

# English Devolution White Paper

Summary of proposals, timelines and key issues

# Introduction

- English Devolution White Paper published on 18 December 2024.
- Sets out how the Government plans to deliver manifesto pledge to transfer power out of Westminster:
  - by widening and deepening devolution, providing mayors with powers and funding and hardwiring them into the way government works
  - by rebuilding and reforming local government as the foundations of devolution
  - by giving communities stronger tools to shape the future of their areas
  - and by improving accountability and building capacity across local government.

# NALC reaction

- NALC initial reaction and chair's open letter:

*“Effective devolution must recognise the role of England's 10,000 parish and town councils as the community tier of local government. They can be a strong voice for our most local neighbourhoods and help address fears of remote government resulting from any larger unitaries set up. By strengthening their role, the government can ensure that devolution delivers tangible benefits for communities nationwide.”*

*“I firmly believe this is a real opportunity for us to stake our claim as the community tier of local government, but we must be ready to rise to the challenge. Parish and town councils and county associations should be on the front foot and engage with principal authorities to ensure your voice and ambitions are heard, particularly in any local proposals for local government reorganisation. Crucially, the white paper contains a range of proposals for which NALC and our network of county associations have lobbied.”*

# Proposals

- Devolution: New framework of three tiers. Foundation Strategic Authorities, Strategic Authorities and Established Strategic Authorities. Preference for minimum 1.5 million population. New powers around spatial planning. Single funding pot for 6 top tier MSA's. Launched devolution priority programme to adopt devo in 2026. Individual councils not eligible for mayoral devolution.
- Local Government Reorganisation: Minimum 500,000 population. Invitations for proposals issued, including postponing May elections. No unitary deserts.
- Resetting relations between central and local government and rewiring relationships between parish and town councils and principal authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice.
- Want see stronger community arrangements when reorganisation happens in the way councils engage at a neighbourhood or area level.
- Financial reforms such as multi-year settlements and more straightforward, less competitive grant funding. Community Ownership Fund discontinued (our councils accessed £7.6 million). Finance settlement continued no council tax referendum principles for parishes.

# Proposals cont.

- Remote attendance at council meetings. NALC responded to the consultation supporting proposals but not introduction of proxy voting.
- Strengthening the standards and conduct regime. Proposals for new body for most serious complaints and appeals. Suspension and disqualification of councillors. Mandatory code of conduct. Publication of all code breaches.
- Oflog been scrapped, following Office for Place which was subsumed into MHCLG.
- Changes to local audit. Proposal for new Local Audit Office. Changing smaller authority thresholds. Future of Smaller Authorities Audit Appointments.
- Improving support and development for councillors.
- Establish a local government workforce development group, run in partnership with the sector, to identify practical solutions to workforce recruitment and retention.

# Timelines

- 16 December 2024 – initial letter from Jim McMahon
- 10 January 2025 – deadline for requests to DPP/LGR/delay elections
- 5 February 2025 – areas for DPP/delay elections announced
- 6 February 2025 – Jim McMahon letter to two-tier areas inviting unitary proposals
- March 2025 – All areas to provide interim LGR plans
- Early Summer 2025 – English Devolution Bill published
- Autumn 2025 – Devo/LGR plans from everyone else
- 2026 – English Devolution Bill receives Royal Assent
- May 2026 – Devo PP mayoral elections
- Apr/May 2027 – new unitary authorities/elections
- Apr/May 2028 – new unitary authorities/elections

# DPP and delayed elections

## Six Devolution Priority Programme areas:

- Cumbria
- Cheshire and Warrington
- Norfolk and Suffolk
- Greater Essex
- Sussex and Brighton
- Hampshire and Solent

## Delayed elections (until May 2026):

- Norfolk
- Suffolk
- Essex
- Thurrock
- Hampshire
- Isle of Wight (33 parish elections)
- East Sussex (1 parish election)
- West Sussex
- Surrey

# What ministers have said

*“At a neighbourhood level, we see town and parish councils playing a critical role in devolution, and we look forward to further conversations with the sector”.*

- Jim McMahon MP, devo and local government minister

*“As we continue to develop our longer-term strategy for communities, I am firmly committed to working together, and with the wider parish sector so that our approach is informed by those who understand the diverse and complex challenges that our communities face. I look forward to our continued collaboration as we take forward this important work”.*

- Alex Norris MP, communities minister

# Our activity and big issues

- Fortnightly meetings with county officers
- Policy Committee, Special Meeting of National Assembly, Networks and other committees
- Responding to consultations on remote meetings, audit and standards and further policy development
- Continue to engage with government/parliament/stakeholders
- Sharing resources/experience/good practice from previous/current devo/LGR areas
- Build into training councils taking on more responsibilities/asset transfer
- Capacity and capability especially smaller councils
- Rebranding the sector
- Creating new councils
- Local government reorganisation proposals on size/number

# Developing our response

During ongoing discussions about the white paper and its implications, we will advocate for several measures to enhance neighbourhood governance:

- Investment in neighbourhood governance — Building local capacity enables parish and town councils to address community needs effectively. Improve relationships between tiers.
- Easier establishment — Simplifying processes to set up parish and town councils in areas without them.
- Promoting civility and respect — Attracting more community involvement by strengthening standards regimes.
- Modernised processes — Allowing hybrid council meetings where local communities see fit. Extending the general power of competence to all parish and town councils.
- Fair access to funding — Simplifying grant procedures and ensuring communities are compensated for new financial burdens, impact of increased national insurance costs.
- Tailored audit framework — Developing an audit system suitable for small authorities that reflects local spending changes.

# Questions and discussion