

Essex Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) research

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Research background and objectives

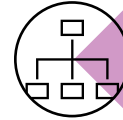
Local Government infrastructure in Essex is due to be reorganised. However, the shape and priorities of the new arrangement are yet to be fully determined. To inform these decisions, Essex's existing councils want to understand how residents feel about the general direction of the forthcoming changes.

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 findings and insights from NatCen's quantitative and qualitative 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 identify.
- Ultimately, **what residents value, and want to see prioritised**, in the context of 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.

Notes on research findings

- The research **did not** suggest, or seek residents' **views on, concrete 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 qualitative sample represents a small subset of the population, so the **findings may not capture the views of all Greater Essex residents**.
- The **survey** did not follow a random probability sampling methodology. Therefore, the degree of confidence that the survey responses represent the views and experiences of the wider Essex population cannot be quantified.

Research methods

Quantitative survey

Survey of residents

(15 minutes, non-probability survey)

1,477 Essex residents

Purpose: The purpose of the survey was to measure attitudes of Greater Essex residents towards LGR. The survey was representative of all residents across Greater Essex in terms of gender, ethnicity, district, and socio-economic group. As well as being large enough to safely report analyses for different subgroups across Greater Essex.

Length: The survey was designed in collaboration with NatCen and all 15 local authorities across Greater Essex, and the survey was designed to take approximately 15 minutes.

Subgroups: The analysis for the survey looked at several subgroups, including residents' demographics, how long they have lived there, and their awareness of LGR. Differences between groups and areas have been tested for statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. For a sample of 1,477 respondents, a 50% point estimate has a 95% confidence interval of approximately ± 2.6 percentage points.

Sample: A total of 1,477 residents in Greater Essex completed the survey.

Research methods

Qualitative methods

Deliberative workshop

(1 x 3-hour workshop, 30 participants total)

6 x North Essex
6 x Mid Essex
10 x West Essex
8 x South Essex

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.

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

Sample: 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.

Focus groups

(3 x 2-hour focus groups, 22 participants total)

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

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.

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

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

Key takeaways

Awareness of LGR is mixed, but residents foresee potential benefits



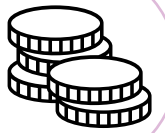
- Survey findings showed prior awareness of LGR in Essex was mixed, with 51% 'not very' or 'not at all' aware of the upcoming changes. However, respondents supported LGR if it led to better services (85%). Workshop and focus group participants similarly saw opportunities around increased efficiency and more simplified council structures.

Improving services is residents' top priority



- Improving public services was the highest priority for residents across both research strands. The majority of survey respondents supported LGR if it led to better services (85%), and qualitative research participants overwhelmingly ranked this as their highest priority.

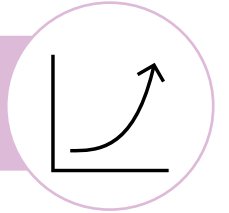
Residents value efficiency over higher taxes



- Less than half of survey respondents (44%) were willing to pay more for improved services. Qualitative insights suggest that residents think services should be improved through efficiencies rather than increasing tax, and survey respondents ranked efficient public spending as their highest priority. Workshop participants wanted local government to be transparent about any changes to services and council tax.

Key takeaways

Preference for a gradual transition over rapid change



- Qualitative research participants favoured a more gradual transition period over rapid changes that would lead to major disruption. They suggested councils look at existing unitary authorities and implement best practice.

Desire for local decision making and resident engagement



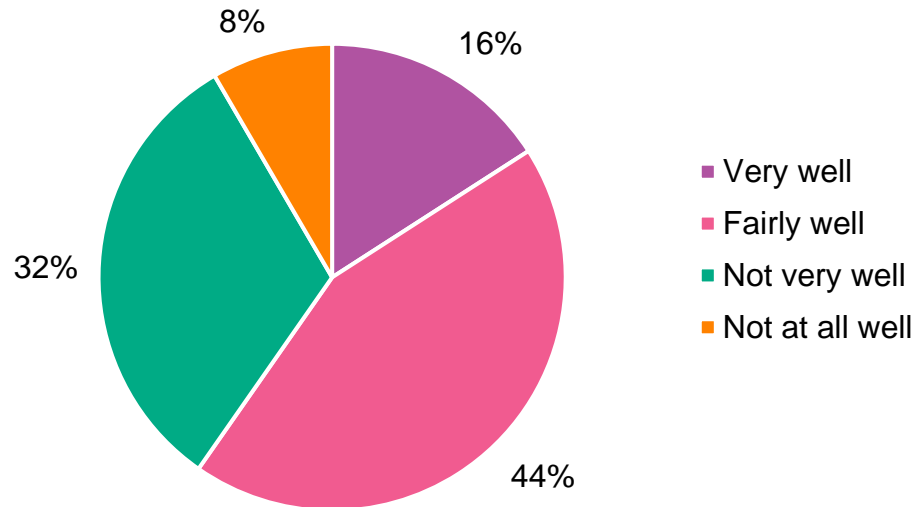
- Although residents did not rank involvement in local decision-making as a top priority for LGR, there was clear support from survey respondents for decisions being made at a more local level (85%). Qualitative research participants expressed a desire for regular and meaningful engagement within their communities and transparency around decision making in the short, medium and long term.

Key findings

Awareness, opportunities and risks of LGR

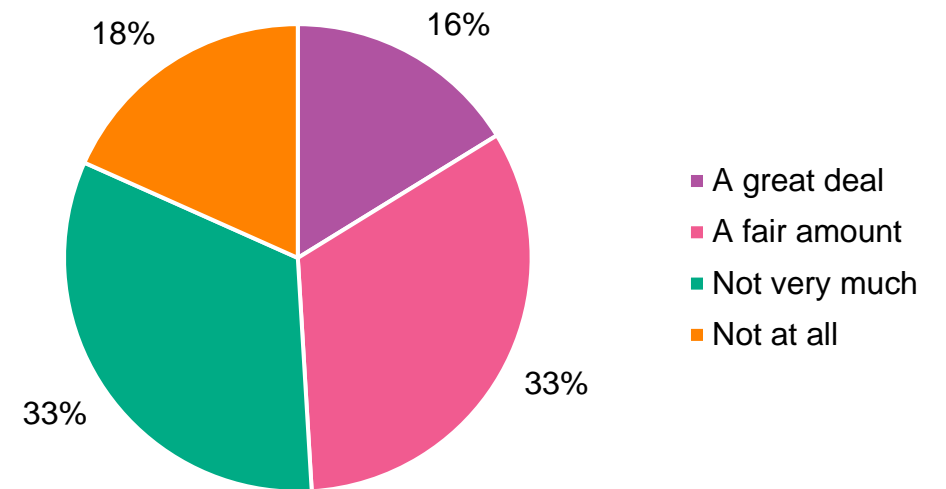
Prior awareness of LGR

To what extent do residents understand how local services are currently delivered?



To what extent do you understand how local services are currently delivered? (n=1477)

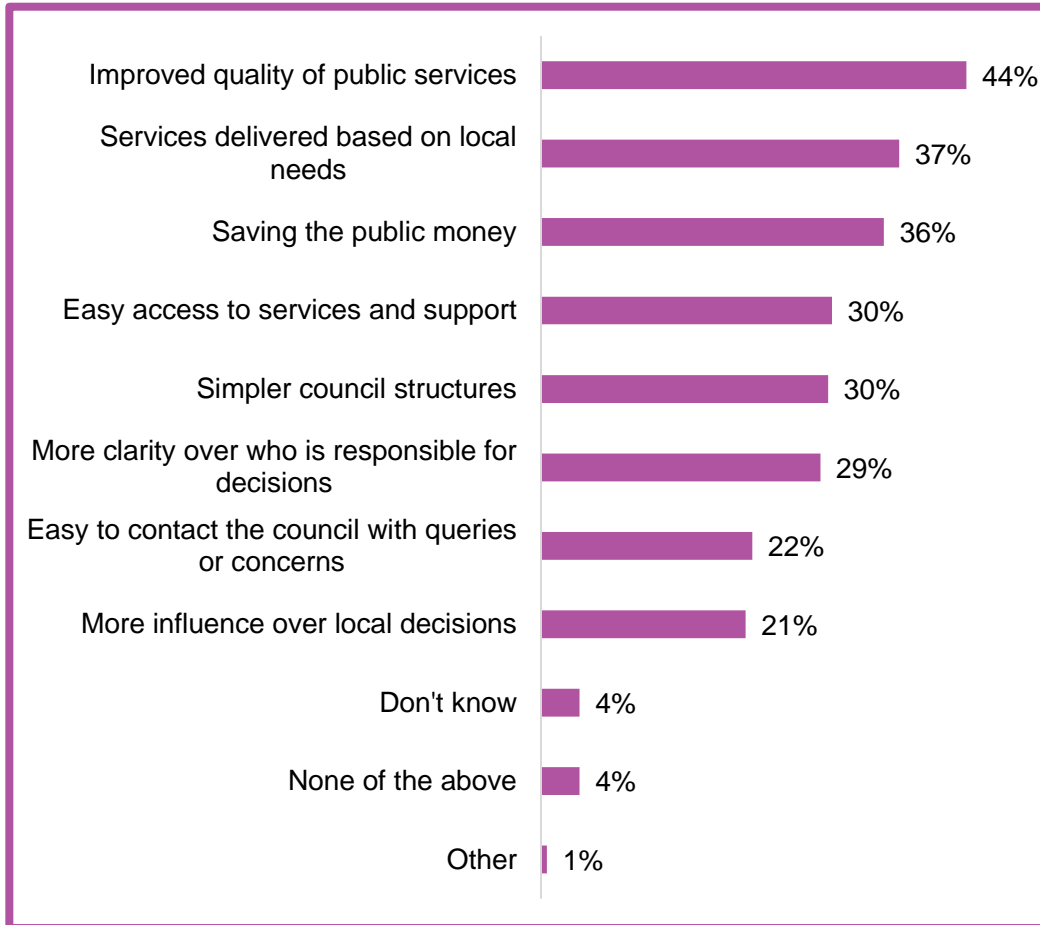
To what extent were residents already aware of the suggested local government reorganisation?



To what extent did you already know about these suggested changes to local government in Essex? (n=1477)

Survey findings indicated that although most respondents said they understood how local services are run 'fairly' or 'very well' (60%), awareness of local government reorganisation was lower; 51% were 'not very' or 'not at all' aware. Older residents and people in South Essex claimed the highest awareness. Awareness of LGR was also mixed for qualitative research participants.

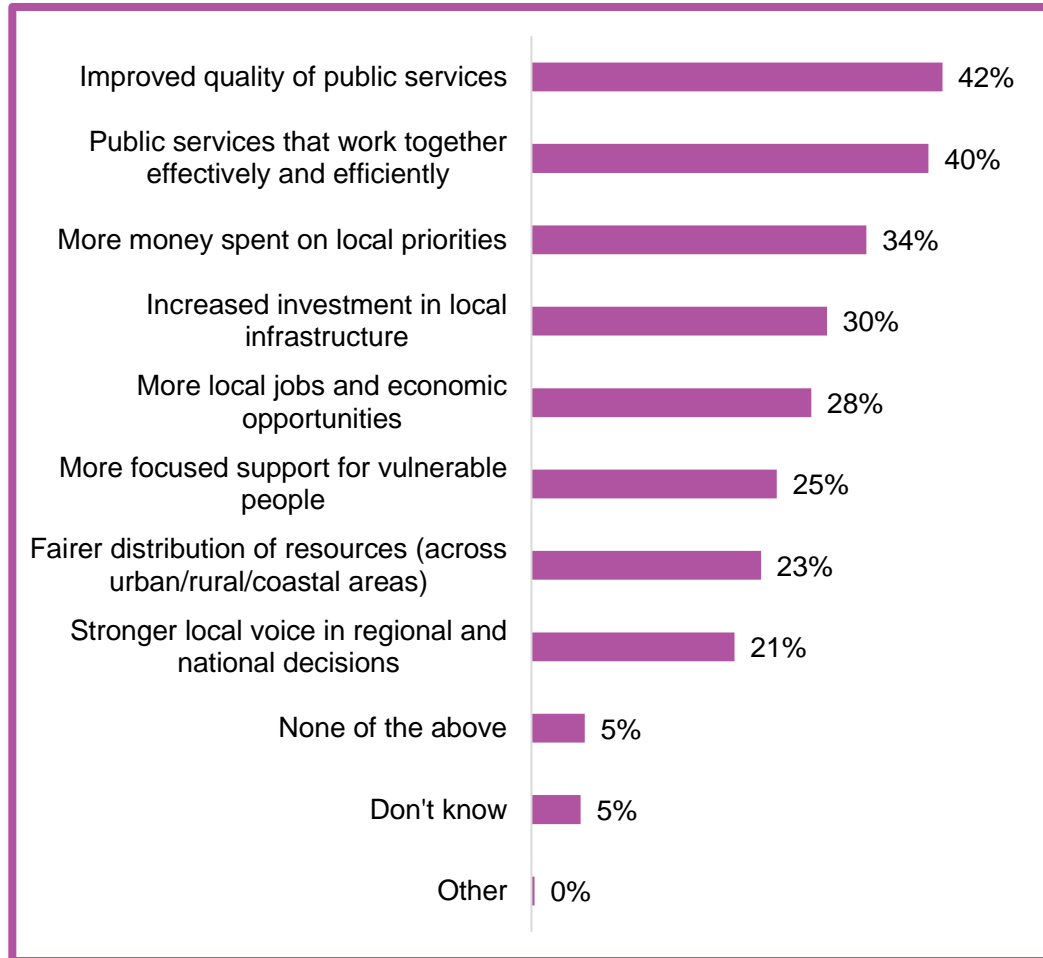
Main opportunities of local government reorganisation for residents and their families



- The main perceived opportunities for LGR for survey respondents included **improved quality of public services** (44%), and **services being delivered based on local needs** (37%).
 - Qualitative research found similar results, with public services prioritised over other areas. Participants saw this as the change that would benefit the greatest number of people and lead to positive outcomes in other areas, e.g. saving the public money.
- The survey findings indicated that having **influence over local decisions** (21%) and **ease of contacting the council with concerns** (22%) were rated lowest.
 - However, qualitative findings highlighted that these were still important to residents: many raised concerns about **not knowing who to contact** or being referred back and forth between services. Residents also indicated a desire to be consulted about LGR and **have a say in how decisions about LGR are made**, to ensure local issues were considered.
- The other LGR opportunities identified by the workshop and focus group participants included:
 - Having a single councillor to contact – making it easier and more convenient to **access one's local representative**.
 - Ensuring service organisation and allocation was **better organised**.
 - **Building public trust** by keeping residents informed, and engaging residents at a local level through small-scale consultation exercises.
 - Making it clearer **who is responsible for what**, and how local government decisions are made.

What do you think would be the main benefits of Local Government Reorganisation for you/your family? Please select up to 3 options (n=1477)

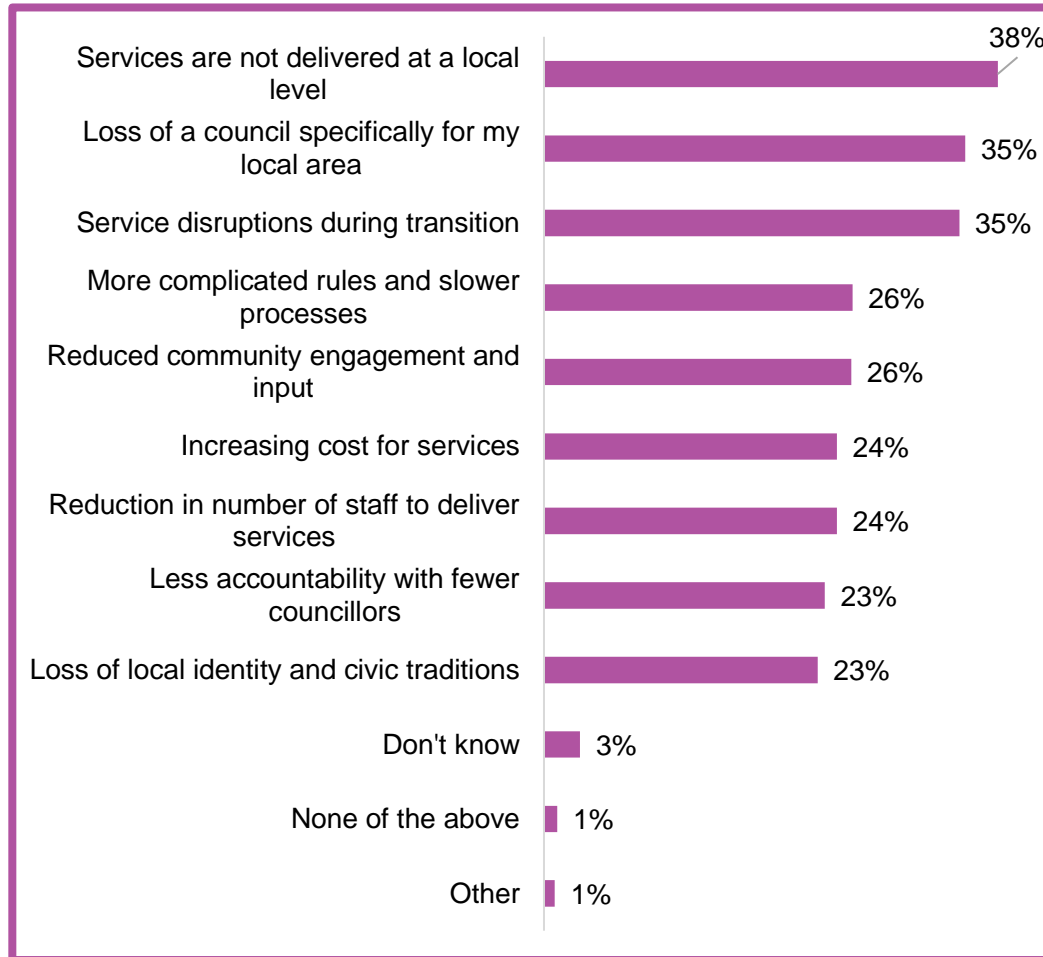
Main opportunities of local government reform for the wider community



What do you think would be the main benefits of Local Government Reorganisation for your wider community? Please select up to 3 options (n=1477)

- In line with findings on opportunities for individuals, survey respondents rated **improved quality of public services** as the main opportunity of LGR for the wider community (42%), underscoring the importance of this issue for residents.
- **Public services working together effectively** was a key opportunity emerging from both research strands. 40% of survey respondents selected this option. Workshop and focus group participants saw joined-up services as a vehicle for more efficient service delivery. Still, participants were uncertain about how services currently run by different councils, and thus operated differently, could be combined in the future.
- For survey respondents, **increasing jobs and economic opportunities** was less commonly selected as a benefit of LGR (28%).
 - Similarly, the qualitative research found that residents were often uncertain about the impact of LGR on jobs and the economy. Some expressed concerns about redundancies within councils, and there was uncertainty around how LGR would lead to greater investment in Essex.
- Other opportunities identified in the workshop and focus groups included:
 - More **targeted service provision** for particular communities, e.g. disabled people
 - Scope for greater **participation of underrepresented groups** in local government
 - Potential for **job creation** and **attracting people to live in Essex**

Main risks of local government reorganisation



What do you think would be the main risks or challenges of Local Government Reorganisation? Please select up to 3 options (n=1477)

- The top three risks selected in the survey reflect key concerns raised in the workshop/focus groups:
 - **Loss of local service delivery** – participants were concerned about the impact of LGR on location of services (i.e. whether they would have to travel further to access them, and whether they would be attentive to local needs).
 - **Disruption to services during transition** – a pervasive theme across groups was apprehension around the transition period and how long services would be disrupted for. Participants favoured a longer transition period to reduce the impact on services and service users.
 - Whilst **loss of a local council** for specific areas was not a major concern for workshop participants, **loss of a local councillor with local knowledge** about the area was seen as a considerable negative impact of LGR.
- In addition, the qualitative findings highlight that risks less commonly selected by survey respondents are still important to residents:
 - **Increased cost of services** – focus group/workshop participants raised concerns about council tax increases and felt that increased efficiency should result from savings rather than tax increases. A relatively low proportion of survey respondents saw **increased cost** as a risk (24%). This may indicate that, although council tax increases were seen as a concern, most people do not anticipate such increases as a result of LGR.
 - **Loss of local identity** was only selected as a key risk by 23% of survey respondents, which chimes with the mixed qualitative findings on the same subject: some felt that their local identity was not tied to their local council; others felt preservation of identities was not the responsibility of local government.

Suggestions for new unitary authorities

From workshop/focus groups

Short term (before LGR)

Draw on best practice from existing unitary authorities

Plan for a phased transition to reduce service disruption

Be transparent around decision making and spending

Inform and consult residents about changes

Medium term (early stages of LGR)

Ensure services work together effectively

Publish targets and UAs progress towards them

Increase frequency and variety of resident engagement activities

Keep residents informed of developments

Long term (2-3 years after LGR)

Focus on boosting the economy

Improve existing infrastructure, e.g. building affordable housing

Ensure services are good value for money

Continue to meaningfully engage residents

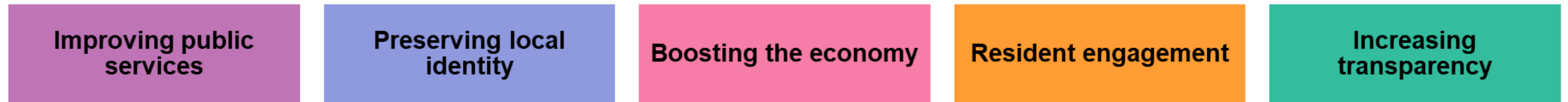
Key findings

Priorities

Understanding priorities

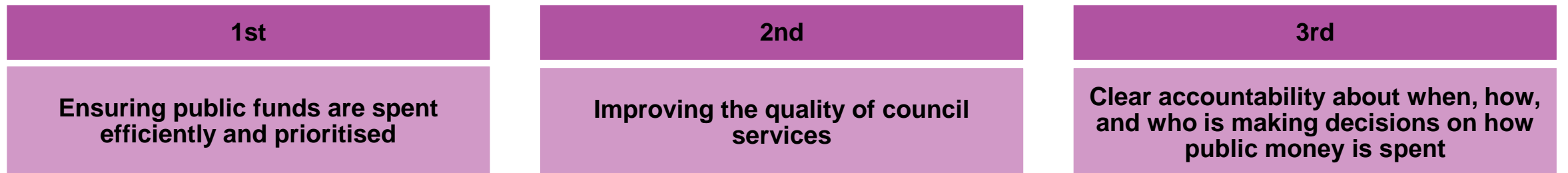
Qualitative strand

In the workshops and focus groups, we asked participants to rank the following priority areas from most to least important. 39 out of 52 total participants reported their highest priority, while 32 reported their lowest priority. We then asked participants to explain their choices.



Quantitative survey

The survey asked residents (n=1477) what was most important to them when it comes to how local councils work. The survey found that residents' top three priorities were:



The following slides present detailed findings on participants' priorities from the qualitative and quantitative strands.

Priorities

Note: for many workshop participants, the priority areas were equally important and interconnected.

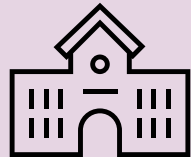
Improving public services

This was the highest priority for most qualitative participants:

- 27 out of 39 participants in the qualitative study ranked this as their highest priority.
- Improving the quality of services was ranked as a top three priority by 45% of residents.
- This was a top priority for those in West Essex.

However, the survey found that residents are less open to paying more for improving services, with less than half (42.3%) supporting this option.

Many in the workshop and focus groups said minimising the disruptions to services caused by LGR was a priority.



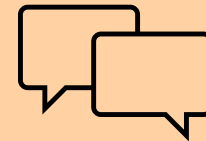
Encouraging resident engagement

Though this was a top priority for many young people, other constituencies in the workshop and focus groups did not see it as a top priority:

- 3 out of 39 participants in the qualitative study ranked this as their highest priority, whilst
- 3 out of 32 participants ranked this as their lowest priority.

However, participants in the survey overwhelmingly supported being personally involved with this decision-making (79.3%).

Still, while many in the workshop and focus groups thought residents' views ought to be included in local council decision-making processes, others expected they would not have time to do this.



Priorities

Note: for many workshop participants, the priority areas were equally important and interconnected.

Increasing transparency and accountability

This was important to some participants;

- 8 out of 32 participants in the qualitative study ranked this as their lowest priority, but 3 out of 39 participants ranked it as their highest priority.
- In the survey, 45% of residents ranked accountability in their top three priorities.
- This was less of a priority for those in the young people and ethnic minority backgrounds focus groups, and a higher priority for those who had lived in Greater Essex for more than 20 years.

Participants in the workshop and focus groups thought increasing transparency would affect other LGR priorities. For example, transparency was seen as a way to mitigate any service disruptions brought about by LGR.

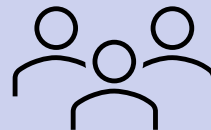


Preserving local identity

Though many participants regarded local identity as important, very few listed it as a top priority:

- 20 out of 32 participants in the qualitative study ranked this as their lowest priority.
- Residents of West Essex found this particularly important.

However, many respondents in the workshop and focus groups said their sense of identity was not connected to the boundaries of their local authority.



Boosting the economy

Boosting the economy was important to some residents:

- 5 out of 39 participants in the qualitative study ranked this as their highest priority.
- 52% of residents said that local councils spending public money efficiently and in a targeted fashion was one of their top three priorities.
- In the qualitative study: residents from minority ethnic backgrounds and those from West Essex were less likely to list the economy as a priority, whereas young people and North Essex residents were more likely to list it as a top priority.
- The survey found the economy was a higher priority for older people and those in Mid Essex.

Some people in the workshop and focus groups thought boosting the economy would come as a result of other changes. For example, they said building affordable housing would create jobs and ensure good housing conditions, and having good housing would attract people to live in the area and attract investment.

Outstanding uncertainties or questions

From workshop/focus groups

Workshop and focus group 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•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?
Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Attracting investment to Essex has been presented as an opportunity of LGR. How is LGR expected to lead to outside investment?
Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•How would information be communicated to residents?•Will residents be informed about the timescale and the changes?

Thank you

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