

Local Government Should Be Local

The Liberal Party Response to the English Devolution White Paper



The Liberal Party views the impending local government reorganisations, outlined by the government in their white paper English Devolution released on the 16th of December 2024, with considerable disquiet.

The Government's proposed reform of local government is talking about devolving powers whilst proposing a massive centralisation of powers.

The Labour government is following in the footsteps of the Conservatives prior to the general election by proposing devolving power only to the regional level, whilst taking it away at the local level. They are both all about centralising power and control.

The proposed mergers of district councils and splitting up of county councils to form new unitary councils was examined in a PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report commissioned by the County Councils Network in 2020. This showed that all the options to create multiple unitary councils were extremely expensive and disruptive.

PwC predicted that the loss of economies of scale at county level would cost billions across the country. With local government already on its knees, spending a fortune on a reorganisation to create a more costly alternative is the last thing we need. Our local council has had to set aside millions to pay for these changes – Comments posted on Reading Chronicle Website

Such a proposal removes local accountability and consultation, whilst centralized decision making at a higher level.

Such a review would potential just create larger wards and benefit career politicians. Councillor expense would be high, as would those of council's officers travelling around their region on legitimate business.

For example, in Devon, which was originally due for a review of district councils under the Conservatives, it can take 90 minutes to drive across the county, and a unified administration would be impractical.

Spending and administration staff would become concentrated close to the administration centre, reducing local expenditure and employment which benefits local communities.

Elections were suspended in the spring of 2025 in 9 areas to allow for the fast tracking of regional devolution. We consider this anti-democratic and prevented the electorate expressing its opinion on any reorganisation at the ballot box

The areas affected were East and West Sussex, Essex and Thurrock, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Norfolk, Suffolk and Surrey and their elections have been delayed for one year until new unitary authorities have been created.

Elections will then be held in tandem with those for 6 new Combined Authority Mayoralities in Cheshire & Warrington, Cumbria, Greater Essex, Hampshire & Solent, Norfolk & Suffolk, and Sussex & Brighton.

As the local government reforms are expected to take up to 3 years, we believe the electorate in all areas affected must be able to elect councillors who represent their views on the form of reorganisation their communities aspire to.

Liberal councillors, past and present have seen various reorganisations imposed at a regional level

First and foremost, devolution is a double-edged sword. It should wrest control of way too much power and money, currently in the hands of a remarkably small cabal of treasury 'establishment' figures and move it to regional players, who are far better placed to know how best to spend the money and exert that power for maximum benefit to their communities

The devolution process also removes important decision-making from people at the sharpest end – those having the most direct contact with electorates, such as district and borough councils. However, it can also devolve more power right down to town and parish councils, but rarely with the commensurate funding to allow that to be effective.

My personal experience is that any ground-up shift in power is invariably to more bureaucratic, inefficient and less delivery focussed authorities, despite rhetoric to the contrary regarding LGR, although the jury is out on completely new Mayoral authorities. I live in hope, but again, this will largely depend on voting choices.

Per Cllr Mike Potter, Pickering Town Council, formally Ryedale District Council, North Yorkshire

Chris Ash, former Peterborough councillor related his experience in Peterborough

"However the trend seems to be toward greater centralisation through mega county style structure – that seems to be about centralisation and making participation more difficult. That is not democracy.

Looking at governance here in Peterborough the local authority was part of Northamptonshire but autonomous as the County of the Soke of Peterborough then for a while merged with Huntingdonshire and later part of Cambridgeshire ruled from Cambridge by Cambridge. Then around 1998/9 we once again become a unity authority There is now the combined authority of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough . which in my view has taken us backwards.

I have always been against the concept of shoving things upward to mega authorities simply because it's convenient the government at Westminster and defiantly against one person in charge that has too much autonomy and can't be shifted until the next fixed election.

Now I am not against districts working together to provide joint services administered from a one central office . with the flexibility of meeting the needs and wishes of local people. There may be merit in larger areas coming together , but they should be more about co-coordinating services and supporting districts - governance should be as close to people as it can be . Where districts are

merged then they need to have some sort of empathy with a similar demography , industry , closer natural links and ties. Large conurbations would I think be an example or perhaps large rural area with similar land uses and towns and villages that have similar needs”

A further prospectus from Cllr Mike Potter, Pickering Town council, formally Ryedale District Council, North Yorkshire

“NYCC insisted the new NYC would be a brand-new council. It has the same leader, CEO and largely the same executive of Tory Cllrs. They had around 2 years to prepare, but it took until around 18 months after LGR for many former district/borough council staff to finally be appointed to positions and teams. The years of uncertainty resulted in the departure of many staff and significant stress to many of the remainder.

I spent the 2 years prior to LGR formally asking, nay demanding that all the costs and savings from the process be transparent and publicly available. I'm not aware of that happening since. It would appear that there have been savings in the cost of senior staff, but how much I don't know.

There was talk of devolving more power down to town and parish councils, but now as a town councillor, I've not seen any of that happening. If it does, will the relevant funding come with it?

I spent two years as vice chair, then chair of the local plan review working party. All our work and progress was abandoned due to the timing of LGR, with the promise of a N Yorks wide local plan within 5 years (hopefully subsuming Ryedale DC's work on site submissions etc). This is a challenging target, but absolutely vital. Time will tell.”

A return to the imposed agenda of regional mayors

The concept of directly elected Mayor's has not been universally welcomed yet it is again on the table.

Previous attempts at imposing regional mayors have been met with indifference. They can only make an impact, such as in Manchester and to a lesser extent London where strategic planning and travel are included in their remit. This goes hand in hand with the devolution of funds.

Adopting elected mayors introduces a cabinet model of local government which is unfamiliar at a regional level.

The consequences of the English devolution proposals

Aside from a loss of local participation and consultation such a move

- Risks creating disconnected councillors with large constituencies, and higher travel expenses for both councillors and council officers.
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- Increased travelled to visit offices or constituency for members of the public

No realistic estimate has been made of the potential of savings in administration, or centralised tendering or staff costs in local redundancies and central recruitment.

- Will require central funding to achieve its aims, otherwise local services will be further damaged.
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- Reduced income for local businesses due to loss of local spending as contractors are centralised.

In all this local opinions and local voices need to be recognised.

Administrative boundaries need to recognise regional and local differences and opinions, proposals to create unitary authorities with populations of 500, 000 may not reflect geographical or demographic realities on the ground.

It should be noted that the course of devolution in Cornwall is unclear as this is a Dutchy.

There are also implications for on the management of debt within merged authorities.

“The main issue is going to be debt burden at the start of the vast majority of the unitary authorities. For instance, Teignbridge is going to be force teamed along with South Hams and West Devon into a unitary set up with the existing unitary authority at Torbay. Torbay has debts exceeding £380m despite only servicing a population of 136,000 (smaller than Teignbridge). WDDC and SHDC have combined debt of £27m as district level councils & Teignbridge a zero operational debt. When the restructuring occurs, Devon County Council debts will be shared across the districts and that means even at optimistic levels the debt the unitary councils will start off with in Devon is likely to see each with £500m debt.

This is bound to impact services in the long run as the debt will require rationalisation of services which means redundancies and loss of localised services.

It’s also likely to see taxpayer assets being sold off once again with not apparent benefit to the public”

Cllr Andrew MacGregor, Teignbridge District Council, Devon.

The Liberal Party calls for

The retention of the lowest tiers of level of representative democracy at district, town and parish level.

Greater devolution of decision-making spending and collection of revenue.

The issuing of planning applications permits and licenses can be done locally, with a pass-through mechanism so that decisions are accepted further back without the need for duplication or referral.

Authority on planning delegated down with limited powers to refer back or intervene.

The scrapping of all combined, and combined county, authorities, (except for the Liverpool City Region and Greater Manchester, due to the presence of inner-city local government boundaries) with all powers and funding being devolved downwards, except for local railways, which will become the responsibility of Great British Railways. This will remove an entire layer of bureaucracy, often too remote for the powers it holds.

Larger town and parish councils, those with a population above 12,000, will gain additional powers, taking over the responsibility for planning permission, local planning, and markets and fairs from district and unitary councils. People tend to identify more with their parish or town, than with their district.

Conclusion.

The Liberal Party remains unconvinced that these reforms of local government will provide any measurable benefits whilst removing local accountability for decisions affecting communities.

Our party believes we can make a strong case against such changes and that local government should be local.

We sincerely believe decisions affecting communities should always be taken as close to the reasonably possible

Community politics is at the very core of our beliefs, and we support local government and in particular, localism which we see as being paramount to a flourishing society.

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