

FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT FOR CAMBRIDGE: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

To: Council, 28 November 2024

Report by: Chief Executive Officer

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Wards affected: not applicable

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At its meeting on 19 October 2023, Council passed a motion (see **annex A**), which noted that:

“... the current fragmentation of responsibilities and decision-making presents an unhelpful hurdle to strategic focus on the big range of issues which bind the city of Cambridge, affecting lives and livelihoods of all our residents. This fragmentation frequently leaves many of our residents confused about the location of responsibilities and accountability.”

Council asked the Leader and Chief Executive to:

“... initiate discussions... to identify options for a less fragmented and more cohesive model of Government for Cambridge, that best serves the needs of its residents. These discussions should involve and engage with the people of the city in a meaningful way, thereby recognising the need for our governance structures to reflect the wishes of the people we serve.”

From July to September this year, the Council carried out a public engagement exercise. 507 people responded to a survey and 60 people attended two public meetings at the Guildhall to share their views.

The results of the survey and the key themes that emerged from the engagement are summarised in this report. Nearly 83% of respondents thought that options for a unitary authority for Cambridge should be explored in more detail.

A majority of the public who took part felt that current local government arrangements are complex and can be confusing. Moreover, that they can work against the delivery of efficient, joined-up public services and can frustrate local democratic accountability on key issues.

Respondents also suggested that a single democratic voice for an international and fast-growing city such as Cambridge was important when engaging local communities, government, businesses, and other key partners.

Respondents noted that administrative structures are just one of several factors that enable good governance and effective public services. Others include sufficient financial resources, evidenced based policy, political leadership, and meaningful community engagement.

The Autumn Budget on 30 October 2024, announced, *“The upcoming English Devolution White Paper will set out more detail on the government’s devolution plans, including on working with councils to move to simpler structures that make sense for their local areas, with efficiency savings from council reorganisation helping to meet the needs of local people”*.

This report invites Council to consider the public feedback and the issues arising and asks the Leader and senior officers to explore next steps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Council is invited to consider the findings of the public engagement and agree the following recommendations:

1. that the Leader discusses the findings with the Leaders of other relevant authorities and other public services such as health, including the potential scope for more effective place based and joint working and that officers follow-up on opportunities;
2. that the Leader and officers engage Ministers and civil servants in relation to the findings of the public engagement, and, develop insights into the potential costs-benefits and models of provision for adults and children’s social care; and,
3. that following those discussions and early evidence gathering, the Leader reports to the relevant committee about appropriate next steps in summer 2025, or earlier depending on proposals in the English Devolution White Paper.

ALIGNMENT WITH COUNCIL VISION

The new ‘One Cambridge – Fair for All’ vision, approved by the full Council in July 2024, highlights the role of well-run public services in supporting thriving and empowered communities. It also emphasises the importance of genuine and accessible democratic accountability championed through transparent and simplified local government.

BACKGROUND: WHY WE UNDERTOOK THIS PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

In October 2023, the Council passed a motion calling on the Leader and the Chief Executive to initiate discussions about a less fragmented and more cohesive model of local government for Cambridge that best serves the needs of its residents.

The purpose of the engagement was to involve the public in a meaningful way as the needs and wishes of the people the Council serves should be reflected in way the city is governed.

This report presents the findings of the public engagement that has taken place.

WHAT DID WE DO?

Public engagement took place over an eight-week period between 8 July and 3 September 2024. Alongside awareness-raising about the current 'two-tiers', it was an exercise in canvassing opinion about the effectiveness of those arrangements and gauging appetite for exploring change.

The engagement exercise did not put forward any specific proposals for local government reorganisation.

The engagement was publicised on the council's website and social media channels, through posters and digital screens, in Cambridge Matters the Council's residents' magazine delivered to every home in the city, and in the local media.

Members of the public and other interested parties were invited to submit views via:

- a short survey about the current local government arrangements, the potential to improve them and initial views about the merits of considering a unitary authority. 507 completed responses were received. Of the 305 respondents who indicated where they live, nearly 84% were from Cambridge.
- two public events held at The Guildhall – with around 60 participants across the two events.
- and, by sharing views via letter or email, 5 responses were received.

There was a limited amount of commentary on social media. This was not analysed.

WHAT DID THE PUBLIC TELL US?

The relatively high quantity of responses to the engagement suggests there is public interest in how the city is governed.

Just over half of respondents suggested they had a good or full understanding of which council, City or County, is responsible for different services. Almost half indicated they *'don't know or don't think it is easy'* to find out how to access the services they want.

More than two thirds of the public that responded *'disagree or strongly disagree'* that the current arrangements are effective at achieving the purpose of local government. This includes for example, providing a democratic voice for residents; delivering efficient and effective local services; improving wellbeing; facilitating initiatives with partners to benefit the local area; and representing local interests on the national stage.

Almost half of respondents *'agree or strongly agree'* that current arrangements can be improved. However, nearly 71% also *'agree or strongly agree'* that a unitary authority would serve their and the city's interests more effectively.

And finally, nearly 83% agree that options for a unitary council for the Cambridge area should be explored.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to explain their answers to the survey questions. Key themes emerged. Respondents felt that:

- current structures are **complicated, unclear, and create confusion over roles and responsibilities**. There are too many layers of government, too many separate bodies, and various partnership bodies active in the area. A unitary structure could streamline decision making and could be simpler to understand and engage with for the public.
- current structures **do not currently facilitate joined-up services and a coherent sense of direction**. A unitary structure could be more joined-up and could allow easier access to services.
- current structures undermine **local control, accountability and transparency over decisions that affect the city**. A unitary structure for Cambridge could enable better local decision making and control, as well as improve transparency and accountability.
- current structures are **inefficient at a time of significant financial pressures for local government** which are unlikely to improve over the medium term. A unitary structure could be more efficient and cost effective.

- **local government should receive appropriate levels of funding as well as greater devolution of policy, regulatory and fiscal powers.** It was noted that the UK is a very centralised state, and that further devolution may allow local government to be more accountable and more capable of meeting local needs.
- irrespective of any potential changes to current structures, **councils and other partners, for example health, should consider how to improve joint working to simplify access to services for residents.** The ideal would be to provide single front doors to enable residents to access services in a more coherent way.
- the **geography of a potential unitary local government** would be important. A variety of views were put forward: the existing Cambridge City boundary established in 1935; an expanded boundary including surrounding urban areas; a Greater Cambridge unitary; a County unitary; and two, three, and four unitary authorities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and other suggestions.
- any new arrangements **should ensure that the needs of residents are given due weight in decision making.** This was set against a perception that some respondents had that powerful external and local interests currently have disproportionate influence.
- Some respondents commented that **more joined up services or a unitary structure would be better able to address complex issues** such as inequality, climate change and environmental improvement across the broad area around Cambridge where residents look to the city for services and solutions.
- Some respondents noted that it would be essential to understand **and mitigate the impact of any changes to local government structures on other authorities** in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.
- Several respondents noted that **better outcomes for residents should be the most important driver for change**, alongside a more active, influential role for residents' voices.
- A smaller number of respondents suggested that **a geographically large unitary authority would be too distant from local communities.**
- A few respondents expressed **concerns about the costs of change** and the financial implications of providing adults and children's social care.

Further detail and analysis about the public engagement exercise can be found in **Annex B.**

HISTORIC CONTEXT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT FOR CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge has been a strategically significant centre for trade, civil, legal, and military administration since the Anglo-Saxon period. In 1086, the Domesday Book recognised it as a principal English borough with 10 wards. Cambridge received its first royal writ from Henry I between 1120 and 1131. This gave the town a monopoly on waterborne traffic and recognised the borough court.

The town received royal charters in 1201, and 1207, which allowed it to become a corporation, appoint a mayor, tax and regulate the local economy. Subsequent monarchs granted letters patent, royal and town charters, and property, including the right to hold markets and seasonal fairs which attracted overseas merchants.

During the Middle Ages municipal government continued to develop at the present-day Guildhall site based around a 'common council' of 24 elected representatives. Records of decisions, taxation, justice dispensed, and town ordinances were kept, most famously in the Cross Book. In 1575, Cambridge received a charter from Queen Elizabeth I, which granted the town its own coat of arms.

Cambridge was confirmed as a municipal corporation by King James in 1605. It became the Borough of Cambridge following the Municipal Corporations Act in 1833. At that time the Borough Council was responsible for policing, highways, drainage, libraries, welfare, public health, and from 1902 elementary education.

The Borough's boundaries were extended in 1912 to include Chesterton and parts of Queen Edith's. The boundary was extended again in 1935 to include Trumpington, parts of East Barnwell and Cherry Hinton. At that time Cambridge had a population of around 70,000 people. The administrative boundary has remained unchanged since then.

Cambridge Borough Council submitted proposals for County Borough status, equivalent to a modern unitary authority, three times during the 20th century - in 1912, 1946 and 1960. On each occasion, independent Commissioners or Government Inspectors recommended that Cambridge should become a County Borough.

Town Clerk, Alan Swift, helped Cambridge to secure City status from King George VI in 1951 in recognition of its history, administrative importance, and economic success. The University of Cambridge had opposed a previous proposal in 1616.

In 1969, the Royal Commission on Local Government recommend two-tier arrangements should be abolished in favour of unitary authorities. It proposed a Greater Cambridge authority in the south and a Greater Peterborough authority in the north.

These proposals were partly implemented by the Local Government Act 1972, which established unitary authorities across much of urban and metropolitan England but introduced the current 'two-tiers' in provincial shires.

The Act established Cambridgeshire County Council from a merger of Huntingdon and Peterborough County Council, and Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely County Council. These authorities had been merged from four to two in 1965.

Until 1974, when the current 'two tiers' were introduced, Cambridge City Council enjoyed wide ranging delegated powers, including responsibility for education, health and welfare, sewage disposal, libraries, transport, planning, and weights and measures.

At the last occasion local government reorganisation was seriously considered in 1994 there was consensus in favour of unitarisation. City and district authorities supported the creation of four new unitary councils based on historic administration and identity:

- **City of Cambridge** – based on an expanded administrative footprint to include urban extensions and boundaries created by new transport schemes
- **Huntingdonshire County Council** – based on its historic geography
- **Greater Peterborough Council** – to include the northern part of Fenland
- **Cambridgeshire County Council** – based on the county's historic geography involving a merger of South Cambridgeshire, East Cambridgeshire and the southern part of Fenland up to March.

The County Council was in favour of a two unitary option, but also supported three.

The rationale presented for a Cambridge unitary was based on the city's growing urban geography and identity, long tradition of self-government as well as its importance as a centre of excellence for science and technology.

The cities and districts' proposal noted that since the late 19th century local government had been characterised by the constant search for greater independence by Cambridge and Peterborough and unstable mergers of historic county areas.

Their report emphasised that 'two tiers' arrangements were too remote from local communities, caused inefficiency, duplication and lack of co-ordination, and clouded accountability.

At that time the Audit Commission recommended compact urban authorities of more than 90,000 population were capable of being more economical than the two-tier system. At the 1991 census, Cambridge had a population of around 92,000 people and Peterborough 153,000.

Peterborough became a unitary authority in 1998. It delivers the functions of a city council and a county council.

In 2009, Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council asked the Boundary Commission to review proposals to expand the city's administrative boundary to take account of urban growth and community identity. This was not taken forward.

This year is the 800-year anniversary that local government has operated from the site of the Guildhall in Cambridge.

CURRENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge is served by two tiers of local government – a city council and a county council. Each provides different services over different geographies. There are some overlapping responsibilities.

[Cambridge City Council](#) has 42 elected councillors representing 14 city wards. [Cambridgeshire County Council](#) has 61 councillors - 12 represent electoral divisions in Cambridge.

Cambridge City Council provides services in the city, such as:

- benefits and housing advice
- community development and community centres
- council housing and homelessness support
- council tax and business rates collection
- economic development
- planning for sustainable development and planning applications
- environmental health
- household waste collection
- parks and open spaces
- sports and leisure facilities

Cambridgeshire County Council provides services across the whole of Cambridgeshire, including:

- birth, death and marriage registration
- education and libraries
- highways, including parking, traffic management, street lighting and potholes
- social care, including children's services, SEND and early years
- flood risk management, minerals and waste planning
- trading standards
- waste disposal

In 2014, a City Deal worth up to £500m was agreed with the coalition government. A joint committee, the [Greater Cambridge Partnership \(GCP\)](#), made up of Cambridge City Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridgeshire County Council was established to oversee implementation.

The government subsequently devolved powers and funding to support growth in Greater Cambridge and the wider sub-region. The [Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority \(CPCA\)](#) was established in 2017. It has a directly elected mayor. The CPCA is responsible for coordinating economic growth and transport.

Other bodies responsible for key local public services across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, include:

- [Cambridgeshire Constabulary](#)
- [Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority](#)
- [Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Integrated Care System \(ICS\)](#)

LEGAL PROCESS FOR ESTABLISHING UNITARY AUTHORITIES

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 sets out the legal process for creating unitary local authorities. The Secretary of State must invite an authority or authorities to submit a proposal. The English Devolution White Paper may set out new criteria or a different approach to local government reorganisation.

It was the previous government's policy to consider whether two conditions had been met before issuing an invitation:

- First, that there is a local request for an invitation.
- Second, the request demonstrates local opinion is coalescing around a single option which is reasonably likely to meet existing publicly announced criteria for unitarization.

Criteria were set out in a parliamentary statement by the Secretary of State on 22 July 2019, which states that a proposal should:

- improve an area's local government;
- command a good deal of local support;
- cover a credible geography, including that a new unitary authority's population would be expected to be in excess of 300,000.

The Secretary of State has the final say on a proposed restructure. Affected councils are not required to give formal consent. Neither is there a requirement for the public to express their support for a change via a referendum or other means. Advisory referendums have been held in some areas in the past.

NEXT STEPS

See recommendations.

If further work is undertaken to develop unitary local government options for the Cambridge area, in addition to assessing these against the core purpose of local government, and issues raised by the public, the following themes should also be explored:

- The financial costs and benefits of change as well as potential disruption during a transition period for residents, other local authorities, and partners.
- The benefits for the sustainable growth of the city-region arising from the potential integration of planning and highways, and other responsibilities.
- Alignment with emerging government policy in relation to devolution, housing, infrastructure, environment and Net-Zero, as well as local government reform.
- The nature of community identity, democratic engagement and interdependency that different geographies might enable and facilitate.

APPENDICES

Annex A: Council motion 19 October 2023 'A Unitary Council'.

Annex B: Analysis of public engagement

ANNEX A: CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL, MOTION 19 OCTOBER 2023

‘A Unitary Council’

Council notes that:

There is renewed public interest in how Cambridge is governed.

Although many important partnership relationships are in place between this and other councils, that the current fragmentation of responsibilities and decision-making presents an unhelpful hurdle to strategic focus on the big range of issues which bind the city of Cambridge, affecting lives and livelihoods of all our residents.

This fragmentation frequently leaves many of our residents confused about the location of responsibilities and accountability.

Past doubts about the critical mass required to justify unitary status are being questioned again, as they were in the 1890s, after both World Wars, in the 1950s and again in the 1960s.

Council affirms that:

1. Power should reside as close to people as is possible.
2. For purposeful, democratic government, we should therefore consider whether a single tier council, amongst other options, framed around the urban geography of the city, is the most appropriate model of Government for our city.
3. We support the calls currently being made for deeper devolution of powers from central government and are committed to working with the Mayor to progress those discussions, for the benefit of both Cambridge and the wider region, to ensure we can best support our communities through the cost of living, climate and biodiversity emergencies. Specifically, we believe devolution in relation to single funding settlements and fiscal powers, devolved skills and adult education budgets and clearer, transport responsibilities would give power back to local communities.

In addition, Council affirms:

4. Its continued commitment to the many, complex partnership arrangements of which it is a part as the best available current means of pursuing joined-up decision-making so long as local government structure remains as it is.

5. Its awareness that whatever model of Governance might emerge, working co-operatively and supportively with our partners and communities is essential to deliver better outcomes for our residents.
6. That the increasing expectations of change and economic growth that face us in this area make it no longer optimal that we have less dedicated local self-government than city areas such as Peterborough, Luton, York, Bedford, Reading or Bath. In particular, reference should be made to the structures in Manchester given that this city sits within a Combined Authority.
7. Its belief that an alternative model of local government could better connect our residents to their representatives and local service providers, and facilitate joined-up decision-making, and strengthen our voice in dialogue with central government and improve the life chances, health and wellbeing, and opportunities for our residents.

Accordingly, Council asks the Leader and Chief Executive to initiate discussions with other Authorities in the region and then central Government to identify options for a less fragmented and more cohesive model of Government for Cambridge, that best serves the needs of its residents. These discussions should involve and engage with the people of the city in a meaningful way, thereby recognising the need for our governance structures to reflect the wishes of the people we serve.

ANNEX B: ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Opportunities to take part in the public engagement exercise through surveys, events or by written feedback were publicised via the Council's website, social media and news releases. The engagement exercise also featured in 'Cambridge Matters', July 2024.

Fourteen comments were received about the engagement exercise. These included feedback about the wording of survey questions, the role of partner councils in the exercise, and requests for proposals to change to local government structures.

SURVEY RESPONSES

The survey took place between 8 July and 3 September 2024. It was available online and as a paper. There were 507 replies. Of the 11 questions, six asked respondents to choose from a range of possible answers.

Q1. Do you understand which services the City Council and the County Council are responsible for providing for residents in Cambridge?

On a scale of 1-5, where 1 = 'don't understand at all' and 5 = 'fully understand'

1	2	3	4	5
44	71	128	161	103

52% of survey respondents rated their understanding of which services are provided by which council as 4 or 5 out of 5 indicating good or fully understanding.

Q2. How easy is it for you to find out which council, City or County Council, provides the services you want to access?

Don't know	Not at all easy	Not easy	Neither/nor	Easy	Very Easy
18	67	160	126	98	38

Nearly 45% of respondents replied that it is 'not easy' or 'not at all easy', compared to nearly 27% who replied 'easy' or 'very easy' to find out which council provides the service they want to access.

Q4. How strongly do you agree or disagree that the current arrangements, with a city and county council serving Cambridge, achieve the purposes of local government?

Don't know	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither/nor	Agree	Strongly agree
10	194	158	64	44	37

69% of survey respondents 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that current arrangements achieve local government's purposes. 16% agree that they do.

Q6. How strongly do you agree or disagree that the city and county councils can improve the two-tier arrangements?

Don't know	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither/nor	Agree	Strongly agree
33	64	76	93	132	109

Nearly 48% of respondents 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that the city and county can improve the two-tier arrangements. Nearly 28% disagree or strongly disagree.

Q8. How strongly do you agree that a unitary council for the Cambridge area would achieve local government purposes more effectively than the current system?

Don't know	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither / nor	Agree	Strongly agree
16	37	44	52	115	243

Nearly 71% of respondents 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that a unitary council for the Cambridge area would be more effective than the current system. 16% disagree or strongly disagree.

Q10. Do you think that options for a unitary council for the Cambridge area should be explored?

Don't know	No	Yes
19	68	420

Nearly 83% of respondents think that unitary council options for the Cambridge area should be explored. 13% did not support this. 4% don't know.

WHERE DO RESPONDENTS RESIDE?

The survey asked respondents to indicate where they live. 202 out of 507 respondents chose not to provide this information. Nearly 84% of respondents who disclosed their place of residence were from Cambridge.

A breakdown of responses to question 8 of the survey, whether a unitary authority would achieve the purposes of local government more effectively than the current system, by place of residence is provided below.

Location	Number of replies	Reply to Question 8		
		Agree / Strongly agree	Disagree / Strongly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree / Don't know
Cambridge	255	71.5%	13.5%	15%
South Cambridgeshire	32	56%	22%	22%
Other Cambs districts	11	45.5%	45.5%	9%
Outside county	7	57%	28.5%	14.5%
Not provided	202	73.5%	15.5%	11%

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS RECEIVED

The survey invited respondents to provide written commentary on their answers under questions 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11. All but seven survey respondents provided comments. In addition to this feedback, two letters and three emails were also received. There were 505 sets of written responses in total.

The free text responses and other feedback received has been analysed and grouped around recurring themes. The interpretation of written comments is intended to be fair and consistent. It provides a general sense of the main themes raised. That analysis was checked against output from an AI language model to provide additional assurance.

Comments on the current approach

Comments about the benefits of the current system were mentioned in around 7% of written responses, including from respondents who recognised some merits of the existing arrangements but in principle prefer unitary local government. Each of the following views were mentioned in around 2% of responses:

- Satisfaction with the efficiency and effectiveness of councils and/or council services

- Current arrangements enable local control of local issues and a strategic approach to issues affecting a wider area
- Current arrangements enable local accountability, representation, and focus.

Suggestions for improving existing arrangements

Around 15% of written responses proposed ways of strengthening existing arrangements. These responses sometimes placed more emphasis on the desired outcomes being achieved and less emphasis on the local government structures. The most frequently raised themes relate to:

- Improving collaboration, co-ordination and join-up of services across councils and partners (6%)
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities of councils and their partners (4%)
- Improving public communications and council websites (3.5%)
- Reviewing and re-assigning which council does what (2.5%).

However, when those who replied 'agree/strongly agree' to question 6 (about improvements to current arrangements) were invited to explain potential improvements they would support, at least 56 suggested a move to a unitary authority. This equates to around 11% of all 505 respondents that provided written comments.

Comparisons between current arrangements and unitary local government

Criticisms of the current system and/or reasons for supporting unitary local government were mentioned in over 77% of written responses. These were raised primarily by respondents who felt a unitary council could be more effective, although some criticisms of the current system were also made by others who were undecided about which local government arrangements would be better. Recurring themes expressed were:

- Confusion over roles and responsibilities of councils and partners under the current system and/or a unitary authority would be simpler to understand (39%)
- Lack of efficiency and cost effectiveness under the current system and/or a unitary authority could be more efficient and cost effective (28%)
- Lack of a joined-up approach to services under the current system and/or a unitary authority could have a more joined-up approach to services (24%)
- Lack of transparency and accountability under the current system and/or a unitary authority could be more transparent and accountable (22%)

- Too many layers of local government and/or a unitary authority could streamline the layers of local government (21%)
- Lack of local control (reflecting local democracy and will) under the current system and/or a unitary authority could provide local control (17%)
- Lack of easy access to services under the current system and/or a unitary authority could provide easier access to services (16%)
- Difficult to get things done under the current system and/or a unitary authority could get things done (10%)
- Lack of joined-up vision/direction/priorities under the current system and/or a unitary authority could provide joined-up vision/direction/priorities (9%)
- Lack of knowledge and focus on the needs of the local area under the current system and/or a unitary authority could have more knowledge and focus on the needs of the local area (8%)
- The current system discourages people from engaging with local government and/or a unitary authority could encourage people to engage (4%)
- Ineffective decision-making processes under the current system and/or a unitary authority could be more effective at making decisions (4%)
- Lack of influence at national and regional levels under the current system and/or a unitary authority could have influence at national and regional levels (4%)
- Dissatisfaction with council services/outcomes and/or a unitary authority could provide better services/outcomes (4%).

Wider comments about local government

Respondents' written comments were not limited to existing two-tier arrangements and unitary local government. Other recurring themes included:

- Criticisms of the Greater Cambridge Partnership, including questions about whether it should continue (16%)
- Criticisms that local government is not focused on residents' needs (10%)
- Criticisms of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority and questions about whether it should continue (9%)
- The needs of the Cambridge urban area being different from rural areas elsewhere in the county (9%)

- Criticisms of disagreement and fractiousness between councils (6%)
- Criticisms of buck-passing between councils (6%)
- Criticisms of council websites (6%)
- Criticisms of politics and political posturing (5%)
- Criticisms of congestion charge proposals and traffic calming measures (5%).

Key words relevant to local government services were mentioned in the 505 written responses as follows:

- Roads, highways and/or potholes (27%)
- Transport and/or traffic (17%)
- Buses and/or public transport (11%)
- Planning policy and/or planning services (7%)
- Pavements, footpaths and/or paths / (7%)
- Infrastructure (7%)
- Parking and/or car parks (7%)
- Cycling and/or cycles (6%)
- Housing (6%)
- Education and/or schools (5%)

Comments on a unitary local government

Comments made primarily by those in favour of a unitary local government included:

- Need for a unitary authority to manage the growth of the city and surrounding area effectively (6%). *A small number of these also mentioned the need to consider how a unitary council might relate to any plans for a development corporation.*
- Recognition of the relationships between Cambridge and surrounding area (4%)
- That a unitary authority would need to be larger than Cambridge (3%)
- That the development of proposals would need careful consideration (3%)
- Don't delay in taking forward a unitary authority model (2%).

In addition, 3% of written comments, mostly from those undecided about a unitary council, said change should focus on achieving the best possible outcome for residents.

Concerns about the implications of a unitary authority were raised in 8% of written responses, primarily by those in favour of the current arrangements. These included:

- A unitary authority, not least, one larger than Cambridge and its surrounding area, could reduce local democratic representation and participation (2%)
- Unilateral steps by Cambridge to move to a unitary authority arrangement would adversely impact the rest of the county (2%)
- Cambridge should not be considered in isolation because it has an impact on the surrounding area (1.5%)
- It is not the councils but the recent additional layers of governance that are the problem (1.5%)
- Keep the current arrangements as specialist services and those benefitting from economies of scale need to be provided over a wide area (1%)
- Moving to a unitary authority model is not worth all the cost and disruption that change would create and/or wider financial implications (1%).

Options suggested for unitary local government

The engagement exercise did not put forward any specific proposals for local government reorganisation. However, 17% of written responses offered specific suggestions. These included:

- a unitary authority for Cambridge and the immediate surrounding area (5.5%)
- two unitary councils spanning Cambridgeshire & Peterborough (3%)
- a unitary Greater Cambridge (3%)
- a unitary authority larger than Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire (2%)
- a unitary Cambridge, including based on existing boundaries (2%)
- a unitary Cambridgeshire (1%)
- miscellaneous other proposals (2.5%)

KEY POINTS FROM PUBLIC EVENTS

Around 60 people, in total, attended two 90-minute events at the Guildhall on 23 July (midweek evening) and 31 August 2024 (Saturday morning). The Council Leader and Chief Executive set the context before participants were invited to discuss and feedback their views. The conversations were loosely structured around four questions.

Does structure have a bearing on achieving the goals of local government?

There was broad recognition that the structure of local government does matter, although unitary local government would not necessarily resolve all issues. Comments included the following points:

- That local government should be designed to meet the needs of residents. Some suggested that residents should be able to access all local public services through the 'same front door' or via the most convenient route.
- An increasing emphasis on providing digital access may not work for everyone.
- Current arrangements can appear to be confusing, inefficient and disjointed. As a result, it was more difficult to focus on local community needs in Cambridge holistically across housing, transport, economic development and infrastructure, social care and community development.
- Attempts to be more joined-up through partnership working can slow down decision making and delivery. It should be simpler, with clearer direction and leadership.
- Cambridge has multiple layers of local government, not just two tiers. This includes the Greater Cambridge Partnership (a joint committee) and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. This is a unique arrangement.
- Some participants raised concerns about decisions at county level not reflecting the needs and wishes of the Cambridge area. These points tended to emphasise the importance of greater local control over the way the city is run.

What other factors are important?

- **Finance:** several attendees suggested that the success of any system of local government was dependent on it being appropriately funded. There were calls for central government to allow local authorities to have greater fiscal powers to enable finance raised to be retained locally. Some suggested that a unitary authority might be better able to draw investment into the area.
- **Local representation and accountability:** Some participants referred to a 'democratic deficit' in relation to the wider public's understanding of how to influence

local government decisions and hold decision-makers to account. Some attendees alluded to a perception that university and business interests have undue influence.

- **Disempowerment:** some noted this feeling had been exacerbated by central government constraints on local powers to act and concerns that future decisions could be taken out of local hands. For instance, if a development corporation was introduced to oversee the future growth of Cambridge and the surrounding area.
- **Increasing community engagement:** Participants emphasised bringing decisions closer to the people; educating residents on how decisions are made; promoting active citizenship and the use of deliberative democracy techniques including, but not limited to, citizens' assemblies. The importance of strengthening engagement with young people was stressed.
- **Joined-up delivery:** emphasis was placed on local government for Cambridge being better able collectively to tackle poverty and inequality, take local action on climate change and address the need for economic growth and more housing.

What scope is there for improving the current system?

- Whilst existing shared services between councils were noted, some questioned their efficiency and effectiveness and whether this was the way forward.
- Others identified opportunities for strengthening joined-up working and collaboration with health, fire and police services as part of a unitary authority approach.

Should options for a unitary authority be explored?

- There was broad consensus that a unitary authority would be worth exploring. Some participants commented that the boundaries would be important. It was suggested that councils that are too large can be too remote; those that are too small may create a sense of belonging and local accountability but may not be financially viable.
- It was suggested that a unitary authority could cover an area wider than the city's existing boundaries. That administrative geography should reflect social, economic and environmental realities, and an understanding of local connection, possibly including travel-to-work areas too.
- Some participants queried how much Cambridge has in common with Peterborough and rural parts of the county. Others emphasised the importance of maintaining connection with communities and businesses in other parts of the county.
- Participants also emphasised the importance of learning from the experience of other areas that have sought too or introduced unitary authorities, as well as insights from previous reports and studies on local government reorganisation.