



## English Devolution White Paper – Key Points for NAVCA Members

17 December 2024

This document is a short summary of the headline points in an extensive and complex White Paper. This is a priority issue for local infrastructure organisations and so we will continue to resource and support you as devolution progresses.

### Introduction

The English Devolution White Paper, published on 16 December 2024, details the ‘the biggest transfer of power out of Westminster to England’s regions this century.’ The aim is to have **universal coverage in England of Strategic Authorities**, moving away from deal-based devolution. Where areas are not already covered by combined authorities, existing councils will be encouraged to work collaboratively to develop new Strategic Authorities, but a ministerial directive will be used if areas do not make progress towards this. There will be **reorganisation of the two-tier system of county and district councils** [currently 21 counties with 164 district councils] to unitary authorities.

MHCLG has also announced that the Office for Local Government [Oflog] will be closed due to its vague and broad remit. Its functions on data and legalities will transfer to MHCLG.

### Strategic Authorities

The White Paper encourages areas to move to the model of elected mayors. These areas will have preferential benefits including:

- a clear pathway to unlocking higher levels of devolution, including access to the Integrated Settlement which will grow in scope over time
- flexible allocated funding, with a long-term investment fund, and a flexible Integrated Settlement
- a mandate to develop a Local Growth Plan, with local growth priorities agreed with the government, providing focus for central government and regional collaboration
- a seat at the table at the Council of Nations and Regions and Mayoral Council.

### Power Transfer

Local leaders will have increased powers over housing, transport, planning, energy, employment support and skills, enabling tailored regional solutions, and improved local service delivery. For hyper-local issues, communities will be empowered to make change happen, for example through Community Right to Buy for community assets, and working with civil society organisations to drive community improvements.

An Integrated Settlement will be used to fund local priorities, consolidating budgets across housing, regeneration, local growth, local transport, skills, retrofit, and employment support. Integrated Settlements will initially be available to Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, North East, South Yorkshire, West Midlands and West Yorkshire Combined Authorities. They will reform the current complex and fragmented funding and reporting arrangements.

### Devolution Architecture

The concept of a Strategic Authority will be created in law. There will be three levels.

1. **Foundation Strategic Authorities** such as non-mayoral combined authorities and combined county authorities, and any local authority designated as a Strategic Authority without a Mayor.
2. **Mayoral Strategic Authorities:** the Greater London Authority, all Mayoral Combined Authorities and all Mayoral Combined County Authorities will automatically begin as Mayoral Strategic Authorities.
3. Those who meet specified eligibility criteria may be designated as **Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities**. This unlocks further devolution, most notably an Integrated Settlement [finance].

The government's strong preference is for partnerships that bring more than one local authority together over a large geography. In exceptional circumstances, the Secretary of State will have the power to designate an individual local authority as a Foundation Strategic Authority only. The ambition is for all parts of England to ultimately have a Mayoral and eventually Established Mayoral Strategic Authority. Strategic Authorities will be able to change structure after local government reorganisation, e.g. when a two-tier area becomes single tier.

Strategic Authorities will have a defined list of areas of competence, set out in law. These are designed to bolster, not detract from, the functions and role of other public bodies, such as NHS England, Jobcentre Plus, the Environment Agency or local authorities. To enable effective working with the public, private and voluntary sectors, wide-ranging legal powers will be given to Strategic Authorities to deliver in their areas of competence. Government will also explore enabling Mayors to promote economic, social, and environmental aims and convene stakeholders, with a corresponding duty on public authorities to respond. It would go hand in hand with a duty to collaborate with constituent local authorities and neighbouring Strategic Authorities in delivering these areas of competence. These changes will put Mayors in charge of their place and give them a mandate to get things done.

Government will consult on the 'areas of competence' that Strategic Authorities should have a mandate to act strategically to drive growth as well as support the shaping of public services, where strategic level coordination adds value. The seven areas of competence currently suggested are:

1. Transport and local infrastructure
2. Skills and employment support

3. Housing and strategic planning
4. Economic development and regeneration
5. Environment and climate change
6. Health, wellbeing and public service reform
7. Public safety.

Where mayoral geographies align with police force and fire and rescue geographies, Mayors will be, by default, responsible for exercising Police and Crime Commissioner and Fire and Rescue Authority functions. Where they do not currently align, steps will be taken to ensure alignment over the longer term. The government will support Strategic Authorities to build resilience across their areas and to working in partnership with Local Resilience Forums.

### Health and Wellbeing

Strategic Authorities have a key role to play in taking action, particularly on the **social determinants of health**, through the exercise of their functions, in areas such as transport, housing, and planning, and through **working with other local leaders to move away from traditional forms of service delivery to a holistic approach, organised around service users**. Strategic Authorities will have a bespoke duty in relation to health improvement and reduction in health inequalities. This will complement the existing health improvement duty held by upper-tier Local Authorities.

To support better **integration between Strategic Authorities and Integrated Care Systems**, the government expects that Mayors (or a delegate) will be appointed to one or more relevant Integrated Care Partnerships in their local area. It will be expected that the Mayor or a delegate is considered for the position of Chair or co-Chair of the Integrated Care Partnership, alongside Local Authority, Integrated Care Board and independent chair options. Additionally, there will be an expectation **that Integrated Care Boards will engage with mayors** during the Integrated Care Board Chair appointment process and **will involve them in setting their priorities and developing their plans**.

### Communities

For the **most deprived communities**, the Long Term Plan for Towns will be reformed into a new regeneration programme for 75 towns across the UK, based on previous programmes such as the New Deal for Communities. The programme will build capacity by developing and strengthening the skills, resources, structures and capabilities of individuals and organisations to drive and sustain improvements for local residents, shaped and delivered by the communities it is intended to benefit.

A strengthened **‘Right to Buy’ Assets of Community Value** will replace the ‘right to bid.’

### District Councils and Removal of Two-Tier Governance

Central government will facilitate a programme of local government reorganisation for two-tier areas and for those unitary councils where there is evidence of failure, or where their size or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver sustainable and high-quality services for their residents. This will be delivered ‘as quickly as possible’ and through legislation if necessary. New unitary councils will usually have a population of around

500,000 people. All two-tier areas and smaller or failing unitaries will be expected to develop proposals for reorganisation, which should also not delay devolution – plans should be complementary.

In the 21 counties with two tiers of local government, before moving to a single tier, they will only be able to establish Combined County Authorities but not Combined Authorities. This means that a county deciding to retain two tiers of councils would only be able to have a Foundation Strategic Authority and so fewer powers devolved powers and budgets. This is a lever to move towards unitary authorities for all areas. Government ‘recognises’ that there will be additional costs in forming unitary authorities and will provide support to develop robust proposals and to ensure a smooth transition. This will include taking decisions to postpone local elections where this will help to smooth the transition process. The Local Government Chronicle reported that council leaders have until 10 January to indicate a “clear commitment” to devolution and reorganisation on or before 10 January if they want to “postpone” elections’ due on 1 May 2025.<sup>1</sup> Areas choosing not to indicate an intention to move towards devolution or reorganisation by 10 January will have until autumn 2025 to submit proposals.

## Implementation

Central government will invite a number of places to join the Devolution Priority Programme, after the invitation in the summer for further areas to express interest in devolution. Areas which have come together under ‘sensible’ geographies, meet the criteria, and where they are ready to achieve mayoral devolution quickly will have priority. This programme will aim to deliver institutions and have Mayors elected in the May 2026 elections. The government will announce the areas included in the Devolution Priority Programme in due course.

An English Devolution Bill will be brought forward – no time line indicated. This will put this devolution framework into law.

Central government will also:

- work with Mayors and Strategic Authorities to consult on the implementation of a wide range of powers and agree areas of competence and how they will be delivered
- there will be further proposals on public service reform and prevention
- work with individual areas subject to local government reorganisation inviting proposals from two tier areas and failing unitary councils. The first wave of reorganisation will take place in this parliament.

The full document is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/governance-and-structure/counties-given-extraordinary-deadline-to-cancel-elections-17-12-2024/>