Engagement assessment

Contents

Background

This report supplies evidence to aid the drafting of the LGR options appraisal. This was a desk-based exercise using existing local and national information. Attitudes to the different options have been extrapolated from these findings but cannot replace direct engagement and consultation on the future shape of Kent and Medway Councils. Conclusions from this report must be caveated given no engagement has yet taken place.

This analysis includes information collected from Kent based sources, learning from other local authority areas, and reports which give a national perspective on awareness and perceptions of LGR or council services more broadly, across residents and service users. Many sources span a number of focus areas (so are referenced more than once).

Relationship with the Council

Research commissioned by KCC in 2023 to understand the different relationships Kent residents have with the Council found that in the main:

- knowledge about local government structures is low, including what services are provided. Little thought is given by many participants within this research to the tier structure.
- many assume that KCC acts as an umbrella organisation for smaller district councils or that KCC is closer to central government.
- there is little appetite to learn more about the structure of local government. A small number of participants acknowledge that information is likely to be readily available but have little desire to seek this out.
- for many participants, KCC feels like a distant organisation that they have a transactional relationship with. For most, KCC is functioning well in the background, and they are therefore satisfied with how things are run.

- participants who rely more heavily on KCC services and those who work adjacent to KCC in a professional capacity are more likely to feel they have a deeper relationship with the council due to higher levels of engagement.
- a smaller number of participants reference perceived differences in funding and resource allocation between East and West Kent. East Kent is viewed as receiving less resource and being more deprived than other, wealthier parts of West Kent[1].

This research tested the following descriptors. The italics show the expectations of respondents.

- Timeliness - *receiving quick responses and updates, so minimal time is wasted interacting with KCC or chasing/following up.*
- Reliability - *doing what you say you will when you say you'll do it.*
- Effectiveness - *a council that delivers value for money and implements services that work for everyone.*
- Approachable - *residents want to be able to get in touch with KCC easily, but sometimes they see the council as a faceless corporation.*
- Inclusivity - *not being discriminatory, accessible services and including residents in decisions.*
- Compassion - *residents want KCC to show compassion and take account of their personal circumstances when it matters.*[2].

The research found that people who use services more intensively (such as social care) have a closer relationship with the council than those who don't view themselves as service users. There may be a more emotional response linked to the experience of a particular service. This could be good or bad[3].

Ethnographic work by the LGA (May 22) which looked at what makes people connected to where they live, included a Margate case study. This supports findings by the resident engagement work and found:

- people have low levels of interest in the council.
- if you are experiencing a personal problem which interacts with the council then interest is increased.
- for some there is suspicion of the council, or politicians more generally.
- the council is easily blamed for things done badly and does not always get the credit for positive changes.
- if necessary conditions are not met, the council is viewed negatively, within this research this included around:
    - lack of council support with housing,
    - support to help access to work
    - local amenities.[4]

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[1] BritainThinks (2023) (Commissioned Research for KCC by MRX) Resident and user experience research (not published)
[2] ibid
[3] ibid
[4] Local Government Association (May 22) 'What makes people feel contented where they live, and what makes people deep-rooted and proud?' Place and Identity Research, LGA, Neighbourly Lab, 16May22 compressed.pdf (p.21/22)

National research[5] by LGiU confirms that while knowledge of local government is limited, local government is typically more trusted than central government. Knowledge of devolution is low.

This report suggests that a greater proportion support a two-tier model at 38% asked, (defined as 'a combination of both districts and county councils responsible for different services in a local area') than a single unitary authority (26%), defined as responsible for all services in a local area. 15% of respondents felt that it made no difference and 22% said they didn't know.

Directly elected Mayors are perceived broadly as positive as this is seen as giving greater accountability, community cohesion, and increasing interest in local government.

Local community groups receive credit for improvements but limited blame for perceived worsening of service quality.[6]

Resident engagement conducted to understand perceptions of LGR: Somerset

Ipsos MORI carried out 2,049 telephone interviews across Somerset. Quotas were used for gender, age and work status. A minimum of 500 interviews were completed in each of the four Somerset district council areas. The report includes the following:

'*Somerset residents showed higher levels of satisfaction with their district council than they did with Somerset County Council. Two-thirds (67%) said that they were satisfied with their district council (15% dissatisfied) compared with 45% who were satisfied with the county council (31% dissatisfied*).' (2021:2)

This may support the hypothesis that people are more likely to be dissatisfied with structures which feel further away.

The report also found significant support for devolution and localism.

'*When it comes to support for the principles of devolution and localism, residents were very much in favour of these principles. Two-thirds (66%) said they supported devolution (in line with both national and local polling) while 71% said they support localism*' (2021:2)[7]

Areas of interest to residents

Within KCC's Budget consultation over half of respondents were not comfortable with spending reductions in Children's Social Care, Highways, Adults and Older People, Schools' Services and Children's Other Services.

Respondents placed highest priority in investing their final £1 left to spend in Children's Social Care and Adults Social Care (both 18.7%), closely followed by Highways (17%).

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[5] State of the Locals 2025, State of the Locals 2025 - LGiU
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ipsos MORI (2021) 'Survey of Somerset residents on local government reorganisation' accessed *Microsoft Word - 20-073479-01 Stronger Somerset Report V3 PUBLIC.docx

Less than 1% of respondents placed highest priority in investing their final £1 left to spend in management, support and overheads or costs of running or operational premises[8].

> T200 staff event (July 24) on the budget:
>
> This internal Budget consultation event found:
>
> - while staff prioritised Adult Social Care (27%) and Children Young People and Education (22%), highways was a lower priority than for residents (10%).

The Tunbridge Wells Resident Survey[9] suggests high satisfaction for parks and open space, with lowest levels of satisfaction being with roads and public rights of way, parking and council tax.

KCC's Community Services consultation in 2023 suggested that people want services which can be accessed easily. There are polarising views around developing/maintaining services where people have higher levels of need:

- 44% of all respondents answering indicated they agree with designing the proposals by looking at where people have the highest need for services (15% indicated they strongly agree).
- 42% of all consultees answering indicated they disagree with this approach (26% indicated they strongly disagree). More women (and those who were pregnant or had children) disagreed compared to men[10].

Given this consultation was linked to access to family services, the gender disparity would suggest that primary carers view their access as the dominant priority, whereas people who are less likely to use services would see 'need' as a dominant factor. 'Need' here is defined as financial but potentially the interpretation could be much broader (mental and physical health, isolation etc).

The Community Warden service consulted on a redesign in 2023/24. Within this consultation there was strong support for community-based services (93% agree – with 86% strongly agreeing), with significant support for a ward-based model[11]. This may suggest resident preference for locally delivered services.

KCC compliments data includes the following themes:

- staff helpfulness and friendliness.
- positive service experiences – services which are efficient, clean, well-organised, ease of booking.

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[8] KCC Budget Consultation 2025-2026, Consultation Report, October 2024. Budget Consultation 2025-26 Report
[9] Tunbridge Wells Borough Council 'Residents' Survey results 2023' Residents' Survey results 2023
[10] Community Services Consultation (Dec 2023) https://letstalk.kent.gov.uk/community-services-consultation
[11] KCC & Lake Market Research (2024) 'Community Warden Service Review, Consultation Report' https://letstalk.kent.gov.uk/community-warden-service

- empathy, understanding and dedication shown by staff, especially when helping them to navigate a challenging situation.[12]

KCC complaints data shows the following areas of concern:

- transport and bus links.
- better communication.
- service quality and improvement.
- road works and traffic management.

Surrey Council tested broad questions around devolution and local government re-organisation with their resident's panel of around 1,400 people. Results were weighted to be representative of the Surrey population.

Between the 12 – 26 February 2025, 558 residents gave their thoughts and preferred outcomes on LGR.

- Residents were asked if they had preference for a 1, 2 or 3 unitary model without additional context. Results showed no clear preference.
- Respondents were asked what their preference of outcome would be for unitarisation. The top three responses were:
  - better value for money (60%)
  - clearer accountability (45%)
  - creating a more financially resilient Council (37%)[13]

Views on council tax and financial efficiency

Responses to the KCC Budget consultation shows:

- some support for increasing council tax, 66% supported an increase in council tax – (52% up to the maximum).
- respondents believe there are opportunities to make savings through wages, pensions, expenses, operational efficiencies and better value for money.
- there is a wish to maintain standards and to reduce inefficiencies.[14]

The KCC Budget consultation also found respondents:

- supported more joint working with partners (92%),
- supported more services being made available online as standard (67%)
- supported charging service users for non-statutory services (60%).
- low support for reducing statutory services to the core minimum (33%).[15]

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[12] Complaints - Oct to Dec 24.docx Not published
[13] Surrey County Council (2025) Audit and Governance Committee
https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/documents/s102970/Item%204a%20-
%20Member%20Questions%20and%20Responses.pdf
[14] KCC Budget Consultations (24/25 & 25/26) Budget Consultation 2025-26 | Let's talk Kent
[15] KCC Budget Consultations (24/25 & 25/26) Budget Consultation 2025-26 | Let's talk Kent

T200 staff event (July 24) on the budget found:

- staff showed a similar level of support to the public consultation for an increase in council tax to maximum (61%), (32% against).
- high support was given to saving money by working with partners in a more joined up way (89%).
- significant support for charging for non-statutory use of services (53%).
- lower (than the public) for saving the council money by putting more online (44%)
- low support for reducing statutory services to a core minimum (16%).

National data from LGA (polling on resident satisfaction) suggests that while 56% of respondents are very or fairly satisfied with the way their local council runs things, only 40% strongly or tend to agree that their council provides value for money. 31% neither agree or disagree[16].

Tunbridge Wells Resident's survey suggests high dissatisfaction with council tax.[17]

Research commissioned by KCC in 2023 to understand the different relationships Kent residents have with the Council found that some residents would like to know more about where their council tax goes and how else the council is funded. Council tax is seen by some as a 'fact of life' but many would like to see something in return[18].

Financial assessments to support KCC's draft options appraisal have shown:

- Option 1 (3 unitaries) - 50% of residents would pay more Council Tax, and 50% would pay less.
- Option 2 (4 unitaries) - 57% of residents would pay more Council Tax.
- Option 3 (4 unitaries) - 65% of residents would pay more Council Tax.
- Option 4 (4 unitaries) - 50% of residents would pay more Council Tax, and 50% would pay less.
- Option 5 (2 unitaries) - This is the only option where less than half of residents would pay more Council Tax (48%) which might make it slightly better supported
- Option 6 (1 unitary - benchmark) – information was not available at the time of writing.

A survey completed in Wales in 2024 on public attitudes to council tax focused on fairness of the council tax system (design, administration and the way it is used and invested into communities). This research found that:

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[16] LGA (2023) Polling on resident satisfaction with councils: round 36
https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Resident%20Satisfaction%20Polling%20Round%2036%20JH%20accessibility%20edits.pdf#:~:text=56%20per%20cent%20of%20respondents%20are%20'very,31%20per%20cent%20neither%20agree%20nor%20disagree.
[17] Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (2023) Residents' Survey results 2023 Residents' Survey results 2023
[18] BritainThinks (2023) (Commissioned Research for KCC by MRX) Resident and user experience research (not published)

> - around two-thirds of respondents (61%) reported that it was not clear to them how council tax is spent.
> - when asked to name services supported by council tax, respondents listed bin and refuge collection (50%), Police (42%), road maintenance (31%).
> - around two thirds of respondents (65%) disagreed that they had seen the benefit of council tax invested in their local community.
> - around three out of five respondents (61%) disagreed with the statement that the council tax system is fair.
> - responses were equally divided in terms of whether local councils do not have enough control over council tax rates, with 41% disagreeing, and 27% answering, 'don't know'.
> - around three out of every five respondents (63%) indicated that their council tax was 'too high'. Before additional information was given around a quarter (24%) of respondents indicated that the amount of council tax they are expected to pay was 'about right'[19].
> - after being provided with information about the services which are funded by council tax, a smaller proportion indicated that the council tax they are asked to pay was too high (54% compared to 63% before the information was provided). A larger proportion of respondents indicated that the amount they are expected to pay was about right (29%, compared to 24% before the information was provided).

The KCC Budget consultation shows that 60% of people were in favour of charging service users for non-statutory services[20]. In the Tunbridge Wells Resident survey 42%, when asked how to balance the budget, suggested charging those who use services[21].

Appetite for innovation in service delivery

National research from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology focused on public attitudes and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) suggests improved public trust and optimism about data practices through AI use[22], but also some concerns expressed around further use of data and accountability including anxiety around data security, and lack of control of information.

This national research suggests that while awareness around AI is increasing, age significantly impacts understanding, with younger people, those living in and around London, and higher socioeconomic groups reporting higher familiarity. Almost half of people surveyed think that AI is already used by public services[23]. There is optimism about the use of AI in areas such as healthcare to support service provision.

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[19] Welsh Government (2024) Survey of public attitudes to council tax, 2024: summary. Survey of public attitudes to council tax, 2024: summary [HTML] | GOV.WALES
[20] KCC Budget Consultations (24/25 & 25/26) Budget Consultation 2025-26 | Let's talk Kent
[21] Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (2023) Residents' Survey results 2023 Residents' Survey results 2023
[22] Gov UK (2024) Public attitudes to data and AI: tracker survey (wave 4) report Public attitudes to data and AI: Tracker survey (Wave 4) report - GOV.UK
[23] ibid

An LGA survey which explored current local government use of AI found that it was being used in areas such as HR, administration (minutes), procurement, finance, cyber security with limited use in health and social care.[24]

In a study published in Government Information Quarterly (March 2024) Haesevoets et al looked at the findings of three studies which explored UK respondents' perception of AI usage in government and found that:

- people prefer AI to have less decisional weight than human decision makers.
- people prefer AI to provide input and advice to decision makers but not make decisions.[25]

In relation to increasing use of digital, Maidstone's citizen engagement found high levels of confidence using digital channels, with slightly lower levels of confidence using web chat (74%) and controlling social media privacy (69%)[26].

The KCC Community Services consultation found that:

- 64% of people feel confident about accessing services digitally.
- 10% were not confident with technology.
- 16% felt that online access to services is not an inclusive approach particularly for the elderly.

Responses highlight that it is important to have an option for face-to-face delivery and that the most important aspect of use was ease.[27]

KCC resident research suggests that residents are generally satisfied with KCC services being delivered digitally if possible, however they stress the importance of flexibility to ensure services remain accessible. While 'functional' services are seen as more easily digitalised, more 'emotive' service experiences are felt to be better delivered through face-to-face interaction with the assumption that any difficulties are more quickly and empathetically managed.[28]

Interest in local democracy and decision making

National research by LGiU shows there is strong public consensus that residents should have a say in decision making, with 81% of people asked, saying that local residents should always have a say about decisions that impact their local area[29]. When asked whose views are the most important for local areas, respondents identified the voices of local residents and councillors. However, 56% suggest it doesn't matter who or where decisions are made, as long as they are

[24] Local Government Association, (2024) 'Local government: State of the sector: AI' https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Local%20Government%20State%20of%20the%20Sector%20AI%20Research%20Report%202024%20-%20UPDATED_3.pdf

[25] Haesevouts et al, March 2024) Government Information Quarterly (Vol 41, Issue 1) 'How do citizens perceive the use of Artificial Intelligence in public sector decisions?' https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0740624X23001065

[26] Resident survey data - Maidstone Borough Council

[27] KCC & Lake Market Research (2024) 'Community Warden Service Review, Consultation Report' https://letstalk.kent.gov.uk/community-warden-service

[28] BritainThinks (2023) (Commissioned Research for KCC by MRX) Resident and user experience research KCC_Resident user and experience research_summary narrative report June 2023 FINAL (not published)

[29] State of the Locals 2025, State of the Locals 2025 - LGiU

the right decisions[30]. 54% agreed that too many policy decisions affecting their local area were made outside of it.

Awareness of the precise role of local government officials is low, with levels of understanding of the work and decisions taken by councils and councillors being below that of Westminster MPs. At both levels of governance, the majority of respondents indicated that they had limited knowledge of the activity of elected representatives. 64% said they knew not very much/nothing at all about the work of their local councillors. 63% said they knew not very much or nothing at all about how decisions were made in their local council[31].

Maidstone citizen engagement shows that 87% of residents are interested in what happens in their neighbourhood, and 51.2% feel part of the neighbourhood. Only 4% definitely agreed that they could influence decisions affecting their local area (21.11% tended to agree), but 37.38% disagreed, suggesting that many don't feel able to influence local decision making[32].

However, looking at election turn out results, district turn out is not significantly different from county level numbers. The most recent county election saw a turnout of 33.4% (May 25)[33] and district turn out in May 2023 shows similar figures, such as 27.79% in Dartford[34], 36.6% in Tonbridge and Malling[35] and 34.87% in Folkestone and Hythe[36] (May 2023). Local evidence would suggest that people do not seem to be more inclined to vote at a more local level.

Partners position

To inform the submission of the Interim Plan for local government reorganisation to Government in March 2025, Kent Leaders and Chief Executives asked partners their views. No geographical breakdowns were provided at this point, although the possibility of 3 or 4 unitary councils was referenced.

Partner indications given at that time are below but may have changed subsequently and may change in the future.

NHS	Would support a 3 unitary model to minimise infrastructure costs and reduce risk of service fragmentation.
Kent Fire and Rescue	Supports 3 unitary model
OPCC	Supports 3 unitary model
Housing authority feedback	Town and County Housing - Supports 3 unitary model
Further Education	Kent Further Education – support 4 unitaries aligned to health trusts East Kent College Group – suggests East Kent as Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone, Swale and Thanet.

[30] State of the Locals 2025, State of the Locals 2025 - LGiU
[31] State of the Locals 2025, State of the Locals 2025 - LGiU
[32] Maidstone Borough Council (2022) Resident survey data - Maidstone Borough Council
[33] The Electoral Commission (2025) Report on the May 2025 local elections in England | Electoral Commission under supporting data ' May 2025, electoral data
[34] Dartford Borough Council Election results – May 2023 dartford.moderngov.co.uk/mgElectionResults.aspx?ID=55&RPID=75265883
[35] Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council Election results – May 2023 Election results by party, 4 May 2023
[36] Folkestone and Hythe District Council Election Results – May 2023 (Average of Ward Turnout) - District council 2023 election results | Folkestone & Hythe District Council

Summary and impact on options

Before engaging residents and partners, it is difficult to draw conclusions on local views and this information will need to be re-visited after any engagement takes place.

Information collected within this report suggests that:

1. there may be low levels of interest in local government by many, and some confusion around government structures, as well as the services delivered by different tiers of government.
2. tier one structures can be perceived as further from the resident than tier two, or community groups.
3. services which are perceived as geographically closer to residents seem to have greater levels of trust (county greater than national, district greater than county, high trust of community groups).
4. other areas have seen some resident support for devolution and localism.
5. residents and staff responding to the Budget consultation prioritised funding for social care, and (for residents) highways, infrastructure and road networks. There is low support for costs around overheads and management, but there is significant support for partnership working and some support for digital innovation.
6. local access to services is important to residents, with people valuing services at a community level.
7. in a neighbouring authority, better value for money, accountability and financial resilience were seen as key outcomes of unitarisation.
8. within the Budget consultation there was some support for increases in council tax (52% to the maximum and 66% supporting some increase to fund services). Other research suggests some residents would like to know more about how council tax might benefit them, and national data suggests that only 40% of respondents felt that councils provide good value for money.
9. there may be some support for charging for non-statutory services.
10. people may support access to services digitally where possible, and potential innovations through AI (where decisions are not being made).
11. residents may like to be further involved in decision making; however, many feel they do not have influence at a local level. Turn out levels at district and county elections are similar. There is low awareness of the role of local government officials and how decisions are taken.

Conclusions

The below explores how these findings may affect the different geographical options for LGR that are included in the options appraisal.

Option 1 (3 unitaries)

Positives may include:

- increasing perception of 'local'/'community' supports relationship with services.
- this may be a good 'middle ground' of strategic versus local that supports engagement in local decision making and visibility of services and where council tax is spent.
- fewer council boundaries (compared to four-unitaries) mean less complexity for residents to access services and for partners to navigate.

- partners had previously supported this option when asked and this model best matches the operational delivery arrangements for Police.

This option may result in 50% of residents paying more council tax, and 50% paying less. Those paying less may view this change as positive, those paying more may view this change as negative.

Negatives may include:

- East Kent includes areas of higher deprivation levels, and this split may create perceptions of 'unfairness' in relation to services and quality of public space.
- This model is more complex than a 1 or 2 unitary option (low level resident knowledge around local government structure and service delivery).
- Perceived increase of back office, managerial duplication or cost.

Option 2/3/4 (four unitaries)

Positives may include:

- increasing perception of 'local'/ 'community' supports relationship with services.
- localised decision making.
- perception that council tax is spent on local provision.

57% of residents would pay more Council Tax for option 2, 65% more for option 3 and 50% for option 4. For those paying higher levels of council tax, this change may be viewed negatively.

 Negatives may include:

- there is more fragmentation and the opportunity for strategic planning is reduced.
- more boundaries between unitaries may increase perceived complexity of local government structure and service delivery.
- perceived increase of back office, managerial duplication or cost.
- increased complexity for partners to work with councils across their delivery boundaries.

Option 5 (2 unitaries)

Positives may include:

- efficiency and value for money for residents is higher in the two-unitary option,
- a simplified structure and system (when compared to 3 and 4 unitary options). May increase understandings of local government and service delivery.

This is the only option where less than half of residents would pay more council tax (48%) which might make it slightly better supported.

Negatives may include:

- East and West split may create the perception of 'unfairness' in relation to services and quality of public space.
- potentially reduces ability to see local impact of council tax.
- potentially reduces opportunity for local decision making and delivery of services.

Option 6 (1 unitary - benchmark)

Positives may include:

- a simplified system, may increase resident awareness and understanding.
- potential reduced cost of back office/managerial.
- supports one council tax system.

Negatives may include:

- residents might feel the local authority is too big and remote and would not be able to see where their council tax is being spent.
- potentially reduces the opportunity for local decision making and delivery of services, as this may feel remote, or outside of the community.