

What next for local government reorganisation?

Was it the right call to delay the White Paper, and has Covid just delayed the inevitable?

15 December 2020

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Last Wednesday, 9 December, was the deadline for detailed plans to be submitted for the three local government areas identified by MHCLG in October as the pilots for the latest round of restructuring. There is no question that the Government have pulled back from their grand plans for devolution and restructuring to go hand in hand. I also suspect that the White Paper will be delayed long enough for Robert Jenrick and colleagues to learn lessons from the plans put forward for these pilot areas.

On one hand it feels like local government reorganisation is in limbo, having been told to gear up for something major and then being told to wait. Many district councils will be feeling relieved that their time is not up yet (I do believe this is an overly pessimistic view). On the other hand, local authorities, along with the rest of the world, have been in a strange "Covid Limbo" for most of this year, a limbo that has given us very little respite and has put unimaginable pressure on councils to deliver support to their communities.

Was it the right call to delay the White Paper? In many ways, yes. Local authorities have had so many additional responsibilities put on them over the last 8 months that it is hard to imagine where the elected members, senior leadership teams and other stakeholder groups would have found any time to discuss a restructure plan. Plus, lockdowns and social distancing would have made that even trickier. Clearly the focus over this last year has to have been on local communities, vulnerable residents, businesses and keeping education on track. It will be interesting to hear, in the new year, about how well formulated the plans for Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Somerset are, when their key decision makers have been pulled in so many different directions. Have they been pushed too hard, too quickly?

On the other hand, is there ever a "right" time to ask local government to consider whether its current structure is fit for purpose? Not really. Has Covid just delayed the inevitable? I think so. More importantly, is the inevitable the right decision? Probably.

One reason that I say "probably" is that local government runs the risk of falling behind its partners, particularly in health, if it doesn't think about size and geographic coverage. In the health sector there is a lot more direction given from central government (PCTs didn't become CCGs because PCTs wanted it). This means that they move forward collectively, if not always happily. In the overlapping worlds of health and social care, local government needs a collective voice, covering areas similar to health geographies. Combined authorities aren't the answer, that isn't where the skills lie.

District and borough councils have so many things to offer, but surely it's better to use that power collectively to set up a structure that delivers to local citizens while also having a stronger voice at a regional and national level?

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