

POWER IN PLACE: DEVOLUTION & DISTRICTS DRIVING OUR RECOVERY

BRIEFING FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS



This document sets out the key asks of the District Councils' Network (DCN) ahead of the Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper. We hope you will be able to support us over the coming weeks secure a devolution deal that allows districts to deliver for their local communities.

ABOUT THE DCN

DCN is a cross-party member led network of 187 district councils. District councils deliver 86 essential services to over 22 million people across 68% of the country, building better lives and stronger economies. District councils are closest to the residents, communities and businesses that make our country great, and we know what they need to reach their full potential.

CONTEXT

We are at a pivotal point in our nation's history. The coming months will define our future for generations to come. The Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper must move quickly for jobs and growth, empowering the existing local capacity and partnerships that can best deliver for local residents, businesses and communities.

District councils represent the best of local government – they are innovative and collaborative, they are strategic leaders and trusted deliverers, they are rooted in community and connected into every business, they drive growth and support some of the most vulnerable, they are pragmatic focusing on outcomes, and they are deeply embedded in the fabric of the communities, towns and cities serving 20 million people across the country.

Devolution should back the success of districts in delivery. It should not distract from the local recovery effort or reduce delivery capacity through forcing reorganisation into a less local, less agile, less responsive local government pushed by interests wanting county unitary councils everywhere. Local governance is a local matter, places must be free to decide how to organise services and to progress any kind of reform only where there is significant local agreement.

Without doubt, our future national and local prosperity will rely on a route forward that is defined by local, regional and national collaboration around a focus on the residents and businesses in places; and at this point they need delivery not debate.

DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL RECOVERY WHITE PAPER: KEY ASKS

The Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper is a crucial opportunity to spread opportunity to every town, city and community in the UK and delivery prosperity and stability in a time of great economic uncertainty. To take this opportunity, the Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper must:

1. Deliver genuine devolution that moves quickly to drive local growth

- There is crisis in our national and local economies and huge challenges facing public services. Jobs and growth must be priority ambitions for devolution and there must be proper levelling up of towns, cities and communities across the country to ensure everyone benefits.
- It should focus on how districts and partners can help deliver best returns from the whole-state effort in our places by granting them new powers, targeting and joining up services and investments, and setting out a clear framework for how this will be taken forward.

- It should not get tripped up and bogged down in debate on local government reform, consuming significant resources and distracting from the urgent task at hand.

2. Retain and build on the local capacity to deliver

- Devolution should empower district councils' existing local delivery capacity with the tools and funding to deliver growth, rather than remove it through reorganisation.
- District councils have been at the centre of the sectors' successes across the Covid-19 pandemic; delivering the most business grants the most quickly, rapidly accommodating rough sleepers, mobilising and coordinating the community effort, stepping in to help shielded and non-shielded vulnerable groups, keeping waste collections running and keeping the planning system going.
- Devolution should empower districts because they deliver solutions, not problems.

3. Empower real-world economies

- District councils reflect the towns, cities and communities in which people live and businesses operate. They are embedded in the catchment areas for high streets and football teams, the travel areas for work and leisure; they know their local economies and hold a range of levers to get growth going.
- A district level response is key. Evidence suggests the pandemic's impact on jobs and growth will vary between district areas *within* county areas more than between county areas and core cities.
- And so, devolution must empower district councils and partners around the economic areas of our future; celebrating our historical ceremonial counties rather than being held back by them.

4. Continue to anchor local government in local communities

- English local government is amongst the most centralised in Europe, and devolution must not centralise further again.
- With populations nearing the size of Northern Ireland and landscapes several times larger than Greater London, county unitary authorities would resemble regional, not local, government.
- The average size of a new county unitary council would be 122 times larger than the average council in Germany, 14 times larger than in Denmark, and 5 times larger than the current average for all councils in England.
- Covid-19 revealed resilience, strength and power in our communities, they must not be pushed away; when asked in referenda, the public consistently vote against creating new unitary counties.

5. Reject false arguments that bigger local government is better or cheaper local government

- The primary case for county unitary councils focuses on achieving scale and savings. However, as a House of Commons briefing for MPs summarised in 2019, all the evidence is clear that increasing scale is no guarantee for increasing efficiency or improving public services.¹
- Although there might be some benefit of delivering some services at different levels, including having some services more local, evidence points to other factors playing a

¹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8619/>

more influential role in service delivery and efficiencies, such as political and officer leadership.

- Meanwhile county councils have promoted questionable projected savings from county unitary proposals, which focus on removing delivery capacity and do not come close to resolving the funding challenges facing local government; evidenced by the challenges facing recently created unitary councils. In fact, rooting services in locality could be most effective in achieving long term financial sustainability.

6. Support strategic leadership across wider functional economic areas

- District councils are the natural administrative building blocks across wider geographies and are already coming together to provide leadership on wider strategic issues connecting towns and cities.
- Devolution should further enable this by equipping district councils and partners, like Local Enterprise Partnerships, to lead strategic issues such as infrastructure, transport and inward investment across wider economic areas; potentially coming together in mayoral combined authorities only where places want them.
- County unitary councils would not work well within such models; creating strategic leadership tension between a small number of large organisations, meanwhile reducing the local delivery capacity to get things done.

7. Introduce an upper limit for the size of new unitary councils, in line with the principle of electoral equality

- Local governance should be determined locally, reform should only take place where there is significant local agreement that it is the right thing for their residents and businesses.
- However, the government should make clear that any future reform should follow the principles of electoral equality as a cornerstone of democracy, as set out in the Conservative manifesto and now in primary legislation as part of the boundary review.
- In doing so, it would mean indicating that a preferred population size for any new unitary council be in line with existing unitary councils, a population of around 250,000 people, and introducing an upper limit of 500,000 to prevent an unacceptable divergence from the principles of electoral equality.

HOW CAN PARLIAMENTARIANS HELP?

- Convene a meeting with your local district leader and chief executive to discuss devolution. DCN is encouraging members to engage more regularly and proactively with their local MP. Your support for this would be greatly appreciated.
- Write to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government calling for the Government to support district councils' key asks for the Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper, and asking for assurances that districts will be central to devolution plans.
- Speak up for district councils during parliamentary debates and question sessions. DCN is always happy to provide suggested oral and written questions, and briefings ahead of debates.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The DCN's full report on devolution is [available here](#). For more information, please contact dcn@local.gov.uk.