White Paper on English Devolution
Hertfordshire local government: what comes next?
A voluntary sector perspective

1) Introduction and background

Every generation or so there is a review of local government. It is regrettable that reviews seem to coincide with periods of international turmoil. In any event, proposals for local government change rarely attract the interest, scrutiny and engagement that they should.

Watford & Three Rivers Trust is a charity operating in Hertfordshire. We aim to build networks, partnerships, alliances and activities that help our community achieve prosperity, wellbeing, togetherness and resilience - and we want a thriving community in which people are, informed, connected and take responsibility for the wellbeing of themselves and others. In all this, we work in close partnership with Hertfordshire County Council, Watford Borough Council, Three Rivers District Council, with many local town and parish councils, businesses, voluntary organisations and communities.

2) The White Paper

In December 2024, the government published a White Paper on "English Devolution" setting out plans for the abolition of Hertfordshire County Council and of the county's Borough and District councils, including those in Watford and Three Rivers. This document is produced by W3RT as a contribution to the local debate on "what comes next".

The White Paper envisages pretty uniform local government throughout England and focuses heavily on:

- driving growth
- efficient commissioning and delivery of services
- "devolution" – the future financial and power relations between local and central government

From this perspective and with this agenda, it may be difficult to understand the particular needs of Hertfordshire, or the nuances of local relationships and partnerships. Economic growth can bring great benefit, but benefits will be harder to identify if people's living standards fall, if Hertfordshire's rural character is lost, or if local government becomes an instrument of national government rather than an expression of local democracy. Hertfordshire's existing structures collaborate on services and commissioning and this can continue regardless of structures. Relations to central government are important, but the White Paper also notes the importance of local accountability.

3) Hertfordshire's initial response to the White Paper

Hertfordshire's initial response to the White Paper (agreed by all elements of the current structure) is to propose either a single unitary authority (based on the existing County boundary), or to offer a range of options for two, three of four unitary authorities.

"Representative shortlist of two, three and four unitary authority options" agreed by all elements of the current local authority structure in Hertfordshire

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2UA scenario



3UA scenario A



3UA scenario B



4UA scenario

4) Local character

Current English local government embraces a quaint and complex menagerie of different forms: unitary authorities, city councils, metropolitan districts, garden city corporations, and borough, district, town, and parish councils. Some stand alone, others are nested within each other, some are “royal”, some have directly elected mayors. This is the result of a thousand years of continuous evolution.

The many different forms of government is a natural reflection of the fact there are many different types of community. Each town, settlement and community is unique; and each deserves a local council that reflects its own character. Local government is the obvious and natural expression of a community’s identity, character and purpose.

5) Innovation

English local government has been pivotal in many developments and innovations including on: safe sanctuaries, municipal freedoms, free trade and open markets, personal rights and liberties, safer workplaces, health services, public health, public education, adult education, public housing, cleaner rivers, safe drinking water, maintained roads, sewerage systems, clean streets, street lighting, railways, public transport, policing, fire services, flood precautions, public parks, pensions, poor relief, out of work benefits, child protection, civil defence, air raid shelters, local adult care services, local amenities such as community centres, theatres and sports facilities.

In each case, local government was well ahead of national government. Clearly, all strands of history and all forms of government also have many instances of poor or corrupt practice. All elements of local government have a duty to synchronise activities and collaborate on joint initiatives – as they did to great effect during the recent Covid pandemic.

6) Partnership

Very often, local services are designed and delivered in partnership with local charities and voluntary organisations. But it is wrong to think local government just commissions services. At its best, the partnership of local charity and local government reacts quickly to local needs, providing solutions and services that are sensitive to local circumstances, designed for local people, and accountable to local communities.

Local government also provides the meeting place for all parts of the local community: convening and hosting networks, co-ordinating disparate services around priorities, mobilising community responses, and forging a shared sense of identity and purpose.

7) Hertfordshire

Records of Hertfordshire, Watford and Rickmansworth all date back more than a thousand years. Hertfordshire is known as “a county of small towns”. People feel a natural affinity and affection for their neighbourhood, for their town or village, and for the county. It is a happy coincidence that current local government arrangements strengthen and harmonise with these natural ties.

It is a reflection on the quality and dedication of our local politicians that our local government institutions are so well regarded and have been well regarded over many years: they are an integral part of our local communities, providing leadership and reflecting local values and aspirations.

8) Accessibility

No system is perfect, but accessibility is a key factor: people become comfortable and familiar with local institutions if they regularly see their councillors and visit the council buildings. Within Watford and Three Rivers, and across Hertfordshire, elected representatives are tireless in visiting local communities, events and activities. In doing so, they learn people's priorities and concerns - and they also make the democratic process real, transparent and personal. Many people know their local councillor, or know someone who does, or can find them approachable. This is trye of individual residents and voters, and it is also true of local businesses and charities. It is also try regardless of voter turnout for any specific election (voter number bear only a small relationship to overall engagement) and regardless of the party political control of a particular council.

9) What comes next

Scale and accessibility

Local government should most usefully be seen as a "bottom up" expression of local community – playing a major role in fostering a sense of identity and belonging by providing a focal point for local networks and communications to ensure that communities are connected and effective at all levels (including local charities, faiths, businesses, employers, developers, colleges, hospitals, police, etc).

By building and sustaining these partnerships, and through being visible and accessible, local government fulfils its secondary role of being the human and accessible face of "the state".

To effectively perform this role, local government should be as close as possible to people's everyday experience: visible, accessible and accountable. From the perspective of strengthening communities and local identity, creating a single countywide authority, or two semi-counties, would leave local authorities too remote. Our preference is for local authorities to be as close as possible to the people they serve. In Hertfordshire, this would favour 3-4 local authorities.

Work with natural communities

As far as possible, the review should look to work with the natural communities and hubs already in existence and taking into account geography, demography, economics, history and communications. In the West, there are natural centres in Watford and around the twin centres of St Albans and Hemel Hempstead. In the East, the natural centres are probably Stevenage and Hertford. This would tend to favour "4UA Scenario".

In 1972, central government's "top down" vision of local government (viewed from Whitehall and Westminster) created the sprawling local authority of Hertsmere that bears no relation to any actual "community". This is no reflection on the people who live there or the councillors who work hard on their behalf. But demographically, socially and economically, Potters Bar aligns with Hatfield to the north or Cheshunt to the East; equally clearly, the east of Hertsmere aligns naturally with Watford. The current review should address past anomalies rather than embed them for another generation.

Town and Parish Councils

Town and Parish councils can play a key role linking larger authorities with local communities; we hope this role can be better highlighted and recognised.

A ceremonial County?

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Whatever the mode adopted in future, most residents will still have a strong association for Hertfordshire long into the future. We hope the successor bodies will continue to collaborate and commission as “Hertfordshire” to retain and strengthen these long-standing ties. The association will also be sustained in part by the “ceremonial” roles of High Sherriff and Lord-Lieutenant. Both these posts play a key role supporting local charities and we hope the successor bodies will retain a duty to support these posts.

Alignment with NHS

The NHS is also undergoing substantial change. We welcome the NHS’s moves to prioritise prevention and to make better use of data and technology. But the NHS also needs a major cultural change so it can work better with local communities and voluntary organisations: current arrangements make it extremely difficult for the NHS to establish successful and productive partnerships. We hope the ICB and NHS can adopt more open and beneficial practices from the County Council, Districts and Boroughs.

Change management

We hope and expect that the new local authorities will work together to sustain existing county-wide commissioning and services in the long term, except where there are over-riding benefits in other approaches. Some services can and should be delivered “at scale” with no significant loss to local accountability or identity. Other services are better connected to local communities to meet particular needs and be locally accountable. We hope these discussions will involve residents and the voluntary sector.

Relations to voluntary sector

In the coming period of change, the biggest risk is the disruption or loss of partnerships and relationships. There will be significant disruption to local networks – and in the charity sector where more than 100 charities reference Hertfordshire in their names, and more than 1,500 include “Hertfordshire” in their description of activities or area of operations. It is not clear that the inevitable disruption has been recognised or planned for. Any reconfiguration of the voluntary sector should of course be led by the voluntary sector and not by local government.

Final thoughts

Charities will work with any form or structure of local government – but our first loyalty will always be to our service users and communities. We recognise that “community” exists independently of local government – and independently of local charities. Local government and charities are both much stronger if they work together – and if they work with people’s affiliations and loyalties rather than seeking to cut across them or recreate them.

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