

Bigger Is **Still Not Better**

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Executive summary

- The international, independent research evidence continues to show that increasing the size of local government is no guarantee of improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and cost reduction; but that local democracy and citizen engagement is more likely to be damaged the larger local government becomes.
- The powers, freedoms, capacity for action, skills and ability of local political leaders, councillors and officers; and the freedoms and autonomy of local government and its resources are important factors in improving local efficiency, effectiveness, and cost reduction. They are also important contributors to public service improvement and strengthening local democracy.
- Central government attempts to restructure local government are based not only on a view of what local size increases might achieve, but also on how local government can contribute to the pace and distribution of the benefits that might emerge from central policy change across a raft of policy areas.
- International trends in local government have shown, over time and in different international settings, a series of mergers and disaggregation of councils as the centre has sought to reshape local government, or as citizens have reacted against past forced mergers of councils.
- Where councils have been merged overseas, the starting and finishing point in the creation of new councils is still with average population sizes smaller than English local government.
- Local government in England still operates in a highly centralised system and is poorly placed in the international Local Autonomy Index when compared to other nations and their local government system.
- Levelling up appears to have conflated economic growth, regeneration and the removal of regional and local economic disparities with changes to local government structure and the creation of new local and sub-regional governance organisations. Levelling up is more likely to succeed if function precedes form.
- It is decentralisation rather than devolution that is being offered to local government. True devolution entails brand new freedoms or powers for local government being created to augment the transfer of existing powers from the centre. It is to be hoped that this can be added into the mix as the White Paper is implemented.
- International evidence indicates that joint-working, cooperation and collaboration between councils and between councils and other organisations provides for efficiency, effectiveness, and cost reduction in local government and public service improvement. This is a powerful alternative to council mergers and larger local government.
- District councils are leading players in collaboration between councils and other organisations, but there is room to improve the spread and extent of inter-council and inter-organisational joint working to fully reap the benefits for local government, local citizens, and public services.
- District councils play, and will continue to play, a vital role in anchoring local, sub-regional, regional and national schemes that are part of levelling up in the communities that such schemes seek to assist.
- District councils are pivotal in stimulating community activity, developing community cohesion, creating local networks, and developing local connections that are vital to social and economic regeneration.
- Without district councils playing a full role in levelling up it will become de-linked from communities and citizens and fail to have the local impact and outcomes sought by the Government.
- Independent international research shows that when it comes to local government structure: bigger is still not better.

1. Introduction

Reorganisation is the department store music of local government in England – always in the background and sometimes too loud and distracting to be able to focus on why you are in the shop in the first place. But, as we comprehensively showed in ‘Bigger Is Not Better’ (DCN 2020), the folklore-like belief with which some at the centre hold that bigger local government is invariably cheaper, more efficient and more effective than smaller local government and that unitary systems are superior to tiered local government, is simply not borne out by evidence or experience.

It is not the size of local government that is the defining feature of effectiveness, efficiency or service improvement; rather, the powers and skills held by local political leaders, councillors and managers, the freedoms, and autonomy of local government and the independent resources it has available are the powerful factors needed for strong and vibrant local government (DCN, 2020).

We also explored in ‘Bigger Is Not Better’ how a one-dimensional view of local government, as solely a provider of services to standards or an agenda set by the Government, as important as those services are, ignores the role of local government as an institution for local self-government, local decision-making, community empowerment, public engagement, and local responses to both local and national policy issues.

Among other things local government in England, as it is currently structured and operates, contributes significantly to:

- economic development, regeneration, and local investment
- ensuring local training and skills are aimed at local priorities
- social and economic well-being
- public service delivery and improvement
- place-based local governance
- good governance and community cohesion
- transparent and open government and decision-making
- providing accountable local leadership
- ensuring local pride, loyalty, and place-based patriotism
- localised as opposed to centralised decision-making and government

- effective partnership working with a range of external agencies
- monitoring, overseeing, and holding to account agencies and bodies such as the NHS and the Police
- overseeing and developing local transport networks
- health and social care and the services needed by children, young people and the elderly.

None of this is solely and only dependent on the size of local government; rather they are dependent on local government’s powers and role as a governing institution and its ability to respond flexibly, subtly and with degrees of local sophistication and knowledge that the centre cannot match.

The report is not intended as a response to the recent Levelling Up White Paper, but the evidence, analysis and discussion is set partly within the context of the White Paper and partly within the general role of local government in a modern democracy.

The purpose of this report is to set out how local government and local leadership in England can be strengthened effectively so as to deal with current and future challenges and to enhance its role in the governance of the country. The next section will refresh the research evidence presented in ‘Bigger Is Not Better’ and set out how the evidence shapes our understanding of the issues relating to local government size. The third section will explore some of the international trends in the role, purpose, and functions of local government. The fourth section will examine the policy alternatives which have been developed internationally to mergers and abolitions of councils and will look specifically at the ways councils co-operate and work together. The fifth will explore the contribution district councils can make to levelling up and devolution. The concluding section will draw out the lessons from the data presented for the role of district-level councils in good governance, devolution and local government autonomy.

2. Why Bigger Is Still Not Better

It has been a constant theme of central government's approach to local government that there is some form of institutional geographical and population optimal size for units of local government that will inevitably provide for maximum efficiency and effectiveness, and which is guaranteed to reduce costs. Not only is that view not supported by consistent and conclusive evidence, it's also based on an assumption that local government's sole purpose is to be a provider, or overseer of public services. It is a view which ignores the community governance role of local government and that it is, or should be, a politically representative institution that responds to the priorities of real communities of place with which the public express a genuine affinity.

In our report 'Bigger Is Not Better' (DCN, 2020) we conducted an extensive review of the existing independent research evidence that had explored the effects of the increase in council size on efficiency, effectiveness, local democracy and community engagement. The findings of the research were summarised thus:

Efficiency, Effectiveness and Performance: Size Doesn't Matter

Despite the conviction with which the case is made that increases in council size improve efficiency, effectiveness, and performance, no consistent or conclusive results were found in the research and literature surveyed, that justify the belief that larger councils are always more efficient, effective, cheaper or a better option in the provision of public services than smaller units of local government. The research and literature is contradictory, with inconsistent findings on this matter.

The complexities of linking performance, efficiency and effectiveness to council size means that, though different services may respond to different size factors, there is no straightforward or certain size at which the performance, efficiency and effectiveness of all services will necessarily respond positively (see Boyne, 1995, Martin, 2005, Andrews, et al, 2006, Andrews and Boyne, 2012).

As we reported in our 2020 document, Newton as far back as 1982 reported that the search for the optimum size for local government... 'has proved to be as successful as the search for the philosophers' stone, since optimality varies according to service and type of authority' (Newton, 1982). Those findings have not been conclusively refuted since their work. Moreover, it rests with consultancy reports, commissioned by those seeking mergers, to create cases that mergers would have financial and service benefits in any given geography, rather than independent research showing that to conclusively be the outcome.

Local Democracy: Size Does Matter

The research and literature is far more consistent in its findings that increases in the population or geographical scale of local government units have a deleterious effect on democratic criteria, such as:

- electoral turnout
- public trust in councillors
- public trust in officers
- levels of engagement
- contact between citizens and councillors
- contact between citizens and council officers
- levels of identification or affinity with the council held by the public

The research and literature reveals that the democratic criteria and function of local government can be damaged by increases in council size.

The trend in the deleterious effect of mergers on local democracy and local government as an institution and agency of local self-government, choice, and public engagement, has not abated since the publication of 'Bigger Is Not Better'. Indeed, more evidence has emerged that council mergers and increases in size store up conflict and territorial antagonism that is created by amalgamations; repositioning them in the new larger council thus dampening public engagement (Baldersheim and Rose, 2021, Kouba and Dosek, 2021).

Moreover, the tendency for central government, across Europe, to play councils off against each other, especially in tiered local government systems, can leave pools of resentment among councillors and the public which again damages public engagement and affinity with the newly created larger body (Houlberg and Klausen, 2021). Indeed, Gendzwill and Kjaer (2021) were crystal clear in the findings from their research that: 'it is demonstrated that a clear and consistent relationship between municipal size and local turnout exists: the larger the municipality the fewer eligible voters turn out at local elections'. There is a clear damage to local democracy and accountability.

Why Mergers?

Given the evidence that council mergers and the creation of larger entities – for that is what they are, administrative entities rather than communities of place – do not guarantee improvements in cost efficiency or effectiveness, why does the centre continue to see larger sub-national institutions of governance as its preferred option? It is interesting to note that most of the published research since our 2020 report exploring council mergers and size increase has focused on the outcomes for local democracy rather than on an economic case for size increases. The reason for this has been explored by Copus, et al (2021) who indicate that the power of a simple, seemingly common-sense repeated narrative stated as an obvious, if unproven, fact can squeeze out other arguments from public space, even if those arguments are backed by evidence. The tactic of repeating - bigger is better and cheaper – is designed to indicate that there is only one solution to a whole host of issues facing local government: make it bigger and they will go away (Hay, 2002, Boswell, 2013).

The consistent use of a set of stories, assumptions, explanations, and scripts about the benefits of mergers and increases in council size has been used not just in this country, but internationally, to shape thinking about local government effectiveness, efficiency, and cost reduction. But that narrative is often refuted by evidence and experience (Dobos, 2021, Baldersheim and Rose, 2021, Houlberg and Klausen, 2021, Navarro and Pano 2021). Indeed, Vabo et al (2021) showed that the 'potential benefits [of amalgamations] are often diffuse and long term, while costs are concentrated and immediate', which makes an expensive diversion of local government reorganisation and the creation of combined authorities at a time of 'levelling up' all the more questionable.'

There is evidence suggesting that central governments seek to restructure and increase the size of local government units not just for what they perceive would be the benefits, but to suit a range of central policy objectives (De Ceuninck et al 2010, Swianiewicz, et al, 2022). That tendency is clear in the Government's recent Levelling Up White Paper which, while ruling out forced council mergers, reflects the centre's preferences for bigger local government in its pursuit of voluntary mergers, county deals and the creation of more

combined authorities. The centre's thinking is conditioned by its view that local government is something to be shaped, reshaped, and reformulated to suit a raft of policy preferences held by the centre. This makes local government structure an unnecessary target and distraction for levelling up policy. A better option would be to empower and liberate our existing councils to deliver levelling up, rather than create new structures on ever larger geographical footprints.

The Government's Levelling Up White Paper contains the centre's usual criticism of tiered local government and its perceived 'fragmentation and administrative complexity'. Yet tiered local government is the easiest and simplest of the fragmented landscape of public service provision to understand and navigate as district and counties represent real communities of place (see Baldersheim and Rose, 2010) rather than territorially artificial entities. Finding out which council does what is a simple and straight-forward process for the public, especially for those in possession of a telephone or the internet. The White Paper does, however, recognise that a wide range of public service providers, organisations and agencies deliver different services over different geographical scales and are far more complex to navigate than elected local government. So, insistence on local government territorial upheaval shows that the centre has become a prisoner of its own rhetoric and policy narrative.

But governments of all political colours, for many decades, have sought to increase the size of local government for positive and negative reasons linked to a policy agenda about the role and purpose of local government, or related to other policies the centre wishes to achieve. The factors that have led the centre to take this route are:

First, the centre seeks to make the changes it wishes to see as quickly as possible; the nature of policy changes means there is always a gap between policy development – implementation – and seeing the positive (or negative) results of that policy change – then policy reformulation – and further results. The centre wants to see positive change as soon as possible and therefore is motivated to ensure local government – and other agencies – are structured in such a way as to promote swift change.

Second, the centre wishes to distribute the benefits of its policy changes as far as possible across the country – and in this case the aptly named 'levelling up' is a good example. To ensure that the benefits of central policy are widely felt, acknowledged, and recognised, the centre seeks to work through a range of national, regional, sub-regional organisations and through local government.

Third is the aspiration that fewer units of local government, fewer councillors and fewer council leaders or elected mayors, makes the centre's job of shaping the activities of local government and centralising the governance of the country easier.



The benefits of this process are for central control, not for local discretion or the ability of local government to respond to local issues and the local manifestation of national and global problems. Indeed, evidence suggests that austerity policies have been designed with council mergers as a central component to reduce the costs of public administration and public service provision (Blom-Hansen, 2016, Kim and Warner, 2021, Swianiewicz, et al, 2022).

To ensure the effectiveness of the Government's levelling up policies an alternative route is required to changing the institutional structure of local government in a way that reflects the heart of austerity-based policies. Indeed, the costs of reorganisation or of creating new units of sub-national government such as combined authorities, alongside the time, energy and resources required to do so is a distraction from the objective of levelling up.

The independent research evidence presented in 'Bigger Is Not Better' has not been refuted since 2020. On the contrary the research referenced above indicates that the conclusions we can draw are the same as we drew in 2020:

- Efficiency, effectiveness, and cost: there is no guarantee that increases in the size of local government will, in each and every case, result in improvements to the efficiency, effectiveness and a reduction in the cost of local government and local services – increases in size may result in improvements, but they also may not, or cause things to deteriorate.
- Local democracy, community engagement, and public participation: there is a more consistent outcome from independent research of the negative effects on a range of democratic factors relating to local government that come from increases in council size.
- Autonomy, powers, freedoms, and the skills of local political and administrative leaders are far more important factors when it comes to efficiency, effectiveness, cost, local democracy, community engagement and public participation, than size of local government alone.

The issue for levelling up and devolution then is not how do we restructure the landscape of sub-national, and sub-regional government to achieve a central government policy agenda; rather, how do we provide existing local government with sufficient autonomy and resources to empower it to deal with the local manifestation of national and local policy problems? In addressing this point it is useful to take an overview of international trends and developments in thinking about local government.

3. International Trends and Developments in Local Government

Two important assumptions underpin the term 'local government'. First, that it is indeed 'local' and that it matches citizens' local affinities, sense of loyalty, local pride and local patriotism; and it is clear that citizens can have affinities to small settlements, villages, towns, cities, counties and their nations at one and the same time (Kerley et al, 2019). The second assumption is that local government would indeed be government – or as is often referred to overseas – 'local self-government'. The term government implies a set of freedoms, a degree of autonomy from the centre, and clear policy discretion as well as some form of democratic accountability.

Article three of the Council of Europe's Charter of Local Self-Government acknowledges that any institution with the term government in its title requires sufficient freedom and discretion to pursue the interests of its area and citizens:

'Local self-government denotes the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population.'

Such recognition of local self-government in law is absent for English local government and the signs from a recent, as yet unpublished, review of compliance with the Charter by this country are not good. Yet across the Council of Europe's 47 member states there are clear trends towards recognition of local self-government as a legal or constitutional operating principle. The Charter is a tool rarely used by local government in this country as a way of pressuring the centre, whereas it is much more regularly used across the 47 members of the Council of Europe as a way of protecting and promoting local autonomy and democracy.

Article five of the charter states:

'Changes in local authority boundaries shall not be made without prior consultation of the local authorities concerned, possibly by means of a referendum where this is permitted by statute.'

Again, the as yet unpublished Council of Europe report on compliance with the Charter does not make happy reading on this point. The Charter is something little used by local government in this country as opposed to a growing trend across 47 signatory countries to use the Charter to protect and defend local government and the more expansive concept of local self-government.

There are also a series of trends in the role, purpose and function of local government that have been emerging internationally that have lessons not just generally for local government in England, but which also provide specific lessons relevant to the Government's levelling up agenda and the way in which the recent White Paper suggests that agenda might be operationalised. The main lessons are set out under the following headings.

Mergers, demergers and disaggregation

While it may be the case that in some countries a series of local government mergers have taken place, such as in Denmark, with an expressed aim of enhancing efficiency, effectiveness and reducing cost; Kjaer and Klemmensen (2015) found that after the Danish reorganisations of 2007 there were higher levels of dissatisfaction with the municipal services in amalgamated municipalities than had been the case in the previous municipalities.

Swainiewicz et al (2017) identify three main waves of territorial reshaping of local government:

The 1960s and 1970s with a largely north European set of amalgamations based on the idea that economies of scale which occur in the private sector would be applicable to local government, and that formed the basis of reorganisations in countries such as: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, West Germany and the United Kingdom. In the same period Communist Eastern Europe experienced a series of council amalgamations based on the central state's desire to simplify and control localities for its own purposes; such amalgamations occurred in countries such as: Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, or Yugoslavia

In the late 1980s and through the 1990s there was a series of council disaggregation and the creation of smaller councils from larger units. This took place mainly in eastern Europe after the fall of Communism and as a reaction against the amalgamation policies of Communist dictatorships. Such disaggregation took place in countries such as: Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Ukraine. There was a wide-spread reaction against forced council mergers where a heavy-handed central state had ignored the wishes of local citizens.

The third wave identified by Swainiewicz et al (2017) came in the late 1990s through to the early 2000s which saw some mergers taking place in countries such as Greece (as a result of an EU demand for amalgamations as a condition of a financial rescue package – a tactic which backfired on the EU in Portugal where public protests halted merger plans), Denmark, additional mergers in England, Finland, Ireland and Turkey. At the same time municipal disaggregation took place in countries such as Bulgaria (Kalcheva, 2021).

Where there have been amalgamations across Europe, the starting point of those mergers was from units of local government far smaller than those in England, and the resultant new councils, on average, remain smaller than the average size of councils in England. Indeed, England has the largest units of local government of all 47 members of the Council of Europe (Swainiewicz et al 2017: 10).

The trend therefore is of mergers and disaggregation, sometimes in the same countries and all this indicates a central government tendency to see the shape and size of local government as something it should determine in the search for the philosopher's stone of optimum size (Copus et al 2020).

Strengthening local leadership

Also speaking to the levelling up agenda is the international trend towards stronger local political leadership – that strength, however, is often left undefined by governments as is the case with the White Paper's exhortations of 'stronger local leadership' – a theme of the centre since the Blair governments. Stronger local leadership often displays itself internationally with institutional changes, especially with the introduction of directly elected mayors (see Magre and Bertrana 2007 Sweeting 2017), which are now commonplace in countries such as: Australia, Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Poland, Portugal, New Zealand and the United States (to name a few).

Along with these institutional changes through the introduction of elected mayors has been a strengthening of the mayor's position in relation to the council and, in many cases and more importantly, with regard to the organisational world beyond the council. That is, mayors have been given responsibilities and powers that extend beyond the council to other institutions (Kukovic 2018) – similarly to the mayor of London.



There are also cases where the centre has not given local government and its mayors formal institutional direct power, but that has been replaced by skilful political leaders using informal influence and pressure to shape the local policy agenda, and what other institutions and organisations do to contribute to that agenda (Copus, 2006, Magre and Bertrana 2007, Elcock, 2008, Fenwick and Elcock, 2014).

Even in countries where the mayor is not directly elected but selected by the council, there have been shifts towards strengthening what would be the equivalent of the leader of the council in this country (but still often referred to as mayor) where the relationship between the mayor and council is firmly tilted towards the mayor. Indeed, local leaders that are not directly elected are, in a range of countries, powerful local leaders, particularly in relation to the council (Soos, 2021, Steyvers et al, 2022, Pano, 2022).

What has become clear however by central calls for powerful local leaders is variations in the approaches taken by central governments – some of which, particularly in federal countries – are experienced in operating with different systems of local government between states, and with varying powers and functions allocated to local government in different states (Rao and Thomas, 2022, Kersting and Cameron, 2022, Heinelt, 2022). Yet, in this country the centre seeks regularity and similarity, to provide it with certainty of action in relation to local government and therefore the White Paper's general repeating of the centre's line of strong local leadership does not match much of what rests with the traditional-style local government overseas. Indeed, the White Paper offers existing council leaders and elected mayors little that will 'strengthen' their position – such strong local leadership is likely to rest with any new combined authorities. Strengthening local leadership does not, however, rely on creating new institutions as overseas experience has shown; it relies on trusting existing local government and its leadership.

Centralisation, decentralisation and localisation

The financial crisis of 2008 has seen a wave of centralising tendencies emerge. The Council of Europe has reported on increases in centralisation in countries as different as Ireland and Cyprus. The latest version of the Local Autonomy Index (Ladner et al, 2015) which measures the autonomy local government has from the centre, has reported a scattered pattern with some countries re-centralising and others localising. The Local Autonomy Index charted the shifts between centralisation and localism across 39 countries and the Index showed that the greatest increases in local autonomy arose in the new Central and Eastern European countries as they emerged from communist rule. The Index identified Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Germany, and Poland as places with particularly high levels of autonomy. The UK fell into the group of countries with the lowest levels of local autonomy.

There is no clear pattern in the shifts between centralisation and localisation internationally, despite much international debate about devolution and decentralisation. Results in levels of centralisation and localisation vary across countries and over time, as would be expected. But there is some stability in the groupings of countries within the Local Autonomy Index with those with the most local autonomy and those with the least, and there has been little shift in the position of English local government despite decades of promised devolution.

The Levelling Up White Paper provides little that will shift the position of local government in England into a higher category on the Local Autonomy Index, particularly as its focus is on economic growth and development rather than a conversion by the centre to devolution as an operating principle of government. The White Paper contains no new freedoms, autonomy, or real powers for existing local government, rather a promise of more combined authorities – some of which will be county-wide. Rather than focusing on strengthening the hand of all councillors, the agenda is focused on a prominent policy option of creating directly elected mayors – an institutional change rather than a recognition of the strengths of the diversity inherent in the existing system. Areas should be able to choose an elected mayor or not, and still benefit from full devolution deals; it is diversity, localism and local knowledge that underpin any successful local government system as these factors lead to speed of response, recognition of local issues and priorities, and how best to respond to national issues and policies within distinct local settings (Mawson, 2009, Orr and Russ, 2009, Wilson and Game, 2011).

The White Paper offers the decentralisation of a range of functions from Whitehall and other agencies rather than devolution. The difference between devolution and decentralisation is much more than a semantic one. What is on offer from the centre is decentralisation of tasks, functions, roles and responsibilities, and some budgets – not devolution of power or an increase in local discretion and autonomy to act. Decentralisation of functions and responsibilities is not devolution of power, freedom and autonomy and England will continue to lag far behind Scotland and Wales in the devolution stakes.

Given the offer of decentralisation rather than devolution, and given the White Paper's preference for structural reform – either through the creation of combined authorities or a new model of county-based combined authority from which districts will be relegated to constituent membership only – the one-dimensional approach taken by the centre to the purpose of local government that we identified in the 2020 report still remains. Yet, there are alternatives to structural reform which can achieve the same objectives contained within the White Paper. It is to those alternatives we now turn.

4. Joint Working and Co-Operation

It is internationally long-standing and commonplace that councils cooperate with each other on a range of functions and services, and such cooperation is not limited to councils sharing geographical borders or even located within the same countries (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007; Teles, 2016; Teles and Swianiewicz, 2018). What is referred to in the literature as 'inter-municipal cooperation' varies, as would be expected, within different national settings given differences in the political and legal systems (Teles and Swianiewicz, 2018). But cooperation constructed by local government is influenced by the same range of factors, such as: systems and styles of local democracy; the responsibilities and functions of local authorities; planning systems and geography; territorial and political diversity; the nature of the functional urban areas and functional economic areas; council areas that cross international borders; rural and urban distinctions; and just who is cooperating with whom. All of these factors shape the nature of the cooperative arrangements and institutional settings developed to provide services and ensure accountability (Haveri and Airaksinen, 2007, Hulst et al 2009, Bel and Warner, 2016, Swianiewicz and Teles, 2018).

While cooperation between councils can take multiple forms, it is internationally an important resource for councils to develop capacity and for addressing efficiency and cost reduction through cooperative arrangements which can and do take different forms across a wide range of functions and service responsibilities. When faced with centrally imposed austerity policies, fiscal constraint, and the need to reduce costs, councils have responded not by calling for mergers but by enhancing and strengthening the way in which they work together (Citroni, et al 2013, Bel and Warner, 2016). Councils have used various formal co-operation arrangements to cover a range of service responsibilities to improve public service delivery and to reform the process of public administration (Baba and Asami 2020). What is also clear from the international research is that co-operation between councils of the same and different types and tiers, and between councils and other public sector agencies and bodies, is that this approach provides a cost saving policy approach and importantly a: 'crucial alternative to municipal mergers or the structural reorganisation of local government service provision' (Drew et al 2019, Dollery et al, 2020).



Co-operation between councils has been used internationally and within England across services such as:

- back-office administration
- legal services
- architectural services
- electoral services
- shared management and administration posts
- economic development and business services and development
- water and sewage services
- health care and hospital provision
- waste disposal
- education
- public safety
- public finances
- child welfare services
- care of the elderly.

The evidence from overseas shows that there are few services that have not been subject to some form of joint working between councils, and that such cooperation removes any economic, cost-saving, service improvement, efficiency, and effectiveness arguments for amalgamations, as these can be achieved by greater and more effective joint working between councils and other public and private bodies. Joint working promotes further collaboration and information exchange; promotes and enhances local government performance across a range of public services; and plays an important role in local government performance and cost reduction (Bel and Xavier 2006, Giacomini and Sancino 2016, Muraoka Avellaneda 2021).

Developing and constructing effective cooperation agreements between councils does take commitment, time, energy, resources and prioritisation by political and managerial leaders (Haveri 2003). It also raises issues of democratic accountability, public awareness, and public engagement.

But skilful and carefully designed mechanisms of accountability through councillors and stimulating citizen engagement can overcome these challenges (Eythorsson, 2018, Gendzwilf and Lackowska, 2018).

In its 2017 report of its inquiry into collaboration and district councils across England, the District Councils APPG found a fragmented nature to the public service landscape, with a host of external bodies and organisations developing public policy, spending public money and influencing the growth and well-being of communities across the country, but doing so without a democratic mandate. This provided all of local government with the specific challenge of holding those bodies to account, but also co-operating with them in service delivery.

The APPG report mapped the pattern of the collaborative arrangements then existing for district councils and found that district councils were operating with external agencies to:

- pool resources and develop capacity to deliver and transform public services
- interact with other agencies to draw them into a shared strategic vision of the development of specific localities
- influence and shape the decisions, policies and actions of external agencies
- in order to hold a wide range of unelected organisations to account.

(DC APPG, 2017:5).

The report commented that:

‘While collaboration is in the DNA of district councils this is not necessarily the case for the range of agencies with which districts need to collaborate for the benefit of residents. It is therefore vital that barriers to collaboration with other agencies are removed and that collaboration with districts becomes a required part of the development of policies and decision-making by other agencies and bodies. Indeed, districts should be empowered to produce a local framework within which other agencies would be expected to collaborate.’ (DC APPG, 2017:6)

The inquiry also found that collaboration between districts was an increasingly important phenomenon for service transformation and improvement. It highlighted how collaboration can be focused on the natural economic geography of an area, and functional economic or ‘travel to work’ areas, both stimulating economic activity and growth and enabling districts to forge strong and resilient partnerships with other districts, counties and public service agencies. These findings match the international evidence cited above showing districts have tapped into a growing international trend.

Equally matching the evidence cited above was the APPG finding that district councils are creating collaborative arrangements with organisations whose geography extends beyond the area of a single district and may cross a number of councils. Indeed many of the organisations with which districts already cooperate have a single service focus, or operate with a much narrower range of service responsibilities compared to elected district councils. Moreover, district councils are working closely with organisations that have different goals and objectives but which can together contribute to public service improvement.

So the question remains: if independent research shows that joint working between councils of different types and tiers, and between councils and other public and private sector bodies can have the same outcomes for cost, efficiency, effectiveness, cost reduction, and service improvement as those sought from council mergers, why does the centre



promote, encourage and prefer to see council mergers, larger local authorities and unitary councils? Part of the answer to that question rests on more needing to be done to reap the benefits of joint-working and inter-organisation cooperation and partnership - and not only as a policy alternative to council mergers. Not all of local government has adopted or embraced joint-working and co-operation as a central approach to its activities.

Poor working and personal relationships between members and officers of different councils, and between councils and other bodies can hamper progress in dealing with local and national problems. Rather than seek to reorganise local government it is far better for the centre to invest in encouraging, supporting, and facilitating the development of the right skills, knowledge, and approach to joint working throughout local government in England so that it truly becomes part of local government DNA.

The case has already been made that the quality, skills and ability of councillors and officers features more in determining the effectiveness of local government than size alone. It is the same with developing joint-working and co-operation (Borazz Le Gales, 2005, Teles, 2016, Bischoff and Wolfschütz (2021). Moreover, the centre should be strengthening the position of local government in the governance of localities and the country, and enhancing its ability to influence, convene, oversee and shape the policies and decisions of other organisations and bodies, rather than relying on structural change alone.

The other response to the question of why governments of all political colours have sought to restructure local government is more straightforward and can be summed up by repeating Newton (1982) thus:

'the search for optimum size ... has proved to be as successful as the search for the philosopher's stone, since optimality varies according to service and type of authority' (Newton, 1982)

or even more pointedly:

'The 'right' size for a municipal government is a matter of the local circumstances and the value judgements of the observer. Like so many issues in politics, this involves matters of ideology and interest' (Keating, 1995: 117):

Council joint working is a clear and internationally recognised policy alternative to mergers and size increases in local government: it is just not an option the centre seems to want to encourage or pursue when it comes to local government in England. Given this, we now turn to how district councils can support the Government's levelling up agenda to indicate that size still really doesn't matter.

5. District Councils: Levelling Up

Levelling Up

The heading of this section is not a typo, but meant to crystallise the weaknesses in the current levelling up agenda and to display how district councils can help to solve those weaknesses. The idea of levelling up across the country to: promote economic growth; stimulate regeneration; create employment opportunities; develop infrastructure; deliver improved public services; solve geographical inequalities; strengthen social capital; and restructure the framework of sub-national government, requires anchoring in the communities, neighbourhoods, and localities that are the target of the agenda. Large-scale and grand schemes can fail if they do not connect to the communities which they aim to assist. The White Paper rightly reminds us that there has been a raft of past policies from various governments designed to achieve similar aims and yet we still need to think of levelling up.

The danger in any economic agenda or policy that is linked to organisational restructuring and addressing geographical economic disparities, is in relying on large-scale organisations to deliver the goods to small, often isolated (socially and economically) communities.

Section Two set out the reasons why governments, of all colours, have sought territorial change in local government – the desire for speedy policy change; the aspiration to distribute the benefits of central policy as far as possible across the country; and the motivation of making the centre's life easier by simply having fewer units of local government and fewer councillors with which to deal. But the centre will never be able to have sufficient levers to make the changes it seeks as fast as it would want without fundamentally damaging the democratic fabric and structure of the country.

Central speed is the wrong ambition, and as we have seen through the Covid pandemic, the centre is not always right in its decisions or actions. A more nuanced and accurate ambition would be for local areas to determine for themselves the nature and speed of changes that they need, and to shape those changes to local circumstance – the centre's policy success is more likely to be achieved through this approach than a 'one-size-fits-all' policy process.





The very nature of any local government system is based on the recognition of geographic, social, political, and local diversity. It is the structural embedding of these factors into the system of local government, rather than a search for uniformity through centralisation, that provides it with the strength and focus to secure change and improvement in very local communities of place (Agranoff, 2004, Denters, et al, 2014, Kopic, 2016, Swianiewicz et al, 2022). Thus, the focus of levelling up must be on those communities levelling up seeks to help, and the only way in which that can be achieved is to empower the existing institutions of local government closest to the communities that are the target of levelling up; and those institutions of local government are district councils.

Social capital, for example, relies on strengthening inter-relationships between networks of people who live in particular areas. Social capital is developed through the workings of close-knit social groups, through the relationships they have, and through their shared sense of identity, values, and trust, and through the way such groups work together and support each other. Developing social capital at the right level can also have an economic effect as it is part of a range of factors which encourage small businesses and social enterprises; develop local economic linkages for supply and delivery; as well as stimulate community activity (Putnam, 2000).

The institution of local government best suited to the task of supporting this aspect of the levelling up agenda is clearly district councils. The evidence we have seen in Section Two shows how district-level and district-sized local government can encourage public participation, enhance community cohesion and ensure institutions relate to the places communities recognise (Baldersheim and Rose, 2021, Kouba and Dosek, 2021, Houlberg and Klausen, 2021). District councils are already engaged in providing services which build links between communities – empower district councils, and social capital will flourish.

The broad economic aims of levelling up also need to focus on the importance of localities – economic activity occurs in places partly because of local people forming and operating businesses in their own localities, which may grow and develop over time with the right support and environment; and partly because regional, national, and international firms require some form of local presence in a town or place.

The former can grow into sub-regional or bigger entities, but they do not start life on that scale; the latter existing organisations still require a local base or outlet. If levelling up is to be successful, it is important to recognise that local, sub-regional, and regional economies are not separate entities – rather they are the sum of their parts and those parts are the real communities of place and the networks of individuals that district councils serve and represent.

District councils are based in and with the real communities of place that are of the right scale to make levelling up a success in its economic and social objectives (Navarro and Pano 2021). There is a danger then that the devolution deal process and county deals or county-based combined authorities could fail to engage with that level of local government vital to the success of the overall agenda. The stress in the White Paper on effective and coherent institutions covering locally recognisable geographies of identity, place, and community, means full engagement of district councils in the process. The White Paper's stress on the need for 'sensible economic areas that join up where people live and work' and the emphasis it places on 'functional economic areas' breaks the link between the economic and social objectives of levelling up – only district councils can re-forge that link.

Joining up the organisations and institutions that will be part of the levelling up process is vital to its success. But, as we have seen in this paper, joining up to level up does not require large-scale organisations, or necessarily the creation of new entities (Martin, 2005, Andrews, et al, 2006, DCN 2020, Swianiewicz, et al, 2022). It requires freedom, flexibility and resources for the existing local government structure to collaborate and co-operate without a centralised oversight; one of the ironies of devolution so far has been the contradiction between passing responsibilities down from the centre (or other organisations) to newly created larger combined authorities which themselves are created from existing councils. It is only the links and local knowledge, intelligence, skills, and awareness that existing councils bring to the combined authority that make them work.

District councils in England deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services to over 22 million people – 40 per cent of the population – and cover 68 per cent of the area of the country. The services district councils provide protect and enhance the quality of life of those communities that are both the target for, and a necessary ingredient to, the levelling up agenda to stimulate the badly needed economic activity to deal with geographical disparities and to develop and strengthen community cohesion, social networks, and community interactions - all of which take place at the very local level. As we saw in Section 4, the strength of the current system is that it enables organisations to operate on different spatial levels, while keeping close to communities and citizens, whilst cooperation generates extra capacity, networks, and resources.



Bringing those organisations and their policies and responsibilities into alignment with a strategic vision developed by elected local government, strengthens the roles and activities of all concerned in co-operative networks to the benefit of communities and citizens (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007, Teles, 2016 Teles and Swainiewicz, 2018).

The district council role in safeguarding the local environment, promoting public health and social care, and in providing leisure facilities and opportunities for individuals and communities, is vital to levelling up through economic regeneration and the active role of district-scaled local government (De Ceuninck et al 2010, Mashamaite and Lethoko (2018) Swianiewicz, et al, 2022). District councils have responsibilities for creating attractive, well managed, safe, and prosperous places in which to live and bring up families. The district role in ensuring and facilitating opportunities for individuals and communities to interact, meet, communicate, and develop their networks, are all fundamental to stimulating growth, removing geographical and community inequalities, and to developing individual and community skills, health and well-being.

The district council role in regenerating high streets; creating, supporting and promoting local businesses; creating local economic partnerships; extending broadband coverage; creating local investment plans; planning responsibilities and neighbourhood plans; the development of partnerships with important local, regional and national stakeholders; planning and facilitating local green growth, economies and employment; and stimulating private-public relationships and partnerships, are all crucial in the success of the levelling up agenda and local economic development. The danger of creating local centralism – by focusing too heavily on county-level government and combined authorities – runs the risk of undermining what levelling up is meant to achieve.

District councils are closest to the communities and citizens that are to benefit from, and be a vital component of, levelling up. District councillors are those elected representatives closest to communities and citizens and live, socialise, and often work and will raise their families within the communities they represent. They are recognisable and easily approachable for local people. They are a source of local knowledge, communication, intelligence gathering and citizen engagement. They take part in stimulating and facilitating community activity; they channel the views and priorities of local people into the local decision-making process, and they champion the very communities and citizens to whom the levelling up agenda speaks. Without fully recognising the contribution district councils have long been making to levelling up and community and economic growth and without devolution fully engaging with and focusing on district councils, there will be little of the 'revolution in local democracy' promised in the Prime Minister's foreword to the White Paper.

Conclusion

Since the publication of 'Bigger Is Not Better' in 2020, independent research evidence has not fundamentally refuted, altered or challenged our findings that increasing local government size does not guarantee improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, service delivery or cost reduction; or that local democracy, citizen engagement and trust in local government can be damaged by size increases. What was also reconfirmed was that central governments have a tendency to see the shape, size and structure of local government as something that can be reformed to suit national government and national policy objectives, and such a centralised approach can fail to utilise the capacity, diversity, local intelligence and sophistication of local government, its councillors and officers in securing national, as well as local, objectives.

District-level local government – and all local government for that matter – is vital to levelling up as a policy agenda. Levelling up need not be predicated, or based, on the need for structural change to local government, or the creation of new entities and institutions of sub-national and sub-regional government. Rather, it requires government to recognise the

strengths of the inter-relationships and capacity within the current system, and to create the framework within which councils, at all tiers, can co-operate among themselves and with other institutions and organisations. The democratic accountability of the landscape of public service provision is secured by strong local leadership and strong local government. Districts, working with county colleagues and the rest of the local public sector, are the only organisations which can secure that accountability.

At the same time as securing local accountability, greater and more extensive use of joint working between local government, and with partner and other organisations, develops capacity, promotes effective working, reduces cost, and protects local democracy. The creation of larger units of local government is therefore not required to achieve these types of improvements; what is required is greater autonomy, local self-determination, stronger local political leadership – involving all councillors – and devolution rather than decentralisation. When it comes to these issues we can safely conclude from the evidence: bigger is still not better.



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