

Devolution & local government within England.

It has long been argued that the UK has been overcentralized and that this has led to inefficient outcomes. Indeed, it is often argued that the UK has not achieved its full potential due to the inefficiency of its overcentralized structure.

In order to create the modern British state and maintain the British Empire, power was heavily centralised within Westminster. This centralisation of power allowed central government to form a formidable army that could protect trade routes the state and its growing empire depended upon. As the country gained vast wealth from the trade and resources the empire brought, the UK could afford to develop a strong local government system. Town Halls were lavish and were designed to be the architectural centre-piece of a town centre. Councils had a good number of staff for their operations, and budgets were strong. Public services covered a broad range of areas and were localised. Councils were clearly financially strong and had a good deal of power over local developments and service delivery.

Whilst World War II increased centralisation to meet the needs of the war effort, local government still had a strong presence post-war until the 1970s. As the UK struggled economically, the need to save money became ever greater. Local governments had inherited strong budgets from their pre-war creation, whilst central government hoarded power to create national institutions that defined the post-war consensus,

such as the NHS. Therefore, a scenario emerged where well-funded local institutions could not fight the decisions made by an increasingly powerful centralised state, resulting in councils' budgets being significantly cut. With the election of Thatcher, another dynamic further weakened local government's position. This was a power dynamic, where Thatcher looked to weaken the power of local authorities who would resist her economic reforms. Once local authorities' power had been successfully challenged, their budgets were further cut so central government could make the required savings to implement their economic reforms. Additionally, with local government having less power, central government was able to undertake more power grabs throughout the Tories' two-decade grip on power, further centralising decision-making in the UK.

Whilst New Labour implemented devolution and improved funding, devolution was ad-hoc and more generous funding would not last once they left office. The next government, the coalition government, would use council cuts to deliver its austerity agenda. The subsequent Conservative governments have continued to push the same agenda. This has left the UK today with poorly funded and weak local governance, limiting the efficiency of its service delivery. The purpose of this policy paper is to outline how the UK can be decentralised by devolving power from Westminster and reforming local government. It will also outline the benefits these reforms could bring to service delivery and state ways in which local service delivery can be better funded.

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The Regions and Regional Authorities

Defining Regional government and reforming local government:

Regional governance aims to devolve Westminster's powers to the English regions.

Regional governance can be hard to define, but pre-existing examples can be given, namely the authorities of London, Scotland and Wales. It must be noted that although Northern Ireland has devolved powers, it is slightly different due to historical differences and the Good Friday Agreement.

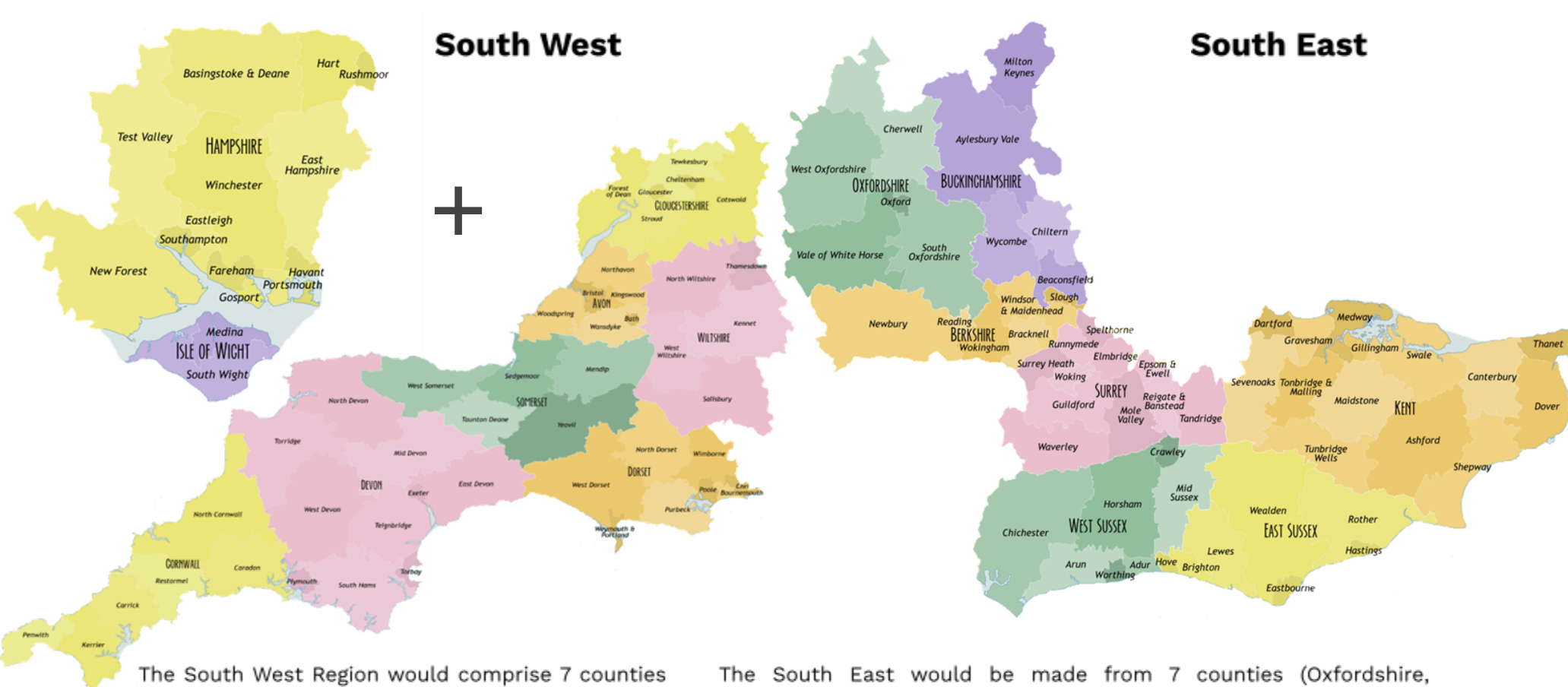
The three authorities of London, Scotland and Wales provide a good blueprint for devolved regional government. If we take the city that has the greatest population (London, with around 8 million), we can say that a devolved administration of this size is clearly functional. The integrated travel network in London has been a key focus for all London Mayors and highlights the ability of devolved authorities to produce better-localised infrastructure when enabled.

Therefore, when seeking to establish new regional authorities, it should be based on the successes of the London model. New areas should contain a similar population to that of Scotland and London, between 5 and 8.5 million people. They should also have similar powers to those of London, such as powers over transport and infrastructure development. This would help to replicate the successes of devolution seen in the capital across the country. In this case, this would help to improve transport networks and potentially increase economic efficiency across the country.

For example, it may help the regions to connect their economically isolated areas to their central economic hubs.

Additionally, reforming local government has long been discussed, proposed and delayed in Westminster. One cause of the delay is defining what devolution and reforms to local government should look like. Some would like to see more powers transferred to borough and district councils, whilst others would like to see more mayors and city councils.

The following section of this policy paper outlines the area each regional authority would cover and the new local authorities that would exist within the region. It also briefly illustrates how local government could be reformed to have a consistent structure to better deliver its service responsibilities. Additionally, it illustrates how local government representatives could be better supported, thus enabling more effective representation.



The South West Region would comprise 7 counties (Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Avon, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Dorset). Due to the population size in this region being smaller than other regions, Hampshire is added to the South West.

Under this region would sit 16 unitary authorities (two for each county).

The South East would be made from 7 counties (Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Surrey, Kent, West Sussex and East Sussex).

Under this region would sit 14 unitary authorities (two for each county). For instance, East Sussex could be split into two by merging Hastings, Rother and Eastbourne lower-tier authorities and then merging the Lewes and Wealden boroughs. These unitary authorities would replace East Sussex County Council. Brighton and Hove would remain a City Council.



London would remain as it is since it already has devolved city-status powers. This would be to not interfere with current forms of devolution within England that have been proven to work.

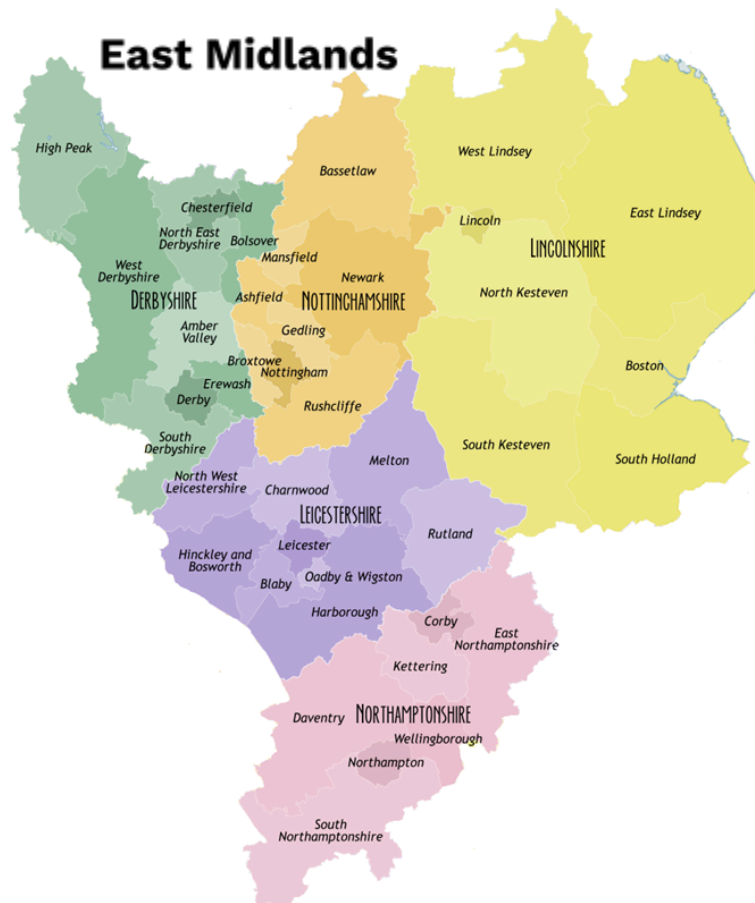
The Eastern region would comprise six counties. This includes Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. Again, unitary authorities could be created with counties being split into two (making 12 in total). Any City Councils would kept intact so as not to interfere with devolution that has already occurred within England.

West Midlands



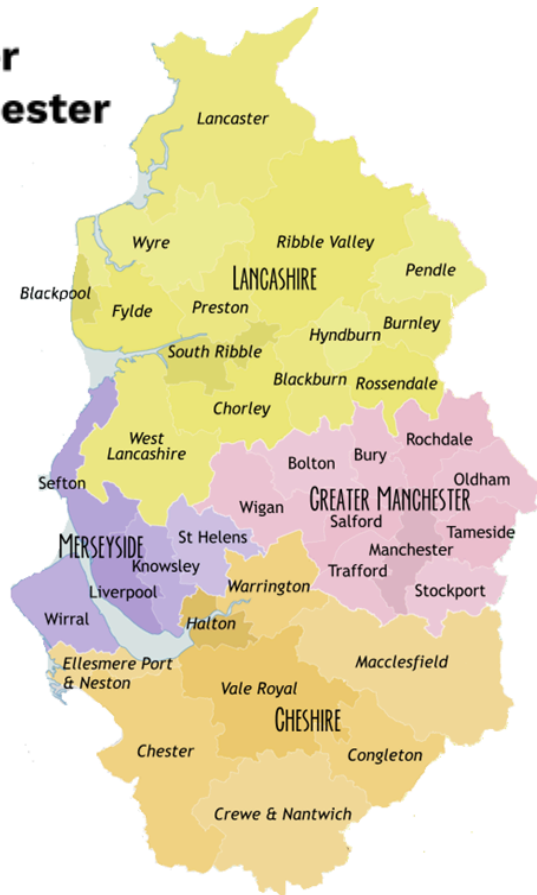
The West Midlands Region would comprise of 5 counties. Each of the five counties could be split into two so as to create 10 unitary authorities. Again, city councils could be kept to avoid disruption to devolution that has already occurred.

East Midlands



The East Midlands region would be created from 5 counties. These include Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. Any upper-tier authorities, such as City Councils, could be kept. Smaller lower-tier authorities, such as borough councils, could be merged into larger unitary authorities within every county. If each county merged its lower-tier authorities into two unitary authorities, this region would create 10-new unitary authorities to deliver local services.

Greater Manchester



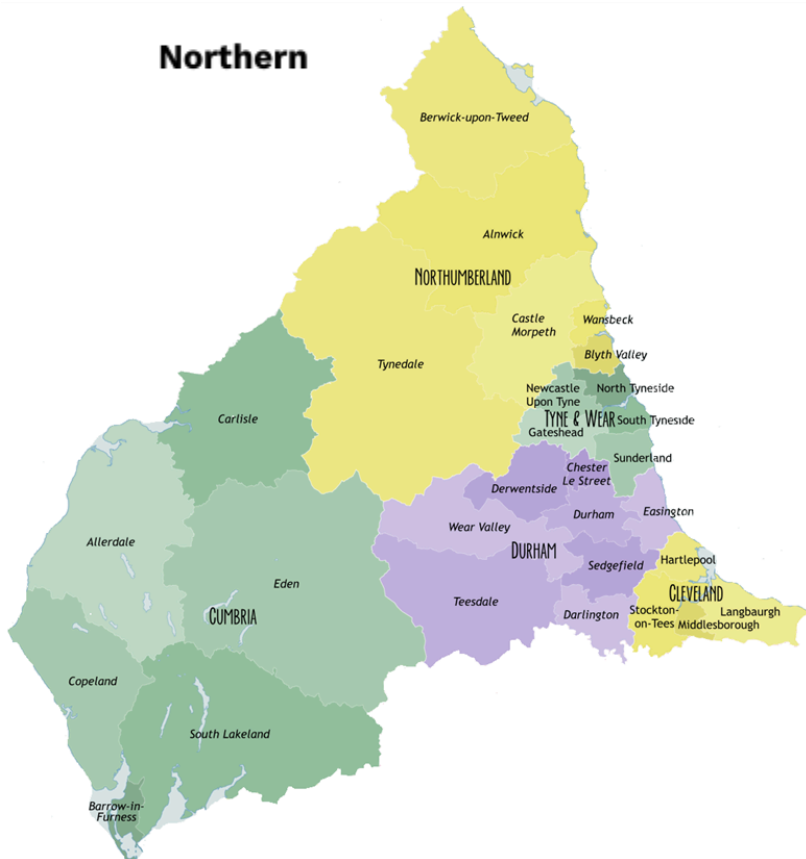
The Greater Manchester region would comprise 4 counties (Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire). To avoid harming the devolution that has already occurred in Manchester and Liverpool, unitary authorities would need to be created in all areas apart from these cities. This could be done by splitting Cheshire and Lancashire into two and creating unitary authorities around the Manchester and Liverpool city council areas by merging borough councils.

Greater Yorkshire



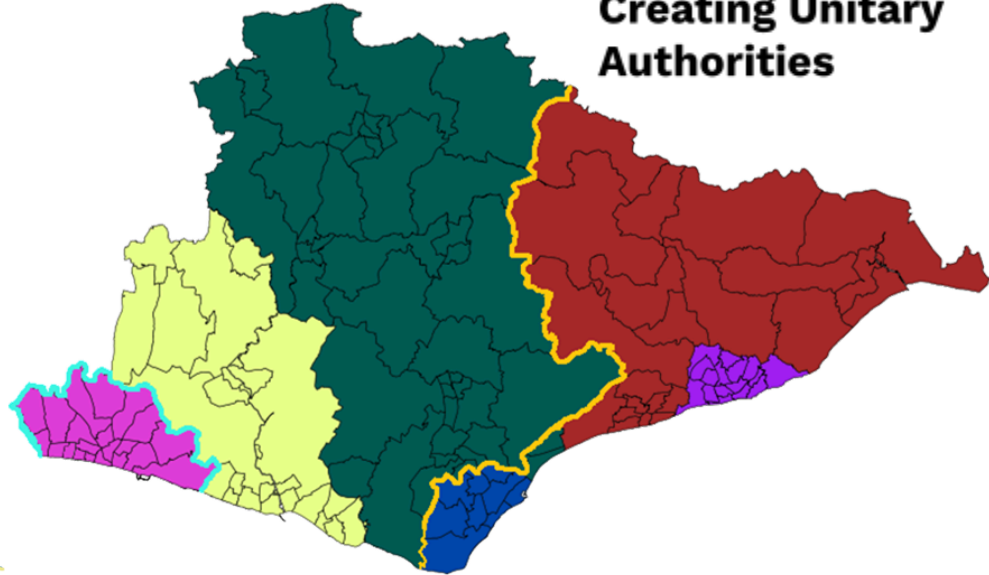
Greater Yorkshire would be made from four counties (South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire and Humberside). Again, each county could be split into two parts to make two new unitary authorities. City Councils already established in this region could remain as currently formed.

Northern



The Northern Region would be formed of 5 counties. Due to the disproportional spread of the English population, this region would have a smaller population than other areas. Keeping this area separate from other more populous areas would be needed to ensure regional representation across England. Unitary authorities could be created by splitting each county into two and retaining city councils.

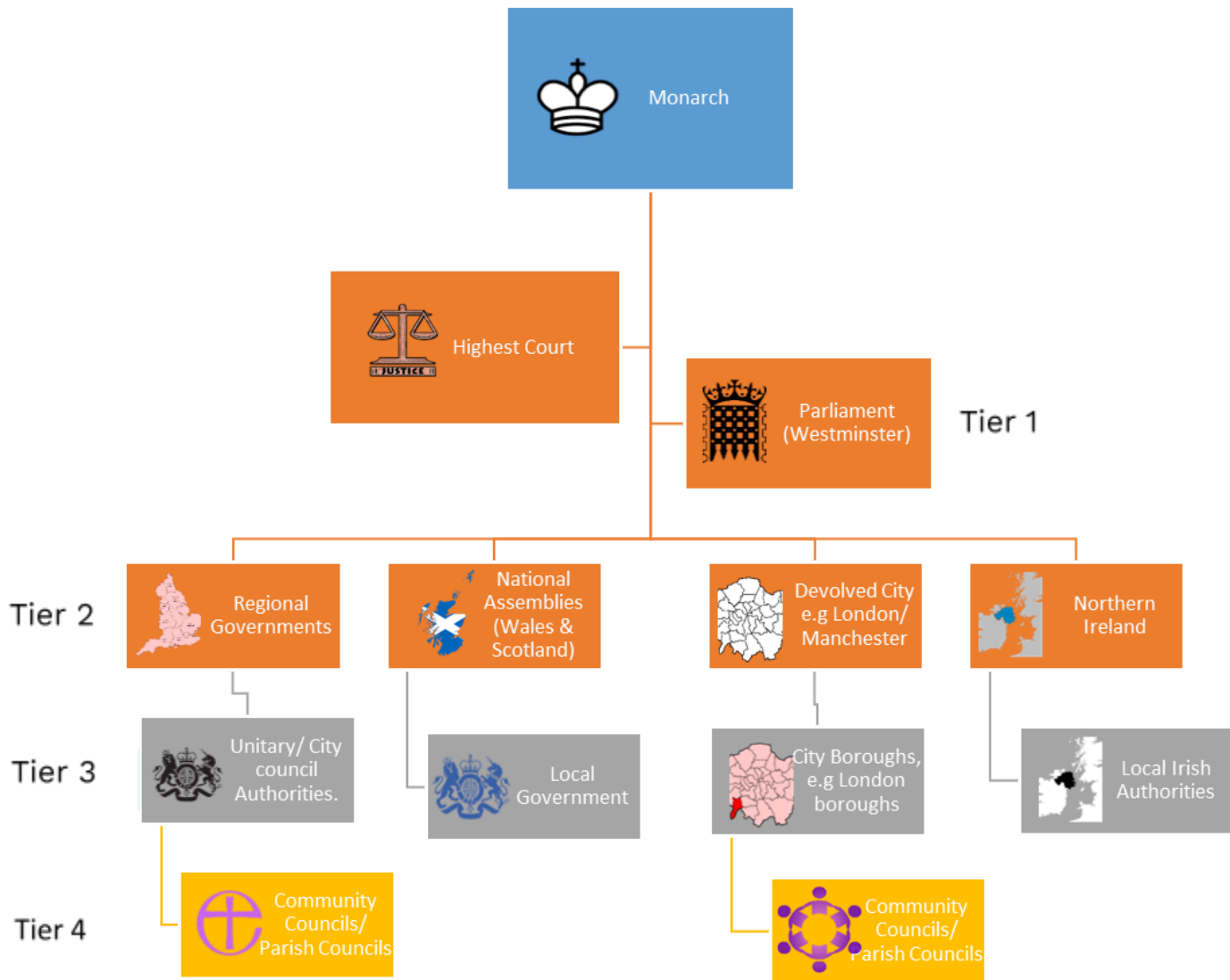
Creating Unitary Authorities



This part of the document mentioned that unitary authorities would be created during the process of devolution to the regions. This is due to the need to reform local government and for devolution to be spread across the country, thus delivering two solutions at once. Historically, local government structures and devolution have been very ad-hoc and implemented inconsistently. By reforming both at once, this problem can be addressed by making structures across the whole of England consistent.

Local government can be consistent by creating unitary authorities of a similar size across England. To do this, lower-tier authorities can be merged. For example, in East Sussex, Hastings, Eastbourne and Rother could be merged to make one new authority and Lewes and Wealden could be combined to make another. These two new unitary authorities would replace East Sussex County Council, the upper-tier council. Brighton and Hove could be unaltered due to it already having a unitary status in the form of a city council (See the Map above). Each authority would have around 270,000 people. This reform would cut the number of councils drastically. In East Sussex, 7 councils would be reduced to 3.

The New Structure of Government in the UK.



The New Structure:

The top of the UK's governing system would remain unchanged, with the monarch symbolically being the head of state. The Supreme Court would remain the highest court (representing the head of English law). The highest political authority would continue to be parliament, with parliament forming the national government – the first tier of government.

Underneath the highest form of government is the new first level of local government - the second tier of government. These would be Regional governments, national assemblies (like the Scottish and Welsh assemblies) and the devolved City councils, such as the London Assembly. Northern Ireland would be on the same level but would continue to have its current functions as agreed by the Good Friday Agreement.

The second level of local government would be local authorities – the third tier of government. For the new regions, the second tier would be unitary authorities and City Council authorities. The Welsh and Scottish assemblies would keep their current local government structure, whilst London would have the option to merge its London Borough system into a unitary authority. The new boundaries for these unitary authorities could be drawn by an independent boundary commission to avoid political interference. Further, new unitary authorities could appoint councillors proportionally to ensure no democratic deficit occurs. Northern Ireland's local institutions would remain unchanged and in the hands of the Northern Irish assembly.

In England, the fourth tier of local government would be community and parish councils. Towns would have their own community councils, and villages could keep their old parish system. What community councils are and how they could work is discussed towards the end of this policy document.

What are the main aims and purposes of regional government?

The creation of regional government needs to be more than just a policy of devolution. It must be seen and used as an opportunity to do the following:

- Improve the efficiency and outcomes within local government.
- Assist in the economic development of the UK and improve its productivity.

- Tackle inequality.
- Break up some of the biggest monopolies. This will help to encourage greater competition.
- Tackle problems Westminster has been reluctant to address.
- Encourage innovation in policy.
- Tailor policy development to different localities with different needs.
- Address skills gaps within specific localities.
- Bring civil society groups into governance within England. This will enable more informed and responsive policy-making.

The Powers that regional authorities would have:

1. Powers to build. This includes:

- a.) Building major rail, highway, motorway and road developments.
- b.) Building large-scale housing projects, such as authorising new garden cities.
- c.) Planting trees, maintaining forests and improving biodiversity (offsetting building).
- d.) Developing flood defences.
- e.) Controlling water infrastructure projects – such as building new reservoirs.

New planning laws could establish regional government's seniority and power to build.

2. Powers over economic development, regeneration and tackling inequality. This includes:

- a) Ensuring economic growth is spread throughout England.

- b) Creating regional links by connecting deprived localities with affluent areas.
- c) Engaging in economic development and regeneration projects.
- d) Encouraging market competition.

3. Powers over the Environment and Energy: This includes:

- a) Building large-scale renewable projects and power plants, such as nuclear power stations and mass wind farms that produce clean energy.
- b) Mitigating pollution and pursuing lower pollution levels.
- c) Setting up and running the National Environment and Biodiversity Service (NEBS) to do this.
- d) Using specialist knowledge to improve the environment and biodiversity.
- e) Maintaining & promoting national parks that fall within regional boundaries.

4. Powers over Education and Training. This includes:

- a) Running the National Education Service. This will:
 - i. Carry out functions the Department of Education is currently responsible for.
 - ii. Set and direct education policy across the country.
 - iii. Fund skills programmes by allocating money to projects.
- b) Implementing and running skills programmes. Programmes would:
 - i. Focus on plugging skills gaps that emerge.
 - ii. Set up skills centres where they are most needed.

- iii. Link with voluntary agencies that are able and willing to deliver training programmes.
 - iv. Adapt skills programmes to emerging markets and future technologies.
- c) Working with the university sector. This would:
- i. Link top universities with highly deprived towns. This can be done by getting universities to expand their services by setting up new departments in deprived towns.
 - ii. Enforce a quota system for getting deprived students into top universities.
 - iii. Reform the university sector where needed, such as changing targets and improving teacher training courses for PhD students.
- d) Create and promote new polytechnics. This will help England adapt by creating the skills needed for emerging markets and future technologies.
- e) Promote the teaching profession, set and maintain standards and seek to recruit enough new teachers to address the staff shortfalls.
- f) Monitor and enforce standards.

5. Powers over Agriculture, Food and Fishing. This includes:

- a) Managing powers that return from the EU that relate to agriculture, food and fishing.
- b) Getting professional bodies in these fields to shape policymaking.
- c) Managing and improving upon the current regulation structure.

d) Supporting these industries post-Brexit – such as maintaining a subsidy programme.

6. Sports, culture, and arts functions (that exist within regional boundaries). This includes:

a) Creating an infrastructure for these services: This could involve taking over empty buildings to increase sports and arts service capacity at a local level.

b) Creating national services to direct sports, culture and arts programmes. This would:

i. Use this infrastructure and national service to create arts schools that will focus on regenerating economically deprived areas. This could be done by developing skills that growing arts-based industries will need.

c) Developing sports and arts programmes to encourage wider participation.

7. Scrutinising local service performance and democracy: Although unitary authorities would have control over local services and democracy, regional government could be used to check that unitary authorities are performing efficiently. Such would involve:

a) Using a national performance framework to record and monitor how efficiently each unitary authority performs.

b) Publishing each unitary authority's results online.

c) Intervening when unitary authorities fail to reach a minimum standard of service delivery.

- d) Setting the electoral cycles of unitary authorities to ensure that elections are held at a consistent but not too frequent rate.

Unitary authorities would keep control of:

- i. Setting local taxation levels and collecting tax.
- ii. Running local elections.
- iii. Approving staff and their wages.
- iv. Setting councillor pay and expenses.
- v. Powers of comms – such as promoting council programmes and projects.
- vi. Powers to hold referendums, if granted permission by Westminster.

How could regional government use these powers?

Now that we have outlined the powers of the regional authorities and stated how they should be formed, we can outline how the system will work. Earlier, it was mentioned that regional government would use the London Assembly model. The London Model works just like how a council would operate, with the use of departments and policy scrutiny to ensure the best policy-making and accountability practices occur.

Based on the powers the regional government has, the following departments would need to exist:

- The planning, infrastructure and Transport department:
- The economic, regeneration and investment department.
- The National Education Service (NES), regional department.

- The Environment and Energy Department.
- Agriculture, Food, Forestry and Fishing department (to work with the environment and economic departments).
- Sports, Culture and Heritage departments.

For each department, elected representatives would need to decide on budgets and allocate money to projects. They will also develop policies that are tailored to a region's needs, analyse proposed plans, test new policies by approving small-scale pilot projects and scrutinise the effectiveness of policies. Reports regarding the efficiency of projects would be published so the constituents of a region can see evidence of successes or failures. These departments should also have a space for civil society groups to influence policy development. This would bring the public closer to public policy and governance. The benefit of this is to make policy-making more informed and shaped by specialist knowledge. This should result in more desirable results that can produce long-term benefits.

The Building, Infrastructure and Transport department

The planning, transport and infrastructure department would cover all large-scale building projects regional government would be responsible for. Parties would allocate councillors to this committee, and these councillors would elect someone to lead this department's committee.

The department would be there to create plans for large-scale house building, such as new garden city projects. This will enable the large-scale house building that is required to tackle the housing crisis. The department would set the location of projects (so as to make land available for developers) and tender contracts to

housebuilding companies. Planning permission would be given to the best bids. Regional government could work with planning and housing experts and civil society groups to ensure good-quality housing is built.

The department will also be able to allocate money for infrastructure projects. This could be achieved through Westminster allocating a pot of money to each region based on a funding formula that would help tackle regional disparities. The department would be charged with selecting projects that better connect less well-off places to more affluent regional economic hubs. Therefore, this regional approach is designed to improve infrastructure within England and bridge the increasing divide within Britain. Such projects may also help Britain to address its puzzling productivity problem, as they could increase economic opportunities and connect businesses to the skills they need. It may also help to keep skilled younger people in deprived towns, thus keeping higher earners and their capital in deprived communities.

Civil society groups would be involved in this process through a competitive bid process. Unitary authorities, businesses, Trade Unions and commerce groups could devise competing infrastructure plans that could then be submitted to regional government representatives. Alternatively, they could be involved in shaping the plans drawn up by civil servants. This would also encourage best investment practices by regions, as competition between projects would encourage debate regarding the best ways to invest limited budgets.

This would also encourage policymakers to provide detailed plans of proposed projects. This is because if they fail to do this, their project may not be chosen due to

representatives' fear of wasting their limited budgets. This could improve infrastructure spending as it could avoid the current Westminster problem of investing in too large and inefficient projects, such as HS2.

Due to investment being focused on smaller projects confined within one region, future investment could deliver better productivity results outside London. This would deliver better economic returns for the taxpayer across the country and would not make the treasury so reliant on economic returns from the capital. This would potentially make more money available for future projects, as investments that produce greater returns would enable more taxation to be gathered.

Regional authorities would also manage transport systems that span cross-region. Renationalising the railways may need to occur due to monopolies not performing, and this department could manage a regional train service. As train services will only be renationalised once a contract is deemed not to be of good value, there will be a period between this decision and the end of the contract date. During this time, regional governments could be instructed to create a service team to prepare, organise and run the services it will be taking over.

This would give the department time to take over all the systems and processes that private train operators have developed. It would also enable the takeover of administration systems and staff. This would enable a smooth transition between private and public provision. It would also allow for a clear transition process to ensure that no jobs and staff are lost in the change.

It would also allow for an understanding between the government and trade unions on what working conditions and pay workers can expect before nationalisation occurs.

This will allow any disputes to be ironed out before the takeover. This could result in fewer industrial disputes and less disruption to our railway services. This department could also make ticket pricing more transparent, accountable and democratic by publishing costing information and allowing elected representatives to debate prices.

An example of addressing inequality: Regional government could address economic inequalities by improving rail connectivity for deprived communities. For instance, within the South East, some deprived communities have much poorer rail links than nearby economic hubs. For example, Hastings is a coastal community that suffers from greater deprivation levels, yet it is quicker to go from London to Oxford than to Hastings to London. This is despite Oxford to London being a much longer journey. This is also the same for Brighton, where travelling from Brighton to London takes significantly less time than travelling from Hastings to London (despite Brighton being much further away from London). Regional governance could improve infrastructure by funnelling money to projects that plan to improve rail networks from Hastings to nearby economic hubs, like Brighton and London. This would assist in decreasing inequality in the UK by providing more economic links and opportunities for people in this deprived town.

Economic, regeneration, and investment department

The Economic Investment Department would cover all economic and investment matters regional government would be responsible for. The elected mayor would lead this department's committee.

The department would be there to identify regeneration projects, oversee plans of proposed projects and allocate money to approved plans. Such projects would focus

on areas within the region that have the greatest deprivation. They would also focus on regenerating local economies that had declined the most, such as specific high streets or de-industrialised areas. It would also exist to identify upcoming problems within regional economies, such as growing skills gaps and staff shortages in key sectors. Information on emerging skills gaps (especially within deprived communities) could be passed on to the National Education Service, so action could be taken as soon as problems emerge.

The department would also be there to support the general health of the economy. It would do this by focusing on initiatives that provide sectors that are vital for the future of the UK economy with the skills needed to produce growth. Such sectors could include maths, sciences and computer-based industries. The department could also be used to support start-ups and entrepreneurs, especially in emerging tech markets.

Another crucial function of the department would be to implement small-scale test cases of policies that aim to improve local economies. This will ensure that policies, once implemented fully, will have the best chance of being successful. Reporting on the results of pilot schemes would also encourage greater transparency of public policy. This will better highlight successes that others could expand upon and identify failures that other authorities could learn from.

The department would also produce reports on a region's economic health, its overall productivity and its key problems. Such reports could also make recommendations for actions that can be used to tackle such problems. It would also produce a report that analyses the effectiveness of agreed decisions, investments and policies.

Regional governments would also have a service that would be there to identify local markets that do not have sufficient competition. For example, regional governments could be responsible for establishing community or regional banking. This would offer more economic choices for people outside the current monopoly of the big high street banks. These banks could offer more responsible lending, with better deals on savings as well. These banks could also offer different options for buyers in the housing market, especially for first-time buyers. Importantly, economic initiatives and freedoms like these would give people greater choices than they currently have, therefore introducing much-needed competition into the market.

In terms of civil society feeding into this department's work, this could consist of Trade Union groups, business leaders and commerce representatives.

Example of economic regeneration: Regional government could create task forces to regenerate high streets suffering from a high rate of unoccupied units. For instance, in the South East, there are coastal high streets that have high rates of unoccupied shopping units. These empty retail units could be taken over by the regional government and run in a way the community wishes it to be. For example, a closed post office could be run as a multi-purpose store where postal services could be kept intact. Also, community banking could replace banks that have left the high street. Regional government could also run socially beneficial services from vacant units. Additionally, regional governments could support independent start-ups innovating new technologies to help reduce the number of vacant units.

The Environment and Energy Department

This department would ensure that environmental regulations are met, biodiversity is protected, and large-scale renewable clean energy projects are implemented. This department will aim to increase competition in the energy market, allow civil society to engage more in projects and policy-making and better manage pollution levels. Further, regional government would be there to help prevent climate change and meet the UK's climate change targets.

Investing in government-owned clean energy: Each region would be allocated funds to build green energy projects. This could include funding clean energy power stations, such as nuclear power stations, and large-scale renewable projects, such as solar and wind farms. The regions that best deliver competition and renewable energy schemes could be rewarded with more funding, thus incentivising all areas of the country to be energy sustainable. This increased funding could be spent on large-scale renewable projects to rapidly increase renewable energy production.

Such projects could be targeted in deprived communities that implement renewables the most, such as deprived coastal areas. This would assist in the development of green energy jobs, thus increasing the amount of high-paid jobs, possibly resulting in more sustainable economies across the UK. Secondly, it could help introduce competition and sustainable energy production, thus driving prices down in the long term. As this will have to be done on a large scale by regional governments across the country, a great deal of this energy will fall into the government's hands. Due to this, regional government could be in charge of setting up and managing government-owned energy distribution centres. This company could be called British Energy. As the government would own and run this national energy service, it would

have an obligation to show how it is investing its money and setting energy prices. Therefore, it would be in its interests to keep energy prices fair. Over time, this is something that would help to lower energy prices.

Bringing specialist knowledge into policymaking: The department would be there to bring specialist knowledge into policymaking in the areas of environmental protection, biodiversity and improving air quality. These professionals could submit plans that aim to improve upon problems within these areas. They would also scrutinise these plans and run test case trials. Regional government would then produce reports on successes and failures. Successes can be expanded upon, with failures being highlighted and learned from.

Managing pollution levels: This department would be able to propose strategies on how to deal with pollution and air quality problems. These strategies would be presented to this committee, and any plans would need to be detailed and scrutinised before being implemented. This would enable regions to focus their efforts on areas that are known to have concentrated pollution and air quality problems. This would also encourage innovation in thinking about how to deal with these problems, which may encourage regions to learn from each other. For instance, this could include projects to reduce congestion in problem areas, thus reducing the amount of harmful pollutants released by car travel. As local areas can have varying environmental issues, a localised approach could target solutions better than current national approaches.

Moreover, regional governments could have the ability to propose legislation on these issues that would only affect their region. For example, it could enforce a minimum

standard of air quality and stipulate measures to take the worst polluting cars off the roads. This would be similar to the ULEZ policy implemented in London.

Maintaining and promoting national parks services: As mentioned earlier, these bodies could be responsible for maintaining and promoting national parks that fall within an authority's regional boundary. This would enable the regions to base their tourism around such landmarks. It could also link with local schools by providing more educational trips to these areas. This would help to promote wildlife, the countryside and the environment to the next generation. This is also where regional government would work to help protect wildlife, such as monitoring bee populations. It would enable the showing of regional differences. It would also allow for the better targeting of local wildlife problems than the current Westminster system provides. Regional government could also have the power to conduct large tree-planting programmes. Such programmes could seek to restore forestry lost by connecting large tree-planting projects together. This would also improve biodiversity by creating large blocks of protected woodland and natural habitats. This service could be called the National Environment and Biodiversity Service (NEBS). Regional government would also be responsible for earmarking environmentally protected spaces. The service would also allocate land for housing, thus ensuring a balance between protecting the environment and allowing the public to live in affordable accommodation.

Example of improving biodiversity: In terms of managing biodiversity, regional governments could spread good practices. For example, in the South East, Rother council has saved £25,000 by stopping cutting verges and opting instead to plant meadows. Under this local government model, this successful policy could be expanded across East Sussex and the wider southeast area, allowing for maximum

utilisation of a positive local policy. This example would increase savings and produce environmental benefits (such as stronger bee populations) across a wide area, thus achieving positive outcomes for more people. Such a positive policy example could be made public, so other regional authorities can learn from these test cases, hopefully encouraging best-practice policy-making by expanding on what is most likely to work. This could make future investments better value for money.

Representatives would also allocate money for finalised projects, debate various policy options and vote on what their overall environmental strategy should be. This could only be agreed upon when backed by professional approval. Finally, they could also be there to ensure group decisions are held to account.

The National Education Service (Regional departments)

One problem with education in this country is that every new government is determined to reform education policy in order to protect education standards. The never-ending restructuring of our education system continually disrupts some of the most important aspects of education, such as consistent teaching and learning.

Yet, due to the cycle of government, how can this be stopped? The answer is to take politicians out of the education system and allow teaching professionals to direct education services. The National Education Service (NES) would do this at a national level, and then regional governments would be responsible for delivering decisions made at a national level and implementing local services.

The NES would allow key stakeholders to run the policymaking process and provide education services for England. Such people could include: academic representatives, teaching staff and (or) teacher unions. Additionally, educators who teach more

practical-based subjects could be involved. This could include those teachers belonging to professional organisations, giving a much-needed focus on developing vocational skills. Further, business federations could help tailor education services towards the skills they are short of. Also, tech and creative-based industries could assist in developing schools that would provide the skills these industries need to grow. Allowing professionals with industry experience to push for change would provide important front-line information when making decisions, thus improving policymaking. This could help education services function better whilst also tailoring services towards current and future economic needs. This work could be ongoing to ensure that every region has the courses needed to give the nation the skills it requires in a rapidly changing globalised economic world.

Skills programmes: A core function of an NES regional department would be to identify local problems, such as a lack of education provision within defined localities. After problems are identified, the NES would then be tasked to devise plans that can plug these gaps and create a task force to deploy solutions. This institution could also be similar to the NHS, where it could offer free advice and help in accessing education services from childhood to retirement age. The NES could also link with charities and voluntary organisations that provide skills training.

The NES could also plug skills gaps by creating training workshops that could focus on specific skills needed within a locality. This will allow the government to address problems at the local level. The NES could connect to job centres to provide retraining for a new career. This may become increasingly needed as people become ever more displaced by newer technologies. This could also be beneficial when helping long-term unemployed people back into work.

Working with the university sector: The NES would work with the university sector. Firstly, it would link universities with deprived areas. Resources could be made available by the NES to universities as an incentive for higher education institutions to create a new department in a deprived town. The NES could also acquire empty buildings to provide infrastructure for these new departments, again giving incentives for high-performing universities to provide their benefits to smaller towns. The NES could also create and enforce a quota that ensures a minimum number of students from deprived areas attend the highest-performing universities.

The NES could also reform the university sector to help it better prepare students for the workplace. For example, it could increase the proportion of academic staff who are education-only staff. This would encourage those who are the best at teaching to pursue careers in academia, whilst also providing students with better learning experiences. It could also develop programmes to help such staff develop career options at universities. For example, such staff could encourage students to pursue teaching, something that could help address teacher recruitment problems.

New higher education vocation institutions: The NES could also reintroduce polytechnics. These institutions would deliver higher-skilled vocational teaching and qualifications, enabling the expansion of vocational training. This would help to rebalance the economy. Regional government could deliver this new form of higher education by using old polytechnics and converting them into vocational-only institutions. It could also use current universities well-known for delivering good vocational courses. These institutions would become beacons for the practical skills needed within the economy.

These new higher education facilities could also be places that would assist in the growth of art and tech industries that will create the jobs of the future. By creating such places in deprived towns, this could increase opportunities for people who currently cannot access higher education opportunities. The NES could have people from these industries directing how the courses should be structured, tailoring these courses to industry needs and standards. The NES would adapt these institutions to growing industries and technologies, such as the creative arts sector. This would allow the country to continue to ensure it has the skills needed to adapt to a world which will be rapidly changed by new technologies.

To avoid the old stigma of polytechnics, these new higher education vocation institutions could be called professional schools. These schools would be advertised as an avenue into professions within specified vocations.

Specifically, these schools could focus on:

1. Coding and APP design.
2. ICT courses (focusing on the creation and management of complex ICT projects).
3. Computer building courses.
4. Media studies (digital design, animation, and coding of websites).
5. Other arts that can use sciences, such as music technology.
6. Robotics
7. Medicine, Nursing & Sports Science (these courses could be owned by NHS institutions).
8. Engineering (such as focusing on construction project skills).

9. Project management courses (focusing on the practical management of typical workplace projects).
10. Environment (such as training people to build eco-friendly infrastructure).
11. Agriculture courses that would teach new pioneering farming techniques designed to help the industry adapt to global warming.
12. Data analytics (this could be very practical computer courses that could focus on algorithm creation and analysis of large data sets).

As building new institutions could be very expensive, adapting our current higher education systems might be the best way forward. The university system could be reformed into two different types of institutions, academic-focused and practical-focused. They would not be assumed to be equal or different in value, but rather different types of qualifications designed for different skills needed in alternative parts of the UK economy. These new professional qualifications would also be aimed at making the UK economy more competitive, productive and balanced. This would also help to address the current challenge of being highly dependent on the services sector.

Regional governments could also help with the scrutiny of schools between Ofsted inspections. It would collect performance indicator data from unitary authorities and publish league tables that could compare schools' performance. It could also encourage schools to adopt Parent Teacher Associations (PTA's) in schools marked as underperforming to help raise standards.

An example of connecting universities to deprived towns: Regional governments could work with universities to intervene in deprived towns where university campuses have

closed. An example of this exists within the South East, in East Sussex. Here, Brighton University closed its Hastings and Eastbourne campuses. Universities from elsewhere could form specialised departments aimed at promoting high-quality education in deprived towns to replace lost education centres. For example, this could be fulfilled by Oxford, Sussex or Kent University. Cambridge & Essex could fulfil the same roles in the East of England. These specialised campuses could only give places to people living in deprived areas or authorities known to have a lack of social mobility. To add a strong incentive, universities most willing to engage with such projects should get a large boost in points towards all university league tables, especially ones emphasising teaching quality.

This could also be done when a lack of A-level provision exists within a local authority. For example, recently, there was a case in the UK where there was no A-level provision anywhere in the entire borough (Knowsley). As mentioned earlier, successful education institutions could be incentivised to take over education provision in a struggling local authority. In this case, successful Further Education (FE) colleges in the surrounding boroughs could be invited to form another college in the Knowsley area.

Agriculture, Food, Forestry and Fishing Department

Managing powers that return from the EU: With Brexit, there is an enormous amount of confusion and uncertainty about what our relationship with Europe will be. Will we maintain current rules and regulations on the policy areas the EU most controls, such as agriculture, food markets and fishing standards? Will we keep the EU's subsidies systems for these industries?

Regional governments could provide oversight of the powers that will be returned by the EU. Regional government could also provide support for these industries after Brexit, to avoid the instability that Brexit may cause within these markets. This extra support would enable the industry to adapt to changes that a post-Brexit era may bring to these industries.

Professionals in policymaking: This could be done by allowing professional organisations, civil society, businesses and union groups to shape policies that could help these industries through a difficult transition period. This will help to provide solutions that will directly address industry concerns, thus enabling more direct and effective policy-making. This will give these industries greater control than they had in their EU-regulated days, helping to empower people who work in these industries. This would also fulfil one reason behind Brexit, that of giving greater control to people who work in these industries in how their industry is shaped.

This department could also produce reports on the key concerns of experts in these industries. These reports could give detailed accounts and facts about the challenges these industries face, enabling a greater understanding of the problems within these sectors. From this, targeted action could take place, making it easier to address problems within these industries and help them grow.

Managing and regulating areas the EU holds: This department would also provide information to the UK government on how its rules and regulations are affecting these industries. It could also outline how these industries can adapt to any existing rules and regulations and make recommendations for how central government can better regulate and support these industries.

Supporting industries post-Brexit: This department would have the power to innovate policy by creating test projects designed to support these industries. Reports scrutinising the performance of pilots would be made, and a successful policy could be rolled out across the country. It could also be in charge of allocating subsidies to assist these industries. This could be funded by allocating part of the money we currently send to the EU to each region. The amount of money sent to each region would be based on which region is most reliant on these industries and these sectors' economic output.

Sports, arts and heritage department

This department is split into three separate services: the sports, arts and heritage services. This department would be in charge of organising these services across their respective region. Their core aim would be to engage the public with local sports, history and arts activities. The national sports, heritage and arts services would be responsible for maintaining and delivering services in their relevant field.

Creating an infrastructure for these services: One of the department's tasks would be to take ownership of empty buildings that could be turned into facilities that local people could use. The end goal would be for the service to transfer the ownership and organisation of this building to local civil society groups. This will not only enable the regeneration of such buildings, but it would also allow such buildings to be self-sustaining.

To gain control of the infrastructure that the national service would initially own, community groups could submit a proposal to demonstrate how they would make the building into a sustainable facility. Once regional government agrees that there is a sustainable model of ownership, the building would be transferred to local civil

society groups to be maintained and run. Here, local groups could use the facilities for relatively low costs, allowing them to run essential services that would enable greater participation. This would have the added advantage of producing health and social benefits.

Once the community group no longer exists or the national service feels the facility is not self-sustaining, the building would be returned to national service. The service would then reallocate the infrastructure to another more viable project at a later date.

Regional authorities could also be given powers to compulsorily purchase empty buildings that could be used as sports venues. This building could be used to create regional sports centres, with centres being transferred to civil society groups that can make them sustainable.

Creating a national service: Powers over culture, arts and heritage could be given, similar to that of London. As just stated, regional government could compulsorily purchase empty buildings to promote these sectors. Once enough buildings across the country have been taken over, a national arts service could be created. This service could create arts and cultural programmes to be delivered across the UK. It could also create education centres that could help produce the skills needed for the growing arts-based industries. As creating such a network will take over empty buildings, this could also aid regeneration in declining high streets and deprived areas. It could also help to increase economic activity in deprived areas.

The national service would encourage individuals to pursue their interests and talents, helping to promote self-fulfilment and tackle the growing mental health

problems the country faces. The aim of this would not just be to create more art but to create a sense of community around peoples' interests. This could also be done with heritage groups, where those interested in promoting local history and culture would have greater ownership of neglected exhibitions and heritage assets. It would also encourage these groups to become self-funded and, in the end, allow local art and heritage projects to generate revenue for local communities. It would also assist in towns keeping their local history documented and displayed to the public, helping to forge a greater sense of identity. It could also assist in deciding how to display a town's history, such as making decisions on controversial statues or historical events.

Creating programmes for the sports and arts: Centres, the national service could develop programmes so that regular sports and arts events are held across the country all year round. Regions could compete with each other, with regions getting cash rewards for the best programmes. This could encourage the best policy practices to spread throughout the country. Arts programmes could help to engage younger people creatively, and sports programmes could help to tackle inactivity problems.

Regional governments could also scrutinise sports in schools to help schools develop their own sports programmes. For instance, they could help education facilities to promote after-school sports activities and promote continued participation in sports after leaving school. They could also encourage after-school arts clubs. Ratings of schools' quality could also give greater consideration to how well schools engage in sports clubs. Regional government could use the national service to help raise funding for sports venues.

Example: In Hastings, a university campus that is closing down could be made into a creative arts-based centre, preparing students for careers in growing technology and media industries. This would also help to tackle socio-economic problems, such as higher unemployment levels, by providing more skills for the town. This could help to increase investment and provide more work opportunities for people living within deprived communities.

Scrutinising local government performance:

Scrapped by the coalition government of 2010-15, the Audit Commission monitored the performance of local government. The Audit Commission could be reinstated to monitor a wide range of local government performance targets. The national government could set the measurements to be used in assessing what constitutes good performance, and regional government could collect information for unitary authorities. Regional government could scrutinise their performance and publish league tables so the public can understand how effective local services are in their area. Once problem areas are identified, regional government could produce a report outlining problems and make recommendations for improvements. If problems persist, regional authorities could have the power to intervene. For example, authorities that do not manage their finances efficiently could be taken over until the authority can demonstrate improvements.

Elections:

Elections will be conducted under a proportional party-list voting system, which will match seats to the percentage of votes cast for each party in a general election per region. Each regional authority will be allocated a select number of representatives,

based on its population size. Parties that gain under 5% of the vote will be eliminated from the equation and allocated no representation. Parties would select candidates in ranking order from 1 to the number of seats allocated. For example, if a party secured 50% of the vote, it would get 50% of the seats. If there is a remainder left and the seats cannot be divided exactly to the percentage of votes cast, then the final additional seat would be allocated to the winning party. This is done in order to give it a “winner’s bonus.”

Proportional representation will be used because part of the reason for creating regional government is to give greater power over key policy areas to more people throughout the UK. This consensus-building could address political and economic inequality by providing better representation on a range of issues. Equal representation would also prevent some parts of the region from dominating others. As mentioned earlier, all this may help increase economic productivity and tackle inequality.

The number of elected regional representatives (RR’s) would be designed not to exceed the current assemblies. For example, Scotland has around 130 members to their assembly, so regional government could have a similar number of representatives. However, if this is too large, the number of members could be closer to what the London Assembly has, around 30. Alternatively, a middle ground of 50 to 80 members could be established. As stated earlier, there would be a committee structure, and representatives would work within a council-like system, such as the London Assembly operates under.

The leader of each committee could be appointed by all representatives, and the leader of a region would also be appointed by all representatives. This would likely be done by negotiations between the parties before a final vote takes place.

Finally, representatives should be paid a full-time wage, as this would ideally be a full-time commitment. When Borough councils are eliminated, the savings made by reducing the number of councillors and elections could pay for such wages. As elected representatives could be paid a decent full-time wage from this pot of money, this would hopefully attract good-quality candidates.

Some of the elected representatives' roles would include:

- To represent the views of their constituents on matters that cover regional powers only.
- To allocate money given to regional government by Westminster to carry out its powers, e.g. infrastructure spending.
- Engage with professionals, civil society groups and staff to improve policy-making and regulations.
- Lobby the central government to propose needed legislation for problems specific to a region or locality within a region.
- To provide scrutiny of bodies that cover the services and powers of regional government.

Why should regional government be implemented?

So far, devolution has been sporadic. Some areas of the UK have benefited from powers that have been devolved, whilst others have not. The most notable beneficiary

of devolution has been London. London has produced visible improvements in areas where it has gained devolved powers, such as transport improvements. The breaking of infrastructure and transport controls Westminster once had over London has enabled this very distinctive region of ours to innovate better transport policy that suits its unique needs. This has generated the changes in transport needed for a modern mega-global city, something which has benefited the UK economically. The greater economic activity that has come from improved connectivity has assisted in London's continued growth. This, in turn, has helped in creating economic growth for the wider UK economy, something that has helped to increase government revenues. Meanwhile, places elsewhere that have not been granted such devolved powers lag behind in infrastructure development. This has led to a scenario where some areas have excellent transport links, whilst others do not have sufficient links. For example, there are still many smaller towns cut off from economic activity, reducing efficiencies, limiting productivity and enabling the cycle of inequality to continue. Where can this stark difference come from? Yes, partly from the fact that London generates so much money, it effectively subsidises every other region in the UK. But, also through the creation and innovations, devolution to London has brought. By breaking the Westminster monopoly on transport, the rest of the country could follow London's successful model. The rest of the UK could pursue smaller, more deliverable localised projects that better connect deprived areas to economic hubs. This will help to improve poorer areas, and it could also create better productivity and economic growth. It could also assist in tackling inequality levels.

This example highlights that regional government needs to exist to spread the benefits of devolution throughout England. Regional government also needs to occur

to create an opportunity to tackle some of our country's biggest problems that Westminster has not been able to address. For example, London has been able to secure greater action on poor air quality because its devolved powers have enabled it to focus on an issue that has been overlooked by Westminster. As Westminster has failed to tackle many problems, creating a new layer of devolved government throughout England with new representatives could provide an opportunity to focus on issues that are currently being overlooked. This example also demonstrates how devolution will allow England to better tailor policy-making to local needs rather than trying to succeed with a one-size-fits-all approach.

This ability to tailor approaches at a local level could also address problems that need to be overcome to address the UK's economic and public service problems. Vacancies within the public sector and key private sectors within the UK economy stop us from improving public services and weaken the economy. Regional government could provide an opportunity to identify how skills gaps vary at a more localised level and tailor policy to plug these deficiencies. This could help the UK to direct skills training and people with the required skills to where they are needed most. This could help to equip workers with the skills both the public and private sectors need. This would also provide an opportunity to increase productivity and growth.

This ability to tailor approaches at a local level could also address challenges that need to be overcome in order to tackle the UK's economic and public service problems. Vacancies within the public sector and key private sectors within the UK economy stop us from improving public services and weakens the UK economy. Regional government could provide an opportunity to identify how skills gaps vary at a

more localised level and tailor policy to plug these deficiencies. This could help the UK to direct skills training and people with the required skills to where they are needed most. This could help to equip workers with the skills both the public and private sectors need. Such reforms would also provide an opportunity to increase productivity and economic growth.

Finally, implementing regional government would also provide a moment to create better scrutiny of local governance. It could recreate the functions of the defunct Audit Commission and deliver reports on how local government can perform more efficiently. This could help local governments to make better use of their declining resources. They could also scrutinise the effectiveness of policy outcomes at a local level. This could help to identify successes that can be expanded upon. It could also identify failures more early and stop policy failures from being widespread. This could improve the overall quality of governance within England.

In summary, Regional government would provide the benefits of:

- Bringing devolution and its benefits to all areas within England.
- Tailoring policy development to different localities with different needs.
- Encouraging innovation in policy.
- Tackling problems Westminster has been reluctant to address.
- Assisting in improving the economy throughout England for all.
- Addressing skills gaps within specific localities to provide public service and economic benefits.
- Bringing civil society groups into governance within England, enabling more informed and responsive policy-making.

- Improving the efficiency and outcomes within local government.

Reforming local government (why we need to create unitary authorities).

Reform through centralisation:

One problem with England's structure of local government is that there is a wide range of different types of authorities. They range from metropolitan borough councils, non-metropolitan borough councils, city councils, county councils and unitary authorities. Therefore, the ability for residents to understand which authority deals with each service is often made more difficult than it needs to be. It also led to an inconsistent structure, making it harder for researchers to compare the performance of local authorities. Therefore, local government needs to be more standardised. This can be done through centralising lower-tier councils. As outlined earlier, this could be done by splitting a county into two and merging lower-tier (borough and district) authorities in these two areas. These merged authorities could then form a unitary council where they will have control of all local services. These two unitary authorities would replace the county council (upper-tier) authority. For example, in East Sussex, Hastings could merge with Rother and Eastbourne, and Lewes could merge with Wealden, with these two new unitary authorities replacing East Sussex County Council.

Services that lower-tier authorities have control over.	Non-Metropolitan District (Borough)	Non-Metropolitan county	Unitary Authority.
Education			
Housing			
Planning & licensing applications			
Strategic Planning			
Transport Planning			
Passenger Transport			
Highways			
Fire Services			
Social Services			
Libraries			
Leisure, Tourism & Recreation			
Waste Collection			
Street cleaning			
Waste Disposal			
Environmental Health			
Revenue Collection			

Note: This table shows the services that different types of authorities currently have control over. Unitary Authorities would have control over all these services.

Why centralise local government and create unitary authorities?

- Providing a more understandable structure for voters and a clearer mandate for elected representatives.
- Simplifying the election cycle – reducing the number of elections.
- Decreasing the size of services held at a county level, helping to make service delivery more localised and, from this, more efficient.
- Decreasing inefficiencies, such as administrative delays.
- Creating a more joined-up approach in service delivery, something which will improve service outcomes for a range of issues.
- Making local government more financially viable by reducing the size of upper-tier departments and merging services.

Providing a more understandable structure and a clearer mandate:

Borough councillors often complain that the borough council frequently acquires responsibilities that should be dealt with at the county level. Oppositely, county councillors often feel the borough council is trying to shift their responsibilities onto the county council. Indeed, much casework at the borough level has to be passed onto the nearest county council, as borough councillors don't have authority over many issues they are frequently asked to address. This illustrates two key problems with the two-tier system. Firstly, it is not always clear, even to those who work within the system, which authority is responsible for a given policy area. Therefore, even those experienced in seeking representation for the borough and county councils find it hard to communicate to voters which council is responsible for a particular service. Consequently, voters can often be confused about what issues they are voting on at

different points in the electoral cycle and often contact the wrong representative when seeking help with a local matter.

Secondly, this blurring of service provision can often lead to one council shifting work onto the other, leading to less efficient and cost-effective service delivery. It can also make some councillors feel powerless. For instance, when a councillor is given casework relating to a road in poor condition, they often contact the county council only to find they have no influence. For example, County Councillors acquire casework relating to transport, such as damage to bus shelters, only to find out that it is the borough council that has to deal with this. As these councillors have no authority over the different-tier councils, they often find it hard to gain a satisfactory response from officers, if they get one at all. Finally, these tensions can produce competing mandates. County Councillors can be elected on different policy pledges to that of borough councillors who represent the same residents. Therefore, one tier can often prevent another tier from acting, even though they have a mandate to carry out proposed policies.

Example - Transport investment in East Sussex: Two years ago, the county council supported and approved cycle lane investment in Hastings. Yet, the first project, a cycle lane through Alexandra Park, was narrowly refused by the borough council. As the two councils could not work together, Hastings lost the chance to improve cycling connectivity in the town. Here, the County Council Transport Department spent time and money on consultants, staff and contractors for reports and designs, but because of competing mandates, they were not able to build anything.

Since 2017, several projects from the county council's democratically approved LCWIP (Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan) have been lost due to borough opposition. This plan would build a greenway through Hastings, building a viable and safer cycling route through key parts of the town. For example, ready-to-build designs for the Alexandra Park and Silverhill to Crowhurst Road sections of the greenway were taken back by ESCC to be spent elsewhere due to borough opposition. This lost the town £800k of investment. The next part of the route was also abandoned, losing further investment for the town. Here we can see how two competing mandates can approve a policy for implementation, only for the project to be turned down at the last hurdle due to competing mandates. This is a costly and inefficient way of implementing local democracy and policymaking.

Simplifying the election cycle:

In a two-tier system, both councils can decide to hold their elections on separate dates and can even opt to run different election cycles. This has led to some localities having an election almost every single year.

Example – The election cycle in Hastings: In Hastings, as the borough is elected every two years and held on a different cycle to that of its sister county council, an election has been held almost every single year since 2010.

This constant cycle of elections is not good for anyone for several reasons. Firstly, it is not financially good for the council as it costs a great deal of council resources to hold elections so frequently. Secondly, it does not suit political parties as it does not give them time to focus on their policy agenda. Local parties often start preparation for a local election 6 to 7 months in advance. The reason for this is that they need to

select candidates, formulate an election strategy and decide on campaigning issues. Therefore, as one election ends, local parties only get a breather of 4 to 5 months before they go back onto an election footing. Consequently, there is little time for parties to consider policy formation and what they would like to push for if they win office. Thirdly, this constant election cycle puts financial strain on local parties, making them reliant on a small number of local donors. Fourthly, it does not encourage political parties to work together. With such a short time until the next election, this intensifies political competition. This intensity causes parties to fear working with each other, as they do not want their opponents to be able to claim credit for successes so close to an election. Finally, the constant cycle of elections takes its toll on the voters and party activists. Voters are left confused as to why they are being asked to vote every year, and can get confused between the different layers of government. Party activists experience frequent high workloads, leading some to become less involved due to the sheer amount of time it takes out of their lives. None of this is good for democracy.

Decreasing inefficiency:

This centralisation will also enable lower-tier services to be delivered more efficiently. This is because it allows all services and departments to be run under the same systems and management. It also enables a more joined-up approach when delivering services and tackling social problems.

Examples of current structural inefficiencies: One issue of having the county council and borough system working alongside each other is that it often deals with the same people in two different ways. When I worked for East Sussex County Council, I often

saw how people were being dealt with by two different authorities, which unnecessarily escalated costs and made service delivery slower and less efficient. At times, this puts increased stress on people who could be in dire situations. By bringing together these different councils and creating one unitary authority, problems like this could be avoided, thus enabling greater efficiency and better service delivery.

These inefficiencies also occur at the borough (lower-tier) level. In September 2024, it was announced that the winter fuel allowance was to be means-tested. Those who lost out from this change were encouraged to apply for the government's new household support fund. This fund is designed to support those on lower incomes with energy bills and food costs. Despite this money being released in September, people in Hastings were unable to apply for this money for a period of two months due to the payment system not having been fully implemented. The main reason for this lengthy delay was the borough council's having to wait for the county council to forward the payment. This delay was furthered when some money was not coded to the correct financial account, meaning the borough council had not realised the payment had been sent. When this error was realised, the borough council then had to go and find the money in its accounting system. These errors resulted in much-needed support funds not being available to the residents of Hastings for an additional two months. This delay occurred at a time when the country gets colder as the winter nights draw in, meaning hardship caused by increased energy payments went needlessly unaddressed.

Creating a more joined-up approach:

Some problems local governments deal with require multiple agencies to work together for them to be fully addressed. Yet, with local government being split between two authorities in some counties, this coordination often does not happen. This makes it much harder for complex problems to be addressed. For instance, economic development, housing, problems around homelessness, issues created by poverty and education and training services often need to work together to be most effective. Yet, these services are split between lower and upper-tier councils, leaving these authorities unable to take a joined-up approach to many problems they encounter.

Examples: In East Sussex, in terms of improving transport, the lower-tier council, Hastings Borough Council (HBC), has no power to build new cycle paths or apply for funding. Therefore, local campaigners have found that their efforts to design new cycle paths and lobby HBC would not lead to any meaningful action. Consequently, efforts to build a more connected transport system have not come to anything. Additionally, HBC has been powerless to stop cuts and make alterations to bus services. This means that the problem of isolated people being less able to access economic opportunities and public services goes unaddressed. This isolation can make economic regeneration harder as it limits money that can be spent in economic centres, making investing in Hastings a less attractive prospect. This lack of investment lowers economic output and job opportunities, again making it harder for those isolated to access economic opportunities. A unitary authority could produce better-coordinated action to tackle such problems.

Currently, a large project is being planned by East Sussex County Council, the upper-tier council, to regenerate the Hastings town centre. Yet, as these plans were drawn up without the involvement of HBC this means that the town's local needs have not been considered as much as they could have been. For example, not making the main road one-way has limited potential to improve pedestrian and cycling access to the train station. Also, plans have not been made on how empty units above empty shops can be converted into much-needed housing. A unitary authority that has control over both housing and economic regeneration would be better able to coordinate plans to target both regeneration and housing needs. It would also have an incentive to work with affected residents and elected representatives, as it would need approval from both to access funding and planning permission. It would also not have to deal with two sets of councillors who will both have a vote and competing mandates.

Coordinating action at the upper-tier levels can also be difficult. For example, ESCC often has had terrible trouble accessing the health plans of children on their caseload, as the health and education sides of their services were based in different buildings. Indeed, sometimes there appeared to be hostility in supplying necessary information. Therefore, centralising local government institutions could potentially provide the incentive to create these linked-up administration systems and services. This could not only save costs but also provide more efficient services.

Addressing the tough financial landscape for local government:

Currently, local government services are under threat as the financial landscape appears ever bleaker for local government. An obvious way to protect these

institutions would be to merge services to make them more cost-effective and efficient. Reforming local government would also provide an excellent opportunity to reform the way local government is funded.

How possible is it to create unitary authorities by merging borough councils?

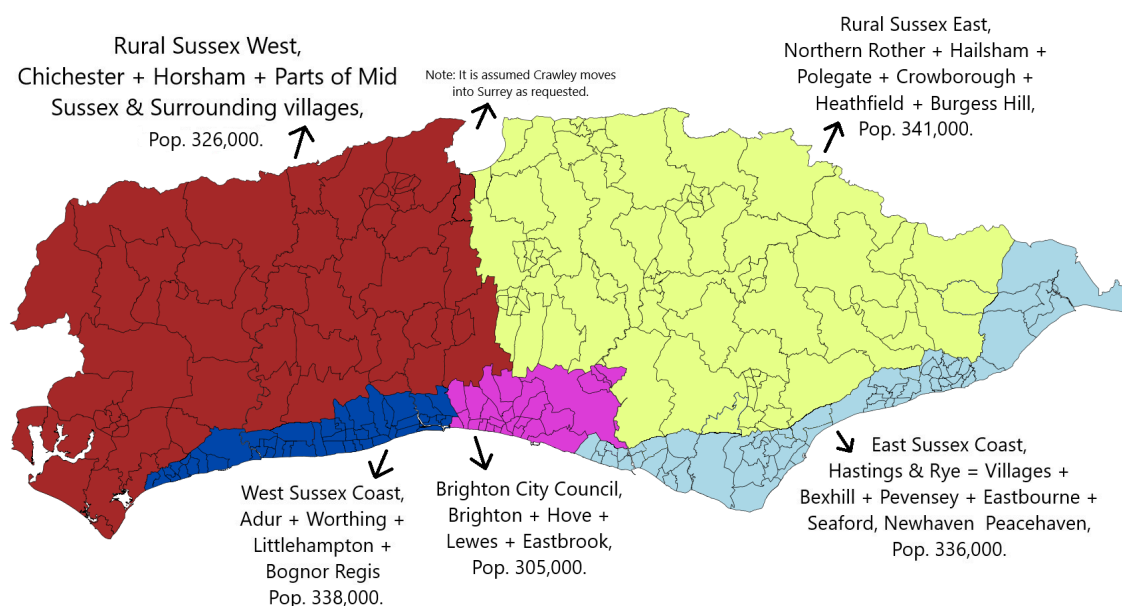
It would be relatively easy to reform local government into a series of unitary authorities, as it has already been partly done. This has already been partially done in East Sussex. In Brighton and Hove, local representatives decided to merge their authorities into a city council. In 1997, Brighton Borough and Hove Borough Council merged. With Labour in control locally and the new national Labour government favouring devolution, in 2001, the unitary authority was granted city status and gained full powers from East Sussex County Council. Indeed, within this short period, it managed to separate even specialist services (such as those within child and adult health and social care services). This shows that a unitary authority with a full range of services can be created in a four-year political cycle, provided there is the political will to achieve it. Further, this is already happening at a borough level across East Sussex. For example, Eastbourne and Lewes District Councils are merging their services to increase efficiency and make much-needed savings. In effect, they are moving half the size of the local County Council into one borough.

Brighton and Hove merged together to create a population of 280,000 and has managed to create a successful unitary authority. Consequently, new unitary authorities should seek to merge boroughs that would produce similar population sizes. Therefore, as East Sussex has a population of 550,000 people, it could be divided into two to create two new unitary authorities. Merging Hastings, parts of

Rother and Eastbourne to create one unitary authority and then merging parts of Rother left over (Lewes and Wealden) would create two councils with a population of roughly 270,000. Therefore, as these populations are similar to that of Brighton City Council, creating more unitary authorities across counties would be feasible and would take little time to work out.

If you were to do this across the whole of East and West Sussex, you could split the area into five roughly evenly sized unitary authorities, see the image below. The advantage of this model would arise under the scenario of regional government being unaffordable. Instead of regional governance, leaders of all unitary authorities within a region (in this case, Sussex) could share powers to gain devolution status. Here, leaders of all the councils could collaborate on the devolved powers outlined earlier in this policy paper. For example, they could work together to decide how infrastructure funding would be spent.

West and East Sussex - Proposed New Unitary Authorities (Five Authorities - 2)



This would still devolve major powers from Westminster to a regional level, but would do so differently to ensure devolution could be delivered despite the financial challenges facing local government.

How to fund devolution and local government reform?

Funding this reformed system of local government could be done by:

- Reforming council tax. This could involve reforming the way taxation is calculated. Current rates are based on 1990s housing prices, and adjusting these rates to modern housing costs could raise more money and make local taxation more equitable. Alternatively, introducing a new progressive property or income tax to fund local government could be an option. If more money could be raised from this system, then business rates could be reduced to help small local businesses and encourage new start-ups. This is also something that would help reduce the number of empty shopping units. This could help regenerate local high streets and local economies.
- Money could be redistributed from more affluent areas to make local government more viable in economically deprived areas.
- Replacing local council taxes with a land value tax. This tax could be made to be more equitable than the current system and could raise more revenue for local government services. It would also allow local government to be less dependent on central government revenues.
- More land and housing taxes to fund devolved authorities.
- Using the money sent to the EU to fund regional government's handling of EU powers, such as farming and fishing.

- Centralising local government across the UK will help reduce waste. It will also help produce greater efficiency by joining departments together. The savings made from this could help make local government more financially viable.
- Bringing civil society into local governance, also known as networked governance. This would help bring in professional and experienced voices when making policy decisions. This, in the long run, would deliver better, more cost-efficient outcomes.
- Bringing more services back in-house when regional authorities are created. This could help to save money currently spent on third-party contracts.
- The Audit Commission could be reinstated to monitor a wide range of local government performance targets. Money could be secured from the efficiencies gained from monitoring performance and improving problem areas.

Building costs and location:

- Regional government could be based in a Westminster site, to minimise building costs. This may be needed due to the increasingly limited budgets the UK faces. Alternatively, departments regional government will take over could be dissolved. The money from these departments could then be allocated to the regional governments across the country through a funding formula.
- Devise a fair funding formula for each region. This fair funding formula would allocate a set amount of money to specific regions based on need, income, historic investment levels and (over time) recorded efficiency levels. The most efficient authorities could be rewarded with more resources over time. This would also provide a chance to allocate more funding to areas that have faced historic under-investment and address inequality within the UK.

Better supporting councillors

With political volatility increasing, there is an increasing trend where elections are producing many new councillors. Therefore, each election cycle is increasingly producing many new, inexperienced councillors. This is leading to more new administrations being run by political representatives who need to learn their brief and council processes before they can implement their agenda. This is something that is making it harder for local government to deliver what people have voted for. Consequently, if unitary authorities are to come into existence and have greater powers, it will be beneficial for these new councillors to have greater support. This support could include:

Civil Servant staff for recognised political groups

Councillors often find themselves overburdened with work and unable to effectively bring the change they campaigned for. This is because councillors often have a much greater load of casework than they initially anticipate and can be overloaded with complex council procedures. Also, they may not have the policy knowledge required to scrutinise council policy proposals or bring about the changes in policy areas they campaigned on. This high load of work can delay councillors from being effective as they have to balance work with learning how the council operates. This, in turn, can cause delays in local government delivering key pieces of work post-election.

To avoid this problem, political groupings could be given civil servant staff to help them learn how the council operates, how to deliver effective policy, and manage their caseload. Groups with more councillors could be given more support. Yet, all groups would be provided with support through being allocated caseworkers and a policy researcher. Caseworkers would help political groupings manage their caseload and manage public relations. Policy researchers would help councillors understand council procedures, how the

council operates, policy areas it covers and how to make changes within each policy area.

Through reforming the voting system, rather than individual councillors representing individual wards, political groups would provide representation across a specified area. Such a voting system would allocate seats based on the proportion of votes cast. In this instance, the political groupings would provide representation across a unitary authority's boundary. This would mean that there would likely be four or five political groupings within each unitary authority that would need civil servant support. Such support would seek to emulate the assistance that staff in MP offices provide to MPs. This support would allow all political groupings to function more effectively from the very start of their term. This would also help the council to deliver policy changes that have been delayed by the election process or have become urgent matters.

Better training

Additionally, upon being selected as a candidate for election, councils could provide all candidates with sources of training in case they become a councillor. More training sources within the council could also be provided. This would quicken the process of making councillors familiar with how the council works and how they can deliver the changes they wish to make.

Using Civil Society to assist councillors

Like at Westminster, there could be a second chamber supporting elected officials to make better decisions and higher-quality policy. Instead of having Lords, council chambers could have recognised professionals who would provide support to councillors. These professionals could scrutinise proposed policy changes and suggest amendments to improve the proposed changes. They could also add more detail to the suggested changes to fill in gaps that the political process may have missed. These professionals would not be able

to create policy themselves, but they would be able to assist politicians in making changes to policy when required. For instance, they could propose changes to policy, but politicians would ultimately decide whether to proceed. Therefore, rather than being a political role, it would be an oversight role that would be designed to help councillors deliver good-quality policy changes. It would also help provide new, inexperienced councillors with the policy knowledge needed to deal with council business and bring desired changes.

Rather than being elected and having a competing mandate, these professional advisors would be appointed by a civil servant-led appointment commission. They would select recognised professionals within each Unitary Authority area to assist politicians in delivering promised changes. They would select professionals to scrutinise and advise within each policy area the council is responsible for. This would make better use of civil society at a localised level. It would also help increase the spread of people who are involved in shaping policy decisions at a local level. These appointments could occur for a set time and occur in a different year from the election. This would allow professionals to be in place to support newly elected councillors from day one. This would help new councillors understand their role and how the council can deliver policy change more quickly. How such an appointments committee would work can be seen in our policy paper that outlines how the House of Lords could be reformed.

Now that we have fully outlined how local government could be reformed, this policy paper outlines how a new tier of local government, community councils, could work.

Community Councils.

One problem with centralising local government is that it would leave towns with minimal localised representation for the most localised of matters. Some policy areas only affect specific communities and can only be shaped by local people on the ground doing the hard work needed to bring the community together. An example of this would be local tourism and events. Once local government is centralised, smaller, more localised issues like tourism will likely be overlooked. The way to avoid such problems would be to simply devolve such policy issues to a town level. Creating community councils in every town within a unitary authority boundary would be relatively simple, as some towns already have Town Councils. Areas that do not have Town Councils will often have their right to have one enshrined in legislation dating back decades (if not hundreds of years). For example, when dissolved, Hastings Borough Council would have the legal right to install its own town council. Therefore, installing town councils in these localities should be a relatively quick and simple process.

Powers:

Community Councils could be awarded the same powers as Town Councils currently possess. This includes:

- Providing the community with a voice on local matters that are decided by higher authorities (such as local and central government departments). This could involve:
 - a) Being consulted on planning applications (giving a voice to local concerns).

- b) Delivering Neighbourhood plans and affordable housing projects.
 - c) Providing a connection between community voices and local agencies (such as the police, fire department, health and education services).
- Maintaining and using local amenities.
 - a) Play areas (child and small outdoor sports centres).
 - b) Recreational areas
 - c) Parks and open spaces – street lighting within such spaces.
 - d) Local car parks.
 - e) Lighting public spaces.
 - f) Allocating allotment space.
 - g) Community buses and bus shelters.
 - h) Community centres and community hubs.
- Creating support groups for vulnerable community groups.
 - a) Youth projects.
 - b) Loneliness prevention schemes.
 - c) Community Green energy projects.
 - d) Warm hubs (in Winter).
- Maintaining Public Toilets
- Installing public bins and collecting the waste
- Running celebratory and commemorative events.
- Applying for grants and then deciding how to spend the grant within a defined local remit.
- Applying certain fixed-penalty fines (dog fouling, graffiti, fly-tipping and littering).

Reforming local government would provide the ideal moment for devolving more powers to local communities. As County and Borough councils merge, the new unitary authority will acquire a lot of responsibilities, meaning hyper-local issues may be overlooked. Such issues may relate to a town's tourism or charitable trusts that have very localised remits. Therefore, to ensure these policy issues get the attention they need, town and parish councils could be given greater powers once a devolution reform bill is passed. These could include:

Additional powers to be handed to community councils

- Promoting the local economy and tourism in the town. This could involve championing local businesses and developing a local tourism strategy.
- Assist in local regeneration projects, such as developing a local high-street regeneration strategy for the unitary authority.
- Community event organisation. This could include creating a year-round schedule of events and funding community projects and services.
- Planning and organising public events, the local council and MP(s) engage in.
- Taking over charitable trusts, borough and district councils will no longer be responsible for, such as trusts that direct investment within a specific localised area.
- Assist in local regeneration projects, such as developing a local high-street regeneration strategy for the unitary authority.
 - a) Providing a voice that will help the unitary authority shape policy to better meet communities' needs.

- b) Identifying community problems (such as poverty problems) and providing information to the new unitary authority, thus helping council departments to address such problems.
- Scrutinising council service performance. A place to give feedback so council services can be improved.
 - Providing a structure for community groups to take action on certain issues. Therefore, these councils will act as a base to mobilise the local community and act upon their concerns.
 - Citizen assemblies to resolve issues that are controversial and deadlocked, provided it is in the public interest to do so. For example, an assembly could choose and prioritise land for house-building when the local council fails to build enough housing. Additionally, assemblies could also make decisions on statues that have controversial historical links (such as with slavery)
 - Holding elected councillors to account.

Who will sit on these Community Councils?

Community Councils will comprise community leaders, local community organisations, voluntary groups, businesses, charities and local pressure groups.

Local community leaders could be elected every 4 years based on very small electoral areas. This would provide a link between someone in the local community whom residents will know and the work the community council will conduct. To ensure fairness, all candidates could be given a chance to make their pitch, and this could be made publicly available. To ensure a decent turnout, this vote could be held at the

same time as elections for the unitary authority. As the list of candidates could be long, the list order on the ballot paper could be randomised to ensure fairness.

Representatives from community groups will be arranged by the local voluntary organisation body, which will be funded by regional government or the local unitary authority.

The role of a local voluntary organisation body:

Local voluntary organisations would do the following:

- Select leaders from community groups to help the community council improve the local community and better support local voluntary organisations.
- Organise and support the local 3rd sector, which will comprise of charities, carers, community groups, social enterprises, associational groups and voluntary groups/ volunteers.
- Create 3rd sector networks where these community groups can interact and work together. This will help them to succeed in achieving their goals, whilst also helping more people in the local community.
- Provide information, training and skills to these groups where possible.
- Raise money for local charities and local social/ voluntary projects. In general, it will raise money to help the community sector.
- Fund community projects and social enterprises (where possible). This could also take the form of community banking and clean energy co-ops.

The body will be given a public space or building to operate from, which will either be funded by regional or local government. This will provide a place that will help the

third sector achieve its aims at a local level. This building could also run citizen assemblies to deal with controversial local issues that local elected representatives may not wish to address.

The purpose of community councils would be to:

- Run services that will benefit the local community, such as arts centres. This could form part of a wider national service for the arts.
- Connect different community organisations to each other to maximise the effectiveness, scope and impact the 3rd sector can have upon a local area.
- Increase membership and activity of community groups across the local area.
- Share the benefits the 3rd sector produces. This could be done by connecting community organisations.
- Provide more voices that can share concerns and supply feedback on a council's performance. These groups could also provide information to shape council services and local policymaking.
- Direct council decisions to be more business and 3rd sector-friendly. Also, it will help shape local council services in a way that will support various local communities' needs.
- Provide people to sit on citizen assemblies to help make decisions on contentious local matters.

Overall, the main function of Community Councils will be to give community leaders and voluntary organisations a chance to shape and run services within the local community. As stated earlier, such services could take the form of arts centres that could be given to community groups by a national arts service. It will also be a base

for the third sector to organise itself and grow from, something which would be designed to provide greater benefits for local communities.

In summary:

Overall, this policy document has outlined how devolution can be spread throughout England by implementing regional government. It has highlighted how implementing regional government could be used as an opportunity to address problems Westminster has been reluctant to deal with. It could also be used as a moment to devolve decision-making on economic matters, something that could tackle inequality and productivity problems within the UK. Additionally, it outlined how regional government could provide a future where policy delivery could be tailored to varying local communities' needs. It also showed how it could provide a moment to address problems within education and skills. Further, it also outlined how such reforms could bring professionals and civil society groups into local governance in a range of service areas. Therefore, this policy paper has also demonstrated how regional governance can be used to make local government more efficient and effective.

This policy paper has also demonstrated how local government can be reformed through centralising services into unitary authorities. Such reforms would standardise the system of local governance, something that would provide a much more understandable structure for voters. It would also simplify the electoral cycle by reducing the number of local elections and different types of representatives. Such reforms would also decrease the number of services being delivered across a county, helping to reduce the size of service delivery. This would help to increase efficiency within local government. Additionally, this would allow local authorities to take a more joined-up approach to tackling problems local governments must deal with across the entire country. Not only could this reduce the burden on local government

by more effectively tackling problems it faces, but it could also produce better outcomes for people reliant on local government services.

Further, the policy paper has outlined how lower-tier councils (borough and district councils) can be replaced with local community networks. Such a reform could encourage third sector development and increase social capital. It could also help regenerate high streets and increase participation in the arts and sports. Such developments would produce social and economic benefits whilst also giving more people a say over local decision-making.

In conclusion, this policy paper recommends that devolution be spread across the UK by creating regional government as laid out in this document. It also encourages local government to be standardised by merging lower-tier councils into unitary authorities. Finally, it also recommends that local communities be empowered to make important decisions within a borough area through the use of citizen assemblies. By doing all of this, people will feel they have greater control, local governance will become more effective, and the UK will start to address some of its overlooked, challenging problems.