

‘Desiloing’ Britain

**Why we need a new system of
interconnected local government**

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Executive Summary

Britain's systems of local government have always been confusing. The Institute for Government has gone as far as to call it an 'incomplete patchwork' system.¹ Meanwhile writers in the Fabian report *Communities in Control* repeatedly lamented the lack of 'community power' despite local government's complexity.² While the diversity in types of local government reflects the energetic engagement of some citizens with constitution and norm-building, it also erects informational barriers to local politics for residents, and unnecessarily complicates engagement between authorities and with central government for officers and civil servants.

This lack of standardisation has led to uneven delivery of public services, difficult budget management, and countless controversies over planning. While it is true power is being hoarded by Westminster, power already decentralised across local government is also not being distributed logically. For example, councils lack the influence to make real change to some areas like policing and health due to conflicting jurisdiction with other local government institutions (e.g. PCCs, Mayors, NHS trusts).

In an effort to resolve the current mess, the new Labour government has put forward proposals to reorganise local government in the English Devolution White Paper. It is seeking to offer a radical new look for the sector, aiming to bolster the credibility of local governance among the public amidst often floundering public service delivery. While Labour didn't make these proposals a major part of its manifesto, they have evidently been in the works for a long time. Prior to the election, prospects of devolution were most prominently raised by the Report of the Commission on the UK's Future led by Gordon Brown in 2022, which made the proposal that reorganisation of power should be a central plank of government policy.³

¹ Institute for Government, 'How the next government should complete the job of English devolution', 9 May 2024, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/next-government-complete-english-devolution>.

² Fabian Society, 'Communities in Control: Pushing Power Down to Spread Prosperity Out', 8 August 2022, <https://fabians.org.uk/publication/communities-in-control-2/>.

³ Commission on the UK's Future, 'Report of the Commission on the UK's Future', 2022, Chapter 3, <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Commission-on-the-UKs-Future.pdf>

Responding directly to the English Devolution White paper, this paper makes two clear additional recommendations for policymakers in relation to local government reform.

Firstly, it advocates a hardball approach to restructuring authorities, urging the government to force conversions into Mayoral Strategic and Unitary Authorities should they engage with processes in bad faith by attempting to stall reform to the detriment of other authorities. At its heart, this paper values a standardising approach, with some space for constitutional diversity in areas with unique geographies or demographics. The aim here is to introduce a baseline ‘one-size-fits-all’ system of powers and constitutions, and to strengthen the democratic right of citizens to know who to hold accountable for decision-making in a modernised two-tier system (Strategic and Unitary Authorities, rather than County and District Councils).

Secondly, this paper advocates a novel approach to the local government workforce, taking advantage of coordinated standards between the new Strategic and Unitary authority models. Though the existing White Paper advocates a ‘local government workforce development group’ to focus on retention through change, this paper makes specific longer-term recommendations for that review to consider.⁴ The primary suggestion is the creation an NLGS (National Local Government Service), creating a prestigious body to facilitate one-stop employment arrangements. This would replace individual authorities with a national ‘posting’ system for officers within the NLGS. It is argued that this system could greatly improve efficiency, standards and workforce satisfaction in the sector.

⁴ MHCLG, ‘Policy paper: English Devolution White Paper’, 16 December 2024, Section 4.2.5, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper#delivering-devolution-at-every-scale>

Introduction

In England alone, there are 326 different local bodies at district level or above, with a typology including: Combined Authorities, District and Borough Councils, County Councils, Unitary Authorities, Metropolitan Boroughs, and the GLA Borough system. If County Councils and Combined Authorities – the current highest tier – are excluded, this still leaves 292 administrative divisions. Each has somewhat differing practices, constitutions and staffing arrangements. This system is a product of Victorian-era legal tradition combined with experimental, fragmented and regionalised modernisation efforts since the mid-20th century.

A list of all authorities in England, comprising the Counties (light blue), Districts (green), Metropolitan Boroughs (pink-purple), Unitary Authorities (yellow), London Boroughs (brown, middle) and Combined Authorities (orange, right). As can be observed, there are clearly far more District Councils than any other type. Unitary authorities are considered to be more consolidated. On the right, Combined Authorities are shown to

have a mix of different types of authority within them at present, though this will change under new English Devolution proposals⁵.

This is actually a relatively small number of authorities when compared internationally. In the US, with a population of around 335 million and 50 states, there are 3244 counties (including districts in US non-state territories). They have substantially fewer heads per authority than the UK, but also uneven populations in each county. The huge variety in size and population reflects greater rurality, sentimental value, legal differences, and land management needs which are less present in Britain.⁶⁷ France contrastingly has only 13 regions and 96 departments (districts), but it also has 35,358 communes recognised by the EU, which can range from city size (e.g. Paris) to that of a small village or parish in Britain.⁸ Germany is most similar to the current arrangements in the UK, with 400 districts and a similar ‘municipality’ system that resembles the English Parish Council system.⁹ The UK’s difference, compared to the US or France for example, is that we do not use constitutionally ‘like unit’ authorities, which ensure similar powers, practices and responsibilities across authorities.

The new Labour government therefore has an opportunity to improve Britain’s local governance.¹⁰ This is an impressive commitment as it is one of the more slow-moving areas of constitutional policy, facing only the push for Unitary Authorities in the 2000s, and the push towards Metropolitan Boroughs in the 1970s-80s. Concern with obtaining local consent for change, based on low-turnout electoral results and a limited number of referenda (such as the 2004 Northeast England devolution referendum), has undermined previous attempts to bring about more system-wide change. This is not a new debate – and has cut

⁵ Datasheet is produced by myself, based on data from the ONS Open Geography portal:

<https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/>.

⁶ Governing, Alan Ehrenhalt, ‘We have way too many Counties in America. Or do we?’, 31 August 2021, <https://www.governing.com/assessments/we-have-way-too-many-counties-in-america-or-do-we>

⁷ National Association of Counties (United States), ‘Why Counties Matter!’, https://www.naco.org/sites/default/files/documents/CountiesMatter_brochure.pdf

⁸ European Committee of the Regions, ‘Division of Powers’, <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/France-Introduction.aspx> AND <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/France-Systems-of-multilevel-governance.aspx> AND <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Germany-Introduction.aspx> AND <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Germany-Systems-of-multilevel-governance.aspx>.

¹⁰ Labour Party, ‘Power and Partnership: Labour’s Plan to Power Up Britain’, March 2024, <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Power-and-Partnership-%E2%80%93-Labours-Plan-to-Power-up-Britain.pdf>.

through to the public imagination. For example, in the 1980s political comedy, *Yes, Prime Minister*, the Prime Minister is unable to deliver reforms across two episodes due to both civil service and local resistance - there was a mutual fear of change from both the centre and the periphery.¹¹

Labour are also different from past governments in that they harbour little political advantage from the district and county council systems.¹² Constitutional change on the matter is therefore now more appetising for legislators, especially where new Labour MPs co-exist with deep blue County and District Councils. Some will see these older Council structures as a thorn in their side, threatening service delivery in the local area and thus jeopardising chances at re-election due to voters harbouring low information about different governance responsibilities. We have already seen this across a range of seats Labour has won in for the first time, where MPs have advocated substantial devolutionary change in contradiction to the relevant Councils.¹³

The proposals for change, the English Devolution White Paper, for this legislation was unveiled on 16th December 2024, offering a radical new look for local government. The paper outlines plans for the implementation of ‘Strategic Authorities’ which would replace Combined Authorities and County Councils, and widen the unitarization of existing district authorities - a process previously restricted to only a few areas.¹⁴ Local Government Minister Jim McMahon has insisted that only Mayoral Strategic Authorities can access the highest powers

¹¹ Yes, Prime Minister, selected clips: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmOvEwtDyys> AND <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6b2OT3C9KY>.

¹² Bennett Institute for Public Policy Cambridge, Jack Shaw and Patrick Diamond, ‘The Labour Party and the politics of devolution’, 11 December 2023, <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/labour-party-devolution/>.

¹³ News & Star, ‘Labour leaders call for Cumbria to embrace ‘devolution revolution’’, 30 December 2024, <https://www.newsandstar.co.uk/news/24819742.labour-leaders-call-cumbria-embrace-devolution-revolution/>.

GloucestershireLive, ‘Five Gloucestershire MPs propose TWO unitary authorities for county in response to government devolution plans’, 10 January 2025, <https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/cheltenham-news/five-gloucestershire-mps-propose-two-9851717>.

Lancashire Telegraph, ‘Axe Lancashire Councils’ call gets mixed response’, 23 November 2024, <https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/24745754.axe-lancashire-councils-call-gets-mixed-response/>.

¹⁴ MHCLG, ‘Policy paper: English Devolution White Paper’, 16 December 2024, Sections 2 and 3, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>.

(planning and transport powers), but this policy could change based on regional consultations.¹⁵

There remains the risk of half-modernisation of local government. Local government needs to finally be ‘desiloed’ by Labour, mixing democratic decision-making with the reality that most policy delivery today takes place across regional lines. Recognising this, and building on the provisions of the White Paper, this policy paper addresses two areas which could benefit from further clarification and reinforcement.

¹⁵ Local Government Chronicle, ‘Minister: ‘It is not acceptable’ to not have a Mayor’, 24 September 2024, <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/minister-it-is-not-acceptable-to-not-have-a-mayor-24-09-2024/>.

Summary of Recommendations

Restructuring Authorities

At present, authorities within England are overly numerous, confusingly multileveled and unevenly empowered. This should be reformed in a way so that local voice is maintained, but a more efficient combination of powers is conferred on authorities. County Councils should face wholesale abolition - as proposed in the White Paper - in favour of expanded Combined/Strategic Authority (C/SA) economic regions, which should eventually embrace more democratic scrutiny functions beyond indirectly-elected district-level councillors.

The government should:

1. Enforce mass unitarization on district authorities with the aim to create 'like units' with similar population levels and equal powers. Where it is anticipated that significant population change could occur (e.g. with New Towns), this should be accounted for.
2. Mandate C/SA membership for all new UAs across England.
3. C/SAs should be allowed to differ significantly in size, reflecting that not all economically linked areas will necessarily be geographically, demographically or developmentally similar.
4. C/SAs should aim to facilitate and direct better cross-UA cooperation, whereas UAs should come to represent the wider democratic mandate and provision of local knowledge.
5. The existing system of scrutiny in C/SAs, with members indirectly-elected by district authorities, should temporarily remain in new SAs. A formal investiture vote by UAs would be implemented, with proportionality processes encouraged to ensure scrutiny.¹⁶
6. Eventual moves toward elected scrutiny bodies should be encouraged - this has already been proposed for GMCA by Manchester City Council.¹⁷

¹⁶ GMCA Constitution, Part 4, Section E, <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/8823/gmcaconstitution2023finaldocx.pdf?NAME=SD285&ID=285&RPID=4839697>.

¹⁷ 'Notice of Motion – Daring more democracy: A Greater Manchester Assembly', 12 July 2023, <https://democracy.manchester.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=12376>.

7. A clear division should emerge between UAs and C/SAs, with C/SAs largely responsible for regional planning, coordination and development, and UAs largely responsible for day-to-day public service scrutiny and delivery.
8. Ministers should reserve the right to 'call in' planning applications from C/SAs where political interference is hindering potential for economic growth.

Building a National Local Government Service (NLGS)

At present, local authorities hire their own staff and have significant autonomy to manage their own staff as they wish. Many staff will remain at one authority for a long period, building up significant specific 'institutional' knowledge. Together with the standardisation strategy however, the new government should seek to take advantage of creating 'like units' from existing districts and encourage greater staff mobility between authorities by creating a centralised staffing body. Though likely to have a large price tag, the long-term windfall from more efficient processes could be larger because of efficiencies made around recruitment and retention for skilled staff.

The government should:

1. Remove local authority staff from the payrolls of single authorities, with a new body, the National Local Government Service (NLGS), replacing them. To maintain their staff, local authorities should pay the NLGS a termly fee (including actual wages).
2. During the transition period, local authorities should enter into dialogue with the LGS to accommodate existing structural and personnel policy differences into a new framework.
3. A skills and qualifications audit should be carried out to understand the current standard of staff across authorities, informing future recruitment and career pathway carving.
4. Recruitment itself should continue to be executed by authorities. Standardised testing for entry to the service such as a 'work styles questionnaire' as with some civil service roles should not be implemented as this could unnecessarily exclude good candidates.¹⁸
5. NLGS-guided recruitment, especially for graduates, should be carried out through reforms to *Impact*, the local-government graduate scheme. It should

¹⁸ Cabinet Office, Pat McFadden MP, 'Reform of the state has to deliver for people', <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/reform-of-the-state-has-to-deliver-for-the-people>.

be expanded to all authorities, with a specific government budget to support advancement of talented graduates.

6. An online platform should be developed to advertise all local authority jobs nationally.
7. Where redundancies could occur, redesignation to another authority post by the NLGS would be possible, rather than Councils unnecessarily shedding talent from the sector.
8. Local authority staff should be supported to move between authorities during their career, developing cross-authority experience rather than ‘institutional’ knowledge.
9. Within the NLGS, staff groups should be created to encourage national standardisation.
10. Begin work on a national officers’ Code of Conduct, codifying new legal responsibilities to report concerns to national investigatory bodies when politicians or other officers engage in corrupt activity, discriminatory behaviour, or dishonesty in public life.¹⁹

Why these reforms?

The aim of these reforms is to improve efficiency in authority interactions with central government and to create units which can easily work together, manifesting a clearer central picture and increasing interconnectivity between authorities. These are areas already accepted for reform by the government and widely across the thinktank sector. The offer made here is similarly expansive on the new White Paper, rather than instructive.

Firstly, the government should move towards the principle that officers should be able to work with newly established profession teams across C/SAs and UAs. These reforms, aiming to standardise and cut across the sector, will be particularly useful when local governments want to create cross-authority transport routes, or where complex cross-jurisdiction planning proposals or social work is concerned. In executing these reforms, central government would recognise that where local authorities assume greater responsibilities, jurisdictional spillover also occurs, requiring inter-authority cooperation. Though this ‘desiloing’ effort and cross-authority cooperation is already proposed through the Council of Nations and Regions, cross-authority workforce

¹⁹ ‘LGA Model Councillor Code of Conduct 2020’, 17 May 2021, <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-government-association-model-councillor-code-conduct-2020>.

connections will also hopefully facilitate policy harmonisation (*not standardisation*).²⁰ In turn, this would allow for a more cohesive understanding of how officers commissioning and running public services are operationalising policies.

Secondly, the reforms will simplify complex localised governance arrangements which currently make accessing politics difficult for members of the public and politicians. A new model will relieve councillors of the planning responsibility and allow them to focus on public service scrutiny, placing planning at a more sensible regional level, with direct, individual accountability to the public at each new Mayoral election. Provided the public is successfully informed about the reforms, Mayors will hopefully be able to be judged by voters on deliverable strategic goals, and Councils on public service scrutiny, mitigating present public confusion over mixed responsibilities. Though concerns this could represent a democratic deficit by centralising powers around planning are valid, it is a small price to pay for a better national unified approach and the long-term fiscal savings that could be made.²¹

Labour should nonetheless prepare for initial electoral backlash as a result of these reforms. Most of the remaining non-unitarized areas are deeply conservative, and it is likely that there will be significant initial local resistance to the reforms.²² In several of the areas, Reform were poised to make significant gains in 2025’s local elections, disrupting the status-quo. Post-reforms, the prospect of an antagonistic Reform Mayor fixated on immigration cannot be dismissed.²³ The government should demonstrate their commitment to the policy by pledging to work in good faith with whoever is elected – Labour will not always control every Mayor.

²⁰ HoC Library, David Torrance, ‘Council of the Nations and Regions’, 12 September 2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/council-of-the-nations-and-regions/>.

²¹ LSE Blogs, Steve Leach and Colin Copus, ‘Unitary authorities: the larger local government becomes, the greater the damage to local democracy’, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/unitary-councils/> AND This view is commonly expressed by members of small opposition parties on current local authorities. The author has had conversations and heard arguments given to this effect.

²² Institute for Government, ‘Six Things we learned from the May 2024 local and mayoral elections’, 10 May 2024, Section 3, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/six-things-we-learned-may-2024-local-and-mayoral-elections>.

²³ PoliticsHome, ‘Immigration is a major concern in Mayoral contests eyed by Reform, new poll shows’, 24 December 2024, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/immigration-top-issue-in-mayoral-battlegrounds-eyed-by-reform>.

Restructuring Authorities

Unitarization and issues with existing structures of local government

Unitarization remains controversial because it is unpopular with groups who are not dominant in non-unitarized regions. This, those groups argue, is because it would move district powers and democracy into larger authorities 'further' from the public, and prevent minority preferences within regions being expressed.²⁴ There have also been some concerns about Unitary Authorities from a service-delivery perspective, as UAs are required to deliver the same spectrum of services and deliver on heavy casework loads for much larger regions than current districts.²⁵²⁶ This is not a reason to reject unitarization, but instead an argument for more attractive working conditions for officers and councillors. This was set out in the White Paper, in which rights to remote working and other reforms were suggested.²⁷

²⁴ Bennett Institute for Public Policy Cambridge, Jack Shaw and Patrick Diamond, 'The Labour Party and the politics of devolution', 11 December 2023, <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/labour-party-devolution/> AND from a conversation with a thinktank expert.

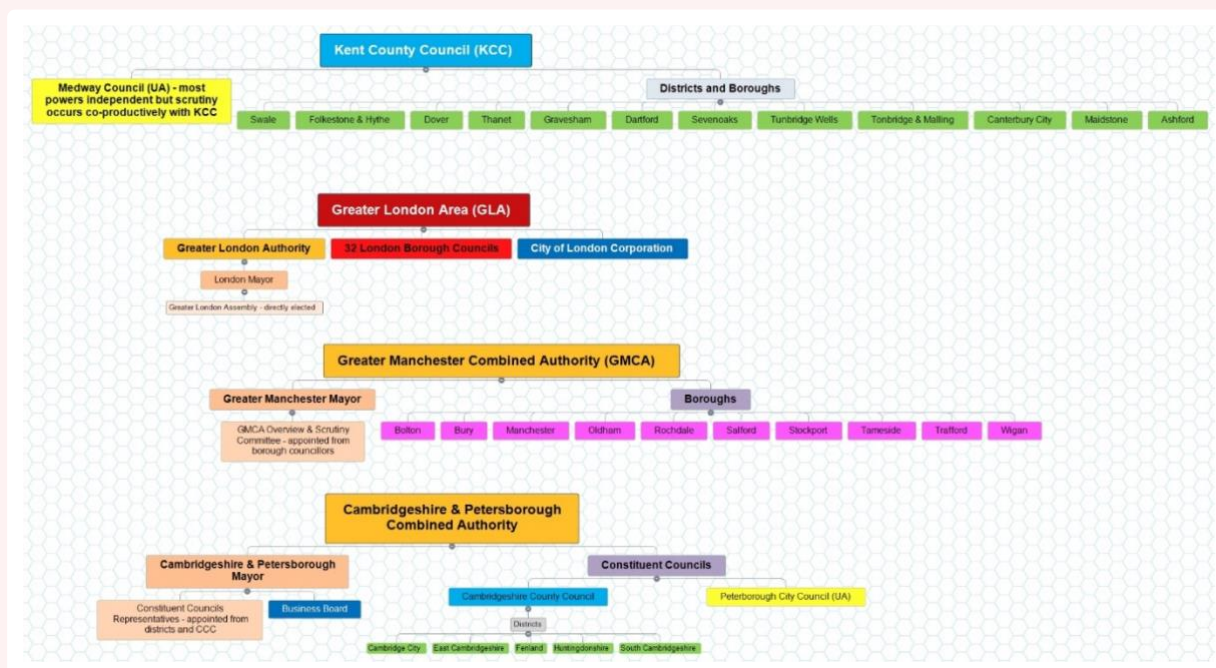
²⁵ LGA, 'The local government workforce', <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/online-and-hybrid-meetings/councillor-hub/introduction-local-government/local#:~:text=There%20are%20also%20significant%20issues,they%20must%20remain%20politically%20neutral.>

²⁶ LSE Blogs, Steve Leach and Colin Copus, 'Unitary authorities: the larger local government becomes, the greater the damage to local democracy', <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/unitary-councils/>

²⁷ MHCLG, 'Policy paper: English Devolution White Paper', 16 December 2024, Section 4.2.5, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper#delivering-devolution-at-every-scale>

'Desiloing Britain': Creating interconnected local government

Despite these concerns, standardisation should occur primarily because the currency of local government is increasingly confusing for stakeholders across the board. As shown in the diagram, there is widespread siloing of bodies which are hard to understand for voters, politicians and officers when interacting with these bodies.²⁸ Increasingly it is also difficult for policymakers to understand the impact of their policies across different types of governance unit.²⁹ These factors have all been noted in the government's White Paper on English devolution.



Kent County Council (KCC), for example, is a typical CC system with 12 districts, one of the largest systems of this kind in the country.³⁰ Alongside KCC, Medway Council, a UA, also operates in the region. KCC and Medway Council share several public services due to uneven public service boundaries, and so co-host some scrutiny hearings together with the 12 KCC districts.^{31,32} Central government may not envision the different types of representation from say Medway, compared to the districts and KCC, in their planning for policy scrutiny.

²⁸ Diagram devised using ONS Open Geography Portal (Ibid), <https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/>.

²⁹ New Local, 'A Labour Vision for Community Power: Participation, Prevention and Devolution', 9 September 2023, Pages 9, 45-46, 62-63, <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/A-Labour-Vision-for-Community-Power-compressed.pdf>.

³⁰ Kent County Council, 'Summary of facts and figures', <https://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/information-and-data/facts-and-figures-about-Kent/summary-of-kent-facts-and-figures#tab-1.2.3>.

³¹ Kent Police, 'Jurisdiction and unique responsibilities', <https://www.kent.police.uk/police-forces/kent-police/areas/kent-police/about-us/about-us/jurisdiction-and-unique-responsibilities/>.

³² Institute for Government 'Completing the map: How the government can extend devolution to the whole of England', September 2024, Pages 46-49, https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Completing-the-map-english-devolution_1.pdf.

Similarly, MCCAs (Mayoral Combined County Authorities) are also complicated, demonstrated through Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA). CPCA's negotiated hybrid structure contains a UA, a CC, 5 district councils and a directly elected Mayor.³³ There are thus many competing decision-makers at the table, through which opposing claims for political legitimacy can be made. Additionally, both the CC and UA can exercise a veto on policy, destabilising decision-making processes. This occurred in 2023 when CPCA attempted to pass a local transport plan, then vetoed by the Peterborough UA Conservative Group.³⁴

The way in which a CA should ideally work is demonstrated by GMCA, where there are ten equal Metropolitan Boroughs run independently. Each district gets equal scrutiny over GMCA and mayoral decisions via indirectly elected members of the district councils to GMCA's Overview & Scrutiny Committee.³⁵ While the vast majority of these have been and are still Labour councillors due to the city's political composition, there have been and are currently some Independent, Liberal Democrat and Conservative members.

The important aspect of GMCA compared to KCC and CPCA is that there is little unevenness and a clear hierarchy in which GMCA is 'above' the ten districts. Contrastingly, in CPCA and KCC, the County and Unitary authorities exist alongside each other, creating more complex scrutiny and decision-making processes due to differing populations and political identities. The previous government's 'devolution deals' procedure (neatly outlined by the IfG) was realistically workable only if those authorities generally agreed with each other.³⁶ Otherwise, as in CPCA, decisions are delayed and governance is less effective because central government funding and planning cannot be agreed on at the local level.

This isn't to say GMCA is perfect (especially around policing and scrutiny), but it remains the national trailblazer in local government modernisation. Coupled with a well-known and popular face in Andy Burnham, it is now the second most prominent local authority system in the UK, attracting new investment and setting the example for the devolution

³³ CPCA, 'About Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority',

<https://cambridgeshirepeterborough-ca.gov.uk/about-us/#:~:text=It%20is%20made%20up%20of,East%20Cambridgeshire%20District%20Council>

³⁴ <https://www.huntspost.co.uk/news/23803580.cambridgeshire-combined-authoritys-transport-plan-fails/> AND The problems with the CPCA were asserted in an expert interview also.

The Cambridge Town Owl, 'Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority fail to approve transport plan', 31 May 2023, <https://cambridgetownowl.com/2023/05/31/cambridgeshire-and-peterborough-combined-authority-fail-to-approve-transport-plan/>.

³⁵ GMCA Constitution, Part 4, Section E, <https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/8823/gmcaconstitution2023finaldocx.pdf?NAME=SD285&ID=285&RPID=4839697>

³⁶ Institute for Government, 'The art of the devolution deal: How England's counties and cities can make a success of devolution', 5 July 2023, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/devolution-deals>

agenda.³⁷ Forceful change may be necessary elsewhere, potentially without getting the full consent of the subject authority. Pro-reform positions have already been set out by Labour MPs in Hertfordshire and Lancashire, County Councils which will likely be forcibly reformed into Unitary Authorities with attached Strategic Authorities within this parliamentary term.³⁸

Separately, the GLA, which is not a traditional unitarized system - and like Manchester has a specific history giving the Mayor and the boroughs context-specific powers - could be treated as a specific governance model designed for managing London's high-density, high wealth environment.³⁹ London's local government structures also benefit from the special attention of central government due to its geographic position. The White Paper has (perhaps surprisingly) suggested eventual alignment for London with the new Strategic Authority system. However, in making decisions on London, government should examine the GLA's specific functions and consider whether London's specific structures demand different systems.

³⁷ YouGov, 'The Most Popular Labour Politicians (tracker)', <https://yougov.co.uk/ratings/politics/popularity/labour-politicians/all>.

³⁸ Local Government Lawyer, 'MP calls on Government to establish three unitaries in Lancashire', 2 December 2024, <https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/governance/396-governance-news/59288-mp-calls-on-government-to-establish-three-unitaries-in-lancashire>.

³⁹ e.g. Sam Bright, *Fortress London: Why We Need to Save the Country from Its Capital*, April 2022.

Being able to know that 'like-units' would be delivering health, planning or educational policy across most of the country would greatly improve civil servants' ability to visualise policy delivery pathways. At present, implementation is planned at least partly by MHCLG, and previously by Oflog (pre-abolition).^{40 41} This centralised policy funnelling process led to implementation plans by local authorities far from those who initially devised policy. While this might sometimes be beneficial (e.g. due to specific geographies or demographics, or democratic processes), it leads to a significant gap between how policy is visualised at the national level and how it is then actually delivered. This type of policymaking-policy-delivery gap already exists in policy environments such as SEND and health delivery policy and could be exacerbated further if new powers are given without structural reform.⁴²

Having established the problems of the current system, why should we pick unitarization as a model? There are many other forms of local government globally, so why does the UK need to embrace such a 'one-size-fits-all' unitaries approach?

The argument from delivery



Source: Labour Party Manifesto 2024

The milestones Sir Keir announced are:

- Raising living standards in every part of the UK - aim to deliver highest sustained growth in the G7
- Rebuilding Britain - build 1.5m homes in England and fast track planning decisions on at least 150 major infrastructure projects
- Ending hospital backlogs - 92% of patients will wait no longer than 18 months
- Putting police back on the beat - with 13,000 additional officers and a named police officer for every neighbourhood
- Giving children the best start in life - getting 75% of five-year-olds in England ready to learn when they start school
- Securing home grown energy - putting the UK on track to at least 95% clean power by 2030.

Source: Sky News

⁴⁰ Oflog was recently subsumed into MHCLG by Minister Jim McMahon's order.

⁴¹ MHCLG, 'Correspondence: Closure of the Office for Local Government (Oflog)', 16 December 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-the-office-for-local-government-oflog/closure-of-the-office-for-local-government-oflog>.

⁴² Civil Service World, 'Bridging the gap: bringing local evidence to national policy', 19 June 2023, <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/bridging-the-gap-bringing-local-evidence-to-national-policy>.

The Productivity Institute, 'You're not speaking my language: policy discontinuity and coordination gaps between the UK's national economic strategies and its place-based policies', March 2022, <https://www.productivity.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WP019-Youre-not-speaking-my-language-FINAL-170322.pdf>.

Local government exists to serve the public by scrutinising and delivering public services. Under Labour, this is directly tied into the former 'five missions' and the new 'six milestones' set out by the Prime Minister.⁴³ Examining these goals in more depth, we can see that they are all subject to support and cooperation from local government.

Securing high growth and increasing living standards across the UK requires enacting increases in living standards across the regions. This is driven by good public services scrutinised by good local government, not just growth and better conditions in London. Similarly, delivery of health and policing services requires partnership with local authorities to ensure public support and coproduction for policing strategies.

Alternatively, sparking a green energy revolution requires loosening up the planning system, and reducing bureaucratic burdens, often caused by relatively small district, town and parish authorities making objections (which, while not legally binding, are a major factor in planning decisions).⁴⁴ Building more homes and small nuclear reactors does require local consent, but this consent can be developed with fewer stakeholders who currently hold up progress.

Unitarization will help lubricate these goals by reducing the number of authorities and enabling better cross-authority planning to achieve these goals. Combined Authorities could create regional green economy plans, Unitary Authorities could scrutinise the effectiveness of NHS services in rural areas more effectively, and central government could reduce its interventions by handing off spatial planning decisions to Mayors, like in London.⁴⁵

By decentralising powers related to these goals more effectively and to larger authorities, we can also allow experiments of scale in some regions of the country, increasing the likelihood of innovations that enable strong growth and success on the

Nuffield Trust, 'Local or national: what role should the government play in social care?', <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/news-item/local-or-national-what-role-should-the-government-play-in-social-care>.

⁴³ LabourList, Tom Belger, '6 milestones, 5 missions, 3 foundations: Have Labour's lists changed too much?' <https://labourlist.org/2024/12/keir-starmer-plan-for-change-milestones/>.

⁴⁴ NALC, 'Utilising the planning system', <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/campaigns/utilising-the-planning-system.html#:~:text=This%20systematic%20approach%20not%20only,are%20pivotal%20in%20shaping%20them>.

⁴⁵ LGA, 'LGA sustainability briefing: the green economy', 16 July 2024, <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/lga-sustainability-briefing-green-economy>. Rural Services Network, 'Scrutiny of Rural Access to Health', January 2017, [https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/images/Local%20Authority/Access to Rural Health Scrutin.pdf](https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/images/Local%20Authority/Access%20to%20Rural%20Health%20Scrutin.pdf). GLA, 'What powers does the Mayor have for planning applications?', <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/planning/planning-applications-and-decisions/what-powers-does-mayor-have-planning-applications#:~:text=Under%20article%207%20of%20the,%20and%20'Stage%203s'>.

service delivery missions.⁴⁶ One of the major problems during Covid was that multileveled governance systems led to disalignment and confusion over restrictions and funding – standardisation can resolve that.⁴⁷ 'Like units' could still be hubs for experimental change on expensive, high-capacity policy areas like social care or temporary housing, but with better comparative potential to other regions.

What we want to avoid in this is local government becoming a servant of central government. Officers should still be aiming to deliver on the goals of the politicians elected to UAs and CAs, but bearing in mind the overall direction of their region and country. Though we as the Fabians would understand this as the delivery of 'Labour's goals', we are building a local government system – and enacting societal change – to last, potentially beyond our own lifespans. Labour's goals could thus more broadly be transferred into missions for government overall, given their more generic focus on improving standards, rather than making any particular political statements. Extending the understanding of these missions by the public to include rewiring local government should be a key aim of unitarization.⁴⁸

The argument from operational connectivity

Another major challenge local government faces is operational connectivity between local authorities. This is not a major issue beyond transport and public service access in rural areas, but many urbanised areas face major challenges.

For example, currently, when a person becomes homeless, it is typically seen as the responsibility of the authority in which they currently live to issue a remedial solution.⁴⁹ This can include a. providing a council home, b. placement in temporary housing, or c. buying property in an alternative area and moving individuals to a new authority where housing is cheaper. Option C is sometimes done without consulting the host authority to address substantial housing difficulties. This is currently most common with London authorities and the southeastern counties, where housing can be cheaper the further you get from the capital.⁵⁰ The process causes significant local tensions and has attracted unfavourable press coverage.

⁴⁶ Local Economy, Kate Broadhurst and Nicholas Gray, 'Understanding Resilient Places: Multi-Level Governance in times of crisis', <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02690942221100101>.

⁴⁷ Alisa Henderson, 'Devolution and the UK's Response to Covid-19', 25 September 2023, <https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/09184423/INQ000269372.pdf>.

⁴⁸ New Local, 'A Labour Vision for Community Power: Participation, Prevention and Devolution', 9 September 2023, <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/A-Labour-Vision-for-Community-Power-compressed.pdf>.

⁴⁹ LGA, 'Procedures for referrals of homeless applicants to another local authority', 5 August 2019, <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/procedures-referrals-homeless-applicants-another-local-authority>.

⁵⁰ The Guardian, 'English Councils pay millions to move homeless families out of big cities', 31 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/31/english-councils-pay-millions-to-move-homeless-families-out-of-big-cities>

Public service bodies are also shared between authorities. For example, Kent Police is shared between Kent County Council and Medway Council. Kent Police themselves operate three distinct divisions (North, West and East) which roughly comprise 4 districts each. Kent Police is therefore jointly scrutinised by Medway Council, Kent’s districts and KCC.⁵¹ While committees are professional, they can be quite clunky arrangements given the unequal powers between authorities and rarely result in any actual direction for the Police (the responsibility for which lies with the PCC). Hypothetical disagreements between Councils, especially say, around policing of minority groups, may lead to unhelpful political conflicts.

Communication between authorities is not the only factor. Central government sometimes has a poor understanding of how their policies are implemented at the local level. For example, on SEND policy, authorities have many legal responsibilities and are issued guidance devised by civil servants. However, they often say they are usually unable to meet responsibilities in full due to financial constraints and need to activate ‘safety valve’ agreements which force cuts.⁵² It has even been reported that some authorities deliberately deliver statutory processes such as EHC plans slowly, so as to reduce budget burdens.⁵³ Consequently, central government SEND policymakers often seem to be setting policy ideals which can’t be implemented by local authorities within budgets. They may be aware of these issues but are not really tasked to address budget problems at the point of policy conception.

In all these instances, greater coordination through a ‘meso-layer’ of government could significantly boost delivery and coordinate language use between different governmental bodies.^{54,55} It could, for example, lead to a C/SA-wide homelessness

LGA, ‘Local government out of area placements guidance’, 23 January 2023,

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-government-out-area-placements-guidance>.

⁵¹ Kent PCC, ‘Police and Crime Panel’, <https://www.kent-pcc.gov.uk/what-we-do/holding-kent-police-to-account/police-and-crime-panel/>.

⁵² Special Needs Jungle, ‘What’s the law when a council says it can’t comply because of resource issues, though it’s “trying its best”’, 25 January 2024, <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/whats-law-when-council-cant-comply-resource-issues-trying-best/>.

Local Government Lawyer, ‘Securing SEND provision in the context of stretched local authority budgets’, 22 February 2024, <https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/education-law/343-education-features/56481-securing-send-provision-in-the-context-of-stretched-local-authority-budgets>.

⁵³ The I, ‘Inside the SEND crisis where council ‘delay tactics’ are denying parents support’, 17 November 2024, https://inews.co.uk/news/inside-send-crisis-tribunal-support-3376116?srltid=AfmBOor6DTMzxMnINVC9uHKbgUQRTsCLXOfmhrtWI_pCwy23NKRv4fQ.

⁵⁴ Anthony J. Liddicoat, ‘Language policy and planning for language maintenance’, 2020, <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/131697/1/WRAP-language-policy-planning-language-maintenance-macro-meso-levels-Liddicoat-2020.pdf>.

⁵⁵ IFS/Nuffield Foundation, Philip McCann, ‘Levelling-up economics’, February 2023, Pages 8-9, <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Levelling-up-economics-IFS-Deaton-Review-of-Inequality.pdf>.

strategy, negotiated realignment of public service boundaries in coordination with new UAs, and clearer policy communication with C/SAs and UAs which leads to a more efficient distribution of resources.

One of the ways it could do this is to standardise how teams are structured across authorities, so that those dealing with major casework decisions (e.g. in the homelessness example) have knowledge about the officers they have to deal with to get something done on the territory of another authority. A legal responsibility could also be introduced to prevent Councils from taking actions without consulting one another – for example, the aforementioned situation of preventing the displacement of residents from one authority to another without notifying them.⁵⁶ Both these cases revolve around housing, but the same principle could apply to other issues with existing clunky guidance, like cross-authority social services cases where families straddle public services and local authority boundaries.⁵⁷

One of the other problems highlighted under the current non-unitarised system is how decisionmakers can undercut one another. The aforementioned CPCA is a perfect example of this, where a non-standardised region containing two politically differentiating authorities was unable to deliver a transport plan because of competing claims to legitimacy and uneven geographical set-ups. In a standardised system, the UAs would generally be of similar size, speaking for their own residents without competing for space with each other. A more centralised model of decision-making in which a Mayor proposes policy plans which are then subsequently scrutinised would not eliminate differences of opinion, but would allow a plan to be formally proposed and for alterations to be made more easily.

The argument from democracy

A final argument in favour of unitarization is that it will greatly improve a feeling of democracy in the English regions. The White Paper makes clear that one aim of devolution is to give regions a clear, single voice who speaks for the populace of that region and consults actively with both lower levels (UAs) and the new Council of Nations and Regions.⁵⁸ That person will be more directly accountable to the public, breaking with most areas at present where f indirectly elect their leaders.

⁵⁶ The Guardian, ‘English Councils pay millions to move homeless families out of big cities’, 31 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/31/english-councils-pay-millions-to-move-homeless-families-out-of-big-cities>.

⁵⁷ HM Government, ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023’, December 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/669e7501ab418ab055592a7b/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_2023.pdf.

⁵⁸ MHCLG, ‘Policy paper: English Devolution White Paper’, 16 December 2024, Section 2.3.2, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>.

The problem is perhaps best embodied by the fact that turnout in local elections is relatively low in those regions with two-tier authorities, somewhere between 30-40%. In most Mayoral Combined Authorities, turnout is still very low despite those individuals holding more national attention than Councils.⁵⁹ As noted recently by the IPPR, there is a crisis of legitimacy in elections, where specific groups are increasingly disengaging from voting even in national elections.⁶⁰ While it is not a given that instituting Mayors will automatically drive higher voter turnout, a set of reforms which universalises Mayoral systems and which provides clearly defined and publicised powers will likely greatly improve their institutional reputations. Over time, as these individuals become noted as more politically important, it could reasonably be hoped that voters turn out more frequently.

Ordinary voters need to be equipped with knowledge about how and why these individuals are important to their experience of governance, and what the differences are between them and Councils. For example, one common area of confusion is waste management. This is a district authority responsibility in most places, but MPs and County councillors are sometimes asked about these issues, despite not being able to alter these policies.⁶¹ A combination of unitarization and the creation of SAs, alongside a prominent government informational campaign, could empower populations to correctly hold certain politicians accountable for the right issues, while rewarding other politicians for good performance. We are unlikely to create perfect high-information voters, but we can do better than we are currently.

For Labour, the major risk of not getting this public information process right is giving regional voice to the wrong people. While democratic choice is important, certain parties may be more motivated than others to turn out in high numbers for less 'meaningful' elections. For these parties, these electoral wins may represent strategic and symbolic steps towards national representation, mainly because the Metro Mayor platform gives these parties a reserved, non-withdrawable spot at the agora through the Council of Nations and Regions where they can put forward their political agenda. We already see this behaviour manifest through organised minority anti-housing campaigns, so it would not be a surprise to see it utilised for other causes.⁶² The type of situation we'd like to avoid is one like in the US, where Republican governors threaten to

⁵⁹ Institute for Government, 'Six Things we learned from the May 2024 local and mayoral elections', 10 May 2024, Section 4, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/six-things-we-learned-may-2024-local-and-mayoral-elections>.

⁶⁰ IPPR, 'Modernising elections : How to get voters back', 2 January 2025, <https://www.ippr.org/articles/modernising-elections>.

⁶¹ <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/why-is-local-government-such-a-mess/>

⁶² UKICE, 'Why is local government such a mess?', 26 April 2023, <https://www.labourtogether.uk/insights/britain-a-nation-of-mimbys>.

send large numbers of irregular migrants to northern cities, threatening the spirit of cooperation and undermining national policy.⁶³

For those who advocate electoral reform, such as the Electoral Reform Society or Compass, wider party representation may seem a positive outcome. However, Labour and the government more broadly should carefully consider the risk of candidates with radical ideologies they cannot control being given unimpeachable control over a regional voice. The ideal candidate to be a Mayor represents their region and the people in it, not their party or ideology. Labour should set out a clear pledge at this stage that they expect their Labour Mayors to oppose the government through official channels (e.g. the new Council of Regions and Nations) if they make decisions contrary to the interests of their region. Through this positioning Labour can prevent government actions being associated with Mayoral ones, avoiding tying them into a mutual electoral death roll or becoming political pawns for future opposition governments.

⁶³ Migration Policy Institute, 'Busing of migrants by GOP governors marks a new twist in state intervention on immigration', 28 September 2022, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/migrant-asylum-seeker-busing>.

Building A National Local Government Service (NLGS)

Staffing and the local government financial crisis

While Labour might like the biggest issue in local government presently to be constitutional reform, the reality is that the most pressing concern is the need for local government fiscal reform.⁶⁴ While this *will* be delivered in limited ways on a larger scale through the 'integrated settlements' model - a makeover of the 'single-departmental settlement' model - it doesn't necessarily address the reasons behind authority costs.

The biggest costs to local authorities in 2023/4 were SEND, wider education services, and children's and adult social care services.⁶⁵ These facilities are usually outsourced to third-party for-profit localised providers (with a limited number of non-profit providers also participating).⁶⁶ While this distances these services from direct political management and is supposed to lead to 'expert' control of care, it has generated tension. Providers cannot be directly scrutinised by councillors with legitimate concerns about failures in services, especially in children's social care. Cabinets could withdraw provider funding, but this is a binary switch, and would generally result in Councils failing to meet their legal obligations.

Council staffing is not a significant drain on the public purse. While it certainly contributes to budgets, especially with the addition of Local Government Pension Scheme contributions, the real costs are the actual delivery of services and infrastructure. For example, where the LGA found that 4p of every £1 was spent on highways and transport in 2023/24, the majority of that is being spent on planning and delivery of highways projects, not on Council staff.

Costs can escalate, however, in recruitment - in both time and money. Currently, recruitment campaigns are typically put to tender for between 15-30 days, even where existing strong candidates for roles could be identified within the sector or organisation.

⁶⁴ New Economics Foundation, 'Devolution won't work unless we fix local government funding', 2 May 2024, <https://neweconomics.org/2024/05/devolution-wont-work-unless-we-fix-local-government-funding>.

⁶⁵ LGA, 'Save local services: How is £1 of council funding spent?', <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/save-local-services/save-local-services-how-ps1-council-funding-spent>

⁶⁶ University of Oxford, 'New Report: For-profit social care provision has drastically increased despite concerns over quality', 7 October 2024, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2024-10-07-new-report-profit-social-care-provision-has-dramatically-increased-despite-concerns#:~:text=Over%20the%20last%2030%20years,to%20private%20for%2Dprofit%20providers>.

The consequences of long and complex recruitment is that pivotal senior positions - and even some lower-level business-critical roles (e.g. social/children’s care) - have been filled by costly agency staff in some authorities, greatly inflating staff budgets and attracting negative press reports.⁶⁷

Creating the NLGS

This paper makes a bold proposition to resolve these issues by unifying Council staffing under one banner – the National Local Government Service (NLGS). The new White Paper called for a *‘local government workforce development group’* during the transition to Strategic and Unitary Authorities, and the NLGS could serve as one potential, particularly radical model for that group to consider alongside unitarization.

The key innovation would be the removal of responsibility for authorities to pay salaries and pensions, instead constructing a national salary system. This would also transfer pensions to a new nationally-led scheme (paid for by Councils with mandatory membership) where possible. This new organisation would also embed direct connectivity between authorities, for example, legislating a mandate to search for existing talent that could be developed throughout the NLGS’s staff roster. While a significant proportion of staff recruitment already occurs from other authorities, a posting model could increase career advancement prospects and reduce sector dissatisfaction.⁶⁸ This would also have the effect of improving graduate prospects in the sector by placing recruitment focus on cross-authority experience rather than institutional experience.

The new body would desilo the local government profession and allow centralised redesignation of staff where possible (including, potentially, during and after unitarization). This specific aspect of the system can help address crises that emerge (e.g. natural disasters, migration difficulties), facilitate national skills audits within the service and prevent the loss of talent from redundancy processes through redesignation. It could also assist with the White Paper’s goal to bring together data leads between Councils, creating specific national local government boards for officers where progress and data is shared with policymakers.⁶⁹ This desiloing would further address the operational gap between the civil service and local government.

⁶⁷ LocalGov, ‘Councils ‘waste’ £2bn on agency staff’, 11 September 2023, <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Councils-waste-2bn-on-agency-staff-/57896>.

⁶⁸ LGiU, ‘Why work in local government? The future of local government careers in the UK’, 11 July 2024, <https://lgiu.org/blog-article/why-work-in-local-government-the-future-of-local-government-careers-in-the-uk/>.

⁶⁹ MHCLG, ‘Policy paper: English Devolution White Paper’, 16 December 2024, Section 6.4, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

Why is now the right time to do this? With the implementation of the new Strategic and Unitary Authorities, local government will become more contiguous and less siloed across the country. Where previously we were dealing with highly divergent organisational structures, the new Unitary and Strategic structures will hopefully lead to greater cohesiveness. The primary barriers to working at another authority would become physically moving to a new area and meeting a new team, with many of the challenges of working for a new organisation broadly reduced because of increasingly similar operational arrangements and work cultures. The result would be greater labour mobility, and the possibility of moving to different areas throughout one's career by choice according to more identified need (both in response to central recruitment campaigns and individual authorities).

Such a change will likely be initially unpopular among authorities, as it will require significant reorganisation over time, and significantly reduce the scope of what they can and can't do in hiring processes. It will also take HR processes and staff budget planning outside of local political scrutiny, but there are ways this could be addressed (for example, having an NLGS-funded HR rep who is scrutinised by committee based in each authority). The aim would not be to stop UAs and SAs from developing their own workforce, but to create a baseline structure on which authorities can build those desired teams.

In principle, this paper proposes no major change in most hiring processes, except for the mandate to seek out existing NLGS talent when hiring for some roles. While recruiting outsiders can bring new skills into the sector, it also prevents local government as a sector cultivating talent and promoting retention in the sector. It would be unusual to do this for lower grade roles (e.g. cleaning, admin and maintenance staff), so the NLGS could choose to enforce this mandate only for higher grade roles where talent-seeking would be appropriate (e.g. management or specialist service delivery).

This section also advocates the creation of a new code of conduct for officers. While this already exists within each individual Council, usually mainly for councillors, greater standardisation brings the opportunity to also formalise officer standards, as was initially proposed in 2008.⁷⁰ While not every position would need to be classified as politically restricted, an expansion on what is expected of the relationship between councillors and officers is required to address concerns over behaviour at certain

⁷⁰ LGA, 'Guidance on LGA Model Councillor Code of Conduct', 8 July 2021, <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/guidance-local-government-association-model-councillor-code-conduct>.

LGA, 'Code of Conduct', December 2008, <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/employment-relations/employment-law-topics-and-e-guides/code>.

authorities in the last few decades to pre-empt the need for LGA Corporate Peer Challenge processes.⁷¹

Rethinking on what basis local government works with its employees is an important step forward after standardisation. With the right calibration, such a system can offer the opportunity to remake local government’s image as a sector, offering greater incentives to join and stay in the workforce, as well as making necessary efficiency improvements to the sector’s hiring processes. Importantly, workforce reform can also finish the work of neutralising the officer’s position nationally to service-wide responsibility, in line with a new national officer’s code of conduct focused on political abstinence, anti-corruption and public honesty.

The argument from prestige

The creation of a single unified professional workforce could help increase the status of local government as a professional sector, diminished since 2010 following austerity. Among a range of professions, both officers and civil servants are viewed as people of ‘good standing in their community’, but such a label is nominal only.⁷² Presently, local government officers are sometimes seen as a ‘step down’ from civil servants, holding roles which are seen as less prestigious yet are arguably more important to policy implementation given they actively deliver services (albeit, within much reduced budgets).⁷³ Local government has continuously been the worst paid public sector industry, and it is suffering a significant retention crisis.⁷⁴ We can and should make being a Council officer a coveted and well-respected position.

Top-tier graduates are currently more attracted to public sector positions deemed to be nationally directorial, usually in specific urban centres where government offices are based. Rarely do they go on to serve the – often more suburban or rural - communities they grew up in through local government. While we do want top people making policy, this might not always be the best place for some candidates. Many existing and future potential policymakers may in fact be excellent policy implementation specialists, responsible for managing budgets and maintaining standards within services.

⁷¹ LGA, ‘Corporate Peer Challenge’, <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/council-assurance-and-peer-challenge/peer-challenges-we-offer/corporate-peer-2>.

⁷² GOV.UK, ‘Countersigning passport applications and photos’, <https://www.gov.uk/countersigning-passport-applications/accepted-occupations-for-countersignatories>.

⁷³ LGiU, ‘Why work in local government? The future of local government careers in the UK’, 11 July 2024, <https://lgiu.org/blog-article/why-work-in-local-government-the-future-of-local-government-careers-in-the-uk>.

⁷⁴ LGA, Naomi Cooke, ‘What will the Government’s employment reforms mean for our local government workforce?’, October 2024, <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/workforce-blog/what-will-governments-employment-reforms-mean>.

Impact, the current local government graduate scheme, could take advantage of the new pay model and unified recruitment process, universalising placements where possible across all authorities by mandating a certain number of 'graduate' posts at fixed salaries well above the minimum wage (£32k or more, adjusted for inflation and pay agreements) with supported fixed-term contracts which would then be open to redesignation after their conclusion. This would give a direct route into council management for top graduates in their home areas, and reduce the need to climb the 'experience' ladder. Such a system could produce a new decentralised professional class with high career prospects in local governance at a younger age. If necessary, this resource can also be transferred into national bodies or public-private partnerships.

Another way to take advantage of standardisation would be to set clear experiential standards for what it takes to be an officer. Currently, grades are set by authorities individually, but greater clarification on which roles require a degree or not, or what sort of experience would be required for more senior roles could be agreed more widely. Demarcating expected career pathways within professions could become much easier, providing individuals with confidence in their future earnings and responsibilities after serving for a period of time. Where profession-based gaps are identified in the workforce, it would become much easier to plug them with officers from other authorities, or to set out national recruitment strategies⁷⁵, including standardised benefits and training that the sector could offer for more difficult to fill positions.

While the labour market remains very competitive in the current moment of economic slump, there will come a moment when there is not such a slump and when the cost of living is finally relieved. We should be making the necessary reforms now to make local government an attractive, prestigious place to work, without compromising on standards, to ensure that the workforce doesn't suffer an exodus post-crisis. By reducing sector rigidity, and opening up Pandora's Box on pay, we can begin to address the retention crisis.

The argument from retention

In a time of great change for the local government workforce, retention in certain sectors like adult social care will likely prove to be an even greater challenge than the LGA and PwC already say it is.⁷⁶ Besides the fact that there will almost certainly be

⁷⁵ In one conversation with an expert, they mentioned that regional employment hubs which perform similar roles already exist. These could be scaled up to a national system, especially considering the likely layoffs resulting from local government reorganisation.

⁷⁶ LGA, 'Councils call for immediate action on adult social care workforce', 10 October 2024, <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/councils-call-immediate-action-adult-social-care-workforce>. CCN, 'Report says workforce capacity is 'one of the biggest challenges' facing councils, and calls for national branding campaign to recruit staff', 5 February 2024,

slimming-down exercises at most authorities in specific sectors, there will be some who no longer wish to work in the new style of authority. Certainly, the move from member-led models at the County Council level, and the fusion of several different district authorities into unitary ones, will change the way in which staffing functions on a fundamental level given the smaller number of councillors and greater centralisation of powers and policymaking.

Developing a national redeployment service as a proto-NLGS alongside the new reforms would be an excellent strategy to try and retain those tempted to leave the profession. This could inform those at risk of redundancy about other opportunities within the sector, including those that will be passed down from central government with devolution. For example, it is probable that railway scrutiny and planning, transport plan development, and more extensive planning reforms will lead to the creation of new roles within local government. Though in principle the specific hiring decisions will lie with councillors and local officers, an NLGS would help advertise these opportunities and provide insights for those tempted to leave for good.

The costs of workforce loss could be significant⁷⁷ – though would be mitigated with an NLGS. Hiring rounds would take months to complete, and many authorities would have significant administrative gaps if, for example, democratic or member services professionals left the sector en-masse because of the substantial changes in their workloads and the types of responsibility they hold. Organisation of committees with unitary authorities and mayoral representatives could become difficult to fulfil, and potentially even be riddled with errors without the professional knowledge those currently in these roles bring. This is different from the institutional knowledge that comes from working at a specific authority and is something that can’t just be built up over time – professional knowledge development requires teaching, correction and guidance from officers who have served in those roles before.

Coupled with this, equalised standards and fewer assessment stages will reduce the complexity of moving roles between authorities and even within them. This would enable individuals to further their career goals and develop skills in different contexts more easily, diversifying our workforce’s skills and stopping career logjams for good performers struggling to get on in their current environments. By making the path of least resistance staying within the sector, we can prevent losses to industries which can make benefits and salary offers we can’t. If recruitment asks simply for a statement of interest, CV, and interview, we can maintain standards while not overburdening existing officers with unnecessary assessment.

<https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/report-says-workforce-capacity-is-one-of-the-biggest-challenges-facing-councils-and-calls-for-national-branding-campaign-to-recruit-staff/>.

⁷⁷ It was noted in one interview I conducted that there has yet to be much work published on this, despite the serious ramifications for workforce role deletion that will likely follow reorganisation.

The NLGS can also offer officers an 'out' from teams or Councils they are unhappy about working for. While it is always a valuable skill to be able to work with those you disagree with, sometimes we know that teams with very skilled people simply do not gel. Rather than losing those staff, the NLGS can help that person find a posting that works for them. This might require physical relocation or a change in profession, but would also give them opportunity in a sector in which intra-service transfer and promotion is often dependent on lengthy prior experience.

Finally, an NLGS can more effectively consider pay agreements. While national pay agreements through stakeholder consultation already occur, the NLGS would be able to make this process more efficient, acting as the conduit between government and local authorities.⁷⁸ We could standardise grades across authorities, and reward sectors struggling to recruit (derived from NLGS data) with higher pay rises or new benefits. This could either be delivered directly by the NLGS, or through 'retention grants' to individual authorities struggling to attract specific workforces (e.g. to redesign offices, to offer new benefits, to invest in skills).

The argument from neutrality

While it has not been a substantial issue in the past, there is an argument that we need to bring local government to the same professional standards as the Civil Service. A level of greater direction by the centre could help achieve this goal. Through a new code of conduct for officers, first proposed in 2008, new guidance on political neutrality could be introduced to ensure that rules are abided by. This could include extending principles of confidentiality and political sensitivity to a greater number of professions to ensure that trust in local government is maintained in the same way it is in the national civil service. It would also enable greater information transmission among officers, and fewer barriers to information for junior officers.

This levelling of responsibilities will make officers feel more trusted, authoritative and confident, reducing 'siloification' within divisions at individual Councils, and greatly improving information transfer. Entrusting officers in this way may have vetting implications, but these processes already occur within the Civil Service, and such procedures could be managed by an NLGS. Alternatively, seniority arrangements could be managed through third-party organisations which handle professional certification. While under the existing system these organisations exist alongside local government

⁷⁸ HoC Library, 'Research Briefing: Public Sector Pay', 15 January 2024, Pages 13, 15-16, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8037/CBP-8037.pdf>. National Joint Council for local government services', 'Local Government Services Pay Agreement 2024', 22 October 2024, <https://www.slcc.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/LGS-Pay-01Apr24.pdf>.

employers as national professional associations (e.g. ADSO, SLCC), they could be partnered with the new NLGS to increase intra-profession coherence.⁷⁹

Statutory neutrality and the removal of salary responsibilities from Councils could have the advantage of reducing undue influence of councillors over some officer activities. While fraud in general is not a major issue, a few cases across the country (for example, at Tower Hamlets Council) have revealed that inappropriate influence by councillors has been exercised on grants, commercial agreements and elections.⁸⁰ Examples of this kind of influence can be found anecdotally, and also in publications such as Private Eye’s ‘Rotten Boroughs’ section.⁸¹ A divorce between Councils and staff pay is likely to be especially important as independent groups for local areas become more common, breaking down traditional national party discipline mechanisms which usually prevent breaches of expected behaviour for councillors.⁸²

Fundamentally, there should be no space for corruption in governance, no matter how small scale or legally grey such actions may be. The principle should be that officers are delivering services on behalf of councillors *within legislation*, with legislation taking the dominant governing position in that relationship. Officers suspected to be involved in fraudulent or corrupt activity could be better dealt with in a national employment body, including those who not only participate in it, but who deliberately fail to report it. A stronger and enforceable legal responsibility to report on breaches could be introduced, reflecting accountability procedures found in existing fraud and safeguarding legislation.

⁷⁹ ADSO website: <https://www.adso.co.uk/>.

SLCC website: <https://www.slcc.co.uk/>.

⁸⁰ The Guardian, ‘Ministers to oversee Tower Hamlets Council amid concerns over leadership’, 11 November 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/nov/11/ministers-to-oversee-tower-hamlets-council-amid-concerns-over-leadership>

⁸¹ Private Eye, ‘Rotten Boroughs’, <https://www.private-eye.co.uk/rotten-boroughs>.

⁸² Cambridge University Press, Steve Leach, ‘The National Parties and Local Government’, 18 January 2022, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/changing-role-of-local-politics-in-britain/national-parties-and-local-government/5BBB2C8DCA29CB75C6F87FFBE1CAC71A>.
BBC News, ‘England local elections 2023: The rise of the independents’, 2 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-65437109>.

Conclusion

The emergence of a new structure for local government is inevitable – the shape it takes, and the way in which we take advantage of that new shape, is something we still have influence over. A significant mistake would be not to engage seriously with the proposals for reform, which offer real change, making services more coordinated and efficient. There will be debates about council and mayoral models, accountability and scrutiny procedures, council tax and funding settlements, but at the end of the day, standardisation will bring more powers and better organisation for people living in England.

Most importantly, local government restructuring offers huge opportunities in areas barely touched upon in this paper, but which have already been explored extensively by others. Notably the reworking of the planning framework, and new public transport powers which could reshape unprecedented state coordination in an area previously limited to the private sector.

The success of these reforms will depend on how local authorities engage with them. Despite the appearance of imposition, many of the powers offered are quite flexible. But councillors and Mayors will now be shifted from stakeholders being consulted, to active decisionmakers. Progress will not be halted solely because of political objections, but will instead be based on best practice, government guidance and officer advice. Local politicians will still play a vital role in highlighting residents' concerns and expressing worry, but more of them will also become directorial, with much more serious legal duties to fulfil.

The logo for Young Fabians is a dark red square containing the text "YOUNG FABIANs" in white. The word "YOUNG" is in a standard sans-serif font, while "FABIANs" is in a bold, slightly stylized sans-serif font.

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