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 you 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 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 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 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 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.