

Bigger is not better: the evidenced case for keeping 'local' government

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SUMMARY

The government's policies towards devolution have so far been focused on an economic growth agenda and on the creation and operation of combined authorities. The commitments for further devolution in the Government's 2019 manifesto have been welcome, and are now more important given the need to support communities through the pandemic and into the social and economic recovery.

Unfortunately, these objectives are unnecessarily hampered by linking devolution to the structural reorganisation of local government and the creation of large unitary councils. The arguments for centralising local government everywhere have been, and will continue to be, pushed by some interests in national and local government. However, their case is based on arguments that are demonstrably false when looking at the genuinely independent academic evidence.

Given the scale of the challenge ahead of us, the acute need for effective and rapid local support in our communities, and the critical importance of strong and effective local government for the long-term wellbeing of people and places, it is imperative to use robust independent academic work to call out those false arguments now, and for the future. That is the purpose of this report.

The summary messages are set out below:

1. Creating large unitary authorities, on the basis of a short-term policy focus on a small number of current issues, is inconsistent with the need to address longer term challenges regarding the health and sustainability of local government and local democracy.
2. In addition to their role as service providers, local authorities have a crucial place-shaping role, responding to the range of economic, social and environmental needs and opportunities in their areas, and leading a positive vision for their residents and businesses. In discussions about structural options, this role has typically and ill-advisedly been neglected or downplayed.
3. In these circumstances, although the cost-effectiveness of service provision is an important consideration, so too are a range of other criteria such as community identity, democratic viability and accountability.
4. The case for the retention and improvement of the existing system of local government in shire counties has been wrongly neglected in successive government agendas.
5. The case for extending the spread of the 'combined authorities' model, which has demonstrated its capacity for spearheading economic regeneration, has equally been neglected, as an alternative to allocating this function to unitary counties or part-counties. It should be included in the evaluation of viable options.
6. England has the largest units of local government and the fewest councillors of all European nations. Further increases in unit size would increase this disparity.

7. The existing system, in various forms, has proved remarkably resilient since it was established in 1974, despite numerous efforts to discredit and marginalize it as a viable structural option. At present over 80% of the population currently live in areas governed by multi-tiered local government.

8. More than 300 pieces of independent academic research over 50 years have found no consistent or conclusive results showing that increases in council size are a guarantee of improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, performance or cost reduction. Councils of all sizes can be efficient, effective, perform well and reduce costs or be inefficient, ineffective, perform badly and fail to reduce costs.

9. Local government leadership (political and managerial), powers, autonomy and financing regimes all have a greater impact on efficiency, effectiveness, performance and cost reduction than does council size.

10. Independent academic research is wholly consistent in its findings that increases in the population or geographical size of councils has a damaging effect on the health of local democracy, such as participation, turnout and overall satisfaction.

11. After a series of in-depth evidence-based studies, which evaluated options on the basis of a wide range of relevant criteria, the Banham Commission concluded that in the large majority of counties, a move to unitary authorities could not be justified.

12. The County Councils Network (CCN) has supported a unitary county position which does not reflect the findings of independent research, unlike research which has been sponsored by a client with vested interests.

13. There is a much wider range of criteria required to effectively assess the options for reorganisation than the narrow focus taken by the CCN, who ignore important factors such as: the reality of cost effectiveness, community identity, public opinion, economic regeneration capacity, councillor representative capacity and democratic viability.

14. The subsidiarity principle, to which the UK government has signed up, states that the responsibility for public services should be allocated to the most local level possible, an outcome unachievable by county-based unitary councils, which lack a focus on genuine local communities, as they are experienced by people.

15. County-based unitaries disregard the significance of the strongest level of community identity other than villages and neighbourhoods - towns and cities - and would lead to the disappearance from the local government map of towns with proud records of civic achievement, such as Lincoln, Carlisle, Barrow, Preston and Burnley.

16. County-based unitaries fail to provide an appropriate basis for economic regeneration, as in most cases they do not correspond to functional economic areas.

17. In all recent surveys and referenda, public support for the status quo has been much higher than support for a move to a large unitary authority. The public must have a say in the boundaries of their local government area, preferably through binding referendum.

18. A move to county-based unitaries would further reduce councillor numbers and increase councillor representative ratios to levels totally out-of-line with comparable Western democracies. It would greatly increase the difficulties and complexities of the work of councillors, while distancing them from their communities.

19. The move to large unitary authorities in the shires would weaken the political party infrastructure, which helps to support a healthy and viable local democracy.

20. A number of misconceptions can be identified about the benefits that it is claimed would emerge from the introduction of large unitary authorities. We argue that the following statements can all be shown to be erroneous:

- There is a viable case for a major reorganisation at the present time.
- The case for unitary county councils is common to all such councils, irrespective of size and geographical configuration. One solution fits all.
- The unitary model of local government is already the dominant model. To extend the number of such authorities would involve a further step along an established path.
- Current local government arrangements in shire counties are confusing to the public and has the biggest question mark over its effectiveness; it is no longer 'fit for purpose'.
- Unitary authorities can be demonstrated to be more cost-effective providers of services than is possible under the current system and the larger the unitary authority the greater the scope for increase cost-effectiveness.
- Counties provide a natural, fundamental, identifiable basis for local government
- Counties are the ideal vehicle for taking forward the government's economic regeneration and 'levelling up' agendas
- It is unitary counties who should spearhead economic regeneration outside the metropolitan areas, rather than creating new combined authorities to carry out this role.
- Large unitary counties can develop a localist agenda by establishing some form of area committee arrangements and devolving powers to them, or by strengthening the role of town and parish councils within their areas.
- There should be no upper limit to the size of unitary authorities.

None of these assertions can stand up to a detailed appraisal of the available evidence

21. Claims that local accountability could be introduced in large unitary authorities by means of area panel arrangements or the strengthening of town and parish councils are difficult to justify and their introduction would constitute a de facto two-tier system to replace the one which the unitary authorities replaced.

22. There is little need or desire (other than among some counties and the CCN) for reorganization, and little to be gained from a disruptive and distracting process of reorganisation at a time when a period of stability, or an evidence-based debate about local government power, autonomy, finance, roles and responsibilities would be far more productive.

23. England is already an outlier across Europe and much of the rest of the world in the large size of its local government units; and this worrying disparity would increase with the creation of county-based unitary councils – or any further size increases. Multi-tiered systems of local government are the dominant form found in other comparable nations.

24. The across-the-board creation of large unitary counties would still see two-tier local government remain the norm for around half of the country's population. The new large unitaries would co-exist with numerous much smaller examples of the genre, with populations of 200,000 or less (in many cases, much less).

25. A move to county-based unitary councils would draw local government away from the governance of recognisable communities and sizeable towns and increase the drift of governmental responsibilities to meaningless conglomerates. 'Local' government, as we have always understood it, would cease to exist.

26. The government's belief that there is an ideal size for unitary authorities (typically in the range 300-500, 000) is unsustainable. There is no evidence to support this view. Seeking to identify an ideal size is a pointless exercise – a search for the Philosophers Stone!

1. INTRODUCTION

The government's policies towards devolution have so far been focused on an economic growth agenda and on the creation and operation of combined authorities. The recent announcement that there are further devolution measures to be introduced is to be welcomed. But this worthy policy objective is unnecessarily hampered by linking devolution to the structural reorganisation of local government and the creation of large unitary councils. There is no logic which suggests that reorganisation is a necessary contribution to a devolution agenda. It is unfortunate that the debate has descended into a reorganisation battle, the cost, upheaval and distraction of which is totally unnecessary. England already has councils with the largest average populations in Europe and the claim that local authorities need to be even larger bears no relationship to the principle of devolution, nor to the level at which services are provided by local government overseas.

A key element of the view held by central government - and some in local government - that there is the need to increase the size of local authorities is the notion 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.

These arguments about size ignore the community governance role of local government and any idea that it is a politically representative institution that should reflect the needs and priorities of communities with which the public express a genuine affinity. Councils have a service provision and a democratic engagement role, both of which must be taken seriously in any reorganisation debate.

What this report demonstrates is that there is no one 'ideal size' for local government that meets all the demands of multi-functional service responsibility and democratic engagement. The report challenges the conventional wisdom that bigger local government is more efficient and effective and that increasing the size of councils will always guarantee improvement. Different services respond to different scale stimuli and so too do the often- overlooked democratic aspects of local government.

The report argues that the search for an optimum size for local government and the designation of a reorganisation of local government as a basis for devolution would be better replaced by a mature debate about the role, powers, functions and freedom, autonomy and financing of local government. Addressing those issues would place local government on a more sustainable and secure footing than any amount of size increases.

One thing is certain: under the current proposals, devolution to English local government – on whatever population size – will

not measure up to the scope of devolution to Scotland and Wales and without an English Parliament, England will always remain short-changed in the devolution stakes.

The report critically examines the arguments, put forward by the county councils, in favour of large unitary authorities being established throughout the shire counties. The report highlights how many of these arguments are unbalanced, ill-conceived and would have a profoundly damaging effect on the long-term health and sustainability of local government in England, and on the quality of services and opportunities for participation in our villages, towns and cities.

The report identifies several misconceptions that can be found in the government briefings on this issue, and in the three reports commissioned by the County Councils Network (CCN), particularly the oddly titled 'Making Counties Count'. Surely 'counties already count', as they are partners with district councils in helping people and places achieve their full potential. But this odd title suggests that the CCN think that they do not count until district councils are abolished and their responsibilities absorbed by the counties.

The next section sets out the main questions to be explored in the report.

The third section sets the context for the devolution debate by drawing lessons from the recent history of reorganisation initiatives in England.

The fourth section examines what independent academic research can tell us about the search for an optimum size of local government and compares this evidence with some of the findings of reports commissioned by consultants.

In the fifth section, we identify and critically appraise ten misconceptions which can be identified in the County Council Network's (CCN) material.

Finally, our conclusions are set out, which make it clear why large county-based unitary authorities would be bad news for citizens, local communities, public services and for local government.

2. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Given the strength and prevalence of the belief that 'bigger is better' among policy-makers trying to shape the map of English local government, it is necessary to test the justification for a series of what are often unchallenged statements and assumptions about the optimum size of local government units. Indeed, there appears to be an implicit and firmly held set of assumptions and beliefs that bigger local government is always better – but better for whom?

The assumptions need to be tested and so too do the intentions behind them and their supporting narrative. The narrative's power comes from its strongly normative value-laden messages, rather than from facts; and from how those that adopt the narrative ignore, or are selective about, the evidence used to support the argument that bigger is better. The test will be applied by exploring the following questions:

1. What is influencing government and others to support council amalgamations and abolitions and the creation of large scale unitaries?
2. What is the evidence to support for an 'optimum size' for local government on the basis of efficiency, effectiveness and democratic engagement?

3. Is there a maximum viable size for local authorities?
4. Should population alone determine the boundaries or size of local authorities?
5. Does the case for devolution rest on the need for English local government to be reorganised on the basis of large unitary authorities?

Whatever else the principle of devolution involves, it must surely imply maximum autonomy for each council to make its own decisions and to have much more influence over those parts of the public sector currently under the auspices of separate unelected bodies. Arguments about devolution must also be detached from arguments about the ideal size of local government units; otherwise the result will be councils which do not and cannot reflect any sense of community identity, with the likely outcome of a disconnected and disengaged local community. As an emphasis on localism, in one form or another, has been a long-standing government policy, it is ironic that the pressure from the centre is to create bigger and more remote councils and therefore more disengaged communities.



3. THE BACKGROUND TO DEVOLUTION

To understand the expectations surrounding the government-initiated review of local government structure in the shire counties, it is helpful to explore the background to current approaches towards devolution and how they have become irrationally linked to local government reorganisation.

There is a contentious history to this 'pro-unitary authority' belief, which has long been a dominant feature of local government. The introduction of large unitary authorities in the non-metropolitan areas of England was one of the key recommendations of the Redcliffe Maud Commission in 1970. Following an influential campaign which deployed the slogan: 'Don't Vote for R.E Mote', the 1970-74 Conservative government rejected this recommendation and introduced the county and district system which still operates in the shire counties unaffected by the unitary principle.

The briefings, statements and comments provided so far by central government, which could be reflected in the forthcoming whitepaper, suggest three key elements to its devolution agenda:

- A commitment to increasing devolution to local government, along the lines pioneered in the various combined authorities, established from 2014 onwards.
- An emphasis on developing structures which can facilitate economic regeneration in the aftermath of the Covid virus and which can progress the government's commitment to 'levelling up' across England.
- A strong predisposition in favour of the introduction of unitary authorities to replace the current system of local government in the shire counties, as a means of achieving these objectives and as part of a long-standing civil service agenda.

The 'pro-unitary authority' stance of Whitehall is a long-term dominant feature of thinking about local government. The introduction of large unitary authorities in the non-metropolitan areas of England was one of the key recommendations of the Redcliffe Maud Commission in 1970. However, following widespread public concern about this proposal, the 1970-74 Conservative government however, rejected Maud's recommendation (which the previous Labour Government had been inclined to support) and introduced the system which still operates in the shire counties.

In 1986, the Conservative government abolished the Greater London Council and the six Metropolitan County Councils centered on Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Leeds and Sheffield and transferred their responsibilities to the metropolitan district councils who were designated unitary authorities (a designation which conveniently ignored the wide range of joint arrangements which were required at Greater London and metropolitan county level).

In 1992, the Conservative government established a Commission chaired by Sir John Banham to review local

government in the shire counties. The terms of reference included a clear expectation that the commission would recommend unitary authorities to replace the existing structure, wherever possible. But after a series of in-depth studies in each county which considered, among other things: community identity, public opinion, the pattern of 'functional economic areas' and the costs and savings predicted to flow from various unitary options and the status quo, the Banham Commission concluded that: in the majority of the shire counties, a move to a unitary system was not justified. The case for unitary authorities found little justification in the evidence collected by the Commission (whose work programme was completed by its successor, the Cooksey Commission, in 1986), nor did it attract significant levels of public support. In only nine of the 39 shire counties concerned were unitary authorities recommended and in only five were they introduced by the government.

In the GLC and the six largest metropolitan areas, the decision taken in 1986 to abandon the tiered system came to be recognised as a misjudgment and was reversed when the GLA was established in 2000 and combined authorities were introduced in the metropolitan areas from 2014 onwards (with several other city regions where this would be an equally appropriate move). Combined authorities have also been established in Greater Bristol, the Tees Valley and Peterborough and Cambridgeshire (in the last instance involving a three-tier system in the county area).

Outside the shire counties, over 80% of the country's population lives in multi-tier local authority areas. This percentage is likely to increase as more combined authorities are introduced.

In 2005, a further pro-unitary government initiative encouraged bids from shire county areas to propose a unitary system of government, counties and districts were permitted to put forward different unitary models. In a process which has been described by Chisholm and Leach (2008) as 'a debasement of probity in the way public affairs are carried out in England' and which led to two judicial reviews, nine new unitary authorities were established including two sub-county unitaries in both Cheshire and Bedfordshire.

In 2014, George Osborne's Northern Powerhouse initiative made no mention in its initial phases, to unitary authorities, but in 2016, when the Cities and Local Government Bill was being introduced in the House of Lords, the rules were changed. The government was now offering three devolutionary options:

1. a deal with a directly elected mayor:
2. a deal involving a move to unitary authorities with no requirement for an elected mayor
3. no deal.

The emergence of a unitary authority clause on to the agenda was an incongruous and wholly unjustified development.

The arguments typically put forward by the MCHLG to justify a move to unitary authority model are two-fold.

- A claim that the current system of district and county councils is confusing to local residents.
- A unitary system would, it is argued, save council tax-payers money. Services could be provided more cost-effectively on a unitary basis, and the larger the authority, the greater the potential savings.

Numerous consultancy reports commissioned and paid for by county councils, individually or collectively, through the County Council Network (CCN), have unsurprisingly supported a unitary position – which as we shall see in the next section, does not reflect the outcome of independent research that has not been sponsored by a client with vested interests.

There are clear advantages for central, rather than local government, from creating large unitary councils, evident for the past thirty years, namely:

- Whitehall has long been aware of the extent to which its administrative duties would be simplified if it only had to deal with a small number of large unitary authorities, all with the same range of functions.
- Far from being the basis for devolution, the creation of a small number of very large unitary councils would make central control of local government easier and would strengthen the centre's hand in deploying local government as an agent of delivery of its own policies.

In other words, it seems that local government must be reshaped to make central government's job easier (see Andersen, 2008).

Government Ministers have often announced their desire to see more unitary authorities with populations between 300,000 and 500,000 created, although the source of such population estimates remains unclear. What is made clear, later in the report, is that not only do local authorities in other countries have populations that don't begin to approach these figures, but that independent research has demonstrated that such population figures find no justification in theory or reality as a foundation for local government. Discussions about local government should not start from the basis of 'ideal size'.

If multi-tiered local government is felt to be appropriate in Greater London, the six former met county areas and a further group of councils operating in conjunction with a combined authority, it is odd and inconsistent that this option should have been marginalised in the current reorganisation and devolution initiative. As was the case in the last evidence-based reorganisation project (the Banham Commission), the onus should be on advocates of a unitary system to demonstrate that change is worthwhile, not just in terms of predicted financial costs and savings, but also for other qualities necessary for a healthy local government system, such as: community identity, subsidiarity, public opinion and democratic viability.

Rather than focusing on how big local government should be it would be much more productive to raise a more fundamental set of questions about the principal purposes of local government:

- Is it a mechanism by which identifiable communities should have a substantial degree of autonomy and self-government?
- Should it involve democratically representative bodies charged with governing, in a broad sense, their localities?
- Or is it predominantly a service provider, charged with the implementation of central government policy? If so, does it need to be elected at all?

Following the influential Lyons report (2007), we support the view that in addition to operating as service providers or commissioners, local authorities have a crucial strategic place-shaping role, responding to the wide range of social, economic and environmental needs in their areas. The idea of local authorities acting in this way as governmental agencies, rather than mere service delivery agents (typically operating within detailed centrally imposed requirements or guidelines) provides a more holistic view of the purpose of local government.

The spread of local authority vision documents in the 1980s and 90s was an illustration of the perceived importance of this role. But, in recent local government reorganisation initiatives, including this one, it is the service provision perspective which has been dominant, with the governmental role downplayed or neglected. This imbalance should be redressed. Place-shaping and the governing of localities should become a major consideration together with the need to ensure that 'local' government reflects real places with which people identify, rather than artificial constructs to which local people feel little or no affinity.

Reflecting on these points, we can see that the county and district areas currently open to review are varied and differentiated and five different (overlapping) categories can be identified:

- counties which approximate to small city regions, with a hole in the middle where the city (typically a unitary authority) is located. Leicestershire and Warwickshire provide examples of this category:
- the London suburbia counties (Surrey, Herts):
- counties with multiple urban/city foci (Hants, Lancs):
- rural counties with a dispersed settlement pattern (Worcestershire, Cumbria and North Yorkshire):
- counties with particularly large populations, which may combine elements of the previous four (e.g. Essex and Kent, although Lancs and Hants also fit into the 'large size' category).

It is highly unlikely that, were a unitary 'solution' to be insisted on, it would be the same solution for all these varied examples. Indeed, in some cases, the designation of unitary councils at the district level and the abolition of the county may well be a sensible alternative. We must be highly sceptical of the damaging claims that all shire counties, in their current form, could and should become unitary authorities. One size (and structure) would certainly not fit all.

Britain is unique among European nations, the USA, and indeed much of the rest of the world, in its enthusiasm for unitary local government, which has recently and inappropriately gained the status of conventional wisdom. Table One provides some examples of the tiered nature of local government:

1. EXAMPLES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT TIERED SYSTEMS

Belgium: 10 provinces; 581 municipalities
Canada: 3,800 municipalities, 10 provinces 3 territories, 13 provincial areas
Germany: States, 402 Counties, 11,902 municipalities, 295 rural districts and 107 district free cities.
Spain: 50 provincial councils; 8,000 municipalities
Sweden: 21 counties, 290 municipalities
Norway: 11 Counties; 356 municipalities (3 municipalities are divided into boroughs)
Denmark: 98 Municipalities (5 regions)
Poland: 2477 municipalities, 380 counties, 16 regions
France: 18 Regions, 101 Departments, aprox 2,000 cantons, 332 arrondissements, aprox 36,000 communes
Italy: 20 regions, 107 provinces and just over 8,000 municipalities
Japan: 20 self-governing cities which are independent of the larger jurisdictions within which they are located (much like county and district councils as a parallel) • 42 core cities, 40 special cities • 688 other cities • 745 self-governing towns outside the cities as well as precincts of urban wards • 183 Villages
Switzerland: 26 Cantons; 2,500 municipalities
The US: • most States have two-tiers of local government: counties and municipalities. • counties may also include townships • municipalities vary between cities, towns, boroughs and villages and the types and nature of these municipalities vary between states

It is simply not the case that, internationally, unitary local government is the predominant model. Tiered local government is an established part of governing systems and a recent OECD (2016) study of 86 nations found a two-tier system to be the predominant model, with three tiers of local government not unusual.

The search for an optimum size of a local authority is a search for the philosophers' stone. Indeed, the question 'how big should local authorities be?' is entirely the wrong starting point. There is no consistent evidence to suggest that there is an 'optimum size' for local government. The prime consideration in any review of local government structure, including this one, should be the long-term health and sustainability of local government and local democracy, not shorter term considerations such as a specific economic regeneration or growth agenda (see, Wall and Vilela Bessa, 2016), or the impact of the Covid 19 virus. Otherwise local government can be seen as little more than a plaything for central government either to reorganise for its own convenience or to suit some short-term political agenda, linked to an unjustified belief that bigger is always better. It is to the myth that 'bigger is always better' to which we now turn.

4. THE SEARCH FOR THE PHILOSOPHERS' STONE: BUSTING THE MYTHS BEHIND BIGGER IS BETTER

The size of local authorities and the relationship between size, performance and local democracy has been the subject of considerable independent academic research, as well as consultants reports, with the latter more likely to arrive at conclusions palatable to those doing the commissioning.

The overall conclusions of the 300 pieces of independent academic research we accessed on the effects of increases in council size can be crystallised as follows:

CONCLUSION 1: EFFICIENCY, EFFECTIVENESS AND PERFORMANCE: SIZE DOESN'T MATTER

Despite the conviction with which the case is made that increases in council size improve efficiency, effectiveness and performance, no consistent or conclusive results were found in the literature surveyed, that justify the belief that larger councils are always more efficient, effective, cheaper or a better option in the provision of public services than smaller units of local government. The literature is contradictory, with inconsistent findings on this matter.

CONCLUSION 2: LOCAL DEMOCRACY – SIZE DOES MATTER

The literature is far more consistent in its findings that increases in the population or geographical scale of local government units have a deleterious effect on democratic criteria, such as:

- electoral turnout,
- public trust in councillors
- public trust in officers
- levels of engagement
- Contact between citizens and councillors
- Contact between citizens and council officers
- Levels of identification or affinity with the council held by the public

The literature reveals that there is inevitability that the democratic criteria of local government will be damaged by increases in council size.

The rest of the section provides a review of the results of independent international academic research into council size and its links to performance, cost and local democracy and draws out the main messages from that research.

Size and Performance

England is already an outlier in the population size of its local authorities having the largest units of local government across Europe. Where amalgamations have taken place overseas, the resultant new councils are still smaller – on average – than councils in England.

If the large councils we have here are supposed to perform in ways which justify the 'bigger is better' belief, the question can be raised of why it was Northamptonshire County Council, at almost 800,000 the largest unit of local government in Northamptonshire, that issued the first section 114 notice for 20 years and not one of the smaller districts? Why did the districts have to suffer as a result of the county's failings and be abolished to be replaced by West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire unitary authorities? It can only be that the government saw an opportunity to pursue its long-term ad hoc reorganisation of English local government to create larger unitary councils.

Stewart (2003: 181) points out that after the 1974 re-organisation the average population size of a shire district council was over ten times the average of the lower tier in Europe. The scale of local authorities indicates that when it comes to geographical size, successive re-organisations have prioritised issues of service performance and management above the needs of community engagement, political representation and democratic accountability. As Stewart noted:

The average population of shire districts is over 10 times the average of the lower tier in Europe... The scale of UK authorities reflected the dominant concept of local authorities as agencies for the provision of services and associated assumptions of sizeism dominant in government and public administration. It was widely assumed that size was associated with efficiency, despite the reality that investigations have failed to find any clear link between size and efficiency and/or effectiveness (Stewart, 2003: 181).

Little has changed in the pattern of research findings (or official thinking about size) since Stewart reached that conclusion and research before and after his writing supports the veracity of his claim.

One of the more robust explorations of local government, the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1969) struggled to balance its desire to see larger units of local government, with its recognition that such units would have a deleterious effect on democratic engagement. Redcliffe-Maud recognised that democratic considerations implied an upper size limit and that if councils became too large councillors would find it difficult to:

- maintain contact with constituents
- hold council officials to account
- comprehend the problems of the area; and determine priorities and policy decisions

The Commission also noted that citizens would fail to identify with large units or have any sense of belonging to it:

Moreover, the bigger the unit, the more doubtful it becomes whether the individual citizen can have any real sense of belonging to it. People should be able to feel that they are included in a particular unit for purposes of government because they share a common interest with the other inhabitants in the efficient administration of the public services provided. But, when the authority is very large there is less of a chance that they will be willing to regard it as the only authority that ought to provide all their services. The distance between the people and their authority, therefore must not be too great. This is particularly import for personal services (para: 275:72)

Wood (1976:56) points out that, for policy makers 'there has long been a magical quality in certain levels of population' but this is a position with no basis. He shows that after 1888 a population of 50,000 qualified a town for county borough status, a figure increased to 75,000 in 1926 and to 100,000 in 1945, with the only intention of preventing the creation of more county boroughs. He lists government departments suggesting: '300,000-500,000 as a desirable minimum for an education authority, 250,000 for a children's authority, 500,000 for a police authority and 150,000-200,000 for a local health authority'. Wood (1976) shows that such figures for population size, including the 250,000 stressed by Redcliffe-Maud often emerged from speculative debate rather than reflecting hard evidence.

It is still the case today that policy makers are searching for an 'ideal size' of council, at worst alighting on a population figure and then seeking evidence that supports it. It is also the case that the search for an 'ideal size' is invariably predicated on the view assumption that the dominant role of local government is that of service provision, rather than a more wide-ranging governance definition.



It is important to test the assumptions which have been the motivating force behind recent local government reorganisation, against a range of independent research findings. What can clearly be seen from research exploring council size and performance is that there are no definitive, consistent conclusions about what constitutes the ideal size of local government to secure optimum performance -quite apart from difficulties in determining what optimum public services performance is (see, Boyne, 1996).

Moreover, different services respond in different ways to size stimuli and that the different dimensions of 'performance' need to be considered in that context (see, Andrews, et al, 2006, Andrews and Boyne, 2012). The link between scale and performance and 'economies of scale' has been challenged by Boyne (1995) who concluded:

Analyses of local government reorganisation have concentrated on a largely spurious link between population size and the efficiency of service provision. There is little point in setting minimum or maximum populations for local units because it is the scale of output which counts, not the number of local residents. The level of output is likely to vary considerably for a given population, depending in part on the level of need for different services. Even when needs are the same in different areas, the level of output will vary as a result of decisions on service quantity and quality... (Boyne, 1995: 221)

Some 10 years later Martin (2005) warned against economies of scale being taken as a sufficient reason for large-scale reorganisation and increases in council size when he commented in a note to the Lyons Inquiry:

The size of individual councils may be far less important now than it was assumed to be in the past. There are at least three reasons for this:

- Authorities are increasingly commissioning rather than delivering services;
- New technology increases the opportunities for new forms of delivery across boundaries and which do not therefore depend for the efficiency on the scale of operations in one locality;
- The increased emphasis on partnership working opens up new possibilities for authorities to work together and/or with other service providers to reap economies of scale (Martin, 2005)

What councils require therefore is not amalgamation, but greater freedom to achieve economies of scale through partnerships involving both the commissioning and delivery of, services.



In a research project involving a range of tests of the relationship between size and performance in English local government, Andrews, et al (2008) reached the following conclusions.

- 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
- The impact of population size varies across services, and between measures of performance for the same service.
- The biggest spenders in local government show the weakest size effect.

Andrews, et al, (2006: 4-5) drew the following lesson: The relationship between size and performance is a complex mosaic: sometimes bigger is better, sometimes small is superior, and sometimes medium-sized authorities achieve the best results. In other words, there is more than size to the story of performance and reorganising local government on one flawed notion is a dangerous and unpredictable step.

Indeed, the conclusions Andrews et al (2006) draw from their research make a powerful statement for policy-makers:

An implication of our findings is that size effects cannot be ignored in decisions on local government reorganisation. A change in the population served is likely to make a small but significant difference to many aspects of local authority performance. However, the direction and strength of that difference is likely to vary across and within services, and to vary from place to place, depending on the size of the existing and new authorities. This suggests that a universal size formula cannot be applied to decisions on reorganisation. Instead, the implications for performance, along with other considerations, should be evaluated in the context of the reforms proposed for each local area (Andrews, et al, 2006:41).

International independent research has cast further serious doubt on the hypothesis that economies of scale and performance are conclusively linked. The overall lesson to draw from the evidence is that the use of this hypothesis as a determining factor in decisions about council size is wholly inappropriate (Bish, 2001, Slack 2003, Dollery and Crase 2004, Dollery and Fleming 2005, Andrews, et al, 2006, Dollery and Barnes 2007). Indeed, much of the supposed advantages of economies of scale and the 'bigger is cheaper'

argument lose their force when councils work together to obtain purchasing advantages and saving through combined administrative functions, without the need for expensive and divisive reorganisations (Deller, Chicoine and Walzer, 1998, Dollery and Fleming 2006, De Ceuninck, 2010, Copus and Wall, 2017). The research findings reported in the literature involve cross-national and cross-continental comparisons and different constitutional systems and therefore have a credibility and generalisability that commissioned consultants' reports lack.

A further series of research projects has undermined the notion, that bigger local government is always more cost-effective (Muzzio and Tompkins, 1989, Keating, 1995, Byrnes and Dollery, 2002, Dollery and Fleming, 2006, Aulich et al 2011, Denters et al, 2012, Slack and Bird, 2013, Schaap and Karsten 2015, Erlingsson et al, 2020). Amalgamations of councils and the creation of larger units is not guaranteed to deliver economies of scale. Other options are available to generate scale and size economies, but that policy-makers often fail to recognise or to pursue options such as joint working, collaboration, enhanced financial autonomy for local government and greater cross boundary / cross public and private sector working (Teles, 2016, Klok, et al 2018).

The full costs of reorganisation are rarely set against the savings predicted to arise from amalgamations. Such costs are often overlooked in policy debates, but have long-term implications for the new councils which were created largely to 'save money'. There is a lack of independent empirical research that shows that the merging of adjacent councils into larger geographical entities with larger and more dispersed populations will result in economies of scale and cost reductions. The research literature indicates not only the complexity involved in issues of scale, but also the need for careful conceptualisation when seeking to understand links between performance and the search for the optimum council size. Newton aptly summed this up, thus:

the search for optimum size ... has proved to be as successful as the search for the philosophers' stone, since optimality varies according to service and type of authority' (Newton, 1982)

Independent academic research shows that one authority size cannot be demonstrated to be preferable to any other, but that different sizes are appropriate to different goals (Muzzio and Tompkins, 1989). Indeed, size sometimes appears to be seen as the solution to a range of local government problems; such arguments are undifferentiated and lack sophistication quite apart from being inaccurate (Denters, Mouritzan and Rose, 2012).

Schaap and Karsten (2015) show that the advocates of increased council size fail to appreciate how different problems – financial, economic or societal - operate at different scales and that increasing the size of councils cannot capture these various problems as they operate on different spatial scales: one size doesn't fit all (See, Ruano et al 2012, , Blom-Hansen, 2016).

The whole business of amalgamations of councils and the creation of larger units was neatly summed up by Keating (1995: 117):

The 'right' size for a municipal government is a matter of the local circumstances and the value judgements of the observer. Like so many issues in politics, this involves matters of ideology and interest'.

Little has changed in the intervening years since he made that observation. The notion that bigger local government can be relied on to always generate economies and efficiency improvements cannot be substantiated.



Local Democracy and the Size Debate

The results of research which explores the impact of increases in council size on local democracy are consistent and do not provide good news for enthusiasts of large unitary authorities. It is clear from the research that as councils increase in size there are a series of negative effects on a wide range of important democratic features (see figure three below, and for examples, Oliver, 2000, Denters 2002, Ladner 2002, Baglioni 2003, Kelleher and Lowery 2004, Kjeaar, et al, 2010, Denk, 2012).

The features in figure three also have different levels of tolerance to size increases, with some being affected sooner when size increases than others (see, McDonnell, 2019). As with the link between size and performance, when considering size and local democracy it depends on which factor is under the microscope as to how quickly there is a negative impact as council size increases (Keating 1995, Cusack, 1997, Rose, 2002, Frandsen, 2002, Lassen and Serritzlew, 2011, Hansen, 2013).

FIGURE 1: DEMOCRATIC FACTORS AND THE SIZE DEBATE

- Electoral turnout
- Membership of and involvement in, political parties, locally
- Attendance at council and public meetings, by the public
- Levels of trust held in councillors
- Levels of trust held in council officers
- Contact between citizens and councillors
- Contact between citizens and council officers
- Local political efficacy
- Councillors perceptions of their own influence
- Involvement in local action groups or political campaigns by the public
- Levels of identification or affinity with the council held by the public
- Public satisfaction with services
- The use of local referendums

Public interest in local government is greater in smaller areas, as is the level of interaction between the public and the 'council'. The 'presence' of the council is more readily felt and recognised by the public in smaller authorities and public participation is greater in smaller authorities than larger ones (Ladner 2002, Baglioni, 2003). Ladner suggested three reasons why these findings emerged:

(a) The influence of individuals on the outcome of elections or votes is larger in smaller constituencies, because they offer quite strong incentives to participate

(b) There is a higher identification with municipal matters in smaller municipalities, and therefore a higher rate of participation

(c) Social control in smaller municipalities is higher. Political participation is more likely to be considered as a social duty in smaller municipalities, resulting in higher levels of participation.

Denters, et al (2014) looked at a specific number of indicators for assessing the democratic quality of local political systems, as follows:

- Local political interest
- Local political knowledge
- Personal political competence
- Confidence in local politicians
- Satisfaction with local government performance
- Local electoral participation (turnout and local distinctiveness)
- Local non-electoral participation (contacting, party activities, community action)

In a comprehensive and detailed analytical study Denters et al (2014) demolish any notion that bigger local government might be better for local democracy. Their research assessed the possible effects of the population size of municipalities on these indicators and concluded that:

- For a number of indicators we find evidence that population size indeed has a negative effect on the quality of local democracy.
- No consistent positive size effects were found.
- 'where we found consistent effects for population size for local democracy... these effects were negative' (that is size adversely affected local democracy) (Denters et al 2014:330).

The literature also reports important findings about the link between the authenticity of the inter-relationship between citizens and councils and a sense of belonging or identification with the council as an entity and a place. Reporting results from research in Finland (Vakkala and Leinonen, 2016, EGPA Conference paper) state that:

When forming bigger municipalities, meaning approximately mergers of three or four municipalities if followed the renewal plans, the local service network is most likely to change. From democratic point of view the mergers diminish the representative part. In northern and eastern Finland the problem is the large surface areas of the municipalities: the new municipalities would in many cases cover current regions or areas. What happens to the municipality identity? ... It can be concluded that the

role of authentic interaction between municipalities and citizens becomes crucial in developing both citizen-orientation and citizens' identification with the municipality. Locality has a strong role in the sense of belonging and the idea of the municipality. Currently the service availability and quality are emphasized in the discourses about the municipality, coloured by efforts to constantly balance between legislation, citizen demands and needs and budgets (Vakkala and Leinonen, 2016).

As far back as 1981, Nielsen made a powerful and definite statement about both size and amalgamation of councils:

local distrust, local lack of efficacy, and local lack of saliency are systematically higher in medium - large municipalities than in smaller ones...the size factor may be a warning against far-reaching amalgamation' (Nielsen, 1981: 57).

The conclusions drawn by Nielsen (1981) and Vakkala and Leinonen (2016) are indicative of a debate about what constitutes community and how notions of community should be reflected in local government structure. The concept of community is important to any vision of local government that rests on the idea that the pattern of geographical settlements should form the basis of local government institutions. Identification with local authorities is much more likely when they are based on identifiable community areas and boundaries.

Conversations about community and community identify alongside considerations of participation by the public with local government are important because of the increasing recognition of the value of public participation in local government. In his work for the Widdicombe Committee, Gyford noted that local representation takes place in an increasingly diverse, complex and fragmented arena and that 'sectional pressures, in pushing local democracy to expand beyond its traditional reliance on representative institutions towards more participatory forms are bound to create a more complex world of local politics' (1986:127).

Since Gyford wrote for the Widdicombe Committee, pressure from central government on local government to adopt a more participatory approach and engage more with citizens has increased, alongside citizens becoming increasingly assertive. Thus, in considering increases in council size it is necessary to take into account the evidence that community engagement and participation can be damaged in bigger units of local government. In an 11 country study of council amalgamations, Baldersheim and Rose (2010), highlight the failure in England of policy makers to consider how democracy and community engagement are damaged by size increases and in some cases have hidden or ignored the adverse effects of size on local democracy.

When it comes to the health, vibrancy and responsiveness of local democracy, bigger is most certainly not better; nor does the argument that it is convince the public, who, where local

referenda have been held on the creation of new, large unitary authorities, have shown they prefer their local government to remain local. In the 2007 round of unitarisation the following local votes were held, providing interesting reading for advocates of amalgamations:

Referendum on a Shropshire Unitary 23rd January 2007:

Shrewsbury 70% vote against unitary Shropshire; Bridgnorth 86% voted against unitary Shropshire; South Shropshire 57% against unitary Shropshire.

Referendum on Durham Unitary 11th June 2007: Durham 76% voted against a unitary Northumberland (The referendum was commissioned by the local authorities in Chester-le-Street, Derwentside, Easington, Sedgfield, Teesdale, Wear Valley and Durham City).

Referendum on Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole

(Dorset) Unitary December 2017: 84% of residents voting in Christchurch voted against a unitary Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole

In each case however, the wishes of the public, as expressed in a democratic process, were seen as being of little consequence and the new unitaries were created.

5. MISCONCEPTIONS IN THE COUNTY COUNCILS NETWORK CASE

The CCN has long campaigned for the abolition of district councils and their replacement with unitary counties rather than trying to focus on continued improvement within the current system. Ideally, counties and districts should be prepared to work in partnership in the good governance of their areas, as indeed some of them have in the past and some still do. Yet, in the reports commissioned by the CCN, there are a number of misconceptions which it is important to recognise, before they are allowed to effect undue influence on future debate.

Misconception 1: There is a viable case for a major reorganisation at the present time

The CCN has welcomed the opportunity provided by the government's reorganisation initiative to introduce more large unitary authorities. But the pursuit of yet another partial local government reorganisation at such a fraught and turbulent time is difficult to comprehend and justify. So much local and national governmental energy will need to be directed in dealing with the health and economic impact of the pandemic and its second wave, and in managing the worst economic recession in living memory. Faced with these serious issues, local government reorganisation is a pointless expense and an unnecessary distraction.

The problem is that the current reorganisation initiative is a short-term measure, designed to kick start local economies following the fallout from Covid 19. In principle, there is a case for a nationwide review, but not at the present time, and to prove sustainable, it would need to take a much longer-term perspective and focus on a range of factors which contribute to good local government. Reorganisation is the wrong answer to the wrong question.

Misconception 2: The 'one-size fits all' case for unitary county councils is common to all such councils, irrespective of size and geographical configuration.

The oddly titled 'Making Counties Count' (the report commissioned and paid for by the CCN which, of the three reports, seeks to provide the most comprehensive review of the issues concerned) is sub-titled 'Weaving a new tapestry for local government'. It is a singularly inappropriate sub-title. Tapestry-weaving implies a subtle and painstaking process of blending threads of different colours. There is no such subtlety about the thrust of the main argument of 'Making Counties Count'. It recommends the establishment of unitary authorities based on existing county council areas across the board, whatever their geographical idiosyncrasies and whatever their size. There should be, they assert, no upper limit on size; a unitary Kent is as viable as a unitary Warwickshire.

The report goes so far as to argue that ideally, county boroughs which exist within existing shire counties should be absorbed into the new county-based creation (e.g. Blackburn with Darwen into Lancashire; Derby into Derbyshire: and

Nottingham into Nottinghamshire and Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester merged back into a county) but acknowledge that 'such steps are probably a bridge too far for the government'. Long may they remain so – the possibility of such towns and cities with their long traditions of civic pride and achievement such as Nottingham and Leicester being incorporated into shire-county based authorities whose populations would then become even bigger is not a happy prospect.

A 'one size fits all' argument ignores the diversity which clearly exists in the constituent elements of the various shire counties. For example, Surrey (dominated by London suburbia) differs from Cumbria (with population concentrated round the circumference with the Lake District at the centre) which differs from Lincolnshire (with its vast tracts of farmland and its multitude of small towns and villages). None of this appears to matter to 'Making Counties Count'. Such diversity has, as we argue later, major implications for the extent to which unitary shire counties can be seen as appropriate vehicles for economic regeneration.

Misconception 3: The unitary model of local government is already the dominant model. To extend the number of such authorities would involve a further step along an established path.

'Making Counties Count' appears to believe that there is a total of 126 single-tier authorities in England, twelve of them unitary counties (or part counties). This is incorrect. There are 55 unitary authorities, including those recently established in Dorset and Northamptonshire. The report appears to have included in its calculation of 'single tier' authorities the 32 London Borough Councils and the 36 Metropolitan District Councils. But in Greater London there is a directly elected mayor and an elected assembly. In the six former metropolitan county areas (and three others) there are combined authorities, headed by an elected mayor.

If any kind of local election is involved then the body concerned becomes a local authority (rather than a joint board) and the system which then operates becomes two-tier local government. Some 80% of the population of England is currently governed by multi-tiered system of local government. If unitary local government were to be introduced in all the counties currently in the frame, that figure would fall to around 50%, but would then increase if further combined authorities were to be created, which is by no means unlikely. Unitary local authorities do not dominate the local government map of England, and whatever the outcome of this review, they will not do so after it.

Misconception 4: Two-tier local government is confusing to the public and has the biggest question mark over its effectiveness. It is no longer 'fit for purpose'

Public confusion is not confined to the allocation of responsibilities between counties and districts (as Making Counties Count acknowledges: see pp 15-19). There are combined authorities, police and crime authorities, local

enterprise partnerships, national park authorities, health commissioning bodies and many other agencies providing public services and often operating on different boundaries to each other and to local government. The introduction of unitary authorities would make but a marginal contribution to reducing this confusion, and actually increase it in the short term.

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 from expressing an overwhelming preference for the continuation of the existing system when presented with unitary alternatives. Today, given the growth of internet and social media facilities it is an unproblematic straightforward process to locate which council deals with any issue, and one which almost all citizens in the western world navigate with ease.

Misconception 5: Unitary authorities can be demonstrated to be more cost-effective providers of services than is possible under the current system and the larger the unitary authority the greater the scope for increase cost-effectiveness.

As we have demonstrated, this assertion cannot be justified; nor is it a guaranteed outcome of larger unitary local government. The claims for increased cost-effectiveness in the county councils' case ignore the crucial issue of 'subsidiarity', and how one defines effectiveness. The principle of subsidiarity, widely adopted in local government structures across the world and written into the European Charter of Self-Government (to which England became a signatory in 1997) argues that the responsibility for the provision of local services should be placed at the most local level of sub-national government feasible, to maximise the responsiveness of the services concerned to varying local circumstances, needs and priorities. Indeed, it was on the basis of this principle that the services which are currently the responsibility of the districts were allocated to them in 1974.

There remains a clear logic to the current system of local government in shire areas. On the one hand, there are the strategic services (such as highways/transportation planning) which require a wider spatial area. On the other there are those services which do not require a wider or more populous area, such as development control, local social housing, leisure and recreation provision and refuse collection, which can more responsively and accountably be delivered by a smaller, less populous local council. That is the true meaning of effectiveness – sensitivity to local need, not the chance to reduce costs by providing a uniform county-wide service.

Misconception 6: Counties provide a natural, fundamental, identifiable basis for local government.

Much is made in 'Making Counties Count' of counties as areas which resonate with the public and that somehow because county cricket clubs use the county name this shows that there should be unitary county based local government! The lack of balance in this argument is scarcely credible. What this rosy picture fails to acknowledge is the much stronger attachment people feel to towns and smaller communities.

The MORI research carried out for the Banham Commission in the mid-1990s revealed a much stronger sense of identity to the town that respondents lived in or near than it did to the county in which the town was situated. For instance, compared to the small and declining numbers who follow county cricket there are vastly greater numbers who support football teams representing their local town. In this and many other ways, towns and small settlements provide a much more 'natural, fundamental' basis for local government than do counties.

An outcome based on large unitary authorities would mean that towns with proud histories, strong local attachments and cherished football teams such as Norwich, Ipswich, Burnley, Carlisle, Barrow and Oxford would disappear from the local government map. And there are of course plenty of clubs, societies, and culinary dishes in towns too – it's Melton Mowbray (not Leicestershire) pies. If one is looking for community identity as a basis for local government units, it is towns and cities that count, not counties.

Misconception 7: Counties are the ideal vehicle for taking forward the government's post-Covid 19 economic regeneration and levelling up agendas.

This is the view put forward in 'Making Counties Count' and 'Place-based recovery'. But can it be sustained? To answer this question, we need to look at the configuration of the counties in the frame.

County council areas are often the bits left over when city regions, cities or large towns have been detached from their area of jurisdiction. The designation of the cities of Leicester, Nottingham and Derby as unitary authorities in the 1990s left their surrounding counties shaped as doughnuts or polo mints. The inclusion of Coventry in the West Midlands MCC in 1974 had a similar impact on Warwickshire.

Cumbria is, in a different sense, another example of a doughnut county council. Its population is concentrated in diverse and distinctive functional economic areas situated around the circumference of the county (Greater Carlisle, Barrow in Furness, West Cumbria). The hole in the middle is the sparsely populated Lake District National Park, whose designated authority exercises planning, housing and other powers independently of the county council.

Within Lancashire there are two holes created by unitary towns or cities and much of its remaining territory falls within the area of influence of these authorities or of the Merseyside and Greater Manchester conurbations. There is no central focus and the county area makes little sense as a focus for economic regeneration or indeed as a viable administrative unit. Surrey and Hertfordshire are largely composed of tracts of Greater London suburbia, and as with Lancashire, lack a central focus, an administrative *raison d'être* and a viable basis for economic regeneration.

A similar lack of cohesion is apparent in most of the other county areas. Worcestershire, Devon, North Yorkshire and Lincolnshire (south of the two unitary authorities in the north of the county) are all largely rural in character with no obvious focal point. The same is true of Hampshire, although the

southern part of this county is in effect part of the South Hants city region.

Staffordshire looks partly to the Potteries city region in the north and the West Midlands city region in the south, with an unfocused, more rural area between the two.

East Sussex and West Sussex have distinctive 'coastal strip' sub-areas with a range of small towns further inland.

Norfolk and Suffolk have cities on the edge of their territories, but large tracts of their remaining territory have little functional connection with the two cities and their hinterlands (see Leach's study for the Norfolk districts 2010).

Kent and Essex are large both in area and population and comprise a mixture of Greater London suburbia, smaller functional economic areas (in both cases the main examples of such areas (Thurrock and the Medway towns) are already detached unitary authorities).

In the vast majority of cases, there is no socio-geographic or economic logic in designating any of the counties as unitary authorities. Typically, they are little more than the sum of their diverse parts.

The most appropriate spatial basis for local authorities which would facilitate economic development at any time is clearly the functional economic area. This was the principal reason why combined authorities were established with devolved powers in the six metropolitan counties and in Greater Bristol, the Tees Valley and Peterborough/ Cambridgeshire. 'Making Counties Count' is critical of the recent focus on functional economic areas as a tool for economic regeneration, claiming that 'Counties have been denuded of much of their significance and status, as the zeitgeist has been to focus on cities and 'functional economic areas' to the detriment of the counties, a structure which many people relate to and identify with' (p11)

It is not surprising that the report is lukewarm about the emphasis on 'functional economic areas', because, as we have argued above, relatively few of the counties fit this criterion. There are functional economic areas which can be identified within the shire counties, for example: the South Hampshire conurbation and Greater Lincoln But very few of them correspond to shire counties, which typically contain bits and pieces of functional areas which cross county boundaries. The argument appears to boil down to 'we are big enough' or will be, if unitary authorities with large enough populations are designated.

Misconception 8: It is unitary counties who should spearhead economic regeneration outside the metropolitan areas, rather than creating new combined authorities to carry out this role.

Although not explicitly stated, a lack of enthusiasm for combined authorities in the three CCN-commissioned reports is readily discernible. There is little mention of them, and where they are mentioned, they are not seen as potentially having a significant contribution to make. This lukewarm assessment may reflect recognition that the combined authority model is a more appropriate vehicle for facilitating economic development than

county-based unitaries would be.

Combined authorities were established from 2014 onwards with similar aims to the current reorganisation agenda: devolution and economic regeneration as major priorities, supported by transportation infrastructure powers (see Wall (2017)). The evidence is that they are proving effective in delivering what was expected of them, with their elected mayors developing a high profile, both locally and nationally. There are many areas outside the current set of combined authorities which would benefit from this designation, for example Blackpool and the Fylde area, South Hampshire, and the Stoke-on-Trent, Derby and Nottingham city regions

Combined authorities can be seen as a tried and trusted model for spearheading economic regeneration within functional economic areas, operating in conjunction with a number of co-terminus authorities which are responsible for the full range of reach of personal, environmental and other services that are best provide on a smaller spatial scales. Combined authorities can work at a range of scales best able to meet local economic conditions. The structure which operates in the Tees Valley Combined Authority for instance has five authorities, average size 130,000 (two of them below 100,000) each with responsibility for the full range of services and function not allocated to the combined authority. There is no evidence that this system is not working effectively and delivering the goods, at both levels.

Misconception 9: Large unitary counties can develop a localist agenda by establishing some form of area committee arrangements and devolving powers to them, or by strengthening the role of town and parish councils within their areas

This familiar reassurance is often made by enthusiasts for large unitary authorities. They argue that by strengthening the involvement of town and parish councils, or by devolving power to some form of area committee system the importance of the local can be accommodated in shire-based unitary councils. In this argument, there is an implicit recognition that unitary large county councils would indeed be too big. There is also an intriguing contradiction in the argument that district councils should be abolished because people find it confusing, but town and parish councils empowered and extended in their coverage.

The Area Action Partnerships in Durham and the Local Area Boards in Wiltshire are put forward in the as examples of good practice: 'In Wiltshire Local Area Boards bring decision making in the heart of the community. They meet regularly and give people a chance to talk to Wiltshire Council staff and councillors.' But, the only powers delegated to the boards are 'grants to community groups' and 'youth funding in partnership with local youth networks'. In no meaningful sense can this be seen as serious devolution, involving genuine local accountability. Nor is there any evidence of these two qualities in Durham's Area Action Partnerships.

The suggestion that a strengthening of town and parish councils

can provide a viable 'localist' counterbalance is equally unsustainable. There are some 9,000 parish and town councils across England and they vary widely in their size, capacity, finances, staffing and the nature of the areas they cover. Some will be more than willing and able to take on extra responsibilities, while others will be reluctant to do so, while yet others will lack the capacity to take on more. It is not unlikely that some counties will try to shift some of their responsibilities to town and parish councils, with little understanding or concern for parishes' desire or ability to carry them out.

There is an intriguing contradiction in the CCN argument that district councils should be abolished but town and parish councils empowered and extended in their coverage. There is an implicit recognition that large and remote unitary county councils would indeed be too big, a problem they would need to overcome by reinventing a version of the system they are seeking to abolish.

Similar reservations can be expressed about area committees and the like. If one looks at what the unitary counties (or part counties) established in 2006 have actually implemented in this respect, the answer is very little more than discussed above. The challenge of operating a system of say 50 such committees (each covering a population of 25,000, in a unitary authority of one million) would be an administrative nightmare, whilst adding considerably to the costs of running an authority of this nature.

Misconception 10: There should be no upper limit to the size of unitary authorities.

From the perspective of a healthy, sustainable local government system, this is the most destructive of all the CCN's misconceptions. The arguments that the larger the population size of the unitary county, the greater the level of potential savings, is shown to be untenable in section 4. That material quite apart from refuting the 'bigger is better' argument also shows a 'diseconomies of scale' effect, which operates as a counteracting force. Several county councils have already indicated that a unitary authority well in excess of 500,000 is their preferred option.

Of all the scenarios which might emerge from the current review, the prospect of unitary authorities with populations of one million or over is the one which gives rise to the gravest concerns -At present the only English local authority with a population approaching that figure is the City of Birmingham (992,000) which is widely acknowledged as a special case, and at least reflects a functional economic area. Indeed, the Kerslake review exploring Birmingham's City Council identified several problems created by its size. In the other metropolitan areas, the big city councils have population around half that figure, and in the shire areas, the largest authority is Cornwall (524,000). There are six shire counties with populations of over one million: Kent, Essex, Hampshire, Lancashire, Surrey and Hertfordshire. If all (or any) of these counties were awarded unitary status on existing boundaries, it would mean a doubling of the 'acceptable' population size of such authorities in the more rural areas of England. Are we confident that we really understand the implications and consequences of such a

radical change?

Rhode Island, the smallest state in the USA has a population of just over one million, and two levels of local government beneath it. There is nowhere else in Europe where unitary councils with populations of 500,000 are to be found, let alone of one million. Luxembourg, for example, with a population of 614,000 has 12 cantons and 102 municipalities; the largest English unitary council, Cornwall, has a population of 569,578 and one council. Is there an implication that Cornwall should be merged with Devon, or Cumbria with Lancashire, so that the magic figure of one million can be reached or exceeded? It is clear that an enthusiasm for unitary authorities of this level of population size would involve the amalgamation of authorities not just in the shire areas but all over the country.

'Making Counties Count' casually states that a unitary council would be able to 'govern a population size of 1.57 million'. It adds that 'a population of 1.57 million would barely make it into the top ten of French Departments by population size and would be the third smallest of the German states (or Lander)' (p34). But the report fails to realise that German Lander are not local government, but rather, states and it is these states, not the federal government, which are responsible for local government. It also fails to point out that German local government is two tier – counties and districts – with 402 counties and almost 12,000 municipalities as well as 295 rural districts and 107 district free cities with an average population size of around 7,000.

As for the French departments – there are three levels of sub-national government in France with the department as the top level. Departments are subdivided into 332 arrondissements, which are further subdivided into cantons, within which are to be found the 36,000 communes across France.

Equally worrying is the CCN's attempt to conflate various population levels of sub-national (and even national) government to reach a population figure that suits its ambitions and to use state government in a federal system, as a way of suggesting that large unitary local authorities are the way forward. That argument demonstrates an inability to distinguish between different types of national and sub-national government; the distribution of the various roles, responsibilities, powers and functions within them; and, a serious misconception about the relationships between different types of governing institutions within multi-tiered systems.

Such serious misconceptions undermine the CCN case that counties should form the basis of a unitary local government system. They should not! It is time we learnt from the experiences of other nations across the globe that make tiered local government work and to draw on what they tell us about local leadership, financial powers, autonomy, efficiency, effectiveness, performance, cost reduction and community cohesion rather than follow a myopic policy that size will solve everything. It will not!

6. CONCLUSIONS

English local government has become steadily more centralised and less autonomous as it has been reshaped and reorganised by the centre to fulfill two primary motivations:

1. Making the centre's job of controlling local government easier
2. Implementing the erroneous view that bigger local government is more efficient and cost-effective.

Such a view embodies a one-dimensional view of local government as predominantly a service-provider or commissioner, when in reality it has a much wider place-shaping governance role shaping the social, economic and environmental well-being of the local community, in which considerations of local democracy and good governance become of paramount importance.

Making Counties Count states: 'we feel so strongly about the merits of unitary authorities that we think the government should consider insisting on unitary councils across the whole of England' (p40). Anyone committed to a form of local government which has a real meaning for communities and citizens and who is committed to sustainable forms of local accountability and local democracy would feel so strongly about the survival of local government in England as to regard the CCN position as totally unacceptable.

Government policies supportive of large unitary authorities are based on concerns for cost reductions in public services, their efficient and effective provision of public services and the need for performance management. These are important considerations, but, as we have shown, they are also not guaranteed to result from increases in size. Of equal importance are considerations of local self-government, community identity and democratic engagement, which have for a long time been overlooked by central government are negatively affected by scale.

It is beholden on those seeking to impose large unitary authorities upon the local communities in England, which have consistently failed to demonstrate support for them, to produce a much more rigorous evidence-based case for their widespread introduction. The inability to do so is the fundamental weakness of the CCN case. It takes no of the formidable body of academic research which casts major doubts on the conventional wisdom that 'bigger is always better'. It is difficult to envisage any one that both understands and cares about local community would support the CCN's view, especially at this time of national and local crisis.

However, if the government were to persist in its belief that there is an ideal size (of around 400,000) and to apply it when making decisions about the future of local government in the shire counties, it should be aware of the potentially disruptive consequences of doing so. The average size of the unitary authorities in England is close to 200,000, half the government's assumed current target figure. Setting aside the new county-based authorities established in 2006 and 2019,

the average size falls to under 180,000. There are 23 unitary authorities with populations below 200,000 and a further two authorities with populations below 100,000. Many of them are based on small cities or large towns and have a strong sense of community identity.

If the government were to follow the logic of the 400,000 figure in a 'second stage' reorganisation initiative, then that would be the end of councils in real places such as York, Derby, Swindon, Southend, Preston, Blackburn and Grimsby (otherwise known as North-East Lincs). If the government did not (and we are certainly not recommending that they should) then the chaotic, patchwork structure of local in England would remain: two-tier local government in Greater London and in the nine areas covered by Combined Authorities and a disparate collection of unitary authorities of all shapes and sizes in the rest of the country.

If the CCN's pressure and the government's apparent belief in the case for large unitary authorities bear fruit, then the outcome should be regarded as the greatest act of municipal vandalism in living memory. It is they who will bear the responsibility for the end of the 'local' in English local government.

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Bigger Is **Still Not Better**

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Executive summary

- The international, independent research evidence continues to show that increasing the size of local government is no guarantee of improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and cost reduction; but that local democracy and citizen engagement is more likely to be damaged the larger local government becomes.
- The powers, freedoms, capacity for action, skills and ability of local political leaders, councillors and officers; and the freedoms and autonomy of local government and its resources are important factors in improving local efficiency, effectiveness, and cost reduction. They are also important contributors to public service improvement and strengthening local democracy.
- Central government attempts to restructure local government are based not only on a view of what local size increases might achieve, but also on how local government can contribute to the pace and distribution of the benefits that might emerge from central policy change across a raft of policy areas.
- International trends in local government have shown, over time and in different international settings, a series of mergers and disaggregation of councils as the centre has sought to reshape local government, or as citizens have reacted against past forced mergers of councils.
- Where councils have been merged overseas, the starting and finishing point in the creation of new councils is still with average population sizes smaller than English local government.
- Local government in England still operates in a highly centralised system and is poorly placed in the international Local Autonomy Index when compared to other nations and their local government system.
- Levelling up appears to have conflated economic growth, regeneration and the removal of regional and local economic disparities with changes to local government structure and the creation of new local and sub-regional governance organisations. Levelling up is more likely to succeed if function precedes form.
- It is decentralisation rather than devolution that is being offered to local government. True devolution entails brand new freedoms or powers for local government being created to augment the transfer of existing powers from the centre. It is to be hoped that this can be added into the mix as the White Paper is implemented.
- International evidence indicates that joint-working, cooperation and collaboration between councils and between councils and other organisations provides for efficiency, effectiveness, and cost reduction in local government and public service improvement. This is a powerful alternative to council mergers and larger local government.
- District councils are leading players in collaboration between councils and other organisations, but there is room to improve the spread and extent of inter-council and inter-organisational joint working to fully reap the benefits for local government, local citizens, and public services.
- District councils play, and will continue to play, a vital role in anchoring local, sub-regional, regional and national schemes that are part of levelling up in the communities that such schemes seek to assist.
- District councils are pivotal in stimulating community activity, developing community cohesion, creating local networks, and developing local connections that are vital to social and economic regeneration.
- Without district councils playing a full role in levelling up it will become de-linked from communities and citizens and fail to have the local impact and outcomes sought by the Government.
- Independent international research shows that when it comes to local government structure: bigger is still not better.

1. Introduction

Reorganisation is the department store music of local government in England – always in the background and sometimes too loud and distracting to be able to focus on why you are in the shop in the first place. But, as we comprehensively showed in ‘Bigger Is Not Better’ (DCN 2020), the folklore-like belief with which some at the centre hold that bigger local government is invariably cheaper, more efficient and more effective than smaller local government and that unitary systems are superior to tiered local government, is simply not borne out by evidence or experience.

It is not the size of local government that is the defining feature of effectiveness, efficiency or service improvement; rather, the powers and skills held by local political leaders, councillors and managers, the freedoms, and autonomy of local government and the independent resources it has available are the powerful factors needed for strong and vibrant local government (DCN, 2020).

We also explored in ‘Bigger Is Not Better’ how a one-dimensional view of local government, as solely a provider of services to standards or an agenda set by the Government, as important as those services are, ignores the role of local government as an institution for local self-government, local decision-making, community empowerment, public engagement, and local responses to both local and national policy issues.

Among other things local government in England, as it is currently structured and operates, contributes significantly to:

- economic development, regeneration, and local investment
- ensuring local training and skills are aimed at local priorities
- social and economic well-being
- public service delivery and improvement
- place-based local governance
- good governance and community cohesion
- transparent and open government and decision-making
- providing accountable local leadership
- ensuring local pride, loyalty, and place-based patriotism
- localised as opposed to centralised decision-making and government

- effective partnership working with a range of external agencies
- monitoring, overseeing, and holding to account agencies and bodies such as the NHS and the Police
- overseeing and developing local transport networks
- health and social care and the services needed by children, young people and the elderly.

None of this is solely and only dependent on the size of local government; rather they are dependent on local government’s powers and role as a governing institution and its ability to respond flexibly, subtly and with degrees of local sophistication and knowledge that the centre cannot match.

The report is not intended as a response to the recent Levelling Up White Paper, but the evidence, analysis and discussion is set partly within the context of the White Paper and partly within the general role of local government in a modern democracy.

The purpose of this report is to set out how local government and local leadership in England can be strengthened effectively so as to deal with current and future challenges and to enhance its role in the governance of the country. The next section will refresh the research evidence presented in ‘Bigger Is Not Better’ and set out how the evidence shapes our understanding of the issues relating to local government size. The third section will explore some of the international trends in the role, purpose, and functions of local government. The fourth section will examine the policy alternatives which have been developed internationally to mergers and abolitions of councils and will look specifically at the ways councils co-operate and work together. The fifth will explore the contribution district councils can make to levelling up and devolution. The concluding section will draw out the lessons from the data presented for the role of district-level councils in good governance, devolution and local government autonomy.

2. Why Bigger Is Still Not Better

It has been a constant theme of central government's approach to local government that there is some form of institutional geographical and population optimal size for units of local government that will inevitably provide for maximum efficiency and effectiveness, and which is guaranteed to reduce costs. Not only is that view not supported by consistent and conclusive evidence, it's also based on an assumption that local government's sole purpose is to be a provider, or overseer of public services. It is a view which ignores the community governance role of local government and that it is, or should be, a politically representative institution that responds to the priorities of real communities of place with which the public express a genuine affinity.

In our report 'Bigger Is Not Better' (DCN, 2020) we conducted an extensive review of the existing independent research evidence that had explored the effects of the increase in council size on efficiency, effectiveness, local democracy and community engagement. The findings of the research were summarised thus:

Efficiency, Effectiveness and Performance: Size Doesn't Matter

Despite the conviction with which the case is made that increases in council size improve efficiency, effectiveness, and performance, no consistent or conclusive results were found in the research and literature surveyed, that justify the belief that larger councils are always more efficient, effective, cheaper or a better option in the provision of public services than smaller units of local government. The research and literature is contradictory, with inconsistent findings on this matter.

The complexities of linking performance, efficiency and effectiveness to council size means that, though different services may respond to different size factors, there is no straightforward or certain size at which the performance, efficiency and effectiveness of all services will necessarily respond positively (see Boyne, 1995, Martin, 2005, Andrews, et al, 2006, Andrews and Boyne, 2012).

As we reported in our 2020 document, Newton as far back as 1982 reported that the search for the optimum size for local government... 'has proved to be as successful as the search for the philosophers' stone, since optimality varies according to service and type of authority' (Newton, 1982). Those findings have not been conclusively refuted since their work. Moreover, it rests with consultancy reports, commissioned by those seeking mergers, to create cases that mergers would have financial and service benefits in any given geography, rather than independent research showing that to conclusively be the outcome.

Local Democracy: Size Does Matter

The research and literature is far more consistent in its findings that increases in the population or geographical scale of local government units have a deleterious effect on democratic criteria, such as:

- electoral turnout
- public trust in councillors
- public trust in officers
- levels of engagement
- contact between citizens and councillors
- contact between citizens and council officers
- levels of identification or affinity with the council held by the public

The research and literature reveals that the democratic criteria and function of local government can be damaged by increases in council size.

The trend in the deleterious effect of mergers on local democracy and local government as an institution and agency of local self-government, choice, and public engagement, has not abated since the publication of 'Bigger Is Not Better'. Indeed, more evidence has emerged that council mergers and increases in size store up conflict and territorial antagonism that is created by amalgamations; repositioning them in the new larger council thus dampening public engagement (Baldersheim and Rose, 2021, Kouba and Dosek, 2021).

Moreover, the tendency for central government, across Europe, to play councils off against each other, especially in tiered local government systems, can leave pools of resentment among councillors and the public which again damages public engagement and affinity with the newly created larger body (Houlberg and Klausen, 2021). Indeed, Gendzwill and Kjaer (2021) were crystal clear in the findings from their research that: 'it is demonstrated that a clear and consistent relationship between municipal size and local turnout exists: the larger the municipality the fewer eligible voters turn out at local elections'. There is a clear damage to local democracy and accountability.

Why Mergers?

Given the evidence that council mergers and the creation of larger entities – for that is what they are, administrative entities rather than communities of place – do not guarantee improvements in cost efficiency or effectiveness, why does the centre continue to see larger sub-national institutions of governance as its preferred option? It is interesting to note that most of the published research since our 2020 report exploring council mergers and size increase has focused on the outcomes for local democracy rather than on an economic case for size increases. The reason for this has been explored by Copus, et al (2021) who indicate that the power of a simple, seemingly common-sense repeated narrative stated as an obvious, if unproven, fact can squeeze out other arguments from public space, even if those arguments are backed by evidence. The tactic of repeating - bigger is better and cheaper – is designed to indicate that there is only one solution to a whole host of issues facing local government: make it bigger and they will go away (Hay, 2002, Boswell, 2013).

The consistent use of a set of stories, assumptions, explanations, and scripts about the benefits of mergers and increases in council size has been used not just in this country, but internationally, to shape thinking about local government effectiveness, efficiency, and cost reduction. But that narrative is often refuted by evidence and experience (Dobos, 2021, Baldersheim and Rose, 2021, Houlberg and Klausen, 2021, Navarro and Pano 2021). Indeed, Vabo et al (2021) showed that the 'potential benefits [of amalgamations] are often diffuse and long term, while costs are concentrated and immediate', which makes an expensive diversion of local government reorganisation and the creation of combined authorities at a time of 'levelling up' all the more questionable.'

There is evidence suggesting that central governments seek to restructure and increase the size of local government units not just for what they perceive would be the benefits, but to suit a range of central policy objectives (De Ceuninck et al 2010, Swianiewicz, et al, 2022). That tendency is clear in the Government's recent Levelling Up White Paper which, while ruling out forced council mergers, reflects the centre's preferences for bigger local government in its pursuit of voluntary mergers, county deals and the creation of more

combined authorities. The centre's thinking is conditioned by its view that local government is something to be shaped, reshaped, and reformulated to suit a raft of policy preferences held by the centre. This makes local government structure an unnecessary target and distraction for levelling up policy. A better option would be to empower and liberate our existing councils to deliver levelling up, rather than create new structures on ever larger geographical footprints.

The Government's Levelling Up White Paper contains the centre's usual criticism of tiered local government and its perceived 'fragmentation and administrative complexity'. Yet tiered local government is the easiest and simplest of the fragmented landscape of public service provision to understand and navigate as district and counties represent real communities of place (see Baldersheim and Rose, 2010) rather than territorially artificial entities. Finding out which council does what is a simple and straight-forward process for the public, especially for those in possession of a telephone or the internet. The White Paper does, however, recognise that a wide range of public service providers, organisations and agencies deliver different services over different geographical scales and are far more complex to navigate than elected local government. So, insistence on local government territorial upheaval shows that the centre has become a prisoner of its own rhetoric and policy narrative.

But governments of all political colours, for many decades, have sought to increase the size of local government for positive and negative reasons linked to a policy agenda about the role and purpose of local government, or related to other policies the centre wishes to achieve. The factors that have led the centre to take this route are:

First, the centre seeks to make the changes it wishes to see as quickly as possible; the nature of policy changes means there is always a gap between policy development – implementation – and seeing the positive (or negative) results of that policy change – then policy reformulation – and further results. The centre wants to see positive change as soon as possible and therefore is motivated to ensure local government – and other agencies – are structured in such a way as to promote swift change.

Second, the centre wishes to distribute the benefits of its policy changes as far as possible across the country – and in this case the aptly named 'levelling up' is a good example. To ensure that the benefits of central policy are widely felt, acknowledged, and recognised, the centre seeks to work through a range of national, regional, sub-regional organisations and through local government.

Third is the aspiration that fewer units of local government, fewer councillors and fewer council leaders or elected mayors, makes the centre's job of shaping the activities of local government and centralising the governance of the country easier.



The benefits of this process are for central control, not for local discretion or the ability of local government to respond to local issues and the local manifestation of national and global problems. Indeed, evidence suggests that austerity policies have been designed with council mergers as a central component to reduce the costs of public administration and public service provision (Blom-Hansen, 2016, Kim and Warner, 2021, Swianiewicz, et al, 2022).

To ensure the effectiveness of the Government's levelling up policies an alternative route is required to changing the institutional structure of local government in a way that reflects the heart of austerity-based policies. Indeed, the costs of reorganisation or of creating new units of sub-national government such as combined authorities, alongside the time, energy and resources required to do so is a distraction from the objective of levelling up.

The independent research evidence presented in 'Bigger Is Not Better' has not been refuted since 2020. On the contrary the research referenced above indicates that the conclusions we can draw are the same as we drew in 2020:

- Efficiency, effectiveness, and cost: there is no guarantee that increases in the size of local government will, in each and every case, result in improvements to the efficiency, effectiveness and a reduction in the cost of local government and local services – increases in size may result in improvements, but they also may not, or cause things to deteriorate.
- Local democracy, community engagement, and public participation: there is a more consistent outcome from independent research of the negative effects on a range of democratic factors relating to local government that come from increases in council size.
- Autonomy, powers, freedoms, and the skills of local political and administrative leaders are far more important factors when it comes to efficiency, effectiveness, cost, local democracy, community engagement and public participation, than size of local government alone.

The issue for levelling up and devolution then is not how do we restructure the landscape of sub-national, and sub-regional government to achieve a central government policy agenda; rather, how do we provide existing local government with sufficient autonomy and resources to empower it to deal with the local manifestation of national and local policy problems? In addressing this point it is useful to take an overview of international trends and developments in thinking about local government.

3. International Trends and Developments in Local Government

Two important assumptions underpin the term 'local government'. First, that it is indeed 'local' and that it matches citizens' local affinities, sense of loyalty, local pride and local patriotism; and it is clear that citizens can have affinities to small settlements, villages, towns, cities, counties and their nations at one and the same time (Kerley et al, 2019). The second assumption is that local government would indeed be government – or as is often referred to overseas – 'local self-government'. The term government implies a set of freedoms, a degree of autonomy from the centre, and clear policy discretion as well as some form of democratic accountability.

Article three of the Council of Europe's Charter of Local Self-Government acknowledges that any institution with the term government in its title requires sufficient freedom and discretion to pursue the interests of its area and citizens:

'Local self-government denotes the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population.'

Such recognition of local self-government in law is absent for English local government and the signs from a recent, as yet unpublished, review of compliance with the Charter by this country are not good. Yet across the Council of Europe's 47 member states there are clear trends towards recognition of local self-government as a legal or constitutional operating principle. The Charter is a tool rarely used by local government in this country as a way of pressuring the centre, whereas it is much more regularly used across the 47 members of the Council of Europe as a way of protecting and promoting local autonomy and democracy.

Article five of the charter states:

'Changes in local authority boundaries shall not be made without prior consultation of the local authorities concerned, possibly by means of a referendum where this is permitted by statute.'

Again, the as yet unpublished Council of Europe report on compliance with the Charter does not make happy reading on this point. The Charter is something little used by local government in this country as opposed to a growing trend across 47 signatory countries to use the Charter to protect and defend local government and the more expansive concept of local self-government.

There are also a series of trends in the role, purpose and function of local government that have been emerging internationally that have lessons not just generally for local government in England, but which also provide specific lessons relevant to the Government's levelling up agenda and the way in which the recent White Paper suggests that agenda might be operationalised. The main lessons are set out under the following headings.

Mergers, demergers and disaggregation

While it may be the case that in some countries a series of local government mergers have taken place, such as in Denmark, with an expressed aim of enhancing efficiency, effectiveness and reducing cost; Kjaer and Klemmensen (2015) found that after the Danish reorganisations of 2007 there were higher levels of dissatisfaction with the municipal services in amalgamated municipalities than had been the case in the previous municipalities.

Swainiewicz et al (2017) identify three main waves of territorial reshaping of local government:

The 1960s and 1970s with a largely north European set of amalgamations based on the idea that economies of scale which occur in the private sector would be applicable to local government, and that formed the basis of reorganisations in countries such as: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, West Germany and the United Kingdom. In the same period Communist Eastern Europe experienced a series of council amalgamations based on the central state's desire to simplify and control localities for its own purposes; such amalgamations occurred in countries such as: Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, or Yugoslavia

In the late 1980s and through the 1990s there was a series of council disaggregation and the creation of smaller councils from larger units. This took place mainly in eastern Europe after the fall of Communism and as a reaction against the amalgamation policies of Communist dictatorships. Such disaggregation took place in countries such as: Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Ukraine. There was a wide-spread reaction against forced council mergers where a heavy-handed central state had ignored the wishes of local citizens.

The third wave identified by Swainiewicz et al (2017) came in the late 1990s through to the early 2000s which saw some mergers taking place in countries such as Greece (as a result of an EU demand for amalgamations as a condition of a financial rescue package – a tactic which backfired on the EU in Portugal where public protests halted merger plans), Denmark, additional mergers in England, Finland, Ireland and Turkey. At the same time municipal disaggregation took place in countries such as Bulgaria (Kalcheva, 2021).

Where there have been amalgamations across Europe, the starting point of those mergers was from units of local government far smaller than those in England, and the resultant new councils, on average, remain smaller than the average size of councils in England. Indeed, England has the largest units of local government of all 47 members of the Council of Europe (Swainiewicz et al 2017:10).

The trend therefore is of mergers and disaggregation, sometimes in the same countries and all this indicates a central government tendency to see the shape and size of local government as something it should determine in the search for the philosopher's stone of optimum size (Copus et al 2020).

Strengthening local leadership

Also speaking to the levelling up agenda is the international trend towards stronger local political leadership – that strength, however, is often left undefined by governments as is the case with the White Paper's exhortations of 'stronger local leadership' – a theme of the centre since the Blair governments. Stronger local leadership often displays itself internationally with institutional changes, especially with the introduction of directly elected mayors (see Magre and Bertrana 2007 Sweeting 2017), which are now commonplace in countries such as: Australia, Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Poland, Portugal, New Zealand and the United States (to name a few).

Along with these institutional changes through the introduction of elected mayors has been a strengthening of the mayor's position in relation to the council and, in many cases and more importantly, with regard to the organisational world beyond the council. That is, mayors have been given responsibilities and powers that extend beyond the council to other institutions (Kukovic 2018) – similarly to the mayor of London.



There are also cases where the centre has not given local government and its mayors formal institutional direct power, but that has been replaced by skilful political leaders using informal influence and pressure to shape the local policy agenda, and what other institutions and organisations do to contribute to that agenda (Copus, 2006, Magre and Bertrana 2007, Elcock, 2008, Fenwick and Elcock, 2014).

Even in countries where the mayor is not directly elected but selected by the council, there have been shifts towards strengthening what would be the equivalent of the leader of the council in this country (but still often referred to as mayor) where the relationship between the mayor and council is firmly tilted towards the mayor. Indeed, local leaders that are not directly elected are, in a range of countries, powerful local leaders, particularly in relation to the council (Soos, 2021, Steyvers et al, 2022, Pano, 2022).

What has become clear however by central calls for powerful local leaders is variations in the approaches taken by central governments – some of which, particularly in federal countries – are experienced in operating with different systems of local government between states, and with varying powers and functions allocated to local government in different states (Rao and Thomas, 2022, Kersting and Cameron, 2022, Heinelt, 2022). Yet, in this country the centre seeks regularity and similarity, to provide it with certainty of action in relation to local government and therefore the White Paper's general repeating of the centre's line of strong local leadership does not match much of what rests with the traditional-style local government overseas. Indeed, the White Paper offers existing council leaders and elected mayors little that will 'strengthen' their position – such strong local leadership is likely to rest with any new combined authorities. Strengthening local leadership does not, however, rely on creating new institutions as overseas experience has shown; it relies on trusting existing local government and its leadership.

Centralisation, decentralisation and localisation

The financial crisis of 2008 has seen a wave of centralising tendencies emerge. The Council of Europe has reported on increases in centralisation in countries as different as Ireland and Cyprus. The latest version of the Local Autonomy Index (Ladner et al, 2015) which measures the autonomy local government has from the centre, has reported a scattered pattern with some countries re-centralising and others localising. The Local Autonomy Index charted the shifts between centralisation and localism across 39 countries and the Index showed that the greatest increases in local autonomy arose in the new Central and Eastern European countries as they emerged from communist rule. The Index identified Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Germany, and Poland as places with particularly high levels of autonomy. The UK fell into the group of countries with the lowest levels of local autonomy.

There is no clear pattern in the shifts between centralisation and localisation internationally, despite much international debate about devolution and decentralisation. Results in levels of centralisation and localisation vary across countries and over time, as would be expected. But there is some stability in the groupings of countries within the Local Autonomy Index with those with the most local autonomy and those with the least, and there has been little shift in the position of English local government despite decades of promised devolution.

The Levelling Up White Paper provides little that will shift the position of local government in England into a higher category on the Local Autonomy Index, particularly as its focus is on economic growth and development rather than a conversion by the centre to devolution as an operating principle of government. The White Paper contains no new freedoms, autonomy, or real powers for existing local government, rather a promise of more combined authorities – some of which will be county-wide. Rather than focusing on strengthening the hand of all councillors, the agenda is focused on a prominent policy option of creating directly elected mayors – an institutional change rather than a recognition of the strengths of the diversity inherent in the existing system. Areas should be able to choose an elected mayor or not, and still benefit from full devolution deals; it is diversity, localism and local knowledge that underpin any successful local government system as these factors lead to speed of response, recognition of local issues and priorities, and how best to respond to national issues and policies within distinct local settings (Mawson, 2009, Orr and Russ, 2009, Wilson and Game, 2011).

The White Paper offers the decentralisation of a range of functions from Whitehall and other agencies rather than devolution. The difference between devolution and decentralisation is much more than a semantic one. What is on offer from the centre is decentralisation of tasks, functions, roles and responsibilities, and some budgets – not devolution of power or an increase in local discretion and autonomy to act. Decentralisation of functions and responsibilities is not devolution of power, freedom and autonomy and England will continue to lag far behind Scotland and Wales in the devolution stakes.

Given the offer of decentralisation rather than devolution, and given the White Paper's preference for structural reform – either through the creation of combined authorities or a new model of county-based combined authority from which districts will be relegated to constituent membership only – the one-dimensional approach taken by the centre to the purpose of local government that we identified in the 2020 report still remains. Yet, there are alternatives to structural reform which can achieve the same objectives contained within the White Paper. It is to those alternatives we now turn.

4. Joint Working and Co-Operation

It is internationally long-standing and commonplace that councils cooperate with each other on a range of functions and services, and such cooperation is not limited to councils sharing geographical borders or even located within the same countries (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007; Teles, 2016; Teles and Swianiewicz, 2018). What is referred to in the literature as 'inter-municipal cooperation' varies, as would be expected, within different national settings given differences in the political and legal systems (Teles and Swianiewicz, 2018). But cooperation constructed by local government is influenced by the same range of factors, such as: systems and styles of local democracy; the responsibilities and functions of local authorities; planning systems and geography; territorial and political diversity; the nature of the functional urban areas and functional economic areas; council areas that cross international borders; rural and urban distinctions; and just who is cooperating with whom. All of these factors shape the nature of the cooperative arrangements and institutional settings developed to provide services and ensure accountability (Haveri and Airaksinen, 2007, Hulst et al 2009, Bel and Warner, 2016, Swianiewicz and Teles, 2018).

While cooperation between councils can take multiple forms, it is internationally an important resource for councils to develop capacity and for addressing efficiency and cost reduction through cooperative arrangements which can and do take different forms across a wide range of functions and service responsibilities. When faced with centrally imposed austerity policies, fiscal constraint, and the need to reduce costs, councils have responded not by calling for mergers but by enhancing and strengthening the way in which they work together (Citroni, et al 2013, Bel and Warner, 2016). Councils have used various formal co-operation arrangements to cover a range of service responsibilities to improve public service delivery and to reform the process of public administration (Baba and Asami 2020). What is also clear from the international research is that co-operation between councils of the same and different types and tiers, and between councils and other public sector agencies and bodies, is that this approach provides a cost saving policy approach and importantly a: 'crucial alternative to municipal mergers or the structural reorganisation of local government service provision' (Drew et al 2019, Dollery et al, 2020).



Co-operation between councils has been used internationally and within England across services such as:

- back-office administration
- legal services
- architectural services
- electoral services
- shared management and administration posts
- economic development and business services and development
- water and sewage services
- health care and hospital provision
- waste disposal
- education
- public safety
- public finances
- child welfare services
- care of the elderly.

The evidence from overseas shows that there are few services that have not been subject to some form of joint working between councils, and that such cooperation removes any economic, cost-saving, service improvement, efficiency, and effectiveness arguments for amalgamations, as these can be achieved by greater and more effective joint working between councils and other public and private bodies. Joint working promotes further collaboration and information exchange; promotes and enhances local government performance across a range of public services; and plays an important role in local government performance and cost reduction (Bel and Xavier 2006, Giacomini and Sancino 2016, Muraoka Avellaneda 2021).

Developing and constructing effective cooperation agreements between councils does take commitment, time, energy, resources and prioritisation by political and managerial leaders (Haveri 2003). It also raises issues of democratic accountability, public awareness, and public engagement.

But skilful and carefully designed mechanisms of accountability through councillors and stimulating citizen engagement can overcome these challenges (Eythorsson, 2018, Gendzwilf and Lackowska, 2018).

In its 2017 report of its inquiry into collaboration and district councils across England, the District Councils APPG found a fragmented nature to the public service landscape, with a host of external bodies and organisations developing public policy, spending public money and influencing the growth and well-being of communities across the country, but doing so without a democratic mandate. This provided all of local government with the specific challenge of holding those bodies to account, but also co-operating with them in service delivery.

The APPG report mapped the pattern of the collaborative arrangements then existing for district councils and found that district councils were operating with external agencies to:

- pool resources and develop capacity to deliver and transform public services
- interact with other agencies to draw them into a shared strategic vision of the development of specific localities
- influence and shape the decisions, policies and actions of external agencies
- in order to hold a wide range of unelected organisations to account.

(DC APPG, 2017:5).

The report commented that:

‘While collaboration is in the DNA of district councils this is not necessarily the case for the range of agencies with which districts need to collaborate for the benefit of residents. It is therefore vital that barriers to collaboration with other agencies are removed and that collaboration with districts becomes a required part of the development of policies and decision-making by other agencies and bodies. Indeed, districts should be empowered to produce a local framework within which other agencies would be expected to collaborate.’ (DC APPG, 2017:6)

The inquiry also found that collaboration between districts was an increasingly important phenomenon for service transformation and improvement. It highlighted how collaboration can be focused on the natural economic geography of an area, and functional economic or ‘travel to work’ areas, both stimulating economic activity and growth and enabling districts to forge strong and resilient partnerships with other districts, counties and public service agencies. These findings match the international evidence cited above showing districts have tapped into a growing international trend.

Equally matching the evidence cited above was the APPG finding that district councils are creating collaborative arrangements with organisations whose geography extends beyond the area of a single district and may cross a number of councils. Indeed many of the organisations with which districts already cooperate have a single service focus, or operate with a much narrower range of service responsibilities compared to elected district councils. Moreover, district councils are working closely with organisations that have different goals and objectives but which can together contribute to public service improvement.

So the question remains: if independent research shows that joint working between councils of different types and tiers, and between councils and other public and private sector bodies can have the same outcomes for cost, efficiency, effectiveness, cost reduction, and service improvement as those sought from council mergers, why does the centre



promote, encourage and prefer to see council mergers, larger local authorities and unitary councils? Part of the answer to that question rests on more needing to be done to reap the benefits of joint-working and inter-organisation cooperation and partnership - and not only as a policy alternative to council mergers. Not all of local government has adopted or embraced joint-working and co-operation as a central approach to its activities.

Poor working and personal relationships between members and officers of different councils, and between councils and other bodies can hamper progress in dealing with local and national problems. Rather than seek to reorganise local government it is far better for the centre to invest in encouraging, supporting, and facilitating the development of the right skills, knowledge, and approach to joint working throughout local government in England so that it truly becomes part of local government DNA.

The case has already been made that the quality, skills and ability of councillors and officers features more in determining the effectiveness of local government than size alone. It is the same with developing joint-working and co-operation (Borazz Le Gales, 2005, Teles, 2016, Bischoff and Wolfschütz (2021). Moreover, the centre should be strengthening the position of local government in the governance of localities and the country, and enhancing its ability to influence, convene, oversee and shape the policies and decisions of other organisations and bodies, rather than relying on structural change alone.

The other response to the question of why governments of all political colours have sought to restructure local government is more straightforward and can be summed up by repeating Newton (1982) thus:

'the search for optimum size ... has proved to be as successful as the search for the philosopher's stone, since optimality varies according to service and type of authority' (Newton, 1982)

or even more pointedly:

'The 'right' size for a municipal government is a matter of the local circumstances and the value judgements of the observer. Like so many issues in politics, this involves matters of ideology and interest' (Keating, 1995: 117):

Council joint working is a clear and internationally recognised policy alternative to mergers and size increases in local government: it is just not an option the centre seems to want to encourage or pursue when it comes to local government in England. Given this, we now turn to how district councils can support the Government's levelling up agenda to indicate that size still really doesn't matter.

5. District Councils: Levelling Up

Levelling Up

The heading of this section is not a typo, but meant to crystallise the weaknesses in the current levelling up agenda and to display how district councils can help to solve those weaknesses. The idea of levelling up across the country to: promote economic growth; stimulate regeneration; create employment opportunities; develop infrastructure; deliver improved public services; solve geographical inequalities; strengthen social capital; and restructure the framework of sub-national government, requires anchoring in the communities, neighbourhoods, and localities that are the target of the agenda. Large-scale and grand schemes can fail if they do not connect to the communities which they aim to assist. The White Paper rightly reminds us that there has been a raft of past policies from various governments designed to achieve similar aims and yet we still need to think of levelling up.

The danger in any economic agenda or policy that is linked to organisational restructuring and addressing geographical economic disparities, is in relying on large-scale organisations to deliver the goods to small, often isolated (socially and economically) communities.

Section Two set out the reasons why governments, of all colours, have sought territorial change in local government – the desire for speedy policy change; the aspiration to distribute the benefits of central policy as far as possible across the country; and the motivation of making the centre's life easier by simply having fewer units of local government and fewer councillors with which to deal. But the centre will never be able to have sufficient levers to make the changes it seeks as fast as it would want without fundamentally damaging the democratic fabric and structure of the country.

Central speed is the wrong ambition, and as we have seen though the Covid pandemic, the centre is not always right in its decisions or actions. A more nuanced and accurate ambition would be for local areas to determine for themselves the nature and speed of changes that they need, and to shape those changes to local circumstance – the centre's policy success is more likely to be achieved through this approach than a 'one-size-fits-all' policy process.





The very nature of any local government system is based on the recognition of geographic, social, political, and local diversity. It is the structural embedding of these factors into the system of local government, rather than a search for uniformity through centralisation, that provides it with the strength and focus to secure change and improvement in very local communities of place (Agranoff, 2004, Denters, et al, 2014, Kopric, 2016, Swianiewicz et al, 2022). Thus, the focus of levelling up must be on those communities levelling up seeks to help, and the only way in which that can be achieved is to empower the existing institutions of local government closest to the communities that are the target of levelling up; and those institutions of local government are district councils.

Social capital, for example, relies on strengthening inter-relationships between networks of people who live in particular areas. Social capital is developed through the workings of close-knit social groups, through the relationships they have, and through their shared sense of identity, values, and trust, and through the way such groups work together and support each other. Developing social capital at the right level can also have an economic effect as it is part of a range of factors which encourage small businesses and social enterprises; develop local economic linkages for supply and delivery; as well as stimulate community activity (Putnam, 2000).

The institution of local government best suited to the task of supporting this aspect of the levelling up agenda is clearly district councils. The evidence we have seen in Section Two shows how district-level and district-sized local government can encourage public participation, enhance community cohesion and ensure institutions relate to the places communities recognise (Baldersheim and Rose, 2021, Kouba and Dosek, 2021, Houlberg and Klausen, 2021). District councils are already engaged in providing services which build links between communities – empower district councils, and social capital will flourish.

The broad economic aims of levelling up also need to focus on the importance of localities – economic activity occurs in places partly because of local people forming and operating businesses in their own localities, which may grow and develop over time with the right support and environment; and partly because regional, national, and international firms require some form of local presence in a town or place.

The former can grow into sub-regional or bigger entities, but they do not start life on that scale; the latter existing organisations still require a local base or outlet. If levelling up is to be successful, it is important to recognise that local, sub-regional, and regional economies are not separate entities – rather they are the sum of their parts and those parts are the real communities of place and the networks of individuals that district councils serve and represent.

District councils are based in and with the real communities of place that are of the right scale to make levelling up a success in its economic and social objectives (Navarro and Pano 2021). There is a danger then that the devolution deal process and county deals or county-based combined authorities could fail to engage with that level of local government vital to the success of the overall agenda. The stress in the White Paper on effective and coherent institutions covering locally recognisable geographies of identity, place, and community, means full engagement of district councils in the process. The White Paper's stress on the need for 'sensible economic areas that join up where people live and work' and the emphasis it places on 'functional economic areas' breaks the link between the economic and social objectives of levelling up – only district councils can re-forge that link.

Joining up the organisations and institutions that will be part of the levelling up process is vital to its success. But, as we have seen in this paper, joining up to level up does not require large-scale organisations, or necessarily the creation of new entities (Martin, 2005, Andrews, et al, 2006, DCN 2020, Swianiewicz, et al, 2022). It requires freedom, flexibility and resources for the existing local government structure to collaborate and co-operate without a centralised oversight; one of the ironies of devolution so far has been the contradiction between passing responsibilities down from the centre (or other organisations) to newly created larger combined authorities which themselves are created from existing councils. It is only the links and local knowledge, intelligence, skills, and awareness that existing councils bring to the combined authority that make them work.

District councils in England deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services to over 22 million people – 40 per cent of the population – and cover 68 per cent of the area of the country. The services district councils provide protect and enhance the quality of life of those communities that are both the target for, and a necessary ingredient to, the levelling up agenda to stimulate the badly needed economic activity to deal with geographical disparities and to develop and strengthen community cohesion, social networks, and community interactions - all of which take place at the very local level. As we saw in Section 4, the strength of the current system is that it enables organisations to operate on different spatial levels, while keeping close to communities and citizens, whilst cooperation generates extra capacity, networks, and resources.



Bringing those organisations and their policies and responsibilities into alignment with a strategic vision developed by elected local government, strengthens the roles and activities of all concerned in co-operative networks to the benefit of communities and citizens (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007, Teles, 2016 Teles and Swainiewicz, 2018).

The district council role in safeguarding the local environment, promoting public health and social care, and in providing leisure facilities and opportunities for individuals and communities, is vital to levelling up through economic regeneration and the active role of district-scaled local government (De Ceuninck et al 2010, Mashamaite and Lethoko (2018) Swianiewicz, et al, 2022). District councils have responsibilities for creating attractive, well managed, safe, and prosperous places in which to live and bring up families. The district role in ensuring and facilitating opportunities for individuals and communities to interact, meet, communicate, and develop their networks, are all fundamental to stimulating growth, removing geographical and community inequalities, and to developing individual and community skills, health and well-being.

The district council role in regenerating high streets; creating, supporting and promoting local businesses; creating local economic partnerships; extending broadband coverage; creating local investment plans; planning responsibilities and neighbourhood plans; the development of partnerships with important local, regional and national stakeholders; planning and facilitating local green growth, economies and employment; and stimulating private-public relationships and partnerships, are all crucial in the success of the levelling up agenda and local economic development. The danger of creating local centralism – by focusing too heavily on county-level government and combined authorities – runs the risk of undermining what levelling up is meant to achieve.

District councils are closest to the communities and citizens that are to benefit from, and be a vital component of, levelling up. District councillors are those elected representatives closest to communities and citizens and live, socialise, and often work and will raise their families within the communities they represent. They are recognisable and easily approachable for local people. They are a source of local knowledge, communication, intelligence gathering and citizen engagement. They take part in stimulating and facilitating community activity; they channel the views and priorities of local people into the local decision-making process, and they champion the very communities and citizens to whom the levelling up agenda speaks. Without fully recognising the contribution district councils have long been making to levelling up and community and economic growth and without devolution fully engaging with and focusing on district councils, there will be little of the 'revolution in local democracy' promised in the Prime Minister's foreword to the White Paper.

Conclusion

Since the publication of 'Bigger Is Not Better' in 2020, independent research evidence has not fundamentally refuted, altered or challenged our findings that increasing local government size does not guarantee improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, service delivery or cost reduction; or that local democracy, citizen engagement and trust in local government can be damaged by size increases. What was also reconfirmed was that central governments have a tendency to see the shape, size and structure of local government as something that can be reformed to suit national government and national policy objectives, and such a centralised approach can fail to utilise the capacity, diversity, local intelligence and sophistication of local government, its councillors and officers in securing national, as well as local, objectives.

District-level local government – and all local government for that matter – is vital to levelling up as a policy agenda. Levelling up need not be predicated, or based, on the need for structural change to local government, or the creation of new entities and institutions of sub-national and sub-regional government. Rather, it requires government to recognise the

strengths of the inter-relationships and capacity within the current system, and to create the framework within which councils, at all tiers, can co-operate among themselves and with other institutions and organisations. The democratic accountability of the landscape of public service provision is secured by strong local leadership and strong local government. Districts, working with county colleagues and the rest of the local public sector, are the only organisations which can secure that accountability.

At the same time as securing local accountability, greater and more extensive use of joint working between local government, and with partner and other organisations, develops capacity, promotes effective working, reduces cost, and protects local democracy. The creation of larger units of local government is therefore not required to achieve these types of improvements; what is required is greater autonomy, local self-determination, stronger local political leadership – involving all councillors – and devolution rather than decentralisation. When it comes to these issues we can safely conclude from the evidence: bigger is still not better.



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