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BRIEFING PAPER

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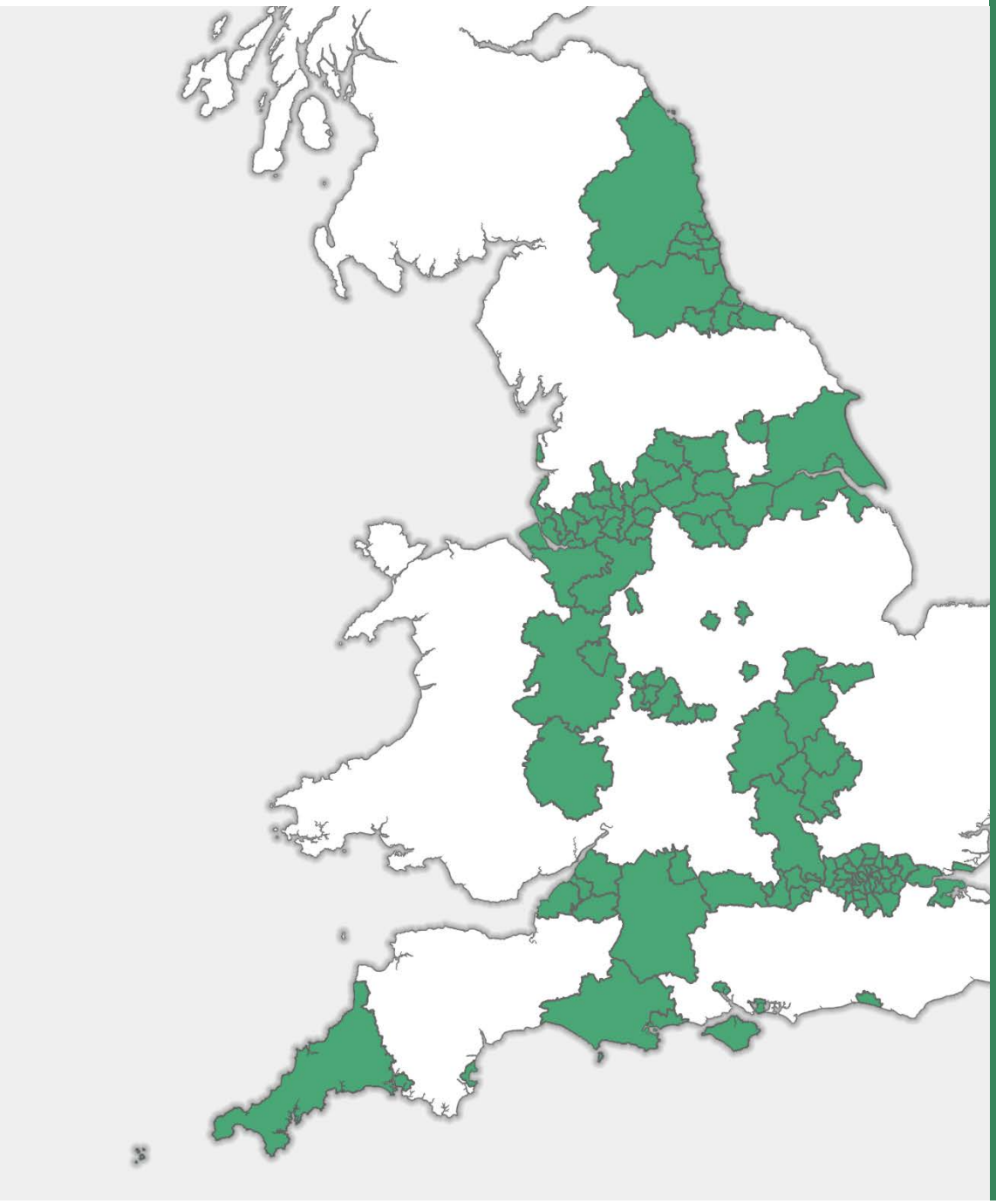
Unitary local government

By Mark Sandford



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Summary

This briefing paper provides a guide to the concept of 'unitary local government', in the context of debates over local government restructuring in England in 2019 and 2020.

Section 1 sets out the legal procedure through which unitary authorities are created and provides a brief history of political debates and the creation of unitary authorities since 1974. Section 2 assesses Government policy on the topic of restructuring and unitary authorities since 2010. Section 3 provides details of previous rounds of restructuring in England.

Section 4 sets out details of reports modelling the potential savings that could be achieved by such changes, plus the figures that are available from previous restructuring processes in England. Section 5 provides details of proposals for new unitary authorities in England that have emerged during 2019 and 2020, together with related commentary.

Section 6 notes a number of the rationales for restructuring, and for merger of smaller authorities into larger units, that have occurred in recent debates in England. A small amount of debate has also taken place on how to achieve the benefits associated with restructuring through alternative means: this is set out in section 7. Section 8 provides details of international academic research on the topic of local government mergers and reforms.

As Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have entirely single-tier systems of local government, this paper covers England only.

1. What is unitary local government?

1.1 Introduction

In 1974, local government in Great Britain was reformed to introduce two different levels or 'tiers' of councils in all areas. All areas in England and Wales had both a county council (e.g. Leicestershire, Somerset) and a district council (e.g. Hastings, North Norfolk). Most areas in Scotland had both a regional council and a district council, alongside three all-purpose island authorities (Orkney, Shetland, and Western Isles). Northern Ireland had 26 district councils, which had fewer responsibilities than local authorities in Great Britain.

In England and Wales, county councils ran public services such as education, libraries, roads and social care, whilst district councils were responsible for matters such as waste, environment and housing.[1] This division of responsibilities applied across most of England and Wales. The exceptions were the English metropolitan counties, where the county councils managed police, fire, transport, planning and other strategic functions, and the metropolitan districts ran most services.

Since 1974, a number of areas of England have seen this standard system of 'two-tier' local government replaced by a single tier of local government.[2] Scotland and Wales adopted a single-tier pattern of local government in 1996. Where it exists, this single tier carries out all the functions of county and district councils. This pattern of government is commonly referred to as 'unitary local government'.

The 2010s have seen many calls for the creation of more unitary authorities, or for the establishment of a uniform pattern of unitary government across all of England. These calls have been associated with various other policy issues, such as local government finance, Covid-19, and devolution deals. They have generated some controversy and disputes in local areas, some of which are explored in section 5.

1.2 Terminology

In England, there are a number of different types of council that carry out all the functions of a county and district council and which, therefore, constitute unitary authorities in practice. In total there are 126 single-tier authorities in England, covering some 34.8 million (62%) of the population. This figure includes:

- The 32 London boroughs. These were established by the *London Government Act 1963*, and are a distinct type of authority in legal terms;

1 For a fuller list of the division of powers between county and district councils, see the Appendix of the Library briefing paper *Local government in England: structures*.
2 See Appendix 1 for a list of single-tier authorities created since 1974

- 36 metropolitan districts. These are the councils in the areas of the former metropolitan counties.[3] When the metropolitan counties were abolished in 1986 (see the Library briefing *Local government in England: structures*), these districts assumed most of their functions, with some passing to joint boards;
- 56 unitary authorities. These have been created in three distinct periods: 1995-98; 2007-09; and 2019-present. These are listed in Appendix 1;
- The City of London and Isles of Scilly, both unique authorities that have always been responsible for all county and district functions in their areas.

Parish and town councils form a further tier of local authority beneath unitary authorities or counties and districts. This briefing paper does not cover them. Further information can be found in the Library briefing paper *Parish and town councils: recent issues*.

Combined authorities have been created in a number of areas in England, including in almost all of the metropolitan county areas (see the Library briefing paper *Devolution to local government in England*). These constitute an additional tier of government in those areas.

In strict legal terms there is no such thing as a 'unitary authority'. Where a restructure occurs, a district council will be made the county council for its area, or vice versa. Alternatively, where a new geographical unit is created, it is a district council exercising the powers of a county council, or vice versa.

1.3 Restructuring: the legal process

The process of changing from a two-tier to a unitary local government system is normally referred to as 'restructuring' or 'reorganisation'. The legal procedure can be found in sections 1-7 of the *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007*.

The Secretary of State may invite a proposal from a local authority to make a proposal for a county or district area, or a group of districts, to be restructured into a unitary authority or authorities. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) can be, but need not be, asked for advice on any matter related to the proposal. Once a proposal is received, the Secretary of State may then consider it and announce his/her intention to make an Order implementing the proposal, or s/he may reject the proposal. Any Order must then be approved by both Houses of Parliament.

When a new unitary authority is created, the Government may decide to postpone elections to its predecessor authorities. This may be done, for instance, when scheduled elections are due to take place a year before the new unitary authority is due to come into existence. Proceeding with elections in that scenario would mean those councillors serving only a single-year term. Where elections are postponed, the

[3] Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, West Midlands, Tyne & Wear.

terms of the sitting councillors can be extended through to the date of the first elections to the new authority.

There are no examples in the UK of a unitary local government structure being (re-)converted into a two-tier system.[4] Any such change would rely on the use of sections 8-10 of the *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007*. Sections 8-10 can also be used to merge two district councils into one.

Referendums and consent

There is no requirement in law for the local authorities affected by a reorganisation proposal to consent to the procedure.[5] Similarly, there is no requirement for public consent to such a change via a referendum or petition. Local authorities have the power to hold referendums on this matter (or any other), and this has been done during previous restructuring processes (see section 3.2 below): but the outcome of any such referendum is not binding.

4 In 2018 the leader of Torbay unitary authority briefly raised the possibility of it becoming a district within Devon, as it was until 1996, but no further action has been taken. See Jimmy Nichols, "Unitary moots reverting to district status amid financial struggle", Local Government Chronicle, 27 Jun 2018

5 Section 15 of the *Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016* provided the Government with wide powers to vary or disapply sections 1-7 of the 2007 Act. This was done principally to allow fast-track restructuring to accompany a 'devolution deal'. The powers could be exercised without the consent of the relevant local authorities: however, a sunset clause in section 15 (8) of the Act means that consent from all relevant local authorities for disapplying those sections of the Act is required as of 31 March 2019.

2. Restructuring: Government policy

2.1 Support for restructuring

Since 2010, the Conservative-led governments have become progressively more supportive of restructuring. The 2010-15 Coalition government ruled it out: Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government from 2010 to 2015, famously said that he kept a pearl-handled revolver in his desk for anyone who mentioned restructuring.[6]

Lord Heseltine's 2012 report *No Stone Unturned* proposed a fully unitary system of local government for England. The Government rejected this recommendation, stating that it would prefer "authorities not to be distracted by structural change".[7]

Since Mr Pickles's departure from the Government in 2015, the Government's stance has changed. The then Secretary of State, James Brokenshire MP, said in an interview with the *Local Government Chronicle* in May 2018:

> There is a clear space and scope for unitary authorities. Obviously it is seeing where there is a need for that and yes, there are proposals on the table that my predecessor had been considering and I will now be looking at.
>
> It's [looking at] how we are best able to deliver quality, sustainable services for local government and the best model for doing that….where devolution and unitary authorities can seek to make a difference then I do want to advance that agenda.[8]

In 2018, Rishi Sunak, then Minister for local government, indicated in Parliament the Government's thinking on the need for 'local support' for unitarization:

> …the Government have already considered that there have been a range of ways to demonstrate that good deal of local support. Other areas have engaged electoral and polling agencies to conduct representative polling, county and district council members—who represent people in different areas—have voted and extensive engagement exercises and consultation processes have happened… We would like to see a good deal of local support, which we assess in the round across the whole area—from business, the voluntary sector, public bodies and local communities. We do not mean unanimous agreement from all councillors, stakeholders, councils and residents. However, we expect as much consensus from councils as possible.[9]

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6 HCDeb 21 Oct 2010 c1155: see also HCDeb 12 Nov 2012 c8

7 DCLG, Government response to the Heseltine Report, Cm 8587, 2013, p.54; HCDeb 12 Nov 2012 cc7-8

8 David Paine, "James Brokenshire: 'Clear space and scope' for more unitaries", *Local Government Chronicle*, 2 May 2018

9 HCDeb 22 May 2018 c337WH

By 2020, the Government's stance was more clearly supportive of unitary restructuring. An answer to a Parliamentary Question in April 2020 stated:

> In a two-tier area, effective joint working between county and district councils is essential, especially at this time of national emergency.
>
> However, the Government recognises that unitary councils can facilitate more integrated decision-making, better service delivery, greater local accountability and empowered local communities.[10]

An answer to a Parliamentary Question in June 2020 hinted at more concrete Government intentions on restructuring:

> **Simon Hoare**: To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what the maximum population size is in which a single unitary authority should operate.
>
> **Simon Clarke**: …. These plans will include restructuring our local institutions to deliver these outcomes, establishing more mayors and more unitary councils the populations of which will depend on local circumstances but as a rule of thumb are expected to be substantially in excess of 300k-400k.[11]

In October 2020, Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, issued formal invitations to councils in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset to submit proposals for unitary restructuring.[12] The invitation required an outline proposal by 9 November, and a final proposal by 9 December 2020. The proposal requires proposed new unitary authorities to be in the population range of 300,000 to 600,000 "or such other figure that… could be considered substantial".

The invitation to North Yorkshire was also extended to York City Council, and the invitation to Somerset was also extended to North Somerset and Bath & North East Somerset councils. These three councils are already unitary authorities. This suggests that the Government is open to proposals that include changes to those councils' areas. The Government has also signalled its openness to postponing any elections scheduled for May 2021 in the relevant areas.[13]

A Written Statement on 12 October 2020 outlined the Government's position on restructuring:

> Locally-led changes to the structure of local government, whether in the form of unitarisation or district mergers, can be an appropriate means of improving local service delivery, saving taxpayers' money and improving local accountability. However, restructuring is only one of the different ways that councils can streamline and make savings. Joint working with other councils and partners can take a variety of forms ranging from adopting joint plans, setting up joint committees, sharing back office

10 PQ 901983 2019-21, 28 Apr 2020
11 PQ HC61744 2017-19, 29 Jun 2020
12 MHCLG, Invitations to submit proposals for unitary local government in Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset, 9 October 2020; see also HCWS 502 2019-21, 12 October 2020
13 HCWS 502 2019-21, 12 October 2020

> services or special purpose vehicles to promote regeneration. Such joint working may extend across county boundaries. Indeed, councils' general power of competence under the Localism Act 2011 makes it easier for councils to get on with sharing services.
>
> The Government will not impose top-down restructuring of local government and will continue to follow a locally-led approach for unitarisation where councils can develop proposals which have strong local support. This has been the Government's consistent approach since 2010, when top-down restructuring was stopped through the Local Government Act 2010.[14]

2.2 Restructuring criteria

In the later 2010s, much of the debate around restructuring in England has focused on the optimum population of any new local authority. The tenor of the debate has favoured economies of scale: merging multiple smaller authorities together to form a larger one.[15]

The then Secretary of State, James Brokenshire, made a written statement on 22 July 2019 which set out the criteria used by the Government to assess requests for restructuring:

> I confirm that I will assess any locally-led unitary proposal that I receive against the criteria for unitarisation which we announced to Parliament in 2017 and which I and my predecessor have consistently used since then. These criteria state that subject to Parliamentary approval a proposal can be implemented, with or without modification, if I conclude that across the area as a whole the proposal is likely to:
>
> 1. improve the area's local government;
> 2. command a good deal of local support across the area; and
> 3. cover an area that provides a credible geography for the proposed new structures, including that any new unitary council's population would be expected to be in excess of 300,000.[16]

These criteria repeat criteria set out on 7 November 2017 by the then Secretary of State, Sajid Javid.[17] They are also in line with guidance provided to councils in Northamptonshire following the publication of the Caller report in February 2018.[18]

It is unclear whether the Government considers there to exist a maximum population size for unitary authorities. The October 2020 invitations (see section 4.1) refer to a maximum population of 600,000 but also allow for an alternative where evidence is made available. A

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14 HCWS 502 2019-21, 12 October 2020

15 Efficiency and economies of scale concerns also underlay three district council mergers in 2019: West Somerset and Taunton Deane; Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury; Waveney and Suffolk Coastal. See the Library briefing paper *Local government in England: structures* for more details.

16 HCWS 1790 2017-19, 22 July 2019

17 HCWS 232 2017-19, 7 Nov 2019

18 MHCLG, *Invitation to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government in Northamptonshire*, 27 Mar 2018. For more information on the events leading up to reorganisation in Northamptonshire, see the Library briefing *Local authority financial resilience*.

Parliamentary Question in September 2020 was circumspect on this point.[19]

In a publication in 2018, associated with the restructuring in Northamptonshire, MHCLG said that its views on population size were informed principally by a report from the consultancy Shared Intelligence in 2016, and a 2006 report from the University of Cardiff entitled *Population size and local authority performance* (see section 8.2 for more details of the latter report).[20]

2.3 Devolution in England

The impetus towards unitary restructuring in the 2010s has been associated with the Government's policy of English devolution (see the Library briefing paper *Devolution to local government in England* for further details).

Devolution to local government in England does not require local government restructuring. Most 'devolution deals' to date have been agreed with areas that have wholly unitary local government. However, debates over local 'bids' for devolution and for restructuring have frequently overlapped. Many local areas seeking devolution deals in 2015-16 also commissioned consultants to investigate the potential for savings from restructuring.

In a speech on 7 July 2020, Simon Clarke, the Minister for Local Government, stated that unitary restructuring would be a precondition for any new devolution deals agreed by the Government.[21] The text of this speech was subsequently withdrawn from the MHCLG website, so its status is uncertain.[22] Mr Clarke said:

> The White Paper will also redefine the way in which local government serves its communities by establishing the unitarisation of councils as a vital first step for negotiating these mayoral devolution deals in the future.
>
> A move to unitarisation will streamline the delivery of good governance…
>
> Place local government on a more sustainable financial and population footing…
>
> Inject more accountability into our democratic structures…
>
> And save money that can be re-invested in those communities.
>
> I say this very conscious of the immense contribution of all tiers of local government during this crisis.
>
> Unitarising at the right scale can preserve the best of district councils' strong relationship with local communities…with the more strategic geography of the county councils.

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19 PQ 93690 2019-21, 25 Sep 2020

20 MHCLG, *The proposed reorganisation of local government in Northamptonshire*, 2018, p10

21 For further information on devolution deals, see the Library briefing paper *Devolution to local government in England*.

22 Nick Golding, "Read the Simon Clarke devo speech the ministry doesn't want you to see", Local Government Chronicle, 17 Jul 2020

The devolution and recovery White Paper was anticipated in autumn 2020, but sector media reports have subsequently suggested that it has been delayed to 2021, possibly due to Government concerns over the impacts of local government restructuring.[23]

[23] Jessica Hill, "Current and former Tory party chairs blamed for devolution turmoil", *Local Government Chronicle*, 7 Oct 2020

3. History of unitary restructuring in England

3.1 The Local Government Review: 1992-95

In 1992 the then Secretary of State, Michael Heseltine, established a Local Government Commission to review all local authorities in Great Britain. The intention was to establish whether 'structural change' – i.e. a move to a unitary structure – was desirable. Government guidance stated that the Commission "should recommend a structure which, in its view, best combined cost effectiveness with a reflection of community identities and interests".[24]

The legislation required any structural change proposed to have regard to the need:

> (a) to reflect the identities and interests of local communities; and
>
> (b) to secure effective and convenient local government.[25]

The Local Government Commission's initial recommendations supported unitary status in most areas. Updated guidance issued in 1993 stated that "the Government expects that [the continuation of the two-tier structure] to be the exception, and that the result will be a substantial increase in the number of unitary authorities in both urban and rural areas".[26]

This provision was challenged by Lancashire County Council via judicial review during 1994. The High Court ruled that this direction was unlawful, and the guidance was reissued with those words removed. The number of proposed unitary authorities was scaled back in the Commission's final recommendations. In the end, 46 new unitary authorities were created via this review (see Appendix 1).

3.2 The 2007-09 review

In 2006 the Labour Government published a White Paper entitled *Strong and prosperous communities*. This proposed permitting unitary restructuring in response to local demand. The proposals were implemented by the *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007*. This Act introduced an application-based process for unitary status. Criteria for proposals for new unitary authorities were published in a document entitled *Invitation to councils in England to make proposals for new unitary structures.* This document stated:

> i) the change to the future unitary local government structures must be:

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24 Department of the Environment, *Policy Guidance to the Local Government Commission for England*, 1993, p3

25 *Local Government Act 1992*, section 13 (5)

26 Department of the Environment, *Policy Guidance to the Local Government Commission for England*, 1993, p2

- affordable, i.e. that the change itself both represents value for money and can be met from councils' existing resource envelope; and
- supported by a broad cross section of partners and stakeholders; and

ii) those future unitary local government structures must:

- provide strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership;
- deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment;

and

- deliver value for money and equity on public services.[27]

Twenty-six proposals were submitted to the Government, of which sixteen were accepted for consultation. Nine new unitary authorities were launched in April 2009 (see Appendix 1 for details).

Following a further review by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, three further unitary councils were to be created, in Norwich, Ipswich and Exeter. This process was halted by the Coalition Government following the May 2010 General Election via the *Local Government Act 2010*.[28]

This review saw two judicial reviews of decisions to abolish district authorities, both of which were unsuccessful. Local referendums were also held in three of the affected county areas:

- **23 Jan 2007**: referendum in three districts of Shropshire on proposals for a unitary Shropshire council:
  - **Shrewsbury**: 70% vote against unitary Shropshire
  - **Bridgnorth**: 86% voted against unitary Shropshire (turnout: 46.5%)
  - **South Shropshire**: 57% against unitary Shropshire (turnout: 42%)[29]
- **11 June 2007**: referendum commissioned by all seven district councils in the Durham County Council area. 76% voted in favour of the status quo, on a turnout of some 40%.[30]
- **19 June 2007**: referendums commissioned by all five district councils in Somerset on a unitary authority for Somerset:[31]

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27 DCLG, *Invitation to councils in England to make proposals for new unitary structures*, 2006, p9

28 More information on the review process with regard to Exeter, Norwich and Ipswich is available in the Library research paper on the Local Government Bill 2010-12.

29 HCDeb 22 Jan 2007 c1238

30 Michael Chisholm and Steve Leach, *Botched business: the damaging process of reorganising local government 2006-08,* 2008, p101

31 BBC, "County votes against one council", 19 June 2007. Detailed figures supplied by personal communication to the author.

Table 1: Somerset referendum results

Council	Yes	%	No	%	Turnout
Mendip	7,853	20.2	31,073	79.8	47.7%
Sedgemoor	6,840	15.8	36,412	84.2	50.3%
South Somerset	9,955	17.3	47,628	82.7	46.2%
Taunton Deane	7,155	18.4	31,708	81.6	47.7%
West Somerset	3,048	20.3	11,933	79.7	53.9%

3.3 Reviews in the late 2010s

Three county areas have moved to unitary status between 2019 and 2021. Two originated with a local request, and the other resulted from serious financial failures. These changes have been *ad hoc* rather than part of a wider, sustained impetus towards unitary local authorities.

Dorset

In late 2016, councils in Dorset submitted proposals for the creation of two unitary authorities: one for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, and one for the remainder of Dorset. The Secretary of State stated that he intended to implement the proposals in a Written Statement on 26 February 2018,[32] and an Order implementing them was made on 25 May 2018.[33] The first elections to the new authorities took place in May 2019.

Having initially assented to the merger, Christchurch Borough Council later opposed it. It held an advisory referendum on the proposals in December 2017. 84% of votes opposed the change, on a turnout of 53%.[34] Christchurch also pursued an unsuccessful judicial review of the merger decision.[35]

Buckinghamshire

Buckinghamshire County Council made a proposal for a unitary county in late 2016. Separately, the four district councils in the area proposed two unitary councils, one for the area of Aylesbury Vale District Council and another covering the area of the other three district councils (Wycombe, South Buckinghamshire and Chiltern).

The Secretary of State made a Written Statement on 1 November 2018 stating that a unitary county structure would be implemented.[36] An Order was made on 22 May 2019.[37]

A report from the *Local Government Chronicle* stated that Buckinghamshire CC commissioned a telephone poll of Buckinghamshire residents from Opinion Research Services. 67% of

32 HCWS 486 2017-19, 26 February 2018
33 See the *Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole (Structural Changes) Order 2018* (SI 2018/648)
34 HLDeb 23 May 2018 c1042
35 See *R (Christchurch) v MHCLG*, EWHC 2126 (2018)
36 House of Commons HCWS1058 2017-19, 1 November 2018
37 See the *Buckinghamshire (Structural Changes) Order 2019* (SI 2019/957)

respondents supported a two-unitary pattern of local government rather than a unitary county council.[38]

Northamptonshire

Following a well-publicised period of financial difficulties during 2018, Max Caller, a former local authority chief executive, produced a critical Best Value report on Northamptonshire County Council in February 2018. Amongst other points, this report recommended restructuring of the county area into two unitary councils.

The Secretary of State wrote to the chief executives of all the local authorities in Northamptonshire on 27 March 2018, inviting a proposal for a move to a unitary structure under section 2 of the 2007 Act. The invitation ruled out a proposal for a unitary county.

In August 2018, the authorities submitted a proposal for two unitary authorities, West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire. The Secretary of State made an order implementing the changes on 13 February 2020.[39] The first elections to these authorities were to have been held in May 2020, but have been delayed to 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

[38] Jon Bunn, "Bucks districts seize on survey results which casts doubt over county unitary", *Local Government Chronicle*, 20 April 2018

[39] See the *Northamptonshire (Structural Changes) Order 2020* (SI 2020/156)

4. Previous restructures: evaluation

4.1 Financial savings

Some high-level figures have been published indicating the savings resulting from previous restructuring processes in England. It is difficult to isolate the financial effects of the restructuring from the effects of other changes and savings taking place at the same time. Additionally, no formal evaluations are available of the financial impacts of restructuring of specific authorities.

EY modelled the financial impacts of unitary restructuring across England in a report published in 2016. This included some details from the five county areas that became unitary authorities in 2008-09. It stated that each of the five new councils had saved £20-28 million per year after restructuring (see Table 2 below).[40]

Table 2: Estimated savings by county unitaries created in 2009

Unitary	Projected saving	Estimated savings achieved
Cornwall	£17m	£25m
Wiltshire	£18m	£25m
Northumberland	£17m	£28m
Durham	£22m	£22m
Shropshire	£20m	£20m
Total	£94m	£120m

A response to a Parliamentary Question from 2010 suggested that, across all authorities where restructuring took place in 2008-09, the total budget saving for the 2009-10 financial year was estimated at £159.1 million.[41] This figure is likely to have been arrived at by comparing the total net expenditure of the new authorities in 2009-10 with that of their predecessors in 2008-09.

Deloitte produced some research into cost savings from the local government restructuring of 2009. This found that service area expenditure in those areas (in selected services) reduced by 13.4% between 2008/09 and 2009/10. For authorities which had not taken part in a merger, expenditure increased by 2.1% over the same period.[42]

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40 Ernst & Young, *Independent Analysis of Governance Scenarios and Public Service Reform in County Areas*, 2016, p62. A document published by Leicestershire County Council in 2014 published the same figures for three counties, but gave figures of £14 million for Wiltshire and £38 million for Durham. The reason for this discrepancy is unclear.

41 HCDeb 9 Feb 2010:c882W

42 Deloitte, *Sizing Up*, 2013, p

The 2012 Heseltine Review, *No Stone Unturned*, quotes a number of figures from Wiltshire Council regarding the costs and savings of the creation of a unitary authority:

> The transitional costs of creating the unitary Wiltshire Council were £18 million. This compares to a saving of a total £68 million between 2009 and 2013. Back office costs now only comprise 9% of Wiltshire Council's budget as opposed to 19% for its predecessor bodies. The new authority has achieved procurement savings of £36 million through increased buying power and stronger market position. Wiltshire Council has found that customers find accessing its services considerably easier with much less confusion about who is responsible for what. The council is also now in a much stronger position to support economic growth and improve the future prospects of residents and businesses.[43]

Professors Michael Chisholm and Steve Leach state that the DCLG estimated annual savings of £75 million resulting from the creation of five unitary counties in the 2006-08 reorganisation. They critique this figure extensively, suggesting that around half of that amount would be a more accurate estimate. They also state that the estimated transition costs during the creation of those unitary counties, a one-off sum of £77 million, was likely to be an underestimate, and suggested that a more rigorous evaluation of the costs would have led the restructures that took place to fail the Government's affordability criteria.[44]

NLGN's 2014 report *As Tiers Go By* expands on the figures from the 2009 restructures:

> The size of the financial dividend appears to be closely related to the number of districts that were abolished.
>
> If we accepted that savings are driven by horizontal integration between district services, then the figures below would suggest that each abolition saves about £4.5m. On this basis, reorganising all of the remaining 27 two tier areas as county unitaries on their existing boundaries would save between £680m-£904.5m.
>
> The upper end of this range is probably very optimistic. Some large counties would need to be broken up into at least two unitaries, reducing the likely saving. It should also be noted that these figures are largely based on data from the late 2000s, a time when councils employed many more staff and, critically, before most districts had started to share their managers and integrate their services.[45]

Analysis of previous restructures

Professor Rhys Andrews, of the University of Cardiff, analysed financial data from the first few years of the unitary authorities created in 2008-09. He found that savings were, thus far, limited to administrative functions:

> …aside from 'back-office' savings, the anticipated improvements in financial performance do not appear to be coming through as

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43 Lord (Michael) Heseltine, *No Stone Unturned in pursuit of growth*, Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012, p.52

44 Michael Chisholm and Steve Leach, *Botched Business: the damaging process of reorganising local government 2006-2008,* 2008, p.85-6

45 Simon Parker and Claire Mansfield, *As Tiers Go By*, NLGN, 2014, p14-15

> the new organization structures gradually become 'bedded-in'. Nonetheless, extending the timeframe of the study would be necessary to affirm this interim conclusion.[46]

This finding echoes the findings of the literature review by Antonio Tavares (see section 8.4), although Tavares's work concerns mergers between authorities at the same local government 'tier', whilst Andrews's concerns unitary restructuring.

Andrews also noted that new county unitary authorities had built up their reserves during the process of restructuring, and that subsequently reserve levels in those authorities had returned to a lower level than the pre-restructuring position of their predecessors.

In a follow-up paper in 2016, Rhys Andrews analysed further data from the unitary authorities created in 2008-09. The findings indicated different trends in performance for different service areas following restructuring, suggesting no single optimal size for a multi-purpose local authority. His study found:

- a linear positive scale effect for Key Stage 2 pupil achievement and bus service timeliness;
- a linear negative scale effect for road maintenance and sport participation;
- a u-shaped relationship for children's social care referrals and secondary education performance;
- an inverted u-shaped relationship for waste recycled.[47]

A 'linear positive effect' means that performance tends to be better in larger authorities, whilst a 'linear negative effect' means the opposite. A 'u-shaped relationship' implies that very small and very large authorities tend to perform more poorly than 'middle-sized' authorities, whilst an 'inverted u-shaped relationship' means the opposite.

Andrews's findings imply a strong case for greater integration of different services, whether through restructuring or collaboration:

> …the structural reorganisation of two-tier governance into a series of single-tier units have resulted in improvements in social care performance for established and new unitary authorities. This may reflect the fact that, unlike county councils, unitary authorities are responsible for housing services and disabled facilities grants and may therefore be able to better coordinate services for vulnerable people within the areas that they serve. ….The result could therefore point towards the relative merits of local government reorganisation in relation to social care services or at the very least greater integration of relevant services in two-tier areas.[48]

Andrews's paper also suggested that population *density*, distinct from population per se, could have an impact on local authority performance. Population density has received comparatively little attention from

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46 Rhys Andrews, "Vertical consolidation and financial sustainability: evidence from English local government", *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy,* 2015, 33, p1538

47 Rhys Andrews, *Quantitative Analysis of the Service Performance of Non-Metropolitan Local Authorities*, unpublished report, July 2016, p10

48 Ibid., p11-12

academics and commentators (though see section 8.4). Andrews's analysis of the data suggests that:

> On population density, however, the results of this study show a stronger correlation between density and service performance. The pattern of findings for population density indicates that rural non-metropolitan authorities have better performing adult and children's social care services than their urban counterparts, and that they are also recycling more of the waste that they collect.[49]

4.2 Restructuring processes: evaluation

2009 lessons learned paper

The then Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published a 'lessons learned' paper in 2010 following the restructuring process of 2008-09. It identified the following issues:

- Ideally, the first elections to any new body should take place ahead of the date of the reorganisation, so that initial strategic and budget planning is shaped and directed by newly-elected councillors instead of councillors from councils facing abolition. This was particularly urgent where a county council was being disaggregated;
- Where early elections were not held, a joint implementation executive should be formed from the 'outgoing' councils, with the council leading the implementation having a majority on the executive;
- Government should clarify its approach to staffing issues at an early stage, to minimise the loss of experienced staff to retirement or redundancy. To this end, a clear approach to managing vacancies in the new authorities is also essential;
- Ideally, the new authority's chief executive should be appointed soon after the new authority's first meeting, and then permitted to assemble their team;
- The implementation executive should have a role in the setting of the final budgets of the 'outgoing' councils, to avoid decisions that impact adversely on the new councils. The Government may make regulations restricting outgoing councils' actions in matters like contracts and land disposal without the assent of the implementation executive.

Reviews of previous restructuring processes

EY's 2016 report noted a number of lessons that had featured in a previous review of restructuring processes by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives:

- Ensure there is a completely fresh start in order to create a separation between the old and new organisations
- Ensure there is a quality plan in place. Quality is considered to be more critical than the length of the planning process itself

[49] Ibid., p12

- Recruit the right people early on, starting with the chief executive, and ensure they are used in the right way from the very beginning
- Create a strong vision and objectives for the new organisation and ensure a focus is put on achieving the outcome and goals that have been outlined
- Put appropriate time and resources into getting the finances right
- Effective communication throughout the reorganisation process
- Work closely with councillors to ensure there is a strong and supportive relationship
- Draw on the experiences and lessons learned from those that have reorganised previously.[50]

The Audit Commission produced a number of reports around the reorganisation processes of 1992-96. In its report *All Change: Managing Local Government Reorganisation and Beyond*, the Commission made a number of recommendations for the transition at the point of a restructure. These included timely appointment of the chief executive and senior management of the new authority; preparing a support programme for the first elected members of the new authority; ensuring that sufficient accommodation is available for staff; and drawing up a project plan for managing the first year of the new authority. They noted in particular that:

> The final few weeks before reorganisation are those when the risks to services and probity are greatest: when service standards are most under threat, financial controls are most likely to break down and equipment goes missing. It is also the time when authorities that are being abolished may be tempted to use up budgets or make spending decisions in a way which commits incoming authorities…[51]

In a further guidance publication, *Seize the Day*, the Audit Commission noted that restructuring can provide an opportunity to remodel the way in which the new authority provides services, "thinking about services from the perspective of the recipient not the provider, and accelerating the move away from the traditional focus on service provision".[52] Such changes are less easy to introduce once a new organisation has begun to bed down.

Seize the Day also noted the importance of harmonising standards where services previously carried out by multiple authorities become the responsibility of a new unitary authority. This also includes policies on matters such as fees and charges, waiting lists, and recovering debts; and staff terms and conditions.

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50 Ernst & Young, *Independent Analysis of Governance Scenarios and Public Service Reform in County Areas*, 2016, p63

51 Audit Commission, *All Change: Managing Local Government Reorganisation and Beyond*, 1996, p39

52 Audit Commission, *Seize the Day*, 1996, p16

Effects of the restructuring process

A few commentators have suggested that disputes arising during the *process* of restructuring can offset any positive effects arising from the long-term outcomes. In their analysis of the 2008-09 reforms, Andrews and Boyne found that:

> The short-term consequences of restructuring are negative… leading to a sharp deterioration in the performance of a group of restructuring organisations. … our evidence suggests that structural change incurs short-run costs, not only in extra expenditure but also in lower performance.[53]

In a separate review of the 2008-09 reforms, Phil Swann, of the consultancy Shared Intelligence, stated:

> It is clear from the interviews on which this research is based that the nature of the process for designing and agreeing unitary arrangements can have a significant impact on a successor council's performance. In several cases district councils "fought" vigorously for unitary status in the face of entrenched opposition from the county. This often created a legacy of sour relationships.[54]

In 2014, the New Local Government Network also noted some evidence that restructuring affected the quality of services whilst it is under way:

> …it has become apparent that reorganisation damages public service performance in the short term. Councils preparing for unitary status in 2006-8 saw a significant drop in scores on the comprehensive performance assessment.[55]

Nevertheless, UK and international studies have also found evidence of services improving after mergers or restructurings have taken place.

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53 Rhys Andrews and George Boyne, "Structural change and public service performance; the impact of the reorganisation process in English local government", *Public Administration* 90:2, 297-312, 2012, p309

54 Phil Swann, *Learning the lessons from local government reorganisation*, Shared Intelligence, 2016, p19

55 Simon Parker and Claire Mansfield, *As Tiers Go By*, NLGN, 2014, p18

5. Recent proposals for unitary authorities

This section collates media reports on proposals for unitary local government from different areas of England.

Inclusion in this section does not guarantee that a full proposal has been submitted to the Government, or that one has been drafted. In many areas, county and district councils hold opposing views on the matter, with counties more likely to propose large unitary authorities and districts more likely to oppose restructuring.

In October 2020, invitations to submit restructuring proposals were issued to Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset (see section 2.1).

5.1 Cumbria

The *Local Government Chronicle* reported in February 2020 that the then Minister, Jake Berry, had met local authority leaders in Cumbria and proposed a combined authority for the county area plus a restructure into two unitary authorities, broadly for 'north' and 'south' Cumbria.[56]

Cumbria's population is in the region of 500,000. This means that one or both of any two new unitary authorities within the county would have less than the Government's preferred minimum population of 300,000 (see section 2.2). Stewart Young, the leader of Cumbria County Council, has signalled his preference for a county-wide unitary authority. Mike Starkie, the mayor of Copeland BC, was reported in June 2020 as saying:

> …the model he and other district leaders have signalled their preference for would be composed of one northern unitary comprised of Carlisle City Council, Copeland and Allerdale BCs and half of Eden DC, and a southern unitary made up of South Lakeland DC, Barrow BC and the other half of Eden DC, with one overarching mayor under a county-wide combined authority.[57]

Previously, the county council had written to the Government supporting reorganisation into a unitary authority in December 2018.[58] Their case referred to an options report produced by EY in 2014. This suggested annual savings of £21.8-£28.3 million if a single unitary authority were created in Cumbria.[59]

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56 Jessica Hill, "County offered devo deal with reorganisation and outsourced care services", *Local Government Chronicle,* 4 Feb 2020. A 'Morecambe Bay' authority, bringing together northern Lancashire together with Barrow-in-Furness, historically an exclave of Lancashire, would not have been an option under this offer.

57 Jessica Hill, "Hopes rise of devo breakthrough in Cumbria", *Local Government Chronicle,* 30 June 2020

58 BBC, "Cumbria council merger proposals sent to government", 21 December 2018; see also Cumbria CC cabinet agenda and reports, 20 December 2018, pp209-215

59 Ernst & Young, *Cumbria County Council: Strategic Financial Case for Local Government Reorganisation in Cumbria*, January 2015

5.2 North Yorkshire

North Yorkshire County Council published a press release on 13 July 2020, which stated that it would pursue options for restructuring alongside a devolution deal.[60]

York City Council, which is already a unitary authority, has stated its opposition to any changes to its own boundaries. It has also published indications of specific demands it would like to see in a devolution deal.[61] The Government's invitation, in October 2020, to North Yorkshire to submit a restructuring proposal was also extended to York City Council.

The *Local Government Chronicle* then reported that the district councils in North Yorkshire were opposed to a single county-wide unitary and have launched a campaign to seek a "people-centred alternative".[62] A report in early November suggested that many of the district councils supported two unitary authorities, in the east and west of the North Yorkshire area, whilst Hambleton DC opposed reorganisation entirely.[63]

5.3 Somerset

In 2018, the (then) six chief executives of the county and district councils in Somerset commissioned an independent report from a consortium led by the consultancy Ignite.[64] Officials from North Somerset and Bath & North East Somerset, both unitary authorities, were also included in discussions. The report was published in February 2020 and identified a number of options: no change; reformed ways of working within the current council structures; a single unitary for Somerset; and two- and three-unitary options.

The latter options would have included merging North Somerset and Bath & North East Somerset with parts of the county council area. Both these councils were included in the Government's October 2020 invitation to submit a proposal for a unitary pattern of government.

The report estimated annual savings from the single unitary option at £35-47 million, with one-off implementation costs of £82 million.[65] It estimated £57-80 million in annual savings from a two-authority option, which would have implementation costs of £111 million; and £45-67 million annual savings from a three-unitary option, with implementation costs of £111 million.

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60 North Yorkshire County Council, "North Yorkshire to consider reorganisation for devolution", 13 July 2020

61 York City Council, *A Mayoral Devolution Deal for York and North Yorkshire*, July 2020; see also York City Council, *Reporting of Agreeing of the 'asks' to submit to Government for consideration of a Devolution Deal for York and North Yorkshire*, 23 July 2020, p4-5

62 Martin George, "North Yorks districts campaign for alternative to unitary 'mega council'", *Local Government Chronicle*, 5 August 2020

63 Jessica Hill, "District breaks rank over North Yorkshire reorganisation bid", *Local Government Chronicle*, 10 Nov 2020

64 Ignite et al, *The Future of Local Government in Somerset: an options appraisal*, February 2020

65 Ibid., p39

Following the publication of the report, Somerset County Council wrote to the Secretary of State to ask him to invite a submission proposing a move to unitary status. In July 2020, the county council published a business case for a single unitary authority.[66] It has also launched a website, One Somerset, to promote the case for a single unitary authority.

Somerset's four district councils issued a statement on 30 July 2020 opposing a single unitary authority:

> The district councils do not believe a unitary council is right for Somerset because a Unitary Council would lead to:
>
> - Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money being spent on changing structures and paying for redundancies
> - Staff unable to focus on the task of delivering for communities and instead dividing attention to new structures and whether they have got a role
> - A "one size fits all" approach to services, with everything centralised in Taunton and decisions not taken by local communities with the knowledge of what is best for local communities
> - The running down and closing of district services to fund the endless growth in costs of adult and childrens' services
> - And then, in a few years' time, there will still be financial problems and poor levels of service because the real community issues that cause demand on services have not been tackled.
>
> There is no evidence that the unitary councils that have been created have produced the financial savings they were forecast to save and many have left a "democratic deficit" being distant from the communities they are meant to serve.[67]

On 20 August Somerset's districts published an alternative plan, supporting one unitary covering the district areas of Sedgemoor and Somerset West & Taunton, and another for Mendip and South Somerset.[68]

5.4 Lincolnshire

Reports in mid-2020 indicated that discussions were taking place regarding a devolution deal for 'Greater Lincolnshire'. This would cover the area of Lincolnshire County Council, plus the unitary councils of North Lincolnshire (based in Scunthorpe) and North-East Lincolnshire (Grimsby). The latter two areas were historically part of Lincolnshire, but were located within the area of Humberside County Council between 1974 and 1998.

A devolution deal was agreed for this geographical area in March 2016.[69] However, it was subsequently rejected in November 2016 by

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66 Somerset County Council, *One Somerset: business case for a new single unitary council for Somerset*, July 2020

67 Mendip DC, *Working together for the future of Somerset: A joint statement from Somerset's district councils*, 30 July 2020either

68 BBC, "Rival unitary authority idea for Somerset branded a 'U-turn'", 13 Aug 2020

69 HM Treasury, *Greater Lincolnshire Devolution Deal*, 16 Mar 2016

votes in Lincolnshire County Council and North Kesteven District Council, and it was then withdrawn by DCLG.[70]

There have been no clear indications of whether a devolution deal would require restructuring in the Lincolnshire County Council area. The seven district councils issued a joint statement on 17 July 2020 proposing that any restructuring linked to a devolution deal should take effect from 2023, and expressing concern at a lack of consultation between them and the county council to date.[71]

5.5 Lancashire

Various plans have been reported for restructuring in Lancashire in 2019 and 2020, alongside plans to establish a non-mayoral or a mayoral combined authority. A number of the plans would include changes to Blackburn with Darwen, and Blackpool. These two authorities became unitary in the 1992-95 restructuring, having previously been district councils within Lancashire.

On 29 July 2020 the BBC reported a 'secret' restructuring plan to divide Lancashire into three unitary areas:

- Central and southern parts of the county - Preston, South Ribble, Chorley and West Lancashire
- A western and northern area - Blackpool, Wyre, Fylde, Lancaster and Ribble Valley
- And the east - Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Rossendale, Hyndburn and Pendle.[72]

This plan includes merging both Blackburn with Darwen, and Blackpool, into larger unitary authorities. This plan has followed earlier indications that in Lancashire the Government would only accept a devolution bid that included local government restructuring.[73]

The five authorities in the third of the groups above had written to the Secretary of State in February 2019 proposing a unitary authority covering that area.[74] Blackburn with Darwen repeated the proposal in October 2019. However, by that time Burnley, Pendle and Hyndburn had withdrawn their support following changes in political control. Pendle councillors remained opposed to restructuring, and to a mayoral combined authority, in July 2020.[75] Burnley passed a motion in mid-July opposing restructuring under any circumstances.[76]

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70 Lincolnshire County Council, "Council Leader intends to say 'no' to a Mayor for Greater Lincolnshire", 11 November 2016

71 East Lindsey DC, "Local government reorganisation in Greater Lincolnshire", 17 July 2020

72 BBC, "Lancashire councils face abolition in shake-up", 29 July 2020

73 Jessica Hill, "Lancs leaders told to reorganise if they want devo", *Local Government Chronicle*, 21 February 2020

74 Sarah Calkin, "Lancashire councils launch unitary call", *Local Government Chronicle,* 28 February 2019.

75 "Pendle councillors discuss proposals for Lancashire Combined Authority", Pendle BC, 13 July 2020

76 Dominic Collis, "Burnley Council moves to safeguard itself in any combined authority plan", *Burnley Express*, 18 July 2020

A report in the *Chorley Guardian* suggested that Wyre BC had made approaches, in late July 2020, to the other councils listed in the second of the three groups above. This followed a meeting in mid-July between all Lancashire councils to discuss options, which ended without agreement.[77]

5.6 Leicestershire

Leicestershire County Council has been exploring options for restructuring since mid-2018.[78] The county council's preference is for a single unitary on its own boundaries. Leicestershire's district councils have not supported restructuring. Leicester City Council, and the historic county of Rutland, have been unitary since 1996: both were previously district councils within Leicestershire.

The county council then considered a report recommending a single unitary council in October 2018. This was opposed by the Conservative MPs in Leicestershire.[79] The county council then published a further 'blueprint' in October 2019, which concluded that a single unitary would save £30 million per year, and a two-unitary model would save £18 million per year. Implementation costs would be £18-19 million in either case. The report does not specify a pattern of boundaries for the two-unitary model.

5.7 Hertfordshire

PriceWaterhouseCoopers produced a report for Hertfordshire County Council in February 2020, which was subsequently published in July 2020. This report estimated annual savings of £34.3 million from creating a single unitary authority in Hertfordshire, and £24.3 million for a two-unitary option.[80] The latter would merge the district councils of Dacorum, Hertsmere, Three Rivers, St Albans and Watford into one authority, and Stevenage, Welwyn Hatfield, Broxbourne, North Herts and East Herts into another.

The report also includes an annual savings figure of £142.2 million estimated to arise from unitary restructuring and "a stretch case of transforming the council".[81] The idea of a single unitary authority for Hertfordshire has aroused opposition from Hertfordshire's district councils.

5.8 Nottinghamshire

Nottinghamshire County Council published a report from Deloitte in December 2018 on reorganisation options. This concluded that a single

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77 Paul Faulkner, "Lancashire leaders meeting ends in acrimony, as councils continue down difficult road to devolution", *Chorley Guardian*, 22 July 2020

78 Jessica Hill, "Fresh bid for mayoral CA overshadowed by restructuring row", *Local Government Chronicle*, 14 Feb 2020. There have been occasional reports in 2019-20 suggesting that the county councils in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire are seeking an 'East Midlands' devolution deal.

79 Rob Cusack, "County's Tory MPs seek immediate end to reorganisation plan", *Local Government Chronicle*, 2 Nov 2018

80 PwC, *Local Government Reform in Hertfordshire*, February 2020, p35

81 Ibid.

unitary authority for the county council area would save £27.1 million per year, compared with £16.4 million for a two unitary option.

In September 2020 the *Local Government Chronicle* reported that Nottinghamshire was again considering a bid for unitary status, alongside further suggestions that Nottingham City Council was considering an attempt to extend its boundaries to include neighbouring parts of Nottinghamshire County Council's area. Nottingham's urban area extends outside the current city council boundaries into Gedling and Broxtowe.[82]

5.9 Essex

A number of different plans have emerged from Essex. Local government in Essex currently consists of Essex County Council and twelve district councils, alongside two unitary authorities (with relatively small populations) in Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea. Suggested options include:

- A combined authority for the district councils of the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA). This would have included Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford and Brentwood district councils, plus Thurrock and Southend, but not Essex County Council. A report in August 2020 suggested that the Government had indicated privately that it would not support this plan;[83]
- A combined authority for Essex, covering multiple unitary authorities.[84] ASELA's members have rejected this option, whereas opinion in the remainder of the county is split;[85]
- Unitary authority proposals have also emerged from Colchester BC (with Braintree, Tendring, and possibly Chelmsford),[86] following indications from Basildon DC in late 2019 and in mid-2020 that they could seek unitary status.[87]

5.10 Other council areas

Surrey

A report in July 2020 stated that Tim Oliver, the leader of Surrey County Council, had approached the Government proposing a single unitary council for Surrey.[88] In response, Surrey's district councils launched a campaign called 'Putting Residents First'. According to the Local Government Chronicle, district leaders are supportive of restructuring,

82 Jessica Hill, "Plans for new East Midlands CA and three counties restructuring gather pace", Local Government Chronicle, 9 Sep 2020
83 Your Thurrock, "Government appears to throw out 'secret' combined authority plan", 2 Aug 2020
84 Gavin Jones, "The importance of a Greater Essex combined authority", *Municipal Journal*, 20 Aug 2020
85 Jessica Hill, "Row erupts over county's plans for Greater Essex combined authority", Local Government Chronicle, 21 Aug 2020
86 Jessica Hill, "Colchester leader suggests new powerhouse unitary authority", *Local Government Chronicle*, 26 Nov 2019
87 Toby Emes, "County council bosses 'no longer oppose' Bas-exit", Basildon Canvey and Southend Echo, 7 Jul 2020
88 Nick Golding, "Surrey leader 'seeks country's biggest unitary'", *Local Government Chronicle*, 10 Jul 2020

but into two or three unitary authorities instead of a single one for the whole of Surrey.[89]

Warwickshire

In August 2020 Warwickshire County Council discussed a report entitled *Local Government Reform in Warwickshire: A Strategic Case for Change.* This proposed a single unitary council for Warwickshire.

Gloucestershire

In Gloucestershire in August 2020, the six district councils suggested a restructure of the county area into two unitary authorities. One would cover the area of Gloucester, Forest of Dean, and Stroud district councils; and the other would cover Cheltenham, Tewkesbury and Cotswold. Gloucestershire County Council has opposed this idea.[90]

Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire County Council considered the possibility of unitary status in the mid-2010s. Ernst & Young produced a report on the financial implications of restructuring in January 2015.[91]

Three councils in Oxfordshire – Oxfordshire County Council, and Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils – submitted a proposal for a unitary county council in Oxfordshire in March 2017. The plan was opposed by Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council. This was one of a number of proposals for unitary councils and combined authorities in the area.[92] These included proposals for district-based unitaries crossing into Northamptonshire and Gloucestershire: one idea was to merge Cotswold DC and West Oxfordshire DC into a single unitary.

In August 2018 it was reported that further consideration of restructuring in Oxfordshire was being 'paused'.[93]

Hampshire

Hampshire County Council launched a consultation on establishing a county-wide unitary authority in August 2016. Discussions took place in late 2016 between district councils in the Solent area and district councils in the 'Heart of Hampshire' (the north and east of the county). PriceWaterhouseCoopers produced a number of reports for the district councils in late 2016.

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89 See Jessica Hill, "Districts decry county's 'Tesco bulk buy approach' to reorganisation", *Local Government Chronicle*, 20 Aug 2020

90 BBC, "Gloucestershire unitary authority plans 'nuts'", 23 Aug 2020

91 Ernst & Young, *Oxfordshire County Council: Strategic Financial Case for a Unitary Council*, November 2014

92 Previous proposals were summarised in Jon Bunn, "The long and winding cul-de-sac of Oxfordshire reorganisation", *Local Government Chronicle*, 29 Mar 2018

93 Rob Cusack, "Oxfordshire unitary decision paused by ministers", *Local Government Chronicle,* 1 Aug 2018

6. Rationales for restructuring

Debates on the creation of unitary authorities offer a number of rationales for replacing two-tier structures with unitary structures. This section summarises the main rationales used in the current debate in England: efficiency; simplicity; and cost savings / economies of scale. This section does not analyse the strength of those rationales. This is a matter of judgement in a very complex policy environment.

6.1 The use of evidence

There exists considerable academic and policy research, both in the UK and internationally, on the appropriate population size and structure of local government (see section 8). But research cannot prove that a particular structure, population, or geographical pattern of local government is inherently superior. Patterns of local government across the rest of the world are extremely diverse. They are dependent on the surrounding political culture, the role and functions of local authorities, and the geography and culture of the state in which they exist.

Current UK debates can often conflate two separate lines of argument: one, that a unitary structure is superior to a two-tier structure, and two, that larger units of local government are superior to, and/or more effective than, smaller units. The latter argument is a more familiar one in an international context. The majority of developed states have merged many smaller local government units into larger ones during the last 40-50 years (see section 8.1), and there is a considerable international literature on the effects of local authority mergers on efficiency and accountability.

Efforts to reduce the *number of tiers* of local government are far less common internationally. Equally, little research is available exploring the effectiveness of one tier of local government as against multiple tiers. A 2016 report from the OECD notes that multi-tier local government is the norm internationally: of 101 countries studied, 31 had a single tier of sub-national government, 47 two tiers, and 23 three tiers.[94]

It is important to bear this distinction in mind when understanding the current debate on single-tier local government in England. For instance, it would be possible in principle to make a case in favour of unitary local government, whilst opposing the creation of very geographically large unitary authorities on other grounds.

Furthermore, local government faces many challenges in the 2020s that restructuring would be unlikely to address directly. Some of these were noted by Professor Catherine Staite in a *Local Government Chronicle* article in 2020:

- The divisions between different parts of local government

[94] OECD, *Subnational governments around the world: structure and finance*, 2016, p10. The 'subnational governments' studied include regional / state levels in federations: so, for instance, Germany would be described as having three tiers of sub-national government, with its Länder, counties, and municipalities.

- Disruption of existing partnerships, make cooperation harder.
- Inadequate funding: the savings generated by reorganisation are always overestimated and the costs of change underestimated
- Anomalies in city/county boundaries
- Lack of leadership and technical capacity
- Accountability[95]

6.2 Effectiveness / efficiency

A system of unitary local government would replace multiple political leaderships and senior officer teams, and thus multiple strategies and perspectives, with a single local government perspective for a given area. This could reduce local conflicts and disagreements which can detract from service delivery. A paper by Richard Boyle, *Re-shaping Local Government,* for the University of Cork in 2016, noted a number of generic arguments for merging local authorities:

> The reasons put forward for merger and amalgamation are generally that it represents an effective method of enhancing the operational efficiency of local councils, improves their administrative and technical capacity, generates cost savings, strengthens strategic decision-making and fosters greater political power.[96]

Rhys Andrews and George Boyne's 2006 paper *Population Size and Local Authority Effectiveness* suggested that:

> …unitary local government, in principle at least, enables more cohesive and integrated leadership; it ensures clearer accountability and clarity over responsibilities, thus supporting stronger customer focus. It also follows that in principle at least it is more efficient because it lessens the scope for duplication and overlap – for example – in relation to back-office administration – it allows for a reduction in the number of senior management posts, and it promotes better co-ordination through easier linkages within one council than between the tiers.[97]

A review of restructuring processes in Australia and New Zealand said:

> …The process of consolidation can generate a focus that transcends individual local government boundaries and encourages councils to operate in a broader context – one that is more regional or system-wide – and enables them to relate more effectively to central governments.[98]

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95 Sarah Calkin, "Catherine Staite: There has never been a worse time for reorganisation", *Local Government Chronicle*, 11 Sep 2020
96 Richard Boyle, Re-shaping Local Government, 2016, p4
97 INLOGOV, *An Independent Review of the Case for Unitary Status*, 2006, p15
98 Aulich, C. M. Gibbs, A. Gooding, P. McKinlay, S. Pillora and G. Sansom (2011), *Consolidation in Local Government: A Fresh Look*, Broadway, NSW: Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, p10

6.3 Simplicity

Commentators have argued that few members of the public understand the division of responsibilities between county and district councils. For instance, Jonn Elledge, on the *CityMetric* website, said:

> The arguments in favour of unitarisation are simple. Firstly, it's more comprehensible: If your rubbish bin wasn't emptied, you no longer need to remember whether that was a failure of your district or your county. With only one council, it must be that council's job – and by the same token, there's less room for buck-passing from the councils themselves.[99]

PriceWaterhouseCoopers' 2020 report on restructuring and scale noted the idea of the "inherent simplicity associated with operating a single organisation":[100]

> It has been a common refrain that the two-tier system of local government can sometimes cause confusion for residents as they are unsure which authority to contact for specific services. Any reorganisation, either two-tier collaboration or structural change in local government should consider how to best enable clear communication and guidance in accessing services.[101]

The think tank ResPublica published a report in 2017 entitled *Devo 2.0: the case for counties*, in which they stated that:

> Joint working between smaller units of government … [involves] divergent incentives, multiple layers of responsibility and slow, sometimes obstructive, decision making processes between tiers with different or overlapping roles. These are very difficult to solve in an informal way.[102]

> Weaknesses exist in many two-tier local government areas (those based on county and district councils). These structures often add to public confusion, create fragmented and sometimes competing local leadership, and lead to duplication, inefficiency and coordination failures in service delivery. A way of removing these weaknesses is the introduction of unitary (single tier) local government…[103]

6.4 Costs and modelling

Many advocates of unitary local government suggest that it would enable public money to be saved. This would result from combining multiple organisations into one, saving on administrative overhead costs and reducing duplication. This argument has featured regularly in debates on local government restructuring for 30-40 years. For instance, Lord Heseltine, in *No Stone Unturned* (2012), said:

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99 Jonn Elledge, The British government wants more mayors and fewer councils in England, *CityMetric*, 30 Jul 2020

100 PwC, *Evaluating the importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation*, County Councils Network, 2020, p8

101 PwC, *Evaluating the importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation*, County Councils Network, 2020, p40

102 Phillip Blond, Tom Follett and Mark Morrin, *Devo 2.0: the case for counties*, 2017, p22-23

103 See, for example, *Explanatory memorandum to the Exeter and Devon (Structural Changes) Order 2010 and the Norwich and Norfolk (Structural Changes) Order 2010*, p11

> Changing to a unitary model of local government will not be easy. It will naturally be uncomfortable for those involved, it may be disruptive in the short term and it will take time. But it would be a mistake not to persevere. The costs of the two-tier system are simply unsustainable. The advantages in increasing effectiveness and freeing resource for the benefit of communities will outweigh the pain.[104]

The case for economies of scale is linked to the idea that local authorities have an optimum population size. As noted, this idea has been influential within Government in recent years (see section 2.2). Most research evidence is equivocal on whether cost savings are available from merger of local governments into larger units (see section 8.1).

Modelling of restructuring in England

A 2016 report *Independent Analysis of Governance Scenarios and Public Service Reform in County Areas* from EY (formerly Ernst & Young) modelled total savings available from restructuring all two-tier areas in England to become unitary. They found that restructuring into a single unitary authority per county area would save £621-781 million per year across the whole of England. Restructuring into two unitary authorities per county area would save £361-520 million per year, and three unitary authorities per county area would save £98-266 million per year.

EY also modelled the transition costs of each option (see section 8.3 below). Single unitaries would cost £277-393 million to implement across the whole of England; the two-unitary option £371-519 million; and the three-unitary option £401-585 million. Subtracting the implementation costs from the annual savings produces a figure of £2.37-£2.86 billion for net savings over a five-year period across the whole of England. They also modelled the financial effects of sharing support services; merging district councils but retaining a two-tier system; and creating three unitary authorities and a combined authority in each county area. The option of single county unitary authorities saved the most of all the options.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers produced a report in 2020 which estimated that a move to unitary authorities on county boundaries in all two-tier areas in England would save approximately £2.9 billion over a five-year period, equating to some £600 million per year – or £25 million per year per county area. Similarly, EY estimated savings over a five-year period at £2.37 to £2.86 billion in 2016.[105] Both of these reports were published by the County Councils Network. They included estimates for alternative patterns of reform, such as introducing two or three unitary authorities in each county area.

The savings projected in these reports are based on modelling, which requires certain assumptions. Each of the reports detail the methodology used. The figures produced by these two reports are

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[104] Lord Heseltine, *No Stone Unturned: in pursuit of growth*, HM Treasury, 2012, p52

[105] PriceWaterhouseCoopers, *Evaluating the importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation*, County Councils Network, July 2020; and Ernst & Young, *Independent Analysis of Governance Scenarios and Public Service Reform in County Areas*, 2016

similar to estimates of annual savings provided by a number of single-tier authorities that were created in England in 2008-09 (see section 4.1).

In contrast, Ruth Dixon and Thomas Elston from the University of Oxford have suggested that the potential for further efficiencies from structural reform in England is limited:

> …economies of scale appear to represent a "phantom" promise of reform, beloved of those looking for a quick fix with an intuitive, if superficial, appeal.
>
> Yet the outputs of multiple research projects suggest that, whether by amalgamation or by collaboration, economies of scale are much harder to achieve in practice than in theory within the already very large English council system. Instead, we suggest that reforms should be targeted to the local context and subject to public debate.[106]

Some reports note the challenges experienced by the creation of smaller unitary authorities, where services previously run at a county level have been split into multiple 'parts'. They refer to this process as 'disaggregation', and suggest that it increases the transition costs of restructuring in comparison to a move to a county-level unitary authority.[107]

Financial challenges

Local government in England has faced large-scale financial challenges since 2010. Since 2013, the level of Revenue Support Grant – the Government's general purpose grant for local authorities – has reduced from £15 billion per year to under £5 billion. During the 2010s, the Local Government Association has produced a number of reports providing estimates of a 'funding gap' – between funding available to local authorities and service needs – running into billions of pounds (see the Library briefing *Local authority financial resilience*).

There are also indications that the financial challenges facing local government during the 2020s will grow still further. For instance, modelling suggests that the early to mid-2020s are likely to see a significant rise in service demand. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated a £3.3 billion rise in costs for local government across England by 2024-25.[108] Additionally, the short- and long-term financial impacts of the coronavirus pandemic remain hard to assess at the time of writing.

The range of figures set out above form part of the context for claims that unitary restructuring could save £600 million per year – across areas that currently have two tiers of local government.

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106 Ruth Dixon and Thomas Elston, "Local government reorganisation: The debate is intense but is the case for reform proven?", *Room 151, 24 Sep 2020*

107 See, for instance, Phil Swann, *Learning the lessons from local government reorganisation*, Shared Intelligence, 2016, p17; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, *Evaluating the importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation*, County Councils Network, July 2020, p13

108 Tom Harris, Louis Hodge, David Phillips, English local government funding: trends and challenges in 2019 and beyond, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2019, p60

7. Alternatives to restructuring

In 2019-20, the debate on the creation of unitary authorities in England has been largely led by advocates. Discussions of alternatives to restructuring have had a lower profile. This sub-section provides some detail of alternative routes suggested for achieving efficiency, simplicity and cost savings without local government restructuring.

7.1 Tensions and simplicity

Academics and commentators have argued that the case for larger authorities on simplicity grounds is unproven. Professors Colin Copus and Steve Leach of De Montfort University, in a report for the District Councils Network in October 2020, stated:

> Public confusion is not confined to the allocation of responsibilities between counties and districts … There are combined authorities, police and crime authorities, local enterprise partnerships, national park authorities, health commissioning bodies and many other agencies providing public services … The confusion experienced by the public in the shire counties at the time of the Banham Commission did not, with very few exceptions, prevent them for expressing an overwhelming preference for the continuation of the existing system when presented with unitary alternatives.[109]

In an unpublished paper in 2016, Professor Rhys Andrews, of the University of Cardiff, suggested that the case for more than one tier of local government was that "a multi-tier system facilitates competitive and political pressures that force local authorities to perform to a high standard. In particular, a two-tier system may generate intra-tier competition, and thereby elicit additional public scrutiny that can exert downward pressure on costs and upward pressure on performance".[110]

Professor Michael Chisholm of the University of Cambridge has suggested that suggestions of 'tensions' between county and district authorities might reflect "genuine differences of interest between areas and differing judgements about priorities, [arising from] a propensity to interpret conflicts as a fault of structure and the habits of bureaucracies rather than as reflecting a basic spatial differentiation of society and hence interests that could not always be congruent".[111]

The 2006 White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, which led to the 2006-08 round of unitary restructuring, also invited two-tier areas to submit plans for 'pathfinder' status, with the aim of clarifying and simplifying two-tier local government:

> The goal for continuing two-tier areas is to achieve:

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109 Steve Leach and Colin Copus, *Bigger is not better: the evidenced case for keeping 'local' government*, District Councils Network, October 2020, p16-17

110 Rhys Andrews, *Quantitative Analysis of the Service Performance of Non-Metropolitan Local Authorities*, unpublished report, July 2016

111 Michael Chisholm, *Structural reform of British local government: Rhetoric and reality*, 2000,p.17

- unified service delivery models, with service users having no need to understand whether the county, district, or other service provider is responsible;
- stronger leadership for place shaping;
- shared back-office functions and integrated service delivery mechanisms.

This might involve significant change. Accordingly, we would like county areas in which all the councils are committed to developing a radically improved two-tier approach to come forward to be pathfinders, pioneering innovative governance arrangements that:

- enhance strategic leadership, neighbourhood empowerment, value for money and equity;
- command a broad cross-section of support; and
- are affordable, representing value for money and meeting any costs of change from councils' existing resources.[112]

7.2 Economies of scale

A Cardiff University report from 2006 highlighted that the effects of the scale at which local government services are delivered varies between services (see section 8.2 for more discussion of this report). This finding confirmed observations made by Travers, Jones and Burnham for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 1993, and also aligned with evidence provided to the Redcliffe-Maud Commission in the late 1960s.[113]

It could be argued, on this basis, that a two-tier system of government can reflect identifiable differences in the optimal scale for service delivery. Services can be delivered at a more local level where appropriate, and over a broader geography where the potential for economies of scale can be demonstrated. This type of idea has affinities with the 'correspondence principle' – that the size of a local government should correspond to the area that benefits from the services that it runs.[114]

Copus and Leach's 2020 report suggests that demands for larger authorities are based upon the belief that:

> …there is some optimal size for councils which provides maximum efficiency and effectiveness and reduces cost. As we shall see this argument is based on two false premises:
>
> - that there is an optimum population size for local authorities
> - that there is one dominant role for local government – that of a service provider or overseer of public services.[115]

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[112] DCLG, *Strong and prosperous communities*, 2006, p64. See also DCLG, *Invitation to councils in England to make proposals for new unitary structures*, 2006, pp21-24, for details of the invitation to two-tier areas to submit pathfinder proposals.

[113] Steve Leach and Colin Copus, *Bigger is not better: the evidenced case for keeping 'local' government*, District Councils Network, October 2020

[114] This principle originates from *Fiscal Federalism*, a seminal study from 1972 by the American academic Wallace Oates.

[115] Steve Leach and Colin Copus, *Bigger is not better: the evidenced case for keeping 'local' government*, District Councils Network, October 2020, p4

7.3 Effectiveness and collaboration

Collaboration between districts and counties has been a feature of English local government for many years. Local authorities in England have general powers to share services and to exercise functions on one another's behalf without needing permission from Government, facilitating collaboration (see the Library briefing paper *Local government: alternative models of service delivery*).

The Local Government Association published a report in August 2020 entitled *The drivers of collaboration*. This highlighted the importance to collaboration of trust at all levels of collaborating organisations, flexibility over how relationships worked, and the importance of both formal structures and informal ways of working. The report emphasised that effective collaboration was not easy and constant work is required to maintain relationships:

> First, focus remorselessly on communities, people and place. Second, remember that the language used can set the tone. Third distinguish between the county as a place, and a collection of places, and the county council as an institution. And finally, encourage more movement of officers between counties and districts.
>
> At the end of the day, however, the historically hierarchical nature of government in England can place both counties and districts in a particular mindset about how they relate to one another. This in turn creates barriers to collaboration from both a top down and a bottom up perspective.[116]

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for District Councils published a report on collaboration between district councils in 2017. This report provides a number of examples of district councils sharing services, motivated by cost and efficiency considerations. The report says:

> The creation of collaborative arrangements between districts, without legal complication, is an effective way to adapt and respond to increasing pressures to cut costs and improve efficiency in a context of austerity. Collaboration facilitates the pooling of resources, avoids duplication of functions and enables savings without reducing the quality of services.[117]

The report also draws attention to local authorities' capacity to collaborate on different geographies for different purposes, referring in particular to functional economic areas (FEAs).[118] It suggests that ad ho collaboration between local authorities may provide greater benefit for economic policy-making than merging units via a restructuring process.

The report also provides a number of examples of district councils collaborating with other bodies, such as NHS bodies, police authorities, universities, voluntary groups and central government agencies. In assessing the critical ingredients of successful collaboration, it reflects

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116 LGA, *The drivers of collaboration*, 2020, p11

117 APPG for District Councils, *District council collaboration and devolution in England*, July 2017, p13

118 Functional economic areas are statistical units derived from analysis of data on matters such travel-to-work patterns, housing markets, leisure markets and other economic flows.

the LGA's 2020 report, citing trust, a shared sense of place, a shared sense of purpose and political will.[119]

[119] Ibid., p17

8. Restructuring: research

8.1 Introduction

This section summarises UK and international research and evidence on the known effects of local authority merger processes. It addresses the question of economies of scale; the organisational impacts of change; and the effects on local democracy and representation.

The vast majority of research on local authority mergers concerns mergers of small local authorities into larger units, not merging multiple tiers of local authority into a single-tier structure. There are very few examples of states seeking to reduce the number of tiers of local government, either in part as in the UK, or via a comprehensive programme.

In contrast, most states in Europe have undertaken some merger of local authorities in recent decades (see Appendix 3). The UK is not unusual in this regard. However, the UK stands out as having a very high average local authority population size, either before or after reforms. Table 3 below shows the average population size, and average population per councillor, of a selection of European states.[120]

Table 3: Population size and representative ratios in a sample of European countries

Country	Population (millions)	Lower tier councils	Average population per council	Total Cllrs ('000s)	Persons per councillor
France	67	36,500	1,800	515	130
Spain	47	8,100	5,800	65	720
Germany	83	12,013	6,900	200	410
Italy	60	8,000	7,500	100	600
Belgium	11.5	581	18,700	13	880
Sweden	10	290	34,400	46	220
Netherlands	17	390	43,500	10	1,700
Denmark	6	98	61,000	5	1,200
England	56	315	177,700	17	3,300

8.2 Economies of scale

The evidence that larger authorities reliably achieve economies of scale is equivocal, both in the UK and elsewhere.

UK evidence

A study led by Rhys Andrews, at the University of Cardiff, examined the effects of local authority population size on service provision, and on authorities' scores in the former Comprehensive Performance

[120] ResPublica, *Size doesn't matter: the arguments for place-based devolution*, October 2020, p25. See also *Local Public Sector Reforms in Times of Crisis: National Trajectories and International Comparisons*, eds Sabine Kuhlmann and Geert Bouckaert, Springer, 2016

Assessment (CPA) regime, in 2006. The study took place in advance of unitary restructuring in a number of parts of England in 2007-09.

The study found some evidence of impact of local authority size on performance, though this varied between services and was smaller for the larger-spending services such as education, social care and housing. The authors found that:

- size has little impact on CPA scores
- one half of the measures of service inspection show a size effect
- a majority of the measures of consumer satisfaction are significantly influenced by size
- population size makes a difference to over one third of the Best Value Performance Indicators
- around three quarters of the value for money measures are influenced by local authority size
- population size has an effect on two thirds of the measures of administrative overheads.

> 5. These size effects comprise a variety of linear positive (30% of significant results), linear negative (14%) and non-linear relationships (54%).
>
> 6. The impact of population size varies across services, and between measures of performance for the same service.
>
> 7. The importance of size effects by service is as follows, in descending order: Leisure & Culture; Benefits; Housing; Environment; Social Services; Education. Thus the biggest spenders in local government show the weakest size effect.[121]

Paragraph 5 in the above quote means that, in some cases, better performance was associated with larger authorities ('linear positive' relationships), whilst in others it was associated with smaller authorities ('linear negative' relationships). The research also found evidence of 'u-shaped' relationships in certain service areas. That is, a larger population was associated with better performance for certain services up to a certain population point, after which the association went into reverse: thus some very large councils scored more poorly on performance in certain service areas. It also found evidence of 'inverted u-shaped' relationships, where performance was higher for very small and very large councils but poorer for councils with population sizes nearer the median. The researchers conclude:

> The big picture is that size makes a difference to corporate and service achievements in local government. Beneath this, however, lies a much more complex set of small pictures: the direction and form of size effects is highly variable. Our results are, therefore, consistent with prior research in this field: the relationship between population size and performance remains a complex mosaic of insignificant, positive, negative and non-linear effects. This is not surprising in multi-functional organisations that are

[121] Rhys Andrews and George Boyne, *Population Size and Local Authority Effectiveness*, DCLG, 2006, p5

> judged on a variety of dimensions and measures of performance.[122]

A Joseph Rowntree Foundation study from 1993 found very little relationship between measures of local authority performance and population levels, either in the UK or other states:

> …It may be possible to show a link between population size and costs or effectiveness in some parts of some services, the relationship is by no means all one way, and there are other factors which probably matter much more … The political culture and management style of a county, district or borough are widely accepted as being most important in determining how efficient and effective an authority is.[123]

The authors' broad conclusion is:

> It does not appear possible to argue a conclusive case for a strong and one-directional link between population size and efficiency or effectiveness. There are some services or functions or specialised parts of some functions or services where population size does have a measurable effect in determining costs or effectiveness. But there is on one size-range which performs better than others across the whole range of services. It is not possible to say larger authorities perform, on the whole, better than smaller… The combined weight of other factors affects performance more than does size.[124]

The District Councils Network's 2020 report *Power in Place* suggested that proposals for large, county-based unitary authorities could find achieving projected savings challenging for a number of reasons, including:

- the analysis assumes savings reducing 90 to 100 councillors in each new county unitary, but counties pursuing county unitary bids are proposing having many more councillors than that. There are similar uncertainties with the staffing assumptions.
- the costs of moving to new county unitary models do not include the large potential costs of growing the role of local town and parish councils which feature in the bids of county unitary proposals, genuine efforts to bolster the role of hundreds of local councils in each county would not be cheap.
- the savings indicated through models on spreadsheets are challenging to realise in practice requiring sufficient political and officer leadership and attention, which is difficult to guarantee given the simultaneous crisis in communities and challenges in public services.
- the drive for savings into county unitary councils will put at risk a range of discretionary services, currently provided by district councils, which are important to residents and

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122 Ibid., p31
123 Tony Travers, George Jones and June Burnham, *The impact of population size on local authority costs and effectiveness*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1993, p22
124 Tony Travers, George Jones and June Burnham, *The impact of population size on local authority costs and effectiveness*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1993, p. 4

business in localities. The saving assumptions might already include the loss of these important services.[125]

International evidence

International research has found some evidence of economies of scale arising from the merger of local governments, but no evidence that mergers will reliably lead to cost savings. In 2002 Joel Byrnes and Brian Dollery, at the University of New England in Australia, reviewed several studies investigating the evidence of economies of scale in larger Australian local governments. Some studies showed evidence of economies of scale, some showed evidence of diseconomies of scale, and others showed evidence of 'U-shaped cost curves' (i.e. very small and very large authorities exhibiting higher costs).[126]

Enid Slack and Richard Bird, at the University of Toronto, analysed the merger of six lower-tier councils into Toronto City Council in 2008. They concluded that the merger had improved financial resilience in the new single council, and given Toronto a stronger voice in economic development matters. They stated that no visible cost savings had been achieved, and participatory forms of governance had reduced.[127]

A study led by Dr Falk Ebinger at the University of Vienna reviewed European academic literature on 'territorial reforms' (i.e. the merger of local authorities). They found that mergers correlated with "the improvement of task accomplishment, service quality and standing against higher administrative levels".[128] Merged local authorities were also more able to negotiate additional responsibilities and greater financial autonomy from higher tiers of government. Those are not automatic outcomes of mergers, but this finding suggests that larger local government units command greater confidence in their effectiveness from state or national governments.

8.3 Transition costs and effects

Any restructuring process will generate one-off transition costs, associated with creating a new organisation, winding down previous ones, and/or mergers. These costs are normally greater than the annual savings of a restructuring process. Most models of the financial effects of potential restructuring therefore anticipate that a restructure can be expected to generate increased expenditure in the short term before beginning to show a net overall saving after a certain number of years. As with modelling of the potential for savings from restructuring, any

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125 District Councils Network, *Power in Place; devolution and districts driving our recovery*, August 2020, p19

126 Byrnes, J. D. and Dollery, B. E. (2002). "Do economies of scale exist in Australian local government? A review of the research evidence", *Urban Policy and Research* 20:4, pp.391-414.

127 Enid Slack and Richard Bird, *Does Municipal Amalgamation Strengthen the Financial Viability of Local Government? A Canadian Example*, ICEPP, Georgia State University, 2013

128 Falk Ebinger, Sabine Kuhlmann & Joerg Bogumil (2019). "Territorial reforms in Europe: effects on administrative performance and democratic participation", *Local Government Studies* 45:1, 1-23, p10

models of transition costs cannot avoid depending in part upon assumptions made by the modellers.

The modelling reports published by EY (2016) and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2020), discussed above in section 6.4, take transition costs (or 'implementation costs') into account in their headline figures (which indicate savings over 5 years of £2.3-£2.9 billion). EY's report estimates implementation costs of £277-393 million for all two-tier areas in England to move to county-level unitary local government.[129] PriceWaterhouseCoopers estimate the same change costing £421 million in transition costs.[130]

Michael Chisholm's *Structural reform of British local government: Rhetoric and reality* (2000) states that the reorganisation process of the 1990s cost a total of at least £505 million, though he stresses that data limitations make it difficult to identify an accurate figure (as noted in section 4.1 above).[131] He noted that the Association of County Councils, in 1992, estimated that a pattern of county-based unitaries across England would save £720 million per year, whereas a district-based pattern of unitaries would add £780 million per year to costs. He stated:

> there can be no doubt that the unquantified costs of reorganisation have been considerable. There were the opportunity costs of the time and energy which were diverted from development work and the taking forward of initiatives because the immediate problems of transition had to take priority. …. Other uncertainties and their attendant costs arose with the transfer of assets… [and] difficulties could arise because there was uncertainty regarding the scale of the financial assets or liabilities which would be bequeathed to the successor councils.[132]

8.4 Democratic responsiveness

Concepts

Academic theory proposes that local authorities covering larger areas or populations will tend to be less responsive to their electorates. Professors Adam Gendzwill and Ulrik Kjaer state that:

> ….from a communitarian perspective it is claimed that in smaller communities, proximity between members, higher socio-economic homogeneity and personal acquaintance create stronger social bonds and more opportunities to engage meaningfully in political activities. The decline-of-community school argues that in larger communities, social bonds are loosened and the sense of community and urge to participate decrease….[133]

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129 Ernst & Young, *Independent Analysis of Governance Scenarios and Public Service Reform in County Areas*, 2016, p30

130 PriceWaterhouseCoopers, *Evaluating the importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation*, County Councils Network, July 2020, p24

131 Michael Chisholm, *Structural reform of British local government: Rhetoric and reality*, 2000,p.109

132 Ibid., p123

133 Adam Gendźwiłł & Ulrik Kjaer (2020) "Mind the gap, please! Pinpointing the influence of municipal size on local electoral participation", *Local Government Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/03003930.2020.1777107

This suggests that merging local authorities into larger units could lead to reduced political participation and satisfaction with the political process, and reduced turnout in elections.

A number of academic studies have set out evidence that these effects often do occur where large local authorities exist. An assessment of the rationales for, and likely effects of, restructuring proposals would need to weigh the importance of measures of democratic satisfaction against matters of cost and economies of scale. These criteria are likely to point to different conclusions as regards the optimal population size covered by a local authority.

This type of decision will inevitably be influenced by political and cultural views of the appropriate role of local authorities. If local authorities are seen primarily as deliverers of national public services, decision-makers may favour larger authorities on the grounds of effectiveness. If they are seen more as local forums for the expression of democracy and citizenship, decision-makers may prefer smaller authorities.

There is a broader question of how important it is for local authority areas to reflect 'community identity'. This concept is difficult to pin down, but it featured in the deliberations of the 1992-95 Local Government Commission, on the grounds that "evidence presented to the Commission suggests that in many cases the boundaries that were defined then were not rooted in the reality of local communities".[134] A further concept that can feature in these debates is 'underboundedness' – the scenario where a city-based local authority does not cover the full urban area of the city. A number of the unitary authorities created in the 1992-95 can be described in this way: examples include Bristol, Leicester and Nottingham.

Studies of size and democratic responsiveness

Adam Gendzwill and Ulrik Kjaer compared the gap between national and local electoral turnout in some 15,000 municipalities across 12 European states (not including the UK). They found that states with larger local authorities tended to have a bigger gap between national and local turnout, suggesting that the existence of larger local authorities is linked to lower local turnout.

Joseph Drew and Brian Dollery studied community satisfaction data from 2008-10 in Victoria, Australia. They found a negative relationship between local authority population size and three measures of satisfaction (overall satisfaction, satisfaction with advocacy and satisfaction with engagement in decision-making). They also found a positive relationship between population *density* and these three measures of satisfaction. These findings analysed the effects of population size but not the effects of local authority mergers. The researchers cautioned that their findings were not conclusive.[135]

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[134] Local Government Commission, *Renewing Local Government in the English Shires: A Progress Report*, 1993, p10

[135] Joseph Drew & Brian Dollery (2016), "Does Size Still Matter? An Empirical Analysis of the Effectiveness of Victorian Local Authorities", *Local Government Studies*, 42:1, 15-28

A systematic review of academic findings on local authority population size and participation, by Josh McDonnell of the University of Western Australia, found a correlation between smallness of local authorities and both 'internal political efficacy' (individuals' views of their political awareness and competence) and 'external political efficacy' (individuals' views about the responsiveness of governments. He concluded that "[increased population] size has a negative effect on all forms of electoral participation included in this review – voting, contacting local officials, meeting attendance and political party activity".[136]

On the other hand, the 2019 study led by Falk Ebinger of the University of Vienna suggests that the effect of mergers on political participation more generally – as opposed to voting - is marginal, and that some studies exist showing no significant relationship between population size and turnout in certain states (e.g. Denmark, Switzerland and Norway).[137]

A review of 52 studies by Antonio Tavares of the University of Minho in 2018 found that, where mergers took place, evidence of cost savings was confined to administrative functions, and these were often offset by higher spending elsewhere in the organisation. At the same time, the quality of local authority services often improved post-merger, perhaps due to increased spending. Tavares's review too suggested that mergers led to a diminished degree of political responsiveness:

> Mergers tend to depress turnout rates, decrease the number of candidates in local elections, reduce internal political efficacy, and negatively affect the level of community attachment of residents.[138]

These findings align with the conclusions of Rhys Andrews of the University of Cardiff, studying early data in 2012 from the English unitary authorities created in 2008-09. Andrews also found, in a study in 2016, that some measures of service quality (children's social care and highways) rose in the unitary authorities established in 2008-09 in comparison to their predecessor councils, but established unitary authorities scored better in adult social care.[139]

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136 Joshua McDonnell (2020) "Municipality size, political efficacy and political participation: a systematic review", *Local Government Studies* 46:3, 331-350, p344

137 Falk Ebinger, Sabine Kuhlmann & Joerg Bogumil (2019) "Territorial reforms in Europe: effects on administrative performance and democratic participation", *Local Government Studies* 45:1, 1-23, p13

138 Antonio Tavares, "Municipal amalgamations and their effects: a literature review", *Miscellanea Geographica – regional studies on development* 22:1, 2018, p.13

139 Rhys Andrews, *Quantitative Analysis of the Service Performance of Non-Metropolitan Local Authorities*, unpublished report, July 2016

Appendix 1: unitary authorities in England

Authority	First elections	Predecessors
Isle of Wight	1995	Isle of Wight CC; Medina BC; South Wight DC
Bath & North-East Somerset	1995	Bath City Council; North-East Somerset DC
Bristol City	1995	
South Gloucestershire	1995	Kingswood DC; Northavon DC
North Somerset	1995	Woodspring DC
Hartlepool	1995	
Middlesbrough	1995	
Redcar & Cleveland	1995	
Stockton-on-Tees	1995	
East Riding of Yorkshire	1995	
North-East Lincolnshire	1995	
North Lincolnshire	1995	Scunthorpe BC; Glanford BC; Boothferry DC (part)
Hull City	1995	
York City	1995	
Luton	1996	
Milton Keynes	1996	
Derby City	1996	
Bournemouth	1996	
Poole	1996	
Darlington	1996	
Brighton & Hove	1996	Brighton BC; Hove BC
Portsmouth City	1996	
Southampton	1996	
Leicester City	1996	
Rutland	1996	
Stoke-on-Trent	1996	
Swindon	1996	Thamesdown BC
Bracknell Forest	1997	
Reading	1997	
Slough	1997	
West Berkshire	1997	
Wokingham	1997	
Windsor & Maidenhead	1997	
Peterborough City	1997	
Halton	1997	
Warrington	1997	
Plymouth City	1997	
Torbay	1997	
Medway	1997	Rochester City Council, Gillingham BC
Southend-on-Sea	1997	
Thurrock	1997	
Herefordshire	1997	Hereford & Worcester CC (part), Hereford City; Leominster (part); Malvern Hills DC (part); South Herefordshire DC
Blackburn with Darwen	1997	
Blackpool	1997	
Nottingham City	1997	
Telford & Wrekin	1997	The Wrekin

Authority	First elections	Predecessors
Central Bedfordshire	2009	Mid-Bedfordshire DC; South Bedfordshire DC
Bedford	2009	
Cheshire West and Chester	2009	Ellesmere Port & Neston BC; Vale Royal BC; Chester City Council; Cheshire CC
Cornwall	2009	Cornwall CC; Penwith DC; Caradon DC; Kerrier DC; Carrick BC; Restormel BC; North Cornwall DC
Durham	2009	Durham CC, Durham City Council, Easington BC, Sedgefield BC, Teesdale DC, Wear Valley DC, Chester-le-Street DC, Derwentside DC
Northumberland	2009	Northumberland CC, Berwick BC, Alnwick DC, Wansbeck DC, Tynedale DC, Castle Morpeth BC, Blyth Valley BC
Shropshire	2009	Shropshire CC, Bridgnorth DC, North Shropshire DC, South Shropshire DC, Shrewsbury & Atcham BC, Oswestry BC
Wiltshire	2009	Wiltshire CC, Salisbury DC, Kennet DC, North Wiltshire DC, West Wiltshire DC
Cheshire East	2009	Macclesfield BC, Congleton BC, Crewe and Nantwich BC, Cheshire CC
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	2019	Bournemouth, Poole, Christchurch DC, Dorset CC (part)
Dorset	2019	Dorset CC (part), East Dorset DC, West Dorset DC, North Dorset DC, Purbeck, Weymouth & Portland
Buckinghamshire	2021 (postponed from 2020)	Buckinghamshire CC, Wycombe DC, Chiltern DC, South Bucks DC, Aylesbury Vale DC
West Northamptonshire	2021 (postponed from 2020)	Daventry DC, South Northamptonshire DC, Northampton BC, Northamptonshire CC (part)
North Northamptonshire	2021 (postponed from 2020)	Corby BC, Kettering BC, Wellingborough BC, East Northamptonshire DC, Northampton CC (part)

Appendix 2: Further reading

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Joshua McDonnell (2020). "Municipality size, political efficacy and political participation: a systematic review", *Local Government Studies*, 46:3, 331-350, DOI: 10.1080/03003930.2019.1600510

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Kyohei Yamada & Kiichiro Arai (2020). "Do boundary consolidations alter the relationship between politicians and voters? The case of municipal mergers in Japan", *Local Government Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/03003930.2020.1761335

Appendix 3: restructuring worldwide

The table below lists local authority merger programmes in European and other developed states since the mid-20th century.

Source: J. Blom-Hansen, K. Houlberg, S.Serritzlew, and D. Treisman (2016), "Jurisdiction Size and Local Government Policy Expenditure: Assessing the Effect of Municipal Amalgamation" *American Political Science Review,* 110 (4), 812-831. p814

Country	Year(s)	Changes
Sweden	1952, 1969	Massive amalgamation
Norway	1960s	Massive amalgamation
Denmark	1970, 2007	Massive amalgamation
Finland	2006-11	From 431 to 336 municipalities
Iceland	2006	From 204 to 79 local units
UK	1960s and 1970s	Massive amalgamation
Ireland	2014	From 114 to 31 local authorities
West Germany	1960s and 1970s	From 24,000 to 8,000 municipalities
Former East Germany	Since 1990	Elimination of 50% of local units
Austria	1960s	From 4,000 to 2,700 local units
Switzerland	Since 1996	From 3,000 to 2,600 communes
Belgium	1970s	Elimination of 75% of municipalities
Netherlands	Since 1950	Elimination of 50% of local units
Luxembourg	2009-2017	Program to cut almost 40% of municipalities
France	1970s	From 37,000 to 36,000 communes
Spain	1977-2007	From 8,800 to 8,111 local units
Italy		No significant reduction
Greece	Since 1990s	Massive amalgamation
Turkey	2008	Planned reduction from 3,225 to 2,950 municipalities
Lithuania	1990s	Elimination of 75% of local units
Latvia	1990s	Elimination of 75% of local units
Estonia		Plans to reduce 226 units to less than 50
Canada	Since 1960s	Amalgamations
Australia	Since 1970s	From 900 to 600 local councils
New Zealand	1980s	From 200 to 74 city and district councils
Japan	1953, 1999	From 3,232 to 1,719 local units
South Korea	1990s	Wave of amalgamations

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