

Unitary authorities: the larger local government becomes, the greater the damage to local democracy

With four new unitary councils looming, [Steve Leach](#) and [Colin Copus](#) write that the process of replacing existing councils with a single unitary authority is founded on two assumptions: that 'bigger is better' for local government; and that unitary councils are better than a two-tier county/district system. They argue both these assumptions are erroneous.

In July 2021, Robert Jenrick announced changes in local government structure in North Yorkshire, Somerset, and Cumbria where the 'two-tier' system is to be replaced by large all-purpose (unitary) authorities. In North Yorkshire (population 605,000) and Somerset (population 560,000), the new authority is a county-wide unitary; in Cumbria two unitary councils are to be created: West Cumbria comprising Allerdale, Carlisle, and Copeland (approx. 274,600) and, East Cumbria consisting of Barrow, Eden, and South Lakeland (approx. 230,000). These changes are another stage of an insidious reorganisation by stealth, and which should be a matter of much greater political and public concern than is the case.

The process is founded on two erroneous assumptions: 'bigger is better' local government; and unitary councils are better than a two-tier county/district system. Neither of these assumptions is supported consistently and conclusively in almost 50 years of independent academic research, and both have unacceptable consequences for the health of local democracy. The evidence instead shows consistently that the larger local government becomes, the greater the damage to local democracy on a range of indicators of democratic viability. [These include](#) trust in councillors and council officials; public engagement and participation; community identity and cohesion; voter turnout.

The primary justification for the 'bigger is better' perspective is that large unitary authorities save money, once the substantial and typically underestimated transitional costs have been borne – a familiar 'economies of scale' argument. But that position is not sustained on the basis of a [comprehensive review](#) of Europe-wide evidence.

As well as flying in the face of evidence, re-organisation by stealth distances further our municipal institutions from the communities and citizens they govern and represent. In Cumbria, there will no longer be councils for real towns with strong community identities and long and proud civic traditions, such as Barrow and Carlisle, whose identity disappears into the meaningless (in community identity terms) conglomerates of West and East Cumbria. A fate already befallen Northampton (now part of West Northamptonshire), Crewe (Cheshire East), Chester (West Cheshire), and the many towns scattered throughout Durham, Northumberland, Dorset and Cornwall in a process which has been re-applied since 2006 by DCHLG whenever an opportunity has arisen.

With the four looming new unitary councils for North Yorkshire, Somerset, and Cumbria (East and West), there will be a loss of 937 councillors. It is proposed that the new North Yorkshire and Somerset authorities have 144 and 100 councillors respectively. No figures are given in the proposal for the two Cumbria councils but we can reasonably assume 70 members on each – giving a total of 384, a net loss of some 553 councillors across the three counties. The conventional wisdom in DCHLG is that there are far too many councillors, but our councillors have among the largest representative ratios across Europe and the work undertaken by them will not disappear with them – those remaining will face greater demands on their time. This substantial reduction in the level of local representation, together with breaking the link between local authorities and places with strong community identity are two of the ways in which local democracy is substantially weakened across England.

Across Europe and the US, multi-level local government is the [prevalent system](#) and the viability and value of the strategic/local division of responsibilities is widely accepted (as in the major city regions of England). It is common practice overseas for a town of any reasonable size to have a local authority congruent with it. The average size of a local authority in England is around 170,000 (and steadily increasing); in Europe it is typically less than a third of this figure. The average population served by a councillor is now 3,200 (also steadily increasing); in Europe it is around one fifth of this figure. It seems most unlikely we have discovered the most appropriate approach to local government structure, when it is so much at odds with the experience and values found everywhere else.

The last major evidence-based structural review was carried by the Banham and Cooksey Commissions in the mid-1990s. Their principal conclusion was that, with a limited number of exceptions (principally Humberside, Avon and Cleveland) the two-tier system was not broken and didn't need fixing. In contrast, there has since developed a realisation at the centre that a smaller number of large unitary authorities would make their administrative task a good deal easier. Thus a series of incoming ministers of both political persuasions, most of whom had little experience of (or interest in) local government structure, have had this spirit poured in their ear as a way of making a mark.

In 2020, there emerged from the DCHLG a proposal to replace the two-tier system in all 25 shire counties with unitary authorities of unspecified size, but with a guideline of around 300-400,000 population mentioned by ministers. In November, a statement from the Secretary of State postponed this initiative, because of the need for local authorities to concentrate on COVID-19, but also because he experienced increasing pressure from MPs whose constituencies were wholly or mainly co-terminous with existing shire districts and who didn't want to lose the valuable asset of an active party base. But there was an exception for North Yorkshire, Somerset and Cumbria, where it was claimed 'there was broad local support for reform' and that 'good progress had been made'.

It is difficult to see how good progress had been made in Cumbria, where four separate and incompatible proposals for unitary structures were submitted to DCHLG by the authorities involved. No evidence of 'a broad level of support' for a particular solution here. Nonetheless, an East/West split has been 'imposed from the centre' which contradicted assurances that changes in local government should be locally-led and not centrally imposed.

Things do not augur well for the possibility of a shift in emphasis away from large unitaries when reorganisation rears its head again later this year or next. But there is one development which could make it more difficult for the government to take a line similar to Cumbria in the remaining shire counties. The DCHLG's mind-set clearly incorporates a preferred size for new unitary authorities. Of the unitaries designated since in 2006, the average size is 380,500, although the population of unitary North Yorkshire and Somerset unitaries (604,900 and 560,000 respectively) demonstrates a worrying readiness to exceed this average figure. Almost all the remaining counties have larger populations than Cumbria, in some cases over a million (Kent, Essex, Lancashire, Hampshire Surrey and Hertfordshire). The likelihood in these counties and others is that DCHLG will opt for sub-county unitaries. Can they seriously be considering a unitary Kent (population 1,589,000) with over a million more people than Wyoming, the smallest US state, which itself has 23 counties, 99 municipalities and 650 special districts? In the face of this outcome, the county councils concerned, and others with populations over 600,000, are best advised to consider the win-win of retaining the two-tier system, an outcome now seen as acceptable by Mr Jenrick, if his November 2020 statement is to be believed.

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