

Comment on English devolution white paper

16 December 2024  Peter Ware

The government has announced sweeping reforms to local government in its English Devolution White Paper.

In an effort to tackle the centralised nature of decision-making in England, it has committed to greater devolution of powers to local areas. It has also proposed fundamental changes to how local authorities are organised, which will affect existing councils across the country.

Peter Ware, Head of Government at UK and Ireland law firm Browne Jacobson, said:

“The scale of these sweeping reforms chimes with the government’s assertion this is a ‘devolution revolution’, which has potential to transform local government into a simpler, more efficient system.

“The creation of strategic authorities and enhanced powers for elected mayors should ensure that every region has a seat at the table nationally, while also removing complexity and duplication in a system that has become a complicated patchwork of arrangements. If the general public and businesses have a better understanding of how local government works, they will be more likely to engage with it.

“Although government will hope that the creation of strategic authorities will streamline local decision-making, this won’t automatically be the case and will require lots of work to ensure efficiencies are delivered.

“Local voices must also not become ignored. Like with the updated National Planning Policy Framework that establishes a ‘stick’-led approach to new development, it’s crucial that communities feel their views are heard in decisions affecting their lives.

“District, borough and indeed all councils must therefore work hard when considering their proposals for local government reorganisation to ensure the localities currently covered by districts and boroughs are adequately represented in new unitary authorities.

“Collaboration between new strategic authorities and their elected mayors will also be vital. In some cases, unitary councils and regional councils will be split across different geographies, as will some district and boroughs.

“With the government imposing mandatory housebuilding targets on each area, authorities must work together where new developments and associated public infrastructure will impact on neighbours.

“More broadly, while Whitehall is obviously keen on driving efficiency in this reset, it mustn’t forget that the true essence of devolution is supposed to provide a bespoke approach to each area’s specific set of opportunities and challenges.

“By standardising governance, powers and funding, there’s a risk of over-simplification in how we tackle very complex and fast-changing issues.”

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