

UNISON Local Government's position on English devolution

Overview

This document is designed to provide UNISON Local Government's position on the English Devolution White Paper (EDWP) and the significant reorganisation of councils across England. Launched in December, EDWP effectively consists of two parallel workstreams running at pace. Workstream one involves devolution to strategic authorities covering around 1.5 million people, and workstream two involves the reorganisation of local authorities into unitary councils covering approximately 500,000 residents.

UNISON members are committed to ensuring high-quality public services, and there is genuine concern about the potential impact of reorganisation on day-to-day council services, particularly workforce capacity and retention. The government must provide additional upfront funding and capacity support to ensure that reorganisation changes do not negatively affect the delivery of essential services. Adequate resources will be key to maintaining stability and supporting the local government workforce through this transition period, ensuring that service standards remain high for our communities.

With the right support, the devolution process can result in positive outcomes for workers, local authorities, and the public. Therefore, councils must be well-resourced for devolution to work and ensure their workforce is supported, well remunerated and trained. Devolution is not the cure for austerity. It can work as long as the vision of English local government is one where power is devolved from Westminster, decisions are made locally, and services are fully funded.

General Concerns & Key Messages

- The EDWP will have a significant impact on our members' employment across England
- Proposals will diminish the role of district councils in strategic governance by consolidating most or all of them into unitary authorities

- Any remaining district councils will be expected to focus on hyper-local services and work closely with new Mayoral Strategic Authorities
- County councils will also be affected
- Employees will be left uncertain about:
 - Their employer's identity
 - Their job roles
 - Their pay, terms, and conditions
 - Their training needs for changing and widening of their roles.

Implications

- English devolution differs from the devolution of powers to Scotland, Cymru/Wales, and Northern Ireland
- We will need to be alert to any threats to members covered by the National Joint Council (NJC), particularly in regions where local bargaining has moved members away from the NJC
- Reorganisation could provide an opportunity to bring non-NJC authorities back into national bargaining structures.

Local government finance and devolution

Local government is currently experiencing a financial crisis. Local government workforce numbers have declined dramatically, and as the White Paper acknowledges, there are significant recruitment and retention problems in local government. Meanwhile, councils are at breaking point after years of austerity.

It is therefore vital that investment in services and staff is central to any reforms. The £3.4bn funding gap identified by UNISON should be closed, and the changes in the White Paper must not be used as a cover for job cuts or the erosion of pay, terms, and conditions.

Impact on services and democracy

- The phasing out of smaller district councils must not undermine local decision-making or lead to increased central control from Whitehall
- The Government's agenda to oversee the 'biggest wave of insourcing of public services in a generation' can be realised by using English devolution and reorganisation to bring services home and in-house whether they are in Local Authority Trading Companies, shared services between existing councils, or outsourced contracts
- Devolution deals should be developed from the bottom up and driven by local communities and staff; not through backroom deals.

Employment

The devolution and reorganisation proposals cannot be a way to reduce workforce terms and conditions. Any proposals should include:

- A commitment to retain national bargaining, with no detriment to the workforce
- No compulsory redundancies
- No loss of pay or reduced conditions for any staff affected
- Enhanced TUPE protections for all transfers
- Use of the NJC for all Unitary Authorities, Strategic Authorities, Combined Authorities, and Mayoral Combined Authorities.

Trade Union Representation

- Trade unions must be key stakeholders at local, regional, and national levels in the implementation of devolution or any local government reorganisation
- Local government workers must be involved in shaping the proposals and have their voices heard
- Devolution should empower local communities, not reduce their influence on the decisions made about their local services
- There should be no reductions or diluting of trade union recognition or facility time agreements following any reorganisation linked to devolution
- As part of any devolution or reorganisation, union representation must be enhanced rather than diminished
- Transfer of trade union recognition and facility time to all new Unitary Authorities, Strategic Authorities, Combined Authorities, and Mayoral Combined Authorities must be guaranteed.

Equality

- Full equality impact assessments must be undertaken for all staffing changes
- Devolution and reorganisation present an opportunity to identify and close the gender, ethnicity, and disability pay gaps; this should not be wasted.

25 March 2025