



When The Structures Change, Who Do We Become?

Part Three: The Margins Don't Move with the Map

AUTHOR
Dr Amanda Milliner

PUBLISHED
April 2026

READING TIME
10 min

TOPIC
Local Government Reorganisation | Change | Place | Communities

A new authority does not automatically inherit trust

Especially not from the people who never fully gave it to the old one.

In the first two parts of this series, I wrote about what Local Government Reorganisation does to place — to the civic identity and sense of belonging that communities build over time. And about what it does to people — the workforce and the leaders carrying the human weight of structural change.

This final piece is about a group who rarely appear in the LGR conversation at all. The people on the margins. Those who were already hardest to reach, least likely to be heard, and most dependent on the relationships and local knowledge that reorganisation puts at risk.

They are the reason this matters most.

The reset nobody plans for

Every reorganisation creates a reset moment. New structures, new teams, new ways of working. For most people, that reset is disruptive. For people on the margins — those experiencing homelessness, those with learning difficulties, those living in poverty, those who have every historical reason to distrust public institutions — it can be something much more serious.

It can mean the relationship they finally built with a housing officer, a community worker, a support team — the relationship that took months or years of patient, consistent engagement to establish — simply disappears. Not because anyone chose to end it. But because reorganisation, if it isn't handled carefully, dissolves the structures that held it in place.

Trust, for people who have been let down by systems repeatedly, is not a given. It is earned, slowly, through consistency and presence. It cannot be *transferred* to a new authority like a file or a caseload. It has to be rebuilt. And rebuilding it takes time that vulnerable people — people in crisis, people in unstable housing, people navigating complex needs — often don't have.



What gets lost in the reorganisation

There is a kind of knowledge that lives in people rather than systems. The housing officer who knows which families are struggling before they reach crisis point. The community development worker who has spent years becoming a trusted face in a neighbourhood that doesn't trust easily. The support worker who understands, through years of relationship, how a particular person communicates, what they need, what helps.

This knowledge is not written down anywhere. It doesn't appear on a database or transfer automatically to a new employer. It exists in the relationship itself.

When reorganisations happen quickly — and they often do, driven by financial pressures and political timelines — this knowledge is at serious risk of being lost. People move on. Teams are restructured. Priorities shift. And the communities who depended on those relationships are left to start again with strangers in an organisation that doesn't yet know them.

For most people, that is frustrating. For people who are already vulnerable, it can tip the balance between stability and crisis.

“Reorganisation is not a neutral act. For those already on the margins, it is one more reminder that the system was not really built with them in mind. New authorities have a chance to prove otherwise. But only if they choose to.”

The under-reporting problem

In my doctoral research, one of the most striking findings was how consistently adults with learning difficulties went unreported in the systems designed to support them. Not because they didn't need help. But because the barriers to reaching out — unfamiliarity, past negative experiences, a lack of accessible routes in — were simply too high.

The same dynamic exists across many marginalised groups. People don't come forward not because they have nothing to say, but because experience has taught them that coming forward doesn't always lead somewhere good.

Reorganisation risks making that problem worse. A new authority, in the early months of its existence, is focused inward — on its own structures, its own processes, its own culture. The outward-facing work of proactive community engagement, of finding and reaching the people who will never walk through the front door, tends to get deprioritised. Not deliberately. But consistently.

The people who most need to be found are the least likely to find their own way in. That is not a new problem — but LGR has the potential to *deepen* it significantly if new authorities don't build proactive engagement into their foundations from the very start.

Your paragraph textYour paragraph text

Hard-won gains are not guaranteed

Across local government, there are pockets of genuinely good practice in reaching marginalised communities. Disability-inclusive services. Trauma-informed housing support. Community health workers embedded in neighbourhoods rather than offices. Approaches that took years to develop, pilot, and embed.

These gains are fragile even in stable times. In a reorganisation, they are at real risk.

When two or more authorities merge, their approaches to inclusion don't automatically align. One authority may have invested significantly in accessible services; another may be starting from a much earlier point. In the process of creating common systems and shared approaches, there is a very real danger that the highest standard is not what survives — instead, what survives is what is easiest to scale.

That is a loss that falls hardest on the people who benefited most from the better approach. And they are rarely the people with the loudest voice in the merger conversation.

What new authorities must do differently

This is not an argument for maintaining the status quo. Some existing authorities are not serving marginalised communities well. Reorganisation can be a genuine opportunity to do better — to build something more inclusive, more proactive, more honest about who is and isn't being reached.

But seizing that opportunity requires intention. It will not happen by accident.

New authorities need to map their marginalised communities before they launch — not after. To understand who is hardest to reach, where the gaps in provision are, and what relationships already exist that must be actively protected rather than passively inherited.

They need to bring community voices into the design of the new organisation, not just its consultation processes. People with lived experience of homelessness, disability, poverty, and marginalisation should be shaping how the new authority works — not being informed of decisions already made.

And they need to be honest about the reset. To acknowledge, openly, that reorganisation disrupts relationships and that rebuilding them is *work* — real, resourced, sustained work — not a communications exercise.

Closing the trilogy

Across these three pieces, I have tried to hold up something that tends to get crowded out in the official narrative around Local Government Reorganisation.

The human cost. Not as a reason to resist change — change, done well, can be genuinely transformative. But as a reason to take it seriously. To ask harder questions. To measure success not just in savings and strategic capacity, but in whether the people who needed local government most still feel it is there for them on the other side.

Places matter. People matter. And the communities on the margins — the ones who were already holding on — matter most of all.

The map has changed. The question now is whether the new authorities that have inherited it are prepared to do the work of truly understanding what — and who — is on it.