
REWIRING LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

Place, public service reform and devolution

Jack Shaw

About Groundwork Research

Groundwork Research is a non-partisan, mission-driven research consultancy working at the intersection of policy, practice and place. We tackle complex policy challenges, with expertise spanning public service reform, devolution, local government and place-based regeneration.

About the author

Jack Shaw Director

Jack is the Director of Groundwork Research and was among the Local Government Information Unit's Top 25 Global Thinkers in Local Government in 2025. He is also a Policy Fellow at The Productivity Institute, based at the University of Manchester and an Affiliated Researcher at the University of Cambridge's Bennett School for Public Policy.

Groundwork Research

groundworkresearch.co.uk

Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	6
01 Proximity: A “natural advantage”	8
02 Scale	11
03 Public service reform	15
04 Growth	17
05 Devolution	20
Conclusion	23
References	24

Executive summary

The Government has made local government reorganisation (LGR) a central priority for the sector. Although the programme is paused and will now be reviewed, Ministers have stressed that the aim is to ensure decisions made so far are sound and that LGR supports the new administration's broader ambition to 'rewire the state'. The pause provides an opportunity to reassess the evidence for LGR through the lens of that agenda, with greater attention given to the relationship between LGR, public service reform and devolution, which has hitherto been overlooked. Against this backdrop, the analysis highlights seven key findings:

-
- 1 The proximity local authorities have to communities can strengthen service delivery.** There is evidence that local authorities have a "natural advantage" when they operate closer to their communities, enabling them to tailor services to local needs, build stronger relationships with communities and partners, and manage competing priorities more effectively, particularly in poly-centric authorities. This emphasis on proximity is consistent with the Government's wider approach to public service reform, reflected in proposals for a new Local Police Unit in every local authority and the NHS 10 Year Plan's emphasis on neighbourhood working.
 - 2 Larger local authorities do not necessarily deliver better outcomes.** While scale can deliver benefits, the evidence does not establish a consistent relationship between population size and performance. Indeed, some evidence suggests that smaller authorities outperform larger ones on certain measures. Given the breadth of services local authorities deliver, the potential for economies of scale varies considerably between services.
 - 3 A more flexible approach to LGR should strike the right balance between proximity to communities and economies of scale.** Given that the evidence challenges the assumption that larger authorities consistently deliver better outcomes, LGR should prioritise creating authorities that are close enough to communities to respond to local needs. Shared services and pooled resources offer a more flexible means of securing economies of scale where they exist, without sacrificing the benefits of proximity.

-
- 4** **Uncertainty over the financial savings of LGR strengthens the case for accelerating public service reform.** The savings arising from LGR are highly uncertain, not least because authorities have used different methodologies and assumptions to estimate them. Even where savings can be realised, authorities will need to supplement that with a focus on public service reform to reduce demand. The Government's decision to pause provides an opportunity to do that.
-
- 5** **The ability of local authorities to drive economic growth is not determined by their size.** Analysis of Office for National Statistics' productivity data found no correlation between local authority population size and labour productivity. Instead, local leadership and the effective use of economic development powers are more important factors in shaping local economies.
-
- 6** **The Government's commitment to establishing strategic authorities across England during this Parliament makes the case for balanced LGR even more strategically important.** Strategic authorities benefit from having a manageable number of constituent authorities that are reasonably balanced in size, enabling simpler and more effective governance arrangements, as demonstrated by Greater Manchester. Where constituent authorities are too few or vary significantly in size, more complex governance arrangements have been required to compensate for these imbalances, creating additional challenges for effective decision-making and accountability.
-
- 7** **Some of the benefits of scale may be better realised through strategic authorities than through larger local authorities.** Since the LGR programme began, strategic authorities have assumed a formal role in public service reform, creating new opportunities to co-ordinate services and pool resources across wider geographies. This weakens the case for pursuing scale through LGR alone.
-

Introduction

LGR is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-design how the local state functions. Not since the reforms initiated by the Local Government Act 1972 has England embarked on a programme of transformation on this scale.

The case for reform is well understood across the sector. Local authorities are contending with a ‘tsunami of demand’ concentrated in a small number of high-cost services — including temporary accommodation, adult and children’s social care and special educational needs. These pressures have been compounded by historic funding decisions that have weakened institutional capacity and financial resilience. The consequences are increasingly visible, with growing reliance on Exceptional Financial Support, an unprecedented number of Section 114 notices and public satisfaction with local government at its lowest level since the Local Government Association began tracking it in 2012.¹

LGR is therefore taking place against a backdrop in which the status quo is increasingly difficult to sustain. Local authorities recognise this and, over the past 18 months, councillors and officials have worked constructively with the Government to pursue a demanding LGR programme at pace. The Government’s subsequent decision to pause has understandably generated strong reactions. But it also creates space to consider what re-organisation is ultimately intended to achieve, something that the original timetable afforded little opportunity.

To date, much of the focus has been on the structures of re-organisation. Authorities have necessarily prioritised achieving a ‘safe and legal’ transition by vesting day, while the debate has concentrated on population thresholds, the risks of disaggregating services and the relative merits of competing structural models. These are legitimate and complex considerations to navigate, but the opportunity is to create institutions better equipped to respond to the growing pressures on public services and support a more devolved system of government. This requires greater consideration of the relationship between LGR, devolution and public service reform. The opportunities to align service boundaries, strengthen collaboration between public institutions and use coterminosity to support more integrated and preventative services remain comparatively underexplored.²

This paper seeks to situate LGR within that wider frame of reference, examining the conditions required to create successful local authorities, including the importance of proximity to communities, the relationship between size and performance, and the opportunities to support economic growth, public service reform and devolution. The Government can productively use this pause in the programme to ensure that, if it resumes, local authorities are best placed to deliver better outcomes for local communities and support the Government’s ambitions to rewire the state.³

Building stronger local authorities

Five conditions underpin the creation of stronger, more resilient local authorities and should guide their design:

PROXIMITY	Close enough to communities to understand and respond to local needs, build strong relationships with partners and reflect local identities and economic geographies.
SCALE	Able to realise economies of scale where they exist without sacrificing the benefits of proximity, using shared services, pooled resources and collaboration to operate flexibly at different scales.
PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM	Designed to support the Government’s ambitions for public service reform, with an emphasis on neighbourhood-level delivery.
GROWTH	Equipped to accelerate economic growth through strong local leadership and effective use of their powers and resources, including planning.
ALIGNED WITH DEVOLUTION	Designed as part of a coherent system and a clear and complementary relationship with strategic authorities, including a balanced number of constituent authorities to support effective governance, collaboration and accountability.

01 Proximity: A “natural advantage”

The most resilient local authorities are built around coherent place identities and sensible economic geographies that share an interest in their collective future. This principle is explicit in the Government’s criteria for LGR.⁴ New authorities need to be large enough to withstand financial challenge, while also taking account of local identity, cultural and historic connections.

Local authorities’ proximity to the communities they serve helps them to develop detailed knowledge of neighbourhoods, their business community, local institutions and the different needs of residents. This “natural advantage” better serves smaller rather than larger local authorities and is a form of institutional capability.⁵ Authorities that understand their places can identify challenges earlier, tailor interventions more effectively and mobilise communities and local partners around shared objectives. It is particularly important for preventative and relational services, where trust, relationship-building and effective partnerships with the voluntary and community sector are central to new delivery models, as Stroud, South Norfolk, Broadland, Chorley and South Ribble demonstrate.



Photo: Amine İspir / Pexels

CASE STUDIES

Stroud District Council

Stroud District Council has adopted a strengths-based approach to community development, using its relationships to improve preventative services. Working with voluntary and community organisations, the authority has expanded its network of independently run Community Hubs to 17 in 2026. Each hub provides access to health services, cost-of-living support and opportunities to tackle social isolation. The hubs are central to the authority's rural delivery model. The approach has improved outcomes and the Local Government Association found that most cost-of-living calls made directly to the authority came from areas without a hub, illustrating their potential to provide earlier, more accessible support. Stroud's experience demonstrates how the authority was able to leverage its local relationships to strengthen community capacity and deliver more preventative services.⁶

South Norfolk Council and Broadland District Council

South Norfolk Council and Broadland District Council have developed an integrated approach to prevention, drawing on their relationships with local communities, health services and voluntary organisations. Their model includes a multi-agency Help Hub, a network of nearly 30 Community Connectors, providing social prescription services in GP surgeries, and a team based at Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital that facilitates patient discharge by addressing housing-related barriers. In 2025-26, the model prevented more than 90 per cent of potential homelessness cases from reaching the statutory threshold, supported more than 8,000 GP referrals for social prescribing and saved up to 6,500 hospital bed days.⁷

Chorley Council and South Ribble Borough Council

Chorley Council and South Ribble Borough Council have demonstrated how district authorities can operate beyond their traditional responsibilities to play a greater role in preventative health and social care. Working with GP practices, Primary Care Networks and other health partners, they have embedded social prescribing within their early intervention and community support services, connecting healthcare with community-based support. This includes helping older people experiencing loneliness to access community groups and, in some cases, become volunteers themselves. By leveraging their relationships with local communities to address the wider determinants of health, the authorities are helping to prevent demand for more costly interventions, with social prescribing generating estimated savings of £3,500 per person for the health service alone.⁸

Proximity also matters for democratic representation. The English Devolution White Paper presented a reduction in the number of councillors as a benefit of LGR, but this risks overlooking the important role elected representatives play in building relationships with local communities. District councillors currently represent an average of 2,874 residents, compared with 4,630 in unitary authorities.⁹ Creating larger authorities with fewer councillors risks weakening democratic accountability by increasing the number of residents each councillor represents. This could make it harder for councillors to understand local needs, maintain relationships with residents and hold local institutions to account. Preserving proximity between councillors and the communities they serve is therefore important to sustaining effective local democracy.



Photo: Michael D Beckwith / Pexels

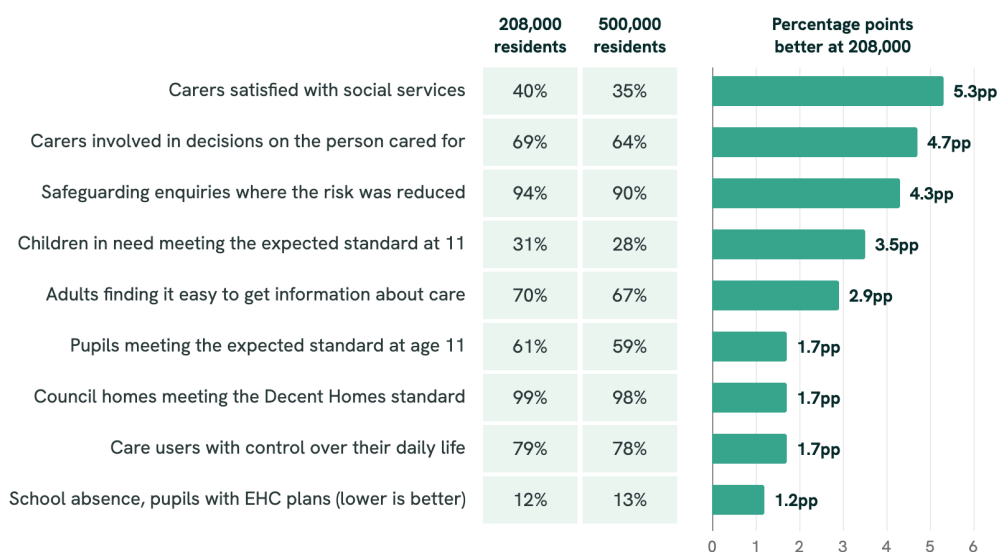
02 Scale

Much of the debate about LGR has focused on the benefits of scale, yet the evidence that larger authorities consistently perform better is limited at best. Some studies find little relationship between size and performance, while others suggest that smaller authorities perform better on some metrics, raising questions about the dominant assumption in some quarters that scale alone delivers better outcomes.

Local authorities deliver a wide range of services with different operating models and cost drivers, meaning that economies and diseconomies of scale vary across functions, regardless of authority size. Given the percentage of local authorities' expenditure on social care, that service warrants particular attention. Yet even then, research by IMPOWER found no clear relationship between authority size and either the quality or productivity of adult social care services.¹⁰

This is reinforced by new analysis from the Local Councils Network, which found no statistically significant correlation between authority size and performance across the vast majority of the 86 indicators in the Local Government Outcomes Framework. Where statistically significant correlations were identified, smaller authorities tended to perform better, including on measures such as carers' satisfaction with social care, Figure I illustrates.

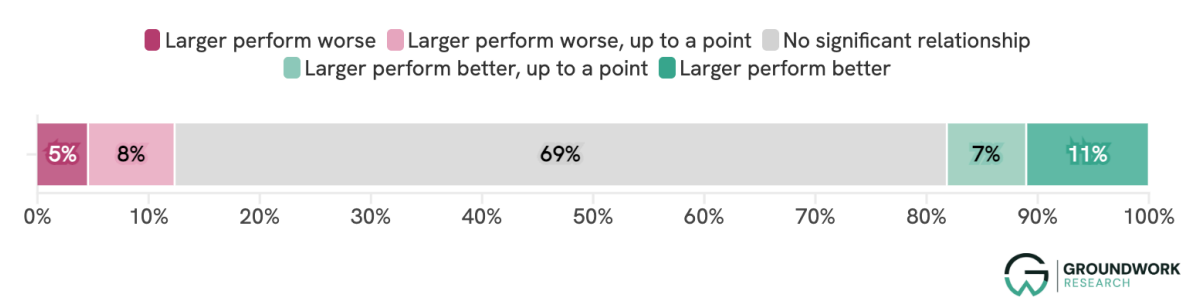
Figure I: The relationship between size and performance



Source: Local Councils Network analysis.¹¹ Local Councils Network uses the smallest population size of the proposed new authorities for its analysis.

The most comprehensive evidence comes from independent research commissioned by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2006 ahead of an earlier tranche of reorganisation. Though the research is dated, it found no ‘optimal’ population or geographical size of authorities. Of the 154 services examined, 69 per cent showed no statistically significant relationship between authority size and performance. Where a relationship did exist, its direction varied between services: for some, larger authorities performed better; for others, smaller authorities did; and in some cases the benefits of scale applied only up to a certain point.

Figure II: The relationship between size and performance, MHCLG-commissioned analysis



Source: Andrews R. et al, *Population size and local authority performance*, 2006.¹²

Given that scale is a poor predictor of local authority performance, the Government should be cautious about creating authorities that undermine the benefits of proximity.

Where individual services would benefit from operating on a greater scale, those benefits can be secured through more flexible arrangements such as shared services or pooled capacity. Indeed, some authorities, including Oxford City Council, have explicitly recognised this in their LGR business case and signalled an appetite to explore shared services and resourcing where there is a clear case for doing so.

This flexibility will become increasingly important as devolution evolves and responsibilities are shared between local and strategic authorities, and there are already well-established examples of these arrangements across the sector, demonstrating that authorities can capture the benefits of scale through collaboration rather than hardwiring structural change.

Figure III: Local and strategic authorities regularly share services or pool resources

Greater Manchester's Housing First Programme	The GMCA launched a Temporary Accommodation Placement Observatory to improve data reliability, created a Housing First Unit, and funded 17 Empty Homes Officers to bring 400 properties back into use. While individual local authorities historically struggled to fund such initiatives, this programme scales up a successful local model delivered by Wigan. By building specialist capacity and co-ordinating across its constituent authorities, GMCA can ensure all of them benefit from shared resources. ¹³
Regional Care Co-operatives	Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs) are local authority-led partnerships that bring together councils, health services and other partners to plan and commission placements for children in care across larger geographical areas. First established in Greater Manchester and the South East in 2025, RCCs pool commissioning expertise, purchasing power and data to improve placement availability, reduce costs and strengthen oversight of the children's social care market. While RCCs operate on behalf of local authorities, some are hosted by strategic authorities, as in Greater Manchester. ¹⁴
South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership	Boston, East Lindsey and South Holland share management, staff and services while remaining separate authorities. The partnership pools capacity and expertise across the three authorities, reducing duplication and increasing resilience. The partnership has identified £47 million in savings since 2021. ¹⁵
London Office for Technology and Innovation (LOTI)	LOTI is a shared innovation capability for London boroughs, hosted by London Councils. It pools expertise in technology, data and service design, helping boroughs develop and scale new approaches to public services.
Essex Procurement Partnership	EPP is a shared procurement function for participating Essex authorities. It pools procurement expertise and purchasing activity to increase capacity, resilience and value for money.

Figure III (continued): Local and strategic authorities regularly share services or pool resources

**Liverpool City Region's
Office for Public Service
Innovation (OPSI)**

OPSI is a shared capability for public service reform, bringing together data, evidence and partners to develop, test and scale preventative approaches to challenges such as children's services and youth support. It is convened and funded by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, working across its six constituent local authorities alongside the NHS, housing, universities and the voluntary sector.

**Greater Cambridge Shared
Planning Service**

The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service brings together the planning functions of Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council into a single, jointly managed service, established in 2018. It pools around 160 staff and specialist planning expertise across the two councils, covering development management, planning policy, enforcement, heritage and biodiversity, while also preparing a joint Local Plan for Greater Cambridge.¹⁶

The Government could facilitate this more nuanced approach to scale by publishing guidance to help local authorities identify where collaboration and shared services could deliver benefits, drawing on successful models from across the sector. This would allow them to access greater scale and specialist capacity where it adds value, while helping preserve the benefits of proximity for services that depend on local knowledge and relationships.

03 Public service reform

The relationship between LGR and public service reform has evolved over time. The English Devolution White Paper argued that bringing together social care, homelessness and public health within a single organisation would enable local authorities to develop more integrated, preventative approaches to service delivery, while strengthening collaboration with other public services, such as the NHS.¹⁷

However, the pace of LGR has required local authorities to prioritise delivering a ‘safe and legal’ transition by vesting day, leaving public service reform a secondary consideration over the past 18 months. The Government’s decision to pause LGR, alongside its renewed emphasis on public service reform under the new administration led by Andy Burnham, creates an opportunity to redress this imbalance.

Two themes are emerging from the Government’s public service reform agenda: a renewed emphasis on neighbourhood-level delivery and a growing role for strategic authorities in co-ordinating public services. The NHS 10 Year Health Plan for England was explicit about the shortcomings of the current model, describing an NHS that is “hospital-centric, detached from communities” and delivers care through “multiple, fragmented siloes.” The alternative it sets out is a Neighbourhood Health Service that will embody a new “preventative principle that care should happen as locally as it can”.¹⁸ This places neighbourhoods at the centre of the Government’s approach to health, with a greater emphasis on integrated services around the needs of local communities.

Meanwhile, the Home Office’s New Model for Policing, published earlier this year, proposes merging police forces to improve efficiency and operational capability. This was accompanied by a Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee under which every council ward in England and Wales are expected to have their own, named, contactable police officer. However, the proposed creation of ‘super police forces’ has attracted criticism for diluting local accountability and undermining devolution.¹⁹

The Burnham administration has recognised this tension. Alongside the ongoing Independent Review of Police Force Structures, chaired by Lord Bernard Hogan-Howe, the Government announced in its ‘Rewiring the State’ Cabinet statement that new local policing units would be established, aligned with local authority boundaries.

Both reforms — policing and the NHS — point towards a growing recognition that neighbourhoods are a central organising principle for public service delivery. While some functions benefit from operating at greater scale, effective prevention, early intervention and community engagement depend on services retaining strong connections to the places and people they serve. LGR should reinforce this approach by creating local authorities that can draw on their natural advantage of proximity to communities to deliver services at a neighbourhood level.

At the same time, the role of strategic authorities in public service reform has become more prominent since the LGR programme began. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act established a new competency for strategic authorities covering “health, wellbeing and public service reform”, while initiatives such as Place-Based Budget Pilots have further strengthened their role. There is an expectation in the forthcoming Rewiring the State White Paper that strategic authorities will play a greater role in supporting local authorities to manage shared pressures — from social care placements to navigating the temporary accommodation market, by co-ordinating provision, pooling resources and intervening at a scale that individual authorities cannot achieve alone.

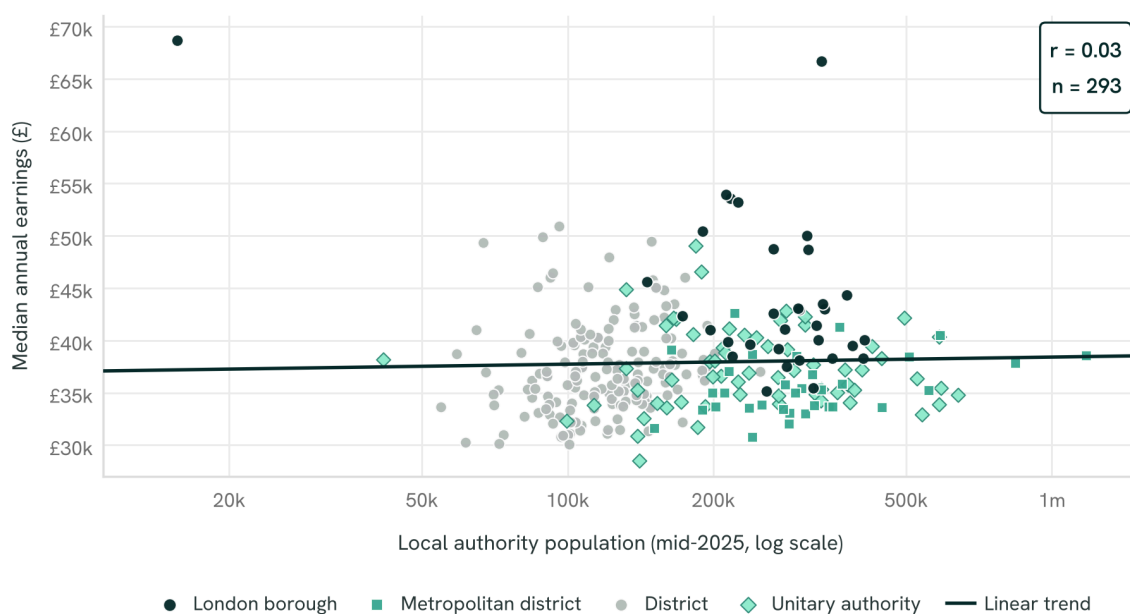
These developments have important implications for LGR. The Government’s emerging model of public service reform increasingly combines neighbourhood-level delivery with strategic coordination across larger geographies. This suggests that some of the benefits of scale previously expected from creating larger unitary authorities may instead be realised through strategic authorities, while the advantages of proximity remain particularly important for local authorities.

Against this backdrop, smaller local authorities are not only more consistent with the Government’s emerging approach to public service reform, but also a lower risk proposition in the face of uncertainty about the relationship between public service reform and devolution in the future. Creating large local authorities risks delivering the disadvantages of both revealed preferences towards public service reform: too distant from communities to support effective neighbourhood working, while duplicating or crowding out the role of strategic authorities in public service reform.

04 Growth

Local authorities play an important role in shaping their economies, regardless of their size. Analysis of Office for National Statistics earnings data reinforces this finding. Across 293 English local authorities, there was a very small statistical correlation between population size and median annual gross earnings for full-time employees in 2025 ($r = 0.03$). District authorities recorded average median annual earnings of £37,269, compared with £37,354 for unitary authorities – a difference of just 0.2 per cent.

Figure IV: Local authority population size and annual earnings



Source: Groundwork Research analysis of Office for National Statistics, *Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings*, 2025. ONS, *Population estimates for England and Wales: mid-2025, 2026*.²⁰

While this is only one measure, and earnings are influenced by factors beyond local control, it provides further evidence that larger local authorities are not inherently better placed to drive economic growth. The size of an authority has no bearing on the economic performance of the area it serves.

Indeed, there are numerous examples of towns and cities served by relatively small district and unitary authorities that have achieved significant economic success. Unlike strategic authorities which have a statutory responsibility to develop a Local Growth Plan, local authorities are not required to develop investment or economic strategies, but one benefit of smaller local authorities is that it may be simpler for them to develop economic strategies when they are built on clear identities. They would not have to spread their investment, capacity and capability across too large an authority or multiple conurbations, often with different or competing interests.

Stevenage, as the following case study illustrates, demonstrates how even a small district authority can compete internationally for investment.



Stevenage Bioscience Catalyst has helped build a life sciences cluster that has attracted more than £4.5 billion in investment. Photo: Tima Miroshnichenko / Pexels

CASE STUDY

Stevenage – The ‘Global Business Economy’

By capitalising on its proximity to London and the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, and through proactive planning, public-private partnerships and strategic land management, Stevenage Borough Council has helped establish the town as a cutting edge location for advanced manufacturing, defence, technology and life sciences.

The scale of investment is significant. Stevenage Bioscience Catalyst, established in 2012 through a £38 million public-private partnership, has helped develop a cluster that has attracted more than £4.5 billion in investment into companies based at the Catalyst. It has hosted 120 companies, while its wider development is projected to support £165 million in annual gross value added (GVA) and 2,900 jobs across the UK by 2040.

Central to this success has been the authority’s proactive approach to planning and regeneration. Its Local Plan allocated space for research and development around the GSK campus, while town centre policies enabled mixed-use development to bring advanced manufacturing, employment and housing closer together. Stevenage also invested in specialist planning capacity to accelerate major developments and provide greater certainty to investors.

The £65 million Autolus Therapeutics headquarters illustrates the impact of this approach. Autolus had initially planned to locate its manufacturing facility in Maryland, United States. However, through close collaboration between the Council, developer Reef Group and investor UBS, the investment was secured for Stevenage instead. Acting as both planning authority and landowner, the authority helped accelerate land acquisition and planning approval, enabling construction to begin within six months of the initial application. The facility was delivered in 18 months, compared with an estimated four years through a conventional approach, supporting around 400 skilled jobs.

This approach has helped unlock further investment. Stevenage has granted planning permission for the £900 million Elevate Quarter development, providing space for data and technology services, advanced manufacturing, commercial and retail activity, with the potential to support more than 4,000 jobs.

Stevenage's experience highlights the importance of local leadership in driving economic growth. Its proximity to the business community, understanding of local economic opportunities, strong investor relationships and responsive planning system have enabled the authority to help transform a relatively small town into an internationally significant centre for life sciences.²¹

05 Devolution

Devolution is central to the Government's agenda, yet many of the areas undergoing LGR are at the back of the queue. Moving through LGR at speed will mean the benefits of devolution, already demonstrated in places such as Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region, can be replicated across suburban and rural England.

The relationship between local and strategic authorities is central to this. Much of the debate around LGR has assumed that the benefits associated with scale – greater capacity, co-ordination and the ability to operate across larger geographies – must be captured by creating larger local authorities. Yet the expansion of the strategic tier across England provides another means of realising these benefits. Local authorities can retain the advantages of proximity to communities, while strategic authorities provide the scale, convening power and political leadership needed to address public service challenges across wider geographies.

Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region demonstrate how this relationship can work in practice. Both have developed models of devolution built around a relatively large number of constituent authorities, each retaining responsibility for local service delivery while working collectively through a strategic authority. In Greater Manchester, for example, the ten constituent authorities have developed extensive arrangements for collaboration, sharing expertise and resources across services. This has enabled local authorities to retain their relationships with communities while benefiting from the collective capacity and strategic direction of the combined authority.

The composition of strategic authorities is therefore an important consideration in LGR. Having enough constituent authorities, of broadly comparable size, can support effective collaboration, ensure that local government remains close to communities and provide a more balanced distribution of influence within strategic authorities. Too many constituent authorities can make collective decision-making cumbersome, but too few creates a different set of risks. Political change in a strategic authority with only one or two constituent authorities can have a disproportionate effect on its functioning, while significant differences in their size can create difficult questions about representation, voting rights and political balance.

These challenges are already reflected in the governance arrangements of newer strategic authorities. Unlike Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region, where each constituent authority appoints one voting member, several newer strategic authorities have adopted bespoke arrangements to manage differences in the number or size of their constituent authorities. York and North Yorkshire, Hull and East Yorkshire, Greater Lincolnshire and the East Midlands, for example, each provide two voting members per constituent authority, while Lancashire and West Yorkshire have developed alternative arrangements to address questions of representation and political balance.

These considerations are particularly relevant as the Government has asked authorities to express a preference for mayoral or non-mayoral devolution. Where executive authority is concentrated in a directly elected Mayor, some decisions can be taken without securing agreement across every constituent authority. Non-mayoral arrangements are more dependent on coalition-building, making the composition and political balance of constituent authorities more consequential. This is especially pertinent as political control of local authorities becomes increasingly fragmented.²²

If devolution is to succeed in non-metropolitan England, LGR should be designed to strengthen the emerging system of devolution, rather than considered independently of it. Creating too few constituent authorities, or authorities of significantly different sizes, risks embedding governance challenges in strategic authorities from the outset. While newer strategic authorities have adopted bespoke arrangements to address these challenges, LGR should seek to avoid creating them in the first place.



Photo: Sky Eye Imagery / Pexels

Figure V: Strategic authorities with more constituent members have fewer bespoke governance arrangements

 Voting arrangements differ from one member per constituent authority

STRATEGIC AUTHORITY	CONSTITUENT AUTHORITIES	VOTING MEMBERS
Greater Manchester	10	10
Cambridgeshire & Peterborough	7	7
North East	7	7
West Midlands	7	14
Liverpool City Region	6	6
Tees Valley	5	5
West Yorkshire	5	8
South Yorkshire	4	4
East Midlands	4	8
Hampshire & the Solent	4	5
West of England	3	3
Greater Lincolnshire	3	6
Lancashire	3	4
Cheshire & Warrington	3	6
Sussex & Brighton	3	6
York & North Yorkshire	2	4
Hull & East Yorkshire	2	4
Cumbria	2	4
Devon & Torbay	2	2

Source: Groundwork Research analysis. The West Midlands, East Midlands, York and North Yorkshire, Hull and East Yorkshire, Greater Lincolnshire, and Cheshire and Warrington each have two voting members per constituent local authority. Lancashire has a bespoke arrangement, with Lancashire County Council appointing two voting members and Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen appointing one each. In West Yorkshire, each of the five constituent authorities appoints one member, with three additional members jointly appointed to reflect political balance.

Conclusion

LGR is an opportunity to reshape local government for a generation. Done well, it can create stronger local authorities with the capacity, resilience and flexibility to respond to the pressures facing public services and support the Government's wider ambitions for devolution and public service reform.

That requires looking beyond structures and population thresholds. There is no single model for a successful local authority, nor does the evidence point to an optimal size. What matters is whether new authorities are rooted in coherent places, have the organisational and financial resilience to manage future pressures, can operate flexibly at different scales and are designed around the wider system of local and strategic government.

The pause provides an opportunity to strengthen the programme on that basis. There are practical issues that need resolving, including the support available to authorities, the costs created by delay and the relationship between LGR and devolution. There is also an opportunity to recover some of the momentum around collaboration and public service reform that re-organisation has created.

None of this requires starting again. Local authorities have already invested significant time, money and capacity in preparing for re-organisation. The priority should be to use the pause to address the weaknesses that have emerged and provide greater clarity about what LGR is intended to achieve.

If the Government gets that right, LGR can do more than reorganise institutions. It can leave behind stronger local authorities, better equipped to reform services, shape their places and work alongside strategic authorities as part of a more effective 'rewired' state.

References

1. Local Government Association, [Polling on resident satisfaction with councils: Round 40](#), 2026.
2. Cabinet Office, [Rewiring the state — Cabinet statement](#), 2026.
3. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [Local government re-organisation: Programme review and decisions withdrawal letter to council leaders](#), 8 September 2026.
4. The criteria were set out in letters to Leaders of authorities undergoing LGR on 5 February 2025. For example, see MHCLG, [Letter: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough](#), 2025.
5. IMPOWER, [The power of prevention and place in new unitary councils: adult social care and local government reorganisation](#), 2025.
6. Local Government Association, [Focusing on strengths to engage communities — Stroud District Council](#), 2023.
7. LGA, [South Norfolk and Broadland District Council's approach to tackling homelessness pressures](#), 2024.
8. IMPOWER, [The power of prevention and place in new unitary councils](#), 2025.
9. Local Councils Network, [English Devolution White Paper: LCN's briefing](#), 2025.
10. IMPOWER, [The power of prevention](#), 2025.
11. Local Councils Network, [Council population: Impact on Value for Money: Summary](#), 2026.
12. Andrews R. et al, Population size and local authority performance, 2006, Table 4, pp-18-25. See also Wilson, D. and Game, C. Local government in the United Kingdom, 2011.
13. Greater Manchester Combined Authority, [Housing First, Planning and Infrastructure Commission](#), 2026.
14. Department for Education, [Regional Care Co-operatives policy statement](#), 2026. DfE, [Delivering the children's social care reset: An implementation plan for local partners](#), 2026.
15. East Lindsey, [South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership exceeds £47 million in efficiencies five years ahead of schedule](#), 2026.
16. Cambridge City Council, [Councils shared planning service honoured for excellence in regional planning](#), 2026.
17. MHCLG, [English Devolution White Paper](#), 2024.
18. National Health Service, [Fit for the future: 10 Year Health Plan for England](#), 2025.
19. Home Office, [From local to national: A new model for policing](#), 2026.
20. Groundwork Research analysis of Office for National Statistics, [Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings](#), 2025. See Table 7.7a. ONS, [Population estimates for England and Wales: mid-2025](#), 2026.
21. HM Treasury, [The Harrington Review of Foreign Direct Investment](#), 2023. Stevenage Borough Council: [Stevenage 2040 investment prospectus: new town, new future](#), 2026. See also [Invest in Stevenage](#).
22. Carr-West, J. [It's NOC — but not as we know it](#), 2026.



REWIRING LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

Place, public service reform and devolution · October 2026