
OTHER IDEAS

Shock treatment:
will English local
government blow
a fuse in a
Rewired State?

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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.

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Introduction

Our previous Localis paper was entitled: *reorganisation, local government and the future of English devolution*. In this paper, we ask a simple, related, question: does local government have a future under devolution? We ask this question because there has been much hyperbolic outpouring over the statements by the new Prime minister, Andy Burnham about devolution, but we remain sceptical as to what the scheme might mean for local government. We write now, because the Cabinet Office Policy paper, published online on 31st July stated: *'we will publish a white paper detailing our plans for the full set of reforms and a clear timetable for their implementation'* (Cabinet Office 2026). In an article for the Local Government Chronicle, in January 2025, after the publication of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment white paper, we asked the question: is this the worst white paper ever written? We hope it was and that the white paper promised by the Cabinet Office doesn't tempt us to write another article in which we state: sorry we were wrong; this is the worst white paper ever written.



The cabinet statement on 'Rewiring the State' shows clearly that local government has far less prominence in government thinking than the comparatively new creation of strategic authorities and their directly elected mayors. That lack of prominence for local government should worry localists, anyone concerned with subsidiarity of political decision-making and service delivery. It should also concern councillors and local communities.

Another worry about the government's approach, since Andy Burnham became prime minister, is the development of a new form of centralism emanating less from Westminster and Whitehall, but, rather, from strategic authorities and mayors, that will exercise influence and control over local government in similar ways to Westminster and Whitehall, while the latter also retain their grip.

It is local government and its role in devolution that is our main concern, particularly why successive governments have, without justification, linked devolution to local government reorganisation (LGR). Reorganisation means units of local government get bigger despite the lack of consistent and compelling evidence that this will deliver the promises made by its supporters (See, Baldersheim and Rose 2010, Denters et al, 2014).

A further concern is that the cabinet statement doesn't appear to recognise the distinction between devolution and decentralisation. The statement refers to the Scottish and Welsh devolved administrations, but nothing is coming to England, as a nation or to its local government, which resembles devolution to Scotland and Wales. Despite the government's intention to rewire the state, England will remain the loose wire, disconnected from real devolution granted to the rest of the UK.

1 Devolution, Decentralisation and Crossed Wires

Decades of white papers, government proposals and ministerial statements have promised local government, devolution. These promises have not been fulfilled. First, because the term devolution has been conflated with decentralisation; second because the centre has no intention of offering local government devolution; and, third, devolution simply sounds better than decentralisation.



Bogdanor (1999:2) states:

“Devolution involves the transfer of powers from a superior to an inferior political authority. More precisely devolution may be defined as consisting of three elements: the transfer to a subordinate elected body, on a geographical basis, of functions at present exercised by ministers and parliament. These functions may be either legislative, the power to make laws, or executive — the power to make secondary laws — statutory instruments, orders and the like within a primary legal framework still determined at Westminster”

While such a transfer has occurred to Scotland and Wales (see Mackinnon, 2015) no such transfer has taken place in England, nor does it appear that it will do so under current devolution proposals. Given the lack of substance in constitutional promises made in the cabinet statement and the likelihood that they will simply be repeated in the forthcoming white paper, a more clear understanding of what is meant by devolution and to whom, is urgently needed.

Devas and Delay (2006:677) show the contrast between devolution and decentralisation, thus:

“Conventionally, a distinction is made between devolution, that is, political decentralisation to a locally elected body with some degree of autonomy and some local own revenue sources, and deconcentration, that is, administrative decentralisation to local agents of the central state”

(Devas and Delay, 2006:677)



Decentralisation focuses on the transfer of tasks, functions, responsibilities and some decision-making with some budgets; contrast this to Bogdanor's definition of devolution: the transfer of central government decision-making, policy-making and legislative powers, and we have more clarity about what is on offer for England. Devas and Delay (2006:688) also point out that even decentralisation can become pointless if the centre (or some other upper tier body) maintains control of the details of what local government does.

The question remains: is the state being rewired, or does it have its wires crossed? Does the existence of crossed wires indicate that, for England, genuine devolution to local authorities isn't really on offer; but that what is envisaged is for combined authorities and elected mayors to take responsibility for more functions and tasks currently delivered or controlled elsewhere?

The cabinet statement certainly raises that concern as it is largely focused on service delivery, while paying insufficient attention to the construction of a new legal framework in different parts of England (along the lines that have been created in Scotland and Wales) and a strengthening of the constitutional status and powers of local government (to which we return later). So, the dominance of decentralisation in the thinking behind the statement becomes increasingly predictable.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* the following exchange takes place:

'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master — that's all.'



To which could be added and when I say devolution, I mean decentralisation; is the government offering Humpty Dumpty devolution?

To add a further concern to the government's framing of devolution, it is clear that it has an overriding emphasis on economic development and growth. So, when the centre's main policy purpose changes, as it will, does the meaning of devolution also change, following Humpty Dumpty's example?

The conflation of devolution and decentralisation, and the granting of a specific purpose to devolution, is not accidental. Making a clear distinction between the two is not just a matter of semantics, but necessary to accurately assess if local government is to become a wiring misconnection in the rewired state.

Rewiring the State: The Miss-connection

The 31st July cabinet policy paper was published among a raft of other announcements that appeared just after Andy Burnham became prime minister. Given that context, the lack of detail and depth in the statement is understandable, but it does allude to background work that had already taken place in its preparation — discussions with local leaders (whoever they might be) — and presumably with Andy Burnham before he became PM.

Despite, or because of that, the statement contains a number of warning signs for the future of local government.

The first concern is the dominance of the focus on strategic authorities and mayors, which should worry anyone in local government. In the section on the new model of government, there is welcome awareness shown of the problems of centralisation, the distance between decision-makers and those affected by decisions, and the imposition of the '*wrong choices*' for communities by those too distant to fully appreciate local nuances or long-term effects. We are offered: '*a radical shift in where powers and resources lie*'. The emphasis in the solution however, is worrying, as we are told: '*Mayors also provide a single point of accountability to the residents who elect them, meaning better responsiveness to what local people need and stronger scrutiny and transparency of decision-making*' (Cabinet Office, 2026:4). Little is said here about local government.



The statement correctly notes that *'local areas [not councils you notice] in England keep less of their own taxes than in almost any other developed country in the world'* (p8), the solution is not a radical rewiring of the financial freedoms that exist for local government, but rather the insertion of a new fuse in the box by providing mayors with funding such as an Overnight Visitor Levy (tourist tax to you and me), but not granting that power to local authorities. Strange, as we are not aware of too many tourists who say: let's visit the Manchester combined authority mayor's area for a day or two: No, they say, let's go to Manchester, or the Peak District National Park, or Saddleworth Moors, or the Pennines, and when they do visit those places, they consume local services and create costs for councils, not strategic authorities.

But, though strategic authorities and mayors are very much the focus of the statement, it is still shot through with centralist thinking, for example: *Strategic authorities and their constituent authorities will have a greater role in preventative services, so long as national standards are being met* (page 8). There is no sign here of freedom to change those standards to meet local needs, or priorities or to reflect local differences; implying the imposition of solutions from afar? There is also criticism (p8) of the tendency for the centre to micro-manage, but doesn't micromanagement rest in the proviso *'as long as national standards are met'*?

There is another example of centralist thinking in the statement namely that there should be the: *'establishment of deputy mayor roles with responsibility for key public services'* (p8). Shouldn't deputy mayors' roles be up to the individual mayors to shape based on mayoral manifestos, policy concerns and priorities, and reflecting local needs, rather than functional service responsibilities instructed by the centre? There is the insistence that all areas of England will be covered, or in the process of being covered, by strategic authorities and mayors by the end of 2027, tempered by the promise not to impose mayors if areas do not want them. If this is the outcome, presumably a strategic authority will still be created but with downgraded functions and budgets compared to those areas with a mayor. The centre needs to rewire its centralist thinking.



The whole statement then becomes a shopping list of services and functions that could rest with elected mayors. At least they will be closer than the centre, but given the geographical scale of strategic authorities (and on many occasions their less than logical geographical area), they won't, in reality, be significantly closer to real communities and places. It is all presented in a managerial and technocratic style which means that the political and governing issues confronting devolution are barely mentioned or considered in the depth they warrant.

The second area of concern, related to the first, is the marginalisation of local government.

There is no direct linking of local government to its role in providing space for citizens to become involved in elected politics, make policy decisions or govern their areas. There is no consideration of the importance of elected representative local authorities as independent bodies and their long tradition, history and experience of representing their areas, compared with that of strategic authorities — or their forerunner combined authorities. That local government tradition, history and experience is what strategic authorities should build on, if they are to have any chance of becoming meaningful for the communities and vast tracts of England they are to govern. But that is itself another problem, in that the statement admits that strategic authorities are only as *strong as the authorities that constitute them* (p11), there is no sense given of what that means, how it will operate, or what existing councils bring to the process of creating new institutions. This is a shortcoming that raises an issue for Andy Burnham's support for the German governmental system and Basic Law (see later).

Local authorities are referred to in the statement only in so much as how they relate to strategic authorities and their elected mayors, or how they might fit in with the arrangements of services or decisions devolved to strategic authorities and mayors. Although the statement does promise a *'major transfer of powers, resources and functions from central government to elected mayors and local authorities in regions across England'* (p4) there is little clarity about how councils will specifically benefit or how they will be involved in the process. Much is couched in terms of 'authorities' (strategic or local, we don't know), and local leaders; whether that is mayors or council leaders or others, we don't know.



There are however, encouraging signs in the reference to '*greater retention of the revenue from business rates for local councils and strategic authorities*' (p8-9), followed later by the promise that the government will instigate:

'a programme of reform to support the financial sustainability of local authorities. This will include retention of more of the business rates raised locally instead of receiving grants from central government, and on-going and future reforms to the highest cost services: adult and children's social care, homelessness, and special educational needs and disabilities'

(CO statement 2026:11).

Business rate retention has been promised before and failed to materialise in any meaningful sense. The danger is that the government will by-pass the potential contribution of business rates to local authorities and simply hand the prize to strategic authority mayors instead. The white paper, when it arrives, needs to be very clear about how local government, not strategic authorities, will benefit from business rate retention and other elements of rewiring.

That clarity is necessary, because one of the many warning signs for local government comes in the comment that: *Mayors are uniquely placed to align national, regional and local priorities and tailor growth, investment and public services to local needs in their area* (Cabinet Office, 2026:3-4). Are they? Aren't local needs best met by local government (the clue in the word 'local').

The third area of concern is the economic development and growth context within which devolution is set. These are aims vital for the nation and for the government's credibility and future electoral success, but they suggest that devolution is being viewed by the centre through the prism of one of its own policy objectives. Inherent in that view of devolution — what can it achieve for the centre — is that the state is not being rewired



on the basis of a fundamental shift in attitudes about the relationship between the centre and sub-national government; but, rather, that centralism is being attenuated and redirected into a specific purpose.

The growth focus to devolution means it is another way the state can implement its policies through other agencies. Growth is important, but it cannot be the sole reason for devolution, or the shape of, and relationships between, governing institutions.

The fourth concern is the frustratingly shallow consideration of the implications of devolution and rewiring for central government. It is part of the statement which seems to have been rushed through as an afterthought, and shows no real intention to devolve power or governing authority to England on a par with Scotland and Wales. Neither is there any analysis of what the ideas set out in the statement mean for the centre's short and long-term relationship within the rewired state. What does the Treasury think of all this, we wonder? Maybe, the white paper will provide the answers; for devolution to be a success it will have to.

Further, there is no indication that the white paper, and state rewiring, will draw lessons from how states are structured overseas, and particularly the far more powerful and independent role for local government that is evident elsewhere. Without detailed consideration of a range of overseas governmental systems — with a focus on local government — the white paper will offer no serious rewiring, just a tinkering with the connections on the circuit board, resulting in decentralisation, not devolution — see, the distinction is important.

Sadly the statement is imbued with bland, technocratic managerialism in comments such as: *'This will enable a place-based approach to budgeting that better meets local priorities'* (p8); *'We will support mayors to foster local innovation ecosystems, devolving a substantially increased share of later-stage innovation funding to local leaders so they can back opportunities with the greatest potential for local growth'* (p7) (even Google translate couldn't help with that one).



Finally the statement refers to 'local leaders' either as part of the discussions in drafting the statement, or as those who will be strengthened through the rewiring. But, we are not told who these local leaders were — council leaders, cabinet members, or scrutiny chairs, existing mayors — or someone else? Further clarification is essential, so we know who is shaping the agenda.

With all that in mind, we now turn to a more promising assessment based on what the prime minister has said about his thoughts on devolution.

2 Challenges for Rewiring

After decades of neglect and disparagement of local government by the centre there is an opportunity for the role of local government in our centrally dominated unitary state to be recognised, re-valued and re-invigorated. Andy Burnham becoming prime minister in July 2026 means we have someone who understands local government, has played a practical role in sub-national government as elected mayor from 2017 to 2026, and who as a government minister between 2005 and 2010, was aware of the damaging effect of centralisation and the long-term dominance of the Treasury. In 'Head North' (2024) co-authored with Steve Rotheram, there is a detailed analysis of the causes of the plight of local government and what needs to be done to address it; it is a wide-ranging manifesto for local government, far beyond the misguided and confused content of the 2024 Devolution White Paper.

But, several questions remain as to what will emerge from the recent Local Government Reorganisation process, as announced by departing local government minister Steve Reed, two days before Andy Burnham became prime minister. 'Head North', provides encouraging indications that LGR would be reconsidered, but some concerns that it may not, or only superficially which has important implications for the LGR pause and review announced on 7th September (see below). We set out the key issues, which in our view, the prime minister should confront and resolve:



- The future of devolution: quick fix or medium-term plan?
- The significance of place and community: does LGR meet these concerns?
- The danger of a quick fix: will LGR blow the rewiring fuse?
- Overseas expertise and the need for evidence-based lessons for rewiring, devolution and LGR

We explore these issues focusing in this section on the challenges of devolution and place for the rewiring project.





1. The future of devolution

Andy Burnham's commitment to devolution is clear from its numerous references in 'Head North' and since becoming PM. But there remain important questions as to what is meant by devolution:

- Devolution to whom?
- On what terms?
- With what level of resources?

He has deployed the concept of devolution to effect as mayor of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). He is supportive of the way elected mayors and combined authorities have been introduced since 2017 in the other five former Metropolitan County Councils (MCCs) and in other areas: Teesside, Humberside, Bristol-based West of England, East Midlands and others.

So far, devolution has spread power to city-regions and not to the vast tracts of rural England not encompassed by city-regions. There has been no mention of how devolution is to be extended, assuming it is, to the ten constituent local authorities in Greater Manchester, the seven in the West Midlands or all the rest. It is in these authorities, mainly metropolitan and London boroughs that local services, directly affecting the quality of local residents' lives, are found: social care, education, housing, recreational and cultural facilities, planning and many more. These authorities, with their wide-ranging service delivery responsibilities, are different in principle and concept to strategic authorities led by elected mayors. Given that devolution is being posited as a silver-bullet, serious questions are raised about not just structure but the finances to keep such services sustainable.

As Clive Betts, the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government committee commented for a 2016 report: *'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'* In other words: fiscal devolution. Presently, there is nothing to indicate whether fiscal devolution of this kind is envisaged, and if so to



what extent. What is needed, among other things, is a change of approach including, from the Treasury, to widen the scope for local authorities to raise new local taxes and to extend the long overdue council tax bands. Unless that occurs, fiscal devolution beyond what is planned for the mayoral combined authorities remains unlikely.

Not yet addressed by the PM and his Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) team is the mismatch between the case for strategic, city-region based authorities and their absence in the large area of England which remain. Strategic authorities grounded in city-regions with a distinctive economic base provide some justification for their existence. But moving away from the GLA, the six former MCCs and those with similar characteristics, the basis for their justification falls apart.

Within the 21 shire counties proposed in Steve Reed's list (issued on 17th July 2026), there are several potential city-regions. But in every shire county there remain large predominantly rural areas, interspersed with small or medium-sized towns, none of which justify being characterised as city-regions. The 'points of the compass' names so far being used demonstrate their lack of identity: NW Essex, SE Kent, Mid Hants and Devon Coast and many others are testimony to their 'left over' character. Where are the city-regions in Surrey, or Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk (outside Greater Lincoln Norwich and Ipswich respectively), not to mention the dominance of Greater London within its circle of adjacent counties?

The PM must resist the temptation to continue this flawed vision and reconsider the options. He is on record as advocating long-term planning rather than short-termism. He has already conceded that his goal of 'rewiring', in which the future of local government is acknowledged as a key component, will take until 2034 to accomplish. That is why the pause and review of 7th September must consider the inconsistencies within the current package.



2. The significance of place and community

Looking through the content of 'Head North' (Burnham and Rotherham, 2024) which relates to devolution and LGR, and noting statements Andy Burnham has made since becoming PM, there are encouraging indications that a more comprehensive view of the issues facing local government might now be taken - especially after the 7th September pause and review. There is a welcome reference to the need for a planned approach '*we need long-term planning, not short-term thinking.*' There is a commitment to '*achieving equivalence in living standards throughout Britain*' which would require, in his view, a German style 'basic law' (see below) which would fund the different regions fairly and equally, and a written constitution, which would provide legal safeguards for local authorities, at whatever territorial level, to resist arbitrary interference from central government.

In the case of constitutional reform, it is particularly welcome that the long-term capacity of the government to introduce measures of structural change in local government in a palpably unconstitutional manner (Burnham and Rotherham, 2024:178) would no longer be feasible. There is also an acknowledgement that work remains on the elected mayor/combined authority agenda. The fact that mayors will not necessarily prove popular outside the major cities is recognised (Ibid:202) as is the case for not imposing change in areas where it has little support.

There are other features of 'Head North' which provide hope for the local government system, particularly the view that '*place first rather than party first.*' The significance of 'place' is recognised in the following insight: '*Place is a unifying force. Whatever people's political allegiances, they will usually share a pride in and passion for the place where they live*' (Ibid:203). As committed supporters of Liverpool FC and Everton FC. Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham are conversant with the importance of locality and we hope that sense would be incorporated into local government through free-standing community-based towns, with



their own local government: places such as Barrow (currently situated in Westmorland and Furness) and the City of Carlisle (currently part of Cumberland, though totally separated and distanced from the west coast towns of Cumbria in socio-economic terms). Indeed, we are told that 'devolution has to be about giving local communities power, and that *'there are plans for economic growth in every postcode in England'*.

In addition, there is a welcome open-mindedness about getting the details right:

'All of England is to have a devo deal in place by 2034. I appreciate that we will find more areas that are not over keen on idea of elected mayors. True devolution means that we that they shouldn't be forced to agree to this to prise powers out of Westminster. We will need to see the development of more flexible arrangements to allow everywhere to be included'

(Ibid: 202)

There is here a series of commitments to the importance of pride of place, of devolution to local communities and flexibility in how devolution will be interpreted to avoid a 'top down' approach. What is needed is recognition of the incompatibility of these views with decisions to pursue LGR especially on the current terms and of a gap in the PM's knowledge of the history of MHCLG. That gap was not something addressed by Angela Rayner nor Jim McMahon during their period as local government ministers from 2024-25, before they were replaced by Steve Reed. Now, reinstated, maybe they should read 'Head North', because as in so many examples of incoming ministers facing a department (MHCLG) with a long-established agenda, the evidence is that they bought into it without challenging its basic premises.



Andy Burnham has had much to assimilate since becoming PM that it would not be at all surprising if he has not had time to think through the implications of MHCLG's long-established position on LGR for his own agenda, set out in 'Head North'. Indeed, it appears Andy Burnham has exposed some contradictions between his thinking in 'Head North' and recent pronouncements on LGR and devolution since taking over as PM.

The PM's commitment to the importance of 'place' and 'community identity' would benefit from revisiting what was written about these concepts in the last major evidence-based review of local government structure: the Banham and Cooksey Commission reports of 1995-96. Banham, having made a range of provisional proposals for large unitary authorities, acted with courage and integrity in commissioning large scale surveys of public opinion and community identity throughout England. As a result, the commission reversed almost all its proposals for large unitary authorities as there was little public support for them and considerable support for authorities based on small to medium sized towns and cities, linked to widespread perceptions of the importance of community identity to local people. The same view has been expressed where local referendum have taken place on reorganisation, since the commission, with all held supporting a retention of the two-tier system (see, Leach and Copus, 2023:94); opinion surveys have also shown similar disinterest in bigger local government (See also, IPSoS, LGiU, 2025). If the PM is serious about the importance of community and place he must recognise that the implementation of LGR in its current form is totally incompatible with these values.

If the PM were to delve into the history of LGR, he would (in our opinion) have good reason to revisit the content of 'Head North', compare it with what we and others have written about MHCLG's not too hidden agenda, (Leach and Copus 2023 and 2025) and ensure the LGR pause and review process explores whether rushing to complete Steve Reed's last minute set of proposals is something with which he is happy.



3. The dangers of the quick fix: will LGR blow the fuse?

The roller-coaster which we as authors have ridden since Andy Burnham became PM started with dismay when we read recent statements by Angela Rayner and Louise Haigh *'firing the starting gun in a joint letter to all areas not yet covered by a strategic authority'* (Municipal Journal August 13th, 2026) and indeed by Andy Burnham himself (public statement in Ilkeston, Derbyshire BBC 11/8/26), that the next stages of LGR in all the remaining counties would go ahead, scheduled for completion by 2029. It was with some relief however, that on 7th September 2026, the Secretary of State announced: *'I have decided to withdraw the decisions made in March this year for Essex, Hampshire, Norfolk and Suffolk and, where relevant, their neighbouring unitary authorities'* (Hansard, 7th September 2026, col 668 web link).

She added:

'I have also decided to conduct a full review of the local government reorganisation programme, including the decisions that were announced in July this year for a further 14 areas, and the two areas where decisions have not yet been taken, and ask that reorganisation activity be paused'

(Ibid)

The purpose of the review however, is not that Andy Burnham has enforced a rapid change in the centralist thinking emanating from the ministry on LGR. Rather, it is as a result of the threats of legal challenges from several affected councils and for the review to enable the legal position to be clarified. So, the review may raise false hopes given the PM's most recent thoughts (at the time of writing) which we quote at length because they



illustrate the inconsistencies and lack of a substantive evidence base which has characterised so much of the output from government ministers (pre and post Starmer) and indeed MHCLG (with 50 years of misguided thinking on LGR behind them).

'I have signalled my support for a major shake-up of local government. Reform is necessary to get more powers to local areas. It's obviously a change about improving the effectiveness of local councils and consolidating their resources. We have to get the building blocks in place across the country to use No 10 North to devolve more powers out of Westminster and Whitehall into a structure of local government which is the same across the land'

(BBC:11/8/2026)

Given all that has been said before, this is a worryingly quick conversion to a centralist view which seems to contradict much of his musings in 'Head North'. But, in the same interview above the PM said he was willing to look at local government reorganisation — a claim repeated by the secretary of state when announcing the pause and review.

In 'looking' again at reorganisation the PM and secretary of state might like to consider in the pause and review where all the strategic authorities are to be found about which they are both so enthusiastic. Yes, there are plenty of strategic authorities in existence: Greater Manchester, the other former MCCs, and Greater London and many others already established, or proposed in areas elsewhere, which can justifiably be characterised as 'strategic'. But look further afield, and they are conspicuous by their absence, East Surrey and West Surrey? Hertfordshire? Large areas of Devon, Kent, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk and many others? If you can locate a viable city-region, you can logically call it a strategic authority. If you can't, a strategic authority loses all meaning. If everything counts as 'strategic', the



term becomes tautological. Back to the drawing board on that one!

The pause and review may be able to account for why the PM's justification for continuing with LGR - pre-7th September announcement — as it is strikingly different to the content of 'Head North' - often passionate and well-argued — unlike his Ilkeston statement - flat in tone, vague and totally unconvincing in content. *'Getting more powers to local areas'* - the epitome of vagueness. *'Improving the effectiveness of local councils'* — hasn't he seen the evidence on how large unitary authorities have no track record of, or evidence base for doing so? And the last references to *'building blocks'*, *'devolution'* (of what, and to whom) and *'a structure of local government which is the same across the land'* (In heaven's name: Why!) are all full of meaningless generalities, reminiscent of the clichés wheeled out by ministers new to the job, and almost certainly heavily influenced by MHCLG.

Our assumption has been that the PM is serious about rewiring the complex interconnections between central and local government; hence the earlier reference to the 2034 completion date. If that is the case and we are now in the LGR pause and review stage, there is time to look at overseas experiences and systems. Changes focused on the Basic Law (see below) and the written constitution proposals are medium to long-term concerns, as the 2034 date acknowledges. The way LGR fits into these matters is another medium-to long-term concern, not a quick fix to be hurriedly concluded by the 2029 election. We wonder what has happened to the *'long-term planning not short-term thinking'* of the Burnham agenda? Maybe, the pause and review of LGR is a recognition that urgency and haste is misplaced; a thorough consideration of how local government fits in the rewired state, and a reversal of the Widdicombe doctrine (see below), need time, thought and evidence.

Assuming that pause and review of LGR is a serious reconsideration and open to (evidence-based) influence on LGR, here are some of the issues the PM might want to bear in mind.

* the extent to which completing LGR by 2029, would hinder progress on the substantive service issues of social housing, homelessness, social care



and primary and secondary education and many others? In existing city regions, there would be scope for taking forward this agenda in (relatively) uncomplicated circumstances. But the 21 shire counties (one third of the current population of provincial England) are about to experience the uncertainty and disruption inevitable with LGR. Given the legal challenges which prompted the LGR pause and review, is this really a sensible use of government time?

*Understandably, given the PM's experience as elected mayor of the GMCA, his attentions are focused on the North West of England and the perceived benefits of spreading elected mayors, combined authorities and city-region based strategic authorities. But there remain a host of unresolved issues which would benefit from further attention before plunging headlong into 'finishing off' LGR. Following the Steve Reed LGR proposals, there remains much unfinished business, if you want a structure with reasonable coherence and consistency between and within existing authorities. What about the existence of vast tracts of provincial rural/small town England to the south of the Severn/Trent: the areas remote from the existing or potentially viable city-regions? Can it be claimed that earmarked West Surrey, Devon Coast and Countryside, South West Essex, North West Hampshire and all the rest of the gaps in the system are viable comparators to Greater Southampton, Norwich, and Ipswich etc? There is certainly no credible socio-economic or geographic basis for doing so.

With those shire counties potentially capable of being transformed into reasonably plausible city-regions, further anomalies emerge from Steve Reed's legacy. Lancashire, for example, is faced with four new proposed city-regions. The first of them, a de facto Greater Blackpool conjoined with Fylde and Wyre districts makes some sense. The remainder do not, on any kind of socio-economic or geographical basis. The city of Lancaster is to be amalgamated with Ribble Valley and Preston, a strange marriage (just look at the shape of the map). Lancaster (with Morecambe) constitutes a viable city-region of its own (population 147,000) over twenty miles north of Preston and with no discernible pattern of social or economic linkages with it.



Ribble Valley has much stronger local linkages with nearby Blackburn with Darwen than it does with Preston (again look at the map of the area). Preston itself developed in the 1960s and thereafter as part of Central Lancashire New Town with major housing and economic growth in Leyland and Chorley, less than ten miles to the south of Preston and linked to them via the M6 and M61. But these places will not now form part of Greater Preston, but will be separated from it, and put in with West Lancashire and other sundry settlements, the epitome of one of the many 'non places' with which provincial England will abound. You couldn't make it up: except that someone in the MHCLG apparently has. So, the PM has inherited a legacy of inconsistency and irrationality which needs to be resolved in the pause and review.

'Head North', is critical of the dominant role of the Treasury and how its economic assumptions often work in favour of further investment in the South East (particularly the Greater London area) to the detriment of the rest of England. The Barnett formula comes in for particular criticism. Proposals are put forward which would greatly loosen the grip of the economic orthodoxy of the Treasury and (as far as local government is concerned) its tight control of expenditure, capital and revenue.

Such a level of awareness is welcome, as is Andy Burnham's recognition of how the Treasury (and much of central government) has failed to recognise the constitutional significance of local government and treated it with disdain (Jones and Travers, 1996). The Treasury has erroneously concluded, that savings can be made by moving to a system of large unitary authorities and it is apparent that the Treasury played a key role in Rachel Reeves's October 2024 statement that the government intended to proceed with LGR, as it came to be embodied in the 2024 Devolution White Paper (see, Leach and Copus 2025).

While Andy Burnham has demonstrated a readiness to challenge Treasury orthodoxy, he has not extended this into a critique of the MHCLG orthodoxy. He has recognised the potential of city-regions in stimulating economic growth and has concentrated his efforts on extending that agenda; a policy area with which he is most familiar. It is also one in which MHCLG is comfortable and supportive. What MHCLG will certainly not



be doing is: proposing reorganisation options outside of its long-term commitment to large unitary authorities; altering its determination to reduce the number of councillors; or change its indifference to the significance of place and community in local government, all topics which the PM would do well to address with the same rigour he has demonstrated in challenging the assumptive world of the Treasury.





4. Rewiring: the lessons from overseas

Before exploring how rewiring may benefit from a study of overseas approaches to local government, it is necessary to remind ourselves of local government's constitutional standing — or rather the lack of it. To leap-frog much detailed constitutional debates, we simply present the Widdicombe committee doctrine (1986) as the last full, and currently unchallenged, statement of the position of local government:

"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)

Further:

"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"

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



Since its publication, that doctrine has not been challenged by any government promising devolution. The current government's seriousness about devolution can therefore be measured by whether rewiring creates an inversion of the Widdicombe doctrine.

Local Government in England, even before the formalisation of its constitutional non-status by Widdicombe, can see councils easily swept away to suit the centre's purposes. Mr Burnham might not yet have realised how different the structure of local government is in England compared with the situation throughout Europe and beyond: he would be well advised to check.

In checking he would see that before the 1972 Local Government Act, there were 1204 councils in England. It was a local government map which expressed the profound sense of community identity about which the PM seems sympathetic: Urban settlements with populations sometimes as low as 4,000 had elected councils characterising real places and communities. These were not dissimilar to France, and its communes, often with equally small populations but which has remained so since, unlike the system in England. Similar acknowledgement of the value of town-and city-based councils can be found in Germany, Italy, Spain and other European countries. Luxembourg, for example, has a population 672,000 with a two-tier system of 112 municipalities and cantons (averaging just over 5,000 populations). In the unitary authority proposed for West Surrey (population 657,000), there will one council. Although there have been a limited number of amalgamations in Europe since 1972, the existing structure has changed little.

Over a period of 50 years, the number of English councils has been reduced from 1204 to around 315 and the number of councillors has fallen sharply as a consequence. If Steve Reed's LGR recommendations were implemented, we would be faced with reductions of around 85% and 90% respectively (see Leach and Copus, 2025). One may well ask why has such a huge discrepancy developed? Could it be that England (and Scotland and Wales) are the only countries across the globe to have got local government structure right? We don't think that is a credible conclusion.



Similar disparities are apparent when one compares the average population size of local authorities in England with those in Europe and USA states: the smallest US state, Wyoming with a population of around 588,000 has 23 counties and 99 municipalities (alongside 643 independent special service and public school districts); its population is less than that of North Yorkshire (630,000) which has only one council! In Rhode Island (population around 1.1 million) there are 39 municipalities. In Surrey (population 1.25 million), assuming LGR does go ahead, there will be two.

Looking at Europe we present a few of the examples available:

Country	Population millions	Local Government
Spain	50	over 8,000 municipalities, 50 provinces, 17 autonomous regions
Italy	59	Approx. 8,000 municipalities, 110 provinces, 20 regions
France	70	35,000 communes, 101 departments, 18 regions
Belgium	12	565 municipalities, 10 provinces, 3 regions
Poland	38 million	2,500 municipalities, 380 counties, 16 regions

(All figures are approx. and taken from a range of sources. See also Leach and Copus 2023 for other examples).

Yet, in England with a population of around 59 million, there are a mere 315 councils: 21 counties, 164 districts and the rest unitary of one sort or another.

In none of these nations in the table (and so many others), will Andy Burnham, find *'a structure of local government which is the same across the land'* a system which he has advanced for England.



The PM's enthusiasm for the German Basic Law is expressed in 'Head North' (2024). But, in Germany, population 83 million, there are almost 11,000 municipalities, 400 counties and 16 Lander. Before a quick discussion of the Basic law we must remind ourselves that Germany is a Federal State, where the Basic Law, sets out (inter alia) the functions, powers and responsibilities of the various state institutions, and their relationships and provides the 16 lander (states) with considerable power. England is a nation within the unitary state of the UK and where the central state has chosen to devolve political and governing power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not England. Indeed, no federal system would leave one of its areas out of the state system to be governed directly by the federal government in the way that England has been excluded from nation-based devolution. Despite this asymmetrical devolution to the nations of the UK, the state remains unitary, that is power is vested in the centre with no constitutionally protected allocation of state functions to different levels of governing institutions.

So, what does a Federal system offer to the unitary state that is the UK, and in particular what does it offer to the governing of England. There is a clue in 'Head North':

'In the second half of the twentieth century, Germany began to prosper in an impressive and equitable manner. To ensure a perception of fairness, Germany decided to add a Basic Law to its written constitution, which stipulates that there must be 'equivalent living standards' between all of the German Lander. When you visit Germany, you can see and feel the success of the policy. In all German towns and cities, there is high-quality public transport, public realm and infrastructure not seen outside London and the South East'

(Burnham and Rotheram, 2024:166)



If the intention is to use Germany as a model for what the Burnham government wants to achieve, it is important he understands that what has been achieved in Germany, or was the intention of the Basic Law, has not required the introduction of a system of huge, anonymous, unitary authorities as envisaged in the current LGR. The prime minister would do well to remind himself how local government works in Germany and ensure the pause and review thinks again about the need for LGR.

The prime minister's interest in the 1949 Basic Law is clearly generated by some of its intentions around ensuring certain public services provided will be of comparable quality across Lander. Article 72 states: *'the establishment of equivalent living conditions throughout the federal territory or the maintenance of legal or economic unity renders federal regulation necessary in the national interest'*.

Interest in the German system is also stimulated by the financial provisions of the Basic Law, designed to bring together and add stability to an economically diverse nation and to achieve that through equalisation. We see again that the policy objectives of economic growth, the regularity of public service provision across the country and redistribution is the direct current for rewiring the state, changing the flow of economic activity in one direction — presumably, north.

So, the Basic Law is not to be explored for what it tells us about the separation of powers and the relationships between the institutions of the state at various governing levels, or developing a system with devolution as a foundational principle for governance, or how moves towards a more formal constitutional statement can be undertaken in a unitary state with no written constitution. It is to be used for the centre to achieve its own policy objectives.

Under the Basic Law, it is the Lander and not the Federal government which has control over the local government structure and restructuring. Are Westminster and Whitehall going to surrender the power to restructure and control local government, presumably to strategic authorities and mayors? But, if it did, what terror would that cause for local government, if an elected regional mayor could merge and abolish



councils? Overall, the interest in the Basic Law and the power and role of the German Lander simply underlines the government's focus on, and preference for, strategic authorities and mayors over local government.

But, why stop at Germany? European local government and local government globally offer many examples which Mr Burnham should consider where local government: provides or oversees a greater range of public services; operates with more financial certainty and fiscal freedoms; enjoys greater autonomy from the centre (or regional governments); has a far stronger political role in the governance of the nation; and, does all this while remaining close to the real places with which people have an affinity and loyalty unlike much of local government in England. We provide a starting point for this exploration in Leach and Copus, 2023, and 2025, and the other evidence is extensive and compelling (see, Dollery and Crase 2004, Dollery and Fleming 2006, Giacomini, et al, 2018, Erlingsson et al 2020, Gendzwill and Kjaer, 2021 Kalcheva, 2021, Swianiewicz, et al 2022 and many more).

At very least, the government should show its commitment to devolution by launching an independent commission or inquiry, with wide ranging terms of reference, to explore how local government operates overseas and use that evidence to inform its devolution policy, rather than carrying on regardless with LGR. Now that would be a pause and review.



5. Conclusion

We have a prime minister who has, in the past, signalled his belief in devolution and local government. Unfortunately, the commitment to the latter does not appear to have been sustained. Contradictions in the PM's current thinking to those expressed in 'Head North' are now emerging, but perhaps the LGR pause and review will resolve those contradictions.

The focus for rewiring and devolution is not local government, other than what it can contribute to strategic authorities and elected mayors. Rewiring, we conclude, does not mean drawing lessons from systems overseas for what they can tell us about strong, effective, smaller, more autonomous and fiscally free local government. It does not mean local government remains local — rooted in places which people have an affinity and loyalty and, it does not mean freeing local government from central control, simply replacing some of that with mayoral control.

Rewiring and devolution are motivated by a central policy aimed at stimulating economic growth and development, and for that growth to be distributed equally across England. Devolution is not the product of a road to Damascus conversion of the centre to a new way of governing England, where the centre relinquishes control and passes that to local government and even strategic authorities. Rewiring and devolution are a smoke-screen for continuing with a long-standing policy of reducing the number of councils and councillors across England and hollowing out local democracy. Those in local government who are currently enthusiastically welcoming devolution, LGR and rewiring may end up with a bit of a shock.



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