

Consultation for reforming local government in Cumbria and Lancaster, North Yorkshire, and Somerset

The evidenced case for retaining 'local' government

19 April 2021

The proposals for reforming local government represent a critical issue for the local leadership and delivery of services across the towns and cities in which residents live, work and play. It is especially critical now as councils work with partners locally to plot the economic and health recovery from the greatest crisis since World War II.

This short submission sets the consultations in the wider context of what we know are the risks of creating huge units of local government as proposed by the county councils in each of the three areas.

It summarises some of the key conclusions of over 300 genuinely independent rigorous evidenced studies from around the world, which ultimately conclude that larger councils like those proposed by the counties:

1. Do not guarantee more efficient or effective services
2. Do lead to falling public trust, engagement, and sense of belonging

Residents inherently understand this and, when asked, consistently vote against creating larger more remote local government.

We have been disappointed by the extent that this consultation process is open in engaging with residents on the reforms, and the Chair of the DCN's Chief Executive Group has written to outline these concerns, with no reply.

Further information is available through the report [Bigger is not better: the evidenced case for keeping 'local' government](#).

About the DCN

DCN is a cross-party member led network providing a single voice to 180 district councils. District councils in England deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services to over 22 million people – 40% of the population – and cover 68% of the country by area.

Key messages

Large county unitary authorities will disconnect local government from local communities:

- A move to county-based unitary councils would draw local government away from the governance of recognisable communities and sizeable towns and increase the drift of governmental responsibilities to meaningless conglomerates. 'Local' government, as we have always understood it, would cease to exist.
- Local authorities have a crucial place-shaping role, responding to the range of economic, social and environmental needs and opportunities in their areas, and leading a positive vision for their residents and businesses. In discussions about structural options, this role has typically and ill-advisedly been neglected or downplayed by county proposals.

- A move to county-based unitary councils would further reduce councillor numbers and increase councillor representative ratios to levels totally out-of-line with comparable Western democracies.
- The move to large county unitary authorities in the shires would weaken the political party infrastructure, which helps to support a healthy and viable local democracy.
- Claims that local accountability could be introduced in county unitary authorities by means of strengthening of town and parish councils are difficult to justify and their introduction would constitute a de facto two-tier system to replace the one which the unitary authorities replaced.
- County-based unitary proposals fail to provide an appropriate basis for economic regeneration, as in most cases they do not correspond to functional economic areas – some would be as large as Northern Ireland.

Bigger local government does not mean cheaper or better local services:

- More than 300 pieces of independent academic research over 50 years have found no consistent or conclusive results showing that increases in council size are a guarantee of improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, performance or cost reduction. Councils of all sizes can be efficient, effective, perform well and reduce costs or be inefficient, ineffective, perform badly and fail to reduce costs.
- One leading University of Oxford academic wrote 'economies of scale appear to represent a "phantom" promise of reform, beloved of those looking for a quick fix'.
- It is difficult to ignore this reality, even work commissioned by the County Councils Network to make the case *for* county unitary councils states that 'in most cases, information for estimated savings delivered solely through reorganisation is not readily available as it is too difficult to accurately separate this figure from general efficiency savings'.
- International evidence is clear that factors such as local government leadership (political and managerial), powers, autonomy and financing regimes all have a greater impact on efficiency, effectiveness, performance, and cost reduction than council size.

Further information

For further information, please see:

- [Bigger is not Better](#) challenges poor arguments for reform into County Unitary
- [Power in Place](#) sets out how devolution can empower Districts to deliver the recovery
- [Size Doesn't Matter](#) provides a pragmatic route forward for devolution in all areas
- [Transformation in Localities](#) explores how to innovate to genuinely improve services.

For more information about DCN, please contact dcn@local.gov.uk.