

# One AI explanation of Devolution White Paper 17 December 2024

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The English Devolution White Paper, titled “Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth,” outlines significant reforms to local government in England, aiming to streamline structures and enhance local governance. While the primary focus is on consolidating district and county councils into larger unitary authorities, the White Paper acknowledges the role of parish and town councils within this new framework.

## Impacts and Benefits for Parish and Town Councils:

1. **Enhanced Local Engagement:** The White Paper emphasizes the importance of local engagement and the role of parish and town councils in representing community interests. By establishing larger unitary authorities, there is an opportunity for parish and town councils to become more prominent in local decision-making, ensuring that the unique needs and preferences of their communities are addressed.

2. **Potential for Increased Responsibilities:** With the move towards unitary authorities, there may be a devolution of certain responsibilities to parish and town councils. This could include greater involvement in planning decisions, management of local amenities, and delivery of community services, allowing for more tailored and responsive governance at the grassroots level.

3. **Access to Funding and Resources:** The restructuring aims to create efficiencies and improve capacity within local government. Parish and town councils might benefit from streamlined processes and potentially increased access to funding, enabling them to undertake local projects and initiatives that directly benefit their communities.

4. **Strengthened Partnerships:** The White Paper promotes collaboration between different tiers of local government. Parish and town councils are encouraged to work closely with the new unitary authorities, fostering partnerships that can lead to more cohesive and effective service delivery.

5. **Preservation of Local Identity:** While larger unitary authorities are being established, the White Paper recognizes the importance of local identity. Parish and town councils will continue to play a crucial role in preserving the character and heritage of their areas, ensuring that local traditions and community spirit are maintained within the broader governance structure.

**In summary**, the English Devolution White Paper presents parish and town councils with opportunities for greater involvement in local governance, potential increases in responsibilities, and access to resources. By engaging proactively with the proposed changes, these councils can enhance their role in serving and representing their communities within the evolving landscape of English local government.

## **You're correct to approach the White Paper with a degree of skepticism.**

While it emphasizes engaging with town and parish councils, the creation and empowerment of combined authorities—led by directly elected mayors—could indeed centralize decision-making at a higher level, potentially diminishing the influence of parish councils. Here's a more cynical perspective:

### **1. Centralization of Power**

Combined authorities are designed to manage significant regional issues such as economic development, transport, and housing. While these are typically outside the remit of parish councils, the increased focus on regional decision-making could overshadow local priorities. Parish councils may find their concerns sidelined in favor of broader regional objectives.

### **2. "Consultation" Without Commitment**

The White Paper encourages "engaging with town and parish councils," but this can often be a token gesture. Consultation does not guarantee influence or that local councils' input will shape decisions meaningfully. It risks becoming a box-ticking exercise where local voices are heard but not acted upon.

### **3. Potential Erosion of Autonomy**

While parish councils could gain new responsibilities, the combined authorities might also absorb certain powers traditionally held at the local level. For instance:

- **Planning:** Strategic housing and infrastructure projects may bypass parish councils, with combined authorities making decisions at a regional level.
- **Funding:** Combined authorities might control funding streams that were previously more accessible to parish councils, making it harder for them to secure resources for local projects.

### **4. Focus on Larger Entities**

The emphasis on population sizes (300,000–600,000) for unitary authorities suggests a preference for economies of scale over hyper-local governance. Parish councils, which represent much smaller communities, might struggle to assert their relevance within this framework.

### **5. The Risk of Devolution "In Name Only"**

Devolution rhetoric often promises empowerment, but in practice, power tends to flow upwards, not downwards. While combined authorities might promise local involvement, they could act as intermediaries that consolidate control rather than share it.

## **The Balance of Power**

The real challenge lies in how parish and town councils assert themselves within this evolving framework. While combined authorities might have the upper hand in terms of scale and funding, parish councils can leverage their direct connection to communities to highlight local needs and advocate for tailored solutions.

## **Moving Forward**

If parish councils fear being overshadowed, they should:

- **Form Alliances:** Collaborate with neighboring councils to amplify their voice in consultations.
- **Engage Proactively:** Ensure they are well-represented in discussions with combined authorities.
- **Push for Guarantees:** Advocate for formalized roles and responsibilities that protect their autonomy and influence.

**Ultimately**, the impact of combined authorities will depend on how effectively parish councils can navigate this new landscape to protect their local relevance and authority.