

Devolution Discussions Summary

All levels of government are going through a process of devolution and discussing whether to join regional combined authorities. North Somerset Council is currently investigating devolution of some of its assets and services to towns and parishes. At the same time it is also exploring joining the West of England Combined Authority (WECA).

In September [North Somerset Council](#) stated, “We have the option to respond declining the government’s invitation for exploratory conversations, which is felt unviable given North Somerset’s financial context and ambition. Alternative geographies have been considered, however the West of England is North Somerset’s primary Functional Economic Area and is therefore being explored as our preferred option. We do not rule out alternative options in the event this becomes undeliverable. The benefits of a mayoral versus non mayoral model will be explored through dialogue with government.” The West of England Combined Authority currently includes Bristol, BANES and South Gloucestershire councils.

The [LGA](#) states, “A combined authority (CA) is a legal body set up using national legislation that enables a group of two or more councils to collaborate and take collective decisions across council boundaries.”

“All CAs can be funded by their constituent councils through a levy... Elected mayors can raise additional resources through a precept (or additional charge) on local council tax bills... All CAs will have the power to borrow money... Many devolution deals include the retention of local business rate growth above an agreed threshold... In addition, elected mayors will be able to increase business rates by 2p in the pound if the relevant Local Enterprise Partnership ([LEP](#)) agrees. Many devolution deals also include other devolved resources including an investment fund.”

WECA is a Limited Liability Partnership ([LLP](#)) – where “Each member pays tax on their share of the profits, as in an ‘ordinary’ business partnership, but they are not personally liable for any debts the business cannot pay.” See Companies House for [West of England Combined Authority membership](#).

For the types of powers that have been devolved to combined authorities see ‘Devolution to local government in England’ - [Appendix 1](#): powers devolved in devolution deals and [Appendix 2](#): participants in devolution deals. For some mapping and additional information see [here](#).

I have attended a number of meetings, discussions and webinars on the topic of devolution, locally, regionally and nationally. The following are a variety of statements, concerns and questions that have been raised regarding devolution from principle authorities (e.g. North Somerset Council - NSC) to parish and town councils, and the potential centralisation of some powers to combined authorities (e.g. West of England Combined Authority – WECA LLP).

- [91% of England](#) is covered by parish and town councils
- Principal councils may use the fact towns and parishes aren't capped. Precepts may be forced to raise 30-80%+ to cover the work that a unitary council is/should be doing.
- Frustration that principal authorities are focussing on the main towns for devolving assets - with smaller councils requests not being addressed.
- As it is time to set budgets and precepts, smaller councils may be unable to cover a service if it is devolved to them halfway through the financial year.

- Risk of double taxation.
 - All tiers of local government should be involved in devolution deals based on the geography.
 - It seems that stakeholder voices have much greater importance and that devolution gives the benefit of being a member of a bigger stakeholder group. This does not seem an improvement for democracy.
 - A combined authority should not be a pre-condition of a devolution funding package.
 - Principal authorities should not be forced to adopt a mayor if it is choosing to join a proposed or existing combined authority.
 - A combined authority would introduce another tier of governance and associated administration costs.
 - A governance model is in the interests of the communities concerned
 - Finance doesn't follow function like it used to.
 - Principal councils should decrease taxes in relation to the services devolved to town and parish councils.
 - In 2021 LGA published “Local service delivery and place-shaping: A framework to support parish and town councils”, a framework for principal councils looking to support parish and town councils to play an increased role in local service delivery and place-shaping
 - The strategic view presented poses the risk that decisions are made on key services (e.g public transport) by people who are further away from the people that they serve.
 - It isn't clear who residents would contact about various issues
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- Can any government authentically fulfil commitments to decentralise power?
 - What happens to the voice of people?
 - How will people hold their representatives to account?
 - Will there be a referendum to join the combined authority?
 - Will more hyperlocal councils help fill a democratic deficit in some areas and help support more devolution to the local level?
 - What will be the role of principle authority in the future if a new layer of combined authority administration is agreed?
 - How do towns and parishes fit into this devolved model, that proposes decision making, taxation and expenditure at all levels - central government, combined authority, principle authority, towns and parishes?
 - What is the devolution cost/risk benefit? Will the principle authority be left with services that the private sector will not want to take on due to potential risk and cost?
 - It has been stated there are risks – how is risk calculated?
 - Will larger combined authority principle authorities that have more population and more votes, make the appointment of a mayor skewed in their favour?
 - Why won't there be representation from parish and town councils in Combined Authorities if all other tiers of local government are represented?
 - What role will parish / town councils play in a combined authority model?
 - Economies of scale – if it saves money to regionalise a service then how does it save money devolving to parishes? Will this increase local taxes for the same service?
 - Do residents benefit from a reduction in tax from the higher councils when the smaller council takes on services? What happens to the overall tax burden upon the residents?

- How many more staff will be needed by the town or parish when taking on land and services?
- Did the town or parish council already have the required skills/capacity/capability in its officers and councillors to take on more services and responsibilities?
- Is there any empirical evidence supporting the combining of authority approach?
- When the devolution deal is agreed, how long does it take for that deal to take effect?
- How long does it take the new authority to make real changes?
- Where does community development work sit? Does this sit at a unitary/county level or beyond? The preventative agenda, to reduce impact on services, needs to feature more prominently in discussions.
- Where does land use classification, with changing priorities, sit within the multi-tiered model? e.g. housing, solar, agriculture, etc.?
- What level of the devolved model will have the most influence?
- Will the principle authority or the combined authority make the strategic decisions and/or the final development decisions?
- Are Government listening to town and parish councils and NALC on the key issues facing the sector?
- Devolution needs financial support e.g. if we take on a service, centre, asset, etc. will all associated requirements and expenditure be identified and paid for by the principle authority e.g. business rate bill, insurances, etc.
- Will devolution be equitable, across towns and parishes within a principle authority?
- Will a combined authority treat member councils equally?
- How does place based budgeting / local area agreements fit in?
- What is the legality of taking on any aspect of a principle authority's statutory responsibilities vs private landowner responsibility? E,g. highways, PROW – NSC needs to define what is its responsibility and what is a landowner responsibility
- How does devolution fit with General Power of Competence?
- What are the current processes, can these be streamlined?
- What is needed vs wanted to do by the principle authority and town/parish councils?
- How does other grants fit in this process? E.g. village orderly grant

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