

Devolution Priority Areas – Notes of NAVCA and ACRE Members’ Meeting 19 March 2025 and Guidance on Consultations

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Summary

The meeting focused on discussing the implications of proposed government devolution and local government reorganisation in England, particularly for the voluntary and community sector including in rural communities. Participants shared experiences and concerns, highlighting the importance of early engagement, partnerships, and ensuring a range of voices including rural are heard in the process. The discussion also covered challenges and opportunities for the voluntary sector, including potential representation in new governance structures and the need to emphasise their role in areas of devolved competence including unemployment support and skills development.

Next steps

1. MHCLG are holding a consultation event in each area of the priority programme in the next couple of weeks, with opportunities to ask questions. Find out when the event is in your area and ensure the VCS is represented.
2. Respond to the consultation on your local area by **11.59pm Sunday 13 April**. It is **recommended that you respond to the consultation by emailing a word document answering the consultation questions directly to the specific MHCLG email address for your area** which can be found on the front page of the online submission portal, and copying it to your local authorities. [Note, the online survey limits written responses to 1000 characters per answer]. Consultation documents can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/devolution-priority-programme-consultations-launch>
3. Outline guidance on responding to the consultation has been provided with these meeting notes.

4. NAVCA and ACRE will submit separate 'national' responses to each of the six consultations to make core points on the VCS and support for rural communities.
5. Please copy in Jeremy and Jill into your consultation responses, and keep us updated in developments in your area: jill.hopkinson@navca.org.uk and j.leggett@acre.org.uk
6. Continue to use the Padlet to add any thoughts and ideas related to devolution.
<https://padlet.com/jillhopkinson/consultations-on-new-strategic-authorities-2px21jyv5s1bvy1>
7. ACRE and NAVCA will hold a meeting for members on Local Government Reorganisation for all affected areas 3.30-5.00pm on Wednesday 23 April. Details to follow.

Discussions

The discussion was shaped around four questions.

1. What are the implications of the proposals for strategic authorities for your work? [as LIO or rural support organisation, and on the VCSE]

Essential for the VCS to develop relationships with new Mayors and decision making groups within the new strategic authorities and be considered an equal contributor alongside statutory partners.

Relationship building / re-building will be important especially in areas where previous councils have not been supportive of the VCS. e.g. Norfolk CC not currently supportive of VCS as a whole and tends to work with a few large charities, centred on Norwich.

District based local infrastructure organisations [LIOs] will need to work with partners to evolve to match the new unitary authority boundaries. County based organisations will also need to review how they operate either to engage with strategic authorities or to match new unitary boundaries. In the small number of areas [currently just Surrey] where the new strategic authority will match the existing county council boundary there may be more continuity in organisation.

We will need to have a clear and consistent offer from local infrastructure and rural community support, for across an area that is currently served by e.g. 10 different LIO/CVS organisations, and a rural support organisation.

Important to consider the impact on the breadth of the VCS alongside the impact on our own organisations.

The creation of a strategic authority containing two or more large urban areas e.g. Southampton and Portsmouth in the proposed Hampshire and Solent SA, risks other deprived areas and rural communities being left behind as work on economic growth, tackling social deprivation, and transport focuses on these cities.

Concern over funding, especially in areas where there have been significant cuts already. The funding that comes with devolution for strategic authorities will be unlikely fund local infrastructure or rural community support, and the new unitary councils will still have significant expenditure on statutory services to be covered. It will be important to make the case for VCS engagement and funding within both new structures.

LIOs and rural community support organisations need to be influencing existing local authorities to ensure that the VCS is not left behind. Where there are opportunities and invitations to engage these should be taken – perhaps working in partnership across a number of organisations – advocating for the VCS.

2. *What are your experiences of engaging with current local authorities on: creation of strategic authorities and move to unitary authorities in two-tier areas?*

Variable and patchy depending on the area and quality of existing relationships.

e.g. Rother District Council keen to engage Rother Voluntary Action as equal partners in conversations about current and pending local government structures. The challenge is the timeframes not supporting meaningful consultation across multiple consultations and limited capacity within the LIO and wider VCS to respond.

Many areas were keen to join the devolution priority programme so that a directly elected mayor could have a place on the Council of Nations and Regions, to ensure that the needs of the area were taken forward [e.g. Cumbria which also wanted to ensure the rural was represented on the Council].

Indications from discussions in Cheshire and Warrington on the future of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund post April 2026, suggests that as there will be a separate pot of money for devolved strategic authorities, it is important for the VCS to be known by officers, senior officers and decision makers within both unitary authorities and the new strategic authorities.

Current local authorities do not have all the answers and are looking for input and ideas particularly around social outcomes from these changes. The VCS has a strong offer to make around key government priorities such as supported volunteering and employment.

The two unitary authorities in Cumbria have been happy to engage with LIO, and a briefing for VCS led by senior council staff is taking place.

Existing local authority partners in Hampshire are interested in devolving asset ownership and building VCSE capacity and capability to take on assets as part of devolution, with a clear role for local infrastructure and rural community support.

There is a risk of decision paralysis with the changes in ICBs, local authority financing devolution and local government reorganisation. Some local councils [not all] are already avoiding giving out information or hiding behind government deadlines. It is important for LIOs and rural community support organisations to act as a key conduit for communications with the VCS and communities. In these circumstances it becomes essential to keep messaging councils about the VCS being a core equal partner with much to contribute to the intended changes.

In Surrey the VCSE Alliance is seen by the county council as the main conduit for information to the VCS. The VCSE Alliance is new and although three of the board members are from infrastructure and the director is hosted by Surrey CA it is not the most mechanism for this.

Other VCSE Alliances Rik have been very clear that it is there to support health and social care only – and not able to be a focal point for wider VCS.

3. Are there other issues related to the devolution priority areas that would be helpful to discuss?

A risk that issues around rural communities that have been of less interest to some councils may continue to be ignored especially if areas closer to large towns and cities choose to focus on high-tech businesses as part of the drive for growth.

The risks and opportunities of community transport, especially but not limited to that in rural areas, moving to strategic authorities.

Essex infrastructure organisations publishing statement on behalf of the VCS engaging in the devolution and local government reorganisation process. Voluntary Sector North West have published a manifesto for devolution.

It is important to be ambitious in what we ask for.

4. What are the key points that need to be included in a consultation response?

See section below for detailed information for each question.

Q2: Governance arrangements – there is an opportunity to suggest that the VCS could have one of the associate member places on the MCA Board. This already happens in the North East Combined Authority.

Health, wellbeing and public service reform priority is something that we should focus on. The VCS plays such a key role in prevention and that needs to filter through with devolution.

The risk of losing existing effective relationships and partnerships between councils, local infrastructure, rural community support organisations and the wider VCS are high.

Consultation responses would benefit from emphasising the role and remit of the VCS in relation to the new strategic authorities [called Mayoral Combined or County Combined Authorities in the consultation] and what the VCS, LIOs and rural community support can offer to the new authorities – how we can support and enable their work [on a funded basis of course]. See evidence compiled by NAVCA for the LGA and combine with your own local examples. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/working-local-infrastructure-organisations-engage-smaller-vcfse-organisations-good>

Responding to the Consultation

This consultation takes a different approach to most other government consultations. Instead of asking direct questions about the proposals, the consultation poses seven crosscutting more general questions, rather than focusing on specific details.

Each question asks for a Likert scale response [strongly agree to strongly disagree] and then has a text box to explain your answer. **NOTE: this only allows responses of 1000 characters.** Answers therefore need to be very concise, or you may therefore wish to **respond to the consultation by also emailing a fuller response to the specific MHCLG email address for your area which can be found on the front page of the online submission portal, and**

copying it to your local authorities. Remember to include an answer to the question that requires a scaled response. That only 1000 characters have been allowed for written information [around 150 words] also suggests the attention that will be given to the answers submitted via the portal will be limited. MHCLG have confirmed that all consultation responses sent by email will be assessed as part of the consultation.

Themes of the seven questions are:

- if the proposed geography will deliver benefits for the area
- governance arrangements
- economy and growth
- improve social outcomes
- improve local government services
- improve the natural environment
- support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities.

There is a risk of fairly nebulous answers being received and from our perspective it will be important to focus on our USPs namely:

- as an equal strategic partner in the transitions to the new governance structures, policies and operating models for the new strategic authorities
- an active participant in forums [e.g. local resilience forums], committees and task and finish groups so that the perspective, experience and trust that the VCS has can inform and help shape this work
- acknowledged as a source of current knowledge and information on people and communities, especially those who are furthest from public services and rural communities
- an enabler of communities and VCFSE organisations to participate in wider engagement, consultation and commissioning
- a key driver of health creation, prevention, early intervention and public service reform, able to address challenges creatively and effectively
- an essential partner in the co-design as well as delivery of public services, community activities and support.

The consultation documents as a whole are fairly light on detail and rely for most of their information on the contents of the Devolution White Paper, little more is learnt, except that there is an opportunity to contribute views. Many proposals will need the Devolution Bill to provide further detail.

It will be very important to include relevant local examples of existing good practice in relationships, partnerships and collaborations to demonstrate what would benefit from retention within or transfer to the new authorities, with links to relevant supporting information. These case studies should be concise with the outcomes delivered clearly identified.

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing a MCA over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to the area?

Refer to section 2.

The key question is whether the devolution framework of the seven areas of competence can be applied to the proposed geography. Is it realistic to suggest that these functions can be delivered effectively over this geographic area?

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed governance arrangements for the MCA?

Refer to section 2.

This is the opportunity to suggest that the VCS could have one of the associate member places on the MCA Board [section 2.2 specifically]. This already happens for example in the North East Combined Authority.

Question 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the MCA will support the economy of the area?

Refer to section 3 and section 4.2 which gives an overview for each devolution priority area of the current economic and social outlook.

Each of the proposed new combined authorities [strategic authorities] will have slightly different areas of competence devolved to them **initially**. Section 3.1 will specify which of the seven areas of competence are being devolved first.

This is an opportunity to emphasise the contribution of the VCS to growth through activities, services, employment, opportunities to volunteer as part of support into employment, and direct and indirect contributions to the wider determinants of health and well-being.

Section 3 as a whole explores the seven areas of competence and what powers would be available. Of particular interest are:

- section 3.2 on transport – important for integrated transport services, community transport and rural bus services
- section 3.3 on skills and employment support – particularly pertinent given recent announcements on benefits and the requirement for strategic authorities to produce their own Get Britain Working plan which is currently being trialled in South Yorkshire and Barnsley. [NAVCA member Barnsley CVS is involved]. Emphasise the contribution of the VCS in this space.
- Section 3.4 focuses on housing and strategic planning – ACRE members may particularly want to comment in relation to this area of competence and growth
- section 3.5 covers economic development and regeneration – eventually strategic authorities will be responsible for securing international investment with local programmes of business support and development of supply chains. An important point to make here is the application of these kinds of programmes to SMEs and VCS organisations, particularly as the consultation notes that government wants to see

more cooperative and mutual groups contributing to the economy. Again, the VCS is a core partner here.

Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the MCA will improve social outcomes in the area?

Refer to section 4.

Eventually but not initially, strategic authorities will have responsibility for health and well-being with a new duty for health improvement and health inequalities. The authority will need to take into account improvement in health outcomes and reducing health inequalities when exercising their powers and functions. The VCS is a key partner in delivery of health and wellbeing and the integration of mayors with current ICS governance will be a key part of this. However, we know almost nothing about what this will look like, there is further reorganisation within health systems, and it is not yet responsibility of any of existing combined authorities.

This is an opportunity to share examples of how the VCS contributes to health outcomes and reducing health inequalities including in rural communities; works directly with councils on public health and facilitates VCS engagement with health systems.

Question 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a MCA will improve local government services in the area?

Refer to sections 3 and 4.

Here is the opportunity to explore the risks, challenges and opportunities for local infrastructure, rural community support and the VCS. Section 4.4 provides an overview of how devolution could impact the area. The questions to explore here are:

- Is this assessment realistic?
- What might be missing?
- What more information is needed?
- What additional opportunities could be developed with the VCS?

Question 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a MCA will improve the local natural environment and overall national environment?

Comment if you have a view – there is not really enough information in the consultation document to comment in detail however perhaps there is a wider point to be made here about working in partnership with communities and the VCS is core to identifying opportunity to enhance the natural environment on the small local scale as well as larger landscape or catchment scale approaches. You may also wish to point out that there are very few references to the climate emergency in the document. Members in Hampshire have shared a useful statement from the South East Climate Alliance on devolution and climate change. It contains some useful pointers for responses, see:

<https://seclimatealliance.uk/making-devolution-work-for-climate-and-nature-how-you-can-help/>

Question 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the MCA will support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities?

Local infrastructure, rural support charities and the VCS can:

- connect strategic authorities to communities of place and identity
- facilitate communication, needs assessment and knowledge sharing
- be a source of current knowledge and information on people and communities, especially those who are furthest from public services
- prevent the risk of strategic authorities being too distant from communities, particularly if unitary councils are not effective at communication or listening – LIOs, rural community support organisations and the VCS provide that important conduit
- be an equal strategic partner in the transitions to the new governance structures, policies and operating models for both new unitary councils and SAs
- an active participant in forums [e.g. local resilience forums], committees and task and finish groups so that the perspective, experience and trust that the VCS has can inform and help shape this work
- an enabler of communities and VCS organisations to participate in wider engagement, consultation and commissioning
- a key driver of health creation, prevention, early intervention and public service reform, able to address challenges creatively and effectively
- an essential partner in the delivery of public services, community activities and support.