

WHITEPAPER

Council mergers and devolution: Embracing change

A knowledge-informed approach





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Introduction

Released in December 2024, the English Devolution White Paper sets out the government's plans to devolve extra powers to local authorities, giving them greater scope than ever before to choose how they run their services. Significantly, the government aims to restructure all remaining two-tier local authorities into single, unitary authorities, and create additional metropolitan mayors. The intention is to drive efficiencies while delivering improved value for money for the taxpayer.

The [white paper](#) (to be followed by the English Devolution Bill in spring/summer 2025), has far reaching consequences for local authorities across England, as the government looks to create unitary authorities with populations of around 500,000, and foundation strategic authorities with populations of 1.5m.

There are, however, outliers – parts of England that fall outside of the government's remit. Plymouth and Torbay, for example, are both existing unitary authorities, yet have populations far below the 500,000 threshold.

What will happen in such cases is unclear, although the government's white paper proposes that small unitary authorities may be merged into single, bigger authorities where there "is evidence of failure or where their size or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver sustainable and high-quality public services".

What is certain is that restructuring will mean a degree of upheaval. At the time of writing, 18 councils have requested that local elections are postponed until May 2026, as they work hard to implement major reorganisations. Furthermore, restructuring has – historically at least – resulted in the loss of jobs through role consolidation, although central government has stressed that job retention must be made a priority.

For former district councillors and related employees, the creation of new, unitary authorities will likely have an effect on daily routines; lengthy commutes may be necessary, and the authority may request a shift towards hybrid and remote working patterns. In the case of the latter, the newly formed authority must be certain it has the necessary technology infrastructure to cope with the changes, prioritising cloud-based platforms and centralised systems.

In this white paper, we explore the implications of large-scale restructuring for merging authorities and the significant changes that lie ahead. We look at how devolution will reshape local service delivery, the critical role of technology in facilitating and streamlining these changes, and the powers given to new mayoral and strategic authorities.

We also discuss the pros and cons of devolution, provide guidance on creating a positive organisational culture, outline steps for successful systems integration, and explain why cloud technology and AI will be invaluable tools for effective and sustainable restructuring.

The newly formed authority must be certain it has the right tech infrastructure to cope with change, prioritising cloud-based platforms and centralised systems.



How will councils be restructured?

Currently, about 50% of England is composed of a two-tier system. Under restructuring, all of the country's authorities will eventually fall under one of four categories: Unitary Authority; Foundation Strategic Authority; Mayoral Strategic Authority; and Mayoral Established Authority.

Unitary Authorities

The government's restructuring proposals will merge district councils and county councils into single, unitary authorities. This may mean that boundaries are restructured across neighbouring counties.

The current structure for non-unitary authorities is as follows:

District Councils

These councils typically represent small geographic areas in non-metropolitan counties, and are responsible for a number of local services, including refuse collection, planning applications, food safety, leisure and recreation, and local tax collection.

Example: Forest of Dean District Council

County Councils

County Councils (usually headquartered in a sizeable town within a county) have greater powers than district councils, and are responsible for the management of education, road maintenance, public transportation networks, social care, libraries, and waste management and recycling.

Example: Gloucestershire County Council

The changes will see the creation of:

Unitary Authorities (UAs)

The government aims to expand the creation of non-mayoral, non-strategic authorities across England. These UAs will represent population sizes of approximately 500,000 residents, and will be responsible for local schools and education services, the management of transport infrastructure and services, social services, waste management, and planning and development.

Foundation Strategic Authorities (FSAs)

2025 and beyond will see the creation of Foundation Strategic Authorities, which will include non-mayoral combined authorities, combined county authorities, and any local authority designated as a strategic authority without a mayor. They will be formed of two or more unitary authorities, and will represent population sizes of around 1.5m. FSAs will focus on broad regional issues, with a remit to improve public services such as transport, infrastructure, health, and public safety.



Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs)

A major component of Local Government Restructuring (LGR) includes the formation of Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs). The Chancellor of the Exchequer has stated that the 'end goal' is to have a directly elected mayor in every area of England.

The current mayoral structure is as follows:

Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs)

MCAs can be formed by a group of local authorities, including metropolitan boroughs, unitary authorities, and district councils. They are designed to improve transport, economic development, and regeneration across a wide area by pooling resources and responsibilities.

Example: Greater Manchester

Mayoral Combined County Authorities (MCCAs)

MCCAs can only be formed by upper-tier authorities, such as county councils and unitary authorities. District or borough councils within the area cannot be members. Similar to MCAs, MCCAs aim to enhance transport, economic development, and regeneration, but they are specifically tailored for areas with two-tier local government systems.

Example: York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority

The proposed changes will establish:

Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs)

In 2025, mayoral devolution will be extended to Greater Lincolnshire, and Hull and East Yorkshire, with ongoing talks to form new mayoral authorities in 2026. These Mayoral Strategic Authorities will include Norfolk and Suffolk, Cumbria, Cheshire and Warrington, Greater Essex, Hampshire and Solent, and Sussex and Brighton. MSAs will be given a mandate to deliver region-specific growth, with greater control over transport, infrastructure, health, education, and social care.

Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities (EMSAs)

At the start of financial year 2025/2026, Greater Manchester and West Midlands will become Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities, granting them Integrated Settlements. This will deliver funding for key services in a single funding pot (in contrast to the previous system of multiple individual funds, each with their own rules and targets), covering adult skills, housing and regeneration, net zero (retrofit), transport, and local growth.

A major component of Local Government Restructuring includes the formation of Mayoral Strategic Authorities.

Benefits, criticisms and blockers

Given the scope and scale of the restructuring, it is unsurprising that there are contrasting views on the proposed changes. We've outlined the most common objections and supporting arguments below.

Benefits

The proposed English Devolution Bill will aim to decentralise power from Westminster to local regions, providing several key benefits:

Local control: Regions will have greater control over their economic development strategies, allowing them to prioritise and address local needs more effectively.

Economic growth: By empowering local authorities, the Bill should unlock regional growth, creating more opportunities for employment and boosting local economies.

Economies of scale: Through centralised procurement activities, local authorities can deliver better value for the public purse. Technology has a key role to play, through cloud-based finance and accounting platforms, and integrated supplier management and contracting software.

Centralised technology platforms: By joining forces, newly formed authorities can benefit from implementing single, centralised systems, improving access to data, making daily processes easier for employees, and offering enhanced digital services to the public.

Reduced bureaucracy: While funding has typically been delivered through dozens of different streams, the proposed mergers would see funding streamlined into fewer pots, simplifying financial management.

Through centralised procurement activities, local authorities can deliver better value for the public purse.





Criticisms and blockers

While some local authority leaders are positive about the government plans, others have raised a number of concerns, including:

Purpose: critics argue that the restructuring will not deliver significant devolved powers, and that the process would be better described as decentralisation.

Cost: There will be substantial up-front costs, including the development of new office buildings and infrastructure, the purchasing of new technology, staff recruitment and restructuring, and consultancy and legal fees.

Job losses: It is likely that some employees will be made redundant, as newly formed authorities look to consolidate roles. While the focus will be on keeping staff in position, job losses – particularly in administration and at executive level – are to be expected.

Disruption to successful regions: While mergers may streamline service delivery for some, affluent or well-performing areas may see no benefit in joining forces with neighbouring counties or regions.

Local issues: Where specific concerns exist in local areas, critics argue that these may be overlooked in a merged system of governance.

Delays: A number of councils have already asked to delay local elections to give them the capacity for restructuring.

Do merged councils perform better?

Research suggests that merging district and county councils into unitary authorities could save significant amounts of money. Accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) has estimated that such mergers could save around £2.94bn over five years. However, these savings are not guaranteed and depend on effective implementation.

There are a number of case studies of existing unitary authorities that point to the overall benefits of restructuring. We've highlighted two examples below:

Cornwall Council

The council was formed in 2009 by merging six district councils and Cornwall County Council into a single authority. The merger aimed to streamline services and reduce costs. According to a [report](#) by the Local

Government Association, Cornwall Council achieved significant savings and improved service delivery. However, there were challenges related to integrating different systems and cultures.

Durham County Council

In 2009, Durham County Council was created by merging seven district councils and Durham County Council. The merger led to cost savings and more efficient service delivery. A study by PwC highlighted that the council managed to reduce administrative costs and improve strategic planning. However, there were initial difficulties in harmonising services, organisational culture, and integrating IT systems.





What can we learn from Cornwall and Durham?

A primary challenge for both regions concerned organisational culture. With multiple district councils and county councils each used to their own way of operating, establishing a single, cohesive culture was a challenge that took some time to resolve.

To overcome these conflicts, council leaders will need to collaborate closely to develop a positive organisational culture that all sides can benefit from. Buy in from employees is critical, and all opinions should be listened to and considered. Rather than insisting on a singular, 'tried and tested approach', creating a new way of working that emphasises clear goals and collaboration should bring positive advantages to the newly formed authority.

Below, we've outlined seven steps to achieving a positive organisational culture – in collaboration with training and leadership expert Dr. Barbara Van der Eecken.

Engagement and teamwork: Achieving cultural change requires collaboration, shared purpose, and involving the whole team. Leaders can set the vision for their department, but cannot implement change alone. Teams need to feel empowered and heard.

Focus on growth and learning: Move away from micromanaging to a culture that encourages self-reflection, feedback, and professional

growth. Provide ongoing guidance rather than imposing directives. Prioritise learning well over learning fast.

Feedback and development: Regular, constructive feedback is vital for high performance. Identify strengths, address challenges, and drive productive outcomes. Adopt a coaching mindset focusing on improvement and innovation over blame.

Define standards: Decide what practices align with organisational values and ensure consistency, eliminating negative behaviours.

Celebrate successes: Mark milestones and achievements, big or small, to keep momentum and reinforce positive behaviours.

Goal setting: Align individual goals with those of the organisation, ensuring transparency and clarity. Use technology to track progress and nudge teams forward.

Adopt a growth mindset: Promote development by viewing challenges as opportunities and reframing mistakes as learning experiences.

Establishing a cohesive culture was a challenge that took some time to resolve.



Another key challenge for Cornwall and Durham concerned systems integration. Both regions were using different software solutions at district and county level, resulting in complex and time-consuming data integration. Below, we've put together ten steps for successful systems integration:

Collaboration and teamwork: Successful integration starts with collaboration. Engage the ICT team and involve all key stakeholders across departments and regions. Aligning everyone to shared objectives ensures smoother execution and a unified strategy.

Assess existing systems: Conduct a thorough evaluation of current IT infrastructure, applications, and data management processes. Identify gaps and areas for improvement to determine optimal integration.

Set clear goals: Define the purpose of the integration upfront. Whether the aim is to boost efficiency, reduce costs, enhance service delivery, or improve scalability, clarity ensures that everyone is working toward the same outcomes.

Prepare your data: Begin with consolidating and cleansing your data. Creating a unified and consistent repository improves data quality and management, streamlining the integration process.

Use modern integration tools: Leverage advanced tools and platforms to ensure a seamless connection between systems:

- Integration Platforms as a Service (iPaaS): Enable efficient data exchange across applications.
- API Management tools: Support smooth communication and data sharing between different applications.

Adopt cloud solutions: Choose cloud providers that align with your security, compliance, and scalability needs. Hybrid cloud models can help integrate on-premises systems with cloud technology for greater flexibility and security.

Strengthen security and ensure compliance: Implement robust security measures to safeguard sensitive data. Ensure full compliance with regulations such as GDPR to avoid penalties and build trust.

Empower staff with training and support: Equip staff with comprehensive training on new systems to maximise usability. Offer ongoing support, and address challenges as they arise post-integration.

Monitor performance: Continuously track the performance of integrated systems. Identify and resolve issues promptly to maintain optimal functionality and ensure long-term success.

Seek feedback and refine systems: Encourage regular input from all users. Use this feedback to refine and optimise the system, accommodating evolving needs and improving overall performance.

By following the above steps, merging councils will be able to take a cohesive, strategic approach to performance management and systems integration – common primary blockers for merging authorities. When adopting cloud solutions or integrating systems, it is essential for merging authorities to choose a technology partner with a proven track record of delivering optimised and tailored software solutions to central and local government.

Different software solutions were being used at district and county level, resulting in complex and time-consuming data integration.

Devolved powers and responsibilities

With the establishment of new strategic and unitary authorities, each will take on responsibility for the delivery of key public services. The process aims to deliver enhanced efficiency, with funding streamlined into fewer, more focused channels. To provide clarity, we've outlined the main responsibilities of each authority below.

Unitary Authorities

Education

Unitary authorities have the responsibility for primary and secondary school administration, support for SEND, and the management of adult education programmes and vocational training.

Transport and roads

UAs are responsible for planning and managing local bus services, maintaining local roads and infrastructure, and reducing congestion.

Social services

Child protection services, adult social care, and family support programmes all fall under UA remit.

Waste management

UAs manage household waste collection and disposal, recycling, and sustainability initiatives.

Housing and planning

UAs have responsibility for managing planning applications, spatial planning, and the conservation of historic buildings.





Foundation Strategic Authorities

Housing and planning

FSA's will be responsible for creating a spatial development strategy. This involves setting cross-border housing targets and planning for infrastructure needs across their areas. They will be given powers to prioritise the development of affordable housing, and ensure developers contribute to affordable housing projects.

Employment

FSA's will gain control over support programmes for employment and innovation. These programmes can be tailored to better suit the needs of the local economy, driving job creation and economic growth.

Transport

Devolution extends to public transport, with FSA's given the responsibility of local bus network management and the reduction of carbon emissions

from buses. The authority will be able to work with the rail network to identify disused 'brownfield' sites suitable for housing development.

Roads

Working with National Highways, FSA's will ensure road networks are well maintained and meet the needs of the region. They will also implement traffic management schemes to reduce congestion and improve safety.

Education and adult skills

New powers will give FSA's control over non-apprenticeship adult skills funding, allowing them to tailor adult education and skills training to better meet local needs and economic conditions. By aligning adult skills programs with local economic strategies, authorities can ensure that training and education are directly relevant to the job market.



Mayoral Strategic Authorities

Transport and infrastructure

MSAs will develop regional transport strategies, improving connectivity and reducing congestion while working towards integrating various modes of transport (e.g. road, rail and cycle). They will have control over major infrastructure projects such as the construction of roads, bridges, and transport systems. Funding will be secured from central government and the private sector.

Skills and employment

As part of the drive to improve employment outcomes for residents, MSAs will offer vocational training and skills development in collaboration with local businesses, educational institutions, and training providers. Employment services will include job matching, career counselling, and tailored assistance for those facing employment barriers.

Housing and strategic planning

MSAs will be responsible for overseeing housing development to meet regional needs, including planning for affordable, sustainable housing that integrates with existing communities. They will also manage spatial planning by coordinating land use and ensuring sustainable growth.

Economic development and regeneration

Support for local businesses will be provided through grants, loans, and advisory services, stimulating growth and creating jobs. Another key responsibility is the management of regeneration projects, aimed at improving existing urban areas. This will involve identifying and developing brownfield sites to enhance public spaces.

Environment

MSAs will be tasked with implementing environment-first practices for their region, such as reducing reliance on cars, enhancing green spaces, and promoting sustainable urban planning. They will oversee waste management systems to ensure efficient recycling, improve air quality through pollution monitoring, and promote the conservation of water sources.

Health and wellbeing

As part of the government's plans for preventative health, MSAs will put in place initiatives to promote healthy living, while playing a significant role in developing Integrated Care Systems to ensure health and social care systems are joined up and more efficient.

Public safety

MSAs will work closely with local police forces to develop strategies for crime prevention and community policing. They will also work towards improving emergency services coordination to speed up response times.



Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities

Economic development

A major focus for EMSAs will be the development of local businesses through investment and innovation. They will have the power to offer integrated funding settlements to SMEs (small and medium enterprises), creating additional local jobs.

Transport and infrastructure

EMSAs will build and oversee major infrastructure projects and new transport hubs. They will work to better integrate different forms of transport, improving regional connectivity. This should make it easier for citizens to access employment opportunities in their towns and cities.

Housing and planning

As part of their 'established' status, EMSAs will be granted enhanced decision making over housing, with greater say in planning, land use, infrastructure need, and housing policy. They will be able to use integrated funding settlements to enact change quickly and efficiently.

Health and social care

EMSAs will be asked to take a holistic, joined-up approach to health and social care that encompasses mental health and wellbeing provision, community health and preventative care, infrastructure improvement, and the integration of health and social care services.

Public safety

EMSAs will have overall responsibility for reducing crime rates through enhanced community policing and crime prevention strategies. Infrastructure will be assessed to ensure better safety standards, with regular inspections, upgrades, and repairs.

The environment

Devolved powers will give EMSAs a wide remit over environmental issues, including the development of renewable energy projects, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, integrating green building standards, promoting sustainable transport, overseeing waste management, and improving green spaces for recreation. They will also be given responsibility for monitoring air and water pollution, and managing protected land.

New powers will give Foundation Strategic Authorities control over non-apprenticeship adult skills funding.

Mayoral Strategic Authorities will have control over major infrastructure projects such as the construction of roads, bridges, and transport systems.

The Cloud: Key to successful outcomes

For merging authorities, the cloud will be a critical component of successful restructuring. Cloud platforms ensure teams stay future ready, agile, and aligned across disparate departments. Offering enhanced cybersecurity, the latest cloud platforms are reliable, scalable, and centred on the user experience.

Since the UK government released its [Cloud First policy](#) in 2013, cloud adoption has risen steadily in local governments, but, as with most UK organisations, the sector is slow to embrace fully cloud-based solutions.

With large-scale restructuring, the demands of the Procurement Act, and a climate unpredictability, moving operations to the cloud is rapidly evolving from a choice to a necessity. Those with legacy on-premise systems are leaving themselves increasingly open to cyber-attacks and the theft of sensitive public data. Merging authorities will need to look towards highly secure, managed systems from trusted technology partners.





The data

A 2024/25 [survey by OneAdvanced](#) shows that local government is roughly on-track with other sectors in the UK when it comes to cloud adoption. One third (33%) in local government now use solely cloud-based systems within their organisations, compared to 35% across industry as a whole. Nearly half (48%) of local government leaders say their organisation uses a combination of cloud and on-premise applications, a figure slightly higher than the industry average of 42%.

The large-scale restructuring taking place across England will require senior leaders to fundamentally rethink how they approach their data, understand their users, and optimise workflows and processes. This shift presents an opportunity to adopt smarter, more efficient strategies that drive meaningful results.

The cloud should form the cornerstone of this strategic thinking. Cloud platforms not only offer a joined-up experience for employees and senior leaders, but deliver an improved experience for local citizens, with 24/7 access to information on key services.

Considering cost

There is little doubt that cost is a primary consideration for merging authorities when implementing new digital solutions. Having already invested in on-premise infrastructure, CFOs, S151 Officers and other finance professionals will be reluctant to make sweeping changes.

From a practical and cost viewpoint, one solution would be to limit cloud migration to a single area of the organisation at the outset. By breaking down cloud adoption into small projects that are developed incrementally, the authority can better mitigate risk, assess adoption rates, address blockers, and develop training provision.

When assessing cost, it is useful to evaluate total cost of ownership (TCO). This is the initial, up-front cost, and the ongoing cost of running an asset. In the case of on-premise infrastructure, these costs include licensing fees, maintenance, repairs, and tech support.

Cloud solutions also come with licensing fees and other costs, but these are typically built into a monthly subscription. The net result, in most cases, is that cloud adoption is cheaper – implementing Azure Virtual Desktop, for example, can lead to 60% savings on licensing, and 70% savings on infrastructure.

Non-financial benefits

While migrating to the cloud can reduce spend, there are other, non-financial benefits to consider. A major benefit is the agility that cloud adoption brings; with hybrid, remote, and flexible working patterns now common, employees need the ability to work outside of the office, whether from a mobile device or virtual desktop. With hybrid working a likely outcome of restructuring, this has clear advantages for merging councils.

For local government bodies with many disparate functions, this agility is of further value. With cloud capabilities, work can be streamlined in the areas of care giving, maintenance and repairs, waste removal, highways, and any role requiring real-time communication between operatives and office-based management.

A further benefit of the cloud is the reduced need for security resources. Cloud providers must adhere to strict security standards, with dedicated staff to safeguard against cyberattacks and data threats. While a properly administered on-premise site may offer high levels of security, this requires staff with the right level of expertise and additional resources to ensure the network remains secure.

Types of cloud adoption

There are three main types of cloud computing: public, private, and hybrid. For departments dealing with highly sensitive data, a private cloud system is recommended – this keeps all data secure within an off-premise environment that is entirely dedicated to the authority.

Other departments may prefer a hybrid cloud model. The hybrid cloud allows the user to access applications on the public cloud (Microsoft 365 for example), with the option to store sensitive data securely on private cloud infrastructure. This model allows authorities to remain compliant with data privacy, while enjoying the benefits of public cloud access.

To ensure cloud infrastructure is deployed correctly, many public sector bodies opt for a managed system, enabling them to utilise staff in other areas of the organisation, with the assurance their cloud infrastructure is optimised and protected on an ongoing basis.

Moving operations to the cloud is rapidly evolving from a choice to a necessity.



Future proofing with AI

Restructuring presents the ideal opportunity to implement powerful AI capabilities, future-proofing operations and enhancing day-to-day work flows and service delivery. AI has a number of pertinent use cases for government authorities, including:

Finance

Agentic AI can be used to automatically spot financial fraud and irregularities. Discrepancies are flagged in real-time, minimising disruption and ensuring quick fixes. This proactive approach helps keep financial systems secure, protects data, and maintains trust.

Customer service

Advanced chatbots offer enhanced levels of out-of-hours customer service for residents seeking information on services, from health-related matters

and waste disposal enquiries to planned disruption to transport and highways. Chatbots have the potential to become a 'one stop shop' for citizen needs by providing a range of services such as complaint lodging, bill payment, legal forms, and employment assistance.

Care giving

AI-embedded software can be used to log location and time and attendance for care givers, provide a detailed assessment of clients, and improve employee safety. This software can be used to evidence provided care, reducing the burden of administration for the employee. From a client perspective, wearable AI technology can assess health metrics such as blood pressure and glucose levels, ensuring timely intervention.



Workforce management

Through intelligent resource scheduling, AI tools can be used to optimise the delivery of human and non-human resources in the field. This saves time and money for the authority, while improving resident satisfaction through rapid job completion rates. AI-enhanced resource scheduling can also help reduce greenhouse emissions by optimising travel routes.

Supplier management

With AI, procurement teams can access real-time updates on supplier information, ensuring they always have the most current data. The technology can quickly analyse large datasets, providing historical data on supplier performance, sustainability practices, and cost efficiency – an invaluable tool for meeting the requirements of the Procurement Act 2023.

Waste management

AI technology has an array of applications in waste management, including route management, waste sorting, and predictive maintenance. IoT (Internet of Things) devices can be added to bins to check waste levels, giving authorities a clear view on the scale of non-recycled waste.

Highways maintenance

AI-powered cameras and computer vision systems can automatically detect and photograph potholes in real-time, allowing for quicker identification

and repair. AI software can further be used in predictive maintenance, allowing teams to manage the repair of roads and highways based on current and historical use.

Adult skills

Adaptive AI underpins advanced technologies used to assess adult digital functional skills, and functional skills in English and maths. The technology uses initial assessment answers to hone subsequent answers based on strengths and weaknesses, equipping adult learners with a tailored solution for improvement in key areas.

Employee retention

Generative AI can be used within continuous performance management platforms, helping employees create professional-sounding feedback, ensuring all voices are given equal weight. AI tools can also be used to provide real-time feedback, helping employees feel motivated and appreciated.

Chatbots have the potential to become a 'one stop shop' for citizen needs.

Choosing a technology partner

Steering committees and buying teams will need to choose technology partners that are not only closely aligned to the needs and challenges of the authority, but also have the requisite sector experience. Trust is critical – some tech partners have a reputation for overpromising and not providing clarity on the solution's limitations.

Any prospective technology partner will need to have a proven track record supplying to government, evidencing projects with case studies and historical data. They must be transparent, citing capabilities and limitations at the outset. At the same time, partners should be able to provide a current roadmap for software updates and new features.

Merged authorities should embrace tech companies that can offer a true partnership, above those than merely fulfil the role of vendor or supplier. These partners should be brought into the fold early on, so they gain a thorough understanding of the requirements. They should offer an onsite presence, and have the authority to educate, advise, and raise difficult questions.

They should also action technical requests quickly – slow response rates are a common blocker for government authorities. What's more, any technology partner should offer ongoing support, from early-stage decision making through to implementation and beyond – support for the entire lifecycle of the solution.

Finally, government authorities should prioritise partnerships with those who innovate, embedding new and emerging technologies in their software to solve common challenges. Partners should be leaders in their field, with ongoing investment in digital solutions that make life easier for employees, and improve the delivery of key public services.

Any technology partner will need to have a proven track record of supplying to government.

Summary

The imminent English Devolution Bill represents a fundamental shift in how local government will operate across England. Through the creation of strategic authorities, the government aims to create more efficient, responsive, and locally accountable public services. This transformation presents both significant opportunities and challenges for local authorities.

The potential benefits are compelling: greater local control over economic development, streamlined funding, economies of scale, and improved service delivery. Success stories from Cornwall and Durham demonstrate that well-implemented mergers can deliver cost savings and enhanced services for residents.

However, the restructuring is not without its critics. Concerns about substantial up-front costs, potential job losses, and disruption to well-performing regions cannot be ignored. Some question whether these changes truly represent meaningful devolution, while others worry that local issues may be overlooked in larger, merged authorities.

In navigating these complexities, councils must focus on developing positive organisational cultures that embrace collaboration and achievement. Technology will be a critical enabler, with cloud solutions and AI offering powerful tools to streamline operations, enhance service delivery, and achieve cost efficiencies. The shift towards digital transformation is not just advantageous but essential for authorities looking to thrive in this new landscape.

As we approach the implementation of these changes, local government leaders must take proactive steps to prepare their organisations, engage their workforces, and develop clear strategies for service delivery under the new structures. With thoughtful planning and execution, the restructuring of local government can deliver on its promise: more effective, efficient, and responsive public services that truly meet the needs of local communities.

Technology will be a critical enabler, with cloud solutions and AI offering powerful tools to streamline operations.



Resources

English Devolution White Paper: [English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK](#)

Local Government Association report: [Cornwall Council: creating Digital Cornwall | Local Government Association](#)

Government Digital Service: [Government Digital Service - GOV.UK](#)

LocalGov article on lessons learned from mergers: [Critical lessons from merging councils | LocalGov](#)

State of Digital Government Review: [State of digital government review - GOV.UK](#)

Institute for Government: [English devolution | Institute for Government](#)

Grant Thornton article on devolution: [The opportunities and challenges of widening devolution | Grant Thornton](#)

Local Government Lawyer article on devolution: [Devolution: the opportunities and the challenges](#)

OneAdvanced Government Trends Report 24/25: <https://dam.oneadvanced.com/m/682a4dd7a4154330/original/GovernmentTrendsReport-Report-GOV.pdf>

OneAdvanced Business Trends Report 24/25: <https://dam.oneadvanced.com/m/75dd4e419abef51d/original/Trends-Report-2024-2025.pdf>



Glossary

Adaptive AI: an Artificial Intelligence that can modify behaviour autonomously when encountering new data.

Agentic AI: an Artificial Intelligence that can act and reason autonomously to solve complex problems.

API: Application Programming Interface, a tool that allows different software systems to communicate and exchange information.

Brownfield site: land previously used for industrial or commercial purposes, now available for redevelopment.

CFO: Chief Financial Officer, responsible for managing an organisation's finances, budgets, and overarching financial strategy.

Continuous Performance Management: the process of tracking employee performance throughout the year (using digital tools) rather than relying solely on annual reviews.

Devolution: the transfer of powers from central government to regional or local authorities.

Established Mayoral Strategic Authority: an urban area with a track record of mayoral governance. These authorities will receive Integrated Settlements (see below) under government proposals.

Foundation Strategic Authority: a strategic body comprising of two or more unitary authorities, that will focus on broad regional issues.

Generative AI: an Artificial Intelligence that can create new content (through user prompts) based on large datasets.

Hybrid cloud: a combination of public and private cloud systems, offering flexibility and enhanced data control.

Integrated Care Systems: partnerships between health and care organisations working together to improve healthcare services locally.

Integrated Settlements: funding settlements in single pots, designed to give Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities greater autonomy over spend allocation.

Integration Platforms as a Service (iPaaS): cloud-based platforms that enable business functions to connect and integrate software systems seamlessly.

Mayoral Combined Authority: an urban area consisting of councils collaborating under an elected mayor to manage shared services and projects.

Mayoral Combined County Authority: a body consisting of one or more combined counties, led by a mayor, to oversee services across the region.

Mayoral Strategic Authority: a strategic governing body led by a mayor, and often comprising of two counties. Tasked with delivering regional growth in key areas.

Mergers: the process of combining two or more authorities into a single entity.

SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), an umbrella term often used in the context of additional learning support and funding.

S151 Officer: a senior council officer tasked with ensuring proper financial management and regulatory compliance. Usually, but not always, the CFO.

SME: Small and Medium Enterprises, businesses with fewer employees and turnover compared to large corporations.

Spatial planning: managing land use across large areas, balancing housing, transport, business, and environmental needs.

Strategic authority: a governing body responsible for decisions on significant regional issues.

TCO: Total Cost of Ownership, all associated costs of running software, including purchase, maintenance, and other expenses.

Two-tier system: a local government structure where responsibilities are divided between county and district councils for various services.

Unitary authority: a single-tier council responsible for delivering all local government services in its area.

Virtual desktop: a computing environment where a user's desktop interface is hosted on a remote server rather than on a local computer, allowing users to access their applications from any device with an internet connection.



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