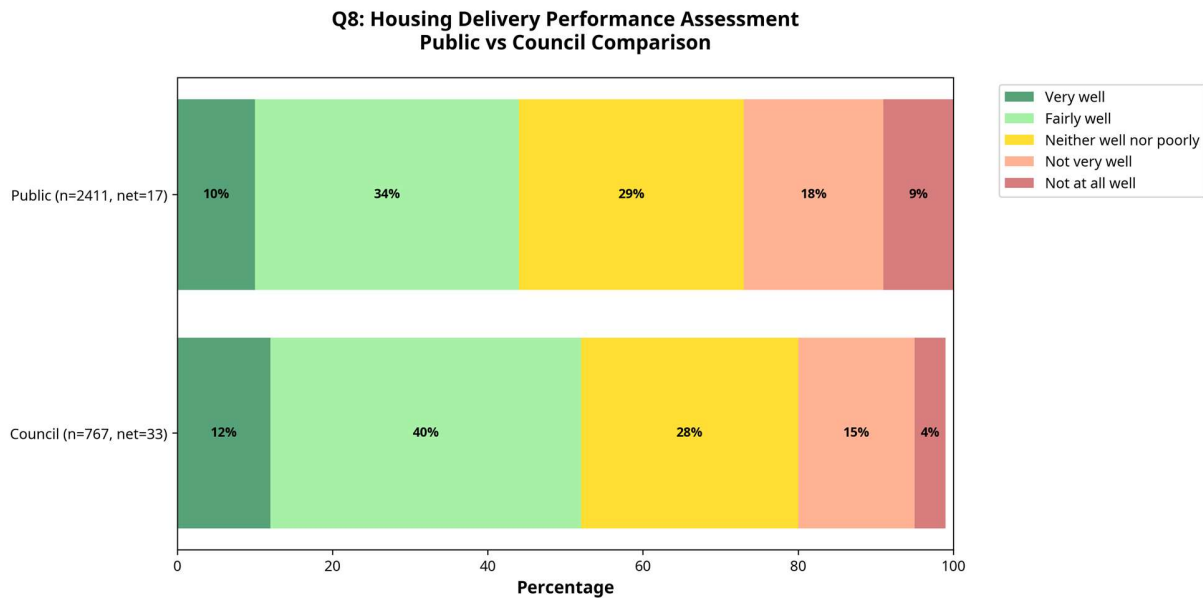
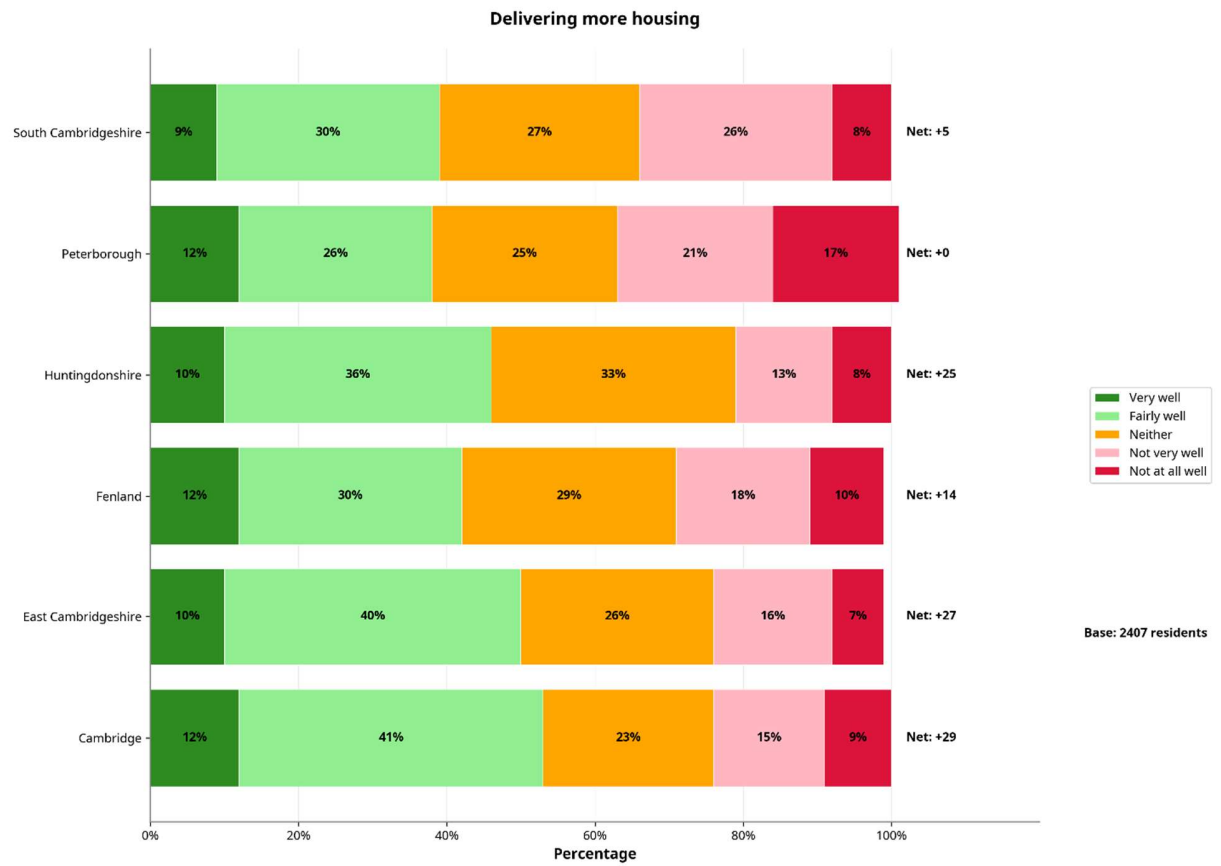


Figure: Housing Delivery Performance Assessment

Geographical differences

Residents' assessment of councils' performance on housing delivery shows limited significant variation across districts. Cambridge and East Cambridgeshire show the highest positive ratings at 53% and 50% respectively, whilst Peterborough shows 38%, South Cambridgeshire 39%, Fenland 42%, and Huntingdonshire 46%.

These differences approach but do not clearly exceed significance thresholds given the confidence intervals. Negative responses range from 21% in Huntingdonshire to 38% in Peterborough, with South Cambridgeshire at 34%. The "neither" category varies from 23% in Cambridge to 33% in Huntingdonshire.



Councillor local knowledge

The performance on this measure is similar for both residents and council staff.

**Q8: Local Councillor Knowledge Performance Assessment
Public vs Council Comparison**

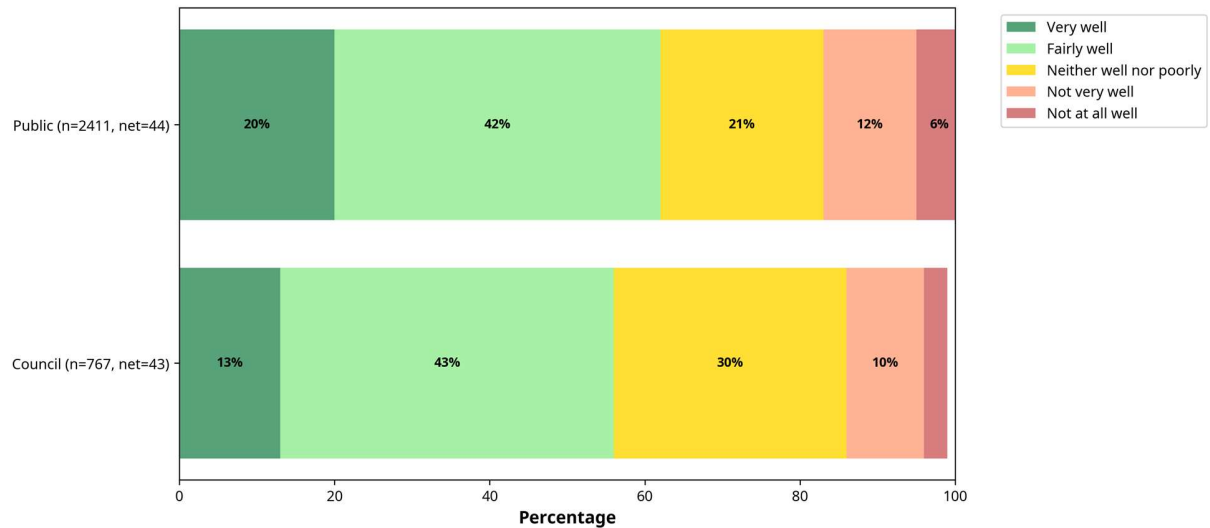
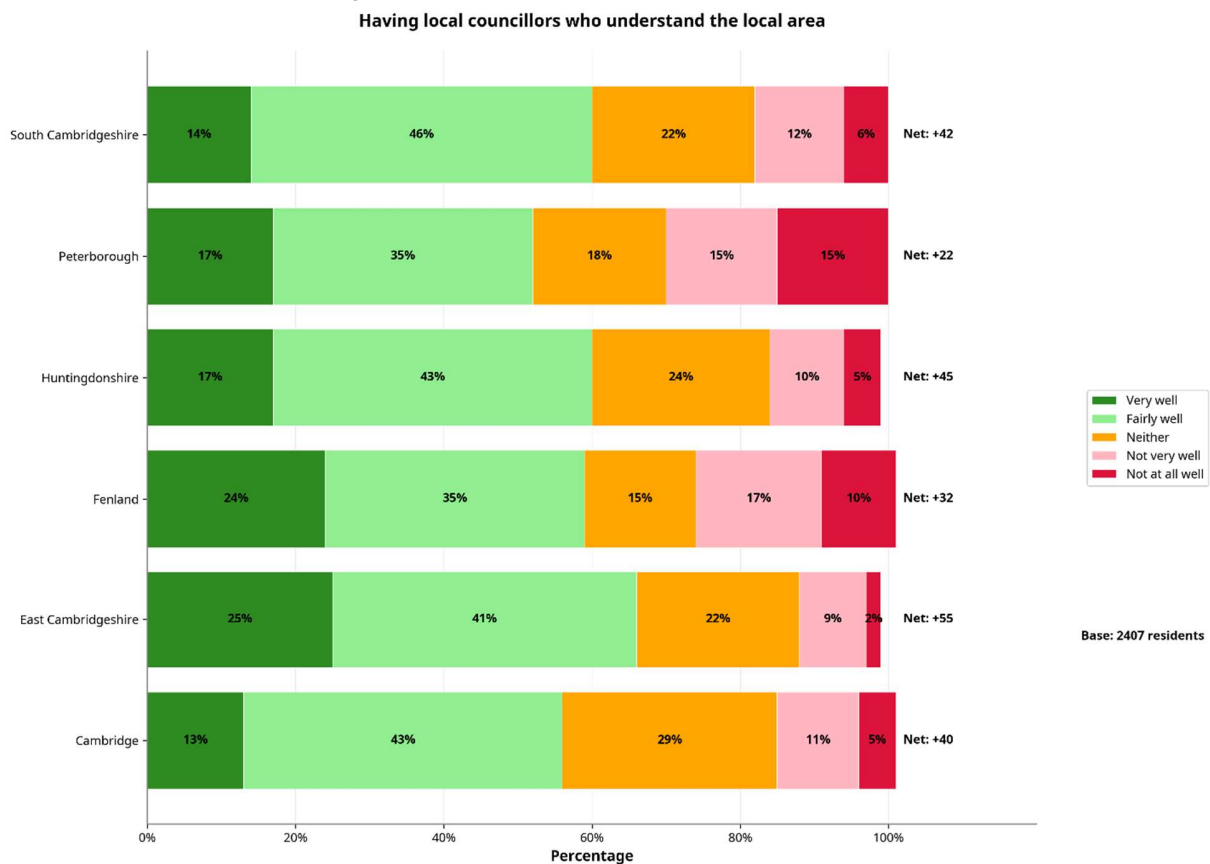


Figure: Local Councillor Knowledge Assessment

Geographical differences

Residents' assessment of having local councillors who understand their area shows significant variation across districts. East Cambridgeshire demonstrates the highest satisfaction at 66%, followed by Huntingdonshire at 60%, South Cambridgeshire at 60%, Fenland at 59%, Cambridge at 56%, and Peterborough at 52%. The 14-point difference between East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough approaches but does not clearly exceed significance thresholds. Negative responses remain consistently low across all districts, ranging from 11% in East Cambridgeshire to 30% in Peterborough. The "neither" category varies from 15% in Fenland to 29% in Cambridge.



Business growth

While the public are negative and the council are positive, there is not a substantial amount between them.

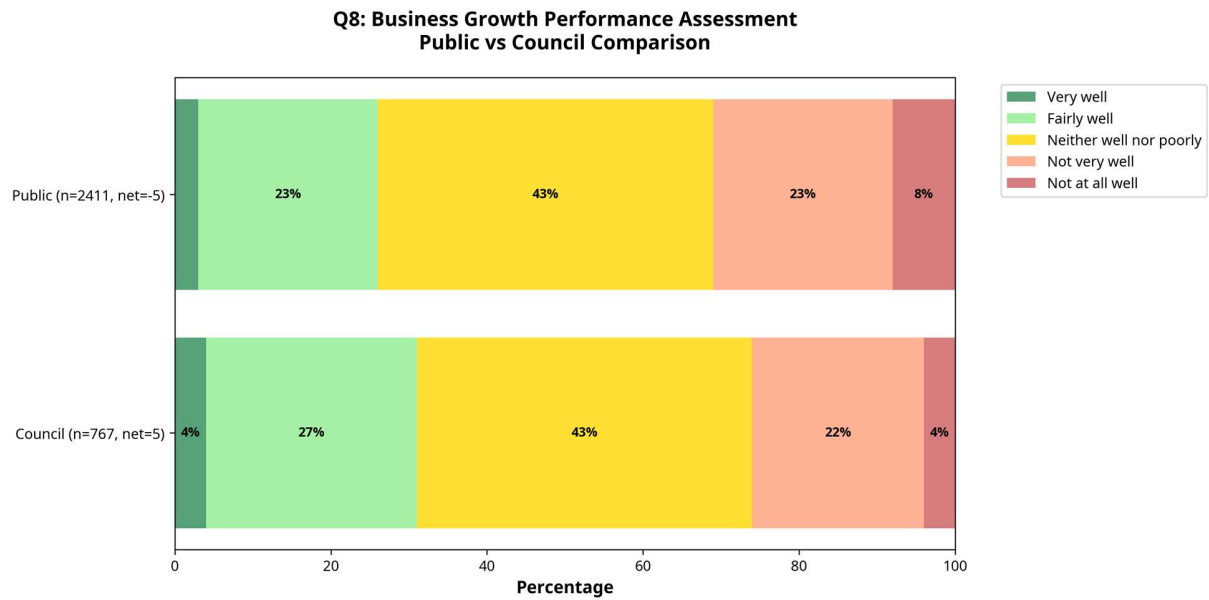
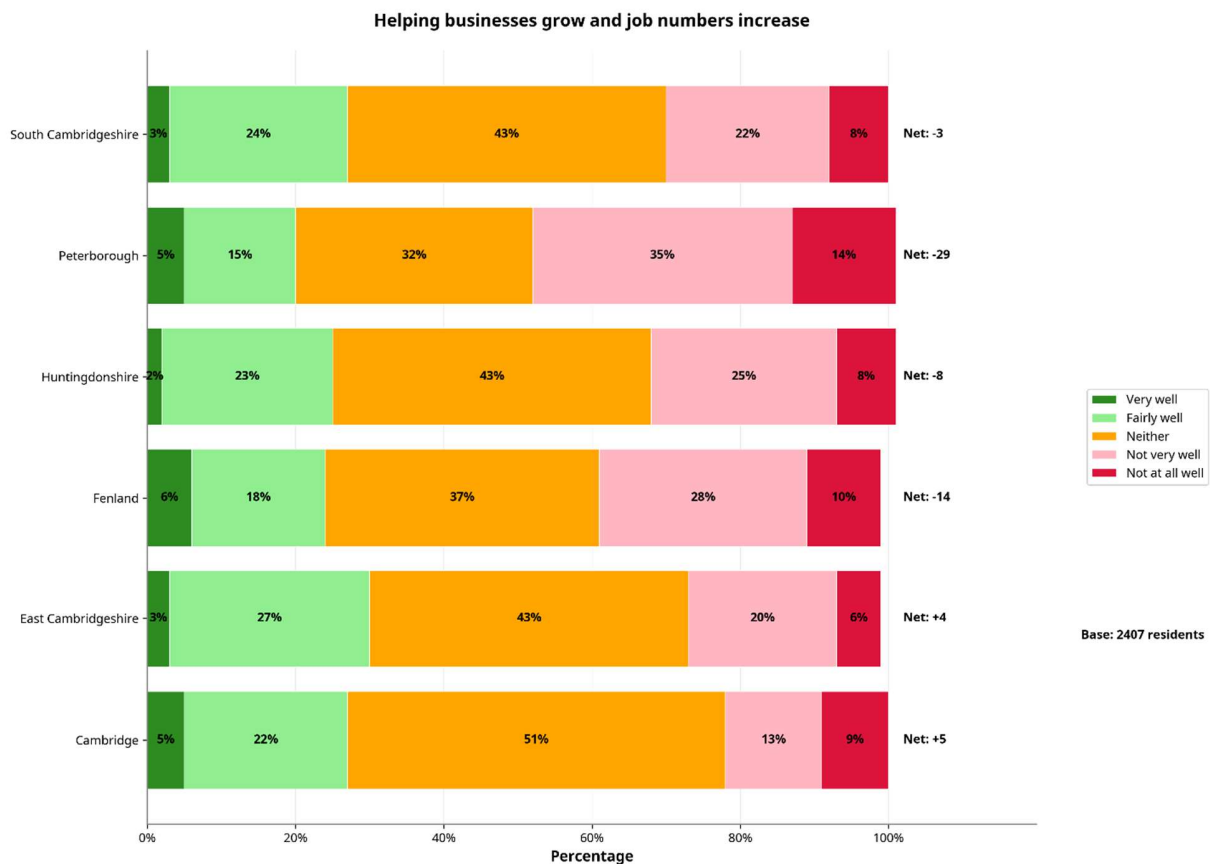


Figure: Business Growth Performance Assessment

Geographical performance

Residents' assessment of councils' performance on business growth and job creation shows minimal significant variation across districts. The dominant response across all areas is "neither," ranging from 32% in Peterborough to 51% in Cambridge, suggesting widespread uncertainty about councils' economic development impact. Positive ratings range from 20% in Peterborough to 30% in East Cambridgeshire, whilst negative responses vary from 22% in Cambridge to 49% in Peterborough. Despite Peterborough showing the highest dissatisfaction at 49% versus Cambridge's 22%, this 27-point difference approaches but does not clearly exceed significance thresholds. The high neutral responses, particularly in Cambridge where over half cannot assess performance, indicate that economic development efforts remain largely invisible to residents or that attribution of business growth to council action proves difficult. This pattern suggests residents across the region struggle to connect council activities with tangible economic outcomes.



Accountability

This is an issue that separates the public from council staff with the public significantly more negative.

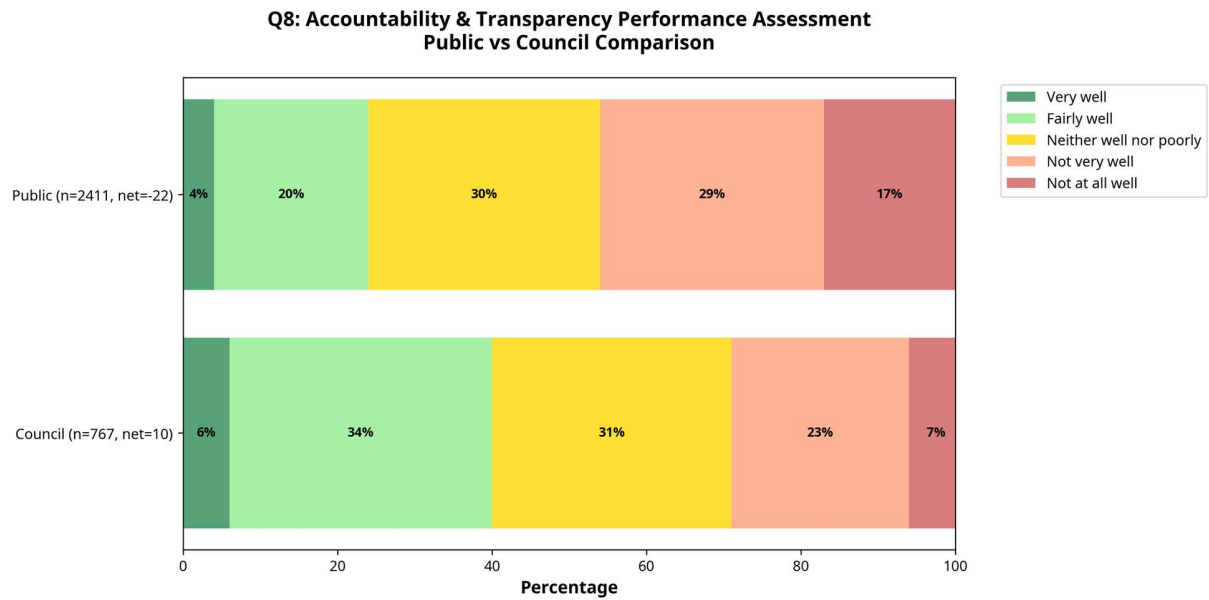
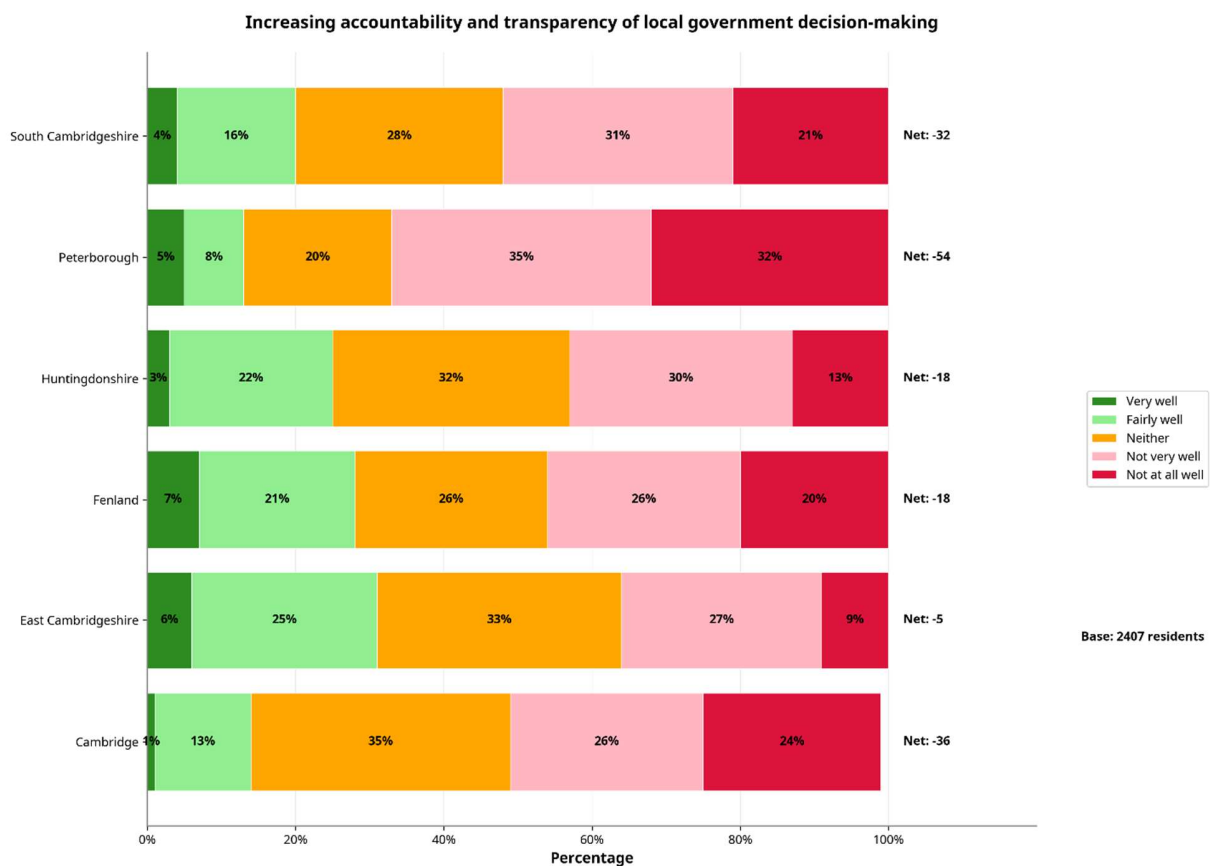


Figure: Accountability & Transparency Assessment

Geographical performance

Residents' assessment of councils' performance on accountability and transparency reveals significant district-level variation. Peterborough shows the highest dissatisfaction with 67% rating performance as not very well or not at all well, compared to Cambridge's 50%, South Cambridgeshire's 52%, Fenland's 46%, Huntingdonshire's 43%, and East Cambridgeshire's 36%. The 31-point gap between Peterborough and East Cambridgeshire exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Positive ratings remain uniformly low across all districts, ranging from 13% in Peterborough to 31% in East Cambridgeshire. The "neither" category varies from 20% in Peterborough to 35% in Cambridge. These findings indicate widespread dissatisfaction with transparency and accountability across the region, with Peterborough showing particularly acute concerns consistent with their earlier expressed distrust in council decision-making. This same observation arose in the focus groups. The generally poor ratings suggest systemic challenges in communicating decisions and engaging residents effectively, though East Cambridgeshire performs relatively better, maintaining its pattern of higher satisfaction across multiple governance measures



Local services

Again on local services, the public do not believe that councils perform well while councils are more positive.

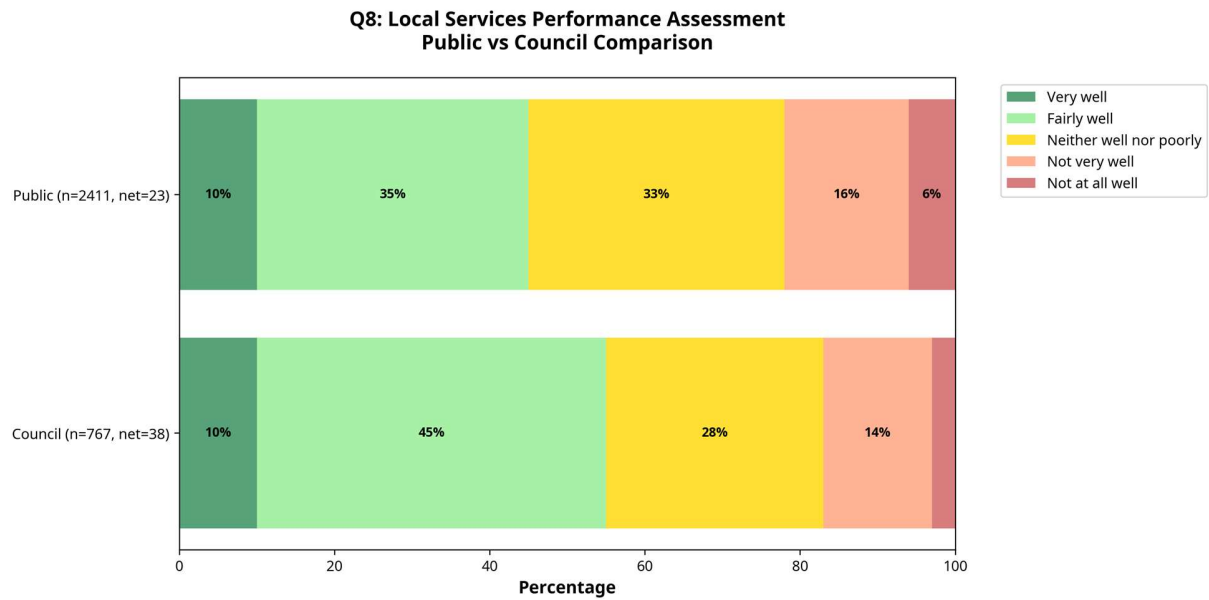
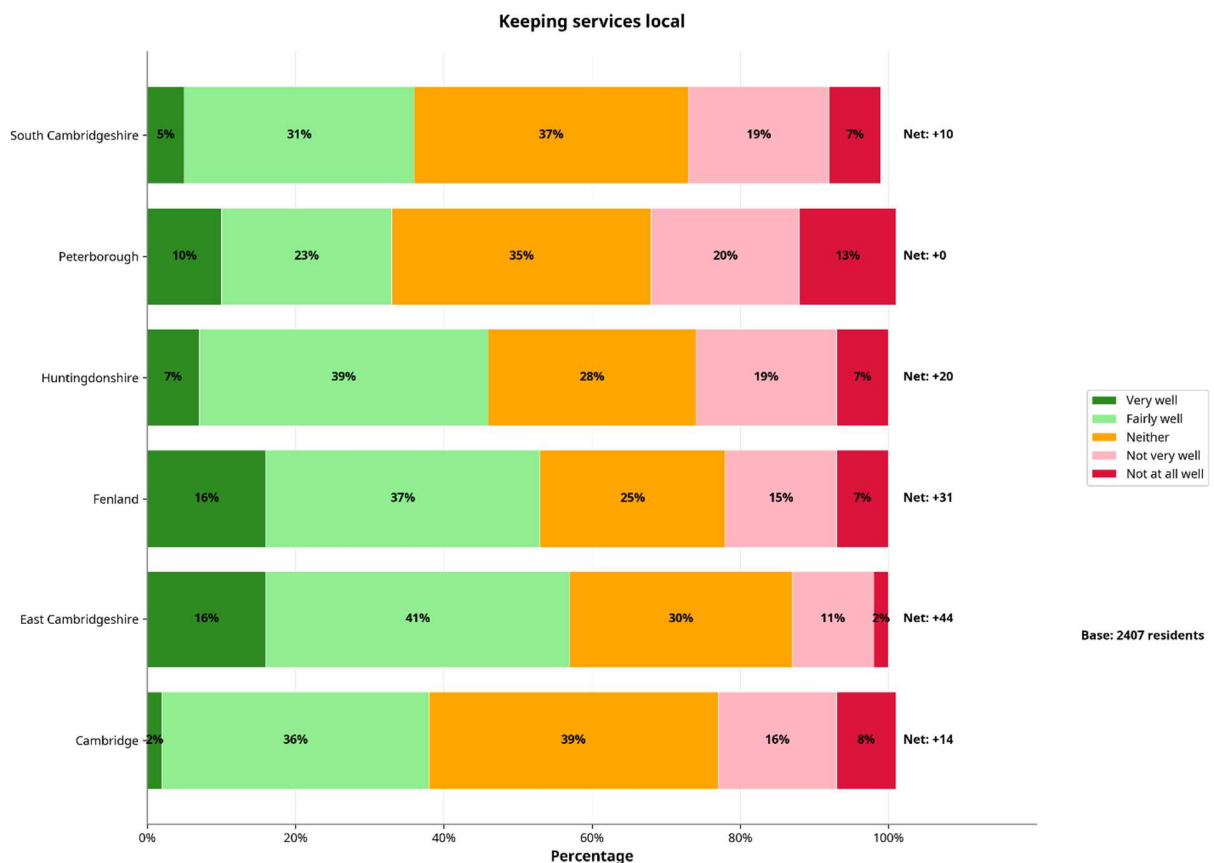


Figure: Local Services Performance Assessment

Geographical performance

Residents' assessment of councils' performance on keeping services local shows limited significant variation across districts. East Cambridgeshire demonstrates the highest satisfaction at 57%, followed by Fenland at 53%, Huntingdonshire at 46%, Cambridge at 38%, South Cambridgeshire at 36%, and Peterborough at 33%. The 24-point difference between East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough approaches but does not clearly exceed significance thresholds given the confidence intervals. Negative responses remain relatively low across all districts, ranging from 13% in East Cambridgeshire to 33% in Peterborough. The "neither" category shows considerable variation from 25% in Fenland to 39% in Cambridge. These patterns suggest moderate satisfaction with local service provision across most districts, with rural areas like East Cambridgeshire and Fenland showing higher ratings. Urban areas show lower satisfaction with 'keeping services local'.



Protecting local identity

The public are significantly less positive on this measure than council staff.

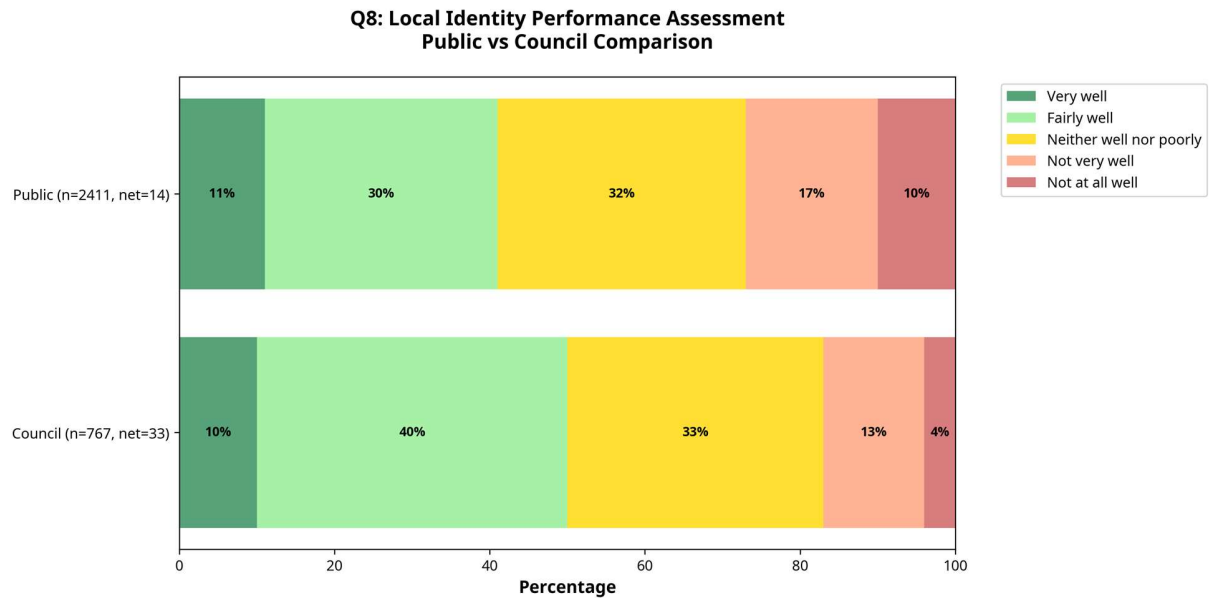
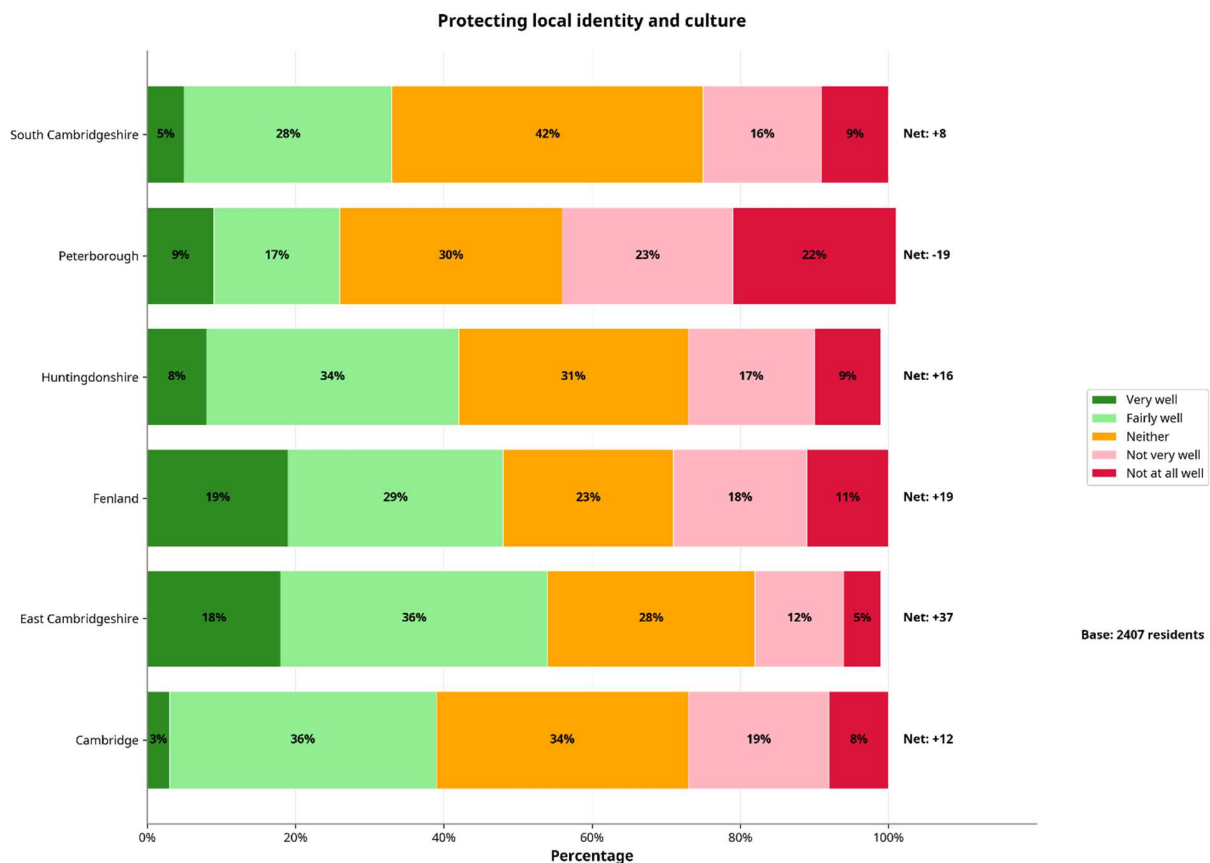


Figure: Local Identity Protection Assessment

Geographical performance

Residents' assessment of councils' performance on protecting local identity and culture shows limited significant variation across districts. East Cambridgeshire shows the highest satisfaction at 54%, followed by Fenland at 48%, Huntingdonshire at 42%, Cambridge at 41%, South Cambridgeshire at 33%, and Peterborough at 26%. The 28-point difference between East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough approaches significance thresholds. Negative responses vary from 17% in East Cambridgeshire to 45% in Peterborough, with this 28-point gap also approaching significance. The "neither" category ranges from 23% in Fenland to 42% in South Cambridgeshire. These patterns suggest rural districts perceive better performance in cultural preservation, possibly reflecting stronger village identities and community cohesion. The high neutral responses, particularly in South Cambridgeshire, suggest many residents struggle to assess this somewhat abstract performance measure or feel disconnected from local cultural initiatives.



Cost reduction

Notably here the public are significantly net negative in their view of that local government is focused on cost reduction.

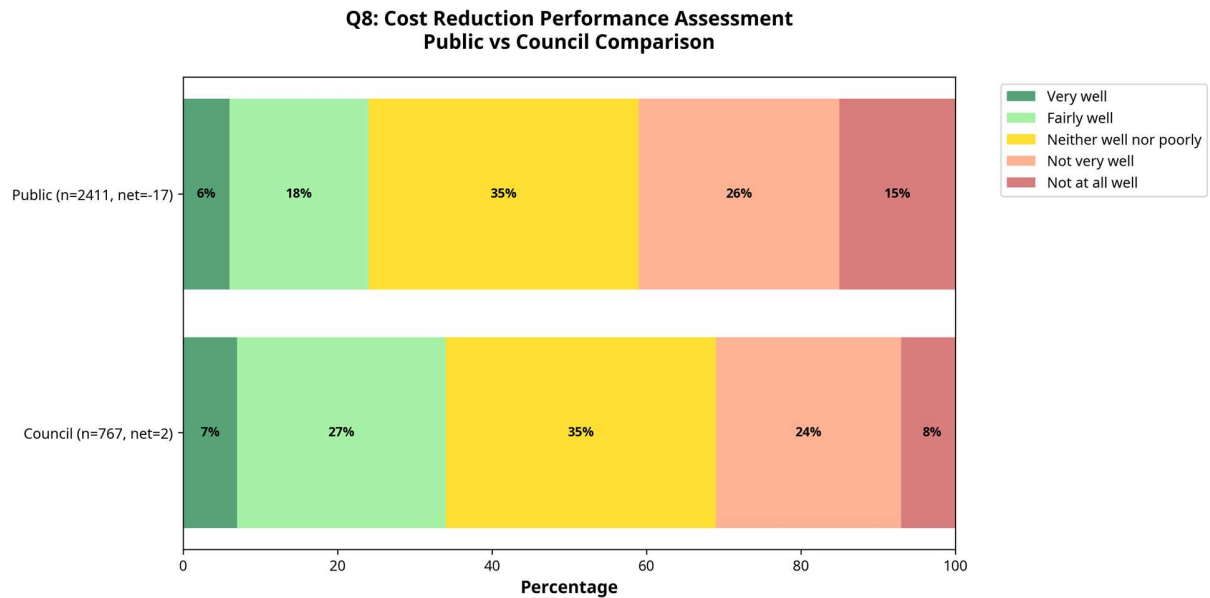
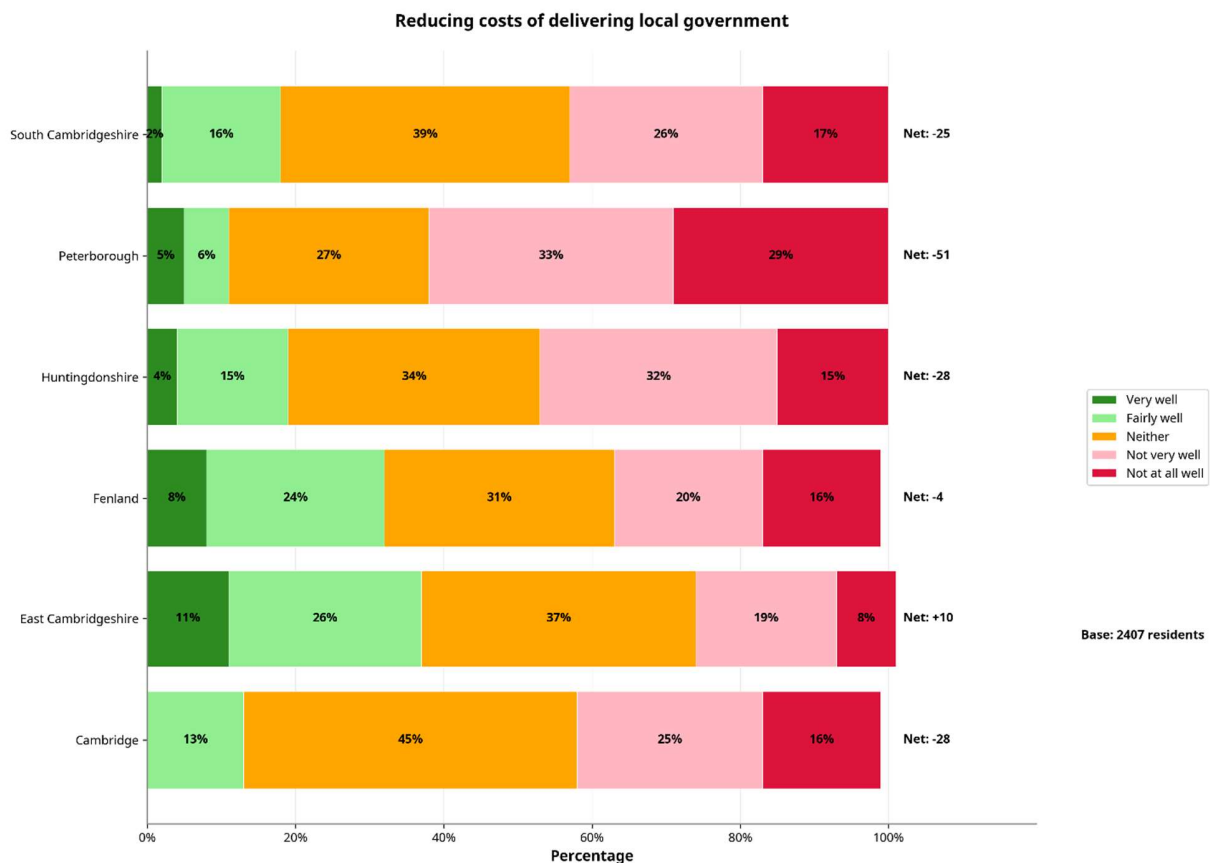


Figure: Cost Reduction Performance Assessment

Geographical performance

Peterborough shows the highest dissatisfaction with 62% rating performance as not very well or not at all well, compared to Cambridge's 41%, South Cambridgeshire's 43%, Huntingdonshire's 47%, Fenland's 36%, and East Cambridgeshire's 27%. The 35-point gap between Peterborough and East Cambridgeshire exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Positive ratings remain consistently low, ranging from 11% in Peterborough to 37% in East Cambridgeshire, with Fenland at 32%. The "neither" category varies from 27% in Peterborough to 45% in Cambridge. These findings indicate widespread scepticism about councils' efficiency efforts, with Peterborough residents expressing particular dissatisfaction consistent with their broader governance concerns. East Cambridgeshire again shows relatively better ratings, suggesting residents perceive more effective cost management. The high neutral responses, especially in Cambridge, may reflect limited visibility of efficiency measures or difficulty assessing administrative cost-effectiveness from a resident perspective.



Reducing the complexity of local government

Both residents and council staff tend to disagree that the local government performs well in terms of reducing the complexity of government.

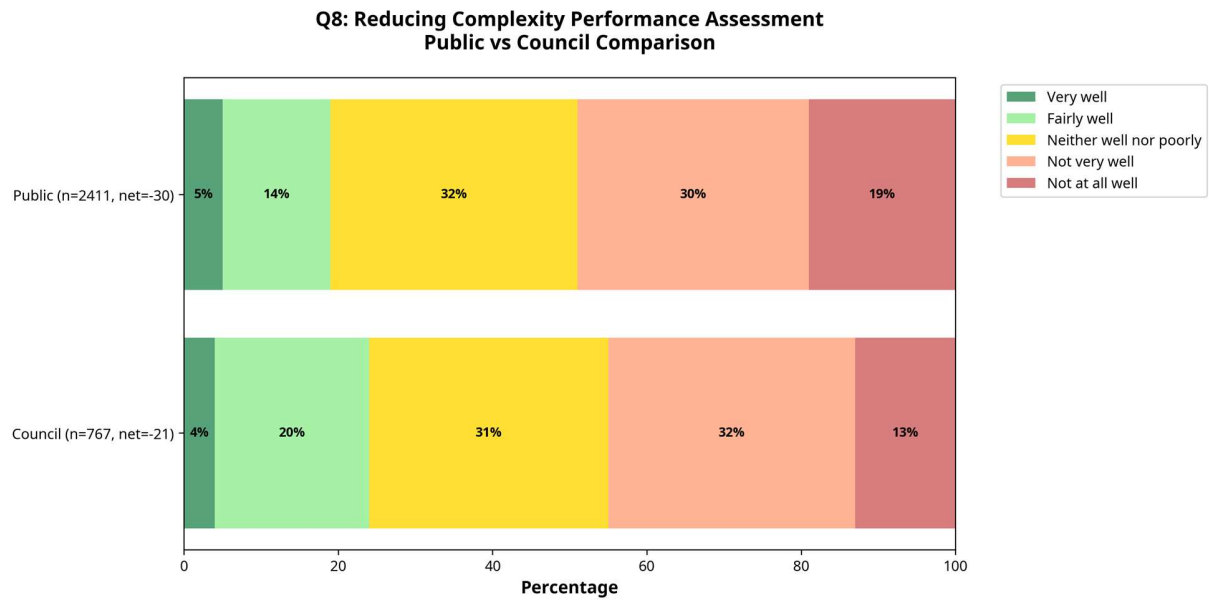
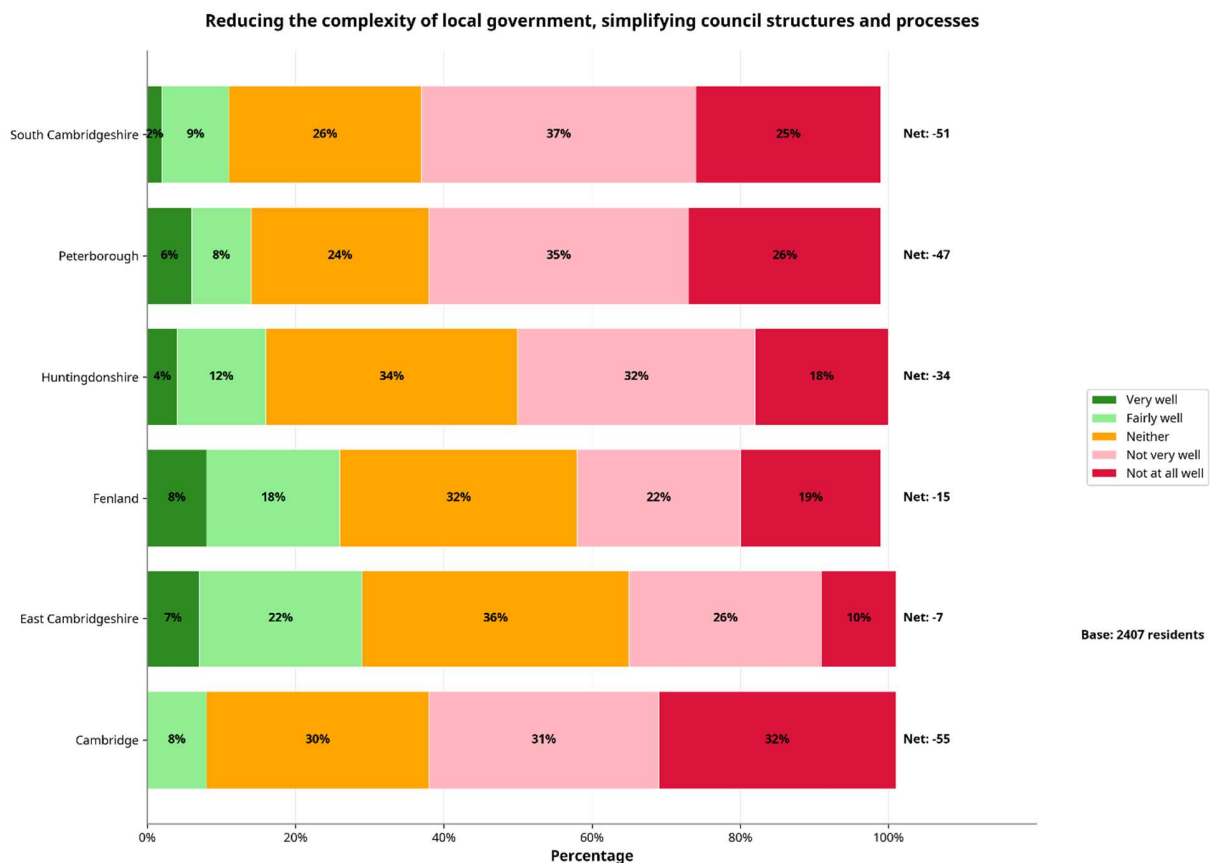


Figure: Complexity Reduction Assessment

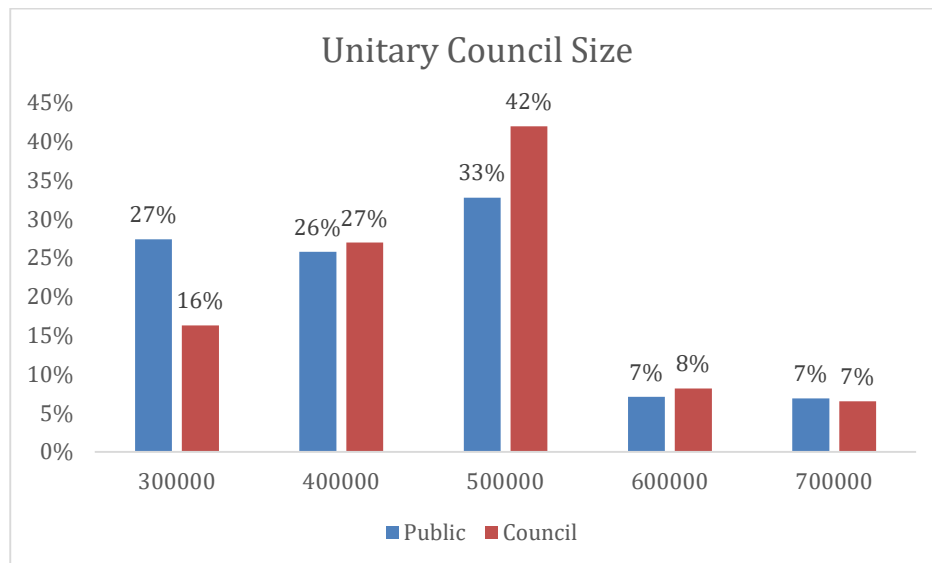
Geographical performance

Cambridge shows the highest dissatisfaction with 63% rating performance as not very well or not at all well, followed by South Cambridgeshire at 62%, Peterborough at 61%, Huntingdonshire at 50%, Fenland at 41%, and East Cambridgeshire at 36%. The 27-point gap between Cambridge and East Cambridgeshire exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Positive ratings remain uniformly low across all districts, ranging from 8% in Cambridge to 29% in East Cambridgeshire, with Fenland at 26%. The "neither" category varies from 24% in Peterborough to 36% in East Cambridgeshire. These findings reveal widespread dissatisfaction with current governance complexity, particularly acute in Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire where the two-tier system may be perceived as especially cumbersome. Peterborough's poor rating despite its unitary status suggests complexity issues transcend structural arrangements. East Cambridgeshire's relatively better assessment maintains its pattern of higher satisfaction across governance measures, though even here the majority perceive room for improvement in simplification.



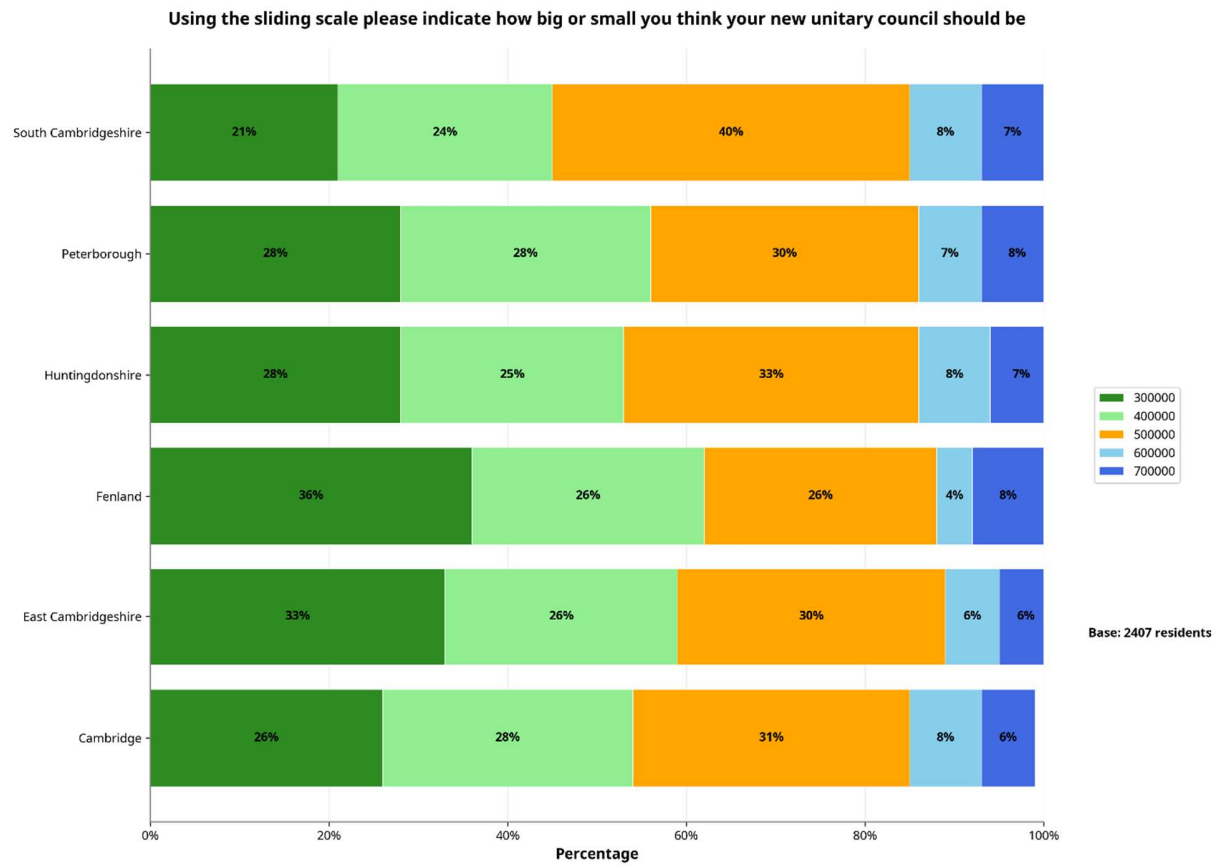
Unitary Council Size

The public mode is for 400,000 in terms of size, although the most picked option is 500,000. Council workers, by contrast, four in ten want to see 500,000 with lower agreement with 300 or 400,000. For both groups, larger than 500,000 is less attractive.



Geographical performance

Fenland shows the strongest preference for smaller councils, with 62% favouring populations under 400,000, compared to Cambridge's 54%, Peterborough's 56%, Huntingdonshire's 53%, East Cambridgeshire's 59%, and South Cambridgeshire's 45%. The 17-point difference between Fenland and South Cambridgeshire exceeds statistical significance thresholds. Conversely, South Cambridgeshire shows the highest support for larger councils, with 48% preferring populations over 500,000, versus Fenland's 30%, representing a significant 18-point gap. The 600,000-700,000 category shows minimal support across all districts at 4-8%. These patterns suggest rural districts like Fenland strongly favour smaller unitary authorities, potentially reflecting concerns about representation and local identity within larger structures. South Cambridgeshire's greater openness to larger councils may reflect recognition of the district's integration with Cambridge and acceptance of broader administrative units. The general preference for mid-sized authorities (400,000-500,000) across most districts indicates residents seek a balance between efficiency and local representation.



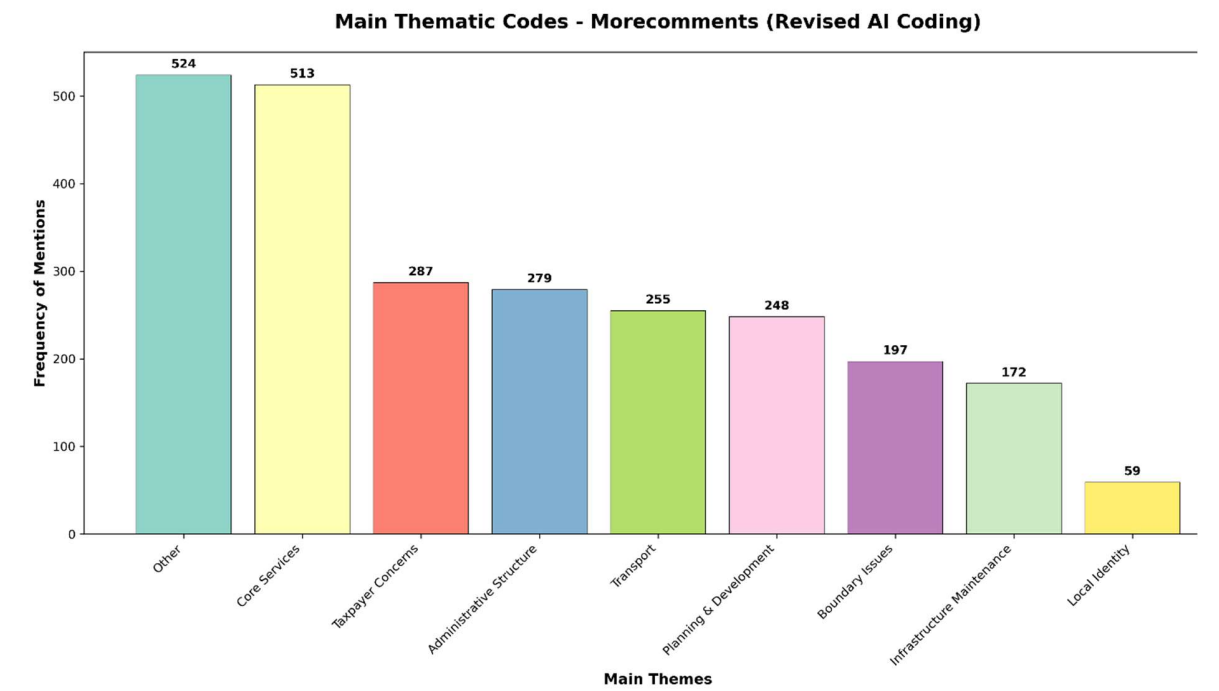
Hopes and concerns

As well as the quantitative questions, there was one open-ended question that asked Do you have any further comments, hopes or concerns you wish to make? Some comments were short and some were extended. Therefore, in terms of coding data, a multicode approach was taken i.e. one statement could make several points and so these have all been tracked. In addition, the districts have been supplied with their individual comments in order to look at individual responses in detail. There were 1,564 comments made in total, these come both from residents and council workers. It will definitely be worth investigating both groups of comments especially in terms of future planning.

In terms of sentiment, the responses were tilted to negative.

Sentiment	Percentage
Very Positive	2%
Positive	16%
Neutral	54%
Negative	26%
Very Negative	3%

The comments were tagged for main thematic content and the further tagged for the detail on those responses. With any coding process, there are likely to be a large amount of others that do not fit into a thematic category but instead make individual points. This is what we find in this survey. Next, people are concerned about core services along with taxpayer concerns, and how the administrative structure will work. These last two sit with planning and development, and transport infrastructure.



The detailed thematic coding reveals a striking hierarchy of public concerns, with service quality and delivery dominating the discourse, accounting for over a quarter (27%) of all coded mentions. This overwhelming focus on service standards suggests that regardless of structural reforms, residents remain fundamentally preoccupied with whether their bins are collected, their roads are maintained, and their local services function effectively.

Three substantial themes emerge in the second tier: longer-term planning comments (16%), transport adequacy (15%), and concerns about the functioning of local structures (13%). Together, these themes paint a picture of communities grappling with both immediate service needs and longer-term strategic challenges around development, connectivity, and governance effectiveness.

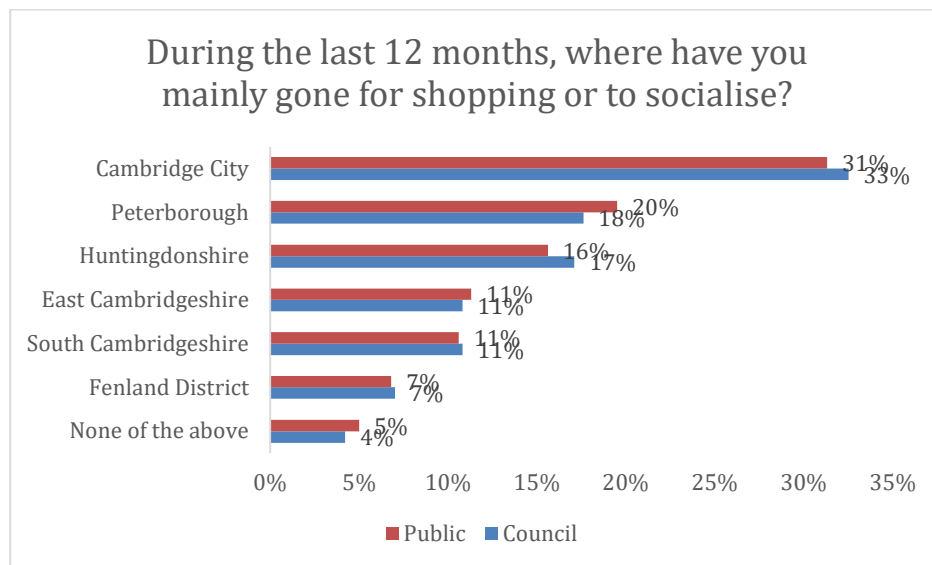
The middle range of the distribution reveals a cluster of interconnected concerns, each garnering between 8% and 9% of mentions. Here we find the cost-effectiveness of changes sitting alongside rural service maintenance and growth management issues, whilst budget allocation concerns and healthcare access each command roughly 8% of the discourse. Educational provision and housing development concerns follow closely, suggesting that residents view these issues as part of an integrated challenge facing local areas.

As we move through the lower frequencies, a tail of more specific concerns emerges, from environmental issues (5%) and protected services (5%) to community business areas and local identity questions (both around 3%). The presence of administration efficiency concerns, opposition to Cambridge-Peterborough combined authority proposals, and fears of losing local voice (each around 2%) speaks to underlying anxieties about democratic representation and administrative distance.

Location Preferences

Shopping and socialising

Residents are most likely to shop in Cambridge or Peterborough, and to a lesser extent, Huntingdonshire.



However, in the context of local government reorganisation, residents have emphasised that the new unitary councils should be located in places that they naturally travel to. Residents' decisions about what is a suitable place are complex and multi-faceted, but the travel time is a factor and it is therefore important to see where people travel for cultural activities, where they travel if they do not feel so well so under some level of duress and finally where they travel for work. We begin by sharing the shopping and socialising experience and then this is layered with health and work.

The analysis of shopping and socialising patterns across the six districts of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough reveals complex patterns of movement and economic interaction that vary considerably by location. These data, collected over a twelve-month period, provide detailed insights into how residents navigate their region for retail and leisure activities, revealing both expected gravitational pulls towards major centres and unexpected patterns of local loyalty and cross-district movement.

Cambridge demonstrates the highest level of self-containment across all surveyed districts. When Cambridge residents were asked where they primarily shop and socialise, 71% indicated they remain within the city boundaries, a figure that significantly exceeds any other district's internal retention rate. This pronounced local focus suggests that Cambridge's retail and leisure

infrastructure adequately serves its population's needs. Secondary destinations for Cambridge residents include South Cambridgeshire at 14%, indicating some movement to retail parks and venues in the immediate surroundings, whilst East Cambridgeshire attracts 9% and Huntingdonshire 4%. Minimal interaction occurs with Peterborough and Fenland, each registering just 1% of Cambridge residents' activity, whilst 1% indicate they primarily shop and socialise outside all listed areas.

South Cambridgeshire presents a notably different pattern, with residents almost evenly split between staying within their district (35%) and travelling to Cambridge (40%). This near-equal division suggests that South Cambridgeshire maintains viable local centres—likely in market towns such as Cambourne, Sawston, and Melbourn—whilst simultaneously functioning within Cambridge's economic orbit. Huntingdonshire attracts 10% of South Cambridgeshire residents, possibly reflecting connections to St Neots and Huntingdon for those in the western parts of the district. East Cambridgeshire draws 8%, whilst both Peterborough and Fenland register just 1% each. The 5% selecting "none of the above" suggests some residents may be oriented towards locations outside the study area, potentially including Royston, Saffron Walden, or further afield to London.

Peterborough emerges as the second major urban centre, demonstrating strong internal cohesion with 63% of residents conducting their shopping and socialising within the city. This high retention rate positions Peterborough as a largely self-sufficient urban area serving its population's retail and leisure needs. Interestingly, 12% of Peterborough residents travel to Cambridge, matched exactly by another 12% who indicate they primarily use areas outside those listed, potentially including Leicester, Northampton, or Stamford. Huntingdonshire attracts 8% of Peterborough residents, likely those in the southern areas of the city accessing Huntingdon or St Neots, whilst Fenland draws 4%, reflecting connections with Whittlesey and March. East Cambridgeshire registers just 1%, and South Cambridgeshire shows no measurable interactivity from Peterborough residents, underlining the limited interaction between Peterborough and the Cambridge-centric southern districts.

Huntingdonshire displays the most evenly distributed pattern amongst the predominantly rural districts. With 46% of residents staying within district for shopping and socialising, Huntingdonshire maintains a moderate level of self-sufficiency, likely centred on its market towns of Huntingdon, St Ives, St Neots, and Ramsey. Cambridge exerts considerable pull, attracting 28% of Huntingdonshire residents—the second-highest proportion of any external district population after East Cambridgeshire. This suggests that many Huntingdonshire residents, particularly those in the eastern areas around St Ives and the Hemingfords, look to Cambridge for major shopping and entertainment. South Cambridgeshire accounts for 10% of activity, whilst Peterborough draws 8%, indicating that Huntingdonshire sits at the intersection of both major urban spheres of influence. East Cambridgeshire and Fenland register 4% and 2% respectively, with 2% selecting none of the above.

Fenland presents a distinctive pattern characterised by strong local orientation combined with significant links to Peterborough. The district retains 42% of its residents' shopping and

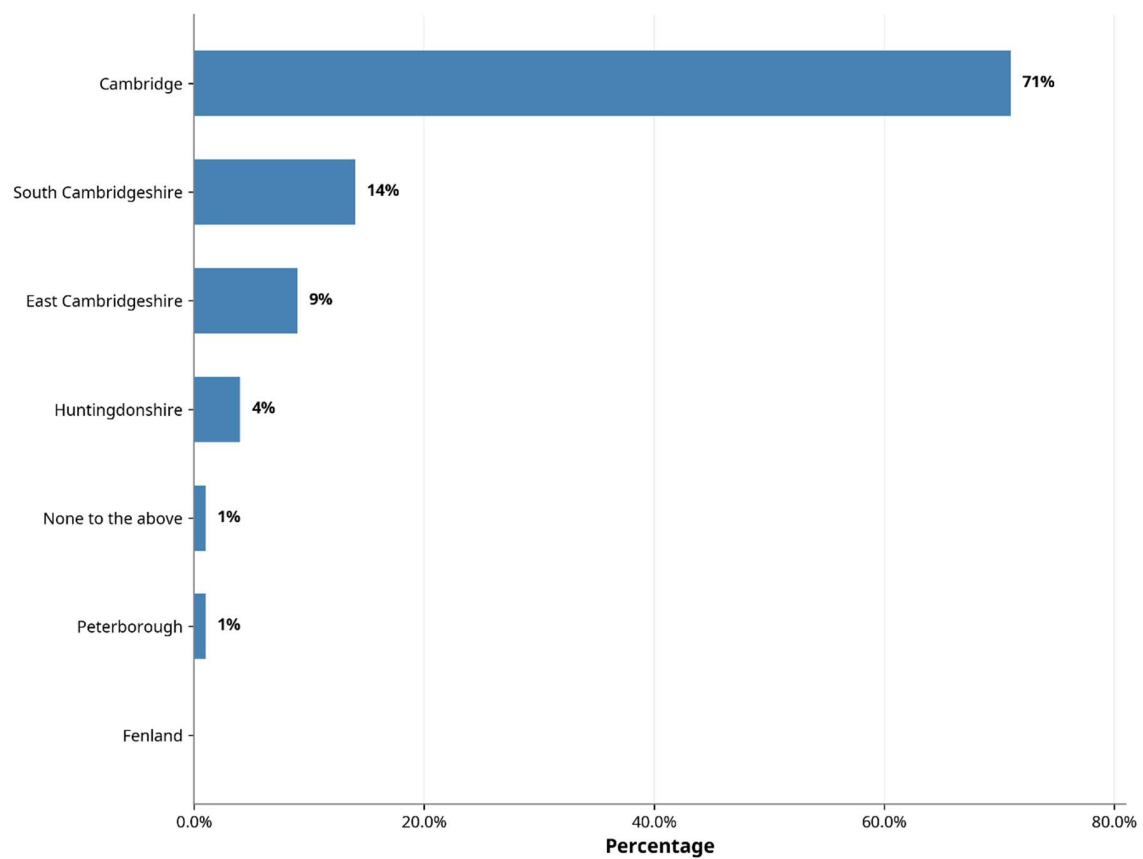
socialising activity, likely concentrated in the market towns of Wisbech, March, Whittlesey, and Chatteris. Peterborough serves as the primary external destination at 23%, reflecting both geographical proximity and transport links, particularly from March and Whittlesey. East Cambridgeshire attracts 13% of Fenland residents, possibly those from southern areas accessing Ely, whilst Cambridge draws just 11%—a notably low figure given Cambridge's regional dominance, suggesting that distance and potentially limited transport connections reduce Cambridge's appeal for Fenland residents.

Huntingdonshire accounts for 8% of activity, whilst 3% indicate they shop and socialise primarily outside the listed areas, potentially in King's Lynn or Downham Market. South Cambridgeshire shows no recorded activity from Fenland residents, highlighting the minimal interaction between these geographically separated districts.

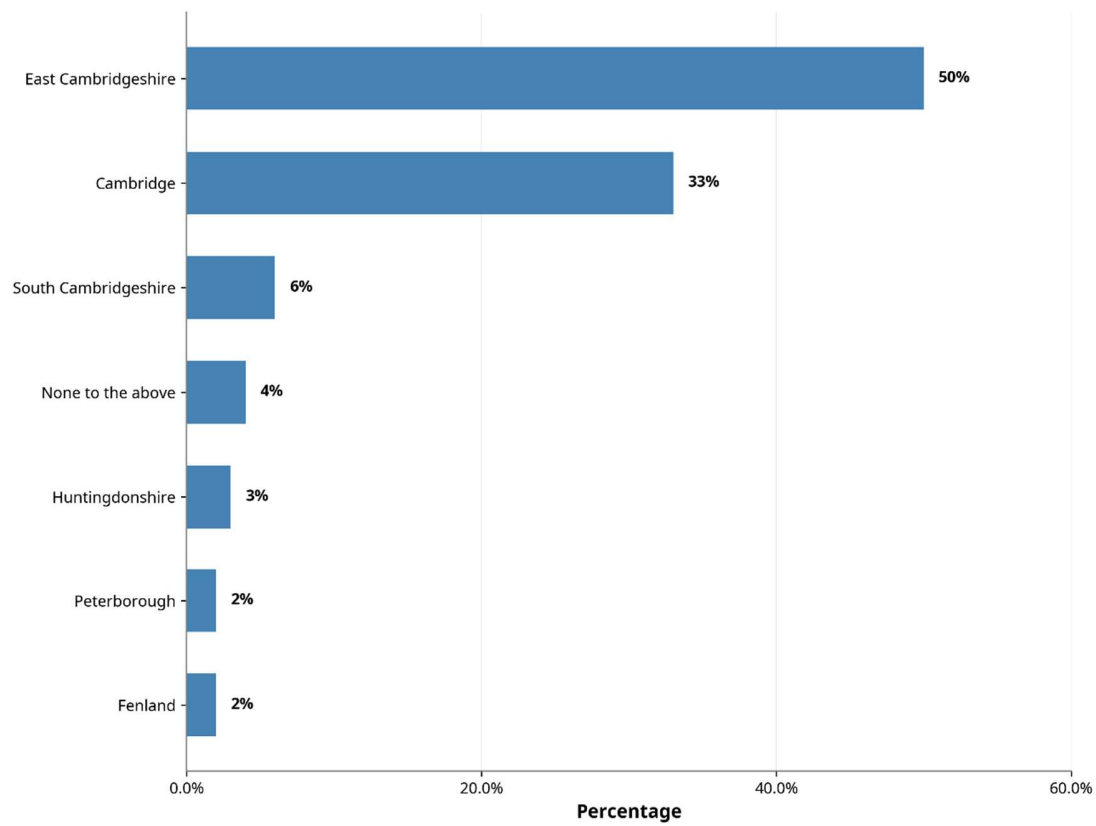
East Cambridgeshire exhibits the most pronounced external orientation of all districts, with an exact 50-50 split between internal and external activity. Half of residents remain within district, likely utilising Ely as the primary centre alongside smaller towns like Soham and Littleport. However, the other half of resident activity flows elsewhere, with Cambridge commanding 33%—the highest proportion of any district's residents travelling to Cambridge after Cambridge itself. This strong connection likely reflects both commuting patterns and the relative accessibility of Cambridge from much of East Cambridgeshire via the A10 and rail links which was supported in the focus groups. South Cambridgeshire attracts 6% of East Cambridgeshire residents, potentially those accessing retail parks or specific venues, whilst 4% indicate they primarily use areas outside those listed. Huntingdonshire draws 3%, and both Peterborough and Fenland register 2% each, indicating limited northward and westward orientation despite geographical proximity to Fenland.

These detailed patterns reveal a region with two distinct urban poles—Cambridge dominating the southern and eastern districts whilst Peterborough serves the north—with varying degrees of self-sufficiency in the rural districts. The data indicate that administrative boundaries only partially reflect actual patterns of movement and economic activity, with some neighbouring districts showing surprisingly limited interaction whilst others demonstrate strong connections despite distance. The variation in "none of the above" responses, ranging from 1% in Cambridge to 12% in Peterborough, suggests differential orientation towards areas outside the study region, with Peterborough residents potentially maintaining stronger links to other regional centres whilst Cambridge residents find their needs met within the immediate area.

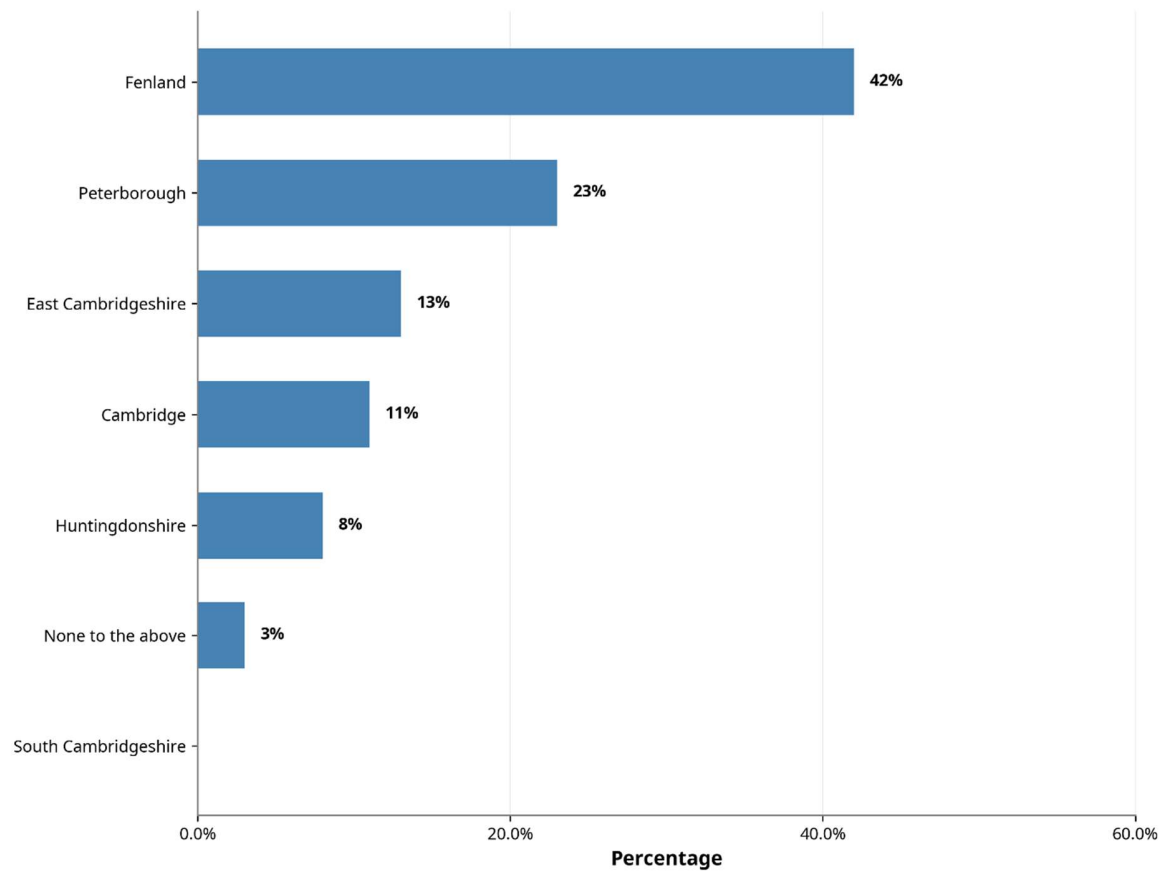
Cambridge - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for shopping or to socialise?



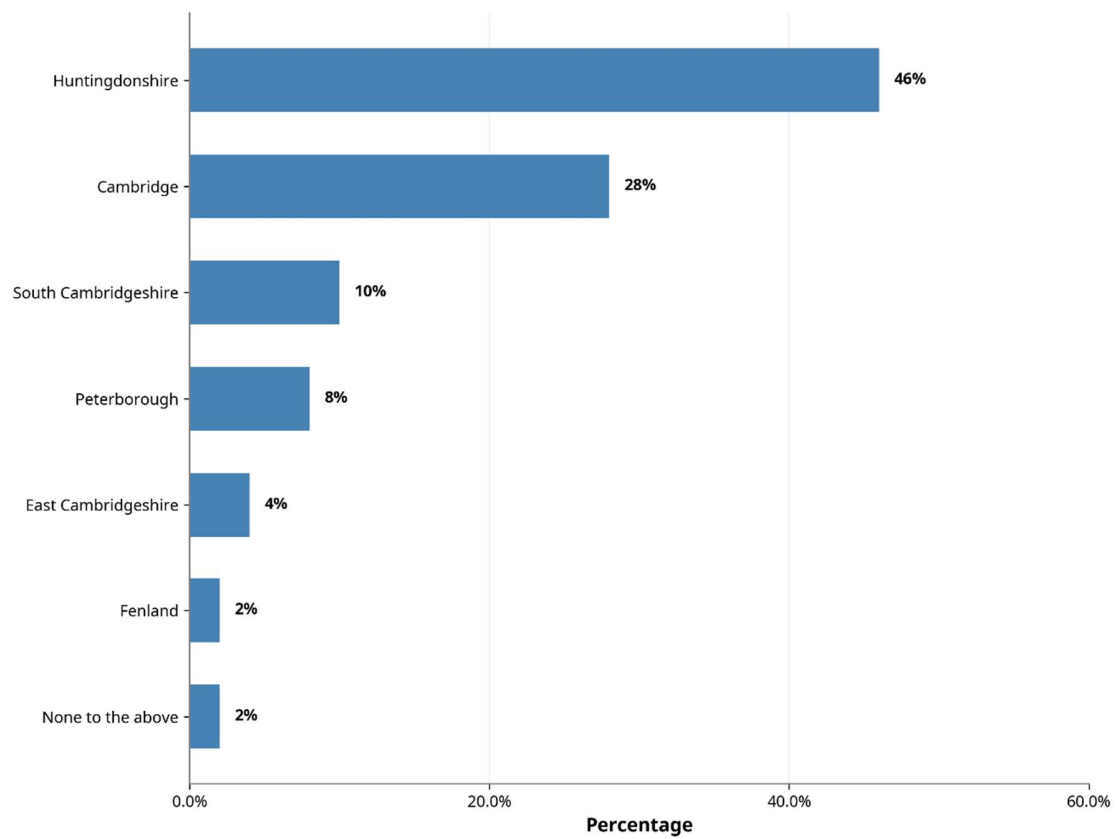
East Cambridgeshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for shopping or to socialise?



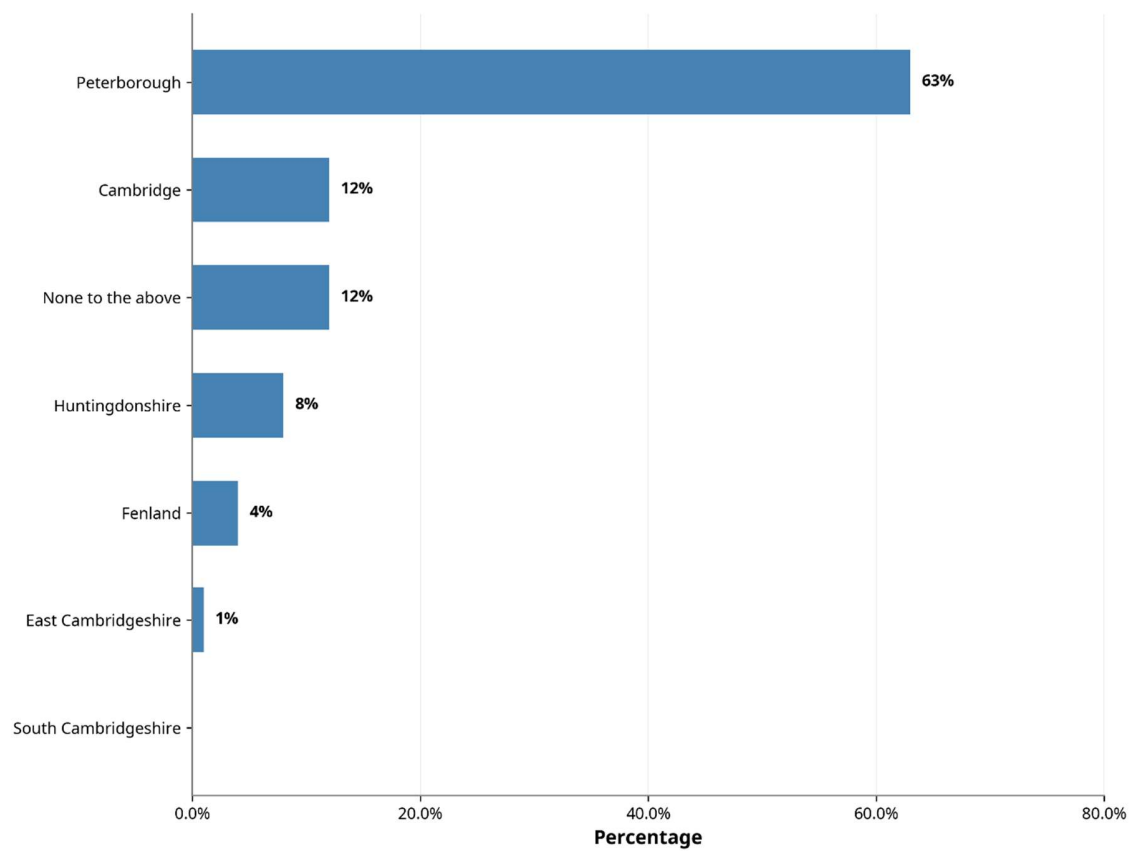
Fenland - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for shopping or to socialise?



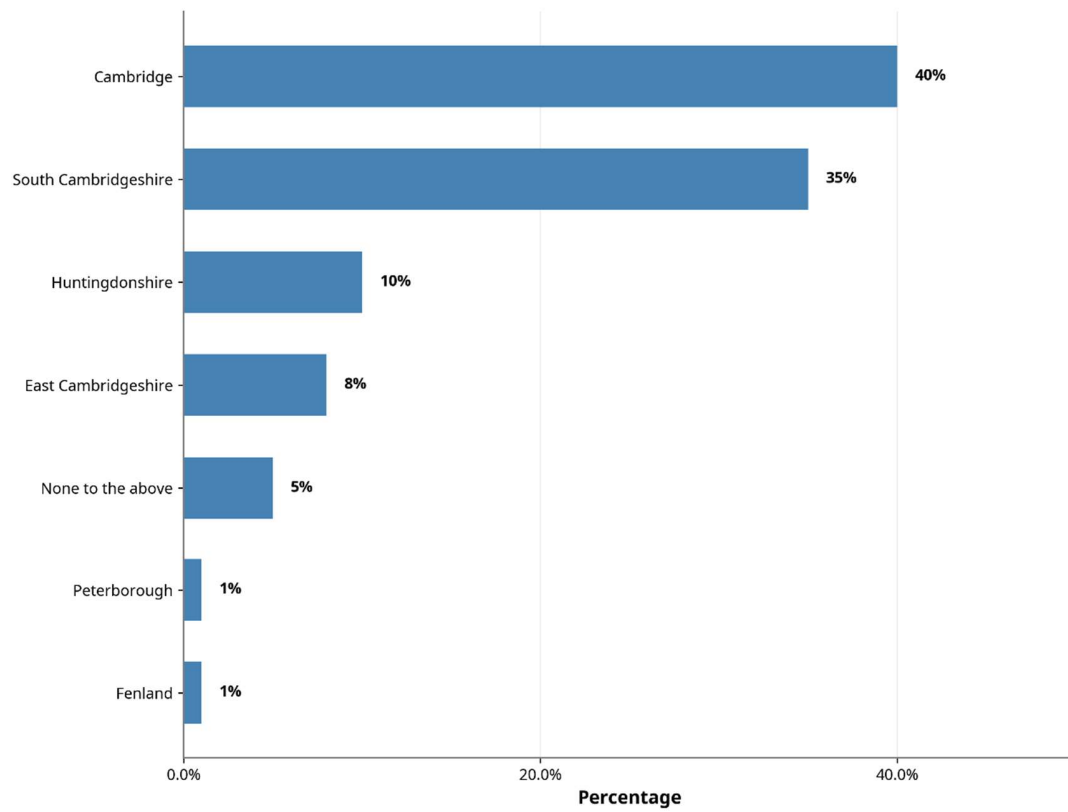
Huntingdonshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for shopping or to socialise?



Peterborough - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for shopping or to socialise?

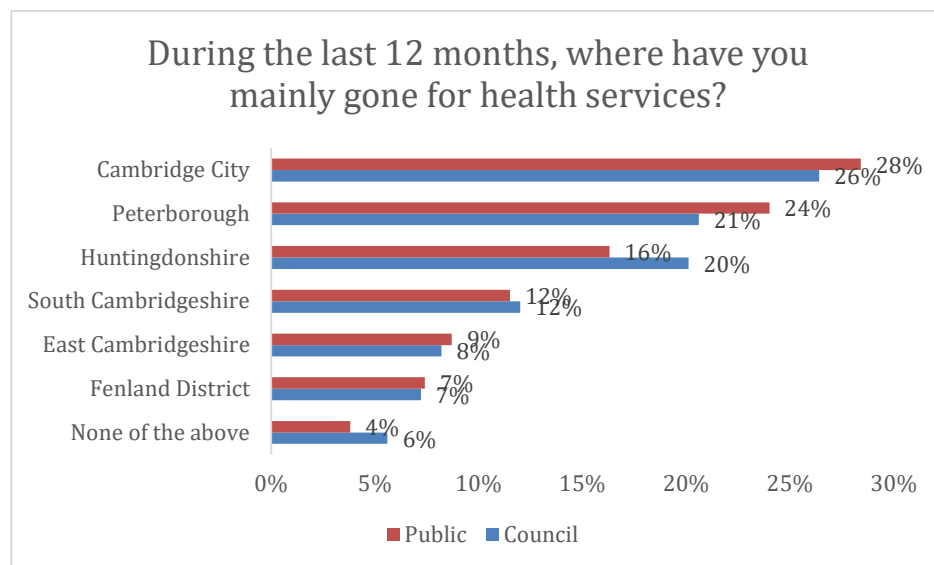


South Cambridgeshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for shopping or to socialise?



Health services

Again, residents have mainly gone to health services in Cambridge, Peterborough or Huntingdonshire.



The analysis of health service utilisation patterns across the six districts reveals markedly different configurations from those observed in shopping and socialising behaviours, with far greater local containment and more pronounced disparities in cross-district healthcare flows. These data illuminates questions about healthcare accessibility, service provision, and the complex interplay between administrative boundaries and clinical commissioning arrangements. Cambridge demonstrates the highest level of healthcare self-sufficiency, with 88% of residents accessing health services within the city. This exceptional retention rate likely reflects the concentration of specialist services at Addenbrooke's Hospital and associated facilities, alongside comprehensive primary care provision. The remaining 12% of Cambridge residents' healthcare activity disperses thinly, with South Cambridgeshire accounting for 8%, East Cambridgeshire 2%, and Huntingdonshire 1%. No measurable healthcare flows occur to Peterborough or Fenland, whilst no respondents indicated accessing healthcare outside the listed areas, suggesting Cambridge's medical infrastructure comprehensively serves its population's needs.

Peterborough exhibits similarly high healthcare self-containment at 81%, anchored by Peterborough City Hospital and its network of primary care facilities. Cambridge attracts 15% of Peterborough residents for healthcare, substantially higher than the reverse flow and likely reflecting specialist service access at Addenbrooke's. Huntingdonshire accounts for 5% of Peterborough residents' healthcare activity, whilst South Cambridgeshire and Fenland each

draw 2%, and East Cambridgeshire 1%. The 6% selecting "none of the above" may access specialist services in Leicester, Northampton, or London.

Huntingdonshire shows moderate healthcare self-sufficiency at 64%, with Hinchingsbrooke Hospital and local primary care serving the majority of needs. However, substantial healthcare flows occur to other districts, with Fenland attracting 16% of Huntingdonshire residents—a surprising finding given Fenland's limited acute hospital provision, potentially reflecting GP registration patterns or community service access. Peterborough draws 12% of Huntingdonshire residents, whilst Cambridge accounts for 10%, likely for specialist services. East Cambridgeshire attracts 4% of activity, with South Cambridgeshire at 2%. The 4% selecting "none of the above" may reflect healthcare access in Bedfordshire or further afield.

East Cambridgeshire demonstrates moderate local provision at 58%, with Princess of Wales Hospital in Ely serving as the primary acute facility alongside local GP practices. Cambridge commands 34% of East Cambridgeshire residents' healthcare activity—the highest external healthcare dependency observed in any district—reflecting both geographical proximity and the pull of specialist services. South Cambridgeshire accounts for 3% of healthcare activity, matching the proportion accessing services outside the listed areas. Notably, no East Cambridgeshire residents report accessing healthcare in Peterborough, Huntingdonshire, or Fenland, suggesting a strong southward orientation in healthcare pathways despite proximity to Fenland.

Fenland exhibits moderate local healthcare retention at 53%, served primarily by the North Cambridgeshire Hospital in Wisbech alongside primary care facilities in market towns. Peterborough emerges as the major external healthcare destination at 24%, reflecting both proximity and established patient pathways, particularly from March and Whittlesey. Huntingdonshire attracts 11% of Fenland residents, whilst Cambridge draws 7%—relatively low given Cambridge's regional specialist role, suggesting distance and transport barriers may limit access. East Cambridgeshire accounts for 3% of activity, matching the proportion accessing services outside the listed areas. South Cambridgeshire shows no measurable healthcare flows from Fenland, highlighting the minimal interaction between these geographically separated districts.

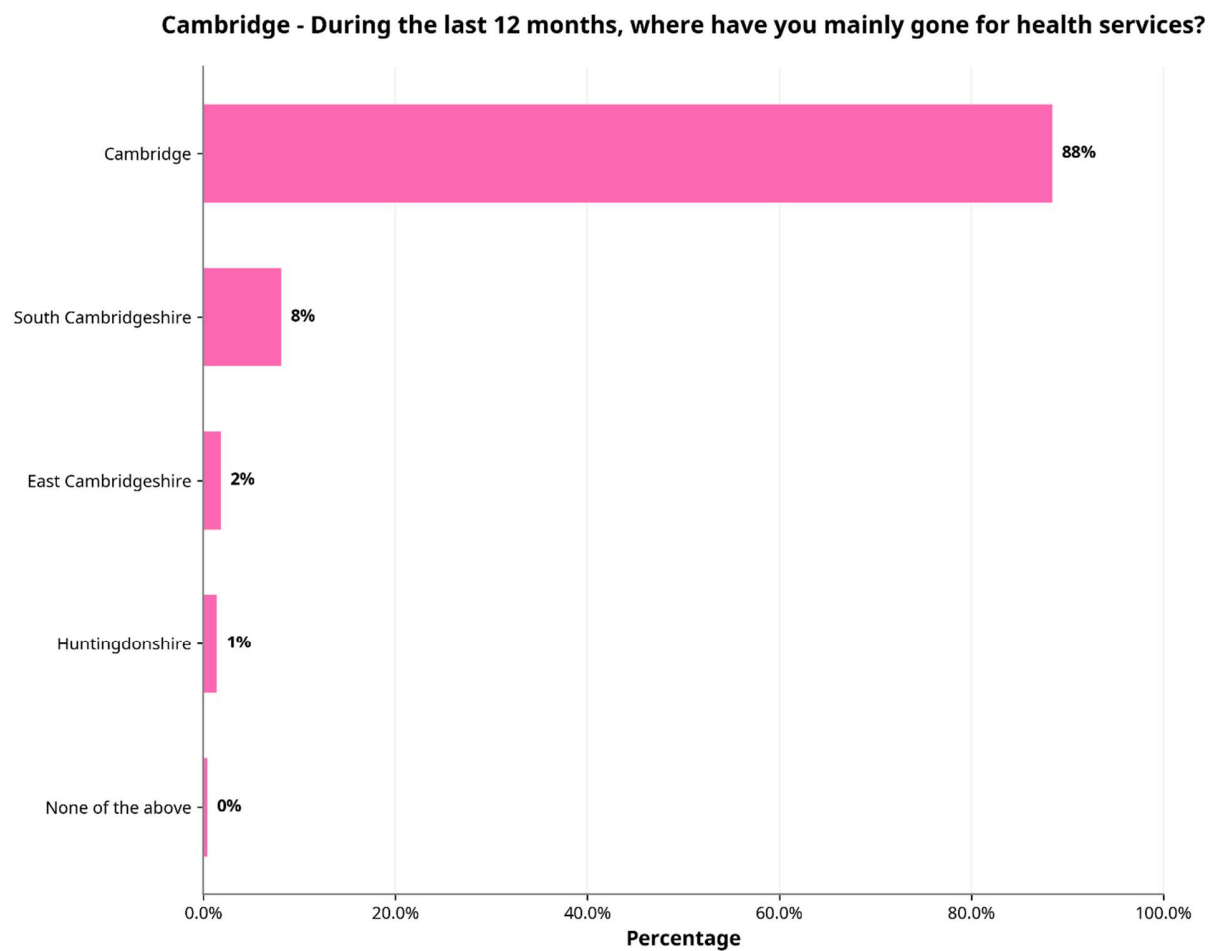
South Cambridgeshire presents the most dispersed healthcare pattern, with only 50% of residents accessing services within district—the lowest retention rate observed. Cambridge dominates external healthcare flows, attracting 37% of South Cambridgeshire residents, reflecting both proximity and the location of acute and specialist services. Huntingdonshire and East Cambridgeshire each draw 4% of residents, whilst the 4% selecting "none of the above" may access services in Hertfordshire or Bedfordshire. Notably, neither Peterborough nor Fenland registers measurable healthcare flows from South Cambridgeshire, reinforcing the district's strong orientation towards Cambridge.

Comparing healthcare patterns with shopping and socialising behaviours reveals fundamental differences in how residents navigate their region. Healthcare shows consistently higher local

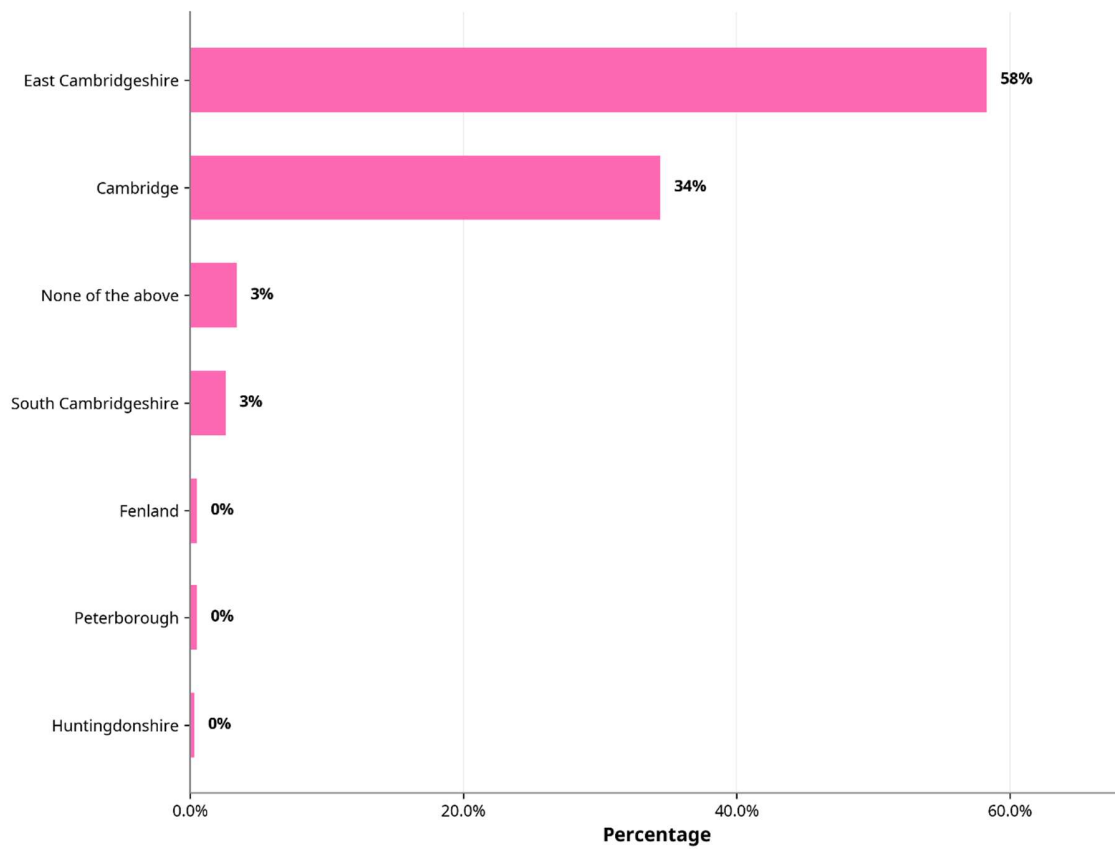
retention rates than shopping across most districts, reflecting the distribution of GP practices and the principle of local provision. However, the pull of specialist centres creates distinct healthcare geographies, with Cambridge commanding substantial healthcare flows from surrounding districts whilst Peterborough serves a more geographically constrained catchment. The absence of reciprocal flows in many cases—such as Cambridge residents rarely accessing healthcare elsewhere—highlights the hierarchical nature of healthcare provision.

The data suggests that administrative boundaries poorly reflect actual healthcare geographies, with some districts showing stronger healthcare connections to neighbouring areas than internal cohesion. Any reconfiguration of local government must carefully consider these established healthcare pathways and the implications for clinical commissioning, ambulance services, and integrated health and social care provision.

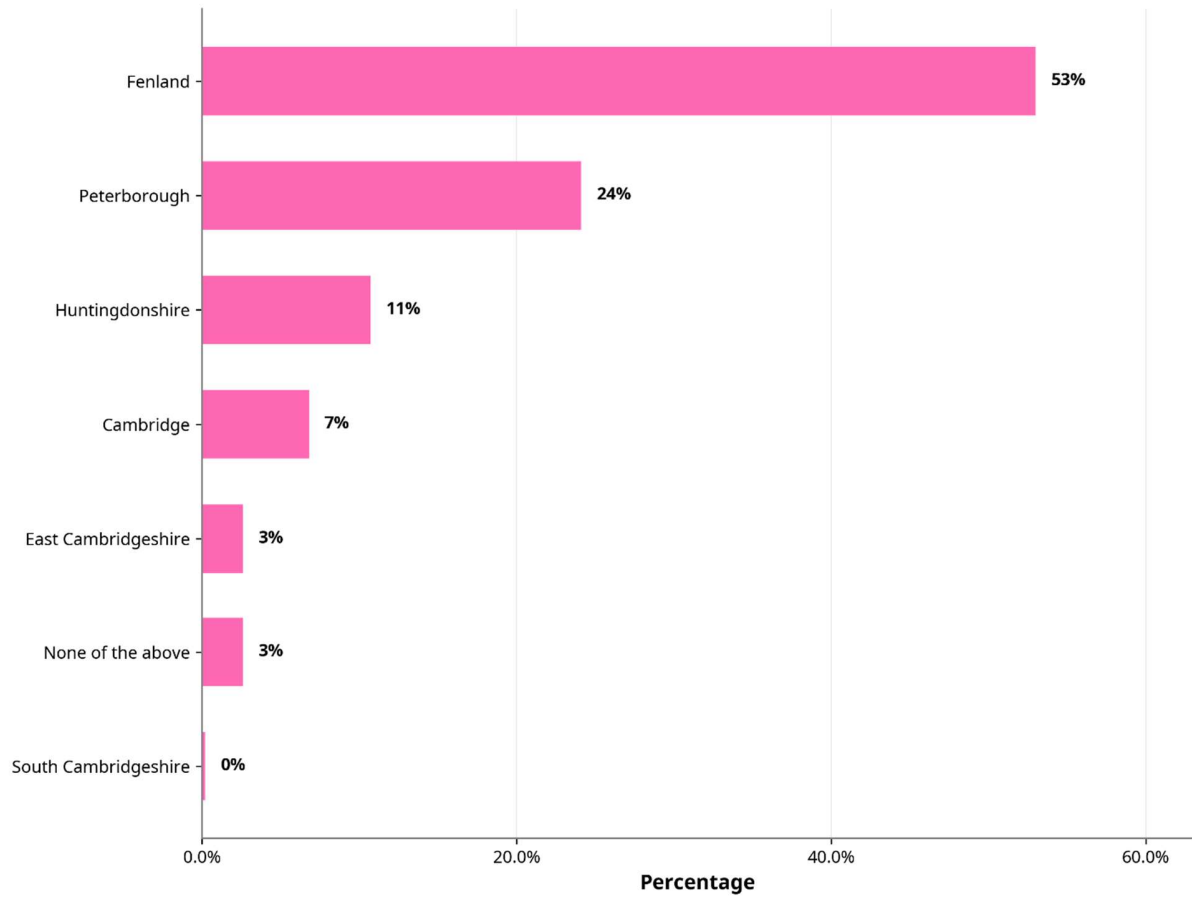
Here are the charts for each district which show where people travel for health services.



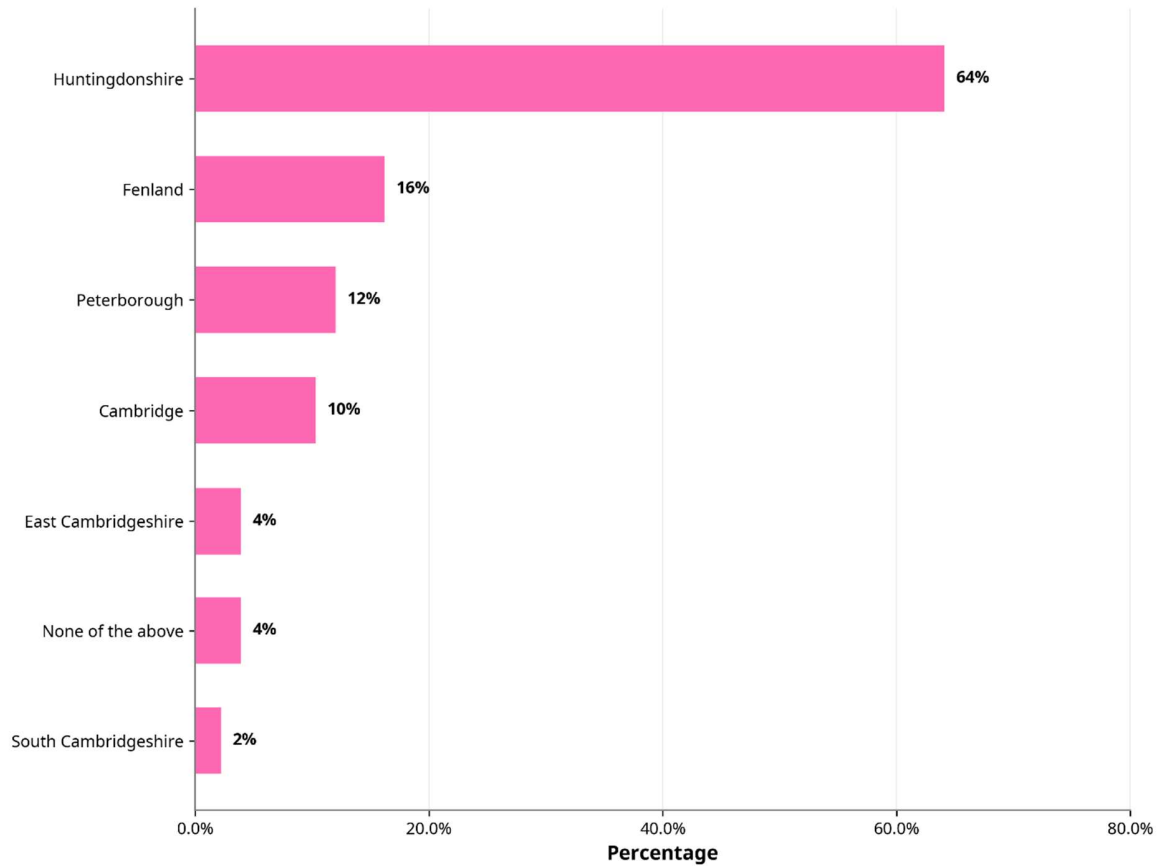
East Cambridgeshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for health services?

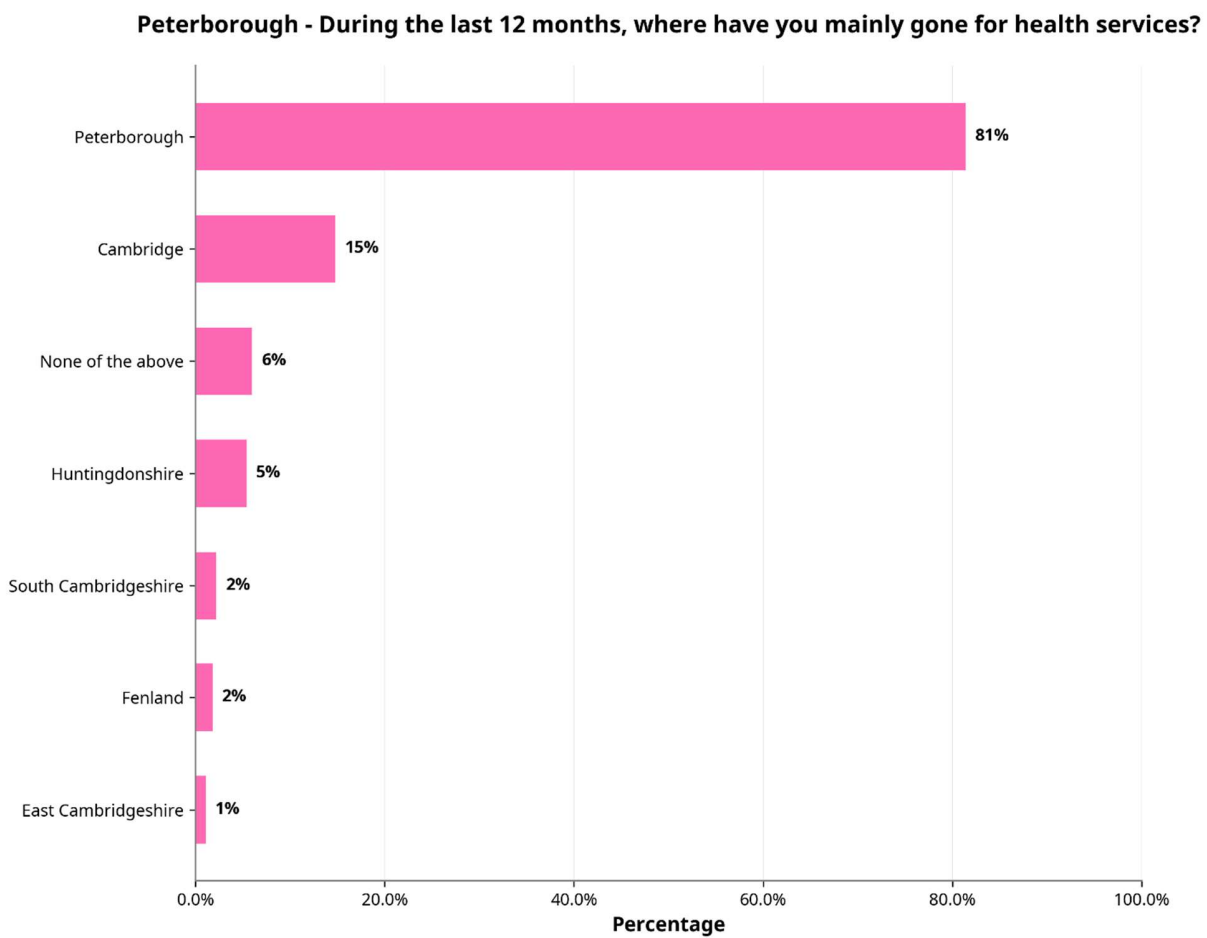


Fenland - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for health services?

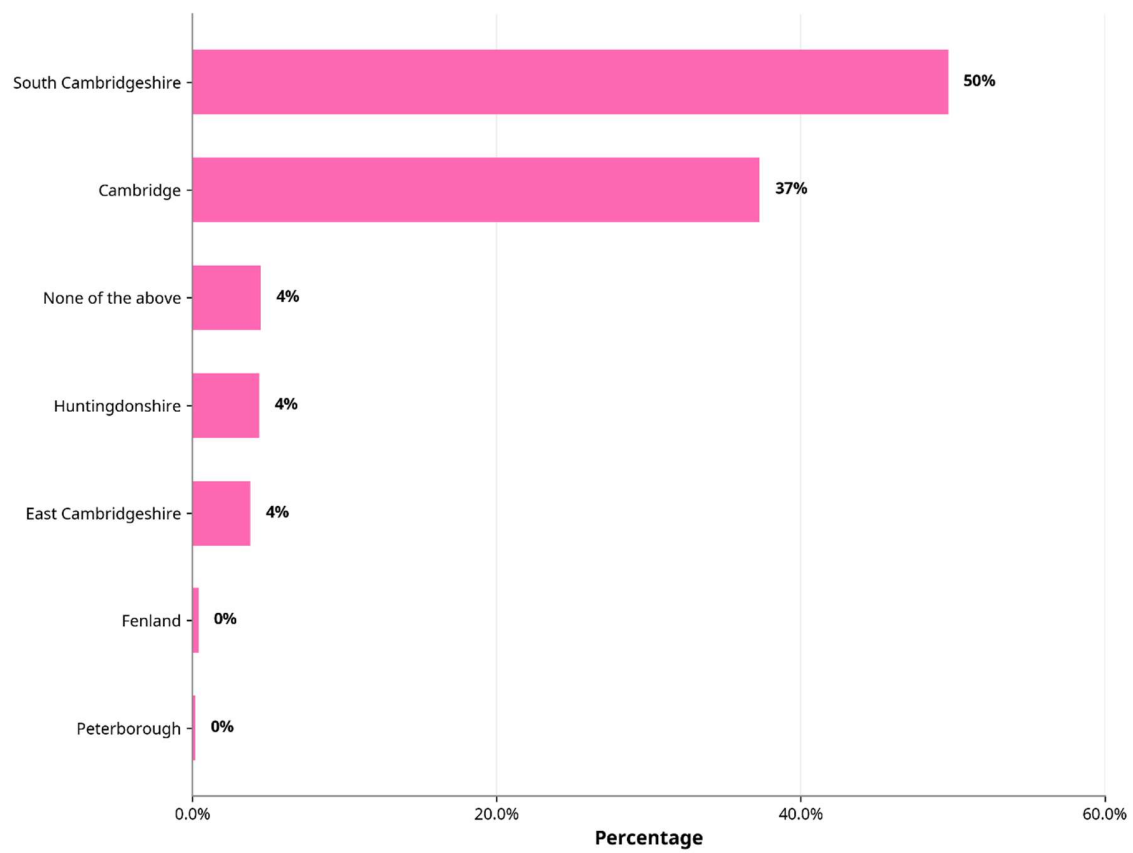


Huntingdonshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for health services?



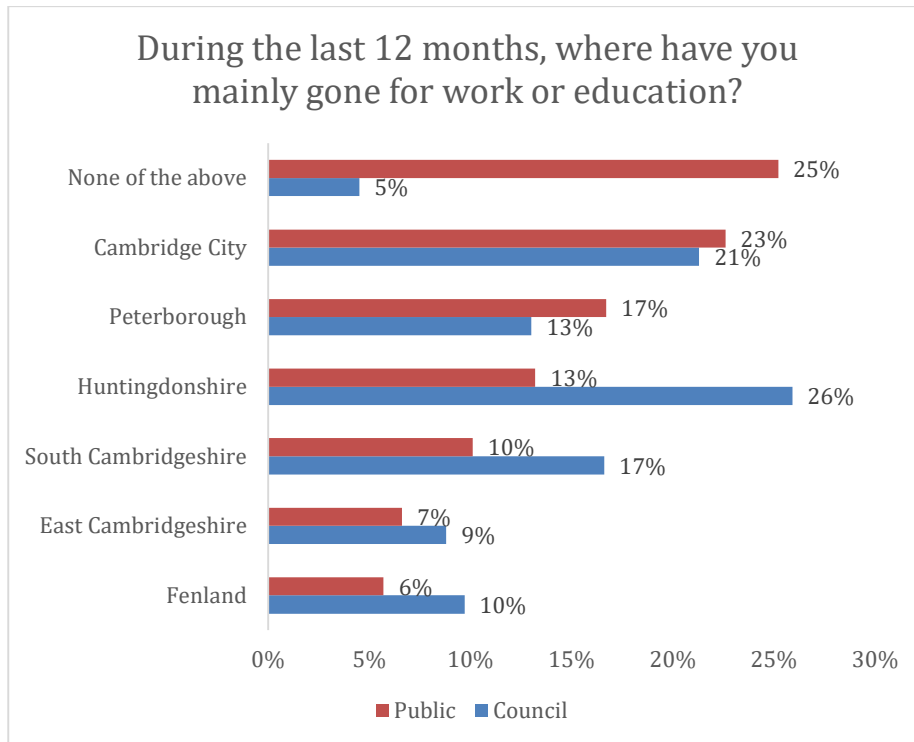


South Cambridgeshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for health services?



Work or education

Many residents do not work in any of the districts and then it is a similar pattern with Cambridge, Peterborough then Huntingdonshire.



Cambridge demonstrates the highest work/education retention at 64%, yet this figure falls substantially below its shopping (71%) and healthcare (88%) self-containment, suggesting that even Cambridge's diverse economy cannot fully employ its resident workforce. The remaining 36% of Cambridge residents commute elsewhere, with South Cambridgeshire attracting 9%, Huntingdonshire 4%, East Cambridgeshire and Peterborough each 2%, and Fenland 1%. Notably, 18% work or study outside the region entirely, indicating significant connections to London, regional universities, or remote working arrangements.

Peterborough shows moderate employment self-sufficiency at 52%, considerably lower than its shopping (63%) or healthcare (81%) retention, highlighting the distinction between service consumption and employment provision. Huntingdonshire attracts 12% of Peterborough's workers—the highest cross-district employment flow from Peterborough—whilst Cambridge draws just 4%. Remarkably, 28% of Peterborough residents work or study outside the region, the highest proportion observed, suggesting limited local employment opportunities relative to the working-age population and potentially significant commuting to Leicester, Northampton, or remote working arrangements.

East Cambridgeshire exhibits the lowest employment self-containment at just 39%, with Cambridge attracting 24% of residents for work or education—demonstrating the district's role as a dormitory area for the Cambridge economy. South Cambridgeshire draws 8% of East Cambridgeshire's workers, whilst 23% work outside the region. This pattern, combined with minimal flows to other districts (Huntingdonshire 3%, Fenland 3%, Peterborough 1%), reveals a district whose residents predominantly look south for employment rather than to neighbouring rural areas.

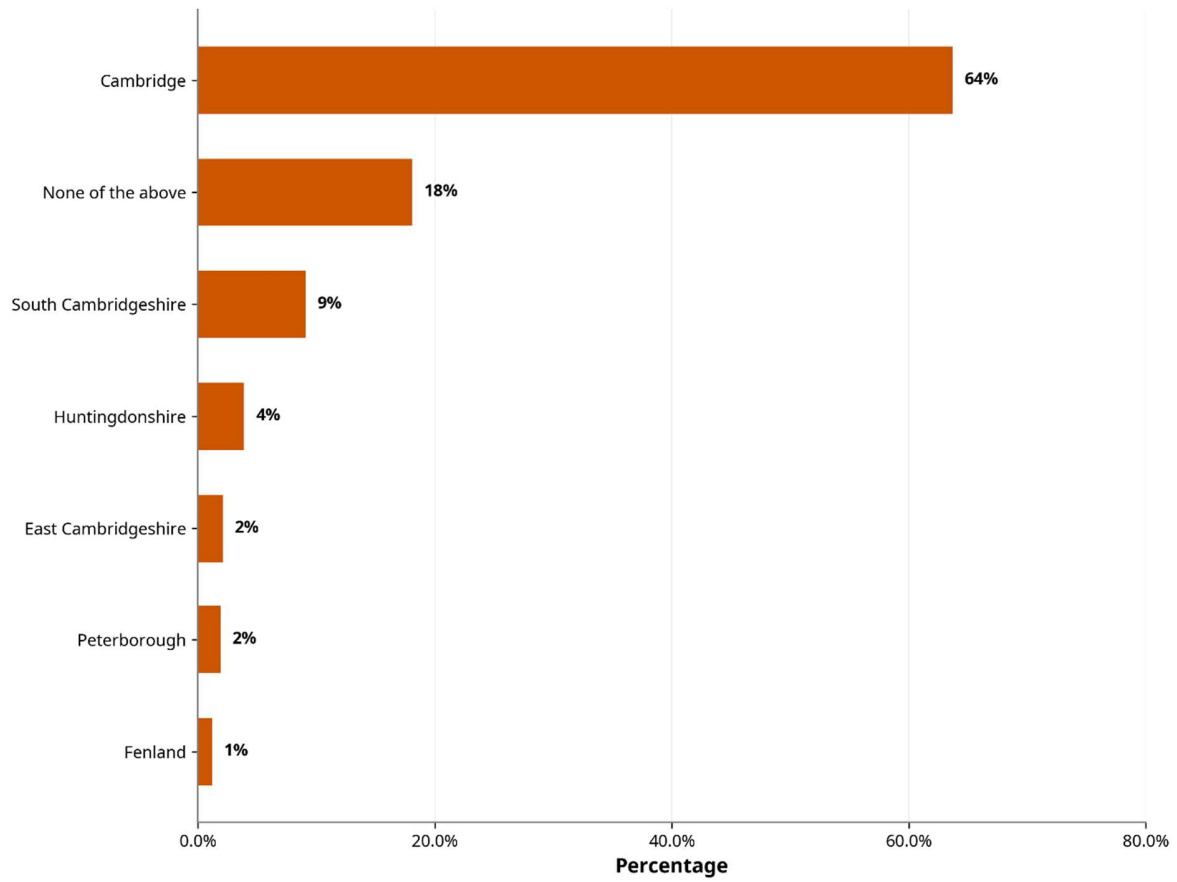
Huntingdonshire shows similarly low local employment at 38%, with residents dispersed across multiple employment centres. Cambridge attracts 13% of Huntingdonshire's workers, Peterborough 7%, and South Cambridgeshire 4%. The substantial 32% working outside the region likely reflects commuting to London, Bedford, or Northampton, highlighting Huntingdonshire's position at the intersection of multiple economic regions. East Cambridgeshire and Fenland each draw just 3% and 2% respectively, indicating limited cross-rural employment flows.

Fenland demonstrates marginally better employment self-containment at 37%, though this remains low by any measure. Peterborough serves as the primary external employment centre at 16%, reflecting established commuting patterns from March and Whittlesey. Huntingdonshire attracts 8% of Fenland's workers, whilst Cambridge draws just 6%, suggesting distance and transport barriers limit access to Cambridge employment. East Cambridgeshire attracts 5% of workers, with 27% working outside the region, potentially in King's Lynn, Wisbech's food processing extending into Lincolnshire, or agricultural employment crossing county boundaries.

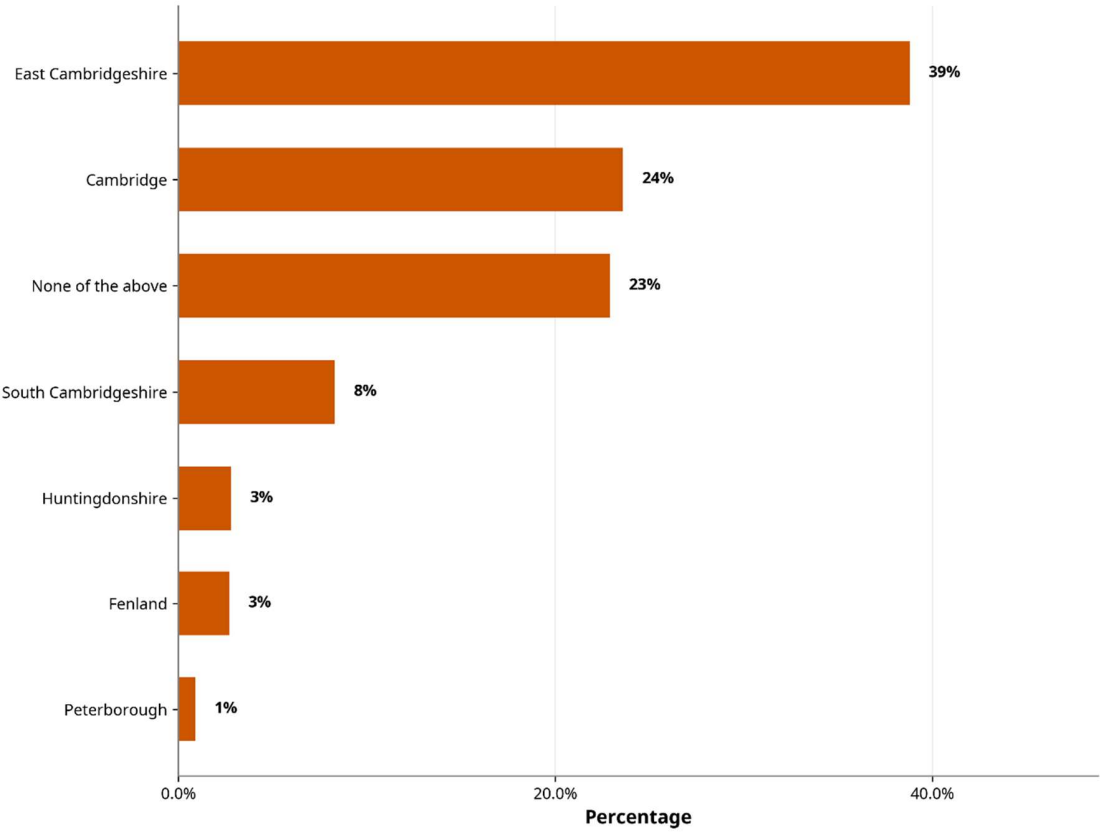
South Cambridgeshire presents the most dramatic employment dispersal, with only 34% working within district—the lowest recorded across all districts. Cambridge dominates external flows, attracting 31% of South Cambridgeshire's workers, confirming the district's role as Cambridge's primary dormitory area. Huntingdonshire draws 6%, East Cambridgeshire 3%, whilst Peterborough and Fenland each attract just 1%. The substantial 24% working outside the region likely includes London commuters, particularly from the southern settlements along the rail corridors, alongside remote workers and those accessing employment in Hertfordshire or Essex.

Comparing across all activity types reveals fundamental patterns in the region's functional geography. Work and education show the lowest local retention rates across all districts, averaging below 45% compared to over 60% for shopping and healthcare. Cambridge emerges as a key employment centre, whilst Peterborough's employment draw remains largely confined to its immediate hinterland. The rural districts function primarily as dormitory areas, with their residents travelling substantial distances for work whilst accessing services more locally. These patterns reveal a region where administrative boundaries bear little relationship to economic realities, where daily commuting flows create complex webs of interdependence. Here are the travel to work charts by district.

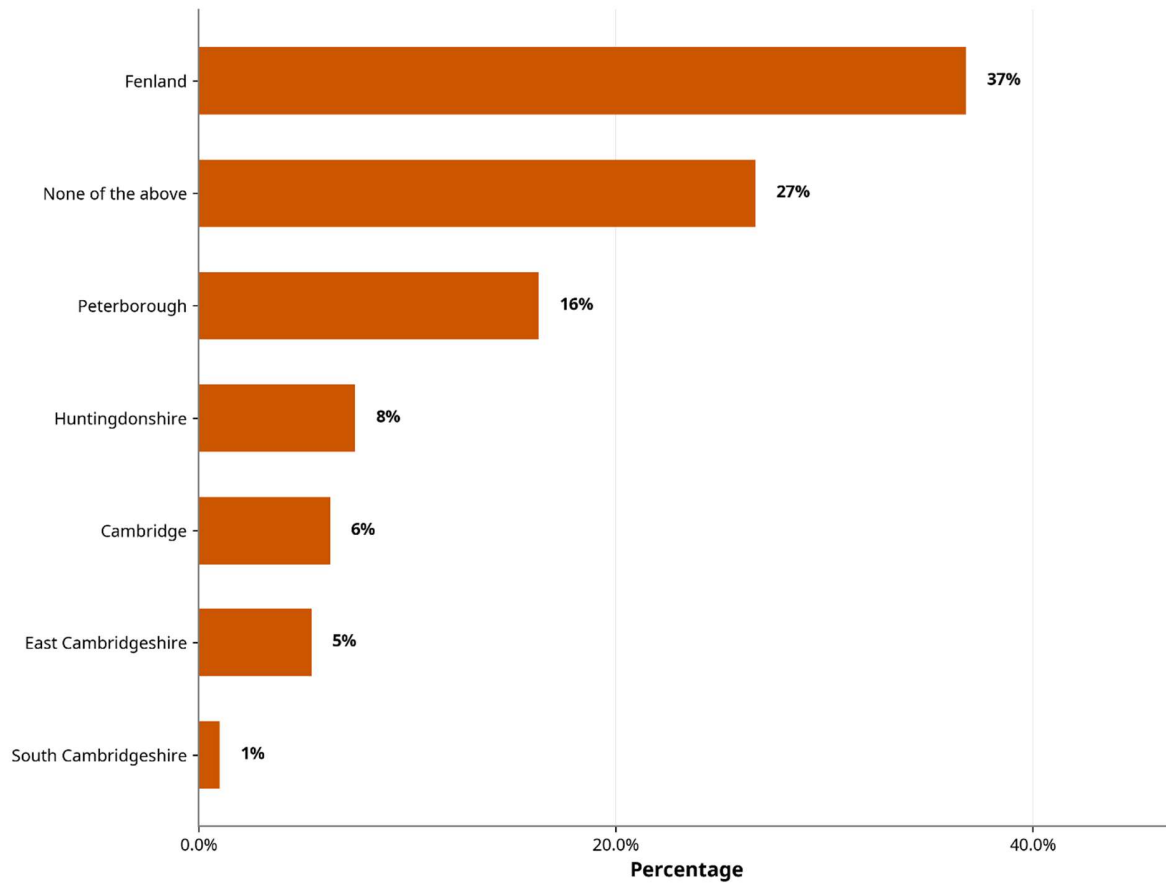
Cambridge - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for work or education?



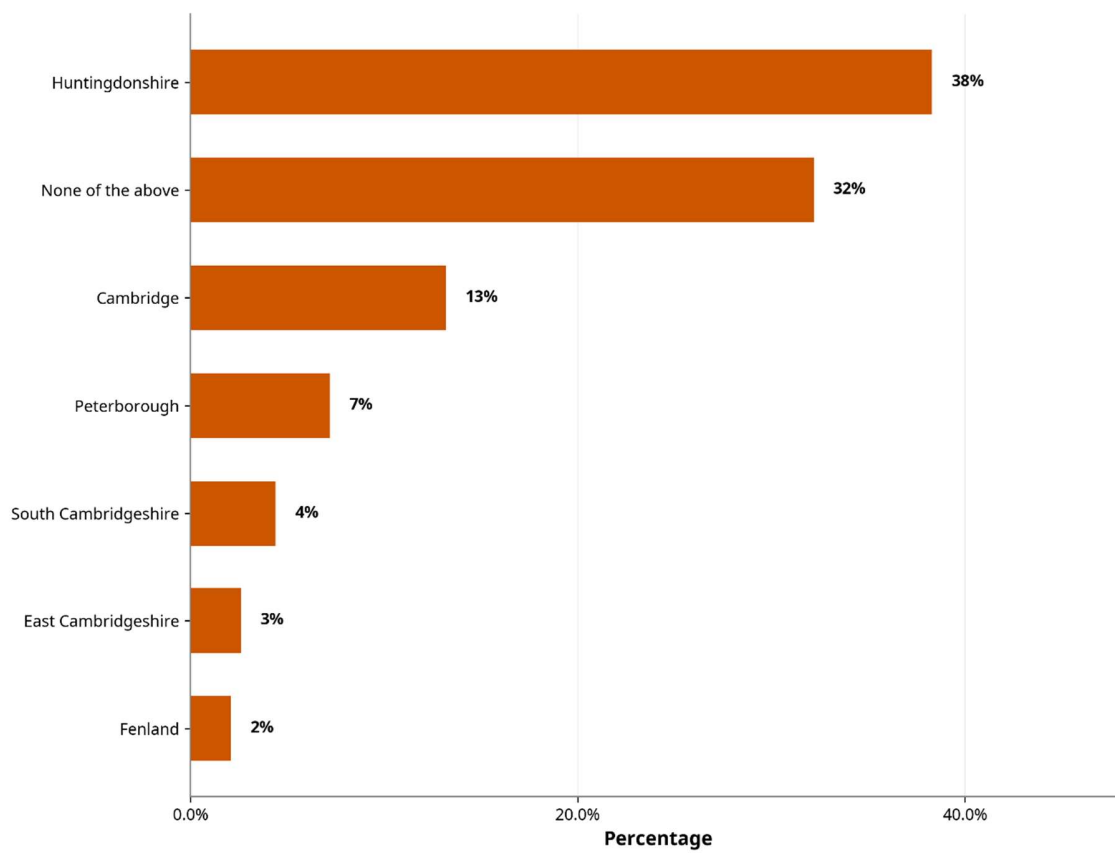
East Cambridgeshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for work or education?



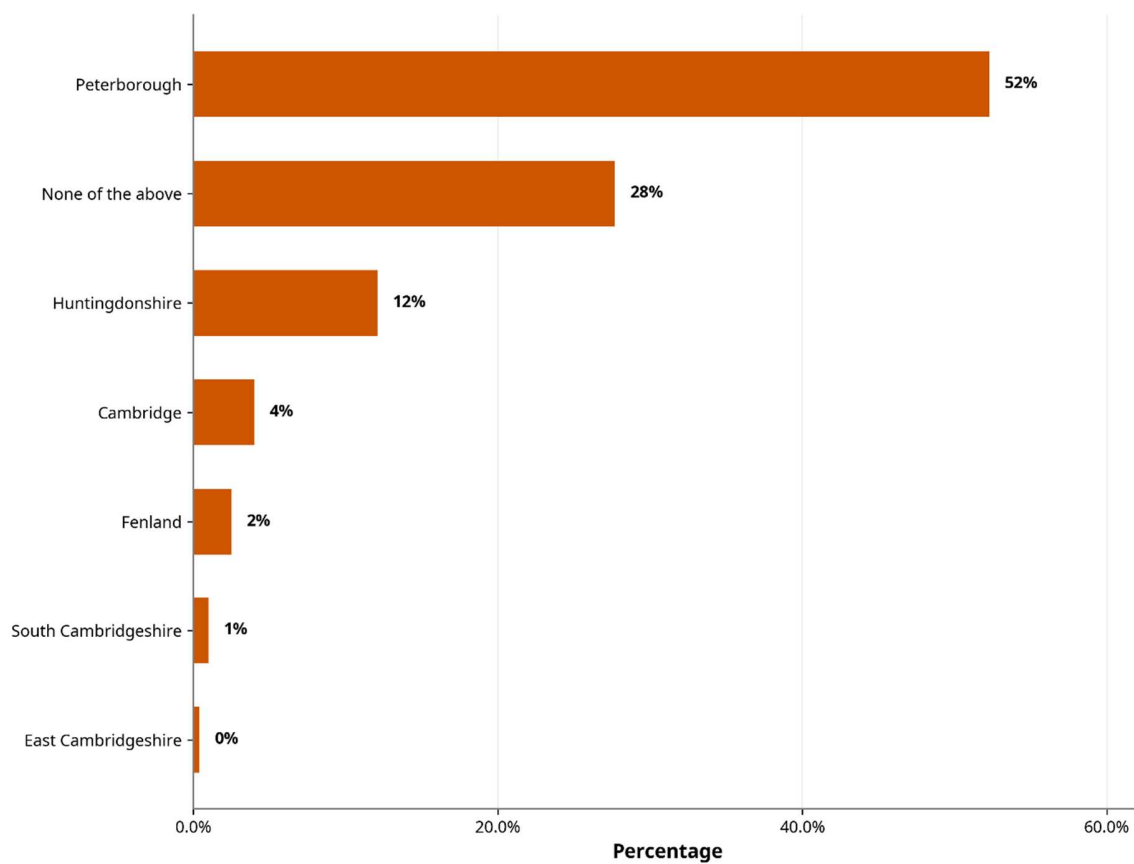
Fenland - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for work or education?



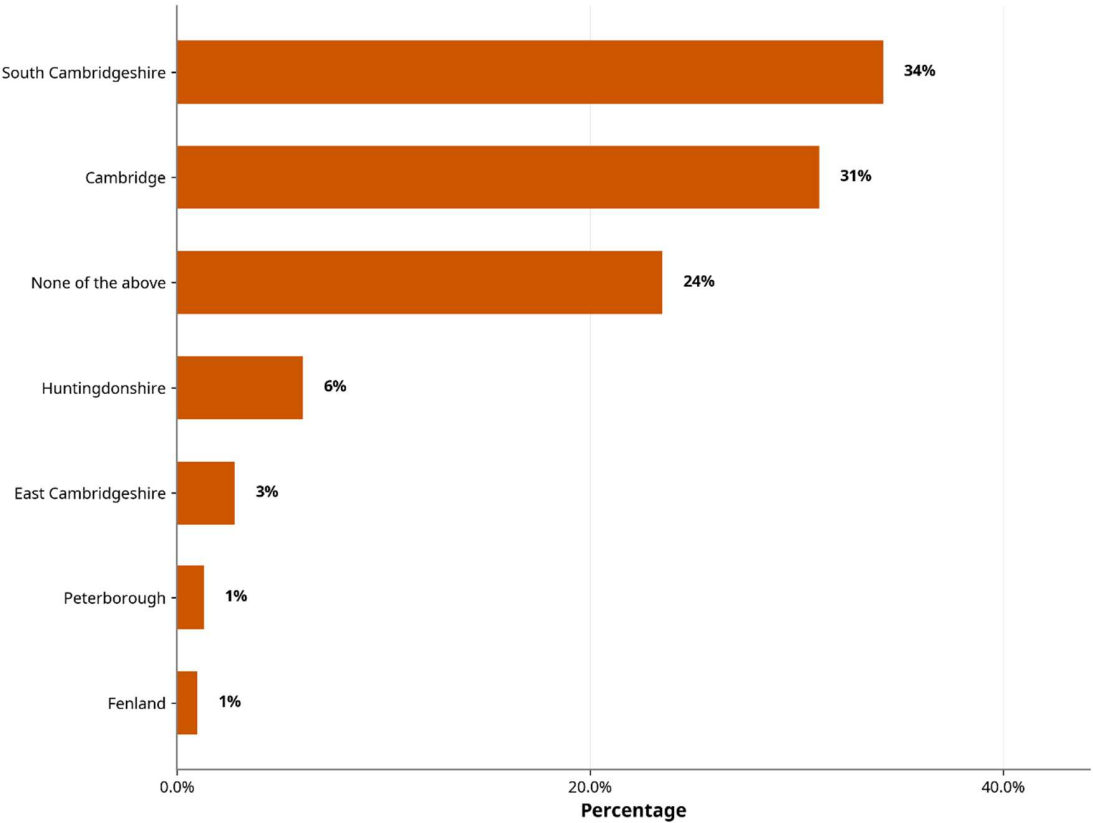
Huntingdonshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for work or education?



Peterborough - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for work or education?



South Cambridgeshire - During the last 12 months, where have you mainly gone for work or education?



Sample profile

Below is presented the actual sample responses and the weighted sample responses. The demographic questions were optional and the count is for the unweighted totals.

Demographic Description	Count	Unweighted (%)	Weighted (%)
Gender	2358		
Male		45	47
Female		50	48
Prefer not to say		1	1
Identify gender if another way		4	4
Age	2318		
18-24		1	4
25-34		8	24
35-44		17	15
45-54		20	18
55-64		22	14
65-74		20	13
75-84		7	8
85+		1	1
Prefer not to say		4	4
Ethnicity	2310		
Asian or Asian British		1	2
Black or Black British		1	1
Chinese		0	0
Mixed/multiple ethnicities		2	2
White British or Any Other White background		94	93
Other		1	1
Prefer not to say		1	1
Disability or long-term illness	2325		
Yes		29	30
No		65	64
Prefer not to say		6	7
Location	2407		
Cambridge City		10	16
East Cambridgeshire		24	10
Fenland		12	11
Huntingdonshire		25	18
Peterborough		15	26
South Cambridgeshire		15	18
Not given		1	1

LGR Stakeholder Survey 2025

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Executive Summary

Survey Profile

The survey achieved participation from 232 stakeholders representing diverse interests across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The response profile included substantial participation from 84 parish and town councils, 77 businesses across multiple sectors and sizes, voluntary and community organisations, public sector bodies, and individual responses from councillors.

Success of Unitary Councils

Stakeholders identify three fundamental requirements for successful unitary councils: **local councillors with genuine local knowledge, operational efficiencies in service delivery, and sound financial foundations**. These priorities reflect stakeholder emphasis on maintaining local connection while achieving the administrative simplification that reorganisation promises to deliver.

The primary opportunities for service improvement through unitary council's centre on **cost savings, streamlined services, and enhanced coordination** between previously separate functions. Stakeholders particularly value the potential for economies of scale in contract negotiation, reduced bureaucratic layers, and single points of contact that eliminate current confusion over service responsibilities across multiple tiers of local government.

However, stakeholders identify significant risks, with over a quarter expressing concern about **loss of local voice and representation**. Service continuity during transition, financial challenges from inherited debts, and managing competing demands across rural-urban divides emerged as additional major concerns requiring careful management during the reorganisation process.

Organisational Perspectives

Stakeholders demonstrate strong local community identification and express greater concern than the general public about some areas being overlooked in larger unitary structures. Despite this apprehension, they would overwhelmingly support reorganisation if it demonstrably improved service delivery, with support levels remarkably similar to public opinion on this conditional basis.

Trust levels among stakeholders mirror public sentiment, with few than half agreeing that they trust local government decisions, indicating **significant credibility challenges** that reorganisation must address rather than exacerbate. Stakeholders show slightly more confidence than residents that local government decisions reflect community values, though this remains a minority position requiring attention in new governance arrangements.

The stakeholder community includes substantial numbers who rely on council services, creating direct interest in maintaining service quality and accessibility during and after reorganisation, reinforcing the importance of their engagement in transition planning and implementation processes. For their part, stakeholders show considerable willingness to engage with the process.

Working Relationships and Governance

Stakeholders prioritise strengthened relationships with new unitary councils, with parish and town councils particularly seeking enhanced roles in local place-shaping and community voice functions. This reflects the recognition that successful unitary authorities must maintain and strengthen rather than weaken local democratic engagement and community representation.

Key governance requests include meaningful consultation and engagement mechanisms, clear channels for parish and town council engagement with unitary authorities, robust scrutiny functions, and effective local committees with delegated powers.

Investment priorities focus on health services, transport infrastructure, and local economic development, indicating stakeholder recognition that successful reorganisation must deliver tangible improvements in big ticket items that directly affect community wellbeing and economic prosperity.

New Unitary Councils: What Matters Most

Echoing the findings from the public survey, the ability to respond quickly to local needs emerges as the paramount stakeholder concern and highlighting expectations that larger authorities should enhance rather than compromise responsiveness. This priority reflects current frustrations with bureaucratic delays and complex decision-making processes across multiple tiers.

Access to funding opportunities and councillors with genuine local area knowledge rank as additional critical factors, emphasising stakeholder expectations that reorganisation should improve both **resource availability** and **local representation quality**.

The emphasis on responsiveness suggests that stakeholders view bureaucratic efficiency as wanting without corresponding improvements in the speed and quality of local problem-solving, creating clear performance expectations for new unitary structures.

Future Focus

Stakeholder investment priorities centre on health services, transport infrastructure, and local economic development, reflecting recognition of fundamental service needs that affect quality of life and economic prosperity. These priorities indicate sophisticated understanding of the interconnections between different service areas and their collective impact on community wellbeing.

Business stakeholders specifically prioritise key infrastructure development—transport, connectivity, and digital services—alongside investment in high streets and town centres. They emphasise the importance of straightforward communication and transaction processes with local authorities.

These priorities suggest that stakeholders view reorganisation as an opportunity to address long-standing infrastructure deficits and economic development challenges, creating expectations for strategic investment and improved service coordination that delivers measurable business and community benefits.

New Unitary Size and Boundary Considerations

While a minority of stakeholders favour the Government's suggested 500,000 population size for unitary authorities, almost half prefer smaller authorities of 300,000-400,000 residents. This preference indicates stakeholder concerns about maintaining local connection and responsiveness in very large authorities.

Geographic coherence and existing community identities and connections emerge as the most crucial factors in determining unitary boundaries, prioritising natural community networks over administrative convenience or population targets.

The boundary preferences indicate stakeholder recognition that successful reorganisation requires respect for existing community connections and geographic logic rather than imposing artificial arrangements that cut across natural networks of local life and economic realities. The public survey offers a detailed account of how these various factors play out by district.

Stakeholder Participation and Transition

About half the stakeholders' express willingness to participate actively in shaping future council services, with contact details provided for ongoing engagement. This participation rate indicates strong stakeholder investment in reorganisation outcomes and readiness to contribute expertise and local knowledge to transition planning.

This willingness to engage provides a valuable opportunity for the transition teams to access local expertise, identify potential problems, and build support for reorganisation processes through collaborative approach to change management.

Communication with Stakeholders

Just under sixty percent of the stakeholders request ongoing communication about reorganisation progress, indicating good levels of interest and concern about transition processes and outcomes. This demand for information reflects stakeholder recognition that successful reorganisation requires sustained communication rather than periodic updates.

Preferred communication channels include direct email updates, consultation on specific service changes, and regular stakeholder meetings. The emphasis on specific service consultation indicates stakeholder expectation for meaningful involvement in detailed implementation decisions rather than general information provision.

Further Comments

Stakeholder feedback consistently returns to three core themes: boundary concerns, local representation preservation, and implementation planning. These recurring themes indicate the fundamental issues that reorganisation must address to maintain stakeholder confidence and support.

Boundary concerns emphasise the importance of respecting existing community connections and geographic logic, with particular opposition to arrangements that force together areas with limited natural connection. Local representation concerns reflect fears that larger authorities will become distant and unresponsive to community needs, requiring innovative approaches to maintaining democratic accountability at scale.

Implementation concerns focus on service continuity, financial planning, and change management, indicating stakeholder recognition that good intentions must be supported by competent execution to avoid service disruption and public confidence harm during transition periods.

Conclusion

This stakeholder research reveals an understanding of reorganisation complexities and clear expectations for improved service delivery, maintained local connection, and competent change management. The high levels of engagement willingness, combined with specific concerns about local representation and service continuity, provide clear guidance for reorganisation planning that respects stakeholder priorities while delivering the efficiency and service improvements that justify structural change.

The convergence between stakeholder and public priorities on responsiveness, local knowledge, and service quality indicates broad consensus on reorganisation success criteria, providing a foundation for transition planning that maintains public and

stakeholder confidence while achieving the strategic objectives that drive local government reform.

Introduction

The Government has mandated that all county and district councils in England will be abolished in April 2028 and replaced with unitary authorities. This directive affects Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, where the current two-tier system comprising Cambridgeshire County Council and six district and city councils will be restructured into one or more unitary authorities serving the area's 930,000 residents.

The Government has established six criteria that proposals for new unitary structures must address. These criteria require that proposals should achieve better outcomes and local service delivery for the whole area, ensure unitary local government is the right size to achieve efficiencies and improve capacity, prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services, demonstrate how councils have worked together to meet local needs informed by local views, support devolution arrangements, and enable stronger community engagement with genuine opportunities for neighbourhood empowerment. Additionally, proposals must consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance.

The affected councils comprise Cambridge City Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, East Cambridgeshire District Council, Fenland District Council, Huntingdonshire District Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council, and Peterborough City Council. Peterborough City Council already operates as a unitary authority but will be included in the reorganisation process. The Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority will remain unchanged. Town and parish councils are not currently required to change under the Government directive.

This reorganisation represents a fundamental shift in local governance arrangements that have served the area for decades. The current system provides different services through different tiers, with residents accessing county council services for education, social care, and highways, while district and city councils provide housing, planning, and environmental services. The proposed unitary structure will consolidate these functions under single authorities, potentially simplifying access to services while creating larger administrative units.

The Government has indicated that financial savings are expected through the process of reducing the number of councils, while also supporting improvements in service delivery through bringing services together. This creates a complex challenge of achieving efficiency gains while maintaining or improving service quality and democratic representation across diverse communities ranging from the urban centres of Cambridge and Peterborough to extensive rural areas.

The area's population is projected to grow to over one million residents within the next fifteen years, adding demographic pressure to the reorganisation challenge. The Government recommendation suggests unitary authorities should serve populations of approximately 500,000, and smaller where appropriate, which would indicate the creation of at least two unitary authorities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, though the final structure remains to be determined through the business case development process.

Methodology

This research employed an online survey methodology to gather stakeholder perspectives on local government reorganisation across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The survey was designed as an engagement exercise rather than a formal consultation, with the purpose of providing qualitative and quantitative data to inform the development of business case proposals for submission to Government by November 2025.

Survey Design and Implementation

The survey instrument was developed collaboratively by the seven affected councils working with Archangel to ensure comprehensive coverage of the Government's six criteria for unitary authority proposals. The survey design prioritised brevity and accessibility, limiting the questionnaire to smaller number of core questions to maximise response rates while gathering essential data on stakeholder priorities and preferences.

While designed as an engagement exercise rather than formal consultation, the approach went above and beyond standard engagement requirements by voluntarily aligning with the Gunning principles for fair consultation. This demonstrated a commitment to best practice standards, ensuring that stakeholders were consulted at a time when proposals were still at a formative stage, sufficient information was provided to enable informed responses, and feedback would be conscientiously considered in decision-making processes.

No maps or visual representations of potential boundary options were included in the survey design, in accordance with the engagement rather than consultation approach adopted for this research.

Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

The online survey was supported by targeted communications to key stakeholder groups including businesses, parish and town councils, community organisations, and public sector partners. This multi-channel approach was designed to ensure comprehensive representation across the diverse communities and interests within Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Stakeholder lists were developed by the communications teams from the seven authorities to include representatives from all sectors and geographic areas, with particular attention to ensuring rural communities, and smaller organisations had opportunities to participate alongside larger urban centres and major employers. The engagement strategy recognised the importance of reaching stakeholders who might not typically participate in local government consultations but whose perspectives are essential for understanding community needs and priorities.

Data Collection Period

The survey was conducted from 19th June 2025 to 20th July 2025, providing a concentrated four-week period for stakeholder participation while meeting the tight timescales required for proposals development. A time extension was provided for paper responses to ensure accessibility for stakeholders who preferred paper survey participation methods or to have a meeting about the survey response, in the case of parish councils. The timing was co-ordinated with broader communications and engagement activities around local government reorganisation to maximise awareness and participation.

Response Profile

The survey achieved participation from 232 stakeholders representing diverse interests across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The response profile included substantial participation from parish and town councils, businesses across multiple sectors and sizes, voluntary and community organisations, public sector bodies, and individual residents responding in various capacities.

Parish and town councils provided the largest single stakeholder group with 84 responses, representing 36% of total participation. This high level of parish council engagement reflects the extensive network of local councils across the area and their direct interest in reorganisation outcomes. Business participation was also substantial, with 77 responses representing a third (33%) of total stakeholders, demonstrating significant engagement from the economic community. A fuller profile of the stakeholders is provided at the end of the report.

Analytical Approach

The analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine stakeholder responses across the range of survey questions. Quantitative analysis focused on response distributions and patterns across different stakeholder groups, while qualitative analysis examined open-ended responses and comments to identify key themes and concerns.

With 232 stakeholder responses, the survey achieved a substantial sample size that provides statistically robust insights with a margin of error of $\pm 6.4\%$ at 95% confidence level. This means that for any percentage reported in the findings, we can be 95% confident that the true value for the broader stakeholder population lies within 6.4 percentage points of the reported figure. For example, if 70% of respondents expressed a particular view, the true proportion among all stakeholders would lie between 63.6% and 76.4%. This enables reliable generalisation of findings to the broader stakeholder community in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough within established confidence intervals.

The sample demonstrated good representation across stakeholder types, with particularly strong participation from parish and town councils and businesses, 77 responses across diverse sectors and sizes. This coverage provides indicatively representative insights into wider stakeholder perspectives across the key groups engaged with local government.

However, several limitations were recognised. As a self-selecting sample, the survey may over-represent more engaged stakeholders who actively choose to participate in local government processes, potentially under-representing less engaged organisations.

The tight timescales for data collection, driven by Government requirements for proposals submission, limited the opportunity for extensive iterative engagement that might have deepened understanding of stakeholder perspectives.

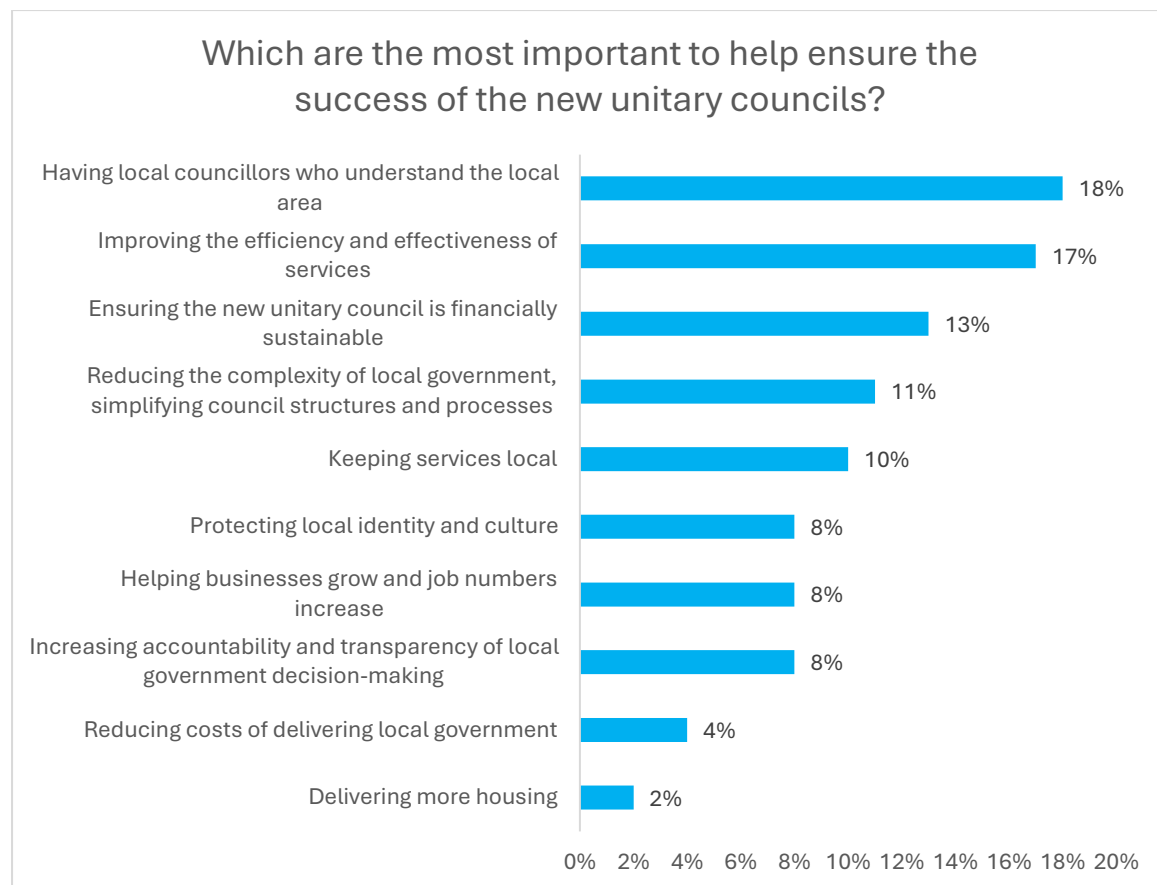
Despite these limitations, the sample size, systematic sampling approach, and good representation across stakeholder types provide confidence that the findings offer statistically valid and indicatively representative insights into stakeholder perspectives on local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

The base for all the charts is 232 unless otherwise stated.

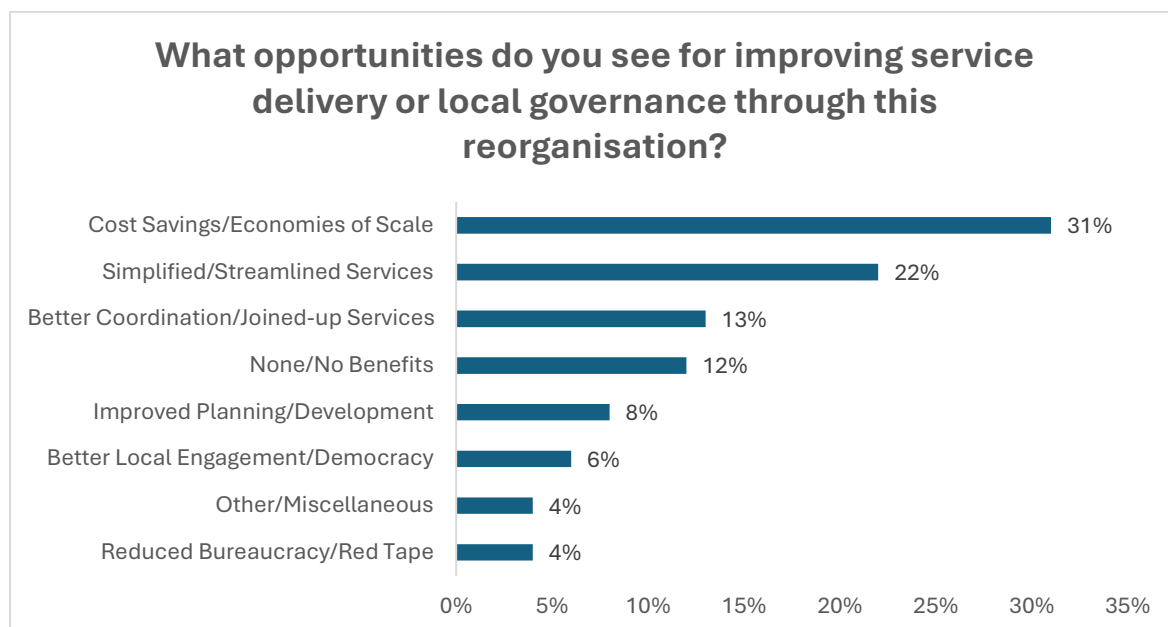
Survey Findings

Success of Unitary Councils

Stakeholders consider that fundamental to the success of the new unitary councils will be **local councillors with local knowledge**. This chimes with the public survey where this was also a top finding. They believe that for the unitary councils to be successful there will need to be efficiencies in the council services provided and that the unitary councils will need to be on sure financial footing. These views should also be seen in the context of using unitary councils to lever simplicity and reducing the complexity of current structures.



From a stakeholder perspective, the main opportunities for improving services through new unitary councils are in terms of cost saving, streamlined services and better co-ordination of services.



This was also a comment question so here is a sample of the feedback relating to the potential for cost saving. Noting that benefits are available if cost saving is done correctly.

"There are many opportunities. By working together services can be streamlined, costs reduced, contracts negotiated harder to bring down both internal and external costs. The opportunity exists to completely reorganise to maximise efficiency and minimise costs of services and their delivery overall if managed correctly."

Owner, Real estate and property

"Bigger is normally better when negotiating contracts, with efficiency"

Director, Agriculture, Farm and Environment

"Having a single unitary council to deliver all services gives scope for economies of scale (if executed carefully)."

District councillor

Other stakeholders emphasised streamlined services:

"Stop the layers of bureaucracy and means people know what services are operated by."

Director, Hospitality and Leisure

"Unitary Council as a single point of contact would be beneficial due to the confusion over the current roles of County/District/Parish/CPCA and the GCP."

Parish clerk

Better co-ordination is hoped for:

"Improved strategic linkages between housing, homelessness provision and adult social care"

Chief Executive, Public Sector body

"A joined-up approach where things happen - everything takes too long, discussions take years without any decisions being taken - we need to get on with things"

General Manager, Leisure and Hospitality

The biggest risk to the transition to unitary councils, mirroring the focus on local councillors with local knowledge, is if these factors are ignored - so a **loss of local voice and representation** are identified by over a quarter of stakeholders. Stakeholders also recognise issues of **service continuity, financial challenges**, and the competing demands with a **rural/urban mix**.



In terms of losing local voice, here are some quotes from the survey:

"Losing local and personal representation. Avoiding creating a faceless, anonymous council with no understanding of or empathy for local issues. Ensuring local communities have councillors who are known to them, who know them and who are accessible."

Parish Councillor

"The biggest risk is the loss of services to smaller parish councils. Parish councils generally are not able to take on more services, and there is a great risk they will struggle to be supported by the unitary authority. I have found county council much less supportive and responsive than the district council, and I have concerns that this will only get worse with a unitary council."

Chief Executive, Arts, Culture and Entertainment

"There is a general local consensus that a move to a unitary council will increase costs in travelling, slower response to urgent local problems, increase in delay making decisions due to more people having to be involved. Loss of local identity due to size of council and no local representation"

Chair, Voluntary Community Group

Concerns about service continuity are also expressed:

"One of the biggest risks during the transition to unitary councils is the potential disruption to service delivery—particularly in areas like planning, social care, and waste collection—if systems and responsibilities are not seamlessly integrated."

Director, Retail and E-commerce

"There is vast scope for chaos. A detailed, robust plan needs to be in place before the reorganisation goes ahead. The Government seems determined to rush through changes in an unrealistically short time."

Director, Health and social care

On financial challenges:

"Money. Without financial facts how can reasonable budgets be set and met. Additionally, closing offices and selling them is just a quick boost financially that will affect one year's accounts, this is not 'Sustainable' income."

Parish councillor

"The biggest risks are undoubtedly financial with some councils struggling, the new unitary area must not start its life with a debt burden inherited from its precursors."

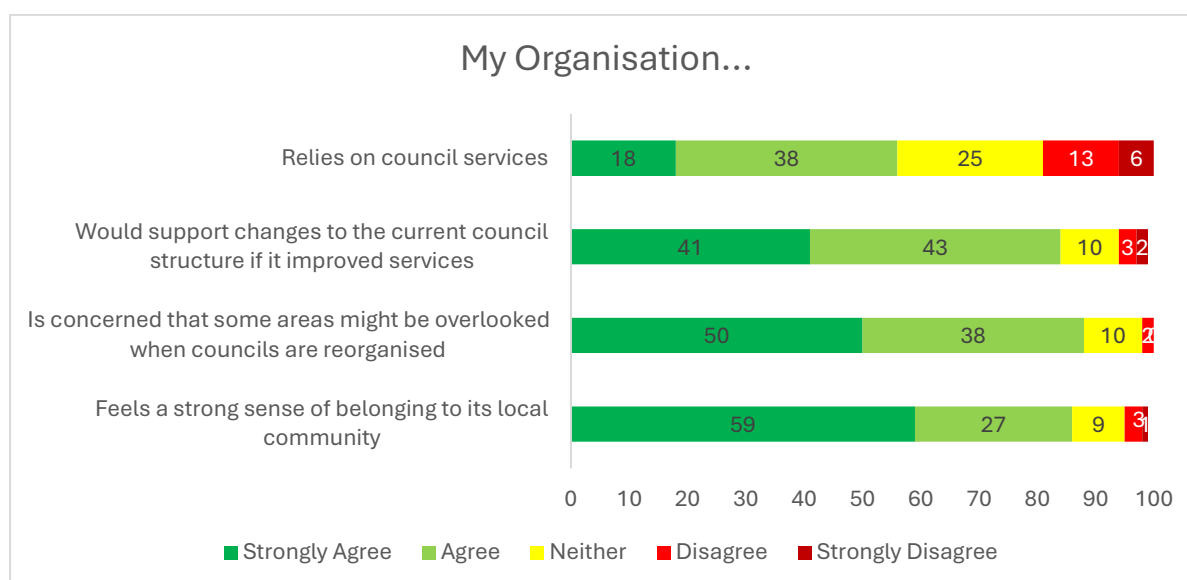
Company secretary, Hospitality and leisure

"Financial burden with debt being taken by its residents when joining an area that has a high borrowing and interest payments"

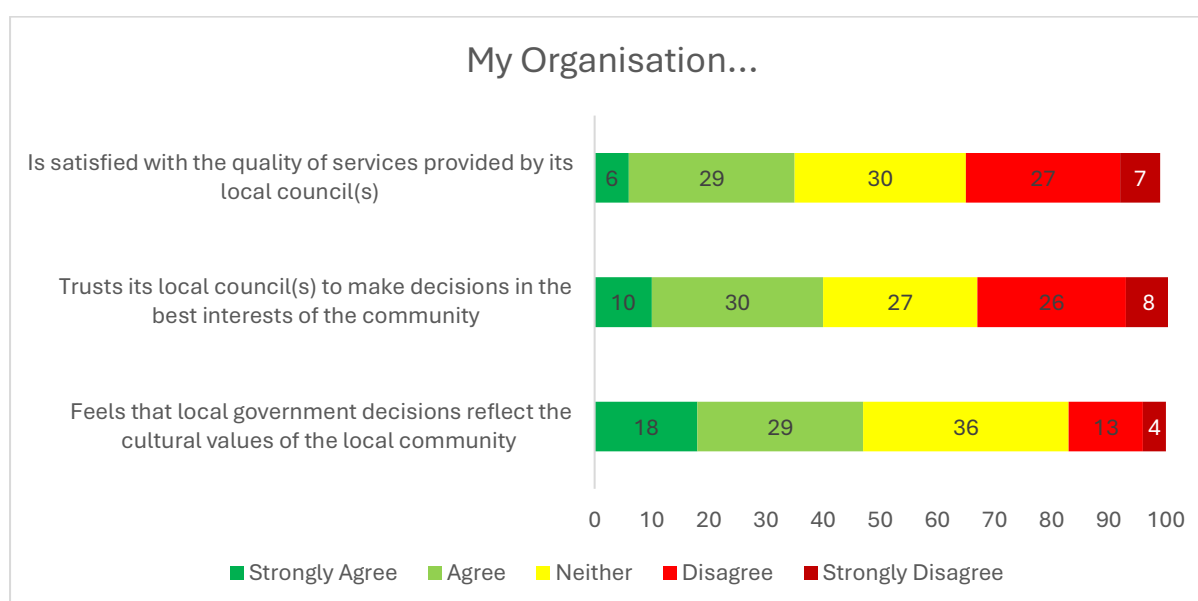
Director, Agriculture, Farming and Environment

Organisational perspectives

Stakeholders see themselves as being part of their local community and significantly express more concern than the public about ‘some areas being overlooked’. This said, they would overwhelmingly support change if, conditionally, it improved services and on this their scores are remarkably similar to the public. Given the mix of stakeholders, there is still a majority that say they rely on council services.



Conversely, stakeholders tend to be more positive about local government decisions reflecting the values of the local community than residents, with just under half agreeing with this statement. On the core value of trust, the levels of agreement are almost exactly the same as the public with fewer than half agreeing with this statement.



Statistical analysis of survey responses from parish councils (84) and business representatives (77) reveals three significant differences in attitudes towards local government.

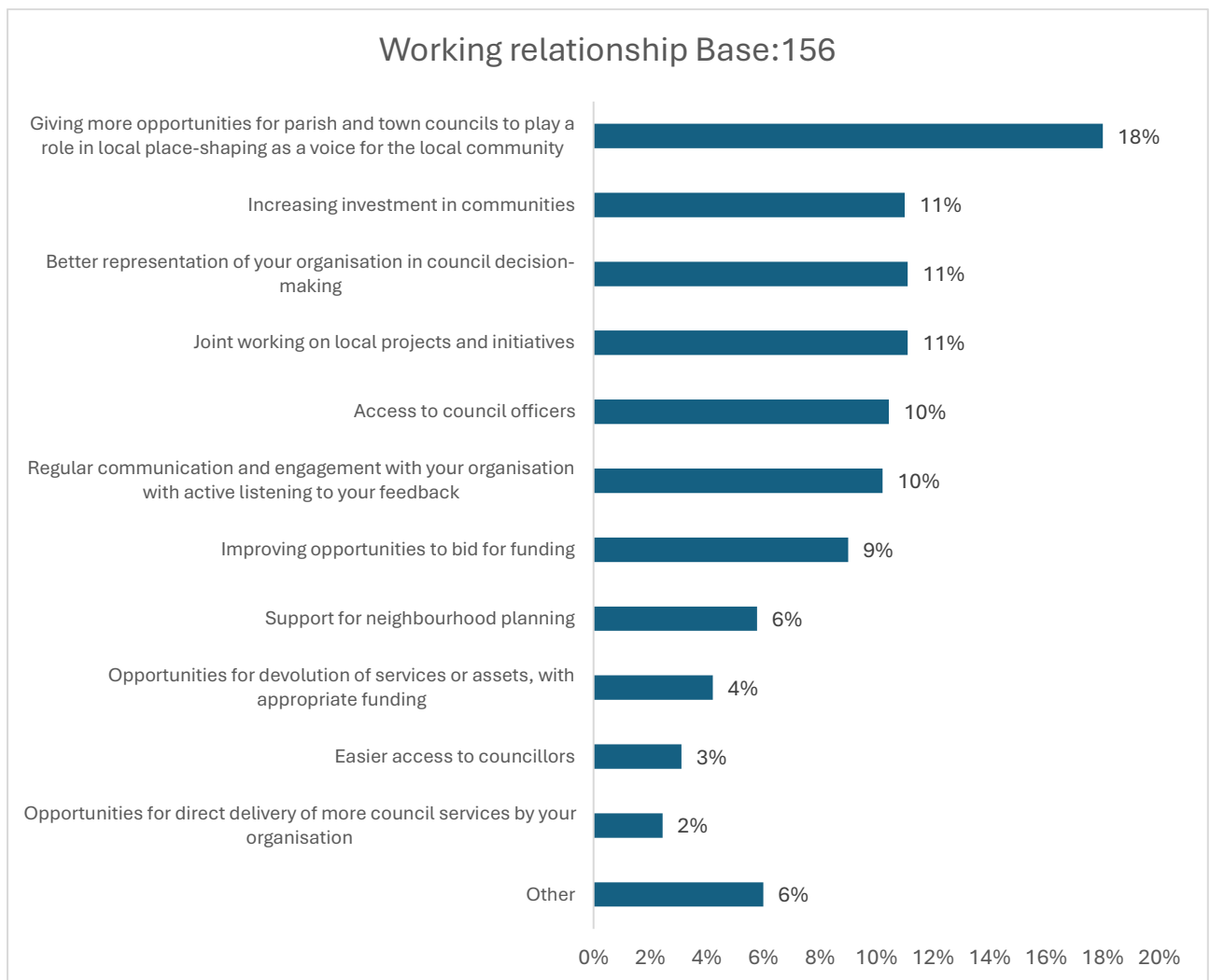
As might be expected, parish councils are more likely to agree they rely on council services (**75% positive responses vs 38% for businesses**). Concern about some areas being overlooked as local government reorganises shows a pronounced gap, with parish councils expressing considerably greater concern (96% vs 82%). Equally, businesses are more likely to disagree on trusting councils to make decisions in the best interests of the community (45% disagree compared to 27% disagree among parish councils).

However, both groups demonstrate remarkable consensus on two key areas: **satisfaction with council services**, and **support for structural changes that would improve service delivery**.

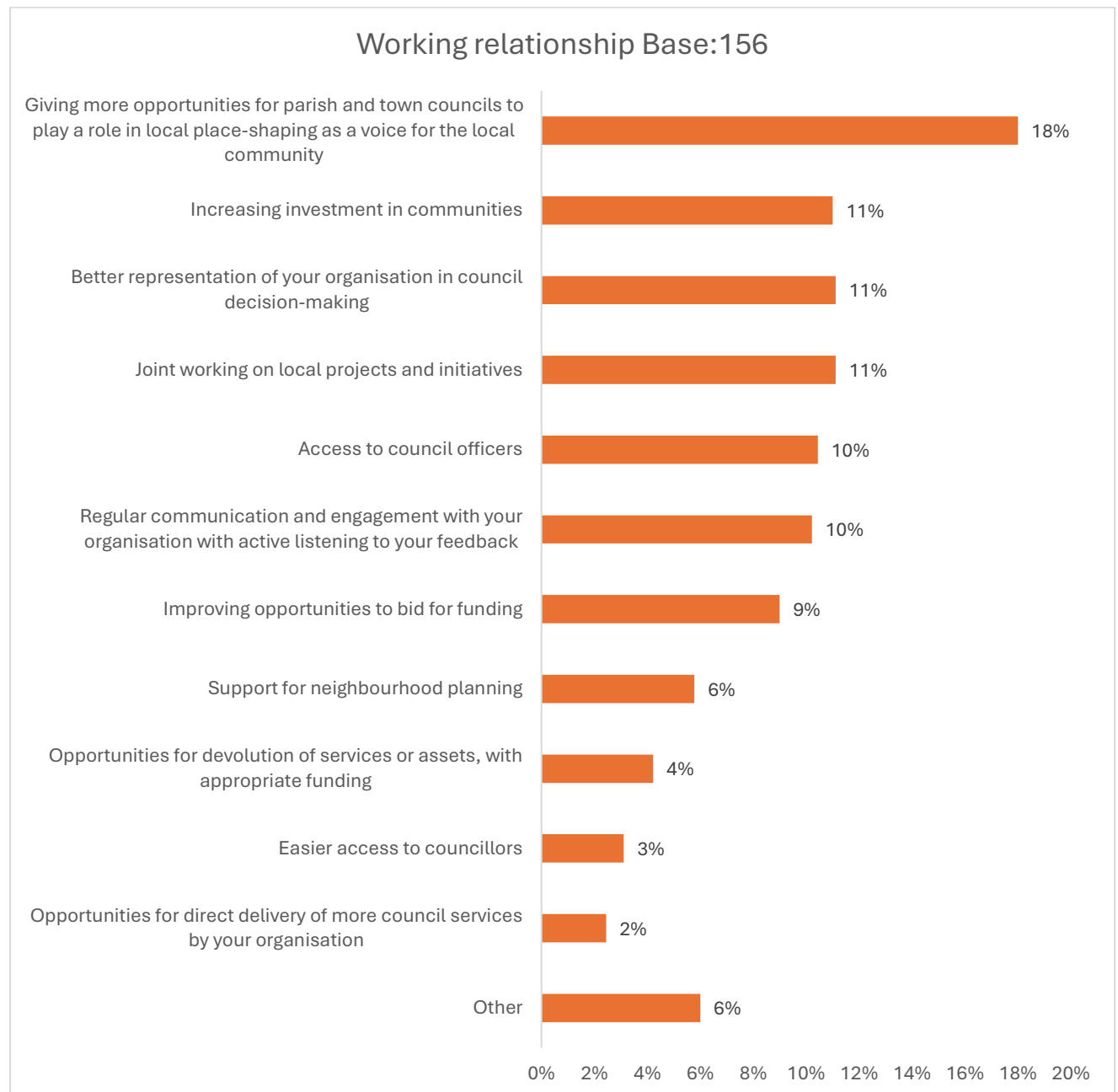
The results indicate that addressing business concerns about trust, whilst leveraging the shared appetite for improvement demonstrated by both constituencies presents a promising pathway during the transition and beyond.

Working relationship and governance

Core to the success of the new unitary councils will be the relationship with stakeholders. In response, the leading request from stakeholders is to give parish and town councils more of a role in local place-shaping and acting as a voice for the community followed by more investment in communities and more representation in terms of their own organization in terms of council decision-making.



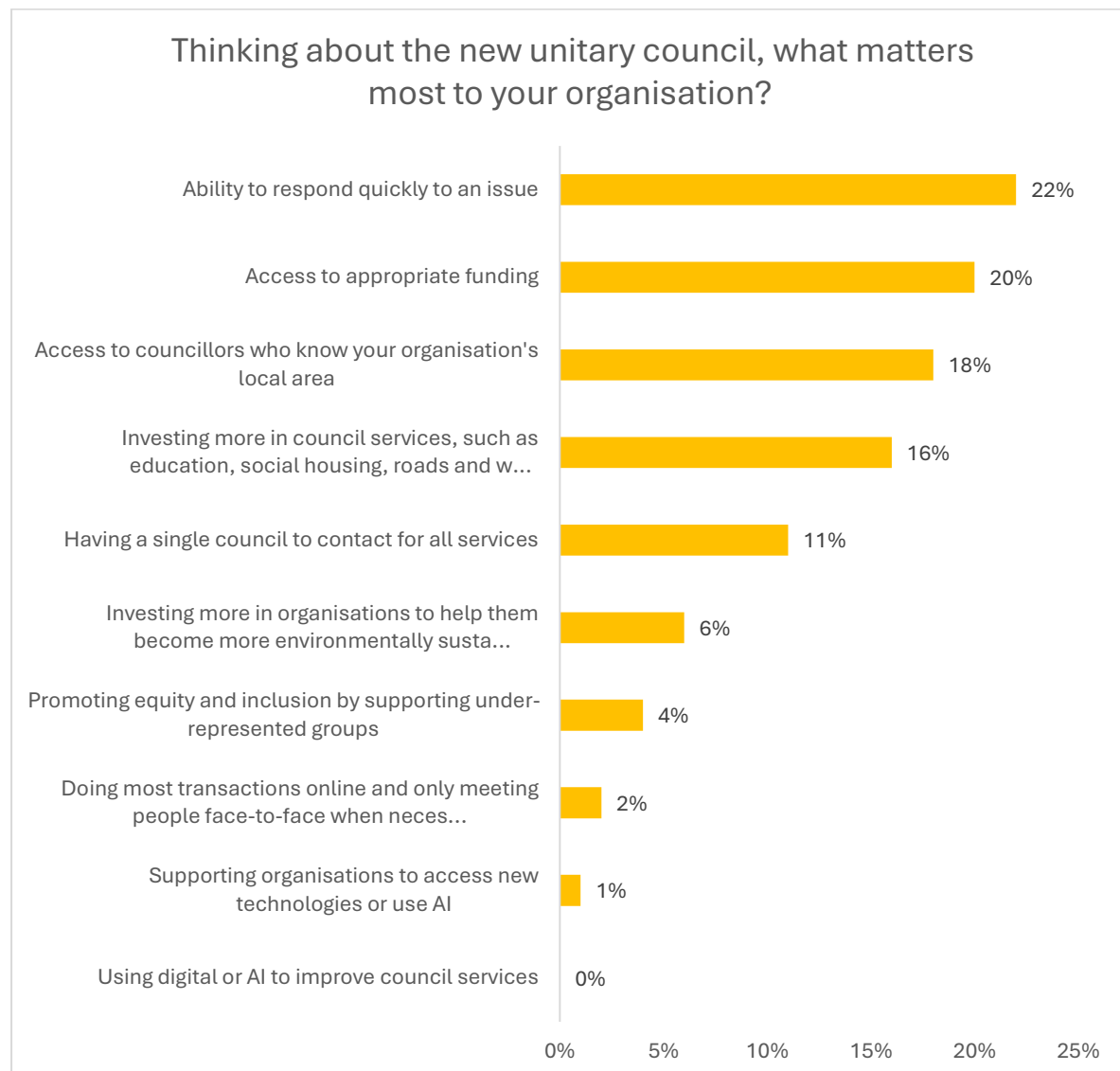
Fitting with their attitudes towards trust, stakeholders are looking for meaningful consultation and engagement and have responded well to further requests for engagement which will be discussed later in the report. There is a desire for clear mechanisms for parish and town councils to engage with the unitary council, robust scrutiny functions and effective local committees with delegated powers.



New unitary councils: what matters most?

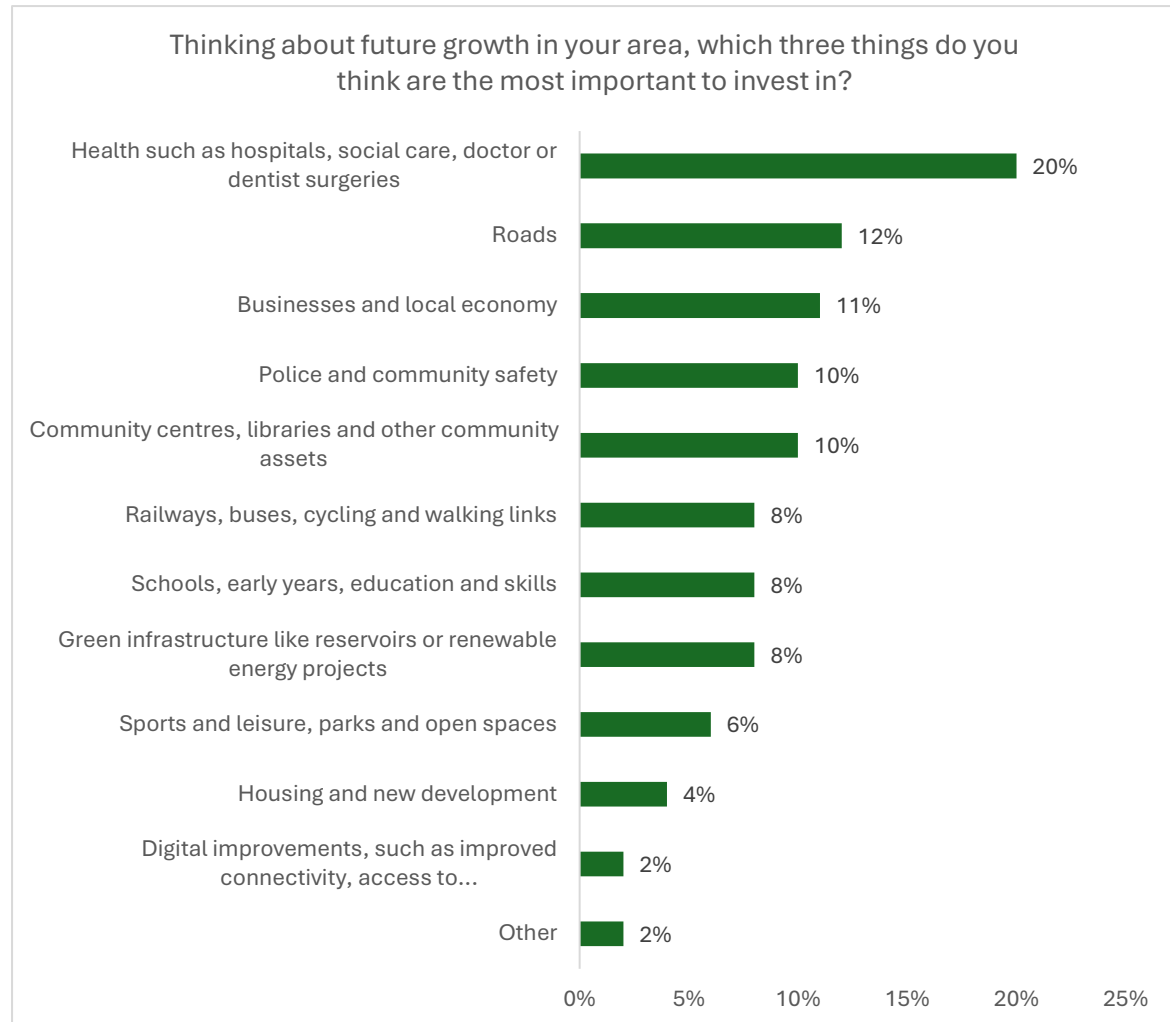
The '**ability to respond quickly**' is what matters most to stakeholders. This is also a top priority for residents and a key perceived benefit of the new unitary councils.

Stakeholders hope that this provides access to funding and councillors who know their organisation's local area. Local knowledge again being elevated here.

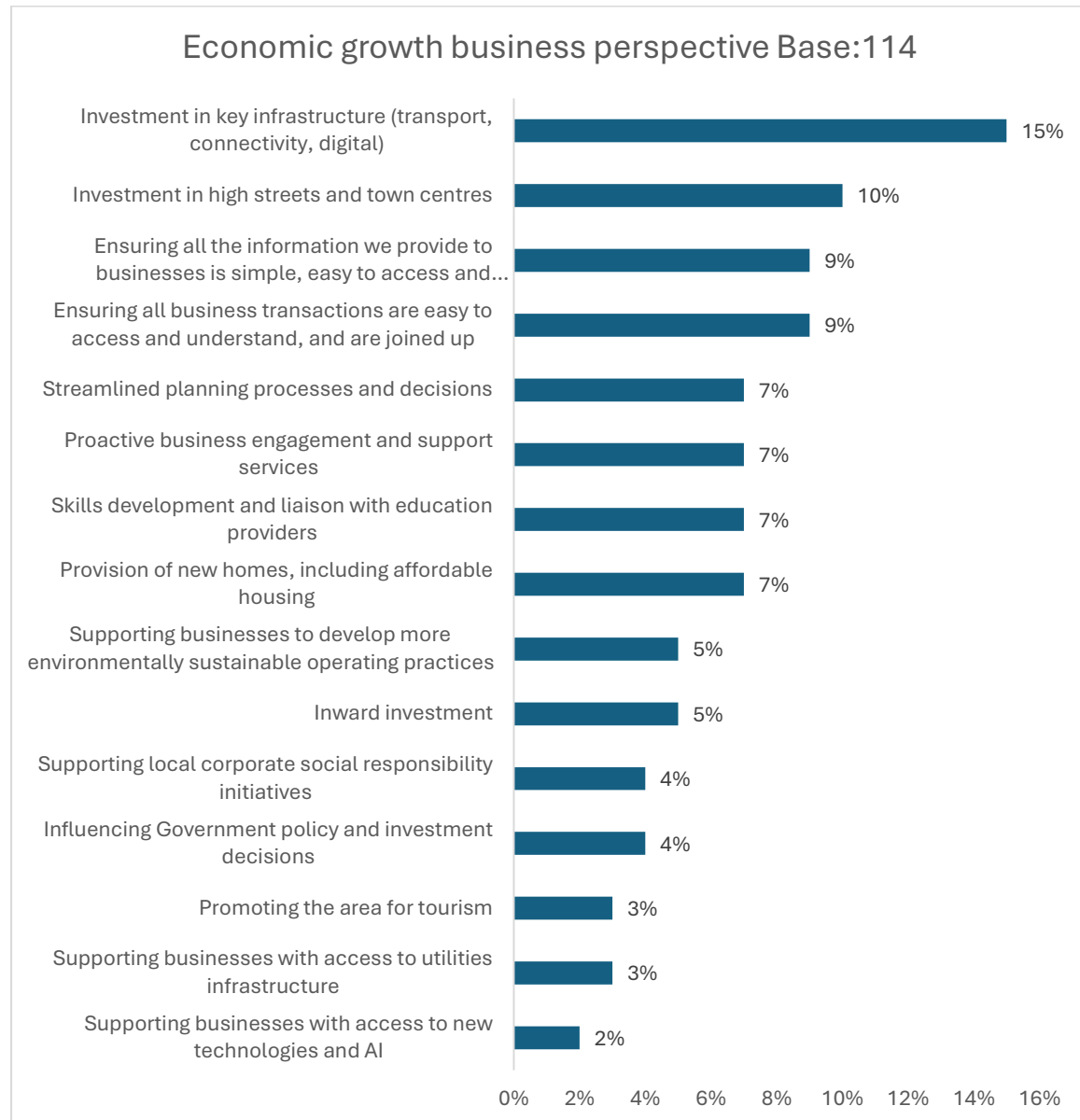


Future Focus

Stakeholders in terms of future investment prioritise health, roads, and the local economy.

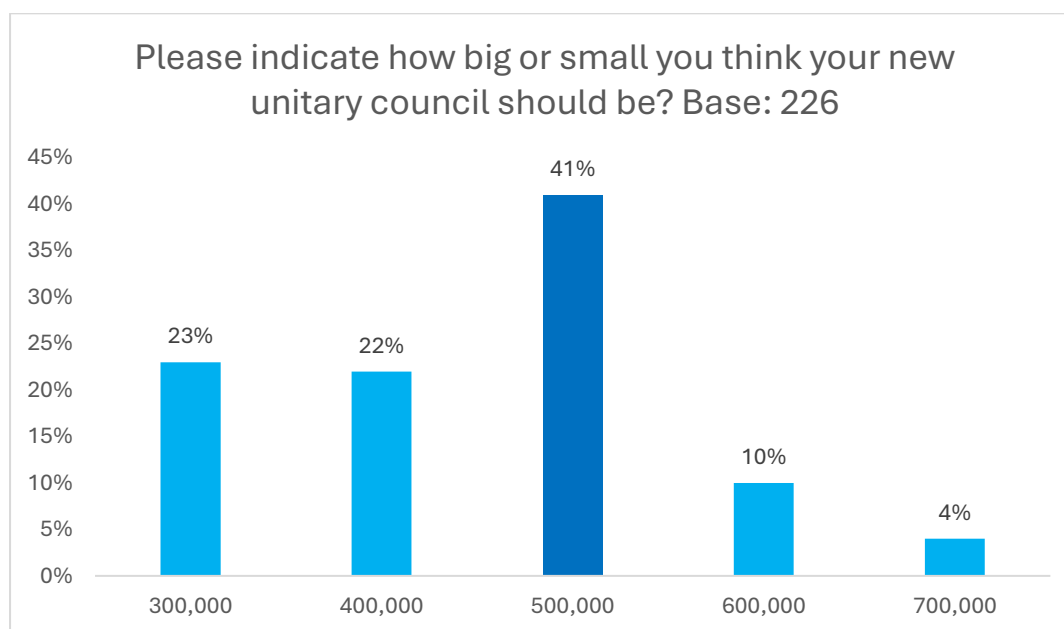


Businesses and others were also asked where the new unitary councils should be focusing in terms of economic growth. They overwhelmingly said **key infrastructure – transport, connectivity and digital** and investing in high streets and town centres, and that interacting with them is straight forwardly communicated and transacted.

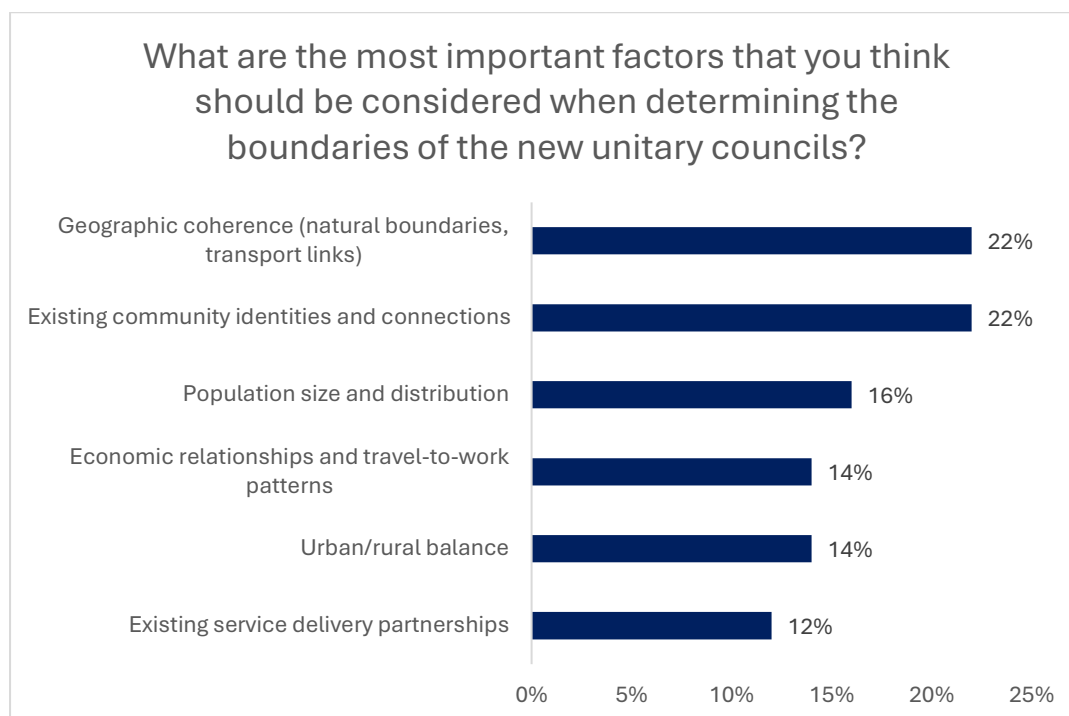


New unitary size and boundary considerations

The minority of stakeholders opt for the 500,000 size option. However, it is worth noting that almost half give three or four hundred thousand. There is much less appetite for any larger unitary of six or seven thousand people.

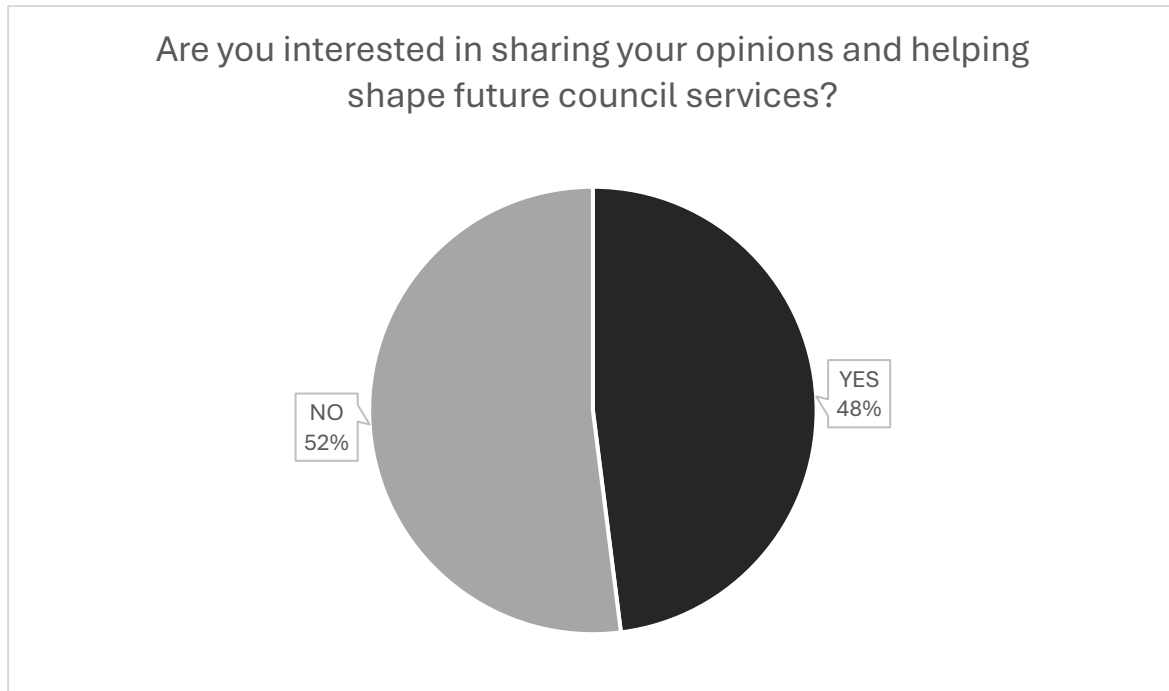


Stakeholders give primacy to geographic coherence and existing community identities and connections in terms of the most crucial factor in determining a new unitary council.

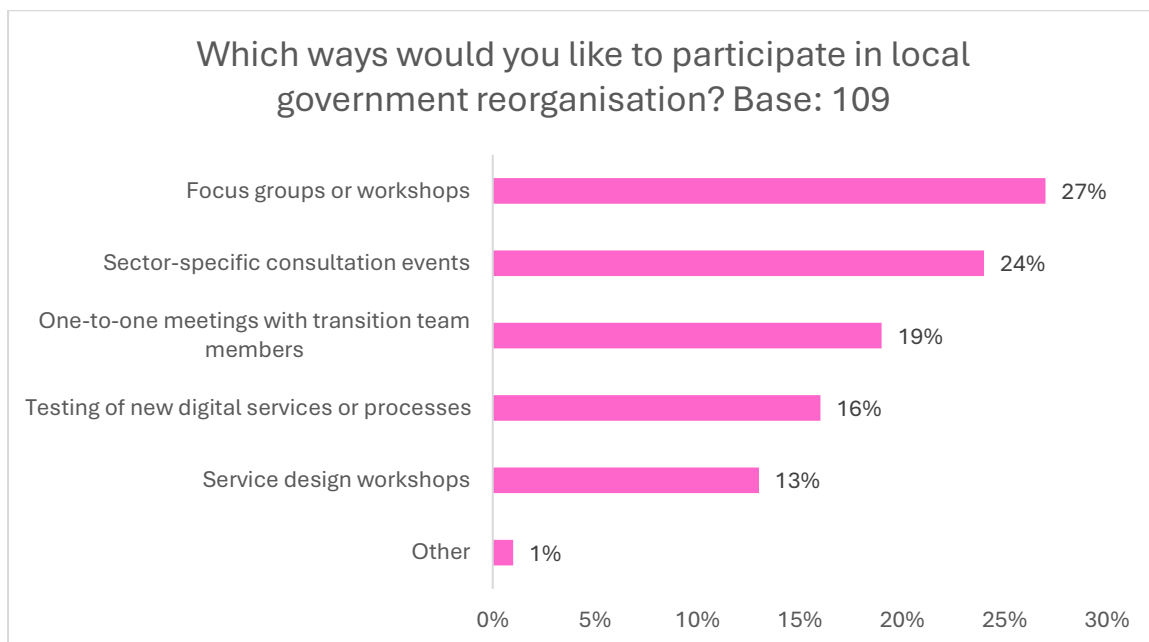


Stakeholder participation and transition

Just under half the stakeholders are keen to participate in sharing and shaping future council services and have provided their details.

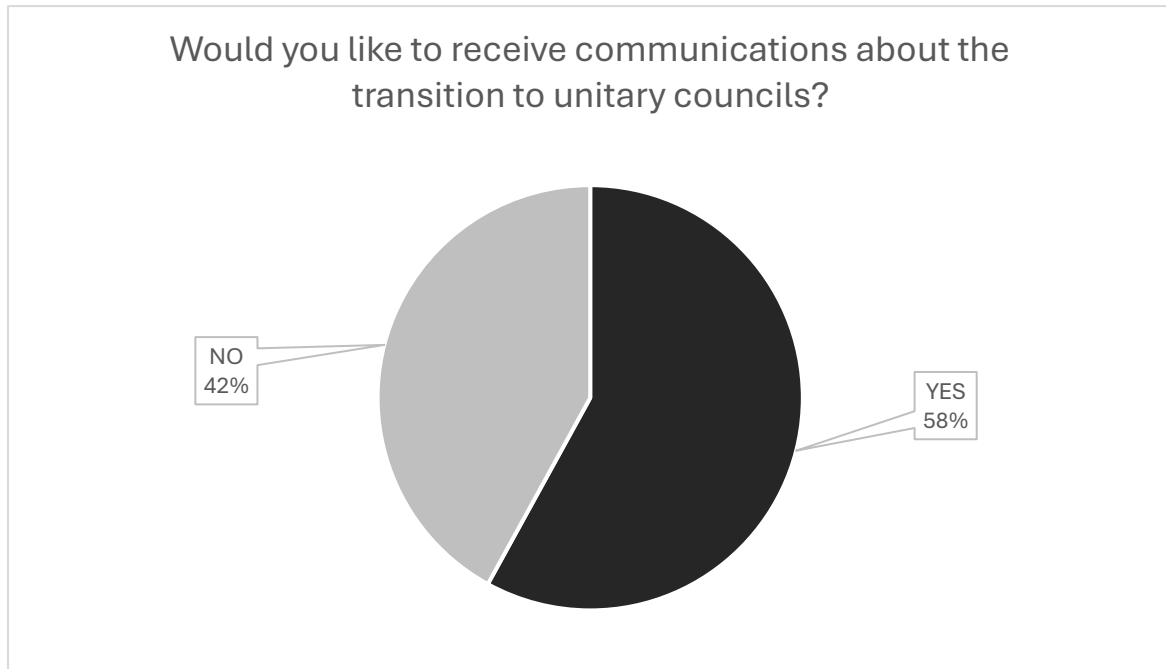


Stakeholders are most responsive to focus groups or workshops and sector-specific consultation events as a means of participating in the local government reorganisation. A smaller number would like one-to-one meetings with the transition team and again we have details of all those who would like this level of engagement.

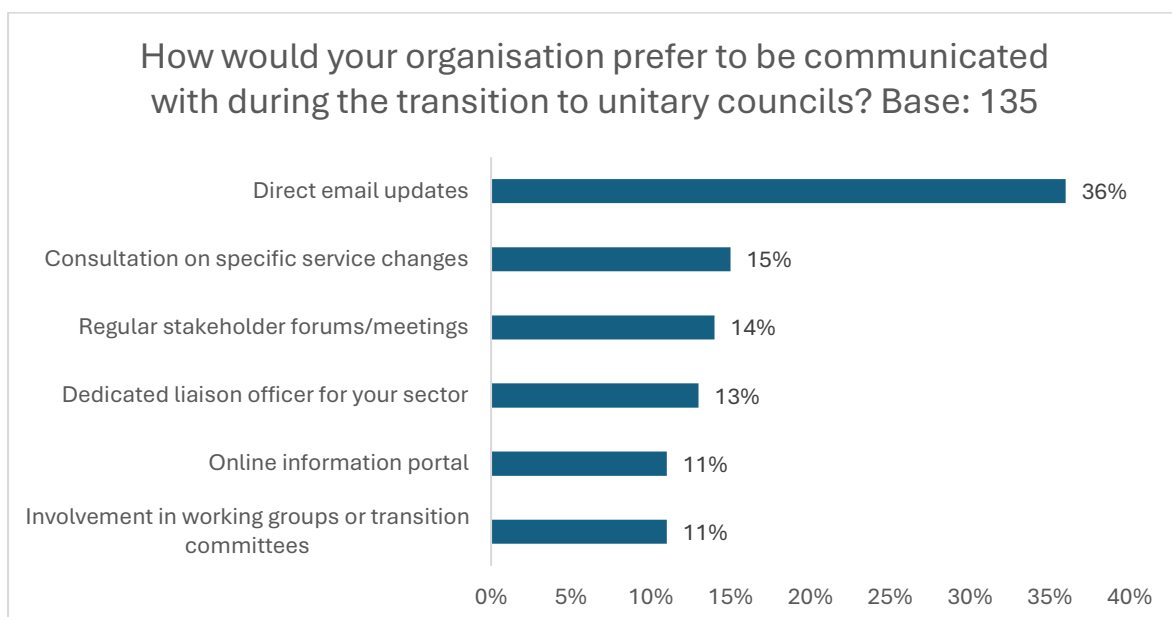


Communication with stakeholders

Positively, over half of stakeholders would like to receive communication about local government reorganization.

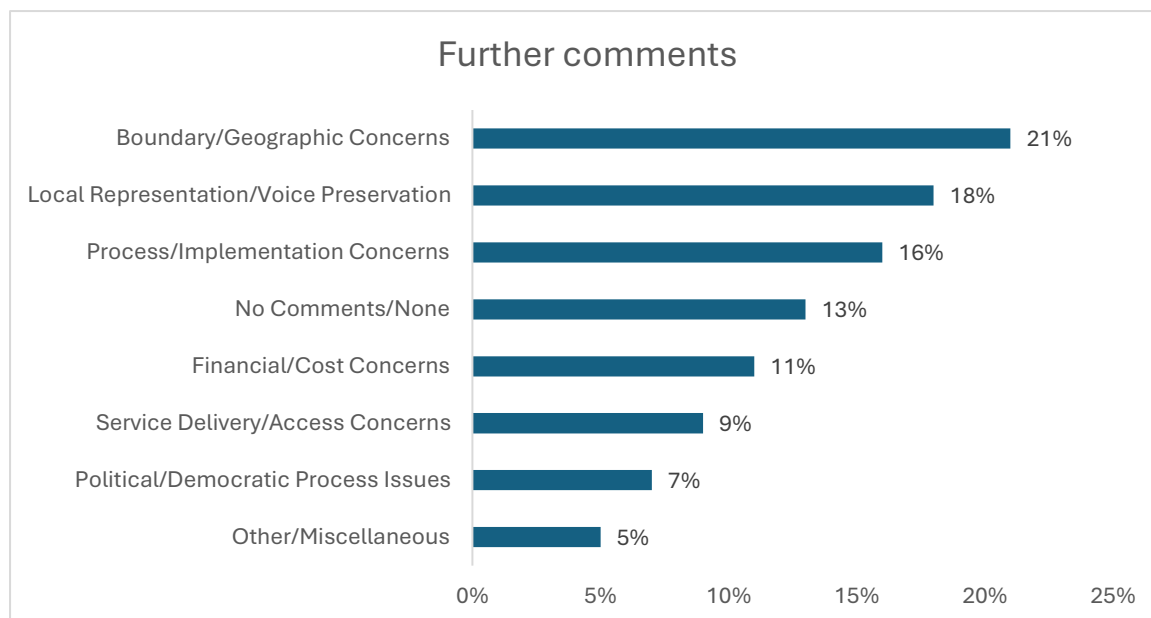


Stakeholders would prefer direct email updates and have provided their contact details, as well as consultation on specific service changes and a smaller group would like regular stakeholder meetings.



Further comments

Stakeholders in further comments return to key themes – boundary concerns, local representation and the how it the reorganization will actually happen.



On boundary concerns, here are a sample of quotes:

"We are currently undertaking a multi-parish Neighbourhood Plan which crosses local authority boundaries—reflecting the real-life connections, development pressures, and shared opportunities centred around St Neots."

Town clerk

"If this change of councils must go ahead, Cheveley Parish Council choose option A which is a merger with Cambs City Council, Cambs County Council and South Cambs. We have no links with Peterborough, Huntingdon or Fenland."

Parish councillor

"Peterborough is a very distinct place to the rest of Cambridgeshire. It would make no sense to create a unitary authority with them."

Business Owner, Retail and E-commerce

On loss of local representation:

"Smaller rural areas are concerned that their needs and priorities will go unrecognised. There needs to be a level of local representation and budget to support these communities rather than funds all going to large projects in city centres."

Parish councillor

"Fenland becomes an amorphous mass being managed by a large disinterested civil authority."

Chair, Voluntary Community Group

On implementation concerns:

"Don't let too many juggling balls slip whilst passing them from one set of hands to another! Make sure all the key things continue to work!"

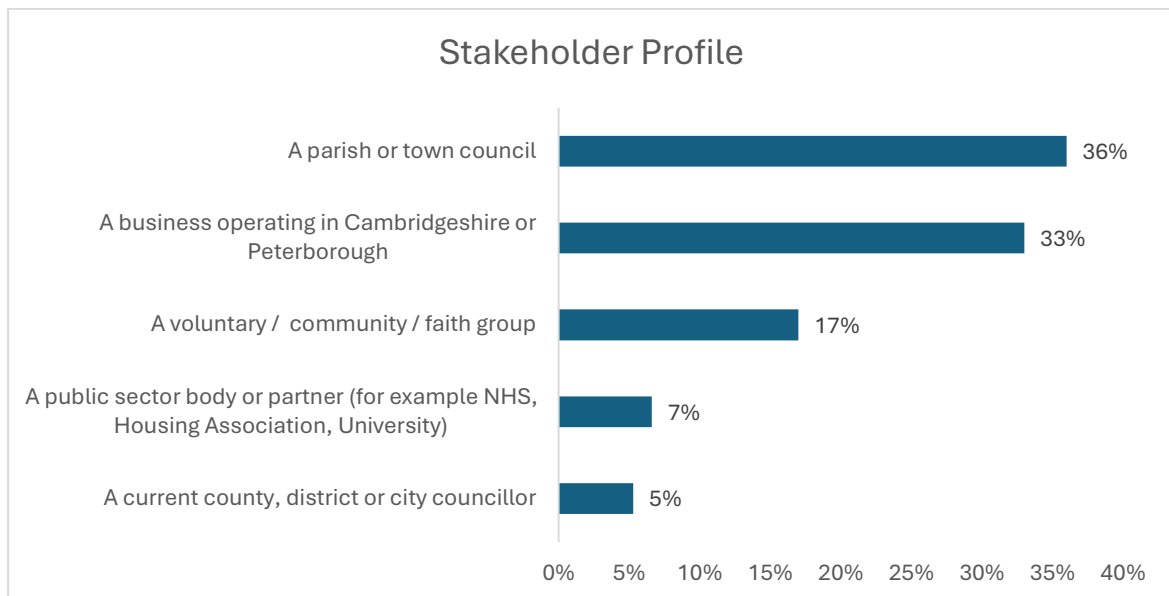
Chair, Voluntary Community Group

"Has this reorganisation been costed out locally and nationally? Do we have this money available, or will it come from central government?"

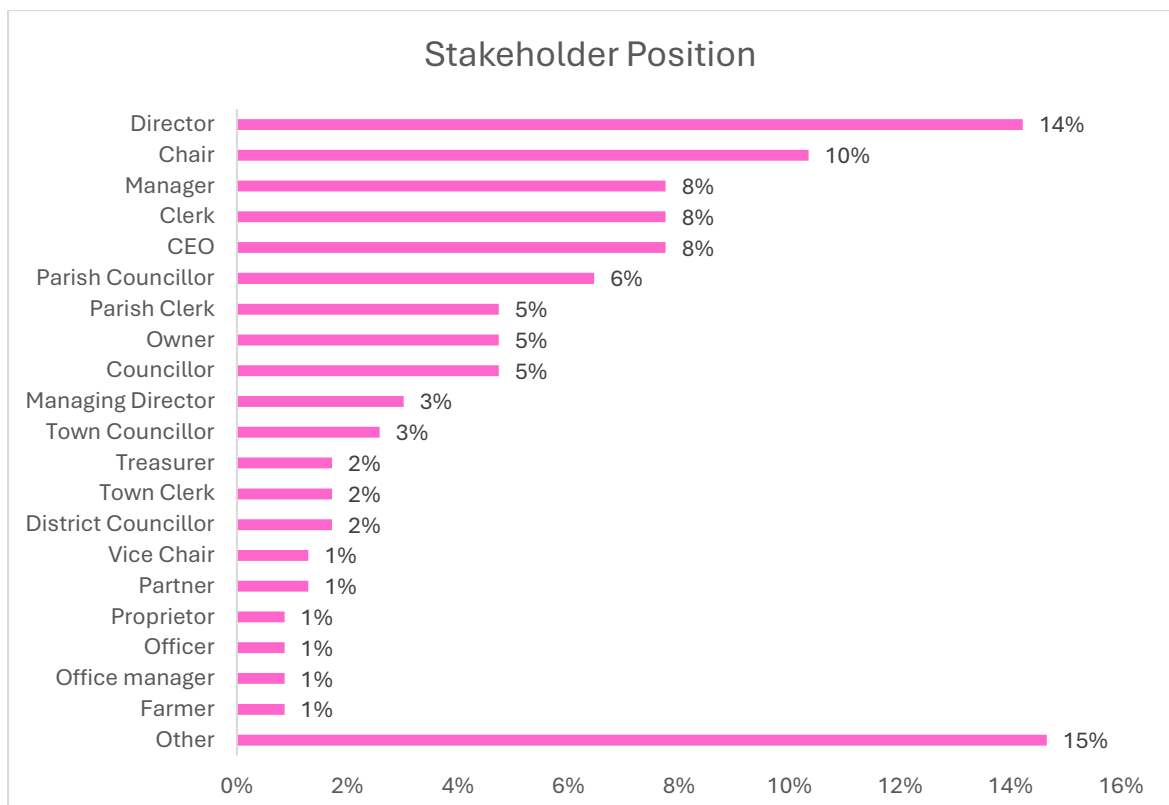
Parish councillor

Sample Profile

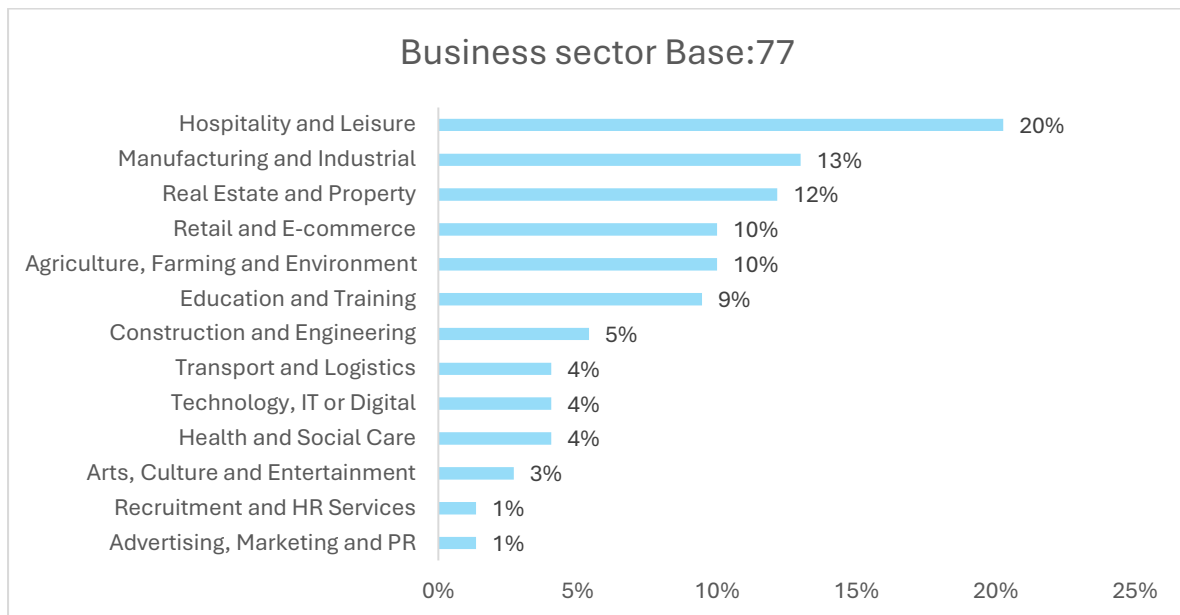
The stakeholders are largely composed of parish councils and businesses.



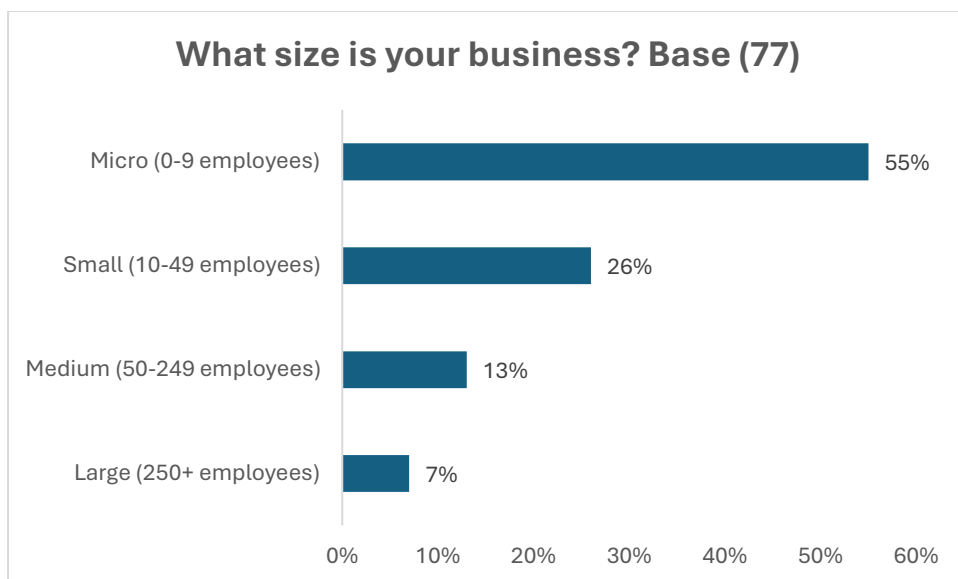
There is a wide range of expertise across the stakeholders.



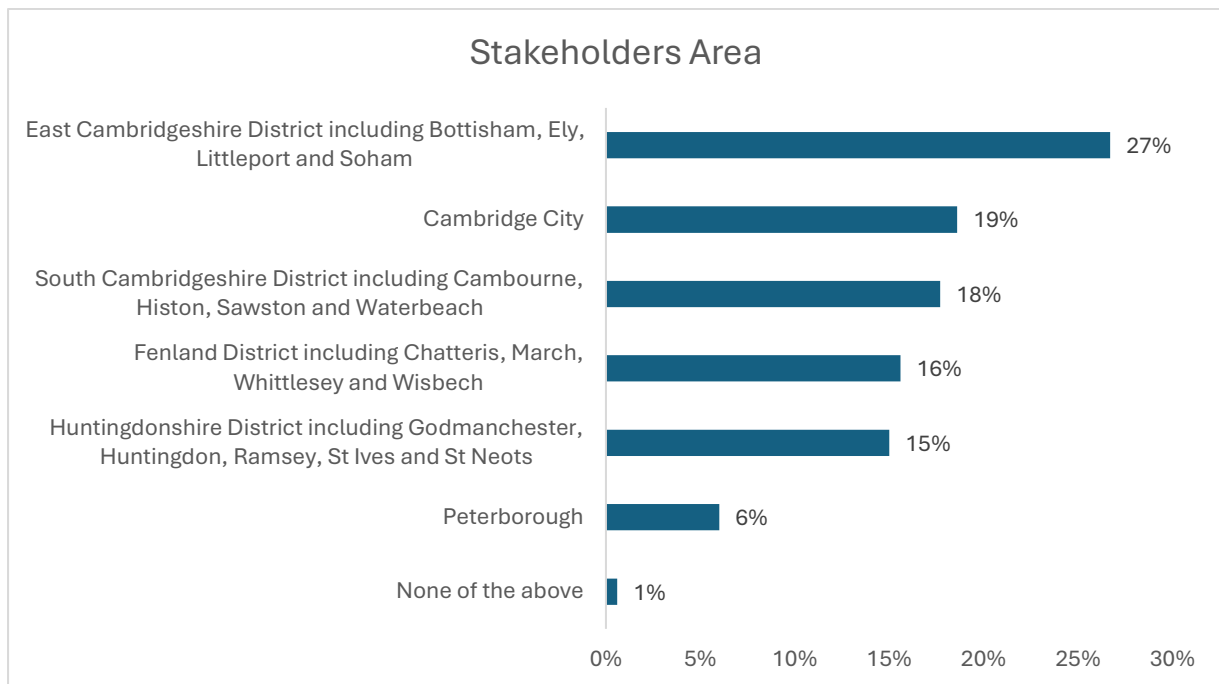
The businesses come from a full range of sectors with hospitality and leisure prominent amongst them.



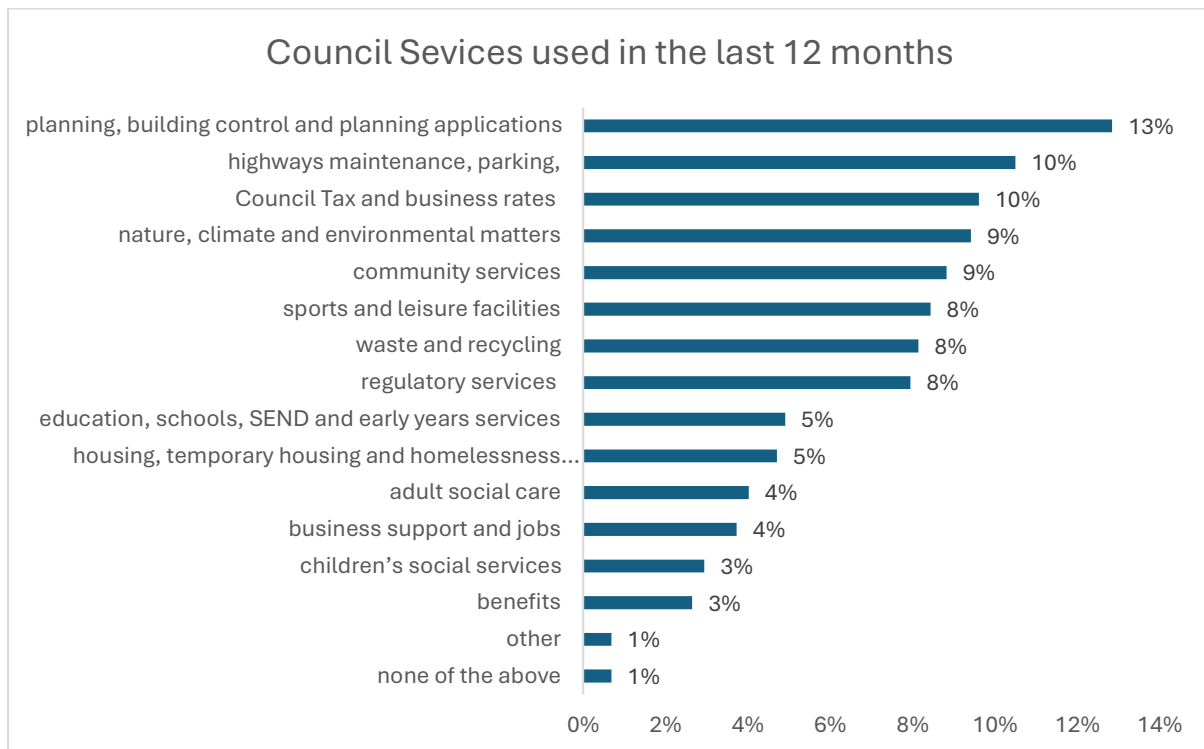
Businesses range in size with the majority from small businesses.



Survey responses are broadly representative with more from East Cambridgeshire and fewer from Peterborough.



The most common council services used by stakeholders were planning, highways and Council Tax and business rates.



Introduction and methodology

Methodology

This report presents findings from qualitative focus group research conducted across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough between July and August 2025. Online focus groups tend to be slightly smaller to manage online but this creates more depth of insight. Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 38 residents across six locations: Cambridge City (5 participants), East Cambridgeshire (6 participants), Fenland (7 participants), Huntingdonshire (6 participants), Peterborough (5 participants) and South Cambridgeshire (9 participants).

Participants were recruited through the online surveys to ensure demographic and geographic diversity. The sample represented a range of ages from 18-24 to 75+, with balanced gender representation (19 female, 19 male participants). Length of residence varied from recent arrivals to lifelong residents, providing perspectives across different levels of community connection and council service usage.

Each focus group session lasted 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured discussion guide covering current service experiences, delivery preferences, local identity, development priorities, and reorganisation concerns. All sessions were conducted online via video conferencing, recorded with consent, and professionally transcribed. Analysis followed thematic coding principles, with direct quotations selected to illustrate key themes while maintaining participant anonymity through demographic categorisation.

The focus groups build on the survey findings and elucidate the key points made in the free text responses found in the public survey.

Participant Demographics

The research engaged 38 residents across the study area with the following demographic profile:

Gender Distribution: Female: 19 participants (50%), Male: 19 participants (50%)

Age Range Distribution: 18-24: 1 participant (3%), 25-34: 5 participants (13%), 35-44: 5 participants (13%), 45-54: 12 participants (32%), 55-64: 7 participants (18%), 65-74: 4 participants (11%), 75+: 3 participants (8%)

Geographic Distribution: Cambridge City: 5 participants, East Cambridgeshire: 6 participants, Fenland: 7 participants, Huntingdonshire: 6 participants, Peterborough: 5 participants, South Cambridgeshire: 9 participants

Participants included both frequent users of council services and those with minimal contact, providing perspectives across the spectrum of resident engagement. Length of

residence ranged from recent arrivals to lifelong residents, with many participants having lived in their areas for 15+ years.

Executive Summary

Service Access and Navigation

The complexity of navigating multiple council structures emerged as one of residents' most significant challenge with local government. Participants consistently reported confusion about service responsibilities across parish, district, and county councils, with many describing lengthy trial-and-error processes to identify the correct authority for their needs. This multi-tier confusion was particularly acute when issues crossed jurisdictional boundaries or when residents moved within the same area.

While the concept of a one-stop-shop approach held strong appeal in principle, residents expressed significant concerns about whether larger unitary authorities would maintain the responsiveness and local knowledge valued in smaller councils. Participants wanted assurance that simplification would enhance rather than compromise service quality, seeking streamlined access without losing the personal relationships and local understanding that made some current services effective.

The evidence reveals a fundamental tension between the desire for simplified access and fears about losing the human-scale governance that residents value, highlighting the challenge of delivering organisational efficiency while preserving local accountability and responsiveness.

Service Quality vs Cost

Residents demonstrated profound scepticism about claims that reorganisation would deliver cost savings, viewing such promises with cynicism based on previous experiences of public sector transformation. This disbelief was rooted in observations of NHS reorganisations, police restructuring, and other public sector changes that had promised efficiency savings but delivered increased costs and service disruption.

Despite this scepticism about transformation savings, participants expressed sophisticated understanding of the relationship between investment and service quality. Many indicated willingness to pay higher Council Tax for demonstrably better services, but this was conditional on seeing genuine improvements rather than funding reorganisation exercises that might not deliver benefits.

The concept of value for money was central to residents' thinking, with participants demanding concrete evidence that reorganisation would deliver genuine benefits justifying the disruption and cost. The challenge for reorganisation proponents lies in overcoming deep-seated public disbelief about efficiency savings while demonstrating that structural change can deliver measurable improvements in service quality and value for taxpayers.

Digital Transformation and Accessibility

Digital transformation revealed fundamental tensions between potential service improvements and serious accessibility concerns. While residents appreciated well-functioning digital services for simple transactions, they consistently emphasised the need for human contact and alternative channels, particularly for complex issues requiring judgement, discretion, or detailed explanation.

Significant barriers to digital adoption emerged, including age-related confidence issues, infrastructure limitations, accessibility needs for people with disabilities, and varying levels of digital literacy. Rural connectivity problems and reliance on mobile devices rather than computers created additional barriers that could prevent effective use of digital services even among willing users.

The evidence strongly supports a "channel choice" approach rather than "digital by default," with participants emphasising that digital services should complement rather than replace traditional channels. Successful digital transformation requires not just technological change but fundamental attention to user needs, accessibility requirements, and the maintenance of human contact for those who cannot or choose not to use digital services.

Place Identity and Community Connection

Place identity and geographic affinity emerged as fundamental considerations shaping residents' views about reorganisation arrangements. Particularly striking was the strong positive identification expressed by residents with Cambridge, contrasted with opposition to association with Peterborough based on perceptions of fundamental differences in character, priorities, and community needs. The more rural districts were concerned that the greater demands in urban areas would mean that they would lose out on services.

These geographic preferences reflected practical daily connections through transport, employment, shopping, healthcare, and cultural activities that create natural communities of interest extending across current administrative boundaries. The ease of travel to Cambridge compared to difficulty reaching Peterborough reinforced broader patterns of economic and social connection that residents see as appropriate foundations for governance arrangements. The conclusion drawn by participants is that they would like new unitary councils to be located in areas where they find it easier to get to.

The evidence demonstrates that successful reorganisation must work with rather than against natural patterns of connection and opposition, creating governance arrangements that reflect genuine community networks rather than administrative convenience. Forced associations that cut across fundamental differences in character and priorities risk undermining the place-based identities that residents value and depend upon.

Local Knowledge vs Professional Capacity

A fundamental tension emerged between valuing intimate local understanding and requiring technical expertise for effective service delivery. Residents highly valued local knowledge – geographical understanding, social awareness, historical perspective, and cultural sensitivity – seeing this as irreplaceable for effective governance and democratic legitimacy.

However, participants also recognised significant limitations in relying solely on local knowledge without adequate professional capacity, particularly for complex technical issues, legal compliance, strategic planning, and resource-intensive services. Smaller councils were seen as often lacking specialist expertise needed for modern governance challenges.

The challenge lies in designing structures that harness both local knowledge and professional capacity effectively. Residents want assurance that larger authorities will maintain local connection and understanding while providing technical expertise and resources needed for effective modern service delivery, requiring innovative approaches that preserve community knowledge while building professional capability. In this respect, participants, when thinking about a large authority think of Cambridgeshire County Council. While opinions of county services are mixed, there are examples of both positive and negative experiences, the concern is with them being seen as bureaucratic and utilitarian, and whether policies can be adjusted at local discretion.

Scale and Geography

Concerns about optimal authority size revealed nuanced understanding that effectiveness requires appropriate balance rather than simply maximising scale. While very small authorities might lack resources and expertise, very large authorities could become unwieldy, bureaucratic, and disconnected from communities, suggesting optimal efficiency at moderate rather than maximum scale.

Geographic accessibility emerged as a fundamental equity issue, with residents recognising that distance, travel time, and transport availability create real barriers particularly affecting elderly people, those without private transport, and families with limited resources. Rural-urban differences in service needs and delivery challenges required flexible approaches rather than standardised urban-focused models. Again, the perception and concern is that the unitary authority will not have the bandwidth to have one policy in one area and one policy in another, which might be more appropriate, but instead has an urban-based policy focus.

Democratic representation challenges were seen as fundamental threats when geographic scale becomes excessive, with participants emphasising that effective representation requires genuine local knowledge, regular community contact, and practical accessibility to constituents.

Democratic Representation and Accountability

It is important to recognise that the majority of people have limited direct contact with elected councillors, revealing a disconnect between theoretical models of local democratic representation and practical reality. Rather than engaging through democratic channels, residents overwhelmingly experienced local government through service delivery, with accountability operating primarily through service performance rather than representative relationships. But while the majority may be council service users, there are a minority who are more active citizens and from the focus group discussions, there do not appear to be any current voice of the customer mechanisms. These mechanisms will become doubly important with the new unitary councils.

This service-focused experience suggests that for many residents, changes to democratic structures may be less significant than impacts on service quality, accessibility, and responsiveness. Electoral behaviour reflected this service-centric approach, with voting decisions based on party competence in service delivery rather than knowledge of individual candidates or assessment of representation quality.

The implications for reorganisation are significant, suggesting that democratic legitimacy may depend more on effective service delivery than traditional measures of democratic engagement, requiring careful attention to how democratic structures can support rather than hinder service effectiveness. This said, the public do want local representation – they want councillors who know their ‘local patch’.

Trust and Confidence

Trust emerged as a fundamental prerequisite for effective governance, with development pressure and planning failures identified as major sources of distrust, particularly in areas experiencing rapid growth. Poor planning decisions, inadequate infrastructure provision, and lack of community consultation created lasting damage to public confidence in local governance.

Leadership and accountability failures were identified as fundamental barriers to trust, with residents expressing frustration about unclear responsibility structures and ineffective accountability mechanisms in the current system. Distance from decision-making centres exacerbated trust problems, particularly when decisions affecting local communities were made without adequate local understanding.

The evidence demonstrates that public trust operates as both prerequisite for and outcome of effective governance, requiring continuous attention to transparency, accountability, competence, and fairness. In areas experiencing substantial development, maintaining trust requires particularly rigorous standards as the scale and complexity of decisions create multiple opportunities for confidence to be undermined.

Transition Concerns and Opportunities

Residents demonstrated acute awareness that reorganisation represents significant undertaking with substantial implications for service delivery, democratic accountability, staff retention, and system integration. Primary concerns focused on managing transition risks and ensuring that change processes did not undermine service quality, accessibility, or continuity.

Service disruption during transition emerged as the most immediate concern, with anxiety about essential services being compromised while councils focused on reorganisation rather than delivery. Staff retention and knowledge preservation were identified as critical challenges, with risk of losing valuable local expertise during periods of uncertainty and change.

Despite concerns, participants recognised opportunities for improvement through well-managed reorganisation, particularly modernising systems, improving coordination, and creating capacity for better technology and specialist expertise. However, these opportunities were seen as dependent on effective implementation and careful preservation of existing strengths while addressing current weaknesses.

Concluding Remarks

This comprehensive qualitative research reveals a sophisticated and nuanced public understanding of the complexities surrounding local government reorganisation. Residents demonstrate clear awareness that structural change involves fundamental trade-offs between competing values and objectives, rather than simple technical adjustments that will automatically improve governance effectiveness.

Key Tensions and Trade-offs

The evidence identifies several fundamental tensions that reorganisation must address:

- **Simplification vs Responsiveness:** While residents desire simplified access through one-stop-shop approaches, they fear losing the local knowledge, personal relationships, and responsive service that characterise effective smaller-scale governance.
- **Professional Capacity vs Local Connection:** There is clear recognition that modern governance requires technical expertise and resources, but deep concern that larger authorities may become disconnected from local communities and lose the intimate understanding that enables effective problem-solving.
- **Efficiency vs Accessibility:** Although participants understand the logic of economies of scale, they are acutely aware that centralisation can create barriers to access, particularly for vulnerable groups, rural communities, and those without private transport.

- **Democratic Accountability vs Service Focus:** The research reveals that residents experience local government primarily through service delivery rather than democratic representation, suggesting that reorganisation success may depend more on maintaining service quality and instituting some kind of mechanism for local voices to be heard.

The Geography of Community Life

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns the importance of natural geographic connections and community networks in shaping residents' preferences for governance arrangements.

This suggests that successful reorganisation from a resident's perspective must respect the practical geography of community life: how people live, work, shop, and access services, rather than imposing arrangements based purely on administrative convenience or theoretical efficiency models. The evidence strongly indicates that governance arrangements work best when they build upon rather than cut across established networks of community life and economic relationship.

Trust as the Foundation of Legitimacy

The research highlights trust and confidence as fundamental prerequisites for effective local governance, particularly in areas experiencing rapid development and change. The distrust expressed by some residents, based on planning failures and accountability deficits, demonstrates how governance failures can create lasting damage to the social contract between councils and communities.

This has particular significance for reorganisation processes, which inevitably create periods of uncertainty, disruption, and reduced accountability. The evidence suggests that maintaining public trust during transition may be as important as achieving the long-term benefits of structural change, requiring exceptional attention to transparency, communication, service continuity, and accountability during reorganisation processes.

Implications for Reorganisation Design

The findings suggest several critical requirements for successful reorganisation:

1. **Preserve Local Connection:** Larger authorities must find innovative ways to maintain local presence, knowledge, and accountability while gaining the benefits of increased scale and professional capacity.
2. **Respect Natural Boundaries:** Geographic arrangements should reflect established patterns of community connection and economic relationship rather than administrative convenience or population targets.
3. **Maintain Service Focus:** Given that residents experience local government primarily through services, reorganisation must prioritise service continuity,

quality, and accessibility over structural considerations. This said, a mechanism of geographical voice of the customer will help with feedback on services.

4. **Manage Transition Risks:** Success requires exceptional attention to change management, communication, service protection, and accountability during transition periods that may extend over several years.
5. **Build Rather Than Assume Trust:** Public scepticism about reorganisation benefits means that trust must be earned through demonstrated competence rather than assumed based on theoretical advantages of larger authorities.

The Challenge Ahead

This research reveals that residents approach reorganisation proposals with informed scepticism based on realistic assessment of the complexities involved and observation of previous transformation exercises. Their concerns are not rooted in resistance to change but in understanding how difficult it is to achieve the promised benefits of structural reform while avoiding the disruption and service degradation that often accompany major organisational change.

The challenge for reorganisation proponents lies not in overcoming uninformed opposition. The public are not opposed to change, they see the benefit of simpler accountable government and their support is conditional on seeing improvements in services. But, instead, the proponents of reorganization should demonstrate that they have adequate understanding of these complexities and sufficient commitment to managing transition risks to justify the disruption that reorganization is perceived as bringing. This requires moving beyond simple assertions about the benefits of larger authorities to detailed evidence of how reorganisation will address the specific concerns and priorities identified by residents while preserving the aspects of current arrangements that work effectively.

Ultimately, the success of local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will depend not just on the theoretical advantages of unitary authorities but on the practical demonstration that larger authorities can deliver the local knowledge, responsive service, democratic accountability, and community connection that residents value while providing the professional capacity, strategic capability, and service resilience that modern governance requires. The evidence from this research provides a clear framework for understanding what residents expect and need from reorganisation, offering valuable guidance for designing and implementing structural changes that genuinely improve rather than compromise the relationship between local government and the communities it serves.

Service access and navigation

The complexity of navigating multiple council structures emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing residents across all five focus group locations. This complexity manifested in confusion about service responsibilities, difficulty identifying correct contacts, and frustration with being passed between different levels of government. The multi-tier system created confusion, with residents often unsure whether to contact district, county, or parish councils for different issues.

"I deal with the council quite a bit, actually, at the moment, on all three levels. And it really frustrates me that everything is so disparate. You know, you've got parish council, got East Cambridge Council, you've got Cambridge City, Cambridge County Council. It's quite difficult to find out exactly who you need to talk to to get something done, and sometimes the councilors are astride more than one council, right? It's a bit of a mess at the moment, and I think it does need sorting out."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

This confusion was particularly acute for residents dealing with issues that crossed jurisdictional lines or when moving house within the same area. The process of identifying the correct authority often involved lengthy trial and error, with residents being redirected multiple times before reaching the appropriate department.

"In regards to my contact with the council on a regular basis, it doesn't happen, but I do contact them regarding things like we had to have a tree [removed] which was oversized...because we've moved within Ely, I had to sort out the Council Tax. Who did I call? I have no idea, because I got put through to one person through to another. So I definitely think there is some improvements that could happen within the system."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

Even when participants knew which council to contact, finding the appropriate department or individual proved challenging. The system appeared to lack integration, with different departments operating in isolation even within the same building, creating additional barriers to effective service delivery.

"Finding out who provides a service can be quite tricky. Actually, getting hold of somebody in any of the councils can be a positive nightmare. It can take weeks sometimes to find a person who deals with the issue. Once you've found somebody, normally it gets resolved. But that initial trying to find somebody or phone the council and excuse me on the phone for an hour just trying to go through hoops to find out who's supposed to be dealing with your particular need, particularly when we're split over three different councils, depending on the service you're looking for."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

When participants did successfully navigate to the correct service, experiences varied dramatically. Some described exemplary service delivery that demonstrated the potential for effective council response, characterised by quick response times, clear communication, and proactive updates on progress.

"My positive experience a years ago near my home due to drought...that was the explanation given - there was severe deformities on the pavement, like dangerously severe for people who use mobility aids, or actually parents with the prams. I reported the problem, and I was really pleasantly surprised to see first thing, there were markings around the place - be aware that there is a problem. Those appeared like two days later, and after a week the situation was sorted, and I even received emails updating me on the progress that was to my opinion a stellar performance."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

However, these positive experiences contrasted sharply with other participants' encounters with prolonged delays, poor communication, and repeated unfulfilled promises. These negative experiences often involved more complex issues or situations where responsibility was disputed between different authorities.

"I'm paying Council Tax, therefore I'm expecting for them to deal with the fact that I have one brown garden bin outside my house that hasn't been used in at least seven years. And I've asked them, I don't want to say wrong thing, three or four times during those seven years, to finally take that bin away, because it's taking space, like literally taking space. And guess what, this summer, we finally managed to get that bin in the car and taken to the recycling centre, because they promised me to take it away every time. And as you figured out they never did."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

Given these navigation challenges and the inconsistency in service delivery, participants generally found the concept of a one-stop-shop approach appealing in principle. The idea of having a single point of contact for all council services resonated across all focus groups, with many seeing this as a potential solution to the current system's complexity. This appeal was evident across different locations and age groups.

"The divisions between responsibilities for various things are not quite as easy to understand as you would think, which makes me think that having one neutral council, where there was one place, one phone number, one set of offices, might make things easier."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

"I think the idea of having one council that you can go to for everything is really appealing. At the moment, you never know if you're calling the right place, and you end up getting passed around. If there was just one number to call, one website to go to, that would make life so much easier."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

"The one-stop-shop idea sounds brilliant in theory. I mean, when you need help with something, you just want to be able to call one place and they sort it out for you, rather than having to work out which of the three or four different councils you need to speak to."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

"I really like the sound of having everything under one roof. It would be so much simpler if you could just go to one place or call one number and they could help you with whatever you need, whether it's Council Tax, planning, or whatever."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

However, while participants welcomed the prospect of simplified access, they also expressed significant concerns about whether larger unitary authorities would maintain the responsiveness and local knowledge that some valued in smaller councils. These concerns were rooted in experiences with existing large authorities and fears about losing personal relationships and local understanding especially when participants made comparisons to the county council. The county council can appear remote and utilitarian in its outlook and key not taking responsibility for its decisions. Policies tailored to work for the majority of people can seem odd to those that they do not work for, especially where there is local context for difference. This is a key concern of residents with larger authorities.

"My issue is with Cambridgeshire County Council, which, it's the sort of size that we seem to be heading to. Oh, well, it's going to be half the size, very difficult. They are very bureaucratic. I think they're so large it's very difficult to find someone who will take responsibility for anything. And they pass you from pillar to post."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

Participants worried that larger authorities might become more impersonal and less responsive to individual concerns, potentially losing the local knowledge and personal relationships that made some current services effective.

"I think there's a danger that you lose that local knowledge and that local connection. And I think that's really important, particularly for things like planning applications and local issues where you need someone who really understands the area and the community."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

The challenge for reorganisation will be delivering the benefits of streamlined access while preserving service quality and local accountability. Participants wanted assurance that simplification would not come at the expense of responsiveness, blanket policies or local understanding but would genuinely improve their ability to access appropriate help when needed. The concern here is about a loss of discretion with local difference.

These navigation challenges were evident across participants' experiences, demonstrating both the frustrations and occasional successes that characterise current service access arrangements. These accounts reinforce the complexity of the current system whilst highlighting the importance of personal intervention in resolving service failures.

"Firstly, I've tried to put in planning permission. Yeah, and the service I got was appalling, no communications. After five months, I actually went to the council village councillor, I immediately get a response."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"I've only had positive experiences recently, though. Just last week I phoned up South Cambs, and I just phoned the standard number, and the woman was very, very helpful."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

Local Knowledge vs Professional Capacity

The tension between local knowledge and professional capacity emerged as one of the most fundamental and complex considerations in participants' discussions about local government reorganisation. This theme encapsulates a core dilemma facing modern local governance: whether to prioritise the intimate understanding that comes from lived experience within a community, or the technical expertise and institutional resources that enable sophisticated service delivery. Far from being a simple either-or choice, participants' discussions revealed this as a multifaceted challenge requiring careful balance and innovative solutions.

The value participants placed on local knowledge was deeply rooted in their experiences of effective local representation and service delivery. This is also observed in both the surveys of residents and stakeholders. Local knowledge manifested in multiple dimensions: geographical understanding of local infrastructure, environmental challenges, and community assets; social awareness of community dynamics, informal networks, and local leadership; historical perspective on previous decisions, ongoing issues, and community development; and cultural sensitivity to local values, priorities, and ways of working. This knowledge was seen as irreplaceable and fundamental to effective local governance.

"I think the local councillors do understand the area better. They know the issues, they know the people, they know what's important to the community. But sometimes they don't have the resources or the expertise to actually do anything about it."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

"I've had really good experiences with our local councillor because they actually live in the area and understand what it's like. They know which roads flood, they know where the problems are. You can't get that from someone sitting in an office miles away."

Female, 65-74, Huntingdonshire

Participants provided numerous examples of how local knowledge translated into more effective problem-solving and service delivery. Councillors and council staff who lived locally were seen as having immediate understanding of issues, knowing the right people to contact, and being able to navigate local networks effectively. This local embeddedness was valued not just for its practical benefits, but also for the democratic legitimacy it provided.

"When I contacted my local councillor about the flooding issue, they knew exactly what I was talking about because they'd lived through it themselves. They understood the problem immediately and knew who to contact."

Female, 45-54, Cambridge City

"I like that our councillors live locally and shop in the same shops as us. They understand what it's like to live here day to day. That connection is really important."

Female, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

The importance of historical and contextual knowledge was particularly emphasised by longer-term residents who had witnessed multiple attempts to address local issues. This institutional memory was seen as crucial for avoiding repeated mistakes and building on previous successes. Participants valued representatives who understood not just current challenges, but the evolution of local issues over time.

"Local knowledge is invaluable. You can't replace someone who's lived in an area for 30 years and knows all the history, all the issues, all the personalities. That's worth its weight in gold."

Male, 65-74, Fenland

"There's something to be said for having councillors who've been involved in the community for years. They know the history, they know what's been tried before, they know what works and what doesn't."

Female, 55-64, Fenland

However, participants also recognised significant limitations in relying solely on local knowledge without adequate professional capacity. These limitations were most apparent in complex technical issues, legal compliance requirements, strategic planning challenges, and resource-intensive service delivery. Smaller councils were seen as often lacking the specialist expertise needed for modern governance challenges.

"The problem with smaller councils is they might know the area well, but they don't always have the professional capacity to deal with complex issues. You need both really - local knowledge and professional expertise."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"Our parish councillors are brilliant because they really care about the village, and they know everyone. But when it comes to bigger issues, they just don't have the power or the resources to make things happen."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

The professional capacity gap was particularly evident in technical areas such as planning, environmental assessment, legal compliance, and financial management. Participants recognised that good intentions and local knowledge were insufficient when dealing with complex regulatory frameworks or technical challenges that required specialist expertise.

"The smaller councils might be more personal, but they don't always have the technical expertise for things like planning applications or complex legal issues. Sometimes you need specialists."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

"The district council staff are lovely, and they try their best, but they're often out of their depth with complex planning issues. They need proper legal and technical support that they just don't have."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

Conversely, participants' experiences with larger authorities highlighted both the benefits and limitations of professional capacity without local knowledge. While larger councils were recognised as having greater resources, specialist staff, and technical capabilities, they were also seen as potentially disconnected from local realities and community needs. This disconnection could result in technically sound but practically inappropriate solutions.

"The county council has more resources and expertise, but they don't really understand local issues. They make decisions that might look good on paper but don't work in practice because they don't know the area."

Male, 75+, Fenland

"The county council has the resources to employ proper experts, but they're so removed from local communities that they don't understand the real impact of their decisions."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

The challenge of scale was a recurring theme, with participants recognising that larger authorities could afford to employ specialists but might lose the local connection that made services relevant and effective. This created a fundamental tension between efficiency and responsiveness, between technical competence and local relevance.

"The advantage of larger authorities is they can afford to employ specialists - planning experts, legal experts, technical experts. Smaller councils often have to rely on generalists who might not have the specific knowledge needed."

Female, 25-34, Peterborough

"I worry that with bigger councils, you lose that personal touch. The councillors won't know the area as well, they won't understand the local issues, and residents will just become numbers on a spreadsheet."

Male, 55-64, Huntingdonshire

Some participants attempted to reconcile this tension by advocating hybrid approaches that could combine local knowledge with professional capacity. These suggestions included maintaining local representation within larger structures, ensuring professional staff had local connections, and creating mechanisms for local input into technical decisions.

"I think you need a balance. Local knowledge is really important for understanding what the community needs, but you also need professional capacity to actually deliver services effectively and efficiently."

Female, 35-44, Peterborough

"Professional capacity is important, but it's no good if the professionals don't understand the local context. You need both elements working together."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

The importance of community dynamics and informal networks was another dimension of local knowledge that participants valued highly. Understanding how communities actually worked - beyond formal structures and official processes - was seen as crucial for effective local governance. This social capital and network knowledge was viewed as particularly difficult to replicate in larger, more formal structures.

"Local councillors understand the community dynamics - they know which groups don't get along, they know the informal networks, they know how to get things done locally."

Male, 65-74, Huntingdonshire

Participants also recognised that the relative importance of local knowledge versus professional capacity might vary depending on the type of service or issue involved. Some services were seen as benefiting more from local understanding and personal relationships, while others required technical expertise and professional systems. The challenge was determining which approach was most appropriate for different functions.

"I think smaller councils are more responsive because they're closer to the community, but they're also more limited in what they can actually achieve. It's a trade-off."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

"The problem is that local councillors might understand the issues, but they don't always have the technical knowledge to solve them. You need professional expertise for things like environmental assessments or legal compliance."

Male, 45-54, Peterborough

The risk of losing local knowledge through reorganisation was a significant concern for many participants. There was worry that larger authorities would inevitably become more bureaucratic and less responsive, with professional staff who lacked local connection and understanding. This concern was particularly acute among participants who had positive experiences with local representatives.

"The danger with reorganisation is that you might get more professional services but lose that local connection and understanding that makes councils effective in the first place."

Male, 75+, Fenland

The challenge for reorganisation lies in designing structures that can harness both local knowledge and professional capacity effectively. Participants wanted assurance that larger authorities would find innovative ways to maintain local connection and understanding while also providing the technical expertise and resources needed for effective modern service delivery.

Participants echoed these concerns about maintaining local representation and connection within larger authority structures. Their perspectives revealed particular anxiety about the loss of accessible local representatives and the risk of creating governance arrangements that are neither truly local nor effectively national in scope.

"I would like to be able to have a representative who I have voted for, who can help me talk to the right person in the council to get whatever issue is resolved."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"At the moment, the county council is in Alconbury, which, okay, it might be more central. It used to be at Castle Hill in Cambridge, which was brilliant for people in Cambridge."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"My concern is we're supposed to have central government to do things for the nation and local government to do things for where I live."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"You're going to end up with governments in the middle. And I've neither got stuff accountable at a national level, nor stuff accountable at a local level, just a bunch of people in the middle who are not really close to anyone."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

The success of reorganisation may ultimately depend on how well this fundamental tension can be resolved, ensuring that the benefits of professional capacity do not come at the expense of the local knowledge and community connection that residents value so highly.

Service Quality vs Cost

The relationship between service quality and cost emerged as a central concern for participants across all focus groups, revealing not only sophisticated understanding about public sector finance but also profound scepticism about promises that reorganisation would deliver cost savings. This scepticism represents perhaps the most significant challenge facing proponents of local government transformation, as participants consistently expressed disbelief that structural changes would result in genuine financial benefits for residents or improved value for money.

The most striking finding was participants' widespread disbelief in claims that transformation would save money. This scepticism was rooted in previous experiences of public sector reorganisation, observations of other transformation exercises, and a general cynicism about promises of efficiency savings. Participants had heard similar promises before and remained unconvinced that reorganisation would deliver the financial benefits being claimed by its proponents.

"Every time they reorganise something, they say it's going to save money and improve services. But it never does. It just costs a fortune to reorganise and then everything costs more afterwards."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"I've heard all this before. They said the same thing when they reorganised the NHS, when they changed the police, when they merged other councils. It always costs more in the end, not less."

Female, 65-74, Huntingdonshire

This scepticism extended to specific claims about efficiency savings and economies of scale. While participants could understand the theoretical logic of larger organisations achieving better value through bulk purchasing or reduced duplication, they remained unconvinced that these theoretical benefits would materialise in practice or be passed on to residents in the form of lower costs or better services.

"They always talk about economies of scale and efficiency savings, but where are they? Show me one reorganisation that actually saved money for the taxpayer. I can't think of any."

Male, 75+, Fenland

"The problem is that any savings just get swallowed up by the bureaucracy. They might save money in one area, but they spend it on consultants and management and new IT systems."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

Participants were particularly sceptical about the costs of transformation itself, recognising that reorganisation exercises typically required substantial upfront investment in new systems, redundancy payments, consultancy fees, and management time. Many questioned whether these transition costs would ever be recovered through subsequent efficiency savings, viewing transformation as an expensive exercise that ultimately increased rather than reduced public spending.

"How much is this reorganisation going to cost? Millions, I bet. And they'll say it's an investment that will pay for itself, but it never does. We'll end up paying more Council Tax to fund the reorganisation and then paying more again afterwards."

Male, 45-54, Cambridge City

"They'll spend a fortune on consultants telling them how to save money. It's ridiculous. The money they spend on the reorganisation could probably fund services for years."

Female, 35-44, East Cambridgeshire

The scepticism was reinforced by participants' observations of previous reorganisation exercises in other sectors or areas. Many could cite examples of transformations that had promised savings but delivered increased costs, leading to a general cynicism about the motives and competence of those promoting reorganisation. This historical perspective created a significant credibility gap that proponents of change would need to address.

"Look at what happened with the NHS reorganisations, or when they changed the police structure. Did any of those save money? No, they all cost more. Why should this be any different?"

Male, 65-74, Peterborough

"I remember when they merged other councils and said it would be more efficient. Council Tax went up, not down. Services got worse, not better. Why should we believe it will be different this time?"

Female, 55-64, Fenland

Despite this scepticism about cost savings, participants demonstrated sophisticated understanding of the relationship between investment and service quality. Many expressed willingness to pay higher Council Tax for demonstrably better services, but this willingness was conditional on seeing genuine improvements rather than simply funding reorganisation exercises that might not deliver benefits.

"I'd rather pay a bit more in Council Tax if it means getting better services. You get what you pay for, and if we want good services, we need to be willing to fund them properly."

Female, 45-54, Cambridge City

"We need to be realistic about costs. If we want professional services with proper expertise, that costs money. You can't expect Champagne service on a beer budget."

Male, 65-74, Peterborough

However, this willingness to invest in quality was undermined by frustration with current arrangements where costs appeared to be rising while service quality remained static or declined. Participants expressed particular concern about situations where Council Tax increases were not matched by visible improvements in service delivery, creating a cycle of declining trust in public sector efficiency.

"The problem is that Council Tax keeps going up, but the services seem to be getting worse. We're paying more but getting less, which doesn't make sense."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"I think people would be willing to pay more if they could see the benefits. The problem is when costs go up, but services don't improve or even get worse."

Male, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

The concept of value for money was central to participants' thinking, but their scepticism about transformation savings meant they approached promises of improved efficiency with considerable caution. Rather than simply accepting claims about economies of scale or reduced duplication, participants wanted concrete evidence that reorganisation would deliver genuine benefits that justified the disruption and cost involved.

"Value for money is what matters. I don't mind paying if I can see that the money is being used effectively and I'm getting good service in return. But I'm not paying for reorganisation that makes things worse."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

Participants recognised that some apparent inefficiencies in current arrangements might actually serve important purposes and were concerned that reorganisation might eliminate these without understanding their value. This nuanced understanding of organisational complexity made them more sceptical of simple claims about efficiency gains through structural change.

"Efficiency savings are fine as long as they don't affect the quality of services that people actually use and depend on. But usually when they talk about efficiency, they mean cutting things that people value."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"The problem with cutting costs is that it often means cutting staff, and then the remaining staff are overworked and can't provide good service. That's not efficiency, that's just making things worse."

Male, 45-54, Peterborough

The importance of transparency and accountability in spending decisions was emphasised throughout discussions, with participants wanting clear evidence that any investment in reorganisation would deliver genuine benefits. The scepticism about transformation savings meant that proponents would need to provide compelling evidence and robust accountability mechanisms to gain public support.

"The key is transparency. If the council can show me where my money is going and what I'm getting for it, I'm more likely to support it. But if they're just asking me to trust them that reorganisation will save money, forget it."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"I think people understand that good services cost money. What they don't like is waste and inefficiency. And reorganisation often looks like the biggest waste of all."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

Participants demonstrated similar scepticism about council spending priorities and efficiency, with particular concern about waste in current arrangements. However, their perspectives also revealed a more nuanced understanding of the need to balance service priorities and costs.

"I think my, one of my biggest concerns of local government and national government is they're trying to do too much, that they're doing things they don't need to do, and they waste vast amounts of money."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"Just recently, in the news, they had this thing about this sewage treatment plant north of Cambridge, which they've now mothballed and wasted 80 million pounds."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

The challenge for reorganisation proponents lies in overcoming this deep-seated scepticism about transformation savings. Participants' disbelief was not based on ignorance or resistance to change, but on informed observation of previous reorganisation exercises and realistic assessment of the costs and complexities involved. Success would require not just promises of efficiency gains, but concrete

evidence that transformation could deliver genuine value for money without compromising service quality or accessibility. Most fundamentally, it would require acknowledgement that the public simply do not believe that transformation saves money, and that this scepticism needs management and represents a major barrier to gaining support for reorganisation proposals.

Digital Transformation and Accessibility

Digital transformation in local government emerged as one of the most complex and contentious themes across all focus groups, revealing fundamental tensions between the potential benefits of online service delivery and serious concerns about accessibility, usability, and digital exclusion through the reorganisation. The discussions revealed that participants' preferences for service delivery channels varied significantly depending on the type of service, the complexity of their needs, and their personal circumstances. Rather than a simple preference for either digital or traditional channels, participants demonstrated an understanding of when different approaches were most appropriate, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach to digital transformation that recognises the diversity of citizen needs and service requirements.

The quality and usability of existing digital services was a major source of frustration across all locations, with participants reporting significant problems with council websites, online portals, and digital processes. These negative experiences had created considerable scepticism about the potential for digital transformation to improve service delivery, with many participants expressing preference for traditional channels despite recognising the theoretical benefits of online access. The contrast between successful and unsuccessful digital experiences highlighted the critical importance of user-centred design and robust technical implementation.

"It's interesting, because before Council Tax, East Cambs has got this Anglia Revenue Partnership thing, which is a bit similar to what is proposed for the unitary thing. I think it's East Cambs, Fenland and I think there are some councils in Norfolk and Suffolk, basically. And they all got together. And if you want to, like, check your Council Tax, you have to go on that portal, this Anglia Revenue thing. You have to log in. It's not very good. It's like, all I want is get a PDF of my Council Tax, and you have to go to a website that's really complicated. You never know what your login is, and it's not very good. I just wish they sent me an email with PDF attached, because that's all I want."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

"Reflecting on that I'd absolutely agree -the Council Tax element - never faced anything like that in the Peterborough Council. But then, as soon as I moved here, all of a sudden, as you mentioned, there's this portal - so many different councils to reach out to. Eventually, I just gave up on the portal and ended up calling."

Female, 55-64, Fenland

However, where digital services worked well, participants were highly appreciative of their convenience and efficiency. The most successful digital interactions were characterised by simplicity, reliability, and clear outcomes, particularly for straightforward transactional services such as reporting environmental issues or accessing basic information.

"I actually have had really positive experiences with Fenland, really happy with them. I've reported fly tipping twice on my lane, and they literally picked it up within 24 hours. I reported to the county council of an overgrown footpath where I wanted to walk my dogs, and again, they organised for that to be all cut back within a reasonably short space of time. It's so easy online now, and actually, I reported it online. I've never actually had to speak to anybody, so everything that I've needed to contact them about, I haven't actually spoken to anybody. I've just filled in online, and it's just been dealt with."

Female, 55-64, Fenland

The preference for telephone and face-to-face services emerged strongly across all focus groups, particularly for complex issues, when problems arose with digital services, or when participants needed reassurance and human interaction. Participants valued the ability to speak to knowledgeable staff who could understand their specific circumstances and provide tailored advice or solutions. The importance of human contact was emphasised not just for practical reasons, but also for the reassurance and confidence it provided.

"I rang the council up. The bin was delivered within a week. I'd spoke to someone on the telephone. Had been perfect, but you just want there to be someone at the end of the phone, email or whatever when you need them. And I think the worry is that there won't be that person to speak to anymore. It will be like - we'll get back to you in five to 10 days, or whatever, and it might be a different person speaking to you each time."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

"I'm standing by their ability to avoid any sort of personal contact. You have to go to a website. You go to a form. You're sitting there going - is there anybody there? You know, press button one, press button two. They just try. And the councils are going the same way, you know, they just try to avoid any sort of human contact."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Service complexity emerged as a crucial factor determining channel preference. Participants consistently distinguished between simple, transactional services that could work well online and complex issues requiring human judgement, discretion, or detailed explanation. Simple services such as bin collection requests, basic information queries, or routine payments were generally considered suitable for digital delivery, provided the systems worked reliably.

"I just need a simple system. I just need to know who I contact with that problem. I'm probably really naive, but I really don't understand the purpose of parish councils, and I'm sorry if someone sits on a parish council, I don't really know their function. I just want that if I have a problem, or my family has a problem, I

need to contact that person, and at the end of the day, I can contact them by email, Instagram, Facebook, in person. I really don't care, as long as I can speak to someone via that digitally or in person or by phone."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"Digital services are fine for simple things, but for anything complicated, you need to speak to a real person who understands your situation. Online services should be an option, not the only option. There should always be a way to speak to someone if you need to."

Female, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

Complex services involving social care, planning applications, licensing, or other issues requiring professional judgement were consistently identified as requiring human interaction. Participants emphasised that these services involved nuanced circumstances that could not be adequately addressed through automated systems or standard online forms.

"When we moved up from London, that was partially because of our kids...we have two adopted kids, just struggled with London, and so have a number of challenges. So, we wanted a slightly more manageable place to live, so I had to deal very quickly with social services and other things. So interestingly, it was relatively straightforward to work out who to talk to. So social services, family support, adoptions - Cambridge County Council, then stuff to do with the house and those practical things Fenland. But I guess the one sort of experience I had with everything was people change jobs quite frequently in all of the councils, the minute that happens, you start from scratch."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

"We want to do some minor works. We live in a listed property [so contacted] the conservation officer. They changed. So it was like rebooting...we had went through three social workers in three and a half weeks at Cambridge with the adoption support. And to be fair, that's not unique to here, [same in] London. I went through six social workers in eight weeks, and it was always the same thing -there was just no continuity."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

The importance of continuity and relationship-building was highlighted particularly in relation to complex services. Participants valued having consistent contact with the same staff members who understood their circumstances and could provide continuity of service and not having to endlessly repeat the details of their case. This was seen as particularly important for ongoing cases or where trust and rapport were essential.

"So, I deal with licensing, because I have a shop, so we've got a premises' license. I've got a license, basically. So I deal with their licensing department at East Cambs District Council. So, I actually just paid them my annual fee today. Actually, they sent me my premises license invoice today. I called them up and I paid by card over the phone. They're all right, but yeah, it is nice because it's a small department. And there's one lady that deals with me every year. Basically, she comes in, does the inspections, and, yeah, we've got a rapport. Basically, she knows the shop, she knows me, etc, so it's nice to have the same person to deal with."

Male, 25-34, Fenland

Digital exclusion emerged as a central concern, with participants highlighting multiple barriers to digital access and use. Age-related digital confidence was frequently mentioned, but participants also identified infrastructure limitations, device constraints, accessibility needs, and varying levels of digital literacy as significant barriers that could exclude substantial portions of the population from digital-first services.

"I do contact them digitally. But it is, it's a major problem, because in Fenland, in March anyway, there are huge numbers of retired people, quite old, who are not digitally aware or not on the internet. And I feel for them if they want some contact and services, they can't just do their report online because they don't use online things."

Male, 75+, Fenland

"Yes, I think that is a problem that you will find when you move to unitary councils, is everyone assumes that you've got a smartphone, everyone assumes that you've got access to email. And those assumptions are dangerous, because not everybody does."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

The generational divide in digital comfort was acknowledged, but participants emphasised that this should not lead to services that excluded older residents. There was strong feeling that digital transformation should enhance rather than replace traditional service channels, ensuring that all residents could access services regardless of their digital confidence or capabilities.

"My mum is 85 and she can't use the internet at all. What's she supposed to do if everything goes online? She needs to be able to phone someone or go into an office. The younger generation might be happy doing everything online, but there are lots of older people who aren't comfortable with technology."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

Infrastructure and access barriers were highlighted as significant constraints on digital service delivery. Rural connectivity issues, reliance on mobile devices rather than computers, and varying levels of internet access were identified as practical barriers that could prevent effective use of digital services even by those willing and able to use them.

"The council needs to remember that not everyone has good internet access. In rural areas, the connection can be really slow or unreliable. I don't have a computer at home, just my phone. Some of these websites don't work properly on a phone, so I can't use them."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Accessibility for people with disabilities and learning difficulties was raised as a crucial consideration often overlooked in digital service design. Participants highlighted the need for digital services to accommodate different needs and abilities, including visual impairments, learning difficulties, and other conditions that might affect ability to use standard online interfaces.

"I've got dyslexia and some of these online forms are really difficult for me to understand. The language is too complicated. I tried to report a problem online and it took me ages to find the right form. Then when I filled it in, nothing happened. I had to phone them anyway."

Female, 35-44, Fenland

Security and privacy concerns were expressed by several participants, particularly older users who were worried about sharing personal information online. These concerns reflected both general anxieties about internet security and specific worries about how councils would protect sensitive data. Building trust in digital services would require transparent communication about security measures and data protection.

"I worry about security with online services. How do I know my personal information is safe? I'd rather deal with someone face to face. If they're going to have digital services, they need to make sure they're accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

The importance of user experience design was emphasised throughout discussions, with participants calling for digital services that were intuitive, well-tested, and designed with real users in mind. Poor website design, complicated forms, and unclear navigation were identified as major barriers to effective digital service use, even among digitally confident users.

"They should test these websites with real people before they launch them. It's obvious that whoever designed them doesn't actually use them. The best digital

services are the ones that are so simple you don't need instructions. Most council websites are the opposite of that."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

"I'm quite good with computers, but even I struggle with some of these council websites. They're not user-friendly at all. The council website is a nightmare. You can never find what you're looking for. It's like they've designed it to make it as difficult as possible."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

Participants provided additional insight into the practical realities of contact centre operations and innovative service delivery approaches. Users highlighted the tired messages when it takes time to deal with a call.

"So I did ring up the council, this week actually - the South Cambs [number] - about a situation. And I know a bit about contact centres and I would guarantee I could do that every day of the week. We'd make that phone call, and they would have that response that we're busier than normal."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

The need for digital support and training was highlighted as essential for successful digital transformation. Participants recognised that simply providing online services was insufficient if people lacked the skills or confidence to use them effectively. There was support for initiatives that would help people develop digital skills, but this was seen as a prerequisite for, rather than a consequence of, digital transformation.

"Online services can be great when they work, but there needs to be proper support and training for people who aren't confident with technology. Digital exclusion is a real problem. Not everyone has the skills, equipment, or confidence to use online services effectively."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

Reliability and availability of digital services were identified as crucial factors in building confidence and encouraging adoption. Participants emphasised that digital services needed to work consistently and be available when needed, with adequate backup support when technical problems occurred.

"I like the idea of 24/7 online services, but only if they actually work 24/7. There's nothing worse than a website that's down when you need it. If you're going to digitise services, you need to make sure the technology actually works and that people know how to use it."

Female, 25-34, Peterborough

The concept of channel choice emerged as a key principle, with participants emphasising that digital services should complement rather than replace traditional channels. The idea of "digital by default, human by exception" was acceptable only if the exception was genuinely available and accessible when needed.

"Digital by default is fine as long as there's still a human alternative for when things go wrong or when people need help. They keep pushing everything online to save money, but what about people who can't or don't want to use the internet? They're being left behind."

Male, 35-44, Fenland

"The problem is that when you phone them, they often just tell you to go online anyway. So, you're stuck in a loop. I don't mind using online services, but they need to be simple and straightforward. Some of these forms are ridiculously complicated."

Male, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

Navigation and service identification emerged as particular challenges in the current system, with participants struggling to understand which council was responsible for which services. Digital transformation was seen as potentially helpful in addressing this confusion, but only if it genuinely simplified rather than complicated the process of finding and accessing appropriate services.

"I find it took me a long time, years when I moved here, to get my head around which part of the council does what. I mean, there's a town in March. It's a town council, which, as far as I can see, doesn't need to exist. I work out and find who to report concerns or issues to amongst the three, and [but the issue] remains with loads of residents in March - they don't know whether the county council or district council, or even the town council."

Male, 75+, Fenland

"You just google your problem, really, it's like, okay, and you don't notice any difference, say, between East Cambs and Fenland, for example."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

Local provision and face-to-face access emerged as important values that participants wanted to preserve in any digital transformation. The preference for local services was not simply about convenience, but reflected deeper values about community connection, accountability, and the importance of human relationships in public service delivery.

"I would rather shop locally and have that contact with the person that's serving me; know that I have a good service and know that the money is being used in a

good way, whereas I would prefer not to shop on Amazon if I can, because of the ethics behind the company. And I think that's kind of the same thing I think the [council] service[s] should be like. So have someone at the end of a phone that you can speak to if you need to be listened to."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

The comparison with private sector digital transformation, particularly in banking, provided important context for participants' expectations and concerns. While participants recognised that digital transformation was inevitable, they were sceptical about claims that it would improve service quality, based on their experience of bank branch closures and reduced personal service in other sectors.

"What we've had at the moment in Ely is all the banks are saying, right, we're going to close our branches, we're going to save money, we're going to go online. Santander is one of our banks. They now only open three days a week rather than five days a week. So, trying to cut costs, which you understand why they're doing it, but it's how it's packaged to you, so that they're honest. They're saying they're going to cut costs."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

The relationship between local knowledge and digital service delivery was identified as a particular concern in the context of unitary authority development. Participants worried that larger, more centralised authorities would lose the local knowledge and relationships that enabled effective problem-solving, particularly for complex or unusual circumstances that did not fit standard digital processes.

"It seems very much you need an enabler, or politely, a fixer, to fix your problems to get you to where you need to get to. And certainly, the thing that I will say within Fenland Council, and I might be speaking out of turn here is, if you know the right fixer, your problem disappears very quickly. The problem, I can see us, when you move to a unitary council, when you base it out of somewhere, you're going to lose, well, to some extent, the brown bag sort of approach is going to disappear, which is good, but also you're going to get a disconnect with your local connections."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

The challenge for digital transformation in local government lies in balancing the potential efficiency and convenience benefits of online services with the imperative to maintain accessibility, choice, and human contact for all residents. Participants' experiences and concerns highlighted that successful digital transformation requires not just technological change, but fundamental attention to user needs, service complexity, accessibility requirements, and the maintenance of alternative channels for those who cannot or choose not to use digital services. The goal should be digital enhancement rather than digital replacement, ensuring that technology improves rather than restricts

access to public services. Most importantly, the evidence suggests that different services require different approaches, and that a one-size-fits-all digital strategy would fail to meet the diverse needs of residents and the varying complexity of local government services. The preference for local provision and human contact, particularly for complex services, represents a fundamental challenge to digital-first approaches that must be addressed if transformation is to gain public support and deliver genuine improvements in service quality and accessibility.

Place Identity and Community Connection

Place identity and community connection emerged as fundamental concerns across all focus groups, revealing not only deep attachments to local character and distinctiveness, but also strong patterns of geographic affinity and explicit opposition that shaped participants' views about potential reorganisation arrangements. The discussions revealed that residents' place identities operated at multiple scales simultaneously, encompassing both immediate local attachments and broader regional connections that created clear preferences for association with some areas and emphatic rejection of others. Most significantly, participants from East Cambridgeshire expressed strong positive identification with Cambridge while demonstrating profound opposition to any association with Peterborough, based on perceptions of fundamental differences in character, priorities, safety, and community needs.

The opposition to Peterborough was not simply a matter of administrative preference but reflected deep-seated perceptions of fundamental differences in community character, safety, and priorities. Participants with direct experience of working across the region were particularly emphatic about these differences, arguing that Peterborough represented a completely different type of place with different challenges, community dynamics, and approaches to local issues. Equally, residents make the point that these demands will call on public resources and this will be to their detriment.

"So, I've worked in Peterborough, Huntingdon, Fenland, East Cambs, Cambridge City. I'm out of the world, brilliant. So, I've worked the whole district, yeah in my previous occupation. Peterborough, and I'm really sorry if you come from Peterborough, is a completely different beast to Ely and Cambridge City. The residents, the communities are completely different...the groups of communities are completely different...their priorities are going to be completely different, to how East Cambridgeshire sort of approach their communities. It can be a really unsafe place as well, Peterborough. Ely, I consider a really safe place at the moment. So, I do have concerns. If we're going to be sort of lumped in, then I think it's probably going to hurt Ely more so than if we were to going to be lumped in with sort of Fenland or Cambridge City."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

This opposition was reinforced by practical considerations about distance, accessibility, and natural patterns of connection. Participants emphasised that the practical difficulties of travelling to Peterborough compared to the ease of reaching Cambridge reflected deeper patterns of economic and social connection that should inform governance arrangements.

"But if we go, if we go with Peterborough, which is, I think, is one of the favoured options. So Peterborough is a long way away, and they have very different priorities from around here. I think I want us to go anywhere [but] Peterborough."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"Try and drive from Ely to Peterborough, then drive from Ely to Cambridge. Yeah, get a drive from Ely to Cambridge. Get a train from Ely to Peterborough. Another World."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Participants demonstrated strong attachment to their local communities whilst also valuing connectivity to broader regional areas. Their perspectives illustrated how place identity encompasses both local distinctiveness and regional connectivity.

"I think I like living in Impington because it has all the amenities, Histon and Impington together, but it's very close to the city, so it's just very convenient in and out of the city."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"I'm very keen on open spaces, and in particular, where I live [we have good], communications - A10, A14. I can get to anywhere in East Anglia in an hour, and there's big blue skies."

Male, 75+, South Cambridgeshire

The differences in community needs and priorities between areas were seen as fundamental barriers to effective joint governance. Participants working in education and social services were particularly clear about the different levels of need and different approaches required in different areas, arguing that combining areas with very different socio-economic profiles would inevitably lead to inappropriate prioritisation and resource allocation. This is a key insight about residents' reservations about going with Peterborough as they think Peterborough will absorb all the resources. They do not consider that there will be a mechanism to preserve budget allocations to different localities.

"So, I work within the education sector... the needs of the people are completely different. So, in Peterborough, there's high level of unemployment, there's low income households, there's high level of social needs. In like Cambridge centre, like East Cambs, all of these places, the level of need is different. So, for example, in Peterborough at the moment, they will be prioritising feeding children over the six weeks' holiday because the families can't afford to feed their children. In East Cambs, there's loads of activities that [are] being put on to support families for supporting their children during the holidays, and when you look at the two places, obviously, if you were merged together, you would prioritise feeding children over providing them with nice activities. But why should we have to go without to support another area?"

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

"It's not just about the total number; it's about the fact that the needs in Peterborough are totally different to the needs in Cambridgeshire. So, putting them both together, you actually cause a lot of disruption. It's difficult to actually offer this the same service to two different types of customer."

Male, 75+, East Cambridgeshire

Concerns about resource allocation and competing priorities were central to opposition to association with areas perceived as having greater needs. Participants worried that the resources and quality of services they currently enjoyed would be diverted to areas with higher levels of deprivation, threatening the community assets and quality of life that had attracted them to their current locations.

"What I see is there is a lot of money being put into Fenland and Peterborough. A lot of money. And if that has to continue, then where's that money come from? Is that then coming out of like East Cambs' budget? Are we then going to have to take a step back to allow that money to continue to be ploughed into Fenland and Peterborough? It makes me feel a little bit uncomfortable."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"So, myself am expecting my first child the end of the year. The reason I live in Ely is because it has all of these resources around me, and the worry is, is that by having areas with higher levels of needs that that will be taken away from us, and it doesn't seem fair, we've not done anything."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

In contrast to the opposition to Peterborough, participants from East Cambridgeshire expressed strong positive identification with Cambridge, describing themselves as feeling "part of Cambridge" and "at home there" despite living outside the city boundaries. This connection was not simply about convenience or transport links but reflected a deeper sense of shared identity and belonging that extended across administrative boundaries.

"I find it quite friendly. I find it a comfortable size, and yes I feel part of Cambridge. I feel part of the city because we're so close to Cambridge, which is the sort of I mean, when I go to Cambridge, I do feel very much at home there, but I really like living in Ely."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

The practical connections to Cambridge through commuting, transport links, and daily life patterns reinforced this sense of shared identity. Participants described choosing their current locations specifically because of the balance they offered between rural or small-town character and easy access to Cambridge for work, services, and cultural activities.

"Before me and my husband bought our first home, he lived in the centre of Cambridge, I lived in a tiny village, which doesn't even have a village shop. And we kind of wanted something in between the two, and we found Ely was perfect with the train. It's great for commuting into [Cambridge] for working [in] Cambridge."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

The perceived quality and prestige associated with Cambridge was also seen as an important factor, with participants noting that the university presence and international profile of Cambridge created expectations and standards that benefited the broader area. This was contrasted with perceptions of other areas that were seen as lacking them.

"That I wonder if the fact that Cambridge is supported quite heavily by the university as well. You know, Cambridge is a little bit more prestige because it does have the university. And I think, you know, from my experiences, from family, you know, services in Cambridge, you know, such as those things we've talked about earlier, like grass cutting, that there doesn't ever seem to be an issue with those kind of things... because I don't know Peterborough that well, but I certainly think you know from here and family talk that that is not an issue. And I think the fact that we have the university, there has to be a level of keeping Cambridge that little bit nicer."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

Local shopping and service preferences also reflected broader values about community connection and local accountability. Participants expressed preferences for local businesses and personal contact that mirrored their broader concerns about maintaining human-scale governance and community connection in any reorganisation arrangements.

Within Cambridge City itself, participants' broader geographic connections reflected patterns of movement and migration that had brought them to the area from other parts of Cambridgeshire and beyond. These movement patterns created communities of people who had actively chosen Cambridge for particular reasons, strengthening attachment to local character and the broader Cambridge-centred region.

"I lived in South Cambs in Bar Hill for 13 or 14 years before that. Having moved from Suffolk originally, my local community, I think the local businesses, the diversity in local businesses [is what I like about the area]."

Female, 35-44, Cambridge City

"We moved here from London, where we lived for six years previously. What I like about the local area is that it's very active and it's very multicultural. It sort of

punches way above its weight with regards to that, or to being metropolitan and cosmopolitan compared to the city size."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

Family connections and life course considerations also shaped geographic identities and connections to the Cambridge area. Participants described how family considerations, educational opportunities, and quality of life factors had influenced their choice of location and their ongoing connections to the Cambridge-centred region.

"I moved here from London, which is where I was born and pretty much lived until I moved here. So I do have some family here that have lived here a bit longer than I have, probably maybe six years now, and they moved here because I got a little brother. He's 11, and my mum wanted to kind of bring him to a place that was safer and maybe had better quality of schools."

Female, 25-34, Cambridge City

Within immediate local areas, the importance of long-term community connections and local knowledge was consistently emphasised. Long-term residents spoke about the evolution of their communities while highlighting the enduring importance of local connections and the human-scale character that made their places distinctive and liveable.

"I live on Arbury Road in Cambridge, which is technically West Chesterton, but which feels like Arbury. I was born in Cambridge. I've always lived here, so I've kind of been aware of the council for 40 plus years. Having lived here a long time, it's still small enough that you can know people. It feels a lot bigger than it used to, a lot more transient families, but there's still a core of people who have known each other since way back."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

"I live in Cambridge City. I've lived here for 40 years. About the community, I value the beauty of the area, and I worry about that being altered by overuse, over traffic and that sort of thing. So, the smallness and the historic importance of it, I value."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

The rural character and agricultural heritage of areas like Fenland and East Cambridgeshire were seen as fundamental to local identity and community connection. Participants emphasised the importance of connection to the land, traditional ways of life, and the distinctive character that distinguished rural areas from urban centres.

"I live in March town and have done for 20 years. What I value about this area is the rural character. We're surrounded by farmland, and that gives the place its

identity. People here have a strong connection to the land and to traditional ways of life."

Male, 75+, Fenland

"I live in Burwell, and I've been here for 39 years. It's a proper village community. Everyone knows everyone, and people look out for each other. The village has its own character and identity, and that's something we really value and want to preserve."

Male, 75+, East Cambridgeshire

Across all locations, participants expressed deep concerns about the potential for reorganisation to threaten local identity and community connection. There was widespread worry that larger authorities would not understand or value local distinctiveness, leading to standardised approaches that failed to recognise what made each place special and meaningful to residents.

"What worries me about reorganisation is that we'll lose that local connection. When decisions are made by people who don't know the area, who don't understand the local character and what makes each place special, you risk losing what people really value about where they live."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"Each area has its own identity and character. You can't just lump them all together and expect it to work. Ely is different from March, which is different from Wisbech, which is different from Peterborough. Those differences matter to people."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

Even within Peterborough itself, participants recognised the distinctive character of their city and its difference from surrounding rural areas. The urban, multicultural character of Peterborough was valued by its residents, but this very distinctiveness reinforced the arguments of rural participants that different types of places required different approaches to governance and service delivery.

"I live in the Wistow area of Peterborough, been here for 15 years. What I value about Peterborough is its diversity. We've got people from all over the world living here, and that creates a really vibrant, multicultural community."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"I live in the Paston area, been here for 12 years. Peterborough has its own distinct identity as a city. It's got its own character, its own communities, and its own way of doing things. That's different from the rural areas around us."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

The evidence from all focus groups demonstrates that place identity and community connection are not simply matters of local attachment, but encompass complex patterns of regional affinity, explicit opposition, and practical connection that shape residents' understanding of community and their preferences for governance arrangements. The strong identification with Cambridge among East Cambridgeshire residents, combined with their emphatic rejection of association with Peterborough, reflects deep-seated perceptions of shared identity, common interests, and natural patterns of social and economic connection that extend across current administrative boundaries. These patterns are reinforced by practical considerations about travel, accessibility, service quality, and resource allocation that create clear preferences for association with some areas and explicit opposition to others. The challenge for local government reorganisation lies in recognising and respecting these multi-layered place identities and patterns of connection, ensuring that new arrangements build upon rather than cut across the geographic affinities and oppositions that residents have developed. This requires understanding not just what makes each local area distinctive, but also how different places relate to each other and the broader regional networks of connection and opposition that shape residents' sense of community and belonging. Successful reorganisation must therefore work with rather than against these natural patterns of connection and opposition, creating governance arrangements that reflect and strengthen the geographic identities and affinities that residents value while avoiding forced associations that cut across fundamental differences in character, priorities, and community needs.

The practical patterns of daily life - transport, shopping, work, healthcare, education, and social activities - provide compelling evidence of the natural geographic connections that shape residents' sense of community and belonging. These everyday connections create powerful bonds that extend across administrative boundaries while reinforcing opposition to forced associations that cut across natural patterns of movement and activity. The evidence from focus group discussions reveals that residents' preferences for governance arrangements are deeply rooted in the practical realities of how they live, work, shop, and access services, creating clear patterns of connection and opposition that reflect genuine community networks rather than administrative convenience.

Transport infrastructure and accessibility patterns create fundamental connections that shape community identity and governance preferences. The ease of travel to Cambridge compared to the difficulty of reaching Peterborough reflects and reinforces broader patterns of economic and social connection that participants see as natural and appropriate foundations for governance arrangements.

"We've got the train station in Ely which connects us directly to Cambridge. It's so easy to get into Cambridge for work or shopping or entertainment. That's one of the main reasons we chose to live here - we get the benefits of a smaller place but with easy access to everything Cambridge offers."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

"The A10 connects us straight down to Cambridge. It's a natural corridor. When people from Ely need to go somewhere for major shopping or services, they go to Cambridge, not Peterborough. That's just the natural flow of how people live and work."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Shopping and retail patterns provide clear evidence of the natural catchment areas and service connections that bind communities together. Participants consistently described Cambridge as their natural destination for major shopping, specialist services, and retail activities, creating economic connections that reinforce broader community identity and belonging.

"When I need to go to a big supermarket or shopping centre, I go to Cambridge. When I need specialist services or want to go out for dinner or entertainment, I go to Cambridge. Peterborough might as well be on the moon for all the connection I have with it."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"All our major shopping is done in Cambridge. The Grand Arcade, John Lewis, all the shops we use are in Cambridge. We know Cambridge, we're comfortable there, we understand how it works. It's where we naturally go."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

Employment and commuting patterns create some of the strongest connections between communities, with many residents describing their work lives as centred on Cambridge despite living outside the city boundaries. These economic connections create shared interests and common concerns that participants see as natural foundations for governance arrangements.

"Most people I know who work outside Ely work in Cambridge. The train makes it so easy. There's a whole community of people who live here but work in Cambridge. That's the natural economic connection."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

"My husband works in Cambridge, I work in Cambridge. Our children go to school here but all our work connections, our professional networks, our career opportunities are in Cambridge. That's where our economic life is centred."

Female, 35-44, East Cambridgeshire

Healthcare and specialist service connections provide another layer of practical connection that reinforces broader community identity. The role of Cambridge as a

centre for specialist healthcare, professional services, and expert advice creates dependencies and connections that participants see as fundamental to their quality of life and community wellbeing.

"For anything specialist - hospital appointments, consultants, specialist shopping - we go to Cambridge. Addenbrooke's Hospital is where we go for serious medical care. That's another connection that ties us to Cambridge rather than anywhere else."

Male, 75+, East Cambridgeshire

"When you need specialist services - legal advice, financial services, medical specialists - you go to Cambridge. That's where the expertise is, that's where the quality services are. It's a natural centre for the whole area."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

Cultural and social connections create emotional and identity bonds that extend beyond practical necessity to encompass lifestyle, values, and community belonging. Participants described Cambridge as their cultural centre, the place they turn to for entertainment, social activities, and cultural enrichment, creating connections that are central to their quality of life and sense of community.

"For culture - theatres, museums, concerts, restaurants - we go to Cambridge. It's our cultural centre. We feel part of that cultural life even though we live outside the city. That's where we go for entertainment and cultural activities."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

"Cambridge is where we go for a night out, for special occasions, for cultural events. We know the restaurants, we know the venues, we feel comfortable there. It's part of our social life and our identity."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

Educational connections and aspirations create intergenerational bonds that shape long-term community identity and planning. The role of Cambridge as an educational centre creates pathways and opportunities that bind families and communities to the broader Cambridge region, influencing decisions about where to live, work, and invest in community life.

"Our children's educational aspirations are tied to Cambridge. The university, the sixth form colleges, the educational opportunities - that's all Cambridge-focused. That's where young people from here look for their future opportunities."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"The educational ecosystem here is all about Cambridge. From primary school through to university, the pathways and opportunities all lead towards Cambridge. That's the natural educational centre for this area."

Female, 35-44, East Cambridgeshire

Property markets and housing patterns reflect and reinforce broader economic and social connections, with participants describing their local housing market as fundamentally connected to Cambridge's economy and attractiveness. These economic connections create shared interests in maintaining and enhancing the Cambridge region's prosperity and quality of life.

"The property market here is tied to Cambridge. House prices, demand, the type of people who move here - it's all connected to Cambridge's economy and Cambridge's attractiveness. We're part of the Cambridge housing market, not Peterborough's."

Male, 35-44, East Cambridgeshire

"People move here because they want to be near Cambridge but can't afford Cambridge itself, or they want more space but still want Cambridge access. The whole housing market and population movement is Cambridge-oriented."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

Business and economic networks create professional and commercial connections that bind communities together through shared economic interests and mutual dependencies. The role of Cambridge as an economic engine creates ripple effects that extend throughout the surrounding area, creating natural economic regions that participants see as appropriate foundations for governance.

"The business connections, the economic networks, the supply chains - they all run towards Cambridge. Local businesses here serve Cambridge commuters, Cambridge workers, people whose economic life is tied to Cambridge."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"Cambridge is the economic engine for this whole area. The jobs, the opportunities, the economic growth - it all radiates out from Cambridge. We're part of that Cambridge economic region, not some separate entity."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

The absence of practical connections to Peterborough provides equally compelling evidence of the boundaries of natural community networks. Participants struggled to identify any practical reasons for connection to Peterborough, describing it as outside their natural area of activity and connection, reinforcing their opposition to governance

arrangements that would force association with areas outside their practical community networks.

"I can't think of a single reason why I would go to Peterborough for anything. Shopping, services, entertainment, work - there's nothing there that would draw me. It's just not part of my life or my community's life in any way."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

"Peterborough feels like a different world. Different shops, different services, different culture. I wouldn't know where to go or what to do there. It's not part of our natural area of connection or activity."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

From the perspective of Cambridge City residents, the role of Cambridge as a regional centre serving a much wider area than the city boundaries was clearly recognised and valued. This perspective reinforced the arguments of surrounding area residents that Cambridge represents a natural centre for regional governance that reflects genuine patterns of connection and dependency.

"People come into Cambridge from all the surrounding areas - Ely, the villages, South Cambridgeshire. You can see it in the traffic patterns, the train usage, the way the city fills up during the day. Cambridge is the natural centre for a much wider area."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

"Cambridge serves a much wider area than just the city itself. People come here for work, shopping, services, culture from all the surrounding areas. It's a regional centre, not just a local one."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

The comprehensive evidence of practical daily connections - from transport and shopping to work and culture - demonstrates that residents' preferences for governance arrangements are not based on abstract administrative considerations but on the lived reality of community networks, economic dependencies, and social connections that shape their daily lives. These patterns of connection create natural regions and communities of interest that extend across current administrative boundaries while creating clear boundaries of opposition and rejection. The challenge for local government reorganisation lies in recognising and respecting these natural patterns of connection and opposition, ensuring that new governance arrangements build upon rather than cut across the practical networks of community life. This requires understanding not just where people live, but how they live - where they work, shop, access services, seek entertainment, and build social connections. Successful reorganisation must therefore reflect the geography of daily life rather than the

convenience of administrative tidiness, creating governance arrangements that strengthen rather than weaken the practical connections that bind communities together and respecting the boundaries of opposition that reflect genuine differences in community networks, economic interests, and social connections.

Scale and Geography

The question of optimal scale and appropriate geographic boundaries emerged as one of the more contentious issues across all focus groups, revealing an understanding of the intricate relationships between authority size, geographic coverage, democratic representation, and service delivery effectiveness. Participants demonstrated clear awareness that decisions about scale and geography are not neutral technical considerations but fundamental choices that will determine whether reorganised authorities can effectively serve diverse communities across varied landscapes, settlement patterns, and socio-economic contexts. The discussions revealed deep scepticism about simplistic assumptions that larger authorities automatically deliver better outcomes, with participants identifying multiple ways in which inappropriate scale and geographic arrangements could undermine rather than enhance local government effectiveness, democratic accountability, and community connection.

Concerns about optimal authority size reflected nuanced understanding of organisational dynamics and the complex relationship between scale and effectiveness. Participants recognised that while very small authorities might lack resources and professional capacity, very large authorities could become unwieldy, bureaucratic, and disconnected from the communities they serve, suggesting that effective local government requires finding an appropriate balance rather than simply maximising size.

"There's definitely an optimal size for councils. Too small and you can't afford the expertise you need. Too big and you become this massive bureaucracy that can't respond to local needs. It's about finding the right balance."

Male, 55-64, Huntingdonshire

"Bigger isn't always better. Look at some of the massive councils - they're slow, bureaucratic, expensive to run. Sometimes smaller is more efficient because you're not carrying all that overhead."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

Geographic accessibility emerged as a fundamental equity issue that would determine whether reorganised authorities could serve all their communities fairly and effectively. Participants were acutely aware that distance, travel time, and transport availability create real barriers to access that disproportionately affect elderly people, those without private transport, people with disabilities, and families with limited financial resources, raising serious questions about the social justice implications of centralised service delivery models.

"If they centralise everything in one location, what about people who don't drive? What about elderly people? What about people who can't afford to travel long distances? It becomes really unfair."

Female, 65-74, Huntingdonshire

"The geography of this area is really important. You've got rural areas, market towns, urban areas - they all have different needs and different ways of accessing services. One size doesn't fit all."

Male, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

The fundamental differences between rural and urban areas were consistently highlighted as creating distinct service needs, delivery challenges, and governance requirements that could not be addressed through standardised approaches designed primarily for urban contexts. Participants from rural areas expressed particular concern that their voices and needs would be systematically marginalised in authorities dominated by urban populations and urban priorities.

"In a big authority dominated by urban areas, rural voices get lost. We have different priorities, different needs, different challenges. But we'll always be outvoted by the cities."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

"Rural areas need different services delivered in different ways. Mobile services, outreach, local hubs. Big urban-focused councils don't understand that. They think everyone can just travel to the city centre."

Female, 45-54, Fenland

Distance and travel considerations were seen as creating fundamental barriers to effective democratic representation and community engagement across large geographic areas. Participants questioned how councillors could maintain meaningful contact with and understanding of communities across very large authorities, particularly given poor public transport connections and the time and cost implications of extensive travel for both representatives and residents.

Participants articulated sophisticated understanding of how geographic and economic connections should inform governance arrangements. Their perspectives highlighted the importance of recognising natural patterns of connection and service delivery requirements that vary significantly across different areas.

"I would be very happy if it was like, you know, Cambridge, South Cambs and Huntingdon say; if that was the split rather than the whole of Cambridgeshire, because roads [feel] very different in Fenland than they do in Cambridge."

Male, 55-64, South Cambridgeshire

"I don't think there are any sensible solutions which separate Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire, because so much of what happens, sort of, in the ring of the donut is affected by Cambridge."

Male, 55-64, South Cambridgeshire

"Yes, and we would naturally look to Cambridge. I work in Cambridge. I'm sure others have various reasons going in and things like that."

Male, 55-64, South Cambridgeshire

"The distances involved are enormous. From one end of this proposed area to the other could be an hour's drive. How can councillors properly represent areas they rarely visit?"

Male, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

"Public transport between different parts of this area is virtually non-existent. If you don't have a car, you're completely cut off from council services if they're centralised."

Female, 25-34, Huntingdonshire

The importance of maintaining local presence and accessibility was emphasised as essential for both service delivery and democratic accountability. Participants argued that local offices and service points were not merely conveniences but fundamental requirements for ensuring that all communities could access services and that councillors and officers remained connected to and accountable to the communities they serve.

"You need local offices, local presence. Not just for convenience, but for accountability. When councillors and officers are based locally, they're part of the community. They see the problems firsthand."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

"Even if the main offices are elsewhere, you need local service points where people can go for help, to drop off documents, to speak to someone face to face. You can't do everything remotely."

Female, 35-44, Peterborough

Democratic representation challenges were seen as fundamental threats to local democracy that would result from excessive geographic scale and population size. Participants emphasised that effective representation requires councillors to have genuine local knowledge, regular community contact, and practical accessibility to constituents, all of which would be compromised by very large wards covering diverse communities across extensive geographic areas.

"How can one councillor properly represent a huge area with thousands of people? They can't know all the local issues, they can't be accessible to everyone. Democracy suffers when the scale gets too big."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

"Local councillors need to be genuinely local. They need to live in the area, shop in the area, use the services themselves. If wards get too big, you lose that local connection."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

Natural boundaries and community connections were consistently emphasised as more important than administrative convenience in determining appropriate geographic coverage for local authorities. Participants argued that successful governance arrangements must respect and build upon existing patterns of community connection, economic relationship, transport links, and geographic logic rather than imposing artificial boundaries that cut across established networks of local life.

"You can't just ignore natural boundaries and community connections. Rivers, roads, historical boundaries - they exist for a reason. They reflect how communities actually work and connect."

Female, 25-34, Cambridge City

"Administrative boundaries should follow natural patterns - how people travel, where they work, where they shop, where they go to school. Not just be drawn on a map for administrative convenience."

Male, 45-54, Cambridge City

Service delivery complexity across large and diverse areas was recognised as requiring sophisticated understanding of local needs, community characteristics, and geographic constraints. Participants emphasised that effective service delivery requires flexibility and local adaptation rather than standardised approaches that ignore the significant differences between urban and rural areas, different demographic groups, and varied community contexts.

"Different areas need different approaches to service delivery. What works in a city doesn't work in a village. What works for young families doesn't work for elderly people. You need flexibility, not standardisation."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"Some services can be centralised efficiently; others need to be delivered locally. You need to understand the service and the community to get that balance right. One-size-fits-all doesn't work."

Male, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

Organisational capacity and infrastructure concerns reflected practical understanding of the enormous challenges involved in merging different authorities with different systems, cultures, processes, and ways of working. Participants questioned whether the necessary infrastructure, systems, and management capacity existed to support much larger authorities without significant disruption to service delivery and democratic processes during potentially lengthy transition periods.

"Do they have the systems and infrastructure to support a much larger organisation? Different councils use different IT systems, different processes. Merging all that is a massive undertaking."

Female, 35-44, Peterborough

"The disruption of merging different organisations could go on for years. Different cultures, different ways of working, different systems. Meanwhile, services suffer while they try to sort it all out."

Male, 45-54, Peterborough

Communication and engagement challenges were seen as becoming exponentially more difficult across large geographic areas with diverse communities and varied communication needs. Participants questioned how larger authorities could maintain effective democratic engagement, ensure meaningful consultation, and provide accessible communication channels that reached all communities and enabled genuine participation in local governance and decision-making processes.

"How do you engage with communities across such a huge area? How do you consult people, how do you make sure everyone's voice is heard? It becomes much more difficult and expensive at that scale."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"Local democracy depends on people feeling connected to their council, knowing their councillors, being able to participate. When the scale gets too big, people feel disconnected, and democracy suffers."

Male, 75+, East Cambridgeshire

Economic efficiency assumptions were challenged by participants who recognised that larger organisations could experience diseconomies of scale that offset theoretical efficiency gains. This reflected sophisticated understanding of organisational dynamics and recognition that optimal efficiency might be achieved at moderate rather than maximum scale, particularly when considering the full costs of democratic engagement, community consultation, and responsive service delivery.

"They promise economies of scale, but what about diseconomies of scale? When organisations get too big, they become inefficient, slow, bureaucratic. There's an optimal size for everything."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

"Smaller organisations can be more efficient because they're more focused, more responsive, less bureaucratic. You don't necessarily save money by making everything bigger."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

Population density and representation concerns reflected understanding that democratic representation requires more than simple population-based calculations and must account for geographic, economic, and community diversity. Participants from rural and smaller urban areas were particularly concerned that their voices would be systematically overwhelmed by larger urban populations, leading to governance arrangements that reflected urban priorities while marginalising rural and small-town needs and perspectives.

"In a large authority, the urban areas will always dominate because that's where most of the people are. Rural areas, market towns, smaller communities - their voices get drowned out."

Female, 55-64, Fenland

"It's not just about population numbers. Geographic representation matters too. A small rural area might have fewer people, but it still needs proper representation and understanding of its needs."

Male, 25-34, Fenland

The comprehensive evidence from all focus groups demonstrates that scale and geography are fundamental determinants of local government effectiveness, democratic accountability, and community connection that cannot be treated as technical details or administrative conveniences.

Participants showed sophisticated understanding of the complex relationships between authority size, geographic coverage, service delivery, democratic representation, and community engagement, recognising that these factors interact in ways that can either enhance or undermine the core purposes of local government. Their concerns about inappropriate scale and geographic boundaries reflect genuine understanding of how these factors shape the practical reality of local governance and its impact on community life, democratic participation, and social equity.

The challenge for local government reorganisation lies in finding optimal arrangements that balance the potential benefits of larger scale - increased resources, professional capacity, strategic capability, and service resilience - with the fundamental requirements

of effective local governance - accessibility, responsiveness, local knowledge, democratic accountability, and community connection. This requires careful consideration of natural boundaries, community networks, transport infrastructure, service delivery requirements, and democratic representation needs rather than simple application of population targets, administrative convenience, or theoretical efficiency models. Successful reorganisation must therefore respect the geography of community life while building sufficient scale and capacity to deliver effective services and strategic leadership, potentially requiring innovative governance approaches that combine larger strategic authorities with strong local delivery mechanisms, democratic structures that ensure effective representation across diverse geographic and community contexts, and service delivery models that balance efficiency with accessibility and local responsiveness.

Democratic Representation and Accountability

One of the most significant findings across all focus groups was the limited direct contact that most participants had with their elected councillors, revealing a fundamental disconnect between the theoretical model of local democratic representation and the practical reality of how residents experience local government. Rather than engaging with local government primarily through democratic channels and representative relationships, participants overwhelmingly described experiencing local government through service delivery, with councillors playing little or no role in their day-to-day interactions with local authorities. This finding has profound implications for understanding public attitudes toward local government reorganisation, as it suggests that for many residents, changes to democratic structures and representative arrangements may be less significant than impacts on service quality, accessibility, and responsiveness. The evidence reveals that accountability operates primarily through service performance rather than through traditional democratic mechanisms, with residents judging councils based on whether services work effectively rather than on the quality of democratic representation or the accessibility of elected representatives.

The extent of limited councillor contact was striking across all focus groups, with many participants unable to name their councillors or describe any direct interaction with elected representatives. This disconnect between residents and their elected representatives suggests that the traditional model of local democratic accountability through regular councillor-constituent contact may not reflect the reality of how most people experience local government.

Participants provided stark illustration of this democratic disconnect, with some expressing complete disengagement from electoral processes due to perceived lack of councillor engagement. However, their perspectives also revealed sophisticated understanding of accountability mechanisms.

"I generally won't vote. My view on life's really simple. If you want me to vote for you, you've got to at least make enough effort to engage with me."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"I have never voted for anything, any, any election at all. I've never met a parish councillor, district councillor, town councillor, county councillor."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"I think the link between what councils do and [what] Council Tax is paid to who has to be made more clear and more kind of transparent and accountable."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

"I don't really know who my councillor is. I've never had any contact with them. When I need something from the council, I just ring the main number or go online. I don't think about councillors at all."

Female, 35-44, Peterborough

"I couldn't tell you who my local councillor is. I've lived here for years, and I've never heard from them, never seen them, never needed to contact them. The council is just the services they provide."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

"Councillors? I'm not sure I could name mine. When I have an issue with the council, I contact the department directly. I don't think about the political side of it, just whether the services work or not."

Female, 45-54, Cambridge City

"I've never contacted a councillor about anything. If I have a problem with bins or planning or whatever, I just contact the council directly. I don't really see what councillors are for in day-to-day life."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

Instead of engaging with local government through democratic representatives, participants consistently described a service-focused experience where their primary concern was whether council services functioned effectively rather than who was making political decisions or how democratic processes operated. This service-centric view of local government suggests that for many residents, the quality and accessibility of service delivery is far more important than the structure or accessibility of democratic representation.

"For me, the council is about whether the bins get collected, whether the roads are fixed, whether planning applications get dealt with properly. I don't really think about who's making the decisions, just whether the services work."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"What matters to me is whether I can get through to someone when I need help, whether they sort out problems quickly, whether the services are good quality. The political side of it doesn't really affect my daily life."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"I judge the council on whether they deliver good services efficiently. I don't really care about the politics or who's in charge, as long as they do their job properly and don't waste money."

Female, 65-74, East Cambridgeshire

"The council for me is about practical things - housing, benefits, planning, environmental health. I don't have much contact with the political side. It's all about whether the services work when you need them."

Male, 75+, East Cambridgeshire

Accountability mechanisms appeared to operate primarily through service performance rather than through traditional democratic channels, with participants describing how they held councils accountable through their experience of service quality, responsiveness, and value for money rather than through engagement with elected representatives or democratic processes. This suggests that effective service delivery may be more important for democratic legitimacy than traditional measures of democratic engagement and representation.

"I hold the council accountable through whether their services are good or bad. If the services are poor, I complain. If they're good, I'm satisfied. That's how I judge them, not through councillors."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

"Accountability for me is about whether they respond when you contact them, whether they fix problems, whether they provide value for money. That's how I judge whether they're doing a good job."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

"When services go wrong, that's when you notice the council. When everything works smoothly, you don't think about them at all. So, accountability is really about service delivery, not politics."

Female, 55-64, Fenland

"I don't vote based on who my councillor is, I vote based on which party I think will run services better. Local elections are about service delivery, not individual representatives."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

The disconnect between democratic representation and service delivery experience was consistently highlighted, with participants describing councillors and council services as operating in separate spheres with little connection between political structures and day-

to-day service delivery. This separation suggests that reorganisation debates focused primarily on democratic structures may miss the aspects of local government that most directly affect residents' lives and satisfaction.

"There's a big gap between the political side of the council and the service delivery side. I interact with the services all the time, but I never see or hear from councillors. They seem to exist in a different world."

Female, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

"The people who actually deliver services - the planning officers, the environmental health officers, the housing officers - they're the ones who matter to residents. Councillors are a bit irrelevant to most people's experience."

Male, 55-64, Huntingdonshire

"I think most people experience the council through services, not through democracy. We don't go to council meetings; we don't contact councillors. We just use the services and judge them on that."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

"The democratic side of local government feels quite remote from everyday life. What matters is whether you can get a planning application processed, whether your bins get collected, whether you can get help when you need it."

Male, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

When participants did express expectations about democratic representation, these were generally focused on ensuring effective service delivery rather than on traditional concepts of democratic engagement or political representation. Councillors were seen as having a role in ensuring services functioned properly rather than as primary channels for democratic participation or community voice, suggesting a more managerial than political view of local democratic representation.

"I suppose councillors should be there if you have a really serious problem that you can't resolve through normal channels. But most of the time, you just want the services to work properly without needing political intervention."

Female, 25-34, Cambridge City

"Good councillors should be invisible most of the time because the services are running smoothly. You only need them when things go wrong, and the normal processes aren't working."

Male, 45-54, Cambridge City

"I'd like to know who my councillor is and how to contact them if I needed to, but I don't want them bothering me with politics. I just want them to make sure the services work properly."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

"Councillors should be making sure the council runs efficiently and provides good services. That's their job. The political stuff is less important than making sure things work for residents."

Male, 65-74, Cambridge City

The implications of this service-focused experience for local government reorganisation were significant, with participants suggesting that changes to democratic structures might have limited impact on their experience of local government as long as service delivery remained effective. This pragmatic approach to reorganisation prioritised service continuity and quality over democratic representation concerns, reflecting the reality that most residents experience local government through services rather than through democratic engagement.

"If councillors are already quite remote from most people's experience, making the wards bigger and the council larger will make them even more remote. But maybe that doesn't matter if the services still work."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"I'm not sure reorganisation will make much difference to how most people experience local government. We'll still just contact the council when we need services. The political structure is a bit irrelevant."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

"As long as reorganisation doesn't make the services worse, I don't really care about the democratic side. Most people don't engage with councillors anyway, so making the wards bigger might not matter much."

Female, 35-44, Peterborough

"The risk with reorganisation is that it disrupts service delivery while they're sorting out the political structures. The services are what matter to people, not the number of councillors or the size of wards."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

Electoral behaviour and voting patterns reflected this service-focused approach to local government, with participants describing voting decisions based on party competence in service delivery rather than on knowledge of individual candidates or assessment of democratic representation quality. This suggests that local electoral accountability

operates primarily through judgements about service performance rather than through evaluation of representative relationships or democratic engagement.

"I vote in local elections based on which party I think will provide better services, not based on knowing the individual candidates. I don't know who most of the candidates are anyway."

Female, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"Local elections are about service delivery and value for money, not about individual representation. I vote for the party I think will run things better, not for specific councillors."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"I don't really know the difference between what county councillors do and what district councillors do. I just know that some of them are responsible for the services I use, and I want those services to be good."

Female, 35-44, East Cambridgeshire

"The current system is confusing because you don't know which councillor is responsible for what. At least with a unitary council, there would be one set of councillors responsible for everything."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

Service quality emerged as the primary accountability mechanism through which residents evaluated council performance and democratic legitimacy, with participants describing how service delivery standards provided the main evidence for judging whether councils were fulfilling their responsibilities effectively. This service-based accountability model suggests that democratic legitimacy may depend more on effective service delivery than on traditional measures of democratic engagement and representation.

"Poor service delivery is the main way I know when the council isn't doing its job properly. If services are good, I assume they're being well managed. If services are poor, I know something's wrong."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

"You can tell whether a council is well run by the quality of its services. Good services mean good management. Poor services mean poor management. That's the real accountability mechanism."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

"When I'm dissatisfied with the council, it's usually because a service has failed or been poorly delivered. That's when I complain or consider voting differently. It's all about service performance."

Female, 45-54, Fenland

"The best accountability is when services work so well that you don't need to think about the council at all. When you have to start contacting councillors, it usually means something has gone wrong."

Male, 25-34, Fenland

These findings reveal a fundamental challenge for local government reorganisation and democratic theory more broadly: the apparent disconnect between theoretical models of local democratic representation and the practical reality of how most residents experience and evaluate local government. The evidence suggests that for many people, local government is primarily a service delivery organisation rather than a democratic institution, with accountability operating through service performance rather than through representative relationships. This has significant implications for reorganisation debates, suggesting that arguments focused primarily on democratic representation, ward sizes, or councillor accessibility may be less relevant to most residents than concerns about service quality, efficiency, and responsiveness. The challenge for reorganisation is therefore to ensure that changes to democratic structures enhance rather than undermine service delivery effectiveness, recognising that democratic legitimacy may depend more on delivering effective services than on maintaining traditional models of representative democracy. This requires careful consideration of how democratic structures can support rather than hinder effective service delivery, how accountability mechanisms can reflect the reality of service-focused citizen engagement, and how reorganisation can strengthen the connection between democratic governance and service performance rather than treating them as separate spheres of local government activity.

Trust and Confidence

Trust and confidence in local government emerged as fundamental prerequisites for effective governance and democratic legitimacy, with participants demonstrating acute awareness of how transparency, accountability, competence, and responsiveness shape public attitudes toward local authorities and their capacity to secure support for major policy initiatives.

The discussions revealed that trust is not simply a desirable outcome but an essential foundation for effective local governance, particularly in contexts of significant change such as local government reorganisation or major development programmes. Participants consistently emphasised that trust must be earned through demonstrated competence, maintained through transparent communication and fair decision-making, and can be easily damaged by poor service delivery, lack of accountability, or perceived unfairness in resource allocation and policy implementation. The evidence suggests that in areas experiencing substantial development and change, such as Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the maintenance of public trust requires particularly high standards of transparency and accountability, as the scale and pace of change can create opportunities for decisions to be made without adequate public scrutiny, potentially engendering distrust that undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of local governance.

Development pressure and planning failures emerged as major sources of distrust across multiple locations, with participants expressing profound concerns about the quality of decision-making, the transparency of planning processes, and the apparent disconnect between development decisions and community needs. These concerns were particularly acute in areas experiencing rapid growth and development pressure, where participants questioned whether planning decisions were being made in the public interest or were unduly influenced by commercial considerations.

The evidence suggests that development-related decisions represent a critical test of local government credibility, with poor planning decisions, inadequate infrastructure provision, and lack of community consultation creating lasting damage to public trust and confidence in local governance. In Peterborough particularly, participants provided extensive evidence of how planning failures, questionable investment decisions, and lack of accountability had fundamentally undermined their confidence in local government.

"I have got very little faith in Peterborough City Council. As a resident of Peterborough City Council, I see different ventures entered...there's back handlers going on here, because there's no common sense in the decisions that are made."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"The planners don't enforce any of this stuff. So, you know...it's so contradictory, they're never following through. They never hold themselves to account, and they've always got an excuse."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"They had a consultation about going to a four day week. They never published the data. They never showed what people's views were. They just said, Oh, it's perfect. It's making everything better."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

"They had the money to make capital investment in that hotel that has cost millions and millions, and that makes me boil, because that's capital that's tax money that's gone into a Hilton Hotel."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

The scale of distrust expressed by Peterborough participants was particularly striking, with detailed accounts of planning enforcement failures, questionable capital investments, and poor-quality development that had fundamentally altered their relationship with their local authority. These concerns extended beyond individual planning decisions to broader questions about governance competence, financial management, and democratic accountability.

"When you grant planning permission for like, 1100 houses, like, actually look at the people that are going to live there, and when you're making that decision, ensure the fact that they have to build a school in there, at least plan those into it, so they're not putting up thousands and thousands of houses putting increased demand on the limited services we already have available."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

"Some of the houses, especially over, like, in Paston, and then ones like that, like they're rushed up and things as well. And it then just kind of gets handed, or in this case, especially with like Cardia, not handed over to the council. And then there's nobody kind of holding them accountable then for the fact that all these houses have gone up in an absolute shoddy condition."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

"They allow a lot of companies into Peterborough to build warehouses, but then those companies don't integrate themselves with the community. So, you know, they don't necessarily, they just slap up the warehouse, fill it with people doing a job, but they then don't integrate into that community."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

The disconnect between planning promises and delivery emerged as a particularly corrosive factor in undermining public trust, with participants describing repeated experiences of development proposals that failed to deliver promised infrastructure, community facilities, or quality standards. This pattern of broken promises in the planning system appeared to create broader cynicism about local government commitments and competence, with implications extending far beyond planning policy to general confidence in local governance.

"If you go and read all the planning applications, boring enough...you read the plan and what's promised, it's never delivered."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

The physical deterioration of local environments emerged as a visible manifestation of governance failures that had profound impacts on residents' trust and confidence in their local authority. Participants described how the transformation of their local area through inappropriate development, loss of green space, and proliferation of warehouses had fundamentally altered their perception of their council's priorities and competence.

"The deterioration over the 31 years since I've lived here, I can't tell you how different it is. Peterborough was fabulous. It was green, you know, it was vibrant. It is full of warehouses now. It's monstrous. It's awful. It's horrendous."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"They do not think about infrastructure. And you know, I've lived here 15 years. I want to be proud of where I live, but when it ranks in the top three for obesity, the top three for the least favourite place in the country to live, all these really negative things, you've got to really look to the council and think, what are you doing?"

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"You have to ask, like, who's actually making those decisions? And thinking, yeah, this will be great for the residents. The library is massively underfunded. We're dealing with the regional pool, and that was basically left to run into the ground."

Male, 25-34, Peterborough

Leadership and accountability failures were identified as fundamental barriers to public trust, with participants expressing frustration about the apparent lack of clear responsibility and accountability within local government structures. The evidence suggests that trust requires clear lines of responsibility and accountability, with identifiable individuals who can be held responsible for decisions and their consequences. When accountability structures are unclear or ineffective, public trust is undermined and cynicism about local government increases.

"What does the chief executive actually do? Because when you write to him, he passes it down to the department you've been struggling to deal with for 18 months. He then won't take any responsibility. He doesn't seem to have any control over the council leaders."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"They put an email out going, oh, look at our budget. We're filling the gap. Going to our interactive piece. And you know, you help us. Well, you go in there and you go, geez, if you're spending that on certain things, it's just shocking. They don't manage their budget like a commercial business."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"Make people feel that they're really involved in the direction of the city. And I don't know, there probably is a medium-term plan for Peterborough. I don't know whether it's being shared with the public. No idea - you'd have to go and find it."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

Fenland participants highlighted how distance from decision-making centres can exacerbate trust problems, particularly when decisions affecting local communities are made by people with limited understanding of local conditions and needs. Their concerns about being marginalised within larger authorities reflected broader anxieties about whether reorganisation might further distance decision-makers from the communities they serve, potentially undermining the local knowledge and accountability that participants valued in smaller councils.

"I think it could, in many respects, be disastrous. And I can give you some examples around here where decisions are taken in Cambridgeshire about stuff that's happening in Fenland. Just locally, we have drainage ditches which become full of water, blocked, overflowing because of Fenland surface water. But it took ages for the councillors to try and sort out who's responsible, Cambridgeshire County Council or Fenland."

Male, 75+, Fenland

"If you say to someone at Cambridgeshire Council, I live in Fenland, they look at you and go, okay, and you tell them the village you live in, they go, okay. They're not going to care, right? Because they believe that their council's the centre of the universe."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

"Things like development - Wisbech is not the same as March. It's certainly not the same as Peterborough or Cambridge. And so, you need to come here. I don't think you need to live here and be here all the time, but you have to get away out from behind your desk and understand the impact of those activities."

Female, 25-34, Fenland

The comprehensive evidence demonstrates that trust and confidence are not peripheral concerns but central requirements for effective local governance, particularly in contexts of significant change and development pressure.

The findings reveal that public trust operates as both a prerequisite for and an outcome of effective governance, requiring continuous attention to transparency, accountability, competence, and fairness in decision-making and service delivery.

In areas experiencing substantial development, such as Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the maintenance of public trust requires particularly rigorous standards of transparency and accountability, as the scale and complexity of development decisions create multiple opportunities for public confidence to be undermined by perceptions of unfair influence, inadequate consultation, or decisions made without proper consideration of community impacts.

The challenge for local government reorganisation lies in ensuring that structural changes enhance rather than undermine the foundations of public trust, recognising that trust damaged during reorganisation processes may take years to rebuild and that loss of public confidence can fundamentally compromise the effectiveness and legitimacy of local governance. This requires careful attention to maintaining service quality during transition periods, ensuring transparent communication about reorganisation processes and objectives, demonstrating genuine commitment to public consultation and engagement, and establishing robust accountability mechanisms that can maintain public confidence in the integrity of decision-making processes.

The evidence suggests that successful reorganisation must therefore prioritise trust-building and trust-maintenance as central objectives rather than treating public confidence as a secondary consideration, recognising that without public trust, even technically sound reorganisation initiatives may fail to deliver their intended benefits and may actually undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of local governance.

The particular challenge in areas experiencing rapid development and change is that the disinfecting light of accountability and transparency becomes even more crucial when the scale and pace of change creates opportunities for decisions to be made without adequate scrutiny, potentially engendering the kind of profound distrust that can take generations to repair and that fundamentally undermines the social contract between local government and the communities it serves.

Transition Concerns and Opportunities

Transition concerns and opportunities emerged as central considerations in participants' evaluation of local government reorganisation proposals.

Participants demonstrated acute awareness that reorganisation represents a significant undertaking with substantial implications for service delivery, democratic accountability, staff retention, system integration, and community relationships, requiring careful planning, realistic timescales, and robust safeguards to protect essential services during periods of institutional change.

"I think the redesign, I can see it for financial reasons, economy reasons, and all the rest of it and cost cutting, but there's nothing written into it that says we will work more closely with our public, the people we represent."

Female, 65-74, South Cambridgeshire

The evidence suggests that while participants recognised potential opportunities for improvement through reorganisation, their primary concerns focused on managing transition risks and ensuring that the process of change did not undermine the quality, accessibility, or continuity of services that communities depend upon. These concerns were informed by observations of previous reorganisation exercises in local government and other public services, with participants drawing on experiences of NHS reorganisations, council mergers, and business restructuring to inform their expectations about the challenges and opportunities associated with major institutional change.

Service disruption during transition periods emerged as the most immediate and pressing concern, with participants expressing anxiety about the potential for essential services to be compromised while councils focused on reorganisation processes rather than service delivery. These concerns reflected understanding that major organisational change inevitably creates periods of uncertainty, confusion, and reduced effectiveness as new systems are implemented, staff adapt to new roles and procedures, and institutional relationships are reconfigured. Participants were particularly concerned about the impact on vulnerable service users who depend on consistent, reliable access to social care, housing support, and other essential services that cannot be easily interrupted or delayed without serious consequences for individual wellbeing and community safety.

"My biggest worry is that during the transition, services will suffer. We've seen it before with other reorganisations - everything gets disrupted while they sort out the new systems."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

"The risk is that while they're busy reorganising themselves, the day-to-day services that people depend on get neglected. That's what happened with the NHS reorganisations."

Male, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

"Change is always disruptive, and it's usually the most vulnerable people who suffer most during transitions. They need to have proper plans to protect essential services."

Female, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

"That'll be even worse if there's less local accountability, and you have one larger authority, quite possibly."

Male, 45-54, South Cambridgeshire

Staff retention and knowledge preservation emerged as critical challenges requiring careful management during reorganisation processes, with participants recognising that experienced staff represent valuable repositories of local knowledge, procedural expertise, and community relationships that could be lost if reorganisation creates uncertainty, redundancy, or career disruption for existing employees. The evidence suggests that participants understood the importance of retaining institutional memory and local expertise while also recognising that reorganisation inevitably creates anxiety and uncertainty for staff that may lead to departures of experienced personnel at precisely the time when their knowledge and skills are most needed to ensure continuity of service delivery.

"When councils merge, you often lose experienced staff who know the local area and understand how things work. That local knowledge is really valuable and hard to replace."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

"There's always uncertainty for staff during reorganisations, and good people often leave rather than wait to see what happens. That's a real loss of expertise and experience."

Female, 45-54, Peterborough

"The people who know how to get things done locally might not fit into the new structure. You could lose all that practical knowledge about how the area works."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

System integration challenges were recognised as significant technical and operational obstacles that could create substantial disruption if not properly managed, with participants drawing on experiences of technology failures, data migration problems, and

procedural incompatibilities in other organisational mergers to inform their expectations about the complexity of bringing together different councils with different systems, procedures, and ways of working. These concerns reflected understanding that the technical aspects of reorganisation are often more complex and time-consuming than political discussions suggest, with potential for significant service disruption if integration processes are poorly planned or inadequately resourced.

"Merging different computer systems is always a nightmare. You see it in business mergers - nothing works properly for months while they try to integrate everything."

Female, 25-34, East Cambridgeshire

"Each council probably has different ways of doing things, different procedures, different systems. Bringing all that together is going to be incredibly complex."

Male, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

"The technical side of merging councils is probably much more complicated than politicians realise. It's not just about drawing new boundaries on a map."

Female, 35-44, Fenland

Cost and resource implications of reorganisation were viewed with considerable scepticism, with participants expressing doubt about official estimates of transition costs and timescales based on their observations of previous reorganisation exercises that had exceeded budgets and taken longer than planned. These concerns reflected broader scepticism about the financial benefits of reorganisation and anxiety that resources devoted to reorganisation processes would reduce funding available for service delivery during periods when budgets are already under pressure and service demands are increasing.

"Reorganisations always cost more than they say they will. Look at any major change programme - they always go over budget and take longer than planned."

Male, 65-74, Peterborough

"They'll spend millions on consultants and new systems and then claim they're saving money. The transition costs are always huge and often forgotten when they calculate the benefits."

Female, 55-64, Cambridge City

"While they're spending money on reorganisation, that's money that's not going on services. The opportunity cost is significant, especially when budgets are already tight."

Male, 35-44, East Cambridgeshire

Democratic accountability during transition periods was identified as a particular concern, with participants recognising that reorganisation processes can create confusion about roles, responsibilities, and lines of accountability that may leave communities without clear channels for raising concerns, seeking help, or holding decision-makers accountable for service performance. These concerns reflected understanding that democratic processes require clarity about who is responsible for what, and that reorganisation can create periods where these relationships are unclear or in flux, potentially leaving residents without effective recourse when services fail or problems arise.

"During the transition period, who's actually accountable? When everything's changing, it's easy for things to fall through the cracks and for no one to take responsibility."

Female, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

"The democratic process gets disrupted during reorganisations. Councillors are focused on the merger rather than on representing their constituents."

Male, 55-64, Fenland

"There's always a period where no one really knows who's in charge or who to contact about problems. That's particularly difficult for people who need help urgently."

Female, 35-44, Peterborough

Despite these concerns, participants also recognised significant opportunities for improvement through well-managed reorganisation, particularly in terms of modernising outdated systems, improving coordination between services, and creating capacity for investment in better technology and more specialist expertise. These opportunities were seen as potentially valuable but dependent on effective implementation and careful attention to preserving existing strengths while addressing current weaknesses in local government provision.

"If it's done properly, reorganisation could be an opportunity to modernise services and get rid of outdated practices. Sometimes you need a big change to break old habits."

Male, 25-34, Cambridge City

"Larger councils might be able to invest in better technology and more specialist staff. That could improve services if they get the implementation right."

Female, 35-44, East Cambridgeshire

"There's potential for better coordination between different services. At the moment, different councils don't always work well together, so unification could help with that."

Male, 45-54, Huntingdonshire

Learning from past experiences emerged as a crucial requirement for successful reorganisation, with participants emphasising the importance of studying previous reorganisation exercises to understand what works, what fails, and how to avoid repeating mistakes that have characterised previous attempts at major structural change in local government and other public services. This reflected sophisticated understanding that reorganisation is not a novel process and that there is substantial evidence available about effective and ineffective approaches to managing major institutional change.

"We need to learn from previous reorganisations and not repeat the same mistakes. There's plenty of evidence about what works and what doesn't."

Female, 55-64, Fenland

"Other areas have been through this process, so there should be lessons about how to manage the transition better and avoid the worst disruption."

Male, 35-44, Peterborough

"The key is proper planning and realistic timescales. Too many reorganisations are rushed and that's when things go wrong."

Female, 45-54, Cambridge City

Preserving existing strengths and effective practices was identified as a crucial requirement for successful reorganisation, with participants emphasising that change should build on what works well rather than disrupting effective services for the sake of standardisation or administrative convenience. This reflected understanding that different councils may have developed different approaches that work well for their particular circumstances and communities, and that reorganisation should seek to preserve and spread good practice rather than imposing uniform approaches that may be less effective in particular contexts.

"They need to identify what's working well in the current system and make sure that's preserved during the transition. Don't throw away the good with the bad."

Male, 55-64, East Cambridgeshire

"Some councils are better than others at certain things. The challenge is to keep the best practices and improve the weaker areas."

Female, 35-44, Huntingdonshire

"Local services that work well shouldn't be disrupted just for the sake of standardisation. If something works, leave it alone."

Male, 45-54, Fenland

Communication and engagement during transition periods were identified as essential requirements for maintaining public confidence and ensuring that reorganisation processes do not undermine community relationships or democratic accountability. Participants emphasised that uncertainty and lack of information create anxiety and reduce public confidence, making clear, regular, and honest communication about progress, problems, and timescales essential for maintaining public support and ensuring that communities can continue to access help and support during periods of institutional change.

"People need to be kept informed about what's happening and when. Uncertainty makes everything worse, so clear communication is essential."

Female, 25-34, Peterborough

"There should be regular updates about progress and any problems that arise. People can cope with difficulties if they understand what's happening and why."

Male, 35-44, Cambridge City

"Residents need to know who to contact during the transition and how to get help if services aren't working properly. Clear communication channels are vital."

Female, 45-54, East Cambridgeshire

The comprehensive evidence demonstrates that participants approached reorganisation proposals with sophisticated understanding of both the potential benefits and the substantial risks associated with major institutional change, recognising that successful reorganisation requires careful planning, realistic timescales, robust safeguards for essential services, effective communication, and genuine commitment to learning from previous experiences of structural change in local government and other public services.

The challenge for reorganisation proponents lies in demonstrating that they have adequate understanding of these complexities and sufficient commitment to managing transition risks to justify the disruption and uncertainty that reorganisation inevitably creates. This requires moving beyond simple assertions about the benefits of larger authorities to detailed planning for transition management, service protection, staff retention, system integration, and democratic accountability during periods of institutional change.

The evidence suggests that public support for reorganisation may depend as much on confidence in transition management as on belief in the long-term benefits of structural change, requiring reorganisation advocates to demonstrate competence in change management as well as vision for improved local governance. Without such

demonstration, reorganisation proposals may be viewed as creating unnecessary risk and disruption for uncertain benefits, potentially undermining public confidence in local government and democratic processes more broadly.