

---

## OTHER IDEAS

---

# Reorganisation, local government and the future of English Devolution

Emeritus Professor Steve Leach

Emeritus professor Colin Copus

De Montfort University, Leicester

# About Localis

## Who we are

We are a leading, independent think tank that was established in 2001. Our work promotes neo-localist ideas through research, events and commentary, covering a range of local and national domestic policy issues.

## Neo-localism

Our research and policy programme is guided by the concept of neo-localism. Neo-localism is about giving places and people more control over the effects of globalisation. It is positive about promoting economic prosperity, but also enhancing other aspects of people's lives such as family and culture. It is not anti-globalisation, but wants to bend the mainstream of social and economic policy so that place is put at the centre of political thinking.

In particular our work is focused on four areas:

- **Decentralising political economy.** Developing and differentiating regional economies and an accompanying devolution of democratic leadership.
- **Empowering local leadership.** Elevating the role and responsibilities of local leaders in shaping and directing their place.
- **Extending local civil capacity.** The mission of the strategic authority as a convener of civil society; from private to charity sector, household to community.
- **Reforming public services.** Ideas to help save the public services and institutions upon which many in society depend.

## What we do

We publish research throughout the year, from extensive reports to shorter pamphlets, on a diverse range of policy areas. We run a broad events programme, including roundtable discussions, panel events and an extensive party conference programme. We also run a membership network of local authorities and corporate fellows.



# Contents

	Foreword	2
	Introduction	3
<b>1</b>	Local Government Reorganisation: Unconstitutional where there is no Constitution	4
	The lack of constitutional safeguards	4
<b>2</b>	The English Devolution White Paper 2024: Inconsistent, Unjustified and Simply Wrong on Reorganisation	9
	Substance, Haste and Timing	9
<b>3</b>	Another Fine Mess	21
<b>4</b>	Worlds Apart	26
<b>5</b>	Our Conclusion: Under The Influence	30
<b>6</b>	References	38

Welcome to the first of 'Other Ideas', an occasional series of publications in which Localis invites guest writers to comment at length, in order to advance arguments on topical place issues and policies.

Emeritus Professors Colin Copus and Steve Leach have delved into the whys and wherefores of the local government reorganization (LGR) debate. As I write, the wounds on this are still raw for many across the district council landscape.

From my own personal perspective, the government decision to call time on a part of the local government family that had just celebrated fifty years of existence wasn't unexpected as much as jarring. Twelve years ago, when features editor for The Municipal Journal, I prophesied in a pamphlet commemorating the first thirty years of the Local Government Information Unit<sup>1</sup> that the districts wouldn't be there for their sixtieth anniversary. Around this time, Lord Porter described districts as cockroaches that would endure a nuclear winter. But this time the jig is up.

Districts had fought a charmed rearguard battle, almost a Tolkienesque long retreat, from Whitehall's regional and economic masterplan from publication of the Redcliffe-Maud report onwards. The infamous 'Don't vote for R.E. Mote' campaign and the unexpected Heath victory in the 1970 general election bought time, as did the rearguard attempt that prevented Lord Heseltine finishing what he began in Scotland and Wales by universalizing unitaries. That it took an inside job last gasp save from legendary behind the scenes operator Sheridan Westlake to stymie Boris Johnson's administration from driving the nail into the district tier coffin would prove to be the last reprieve.

From my personal experience working for the District Councils' Network, I also understand how callous and insensitive it can be to causally disregard an entire tier of local administration and cadre of dedicated local leaders and public servants at a time of turmoil. But like Caesar at the Rubicon, the die has been cast. And in this context we see the value in bringing to light, while the embers are still burning, a final investigation into the rationale and the potential impacts of LGR in terms of local political economy, neighbourhood services as well as the constitutional and local democratic of a step that will remove nine-out-of-ten councillors in the shires.

**Jonathan Werran, chief executive, Localis**

---

1 <http://www.lgiu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/The-Future-Town-Hall-web.pdf>

## Introduction

The English Devolution white paper, published in December 2024, set in motion a chain of events raising a series of fundamental questions about the arguments underpinning it. In this report, we identify the major issues of concern: those which raise the constitutional issues in the white paper; a lack of substance and justification regarding the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) elements of the white paper and its tenuous connection with devolution; the inconsistencies in the potential impact of the white paper throughout England; the discrepancies between England and other European countries in relation to the size, composition and justification for local authorities; and, how Whitehall's long-term policy agenda, rarely explicit, has consistently sought opportunities for reorganisation. Finally, we comment on how little 'devolution' to local government as it exists is on offer, with decentralisation the best that can be expected but even that at the cost of reorganisation.

# 1. Local Government Reorganisation: Unconstitutional where there is no Constitution

The intentions of the Labour government between December 2024, when it published the White Paper 'English Devolution' and the announcement in February 2025 that local elections in nine county councils were to be cancelled, is another campaign in the centre's war of attrition over local government structure. The constitutionally weak position of local government enables the centre to almost act at will – political opposition to one side – when it comes to local government. Here we examine that parlous position and how the white paper is a missed opportunity to change it.

## **The lack of constitutional safeguards**

British government often operates as if there were a formal written constitution; that is, behaves constitutionally. Until recently, major issues governments were minded to introduce meant the 'constitution' would be respected in unwritten informal terms. In particular, if the matters significantly affected democratic and electoral issues involving local and central government. There would typically, for example, be public debate and consultation, and a serious scrutiny of evidence, usually overseen by a Royal Commission, a Committee of Inquiry or a Parliamentary Select Committee. Examples include the Herbert Commission on London Government; the Redcliffe-Maud Commission on local government; the Widdicombe committee (1986); and, the Banham and Cooksey Commission Reports (1992-96). The practice of Commissions, Committees and a related governmental predisposition to behave constitutionally has declined over time as the centre has become reluctant to assess evidence contrary to its established views.



Local government occupies a constitutionally perilous position with the last occasion on which its status was clarified being the 1986 report of the Widdicombe committee, which boldly stated:

**“Although local government has origins pre-dating the sovereignty of Parliament, all current local authorities are the statutory creations of parliament and have no independent status or right to exist. The whole system of local government could lawfully be abolished by Act of Parliament”**

**(HMSO, 1986:45, para 3.3)**

The committee went onto comment:

**“The position of local government in our political system is therefore governed by constitutional convention as well as by the simple fact that it derives its existence and powers from Parliament. It would however, be wrong to assume that such constitutional convention amounts to or derives from any natural right for local government to exist. It is a convention based on, and subject to, the contribution which local government can bring to good government”**

**(Widdicombe committee, 1986:46, paras 3.5 and 3.6)**

A number of issues are of note: first, the report was published during what might be called the mandate wars of the 1980s between local and central government and sits in that context. Second, the analysis is at variance with the work of Toulmin-Smith, who argues that it is Parliament that has usurped the powers of local institutions. Third, the government has done nothing in the English Devolution White Paper to address and radically change the constitutional position of local government. Quite the contrary, the government is relying on a constitutionally dismissive view of

local government to further reorganisation. It is ironic that a government supposedly committed to devolution uses the Widdicombe doctrine to do its business, rather than using the opportunity to change local government's constitutional position.

## The cancellation of local elections

The constitutional issues need to be confronted as local government relies on the spirit of an unwritten constitution in ways often unnecessary overseas. One action certainly cannot be justified in a constitutional spirit is the decision by Angela Rayner, the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, to cancel council elections in May 2025 because she was *'midway through reforming the structure of local government'* (The Guardian 6th February, 2025).

The elections for the county councils of East Sussex, West Sussex, Norfolk, Suffolk, Surrey, and Hampshire were to be cancelled because Rayner argued: *'it was pointless going ahead with elections to authorities that are not going to exist'* (The Guardian 5th February 2025). Such an indication that the government had made up its mind – and consultation, investigation and discussion are pointless – is a fundamentally unconstitutional position about the existence of another level of elected government and one which strikes a chilling note. Why is it so urgent for this process to be embarked on so quickly, to the extent that cancellation of local elections on this scale is required?

Local elections can and do change lives, on issues from schools to social care to homelessness, decided how local social, political and economic issues are resolved. For the May 2025 local elections to be cancelled raises the question of how such a move can be justified in what is supposed to be our settled democracy. Next, a population target figure of half-a-million for new unitary councils, possibly more, was identified in the 2024 White Paper, although without serious justification. Why is it so incontrovertible that some of the smaller counties (for example Suffolk and East and West Sussex) might not be re-designated as unitary counties? Thurrock, another target, is already a unitary authority of over 177,000, far larger than many of the existing unitary authorities in Cleveland and Berkshire. How



do we know it might not be included in this form, without the need for a cancelled election? The constitutional inconsistencies and inadequacies mount. Vitally, where does this magic figure of half-a-million come from? There is little in the 2024 White Paper to explain the origin of the figure, beyond claims taken from a Price waterhouseCoopers (PwC) report commissioned in 2020 by the County Councils Network.

If this were not enough to challenge the constitutional legitimacy of the situation, there are convincing arguments that the government is behaving unconstitutionally, in spirit if not in the absence of formal powers. White Papers and the green papers which traditionally preceded them (a tendency that has disappeared) required the provision of reasoned arguments and evidence to justify their intentions. This is not true of the 2024 White Paper, which devotes five pages of highly challengeable claims to justify the biggest local government upheaval for over 50 years, and nowhere in the 2024 Labour Party manifesto was there reference to local government reorganisation. Such potentially unconstitutional behaviour places us aside from much centre and local relationships overseas (Hendriks, et al, 2011; Kerley, et al, 2019).

With major local government reorganisation and reform, the normal expectation has been that government proposals should be subjected to proper scrutiny from an independent committee or commission displaying objectivity and involving expert witnesses.

A further example of unconstitutional behaviour comes from the meticulous scrutiny of evidence carried out by Chisholm and Leach (2008). They highlighted the shift away from evidence based policy to a constitutionally suspect approach to reorganisation by a past Labour Government's 2006-07 proposals for introducing large unitary authorities in England. Chisholm and Leach concluded that decisions then were inconsistent, misleading information was given, and there were obvious financial deficiencies in estimates employed (Chisholm and Leach, 2008: 148-9): little has changed. Indeed, Wood (1976) demonstrated how long the centre has been operating in a dubious constitutional fashion in regard to local government reorganisation.

The centre's approach raises serious concerns about democratic and political legitimacy in a unitary state, where the only set of checks and balance available beyond central government is local government. For local government to be marginalised and dealt with in a dismissive and disparaging fashion is dangerous. It is a strange state of affairs that a government committed to devolution has missed an opportunity to truly devolve by strengthening the constitutional relationship of local government to the centre. Instead the government is relying on local government's constitutional weakness to abolish an entire tier of councils.

## 2. The English Devolution White Paper 2024: Inconsistent, unjustified and simply wrong on reorganisation

### Substance, haste and timing

Three contextual elements raise important questions about the English Devolution White Paper. First the imbalance between space devoted to devolution and that to local government reorganisation (LGR). Around 90 percent of the White Paper's 119 pages focus on 'devolution', embracing the case for strategic authorities, combined authorities, elected mayors and how these will transform the sub-national governing landscape. Far less space is devoted to LGR and the egregious case for dismantling the two tier-system across swathes of England, almost all from a line south of the West Midlands and covering the south and south-west of England. The white paper's coverage of LGR is thin, and relies on unconvincing evidence and generalities. It is as if LGR has been tacked on as an afterthought. The white paper, unsurprisingly, matches the significant focus on devolution in the Labour Party's 2024 manifesto, which itself made no reference to Local Government reorganisation.

### Second: why the unnecessary haste?

The foreword from Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner and Minister for Local Government Jim McMahon must have been prepared and published in little over two months (Rachael Reeves's announcement of the basis of the White Papers content, would necessarily have required Treasury approval). Could this really have provided adequate time to produce reasoned justifications?

The proposals represent the biggest upheaval of local government in England since Redcliffe Maud in (1966-69) and, to some extent, the Banham Commission of 1992-95, both extensive and well-researched reports. How can one justify legislation of this significance being rushed through in such a short period with so many major unresolved issues?

A longer period of consultation, analysis and scrutiny is required. But, pressure has built only a few months after the launch of the White Paper for counties and districts to reach agreement on reorganisation proposals. It is as if the MCHLG want to firm plans for change before a campaign to challenge them has the chance to develop.

These suspicions are intensified by the cancellation in May 2025 of the elections of seven county councils (and two unitary councils) on the grounds that ‘they are not going to exist’, two months after the White Paper announcement, how can we be so sure that this will be the case, and again, why the need for such haste?

Third, how will the timing of the government’s proposals prove compatible with policies for education, social care and housing and its Commitment to a major programme of housing construction – over 1.5 million new homes before the 2029 election? It regards education, social care and homelessness as priorities in this period. These commitments will fall in the middle of a period of extended upheaval involving all county and district councils who have responsibility for one or other of these functions (to which could be added town planning), which involve 37 percent of England’s existing (as yet un-reorganised) population. Is it conceivable these major changes can be adequately dealt with at a time of transition, when district and county councils are to be dismembered and reassembled?

### **Bigger is not Better.**

Estimates of savings from unitarisation and bigger local government have been promoted at regular intervals, often using reports commissioned by the County Council Network. They are now being promoted by MCHLG which, it should be noted, refers to ‘potential’ or ‘expected’ savings, not savings convincingly demonstrated. Following an exhaustive analysis of over 300 pieces of independent academic research, Copus, Leach and Jones (2020) showed that in relation to efficiency, effectiveness and performance, no consistent or conclusive results were found to justify a belief in larger councils always being cheaper than their smaller counter-parts.



In this connection, there is an important and relevant quote from Professor George Boyne, who has a long record of experience in such matters:

**“Analyses of local government reorganisation have concentrated on a largely spurious link between population size and the efficiency of service provision. There is little point in setting minimum or maximum populations for local units, because it is the scale of output that counts, not the number of local residents. Even when needs are the same in different areas, the level of output will vary as a result of decisions on service quantity and quality”**

**(Boyne, 1995: 221)**

In contrast, when it comes to local democracy, there is clearer evidence that size matters. The evidence explored by Copus et al (2020) shows that increases in population or geographical scale of local government is likely to have a deleterious effect on a range of democratic criteria, including electoral turnout, public trust in councillors and officers and levels of participative engagement, amongst several others. Decades of independent academic research and evidence completely undermines the white paper claims that increasing local government size will save money, or that fewer councillors is a good idea (see for example, Kjaer and Klemmensen 2015, Drew et al, 2019, Dollery et al, 2020, Navarro and Pano, 2021, Decentralisation.net 2025). Copus, et al 2020 and Copus 2022, provide a summary of the literature and evidence on the effects of increasing council size, ignored in the white paper.

## **Devolution of what, and to whom?**

The White Paper is full of references to ‘devolution’ achievements in Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and elsewhere. But who is likely to benefit from devolution? Is it the former metropolitan county councils and other areas based on large city regions where a case can be made that devolution has a positive impact? The six metropolitan counties, abolished

in 1986 were resurrected in 2014 as Combined Authorities (CAs) headed by elected mayors. In each area, powers have been devolved in relation to economic regeneration, passenger transport (including buses), strategic land-use planning and, to a more limited extent, strategic housing. Since then, the process has been extended to Teesside, East Midlands, the West of England (based on Bristol) all of which have plausible arguments for doing so. Elsewhere, for example the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, the justifications are more tenuous. There is nothing contentious about this interpretation of 'devolution'. Resources have been allocated, strategies developed, and progress made on objectives.

But as the focus switches away from these city regions and conurbations, 'devolution' becomes more problematic. The kind of strategic functions outlined above are very different in nature from the welfare-related services, operating at 'principal local authority level', which provided the lifeblood of local government over many decades – children services, social care, housing and homelessness, primary and secondary education and more, all part of the rich tapestry of life and hugely important to residents. The White Paper does not mention the extent to which real powers, resources and finance will be devolved to local authorities.

In the House of Commons Select Committee report 'Devolution; the next five years and beyond' (House of Commons, 2016), then Chair of the committee, Clive Betts, argued convincingly:

**"There is an understanding that devolution can't just be about handing power down. It has to be about finance too. The two strands have to work hand in hand"**

Or, as another expert witness to the Committee emphasised:

**"If the government is serious about devolution, it has to come up with some form of fiscal devolution, that would remove the constraints on local government expenditure and free up combined and local authorities to play the devolutionary role expected of them"**

To what extent will these expectations be met? As regards the existing CAs, to a limited extent they have. But as regards local authorities with service responsibilities, this seems highly unlikely as there has been no commitment to 'fiscal devolution', nor is this likely in the foreseeable future.

The White Paper does not distinguish between devolution as an application of the importance of strategic authorities in metropolitan areas and its relevance elsewhere particularly in provincial England with its vast tracks of rural countryside. Strategic authorities may make sense in Greater Manchester and other such areas, but in Kent or Hertfordshire or Surrey? In these and many examples there is no reasonable basis of a city region. Hertfordshire and Surrey are mainly focussed on the impact of the Greater London travel-to-work area, as is the case with large parts of Kent and Essex, much of the remainder are made up of smaller sub-regional centres with a lot of open space between them. 'Strategic authorities' here and elsewhere across the country are unconvincing.

So, what is the case for Combined Authorities (CAs), headed by elected mayors in such areas? To what extent do they need to be 'combined' and with what adjacent units? The fragility of this process was illustrated in Cumbria in 2020 when Cumbria County Council and district councils were abolished and replaced with two unitary authorities: Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness. The two authorities have little in common in socio-geographic-terms: Cumberland looks to the (former) county's west coastal area: Whitehaven, Workington, and broadly Carlisle; whereas the towns in the South East (Barrow, Kendal and Penrith) have little in common and a largely separate identity. But in 2025, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) exerted pressure on the two councils to form a combined authority, with an elected mayor, covering the whole of Cumbria. The added value – indeed the whole point of the exercise – is difficult to fathom, especially given the cost of the reorganisation which only took place in 2023. The misconceived reorganisation project looks more and more like a 'neat and tidy' departmental exercise, bearing little resemblance to the complexities of life in the real world of local government.

If there is little fiscal devolution on offer in the twenty-one county areas under review, then the only plausible conclusion is that a large element of

centralisation is involved in LGR. Where until recently, there were over 200 'uncentralised' local authorities in provincial England, if the 2024 White Paper is implemented as expected, there will be around 20 – 10 percent of the current total. If that does not constitute 'centralisation', what does? The White Paper recognises that 'England has one of the most centralised developed countries in the world' (MLCHG:2024:7) but its LGR proposals do nothing to change that situation. Contrary to the assertions of the White Paper, there is no credible current link between devolution and LGR.

## **The source of the magic number half-a-million**

We return here to the size question. As the government is committed to across-the-board establishment of unitary authorities, with a minimum population of half-a-million, it is reasonable to ask the source of that figure and how it links to the centre's long term thinking. What we see is the use of some convenient 'evidence' and an ignoring of the 'inconvenient truth' about the effects of reorganisation. There are a number of steps involved in reaching the figure which start to reveal the source. Those steps begin from two parliamentary questions put to the minister and department:

[In the first answer to a direct question from Neil O'Brien MP, about the evidential base for the figure, the minister does not state the source requested.](#)

[In the second answer the minister presents a PWC report – Evaluating the Importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation \(2020\) – as the source for savings.](#)

The PWC report 2020 commissioned by the County Council Network does not mention half-a-million as a population, rather, two figures are given: 300,000 to 400,000 and 300,000 to 800,000 (p:4, p:13). The report does not point out the substantial body of independent evidence, stretching back decades, showing increasing council size is not guaranteed to provide the returns suggested by those seeking unitarisation. The report was published in the same year as another County Council Network commissioned report: Making Counties Count (Henham Strategy, 2020). That report urged the creation of unitary councils with a minimum of



400,000 and no maximum limit. The figure appears to develop from statements by the former Minister, Simon Clarke, proposing that unitaries should be 'substantially in excess of 300k-400k'. Clarke gave no source for this figure (2020:34).

The impact of the magic half-a-million for most existing counties (and all districts) will be the carving up of county areas of what have long been Kent, Essex, Hertfordshire and Surrey (fast-tracked into unnecessary postponed elections) and other areas into meaningless chunks of provincial England, with give-away names like West Essex, South-East Kent or North Surrey.

It looks as if the government has taken the two CCN-commissioned reports to create a figure which would mean not only abolishing districts, but creating a series of meaningless sub-county unitary councils simply to achieve half-a-million population to see 'councils of the right size to achieve effective influence capacity and withstand financial shocks' (MHCLG:17). No evidence exists that this is the case. But, we suspect the story runs deeper, as we will see later when we explore how the rejection of the 1969 Redcliffe-Maud report's recommendations for 58 unitary councils across England by the 1970 Conservative government, seriously unsettled the ministry.

### **Councillors as a residual rump**

The reference to the alleged benefits of the reduction in the number of councillors (referred to in positive terms in Cumbria and elsewhere) is a particular cause for concern. Various earlier references to councillors are noted in the White Paper. Initially an encouraging recognition of the 'vital role of local councillors as frontline community convenors'. But, there follows a reference to the advantages of 'fewer politicians (councillors) who are more able to focus on delivering for residents' (MHCLG:17). If new unitary authorities in existing two-tier areas will have populations of half-a-million, that is a huge decrease in numbers of councillors – a loss of 90 percent on our calculations, meaning a decrease from around 12,000 to 1,200. That will place considerable strains on remaining councillors to deal with the workload as the work of the

disappeared councillors does not disappear with them. The job of the councillor is set to get much harder, especially given the poor support and resources they often receive and that councillors are already overworked (Leach and Copus, 2023).

## 1. The marginalisation of Community Identity

The White Paper recognises the relevance of communities:

**“England is made up of thousands of communities – towns, cities and villages – where people look after one another and feel proud of where they live. Policies have been done to communities rather than for them, with ‘one-size fits all’ approaches and complicated funding processes which reflect the silos of Whitehall rather than the needs of communities. This has left people feeling as if their lives and places they call home have slipped out of their control. Communities need power returned to them”**

**(MHCLG: 93)**

There is little thought however, as to what the term ‘communities’ involves. In what sense can such arbitrary constructs resulting from the imposition of a half-a-million population base be regarded as ‘communities’? There has been a long tradition throughout Europe (and US states) acknowledging the importance and relevance of local communities to which people identify – typically village, town and city. It is extremely unusual to find a geographical place which is not based in and represented by an elected local authority. Indeed, in many cases (for example, the French communes) very small place-based population units are commonplace. Multi-tier local government, typically expressing the value of subsidiarity, is widely supported throughout Europe and the USA (Copus, et al 2020).

But not in England. The white paper's statement that '*people look after one another and feel proud of where they live*' and 'that policies have been done to communities rather than for them, in ways which '*reflect the silos of Whitehall rather than the needs of communities*', is impossible to reconcile with the creation of unitary councils based on an arbitrary population figure. Indeed, the lack of public consultation or local referenda on reorganisation adds fuel to that fire. As late as 1996, the importance of community identity in local government reorganisation was taken seriously. In the most thorough piece of evidence-based analysis of the 1992-95 Banham Commission, its Chair, Sir John Banham – after publishing a series of draft proposals featuring large unitary authorities, often county-based – recognised that most of these proposals had proved controversial, and having placed increasing emphasis on research evidence on community identity and public opinion, withdrew most of the draft proposals. This change of view which reflected his Commission's brief: 'to reflect the identities and interests of local communities'.

From 2006 onwards, 'community identity', never featured in the briefs of successive governments. Periodic ad hoc reorganisations took place, invariably resulting in the establishment of large unitary authorities. Over time many district authorities, centred on real places and communities, with long and proud traditions of civic leadership, disappeared. Before the big unitary plans of the current government, many of remaining district councils were based on real places and identifiable communities. As a result of the White Paper proposals, there will be hardly any authorities who could justifiably be seen as reflecting a viable sense of community identity.

There is an interesting but unconvincing addition to the importance of communities in the White Paper:

**“We know people value the role of governance at the community scale and that can be a concern when local government is reorganised. We will want therefore to see stronger community arrangements when reorganisation happens in the way councils engage at an area level”**

**(MHCLG: 100)**

But, if you need to invent seemingly arbitrary sub-units in new unitary councils, are you not admitting those new bodies are too big? Indeed, Leach and Copus (2023:99-100) review the measures taken by unitary councils to improve engagement and find them to be less than effective.

## **The bidding system, the ‘big stick’ and the ‘divide and rule’ implications**

There are further concerns about the Government’s proposals. First, counties and districts have been instructed to co-operate in developing reorganisation proposals for unitary authorities with populations of around half-a-million. But there may be exceptions made on a ‘case-by-case basis’ and such a qualification appears to give the centre power to do what it likes; be wary of ‘case-by-case’ provisos.

The reorganisation bidding system is unlikely to produce consensus. County councils favour options based on existing counties, if they feel there is a good chance of a reasonable approximation to the magic number. District councils have so far mainly opposed such proposals, understandably unconvinced about the justification of the half-a-million figure. They would prefer smaller unitary authorities which reflected a reasonable degree of community identity.

What are the government’s intentions if mutually agreed proposals fail to emerge? The answer is clear: the government will use force through a ministerial directive where it thinks there is majority support for a



particular proposal (MHCLG, 2024: 36). Another example of central government doing 'to' rather than 'with' communities.

What does 'majority support' mean and how will it be identified? Majority support is something which proved virtually impossible in many past reorganisations and is proving difficult to achieve in great tracks of the country and what is that majority – the public in a referendum?

The issue of geography raises difficult questions to which the white paper provides few convincing answers:

- 'contiguity' (geography must be contiguous across its constituent councils, either now or with clear plans agreed with local government):
- 'no devolution islands' (geography must not create devolution islands by leaving areas which are too small to go it alone or which do not have natural partners):
- 'delivery' (geography must ensure effective delivery of key functions, including Special Developments Strategies):
- 'alignment' (the government should seek to ensure alignment between devolution and other public sector boundaries) and 'identity' (a vital element of successful devolution is the ability of local residents to engage with their devolved institutions and local identity plays a key role in this) (MHCLG 2024: 31)

All of this is asking a lot from 'geography'. It will be interesting to see what key role 'local identity' plays in this context, given the almost total neglect of it elsewhere in the White Paper.

Locality and community is best reflected in a multi-tier system. The two-tier system of local government outside the county boroughs operated with few problems from 1881 to 1974 and then from 1974 onwards within the 39 shire counties, until it began to be dismantled, on a piecemeal basis from 1996. Since then it has been criticised and eroded by the centre and self-interested county councils. There has been little understanding of the benefits of a system which distinguishes between strategic services (like transportation, highways and land-use planning) and those appropriately

dealt with at a local level, responsive to the needs of local communities and mindful of the concept of subsidiarity (adopted by the 1997 Labour government). Tiered structures are and have been common across Western Europe; internationally multi-tiered local government has long been well-established (OECD 2016, Copus, et al, 2022). Yet, our centre operates in a totally different way, and (in the 2024 White Paper) with superficial justifications.

Yes, the current map of local authorities is messy, but so is real democracy and real communities, but that is the nature of community. All we are left with is the benefit for the centre of imposing a rigid template on what remains of two-tier shire England of larger and fewer councils into a nice, neat map of local government.

What should be recognised and roundly condemned is the disparaging and dismissive way county and district councils have been summarily abolished on flimsy pretexts. If this is not centralisation at its worst, what is it? If it does not herald the death of local government reflecting local community identity, what does? If it is not a continued decimation of the world of committed councillors (already severely depleted) what is?

Dennis Reed, former chief executive of the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), provides an insightful conclusion here when he wrote in the following terms (Municipal Journal February, 2025):

**“The White Paper has nothing to do with devolution. It is a centralisation agenda, dividing local government into delivery units manageable by civil servants with a veneer of local democracy through elected mayors. We know from discussion over the last decade that this has always been the agenda of MCHLG/Treasury civil servants, and they have finally got a Government to buy it, on the grounds of growth and efficiency. If carried through, it will be the death of local democracy as we know it and the further marginalisation of local councillors”**

### 3. Another Fine Mess

Whitehall seems to see the half-a-million population target for unitary councils as an article of faith. For the largest shire counties in England – Kent, Essex, Lancashire, Hertfordshire, Hampshire and Devon – the implication is they will be split into two, three or four separate units. For smaller counties, including Warwickshire, Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, a different route may be taken.

But, what are the implications of this magical figure for the future of unitary authorities outside the shire counties and districts? There is an important principle here. If unitary populations of half-a-million are required and the intention is to join together such units as combined authorities (CAs), under elected mayors (as in the six former metropolitan county areas, and elsewhere), then is there an expectation that units of similar size will be introduced in existing CAs. Otherwise, it becomes extremely difficult to justify a consistent approach to population.

Using the 2021 population estimates, some interesting comparisons become apparent.

- In the 36 metropolitan districts classified by MCHLG as unitary, the average population ranges from 566,000 (Sheffield) to 148,000 (South Tyneside), excluding Birmingham and Leeds, whose populations are well above these levels (so will they be split?)
- In the other 62 unitary authorities, population varies between 624,000 (North Yorkshire) and 41,000 (Rutland).
- Several of the pre-1996 Banham/Cooksey unitary authorities were established with much larger populations than those designated from 2006 onwards: eight of them exceeded 400,000 and seven fall between 400,000 and 300,000. Most of these were categorised as unitary following the abolition of Avon, Humberside and the 'big city' grouping (including Nottingham, Derby and Leicester), the remainder twenty-two unitary authorities have populations of below 200,000, including Hartlepool (94,000), Darlington (109,000), Torbay (139,000), the Isle of Wight (140,000) Rutland (41,000).

Rutland, with a population of 41,000, for example, surely cannot survive the determination to snuff out smaller councils, and any uncontested strong community identity will be ignored. The Isle of Wight (140,000), a similar strong case, could be reabsorbed into whatever happens in Hampshire.

In the remaining unitary authorities with populations below 200,000 and the twenty-one MBCs with populations below 300,000 the department (and ministers) are faced with a number of inconsistencies in applying the half-a-million population, or is this to be fudged? If it is, then that fudge can be used to argue the abolition of district councils is unnecessary.

Interesting questions follow from the insistence that half-a-million is the right answer for devolution.

### **1. Within the shire county areas, what provision will be made for the existing authorities located within or immediately adjacent to them?**

There are several such authorities scattered around the shire counties, almost all designated at the end of the Banham/Cooksey era in 1996:

- Southend (180,000) and Thurrock (177,000) within Essex
- Medway (283,000) north of Kent
- Torbay (139,000) within Devon
- Blackburn with Darwen (156,000)
- Herefordshire (189,000) adjacent to Worcestershire
- North Lincs (170,000) and North East Lincs (153,000)
  - Greater Grimsby and Greater Scunthorpe respectively
- Isle of Wight (140,000)
- Rutland (41,000)

All these unitary authorities have viability in terms of community identity. They all represent 'real places' or approximations to them with which local residents identify. Yet, it is hard to imagine any surviving the half-a-million demand. All would be subsumed within meaningless conglomerations comprising smaller authorities conveniently attached to bits of Essex, Kent, Lancashire etc. What would become of Torbay, Blackburn with Darwen, Southend and others? Because of their arbitrary division into 'bite-sized' units, they would lose all meaning as unitary authorities based on real places, a concern identified in almost all of the Banham/Cooksey Commission findings.

**2. What should be the outcome within existing or designated former metropolitan county council (MCC) areas, where existing (so-called) unitary authorities have populations well below half-a-million?**

In relation to the justifications above, the allocation of appropriate sizes to the metropolitan borough councils (MBCs) within the MCCs in the 1974 re-organisation had, with some reservations, a degree of logic which acknowledged the importance of community identity. All the 'big cities'- Manchester, Liverpool Leeds etc. – fit this criterion. There is less clarity about Kirklees, Wakefield, Sandwell and North Tyneside, but overall, the MBCs have a reasonably viable sense of community.

The problem for MCHLG (and for the minister's links with Oldham MBC – population 244,000) is that few meet the half-a-million requirements, which, if it is to be applied throughout the large remaining part of county-based England, must logically be applied elsewhere. Only seven of the MBCs have populations above 350,000. Of those remaining, 14 have populations between Sandwell (344,000) and Wolverhampton (268,000), with the remainder spanning Barnsley (246,000) and South Tyneside (148,000). Such discrepancies undermine any hard and fast population figure, which can be seen to be crumbling.

### **3. What should be the outcome for unitary authorities of populations less than half-a-million outside the six MCC and shire county areas?**

The unitary authorities established by the Banham/Cooksey Commission in 1996 – following the adherence of its members to the importance of retaining, as far as possible, units with a viable community identity – have much smaller populations than the MBCs and those unitary authorities established from 2006 onwards. Falling within the former category are the five urban-based authorities in Teesside, of which the smallest are Hartlepool (94,000) and Darlington (109,000) with an average of 124,000. Within the now extinct county of Berkshire, the six unitary authorities established in 1996 all had populations ranging between 155,000 and 181,000 (average 170,000). Outside these two former county areas lie Telford and Wrekin 189,000, Bedford 187,000 and Bath and North East Somerset 196,000. In almost all these cases there was a justification for a unitary authority on community identity grounds. But the average populations are less than 150,000. Are we to see a sizeable number of small unitary authorities (viable in terms of community identity) to be abolished?

### **4. Where does this leave the GLA, and the London Boroughs?**

There is presumably no prospect of the retention of a two-tier system, unless there is a plan to introduce a unitary authority of 2.7 million. But what are the implications for London boroughs ranging in size from 392,000 (Croydon) to 148,000 (Kensington and Chelsea) and averaging at around 270,000. If there is a commitment to the magic half-a-million figure, will that mean merging London Boroughs? But what would be the point? As elsewhere, Greater London would be faced with the prospect of arbitrary amalgamations of tracts of Greater London, which would be meaningless to its residents (who could maybe just about have coped with some of the current 'communities' such as Greenwich, Wandsworth, Richmond, Kingston and Enfield). The carving-up scheduled for West Essex, North Herts and South Kent would, no doubt, re-emerge in these 'points of the compass' designations within the metropolis.

**5. In the increasing number of existing and planned mayoral-led Combined Authorities, how can it be claimed a unitary system exists, when there are two-tiers: the mayor and the component authorities both subject to regular democratic election.**

The centre appears to assume Combined Authorities under elected mayors and any CAs created with elected mayors covering unitary councils and counties can be seen as 'unitary' local government. In the six MCCs, there is an established pattern of mayors, working with council leaders, with shared powers and powers resting at either mayoral or council level; a two-tier system of elected government with the MBCs subject to election three years out of four, and the mayor elected every four years. Even though it is an individual who is democratically elected, the two-tier principle holds good. As the spread of elected mayors with combined authorities continues the reinvention of the two-tier system, but on a much larger scale, is evident to all.

Reviewing these questions as a package, it is a surprise this element of the White Paper has not received more attention and analysis. In addition, more clarity is needed around what 'devolution' means and how it relates to the half-a-million population. The conclusion can be drawn that reorganisation is the real driving force behind the white paper.



## 4. Worlds Apart

It is instructive to compare local government within the UK, Europe and the USA in the fifty years since the 1974 reorganisation, to explain how approaches have diverged. They are now 'worlds apart' and operate on the basis of totally different assumptions, traditions and rules of the game.

Before the 1972 Act, and subsequent reorganisation, there were 1204 democratically-elected councils, comprising the Greater London Council (and 32 London boroughs), 79 county boroughs, and 39 shire county councils, within which nestled 1086 municipal boroughs, urban district councils and rural district councils. It was a local government map which mirrored and expressed the profound sense of community identity within which local government was rooted. Rural districts apart, any urban settlement of any size – small or large town or city – had its own elected council, with populations sometimes as low as 4,000. The system operated universally and unproblematically as two-tiers of local government.

The situation was similar throughout Western democracies and the USA. In France, the locally elected communes with powerful mayors were close in structure and spirit to pre-1970 experience in England. Indeed, in Europe and the USA, three-tier local government was, and is, a viable element (Leach and Copus 2023: 79).

Since the 1970s, patterns of local government in Europe and the USA changed gradually. There were occasional amalgamations but stability prevailed, with very few examples of town and city-based authorities losing their civic identity. It would have been inconceivable for medium-sized towns across Europe ceasing to retain their identity, typically with the expectation that they would continue to operate within a two-or three-tier system, which was nowhere seen as a problem. Indeed, examples of unitary authorities anywhere in Europe, apart from the big cities are few and far between (see, Swianiewicz, 2010, Kerley et al, 2019).

Yet over the same period, the gulf between local government in England and elsewhere has widened. Consider the following:

The recently created unitary authority of North Yorkshire (now incongruously linked with a 'combined authority' embracing York) has a population of around 618,000; the USA State of Wyoming at 579,500 has 23 counties and 99 incorporated municipalities, comprising cities and towns throughout the State.

The area covering North Yorkshire comprises approximately 1.9 million acres, over double the population of the USA State of Rhode Island (approx. 989,000 acres). Rhode Island comprises 39 incorporated municipalities (cities and towns).

In Cornwall before the 2008 reorganisation, there was a county and six district councils with an overall council membership of around 450. After the abolition of those councils and their replacement by a single unitary there were 87 elected councillors – a mere 20 percent of the former membership. In North Yorkshire, over a period of similar change in 2022, there were seven districts and a county council with around 500 councillors. After their abolition and replacement by a unitary council there were 72 councillors, around 15 percent of the former membership.

To travel by car in Cornwall from St Just on the west coast to Bude would take two hours (current AA estimates). The journey in North Yorkshire from Hawes in Wensleydale to Filey on the east coast would take on average over three hours.

Luxembourg's population is 672,000, slightly higher than the county of North Yorkshire. It covers approx. 998 square miles, 60 percent less than the county. Luxembourg's largest city's population is 136,210. Elsewhere, there is a two-tier system of local government, consisting of 12 cantons, (first level sub-divisions of the country) and 102 elected communes (municipalities), four of which have city status and many of whom have population sizes as small as 2-3,000. The total number of local authorities in Luxembourg is 114 with an average population size of 6,000. In North Yorkshire it is one, unitary authority with a population of 618,000.

Unitary local government is not the standard model across Europe. In England, assuming the white paper's proposals go ahead, there could be around 60 unitary authorities (including MBCs), linked in groups of two or more combined authorities, and (assuming no further amalgamations) 32 London boroughs and the GLA. The average population size of this conglomeration of elected authorities would be over half-a-million. In 1972, prior to the 1974 reorganisation, it was 37,000, and by 2023 167,000.

In France, Spain, Italy and Germany the size comparisons with England in 1974 would be similar. (Leach and Copus (2023:88 Table 8.1.) found councils in England were at least (on a conservative estimate) 50 percent larger than the four comparators. By 2025, assuming the 2024 White Paper proposals are implemented, they would be over 90 percent larger.

In 1972, before the 1974 reorganisation, the average number of councillors served by their local populations in England was – close to 37,000, a ratio of one councillor per 1,300 population, broadly similar to those in the four countries above (although significantly smaller in France). By 2023, it had decreased to 17,000 (a ratio of one councillor per 3,300 population), a decrease of 60 percent. In 2025, if the 2024 White Paper proposals go ahead, it will have decreased to a level approaching 90 percent.

Exploring these few exemplary population characteristics and differences, and configurations of local government structure, we are left wondering why the centre, including successive governments are so far out of step with Europe and the USA? Where do we have to look to try to discover a convincing explanation for this huge discrepancy?

To understand the trend behind this sequence, we need look no further than the fifty-five-year-old agenda of the Local Government Division (LGD) of what was in 1970 the Department of the Environment (DOE), which has reappeared in various guises since, most recently the Ministry of Communities, Housing and Local Government (MCHLG). The decision in 1970 by Peter Walker to reject the Redcliffe-Maud Report's recommendations for 58 unitary councils across England had a considerable impact on the long-term thinking of the ministry overseeing local government. Instead, the Conservative government introduced a new two-tier local government system with metropolitan county councils and districts (MBCs) in six areas (plus Greater London, established in 1965) and a two-tier system of county and district councils elsewhere. The background to Redcliffe-Maud and the influence of the LGD is explored later, but one civil servant's reaction at the time is of particular significance:

**"It was a shattering moment for the LGD and the DOE, because the Conservatives, as it turned out, were committed against the Redcliffe-Maud reorganisation. The Permanent Secretary reported 'they are not going to do it; they want to do something else' It took us right back to the drawing board"**

**(Young and Rao, 1997: 200-201).**

The Redcliffe-Maud's recommendations, and their rejection, has been a constant rallying point for the centre for the sequence of reorganisations since 1974 and for seeking opportunities to reorganise wherever they present themselves. That rallying point has led to the current situation where English local government is worlds apart from almost anywhere else.

## 5. Our Conclusion: Under The Influence

As reorganisation proposals become more advanced after the Devolution White Paper's publication, we summarise the worst effects thus, so ending with "effects:

- the number of councillors in the shires is set to be cut by around 90 percent:
- no trace will remain of district councils which reflect residents' community identity and 'real' places
- an extended period of disruption over the next few years, as counties and districts strive to come to terms with the long transition and cost involved, with myriad missed opportunities for 'getting on with the day job' such as dealing with the challenges of new housing targets (300, 000 per annum), and the continued provision of their service responsibilities
- the spurious and unsubstantiated claims regarding how much money is going to be saved by mega unitary councils bearing no resemblance to anywhere with which anyone would identify
- No real devolution to what is left of local government

We also surmise that the existing ministerial team have been 'under the influence'. Not, we hasten to add, of alcoholic beverages, but of those at the centre with a long-standing commitment to reorganisation. To understand that long-term agenda it is important to examine the various initiatives set in motion over the years, as far back as the proposals of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1966-69). Only then can sense be made of this process and how it culminated in the Labour government's 2024 White Paper.

The genesis of this long-term agenda can be traced back to the Department's roots in 1966, after which, its well-established and persistent view reappeared, when suitable opportunities were identified. When the Redcliffe-Maud commission was launched in 1966, with a good deal

of influence from the Permanent Secretary Dame Evelyn Sharp, there was a spate of 'expert opinion' presentations from senior civil servants advocating the benefits to key strategic services such as education, strategic planning and large-scale infrastructure redevelopment (among others), from large unitary councils, highlighting claims of 'economies of scale' and how large unitary authorities would function efficiently and effectively (Wood, 1976, Dearlove, 1979, Wilson and Game, 2011).

As Young and Rao point out:

**"The Commission accepted a conventional belief that fewer, larger authorities would be more effective. This was on the basis of 'evidence', that is, submission of convenient opinion, that could not stand up to critical scrutiny and was largely orchestrated by Whitehall mandarins. Research set up by the Commission was discounted whenever it pointed in a different direction"**  
(1997:200-201)

Little attention was paid to 'community identity', which never involved (or required) considered substantive survey evidence throughout the commissions investigations. Although the Commission agonised over the discrepancies between community identity and large unitary authorities, they went along with it. The result was a recommendation for 58 unitary authorities throughout England, when previously there had been over 1,200 councils.

The 1969 Labour government enthusiastically accepted the Commission's recommendations. But, a Conservative administration under Edward Heath, returned to power in February 1970, saw then minister, Peter Walker, unconvinced by the proposals. Walker was also aware of local dissatisfaction emerging under the imaginative strapline 'Don't Vote for R.E Mote' and as a consequence, rejected the plans. Instead an 'across the board' two-tier local government system was introduced of six

metropolitan counties operating with metropolitan borough councils (MBCs), and 39 shire counties with districts of populations of around 120,000. There was some weakening of community identity involved, but infinitely less so than in the Redcliffe-Maud proposals.

The ministry's reaction to the in 1974 system, was one of shock as evidenced in the earlier quote by a senior civil servant. But the persistence of the department's mind set survived and lived to fight many other days.

There was little opportunity for a major reappraisal when Labour regained power in 1974, nor between 1979 and 1991 – a period dominated by Margaret Thatcher's antagonism toward the GLC, resulting in its abolition in 1986 along with the six metropolitan county councils. A further opportunity emerged in 1991 when Michael Heseltine was appointed Minister for the Environment whose priority was to rectify the problems (and extensive public outcry) caused by the community charge (poll tax). Heseltine replaced the poll tax with the council tax but extended his brief to incorporate a 'root and branch' review of local government encompassing three elements: council tax; elected mayors; and, local government reorganisation (LGR).

In 1992, work commenced on LGR, following the establishment of a Commission, chaired by Sir John Banham. The terms of reference, strongly influenced by Heseltine's views (and the department's Local Government Division), included a strong preference for unitary authorities, widely expected to replace counties and districts. But, in 1991 Heseltine was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and his departmental responsibilities passed to Michael Howard, who appeared less committed to this course of action. Despite initial expectations, a level of resistance to the unitary proposals was displayed by the Banham Commission, who, on the basis of wide-ranging survey evidence of community and public preference, concluded that in most cases, the introduction of large unitary authorities was not justified, nor was any re-emergence of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission recommendations. Significantly, it was the last time any form of commission was formed in which community identity and public preference played its part; such evidence-based initiatives could not be guaranteed to provide the right answers.



Every time a new local government Minister has arrived, opportunities emerge for reopening the unitary debate. Those open to influence in 2005-06 included Hazel Blears, Ruth Kelly and John Healey in 2006-07. The DCLG (as it was then) saw an initiative launched in 2006, after the departure of David Miliband, who had taken a more balanced and analytical approach to the issues. In his absence, the DCLG White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' (DCLG,2006) was published, followed by invitations for county and district councils to present proposals for unitary authorities. The process which followed was described in meticulous evidence-based research, and justifiably characterised as 'botched business, thus:

**'Five criteria were set out by DCLG in the following terms: proposals must be affordable: supported by a broad cross-section of partners and stakeholders: provide strong, effective and accountable leadership: deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment: and deliver value for many and equity on public services. Regrettably, none of these criteria were met. Unreliable data was accepted by the Department; inconsistent decisions were taken and misleading information given on the basis for those decisions. Parliament was misled and there was a large element of political deception'**

**(Chisholm and Leach, 2008: 152-3).**

Further attempts to encourage a succession of new ministers (including James Brokenshire, Sajid Javid, Simon Clarke and Robert Jenrick) to appreciate the benefits of 'unitary authorities' became apparent from 2015 onwards.

In 2015, devolution deals – typically including combined authorities in metropolitan county areas – were being negotiated. Then came a strange new initiative, whereby any grouping of authorities (or, in Cornwall, a single unitary authority) could make a bid to become a Combined Authority. The nature of the initiative drifted from one that was city region – or metropolitan county area – based, to one (apparently) anyone could join, as long as they played by the rules. By now, Osborne had focused his energies elsewhere; his Northern Powerhouse priority had done its job. But, the centre moved on and in February 2016, when the Cities and Local Government Bill was being debated, a further initiative was launched; the government were offering three devolutionary options: a deal with a directly elected mayor; a move to unitary authorities with no directly elected mayor; or 'no deal'.

What started as a relatively circumscribed Northern Powerhouse initiative turned into a centrally driven, deal-based prospect of 'devolution' offered as an incentive in county areas operating a two-tier system to form unitary authorities. It is hard to imagine where this proposal could suddenly have emerged from other than the ministry, which had by then been party to the Labour government's unitary authority initiative of 2006-08. When the Conservatives came to power in 2010, under Eric Pickles, there was no place for the agenda, but when he moved in 2015, opportunities emerged to resume the process, once the incoming ministers had been briefed.

It is always strange that when new local government ministers have been appointed, and despite never mentioning local government reorganisation in their entire political career, after a relative short period in office they appear in public settings with exciting new proposals. Since 2015, there was a rapid turnover of ministers: James Brokenshire, Simon Clarke, Sajid Javid and Robert Jenrick, all followed the departmental line (so we would surmise). For example, in a speech to the County Councils Network in 2017, Javid gave ringing endorsement to unitaries,

telling delegates he wanted to see unitary councils between 300,000 to half-a-million across England. Now where could that figure have come from? Had he made his own detailed calculations? Or had he received a ministerial briefing to that regard? In a predictable pattern, Simon Clarke, the minister for local government in the incoming Johnson administration, soon began to make similar public statements of enthusiasm for unitary authorities with a similar size range. By the time he moved in 2020, the writing was on the wall for the two-tier system; the ministerial team under Robert Jenrick instructed county and district councils in remaining shire areas to produce proposals for large unitary authorities, of the specified (within broad limits) population size, with increasing pressure from the CCN to go for an 'as large as possible'.

But the policy was soon reversed, because within five months of Johnson becoming prime minister, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Under pressure from Jenrick and backbenchers, and despite fervent representations from the CCN to persist, the 'unitary authority' plan was side-lined, albeit with three incongruous exceptions: in Somerset, Cumbria and North Yorkshire where it was argued (with little convincing evidence) there was 'broad local support for reform.' In Cumbria, where proposals were submitted at the government's request, there were four different plans from groups of authorities – all incompatible. But, unitarisation went ahead.

The 2024 English Devolution White Paper was the unitarisers' big breakthrough. We suggest, that the strategy pursued by the centre over the past fifty years has been to exploit opportunities to further its 'bigger is better' unitary authority agenda. A clue to this was provided in in 2007, when a local authority chief executive reported to Chisholm and Leach a conversation with a senior civil servant extolling the administrative benefits of dealing with unitary councils, instead of councils in a two-tier system. For 'administrative convenience', means – fewer local authorities to deal with; no 'complicated' two-tier arrangements; and, an increasing number of elected mayors to simplify access to democratic arrangements. When the sequence of unitarising initiatives introduced from 1991 is identified and possible explanations examined a plausible – convincing – narrative can be identified, in which alternative explanations are conspicuous by their absences. The narrative can be summarised as follows:

The complexity of the issues involved in local government reorganisation would vex any new minister. It is true that local government minister Jim McMahon had been leader of Oldham MBC between 2011 and 2016. But, his contact with two-tier local government is unlikely to have been a priority while dealing with the challenges facing Oldham and facilitating emergence of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, no doubt igniting enthusiasm for CAs. Secretary of State Angela Rayner had no record of local government at this level, nor experience of two-tier local government outside Greater Manchester. In these circumstances, being influenced by Whitehall supporters of unitarisation, as has been the case with so many other ministers, is unsurprising.

On display is a Whitehall and Westminster long-standing agenda to make life easier by reducing the number of councils and councillors coupled with immunity to international evidence conflicting with its plan. Those in local government complicit with the unitarising agenda may have overplayed their hand though, with the County Councils Network appearing to accept counties such as Essex, Kent, Surrey, Hertfordshire and others will disappear under the half-a-million guidance, but may be hoping to acquire a handful of additional unitary counties, unless they can convince supporters at the centre to increase or remove the population limit.

The legislation will work its way through parliament, the centre will congratulate itself on 'a job well done' and relish the prospect of the 'administrative convenience' resulting by reducing the number of tiresome local authorities by two thirds and introducing 20-30 Combined Authorities, with elected mayors, with whom the centre will find it more convenient to negotiate.

Assuming the plans are implemented over the next few years, the outcome will be:

- a huge gulf between the number of councillors in England and elsewhere in Western Europe
- the almost total absence of councils based on real places with strong community identities
- the vastness of the meaningless authorities created on the basis of unproven assumptions regarding 'ideal size' of councils (half-a-million apparently)
- a huge discrepancy between local government structure in England and elsewhere.
- A local government system with no new powers, freedoms and autonomy than before reorganisation and with the same problems – only bigger

We are on the verge of a major change in local government which will finally snuff out any notion, in England, that local government should be local.

## References

- Boyne, G. (1995). Population Size and Economies of Scale in Local Government. *Policy & Politics*, 23(3), 213-222
- Chisholm, M., and S. Leach (2008) Botched Business: *The Damaging Process of re-Organising Local Government*, 2006-2008, Douglas McLean
- Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business (The Widdicombe Committee) (1986), London, HMSO. *Report of the Committee*
- Copus, C, R Kerley and A Jones (2022) (eds) A Modern Guide to Local and Regional Politics, Edward Elgar
- Copus, C, S. Leach and A. Jones (2020) Bigger is not Better: The Evidenced Case for Keeping 'Local' Government
- Copus, (2022) Bigger is still Not Better
- Dearlove, J., *The Reorganisation of British Local Government: Old Orthodoxies and a Political Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Department of Communities and Local Government (2006), *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, cm 6939-1
- Dollery B., Kitchen H., McMillan M., Shah A. (2020) Intermunicipal Cooperation. In: Local Public, Fiscal and Financial Governance. Palgrave Macmillan
- Drew J, E Razin And R Andrews (2019) Rhetoric In Municipal Amalgamations: A Comparative Analysis, *Local Government Studies*, 45:5, 748-767
- Hendriks, F A. Lidstrom, and J. Loughlin, (eds) (2011) *The oxford handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- House of Commons, Communities and Local Government Committee (2016) First Report of Session 2015–16 Devolution: The next five years and beyond

Kerley, R, J.Liddle and P. Dunning (2019), *The Routledge Handbook of International Local Government*, Routledge, Oxford.

Kjaer, U and R Klemmensen (2015) What are the Local Political Costs of Centrally Determined Reforms of Local Government? *Local Government Studies* 41:1, pages 100-118.

Leach, S and C. Copus (2023), *The Strange Demise of the Local in Local Government*, Palgrave Macmillan

MHCLG (2024) *English Devolution White Paper: Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, cmmd 1218

Navarro C and E Pano, (2021) One Size Does Not Fit All: Growing Cities and Shrinking Towns in the Spanish Local Map ch5 81-98 in Lackowska, Szmigiel-Rawska and Teles (ed) *Local Government in Europe: New Perspectives and Democratic Challenges*, Bristol University Press

OECD and United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) (2016) *Subnational governments around the world Structure and finance: A first contribution to the Global Observatory on Local Finances*

Price Waterhouse Coopers (2020) *Evaluating the Importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation*, County Council Network

*Reports of the Local Government Commission for England 1992*, (Banham Commission) (Cooksey Commission, 1996)

Royal Commission on Local Government, HMSO (1969) Vol.1 Report, cm 4040 (Redcliffe-Maud)

Swianiewicz, P (ed) (2010) *Territorial Consolidation Reforms in Europe*, Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, Open Society Institute-Budapest

Toulmin-Smith, J., (1851) *Local Government and Centralisation: The Characteristics of Each; and its Practical Tendencies, As affecting Social, Moral and political Welfare and Progress, Including Comprehensive Outlines of the English Constitution*, Elibron Classics Series, 2005.



Wilson, D., and C.Game, (2011) *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke

Wood, B., (1976) *The Process of Local Government Reform 1966-74*, George Allen and Unwin, London

Young, K., and N. Rao, (1997) *Local Government Since 1945*, Blackwell.

## Web references

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/feb/05/england-council-elections-postponed-local-government-shake-up>

Reed, D. C.Copus and S. Leach, A Magic Population Number for Local government is A Fallacy, Municipal Journal 10th February 2025 <https://www.themj.co.uk/magic-population-local-government-fallacy>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-12-18/21007>

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-12-16/20129>

<https://decentralization.net/2025/03/does-the-amalgamation-of-local-governments-really-improve-service-delivery-fiscal-capacity-and-citizen-choice/>





## **Localis**

Vox Studios, V.311  
1-45 Durham St  
London, SE11 5JH

0870 448 1530  
[info@localis.org.uk](mailto:info@localis.org.uk)

**[localis.org.uk](http://localis.org.uk)**