



DISTRICT COUNCILS' NETWORK

Innovative and collaborative  
solutions for people and places

**Dateline: 3 November 2016**

**DCN high level response to: “CCN response to independent studies  
on structural reform”**

The DCN welcomes the thoughts provoked by this interesting analysis. In particular, the DCN welcomes the paper for the questions it opens up about the best way to deliver public services of the future in district and county areas.

Alongside the CCN and other partners in the local government family, the DCN is committed to driving, from the bottom-up, local solutions capable of delivering the best economic and social outcomes for the 22 million people we jointly serve.

The DCN is clear that the structure and governance of local government should be determined by what works best for local areas. The redesign of public services is best determined by localities themselves; one size does not fit all.

However, the DCN questions if the analysis truly identifies the right solutions for our local areas in favour of administrative convenience – instead placing structures above services in importance and ignoring the needs of localities and the way in which modern economies operate. The response presents an overly simplistic approach that treats all counties, the largest and smallest, on the same basis, regardless of the economic geography. Rather than a simplistic approach to boundaries, we would have looked for a more in depth objective analysis of clustering within, or even across county boundaries, to further reflect economic geography and natural communities.

The analysis shies away from detailed consideration of many alternative proposals for place-based public service reform, in favour of focusing on historic county boundaries, many of which predate the Domesday Book. In the post-Brexit world, localities need a more thoughtful approach, rooted in evidence-based governance areas that map onto Functional Economic Areas (including Travel to Work Areas and Strategic Housing Markets), working at a scale and geography that responds to how residents and businesses live their lives in today's modern world.

From a recent membership survey, many districts have an appetite for reform and we note this study is limited to only few models of the many that could be enacted. Adopting a one-size-fits-all 'county unitary' approach will not deliver better outcomes for our people and places - all counties are not equally sized and therefore the DCN advocates a range of models be developed that reflect local need and circumstances, based on population and area size.

It is also important that any transformation is rooted in the principles of devolution and subsidiarity with the right services delivered at the right level. The need to create an

industrial strategy that rebalances the national economy demands bold action to seize the new opportunities of devolution.

The CCN summary rules out any exploration of alternative geographies and structures to minimise service disruption for areas such as social care. This is a worthy consideration, but ultimately one which would not address the long-term demographic pressures and rising demand for services in district and county areas. Instead, any public sector transformation needs to deliver better outcomes for people and places and must, therefore, look to how we can work differently, for example placing a greater focus on prevention services.

Resolving the housing crisis is among the biggest domestic challenges of today, and again the paper makes no allowance for the fact that in this role, districts nationally lead the way as strategic planning and housing authorities – let alone the reality that unlike counties, district councils provide universal services that benefit the day-to-day lives of every resident in our areas.

Democratic accountability rooted in localities and communities plays a vital role in modern democracy. It is important that any transformation in local government supports the local democratic leadership role in vital service areas and does not impact negatively on representational democracy.

The DCN also endorses consensual approaches to local government transformation. The CCN report proposes ‘to require the consent of the county council to progress any reorganisation proposals’. The DCN does not support this and instead advocates that it should be for localities to collectively determine what model will work best for their area through local decision making processes.

As a network, the DCN is clear that when it comes to devolution it should be for local areas to determine what works best for their locality and many of our members have demonstrated an appetite for the transformation of local services where there is local need and consensus.

Moving ahead, the DCN would like to work with the CCN and other members of the local government family to establish an independent review of the alternative models for public service reform to drive economic growth and transform public service delivery in county and district areas. This will require an intelligent and evidence-based analysis which is reflective of the way localities operate in the modern economy.

**More information:**

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The District Councils’ Network is a cross-party member led network of all 201 district councils. We are a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association (LGA), and provide a single voice for district councils within the LGA. We lobby central government, the political parties and other stakeholders directly on behalf of our members, as well as commissioning research, providing support, and sharing best practice.

District councils in England deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services to nearly 22 million people - 40% of the population - and cover 68% of the country.