Essex Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) research

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National Centre for Social Research

Acknowledgements

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We are also grateful to the resident engagement steering group for their input in the participant briefing materials on behalf of Local Authorities across Greater Essex.

Introduction

Research background

Local Government infrastructure in Essex is due to be reorganised. However, the shape and priorities of the new arrangement are yet to be fully determined. To inform these decisions, Essex's existing councils want to understand how residents feel about the general direction of the forthcoming changes.

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) was commissioned to conduct research with residents of Greater Essex, exploring their views on **Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)**. This research was co-ordinated by Essex County Council on behalf of the 15 councils across Greater Essex.

This slide deck discusses the insights from the qualitative research; a separate slide deck on quantitative survey findings is available.

What is LGR?
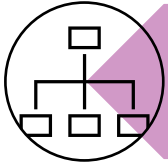
Central Government has set out plans to replace Essex's two-tier system of local government with a **single-tier system of unitary authorities**. The goal is to have **simpler council structures**, improving efficiency and capacity.

Currently, there are 15 councils across Greater Essex. These councils will be replaced with a smaller (but still undetermined) number of unitary authorities, which will be **responsible for all local services in the area.**
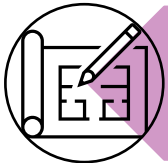
NatCen's research findings will inform the development of business cases which set out different plans for how the new unitary authorities should be arranged.

Aims of the research

The research explored:

- Residents' views and perceptions of Local Government Reorganisation.

- What residents see as the key opportunities and considerations around LGR for themselves, their families, and their communities, in relation to 5 key areas: services, transparency and accountability, the economy, resident engagement and local identity.

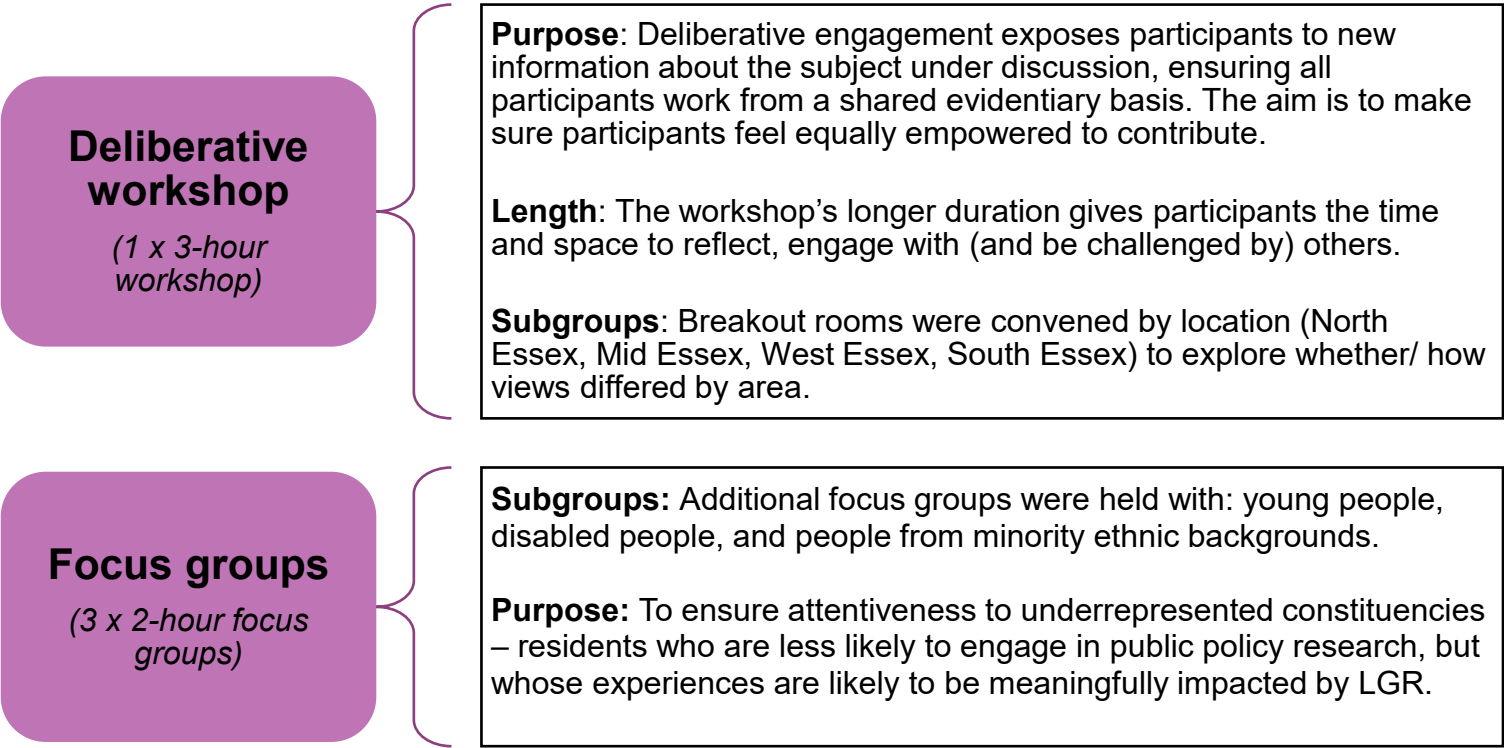- Ultimately, **what residents value, and want to see prioritised**, in the context of LGR.

Notes on research findings

- The research **did not** suggest, or seek residents' **views on, specific LGR proposals** (i.e. specific institutional arrangements).

- We aimed to elicit residents' **overarching priorities** for Essex's reorganised local government, not their views on how exactly that reorganisation should look or be realised (participants did not reflect on their preferred number of unitary authorities, and their geographical boundaries, for example).

- The sample represents a small subset of the population, so the **findings may not capture the views of all Greater Essex residents.**

Methodological overview

LGR is a complex process, the outcome of which remains uncertain. Nevertheless, whatever form it takes, the effects of LGR will be felt across the county. To ensure a diverse range of Essex residents were able and empowered to contribute to discussions about the future of their county, we took a two-pronged methodological approach:

Deliberative workshop
(1 x 3-hour workshop)

Purpose: Deliberative engagement exposes participants to new information about the subject under discussion, ensuring all participants work from a shared evidentiary basis. The aim is to make sure participants feel equally empowered to contribute.

Length: The workshop's longer duration gives participants the time and space to reflect, engage with (and be challenged by) others.

Subgroups: Breakout rooms were convened by location (North Essex, Mid Essex, West Essex, South Essex) to explore whether/ how views differed by area.

Focus groups
(3 x 2-hour focus groups)

Subgroups: Additional focus groups were held with: young people, disabled people, and people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Purpose: To ensure attentiveness to underrepresented constituencies – residents who are less likely to engage in public policy research, but whose experiences are likely to be meaningfully impacted by LGR.

Research encounters involved:

- **Briefing:** residents were sent pre-workshop briefing slides. In the workshop, participants heard a presentation from expert speaker: Jen Gould, Deputy Chief Executive, Epping Forest District Council.

- **Facilitation:** facilitators posed questions throughout the sessions to elicit discussion about LGR; its possible impacts on individuals, families and communities.

- **Deliberation**: discussions captured residents' views about, and priorities for, LGR.

Recruitment and sample

Recruitment criteria for location in Essex was based on participants' postcode. Some postcodes are on the borders between areas in Essex. Therefore, there is some overlap in the geographical areas of participants for the breakout room groups.

Deliberative workshop
(30 participants total)

Participants recruited through Criteria Recruitment, a trusted recruitment provider.

The sample was **reflective of the wider population of Essex** in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and social grade.

Quotas were set for the below four areas to ensure a spread of participants from across the county and to identify different viewpoints by geographical area.
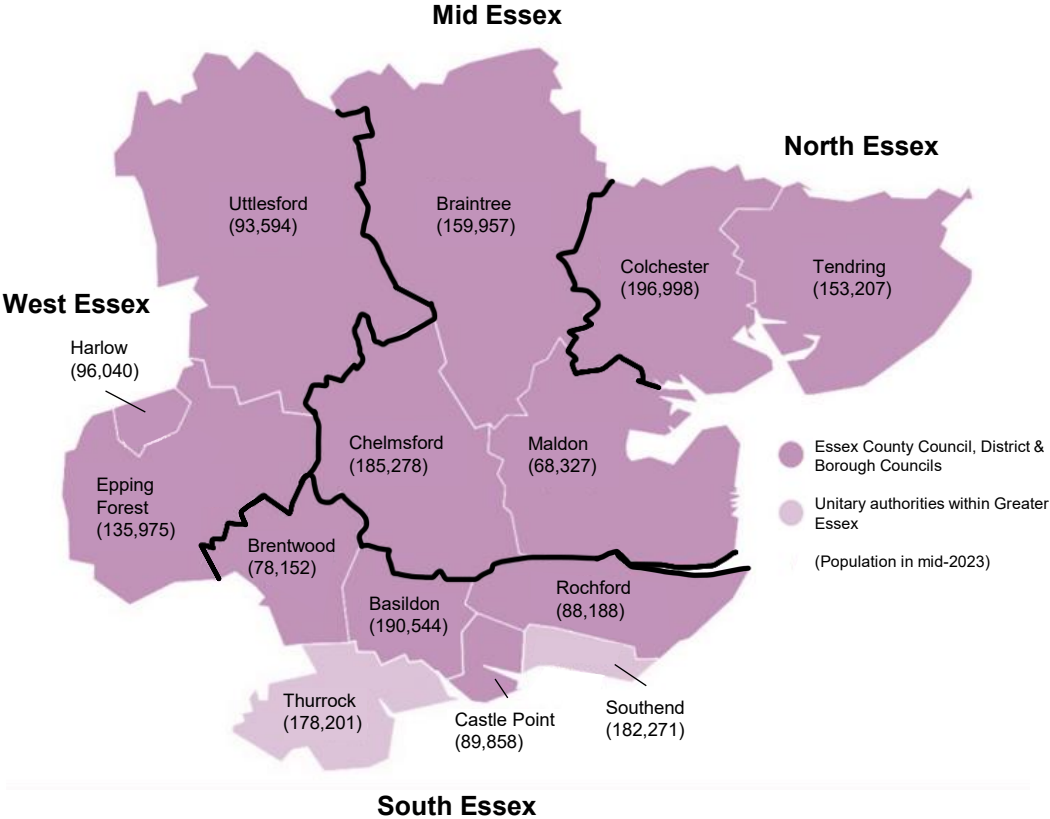
6 x North Essex (Colchester and Tendring)
6 x Mid Essex (Maldon, Chelmsford and Braintree)
10 x West Essex (Harlow, Uttlesford and Epping Forest)
8 x South Essex (Brentwood, Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford, Southend, and Thurrock)

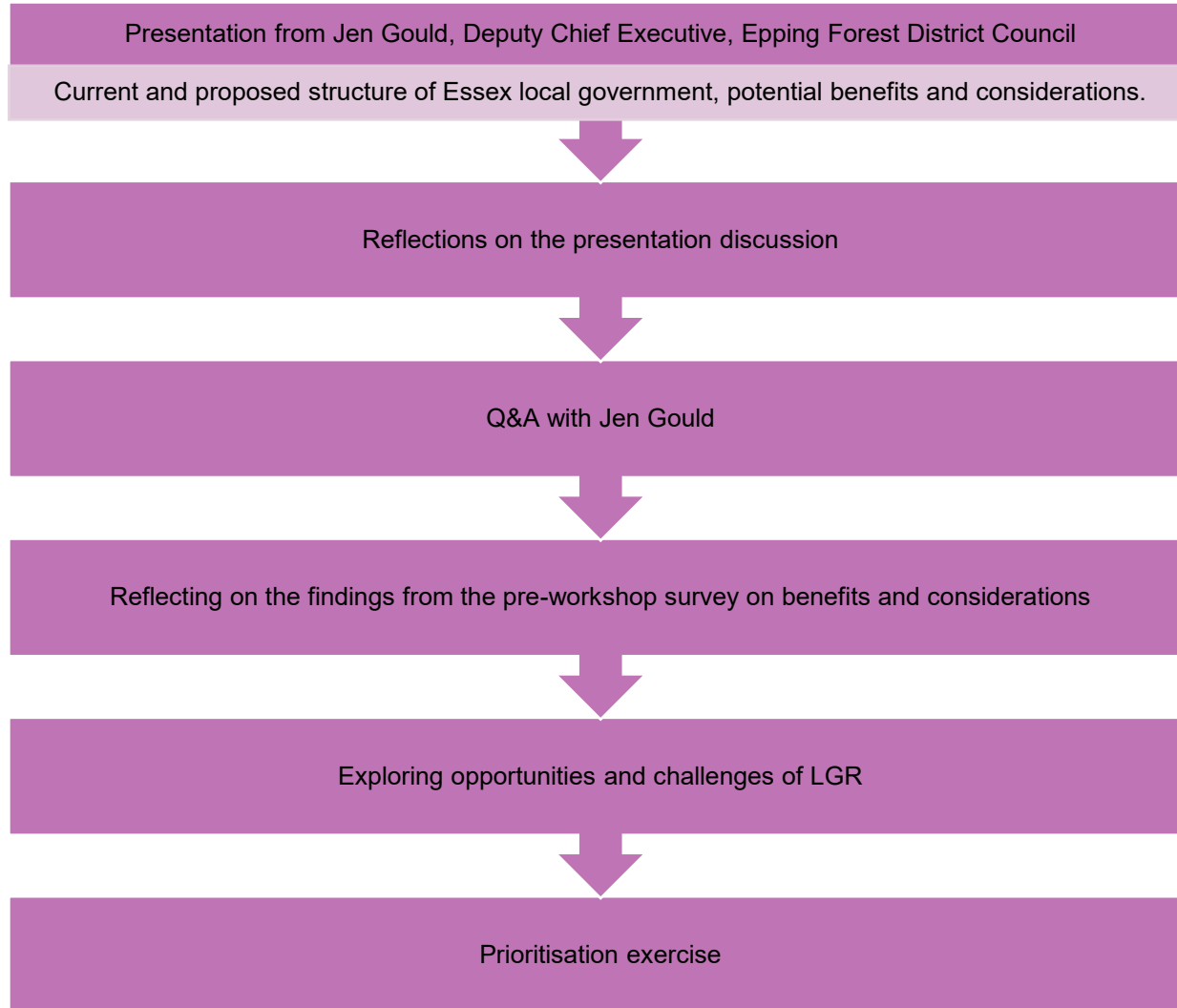**Focus groups**
(22 participants total)

Participants recruited through mixed approach; Essex County Council shared focus group invitation with Essex-based community groups, supplemented by Criteria Recruitment.

The sample was made of residents from across the county.

8 x Young people (aged 16-25)
8 x People from ethnic minority backgrounds
6 x People with disabilities and/or health conditions

Mid Essex

North Essex

West Essex

Uttlesford (93,594)

Braintree (159,957)

Colchester (196,998)

Tendring (153,207)

Harlow (96,040)

Chelmsford (185,278)

Maldon (68,327)

Epping Forest (135,975)

Brentwood (78,152)

Basildon (190,544)

Rochford (88,188)

Thurrock (178,201)

Castle Point (89,858)

Southend (182,271)

South Essex

● Essex County Council, District & Borough Councils

● Unitary authorities within Greater Essex

(Population in mid-2023)

Workshop structure and information provided

Presentation from Jen Gould, Deputy Chief Executive, Epping Forest District Council

Current and proposed structure of Essex local government, potential benefits and considerations.

Reflections on the presentation discussion

Q&A with Jen Gould

Reflecting on the findings from the pre-workshop survey on benefits and considerations

Exploring opportunities and challenges of LGR

Prioritisation exercise

Before the deliberative workshop, participants were given briefing materials, setting out a definition of LGR and what it might mean for Essex – the opportunities and challenges. Participants also completed a short survey, capturing their views on the benefits, risks, and priorities of LGR.

During the workshop, participants heard from an expert speaker, who provided an overview of the current council structure in Greater Essex, and how LGR will change that structure. The presentation explained how responsibility for local service provisions will change; reiterating the aims of LGR, as well as the opportunities and considerations that might come from it.

Participants were given three opportunities to discuss their thoughts and feelings about LGR, and how it may affect them and their communities. These discussions alternated between 'breakout rooms', in which participants were split by geographical area (see previous slide), and plenary discussions (involving the whole group).

The focus groups followed the same structure and format, but did not include an expert presentation.

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# Findings from the workshop and focus groups
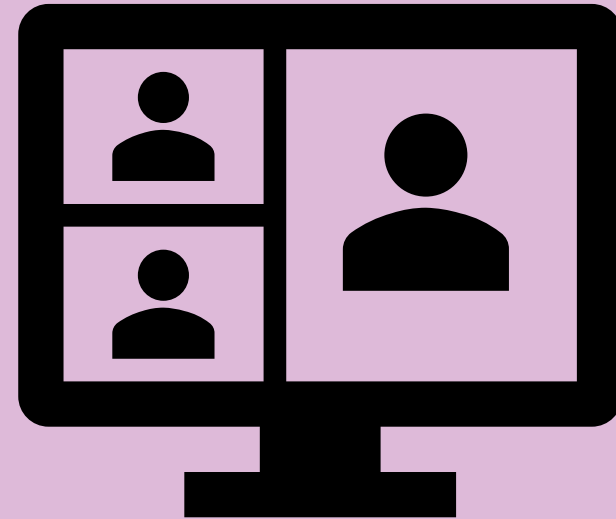
Key findings
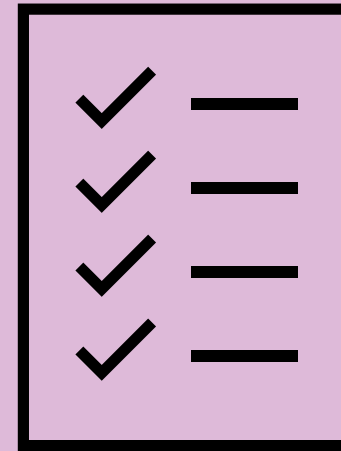
Key findings

Uncertainty around the practicalities of LGR

- Residents **recognised the long-term benefits** of LGR (e.g. economic benefits, greater efficiency) but worried about the short-term consequences.

- There was uncertainty around **how the transition period would be managed** and what the impact would be on services.

- Residents were also **concerned about the fairness of distributing resources** more evenly, in terms of managing existing council debts and ensuring areas with the greatest need would have adequate provisions.
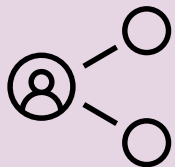
Desire for transparency and consultation

- Given the uncertainties around LGR, **transparency about decisions made** was of vital importance. This included how decisions were made, by who, and what the positive and negative impacts will be.

- Residents saw the changes as likely to have a significant impact on their lives, and therefore emphasised the need for **communities to be consulted, to ensure local priorities are considered**.
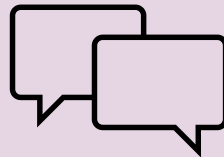
Service delivery considered the key area to prioritise

- **Improving public services was widely viewed as the most important area** to prioritise in decisions made about LGR. This was seen to be the most tangible area for councils to influence, have the greatest benefits for the most amount of people, and positively impact other areas, e.g. the economy.

- **Preserving local identity was viewed as the lowest priority area** as residents thought it would be difficult for councils to influence, and in some cases, were sceptical about the extent to which this would lead to positive changes.
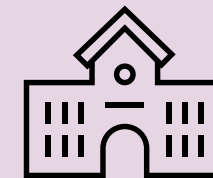
Initial feelings about
LGR

Initial feelings about LGR

Uncertainties around the rationale for LGR

"Where's the **money** coming from? Is it [the] case they just want to cut costs and provide a lesser service?"
(West Essex breakout room)

"The whole point of making it more efficient is it **costs less or I get a better service** for the same money, I don't get a different service for more money."
(People with disabilities and/or health conditions' focus group)

"It's quite key to … **demonstrate why** they're going through all this change because if it is going to save the public money, then you'd think that should play out in terms of council tax not rising."
(North Essex breakout room)

Positive outlook about greater efficiency of services

"It'll be more **streamlined** … if there's an issue or you've got a concern, [you could just] ring one place rather than trying to figure it out."
(Mid Essex breakout room)

"I've always considered that the split responsibilities has been basic inefficiency and … **a unitary authority is a far better approach**."
(People with disabilities and/or health conditions' focus group)

"In [some] areas, services are spread too thinly on the ground, so it makes a bit more sense to equally distribute them so that they can be **more efficient.**"
(Mid Essex breakout room)

Mixed views about distribution of resources across wider areas

"How will the services be distributed evenly? **[If] one area requires more investment** than another … how will that be evened out?"
(Ethnic minority backgrounds focus group)

"We're not affluent area, but … you're gonna **take away** everything from us to firefight something like Thurrock or someone who's in a worse position than what we are."
(Mid Essex breakout room)

"[Resources have] to be **distributed evenly**. What's the point otherwise? Everybody's equal, aren't they?"
(West Essex breakout room)

Worry about the impact of the transition period

"The councils are gonna be more focused on having the schools and the hospitals being put into place … so if people have **problems** that are quite niche, they're going to **not really attend to them.**"
(Young people focus group)

"You want to reduce cost, put that money back into services. But … it's going to take you one to two, **possibly five years to get everything up and running.**"
(Mid Essex breakout room)

"The point on it being more efficient and effective, I think that will happen over time. I think there's definitely a world in which it's quite an **inefficient process to begin with**."
(Ethnic minority backgrounds focus group)

Improving public
services
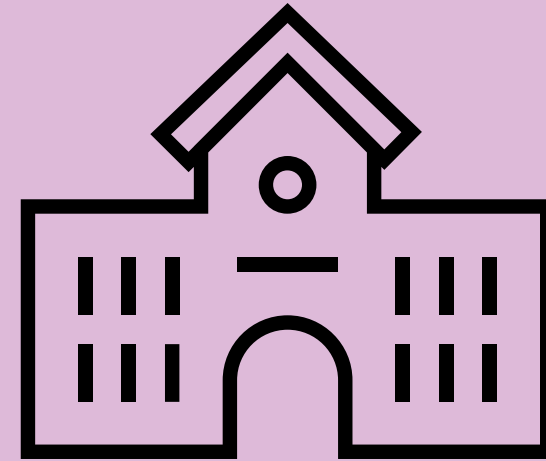
Opportunities

In the workshop and focus groups, participants discussed what Local Government Reorganisation might mean for the delivery and quality of public services. This is how they understood the potential opportunities.

When discussing the impact of LGR on public services, **many participants were unsure about the possible benefits.** They felt they did not have enough detail about LGR to accurately predict how it would affect the services used by them and their communities.

Potential opportunities for **individuals and families**

- The organisation and allocation of services might be **simplified** and **better organised** as a result of LGR.
- This could mean that services are **more efficiently run** and **more aligned** with each other:

For example: Currently, waste collection and disposal is run by separate councils, each with their own standards and requirements (e.g. regarding the number of bins collected and the types of waste collected in each). Consolidating these service providers should standardise procedures – making the service consistent across the county, and, in turn, making it simpler for the council to collect and manage waste.

For example: Simplifying and making it clearer who is responsible for housing for disabled people.

- Some thought this could lead to **services being more cohesive and communicating better**, which would mean fewer people would get 'lost' being referred between services. Some noted this happens when it is unclear who is responsible for services or responding to queries.

Potential opportunities for **the wider community**

- **Support could be targeted** at certain groups, for example, residents with disabilities and/or health conditions.
- Some participants felt that services were already targeted in Essex. However, others said LGR could bring out better or more targeted service provision.
- Some disabled participants or participants with health conditions saw LGR as an opportunity to improve housing provision for disabled communities in Essex.

"Essex County [Council] is quite involved in housing for disabled and other disadvantaged people, whereas the official responsibility for housing it lies with the districts, and that's another duplication that would go [when LGR is implemented]" (People with disabilities and/or health conditions' focus group)

Considerations

Although participants did not feel they had enough information or context to assess the potential benefits of LGR to public services, they raised a number of concerns/considerations:

Possible **logistical issues**

- Some participants were concerned that the **services in their current locations might close**, meaning that they would have to travel to different places to access them:

  > "Are we going to be sharing [services] with other boroughs and are we going to be travelling long distances to go there… you need money to travel which you might not have."
  > (Ethnic minority backgrounds focus group)

- This would be particularly negative for **older people and people on lower incomes** who may not be able to afford to travel.
  - However, others might find services more accessible.
- Some were worried that the transition to LGR would **disrupt services**, especially if there were **redundancies** within local government. For example, some residents were concerned about the potential for strike action to affect bin collection.

Service **provision may not be local enough**

- Unitary Authorities (UAs) will cover larger geographic areas than the existing councils. Participants from West, North and Mid Essex, as well as those from minority ethnic backgrounds, worried that councillors in these larger regions would **lack sufficient knowledge of the local areas within the UA.**

  > "The downside is that the councils now know the area very well and people feel closer to them, and it [the council] is going to be not so close when they represent a larger area."
  > (People with disabilities and/or health conditions' focus group)

- Consequently, they raised concerns that:
  - LGR might result in service provision being **less attuned or tailored to local needs**; some were concerned that services may not be distributed evenly, and that some areas would be left behind if resources targeted particular areas.
  - The **quality of public services would decline**. For example, waiting times for services might increase due to potential cuts to staffing, or services serving larger areas of residents.

Considerations

Questions about **funding and resource**

- Some were worried that **service providers would lose staff** in the transition to LGR.

    "Are we going to lose [council] jobs locally and then have a central council further away in Essex? What does that mean [for] the employment prospects for people in Clacton that do work for the local council here?" (North Essex breakout room)

- Some specific concerns were:
    - Residents were concerned that access to schools could become more competitive.
    - Some West Essex residents – who described their local services as high quality – were anxious to ensure there was no reduction in quality.

Questions about **changes to council tax**

- Most participants were concerned about council tax increasing due to LGR, and many were worried about the **possibility of services being cut** despite increases in council tax.

    "If they're putting the Council tax up, it's not really going to be more cost effective for us because we'll be paying more each year for the same services." (North Essex breakout room)

Suggestions

Participants had a number of suggestions for how LGR might maximise the benefits delivered, and mitigate the risks posed, to public services.

A phased transition

- Some residents suggested a **gradual transition** from the current system to the new LGR arrangements in order to minimise disruption to public services.

Transparency about decisions

- Others said Essex County Council (ECC), Local Authorities (LAs) and the new Unitary Authorities (UAs) must be **transparent with residents** about the details of planned changes and how they may affect services – for example, by providing information about anticipated service disruptions.

- Several participants also said it would be helpful to be given **information about the successes or challenges faced by current UAs.**
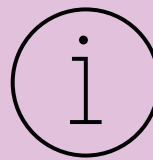
Consult residents and staff across Essex

- Consultation should involve speaking to residents and staff in existing UAs about how local needs are met in single-tier systems.

- Many participants recommended ECC, LAs and new UAs actively **seek insights from existing UAs** about how they are running public services – for example, what is working and what isn't, and how the transition was managed. ECC should learn from their successes and mistakes, to make sure public services are improved.

- Ask residents in each area of Essex what their priorities are – do they want changes to particular services?
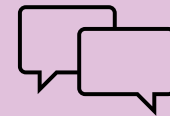
Boosting the economy
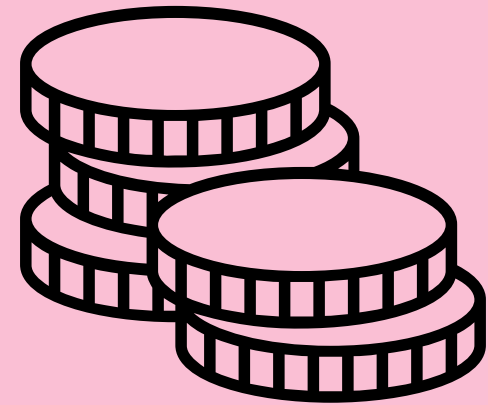
Opportunities

In the workshop and focus groups, participants discussed how Local Government Reorganisation might boost the economy across Essex, and in local areas. This is how they understood the potential opportunities.

Participants were somewhat reticent about the potential of LGR to boost the local economy. This was because they often felt that the **economic advantages of LGR would come as a result of changes in other areas**, such as public services.

Potential opportunities for **the wider community**

- Possible investments in businesses could **create local jobs and new infrastructure.**
- Participants thought Essex's proximity to London would ensure consistent business investment.
- Some noted that this would create more local jobs for residents.

Some noted that smaller areas of Essex, like Clacton and Walton, needed more investment to help boost their economy. One participant noted that Clacton has poor transport links, so investments would be beneficial in this area.

- Boosting the economy may **attract people to the area.**
- Some mentioned that good services would increase the likelihood of people moving to the area. One resident gave the example of their house recently increasing in price as a train station was recently built near them, making their area a more desirable place to live.
- Boosting the economy may **boost morale.**
- Some participants mentioned they were disappointed in the way their county is currently being run, and that boosting the economy might fortify local morale.

Considerations

Participants raised a number of concerns/considerations about the economic consequences of LGR:

Resource distribution

- Most participants questioned whether the UAs would **prioritise the needs of local areas.**

- However, residents from West Essex were also concerned that attentiveness to local needs might cause UAs to **redistribute resources** from wealthy areas, like West Essex, to less advantaged ones.

  "It would be a worry if you moved to this area because you thought it was a good area to live in and it was being run well, [and then] to have to pick up the flack from elsewhere in Essex." (West Essex breakout room)

- Residents from West Essex were also concerned about the potential impacts of merging with councils deemed less 'successful'.

  "Up in the Northeast, north of Colchester, and Tendring, they're suffering hugely, and obviously the big worry for people in successful council boroughs, is that we're going to be just subsidising their inefficiency" (West Essex breakout room)

- Similar concerns were raised about **debt absorption**. For example, residents from South Essex were concerned that if Thurrock were to merge with another area, the need to service Thurrock's debt would result in funds being taken away from other areas, negatively impacting their economy and public services.

Smaller areas may be **less likely to attract investment**

- Some participants thought that cities, such as Chelmsford, would attract investment, but that **smaller towns**, like Witham, **would be overlooked**.

Job cuts

- When merging councils, many were concerned that overlapping or duplicated roles would lead to **local government job cuts**.

Suggestions

Participants had a few suggestions for how LGR might maximise the benefits delivered, and mitigate the risks posed, to the economy. However, many participants expressed reservations, saying they did not know enough about local economic conditions or prospects to make hard or clear suggestions.

New UAs should focus on economy and infrastructure in the long-term

- For example, **building affordable housing**. This would have positive effects in the short term, such as job creation, and long term, such as ensuring suitable and affordable housing for residents, particularly vulnerable residents and residents with financial difficulties.

Retain local government staff knowledge and expertise

- Some suggested that it should be a priority for UAs to **retain the knowledge and expertise of existing staff** – keeping them on in comparable posts – as many councillors have knowledge about local issues and have strong relationships with residents that could improve outcomes.
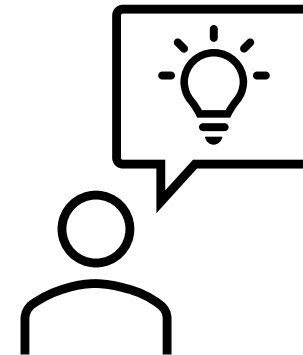
Increasing transparency and accountability

Opportunities

In the workshop and focus groups, participants discussed how Local Government Reorganisation might increase transparency and accountability between local government and residents. This is how they understood the potential opportunities.

Potential opportunities for **individuals and families**

- Having a **single councillor** for residents to contact, rather than a larger team. At present, some residents are unsure who to contact about specific issues.
  - This will make accessing services, and knowing who is responsible for services, easier and more convenient.
  - Some were concerned about their council tax being used to pay for multiple councillors, so having fewer would be better.

- It may be **clearer who is responsible for what** and how decisions are made.
  - Some participants noted there will be fewer 'blame games' as it will be clear who is accountable for policy decisions or changes.
  - This could lead to more efficient decision making as there are fewer people involved.

Potential opportunities for **the wider community**

- Increased transparency and accountability may **increase participation of underrepresented groups** in local government.
- Young people noted that increasing transparency may encourage them to get involved in local government. For example, having a dedicated forum for residents to raise questions to councillors in each UA could lead to more interest from young people.

Some young people said they find out who to contact in the council about various issues through social media. Having one central contact would make solving issues much easier – increasing transparency and accountability.

"If anyone has any queries about anything, who to report to, we kind of go straight to the Facebook page, ask our councillor, who do we ask? Because it's not very clear...if there was one straight answer for that, it would be a lot easier…a lot of things would be dealt with a lot quicker." (Young people focus group)

Considerations

Participants raised a number of concerns/considerations about the impact of LGR on local government transparency and accountability:

Some were worried that **fewer councillors** would have a negative effect on transparency and accountability

- Some people were **unclear how LGR could improve accountability or transparency**, or thought that fewer staff would mean decisions and **actions take longer** to implement.
    - A resident in the disability and/or health condition focus group was concerned that LGR might result in less accountability for services they use, which are currently run by the district council.
    - Some had logistical concerns about accessing councillors.
    - Others had negative experiences with previous institutional mergers, claiming accountability did not improve. They worried that their issues would not be resolved by one (more) central contact. They were therefore worried about LGR leading to poorer transparency and accountability.

Many were concerned **councillors will not have local knowledge**

- Some questioned **how UAs will decide on their councillors**, and wondered about the extent to which councillors could have knowledge of all of the local areas within the new UAs.

    "When I have had engagement with [local councillors] they are aware of their local area… it's worrying a little bit that we might lose some of those people" (West Essex breakout room)

- They also noted councillors need to be **representative of different communities** – for example, coming from particular minority ethnic backgrounds to reflect their area's demographic makeup.

Suggestions

Participants had a number of suggestions for how LGR could increase transparency and accountability.

Increase engagement with residents and local government staff	**Transparency about plans for spending, and what UAs spend their funds on**	**UAs publish targets and their progress towards them**
• Some suggested knowledge from current councils should be retained where possible, as there is a lot of existing expertise about local areas and residents' needs. • Many suggested LAs survey or speak to existing UAs to see what has been effective and ineffective in their transition, and why. This could inform LGR and make sure benefits are realised, and risks mitigated. • Participants suggested consulting residents using a range of methods, e.g. letters, public assemblies, and through online forums, such as existing resident Facebook or WhatsApp groups.	• One suggestion to ensure accountability was regular public forums, where local council leaders can be asked questions by residents, although it was noted that this may take lots of resource to do, and may delay action.	• Some suggested councils should set clear targets for improvements, and publish their progress toward them, to increase transparency.

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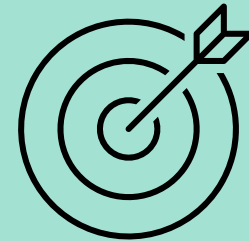
Encouraging resident engagement
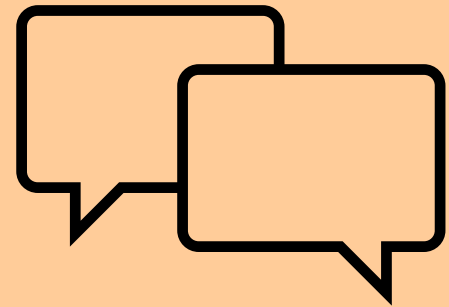
Opportunities

Participants discussed how Local Government Reorganisation could encourage resident engagement. This is how they understood the potential opportunities.

Opportunities for residents to **influence decisions about LGR**

- Residents felt that being consulted about LGR was important for:
- **Building public trust** and **gaining public buy-in,** as residents will be impacted by the changes in significant ways.
- Ensuring **changes are shaped by local needs** rather than just following the directive from national government.
- This could be achieved through a **wider public consultation** exercise (see Suggestions), gathering input from a wide range of residents.

> "I think encouraging resident engagement needs to be [considered…] so that residents don't feel left out of the loop…And if they wish to, then they can get involved in decision making." (Ethnic minority backgrounds focus group)

Opportunities for **improvements to resident engagement** under new local government arrangements

- Frequent and intentional resident engagement was seen as crucial given the wider area and greater population that new unitary authorities would need to represent. This included:
- Ensuring channels for resident engagement are widely advertised and **cater to everyone** (e.g. surgeries run at a range of times).
- **Keeping residents informed** of developments was another key aspect of engagement that residents valued.

> *Young people highlighted opportunities for **greater youth engagement:***
>
> *Establishing youth voice forums within each unitary authority could lead to more localised meetings than are possible within the current Essex Youth Assembly, and opportunities for young people to have greater influence on their communities.*

> "Young people should be quite involved in it [decisions about LGR]. I mean, we're going to carry on growing up here or potentially live here when we're older. So I feel like we should be interested in what's going on." (Young people focus group)

Considerations

Participants raised a number of concerns/considerations about the prospect of increased resident engagement:

Risk that resident engagement exercises **lose local focus**:

- Residents expressed concerns about the **logistical challenges** of engaging residents across a wider area, in terms of accommodating a larger population, and being **responsive to the different needs of residents in different areas.**
- It was **unclear how this would be managed** in practice.
    - Being able to engage with representatives in a more **local capacity** was important for sustaining engagement, but this was seen as improbable due to fewer councillors covering a wider area.
    - Some felt that issues outside of their local area were not relevant to them and would not be supportive of an authority-wide consultation/forum.

    "Some things that are going on in one part of Essex are totally irrelevant to someone who in another part of it…we can't have someone sitting in Harlow talking about something going on in Pitsea." (West Essex breakout room)

Many were concerned **about how to resident views genuinely inform change:**

- Whilst resident engagement was seen as an important function of their local authority, some were sceptical about the extent to which residents' views would be considered:
    - Some **viewed resident engagement as 'performative'** and resulted in no real change, based on previous experiences.
    - Others saw **reduced resident engagement as a natural consequence of the restructure**, as serving a wider area would mean unitary authorities would be less responsive.
- These findings highlight a need for resident **engagement at a local level**, ensuring views of different communities are listened to and acted upon.

    "Out of all the decisions, they implement one and then discard the rest of them. And when challenged they come back and then say, 'Oh, that's what their consultation recommended.' So, I'm really sceptical about it." (Mid Essex breakout room)

Suggestions

Participants had a number of suggestions for how LGR could increase resident engagement.

Increasing the frequency and variety of resident engagement exercises

- Participants suggested a **range of methods** to engage residents, including:
  - Citizens assemblies;
  - Other forms of deliberative engagement;
  - Online surveys or polls;
  - Surgeries with residents – some suggested these take place online and in-person, so that residents with different technical abilities and busy schedules can contribute.

- Residents also wanted to be **engaged at a local level**, within their communities. This meant:
  - **Smaller meetings** with residents in different areas.
  - **Attention given to local issues** to bridge the gap between district councils and unitary authorities.

"[Councils] could…sell the vision of why the change is happening, how it's going to benefit people, and then…gauge…[public perceptions] to make sure they've got it right in terms of how they're taking it forward." (North Essex breakout room)

Keeping residents informed about developments

- **Regular updates** would help residents to stay informed and understand the changes being made. This meant:
  - Being clear about the benefits of changes, as well as the risks, would help to sustain buy-in.

- There was an appetite for updates about local areas specifically.
  - One suggestion was a newsletter outlining the local changes, which would make residents feel they were being **engaged on a personal level.**

*Residents from minority ethnic groups suggested councils could engage their communities better **by utilising existing networks** on WhatsApp, e.g. via community leaders. This platform was seen as a more effective way to reach people than conventional methods (e.g. letters), particularly for those who speak other languages*

"The problem is there's no engagement with us as residents…but as a local resident…I'll go on Facebook and find it on WhatsApp…The information [channel] is there. It's just that there's no one who's engaging with [it]." (Ethnic minority background focus group)

Preserving local identity
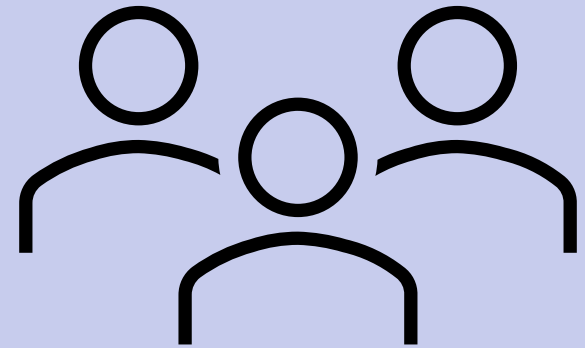
Views on impact of LGR on local identity

Participants had **mixed views** on the ways in which LGR would impact local identity:

- Residents saw local identity as **something to be protected, rather than something that might be strengthened** as a result of LGR.
  - Whilst participants generally viewed local identity as important, some felt this was not connected to their local council and would not be impacted by LGR at all.
  - Others, by contrast, felt that local government and local identity are connected, as the former provides community services which influence how people feel about their local area. Changes to service provision could therefore influence local identity.

"For me, identity is where you identify with the people you live around…I don't identify with Chelmsford Council. I don't identify with Baddow village council [sic]. I identify with the people." (People with disabilities and/or health conditions' focus group)

"Local identities died out generations ago. I haven't felt an identity with any of the areas I've lived in since I was a child." (People with disabilities and/or health conditions' focus group)

"It'll be quite easy for us to preserve the identities no matter what decision is made [about LGR]…We will all do our best to preserve it." (People with disabilities and/or health conditions' focus group)

Considerations and Suggestions

Participants raised a number of concerns/considerations relating to local identity, and some suggestions on how to preserve local identity in the wake of LGR:

Loss of local provision for communities

- Residents expressed concerns about **whether local charities, community projects, and events would continue** under new local government arrangements.
    - Participants mentioned community health services, community hubs, youth hubs, and sports hubs.
- Residents suggested unitary authorities fund more community/social facilities to foster community spirit.

Lack of cohesion between areas newly grouped under new structures

- Residents in some areas were concerned about the boundaries of the new UAs and the impact of combining areas they saw as culturally distinct.
    - For example, residents in West Essex expressed **pride in their local area** and worried about the impacts of being grouped together with what they viewed as less desirable areas.
    - They also worried that the new name given to the new unitary authority could impact how that area was viewed, and could lead to the **loss of the reputation** of the district council, and residents' positive associations with it.

    "What [will] they actually name that [new] council? I think that would have quite a big bearing on people's feelings of what will happen or how they'll feel." (West Essex breakout room)

- Some residents suggested that consideration should be given to the **similarities and differences between areas** when deciding the geographic boundaries of the unitary authorities to maximise cohesion.

    "[Councils should avoid] pushing huge parts of Essex together for the sake of it...[and focus on] putting areas together because they've got similar demographics or similar economic circumstances…so they'll work in a more cohesive way" (Young people focus group)

Priorities
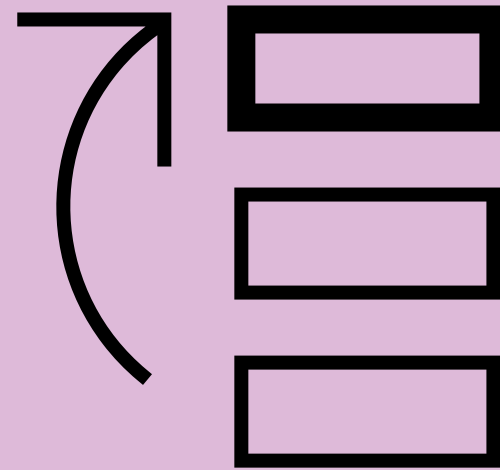
Prioritisation task

After discussing the potential opportunities and challenges of LGR, we asked participants to rank the following priority areas from most to least important. We then asked participants to explain their choices.

| Improving public services | Preserving local identity | Boosting the economy | Resident engagement | Increasing transparency |

Purpose: To challenge participants to decide which areas they would prioritise at the cost of other areas, as local authorities will need to make compromises in their plans for LGR. We set out to understand the extent to which participants agreed on priorities, though we did not seek to achieve a consensus within the group.

Note on findings: Many participants noted that they thought all areas were important, and, in many cases, were interconnected. As such, the ranking exercise alone did not fully reflect participants' complete views on which areas were important; the subsequent discussion offered more detailed insight.

The following slides report findings on participants' highest and lowest priorities from the ranking exercise, and the discussions that followed. This includes the differences that emerged in participants' opinions by geographical area and demographic group.

Prioritisation task findings

Note: for many participants, **the priority areas were equally important and interconnected.** Thus, it was difficult – and possibly reductive – to rank them.

Improving public services

27 out of 39 participants ranked this as their highest priority.

Boosting the economy

5 out of 39 participants ranked this as their highest priority.

Resident engagement

3 out of 39 participants ranked this as their highest priority, whilst 3 out of 32 participants ranked this as their lowest priority.

Preserving local identity

20 out of 32 participants ranked this as their lowest priority.

Increasing transparency

8 out of 32 participants ranked this as their lowest priority, but 3 out of 39 participants ranked it as their highest priority.

Highest priority

- Encouraging resident engagement , 3
- Preserving local identity, 1
- Increasing transparency, 3
- Boosting the economy, 5
- Improving public services, 27

Lowest priority

- Boosting the economy, 1
- Increasing transparency, 8
- Preserving local identity, 20
- Encouraging resident engagement , 3
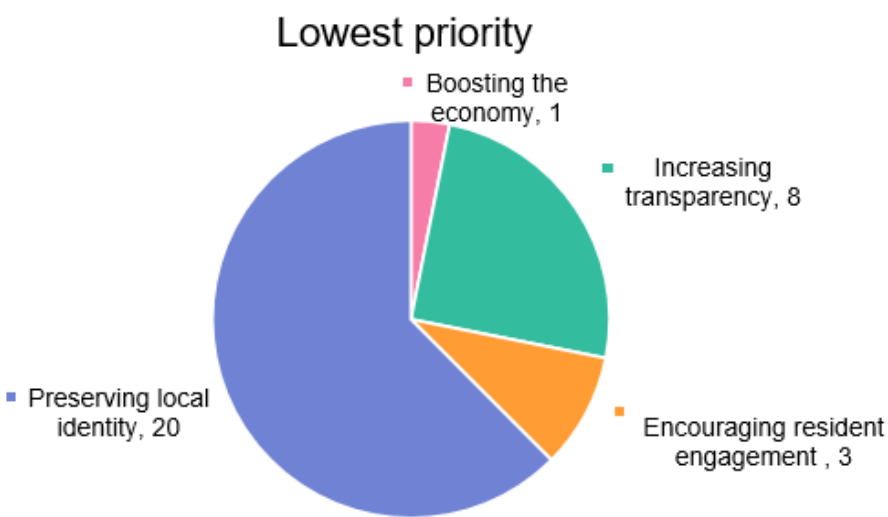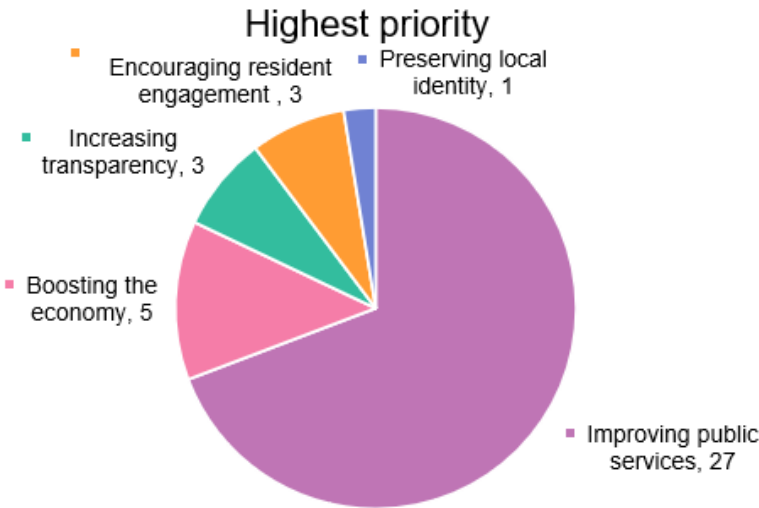
Footnote: 39 out of 52 total participants reported their highest priority, and 32 reported their lowest priority

Priority areas

Participants discussed their priorities in depth; what was a low priority for some was a high priority for others. Many valued multiple areas; **it was commonly said that all the priority areas were important.** The following list seeks to capture this diversity, as well as common themes; it does not reflect an order of priority, as participants did not agree on this.

Public services
This was the highest priority for most participants.

- Participants noted public services was the most tangible priority area and would therefore directly benefit the most people.
- Some noted improving services will also lead to positive outcomes in other areas, e.g. improving public trust as people see their money as being put to good use.
- Many residents said it was important that disruption to services caused by LGR be kept to a minimum.

Resident engagement
This was a top priority for some.

- Residents disagreed on whether this was a high or low priority for them.
- Many thought resident's views needed to be included in council decision-making processes so that residents are kept in the loop and their thoughts shape the actions of the councils.
- Others thought that people may not have time to be involved in decision-making, or were doubtful that engagement would lead to improvements for residents.

Transparency and accountability
This was important to some participants.

- Some residents noted this was important to them.
- Increasing transparency was noted by some as affecting other areas e.g., increased transparency would mitigate against disruptions to services; young people thought making residents aware of disruption and reassuring them of long-term benefits would boost morale.

Local identity
This was important but not a top priority for most.

- This was seen as important to residents, but for many it was not their top priority.
- Whilst some residents thought the areas comprising the new UAs should be cohesive to protect local identities, others did not think that local identity was connected to the boundaries of their local authority.

Economy
Effects on economy will come from other changes.

- This is important to some residents, but others said improvements to the economy will come with other things in place.

  For example, according to young people, building affordable housing will create jobs and ensure good housing conditions for vulnerable groups of residents. Having good housing will attract people to live in the area and attract investment.

- However, some noted that boosting the economy would also boost morale for residents.

Priority areas – differences by area and demographics

Public services

This was the highest priority for most participants, regardless of area and demographics.

- This priority did not vary by areas and demographics – this was many participants' priority across the groups.

Resident engagement

This was important to some young people.

- Some young people noted that a priority for them was that the voices of young people are heard, including those who are under 18 and unable to vote, and vulnerable young people, such as those in care.

Transparency and accountability

This was less important to some groups.

- Accountability was less important than the other priority areas to some young people and some people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Some participants from these groups did not think LGR would have a significant impact on transparency/accountability.

Local identity

This was important to some from West Essex.

- It was important to some residents in West Essex to preserve their local identity:

  "What [will] they actually name that [combined] council? I think that would have quite a big bearing on people's feelings of what will happen or how they'll feel." (West Essex breakout room)

Economy

Mixed thoughts between groups.

- Some participants from minority ethnic backgrounds and some from West Essex thought that economy was not a priority, whilst some young people and some North Essex residents thought that it was important to focus on.
- Some participants from ethnic minority backgrounds and from Mid Essex thought that boosting the economy will come from improving other areas, such as public services.

Outstanding uncertainties or questions

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Outstanding uncertainties or questions

Participants posed questions throughout their discussions. These areas of uncertainty help explain participant reticence on certain issues (e.g. how LGR might create opportunities for local services). They also offer loose guidelines for how the process and outcomes of LGR might be communicated in the future.

Financial impact on residents

What will the impact of LGR be on council tax? Will it increase or decrease?

Where will other savings be made as a result of LGR?

Distribution of funds

How will budgets for unitary authorities be decided?

How will existing council debts be redistributed? Will there be a 'clean slate' or will some areas be worse off as a result?

Will the needs of local areas be considered in decisions about distribution of funds to different areas?

Services

Will services become less tailored to smaller areas following LGR? Will services be located in the larger towns/cities, forcing those from smaller towns to travel further?

How easy/hard will it be to access services after LGR compared to now?

Will LGR be used as an opportunity to address issues with existing services, e.g. local transport links?

Will existing council-specific projects/services continue to operate within the areas they currently serve?

Council jobs

Will there be job losses for local government employees when authorities are combined, as there will be multiple officers with the same roles?

How will staffing restructures affect service delivery?

Outstanding uncertainties or questions

Economy

Attracting investment to Essex has been presented as a benefit of LGR. How is LGR expected to lead to outside investment?

Transition

What is the time scale for the transition to new unitary authorities?

How will the services currently run by different councils be amalgamated? Will this be a quick or gradual transition?

Local councils currently operate differently. So, how will a decision be made about how the new unitary authority operates? Will local authorities look at best practice across Essex?

Political leadership

How will the role of mayors change with LGR? Will there be one mayor for Essex, like lord mayors in London and Manchester?

Will areas keep their local councillors? Will there still be a representative for each area within the unitary authority?

Resident engagement

How would information be communicated to residents?

Will residents be informed about the timescale and the changes?

Conclusions

Key takeaways for local authorities

Involve local communities

Residents expressed a desire to be involved in decision making throughout the LGR process. This meant regular and meaningful engagement within their communities. At a minimum, residents wanted developments clearly explained and transparency around who was responsible for those actions, and the impacts in the short, medium and long term.

Prioritise public services

Business cases should prioritise improving service delivery and ensuring as smooth a transition as possible. Residents favoured a more gradual transition over rapid changes that would lead to major disruption. Consideration should also be given to the future of local services and projects which bring value to communities.

Consider local identities

Despite not citing preservation of local identity as a key priority, across our discussions, residents expressed reservations about the impact of reorganisation on the attentiveness to local needs and identities. It is therefore important for local authorities to be clear about how the final decision is reached and be responsive to residents' concerns about these changes.

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Thank you