

# External Hire Launch event on English Devolution- 20240515\_095549-Meeting Recording

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## T TEAMS ROOM: Conference Room 24:29

Good morning, everybody.

Thank you very, very much for coming.

My name is Robert Salisbury and I'm I attempt to chair the constitutional reform group.

Uh, which has published the document that I think that you will be issued with and if I may, I can start with what is necessarily a a long list of thank yous, this sort of endeavor takes a long time in the gestation, and we're hugely grateful since we've done this on pretty much.

But shoestring to a large number of people.

Of course, our host Doctor, Hannah White, and the Institute for Government.

However, I think of recently shown quite interested in this particular subject by publishing a paper of that, couldn't we select which I hope you may feel is complementary, at least to what we are saying and her team the IGI.

I'd also like like to thank Jonathan Hill, James Arroyo, a Dean and the team at Ditchley who were lavish hosts for our second conference which at which the idea for this joint pamphlet and bill was adopted and you'll find that at the back of the document a list of the participants in the two conferences which led to this production.

Umm, the list is pretty well endless of those who've contributed, but I particularly like to mention Mark Sanford's very nice of you to come and thank you, Mark, for everything that you've done to make this work.

Umm and Brian it Darnell who, with some assistance from an anonymous source, has drafted the bill.

And of course, Sharma.

You know what you've done to draw all the strings together?

So, as always, a million thanks for what you've done, particularly pleased to welcome. I think we'll garton.

And his team from from the DLUCH.

And I'm always amazed by the number of letters that government departments now

have to their name.

Perhaps one of the main reforms we can do is reduce their number, but I'm very grateful for the constructive comments that they produced as a result of our meeting and our presentation few weeks ago, the Secretary of State.

Umm, now I I'm certainly not going to give you any sort of advance of exposition. I'm going to leave that to the two distinguished former cabinet members that we have here.

Who are the joint authors of the pamphlet?

All I would say is that we all know that reform of local government seems to be agreed as a necessity.

Uh, but we are in the process of reform and that I've, if I were to ask, as they say, any school child to explain in two sentences what the structure of local government in England was, I think not only they would find it difficult to give us accept sync. To answer that in itself, I think shows the necessity for bringing a bit of order and method into how this is done.

I find myself in Liverpool quite often.

Fact I came down from Liverpool after a couple of days yesterday and I'm constantly reminded every time I go to the growing gap between London and the Southeast and the rest of the country.

Umm.

As somebody who was first job was in California Way a long time ago, in prehistory, I. If I'd been clever enough, I would have realized what I was witnessing was the beginning of Silicon Valley's first big loan that I worked on was have a a big expansion loan for Hewlett Packard.

I was far too stupid to realize what was going on, but what?

Looking back on, it was clear was that the partnership between State Washington, local enterprise and particularly long term capital was what produced that extraordinary explosion.

After a report in the 50s which suggested that in the coming prosperity of the Pacific Rim, Umm California was in danger of being the poor relation seems a bit odd when you look at it now and it seems to me that reform of local government is not just an end in itself, the political forces, but it's actually a means to an end.

If we're going to improve our chances of using universities as central hubs, introducing proper local transport, coordinated planning without.

I without wasting completely the enormous possibilities we have or regeneration in

this country, and it seems to us, I think, if I'm not seeing the Thunder of John and David, that above all, proper local government reform and devolution of power is a means and a prerequisite to that end.

And this is a contribution to the debate, I hope maybe the beginnings of the building of the consensus.

After all, if we are going to achieve this objective, I suspect it's going to take more than one electoral cycle.

So if it's possible for the two main parties to agree, at least on the direction of travel, that would be a start.

There is, after all, the precedent.

I think the Adonis go reforms in education is a good example of how direction of travel can be made to work, at least to a certain extent.

So without further ado, so thank you all for coming.

I hope that we can have a good discussion about this.

There's some expert people in the room, and in order to lay out before you the bones of what we have in mind, over to you, John.

But thank you very much indeed and thank all of you for coming today.

After the you who joined us online and also like to give my thanks to the Institute for Government and to the constitutional reform group, David and I get to put our names on the pamphlets.

We are the ones who are responsible for what's in it, but it could not have been produced without considerable number of experts from a wide range of backgrounds who took part in the events that CID hosted.

So thank you, Robert, for that.

In the cross party spirit in the presentation, I will leave it to David to be the only one to make any comments about the Conservative people to do.

They all live in my the Labour Party.

Just after the mayoral elections, Andy Burnham said that he wanted the power to end the right to buy in Manchester.

Rachel Reeves reported response that Labour has no plans.

Might just to give the impression that she would be happy not to hear about it again, and the exchange prompted some discussion about potential relationships in the future between Labour mayors and a labour government.

But perhaps many of us, the exchange prompted the deeper question journey.

There has to be a better way of deciding which policy should be devolved and to

what level of local government the current model seems to ask mayors to be policy entrepreneurs, pitching to a Whitehall Dragons den in which Whitehall totally retains the discretion to say yes or no.

Now both the major parties agree that England is too centralized.

They agree that stark regional inequalities in productivity, wealth, income, health, education and skills stem in part from the lack of an effective layer of sub regional government that exist in many other OECD countries.

Both parties also want local communities to have more say over high streets and local assets.

Both recognize the important role of local authorities in place shaping.

Yet despite the apparent consensus, progress has been very slow, patchy and fit for are the A's were set up and then scrapped?

Let's have come and now they have gone.

May all authorities do now cover somewhat more than half of England outside London, but they vary enormously, and often, inexplicably, in their powers and responsibilities.

Some mayors have undoubtedly used both their formal powers and their soft power effectively, others less so.

But if we stand back and consider if we actually do believe that devolution is essential to reshaping the economy, society, well being of opportunity across England that Robert has talked about, we have to conclude there has been far too little devolution.

The process lacked the resources involved are far too limited.

As of 2023, less than £3 billion a year was the subject of devolution deals.

Resources on that scale will not make a difference, however potentially valuable bits of it are the we're suggesting.

We need a new and more comprehensive approach.

It needs to deal with the current obstacles to devolution.

These include the reliance on Whitehall discretion and deal making, the complexity of the system with no less now than 4 tiers, and many variations within each tier.

The dependence on a systems of upwards accountability to departmental accounting officers, and the simple fact that the model evolved essentially for city regions, fits far less well in rural areas and those with freestanding towns and smaller cities, and the whole system has to have sufficient devolved funding to make a real difference.

So what did I proposing is to put English devolution and the rights of devolved

bodies onto a statutory and quasi constitutional basis, one in which devolution policy can be shaped by the views of English, local government and not remain solely at the discretion of central government.

And alongside the policy proposals in the document you have, we're publishing a draft bill to show that legislating in this area is not only desirable, but also possible. And I want to set out Kia elements of our approach.

But before I do, there's one area of our thinking I need to explain because otherwise I'll keep having to repeat myself.

We focus in this on 2 levels of devolved authority.

The first is the so-called upper tier authorities of met boroughs, counties and unitaries, and the second is combined local authorities and the existing mayoral combined authorities.

Now we focus on upper tier authorities as the building block for several reasons.

Firstly, they do provide a broadly similar tier of local government that exists in every part of England outside of London.

This allows a coherent and consistent policy approach in all areas.

Secondly, their size makes them large enough to exercise a wider range of powers for themselves.

And thirdly, it was met boroughs in particular who were the driving force behind the original idea for combined authorities and we want to revitalise that role.

So when I talk about local authorities, I'm talking about that layer of upper Tier Council.

Our proposals do also explicitly consider the place of district councils, and I'll come back to that, so our first proposal is for a statutory national devolution framework.

The framework would set out a range of additional powers that should be available as of right now to local authorities.

It will also set out additional powers that might be drawn down at the request of a local authority in an analogous way, there would be a set of powers, different powers that would be available to combined.

Local authorities have, as of right and additional powers that might be drawn down at the request of the combined authorities.

The crucial thing here is that the policy set out in the devolution framework would be available as of right.

The only circumstance in which government might block the drawdown of additional

powers would be that when there are serious dates about the capacity of the devolved body to exercise them effectively.

But even then, there would be a legal responsibility on central government to work with the local devolved body to address capacity constraints, whether that comes from a shortage of skills, shortage of staff or shortage of resources.

The where does the national devolution framework come from?

As you all know, English local government has no formal role in shaping devolution policy at the moment.

We think that should change and we believe that the national devolution framework should be drawn up jointly between central government and English local government.

To facilitate this, we oppose a proposed establishing a new statutory English local Government Council without going into the details of it as devolution is extended as combined local authorities extend right across England, the local government council would represent combined local authorities from across England and include the Mayor of London.

Take nothing away from the work of the LGA, the County Council network, the M10 group and the rest of it.

But actually we need a coherent representative structure for English local government.

As I mentioned earlier, we do want to refresh the low role of local authorities in the devolution.

A lot of discussion of methods and combined authorities have tended to divert attention away from the critical local authority role, so we want the upper tier local authorities to gain new powers in their own right.

They should also play the leading role in creating, shaping and leading new combined authorities.

We're putting local authorities in the driving seat.

Doesn't mean the larger combined authority is the less important.

Quite the contrary.

There are powers, particularly around economic development, spatial planning, strategic infrastructure that must be exercised over a wider geography than individual local authorities, and we believe that the best way to complete the map that's people talk about it is to ensure that the powers and resources on offer are sufficient to incentivize local authorities to form new combined local authorities.

They should determine the membership of combined authorities that Governance arrangement and indeed, whether or not an elected mayor is appropriate to that area, so long as they move many meet minimum size requirements.

New combined local authorities should not require wise fool for approval as they currently do.

And just to be clear, we should be clear that any new powers and resources would be available to all upper tier and existing mail authorities, not just a new one.

No, there is a danger that the creation of more powerful upper tier authorities and the creation of more powerful combined authorities might be seen to drag power up from local lower levels of government and from local communities.

And integral part of our proposal is to place on both upper tier authorities and combined local authorities a legal duty of subsidiarity.

They would be required to devolve their own powers to the lowest possible level.

That is appropriate, which would obviously include identifying the role for district councils where they exist times and parishes and local communities.

And it's a legal duty, not an exportation, to publish community empowerment plans, which would be subject not only to consultation and build attentionally to challenge.

They're just a couple of more points.

If you're bear with me, devolution won't be effective unless powers and resources are aligned and can meet the needs of local government.

And when powers are devolved, the appropriate resources must be devolved too, and we also need to end the current situation where government agencies can spend money within devolved areas without respecting local strategic priorities.

And fundamentally, we need a fair funding formula.

Doesn't over focus on single issues of business rates or tourist acts or whatever, but considers current local taxes, new taxes.

They're tension locally of national taxation and a redistribution, and it should not only ensure fair funding across England, but enable local authorities and combined authorities.

Law discretion over spending within their area.

We also think that fair funding formula should be developed jointly between local and central government and the would take time to develop, should be part of the national devolution framework.

Do I turn now to the final but crucial issue?

The system of upwards accountability to departmental accounting officers

themselves, fragmented across Whitehall and ultimately accountable to the Treasury, is a huge drag on devolution if it is less unchanged, left unchanged the forces pulling back against devolution will be hard to stop.

But as former ministers in a highly centralized political culture, we know we can't trade to today's ministers.

You've just got to learn to let go.

Devolution must have a new, locally focused system of accountability, so we suggest the responsibilities of departmental accounting officers could be legally devolved, perhaps to chief executives, have combined local authorities.

We suggest the establishment of local public accounts committees not only able to look at the resources devolved to local authorities, but the wider pool of public spending, and, as recent events have shown, we need a new statutory audit service able to intervene in cases of egregious financial mismanagement and taken together, we actually believe that we could say to ministers these will provide more robust scrutiny and accountability than actually in practice is offered today.

To any of you scouring our document to see who would exercise which power of what level, we've not tried to add to an already rich literature in that field.

I think we're just say that too much of the debate, perhaps as focused simply on the powers and too little on the legal and constitutional framework within which devolution takes place, unless we can change the statutory and constitutional relationship between the center of government and local government, English devolution will always promise a lot and deliver to the.

So we are proposing a fundamental reshaping of the way that England is governed.

I just agree.

Enforced across the party.

Nature this work, we both believe that this will be the work of more than one Parliament and the work of more than one party.

Thank you, Billy.

Thank you.

You're on the phone today.

Ingram good.

Robert, thank you very much indeed.

And I I would echo John's thanks to the various individuals and groups who have supported this work and actually personal.

Thank you to you, Robert, for your energy in actually convening people to to the

share their thoughts and ideas and not just to share their thoughts, but then to try to turn those into a into a practical outcome, which is not always something that flows from.

They're great discussions about public policy and John has set out very clearly an expertly what our proposals.

Uh.

A include what they are intended to achieve.

What they wanted to do was to address this issue from a slightly more small pee political perspective and set out briefly what improvements.

I believe that these reforms would bring to the way in which we do politics in England and in the United Kingdom more generally.

I like this like took an interest in this agenda and I became convinced of the case for further and significant English devolution as a consequence of.

Two phenomena, I mean the first was unawareness.

Look, while the 1998 constitutional settlement of of Tony Blair's government had become part of the established architecture and Cabinet Office, when I had responsibility for devolution, I made it a priority to try to work as constructive as possible with the governments of the three devolved nations of this country, but that the 1998 settlement had a missing ingredient, which was what do you do about England?

Because formal federalism, whether you think it in principle, that's a good or bad idea.

Just ain't gonna work in the United Kingdom, where England as a unit is so dominant in terms of population and in terms of economic output.

And one of but but at the same time, you had to confront the problem.

It was encapsulate the sort of pump Queens question I used to play with my EU counterparts when I was Europe Minister, which is to ask which is the nation in the biggest nation in Europe that lacks its own representative body or assembly.

And you've people talk about the past country or Catalonia, or the Albanians in Greece and actually said he's England and they're all rather rather taken aback. And while I'm I'm not somebody who advocates for an English parliament or for formal UK federalism, I think that the proposals that we are publishing today go quite a long way to trying to address the English question in a way that is true to the the constitutional political realities of the UK and the political reality that in England. It is very, very hard umm to construct a set of regional authorities, but both have the

economic logic, but also genuine public buy in and are reflective of a sense of real local or regional identity.

And I think that that was a John Prescott made a an effort on that.

But I I would argue, I don't think that that work because I don't think that that fitted with how people saw their country and how they identified as partial.

They particular counter particular place within the country.

The second reason why I took an interest and why I I wanted to see so the work done with what I saw in government and they saw that the work that George Osborne initiated when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer in pioneering those early city deal, particularly with Greater Manchester did have a beneficial effect.

And I remember the Tory minister going up and sitting with Andy Burnham in his office in Manchester and Andy saying to me I feel more fulfilled doing this job in Greater Manchester.

Then I I have felt in any of the roles that I had in government sitting at Westminster and different level because they did not have additional devolved powers.

By one, we're going to Cornwall after it became a unitary authority and talking to the civic leaders there and to the University of the business leaders and sort.

This sends on a team call that had a vision for the future of the country that was in line with what national government wanted in terms of economic growth and technology and skills and so on, but which was tailored in a way that was specific to the needs and the ambitions and the particular circumstances of called and the people of Cornwall.

And I saw in my toes around the country how universities, businesses, trade unions, the agents are both central and national government in a A A a regional sub region usually have, you know a better politan area coming together could give greater heft through the work that was being done to try to improve life in that part of the country.

And we're more likely to be effective than trying to micromanage all of this from an office in in Whitehall.

And now those are my reasons, but I think one has to acknowledge that there are bound to be criticisms of the ideas that we're being put, that we're putting forward today.

And John referred to the, but I've perhaps the institutional course of central government departments of eight and HM Treasury in particular, that has persisted through labour and conservative and coalition governments undimmed.

And we actually acknowledge in the paper that there are, you know, some genuinely good reasons why there has been that skepticism in central government.

And we have proposed ways in which those concerns can be successfully addressed, but there will also be political objections so people who will be saying, oh, we are creating another layer of politicians and there will be people, I think, probably in my own party in particular, but.

Other you know cross party lines too.

Who?

Who?

City.

Westminster, who will be nervous about new elected figures in their own backyard?

Who they think might become rivals to them.

So I want to set out alright political reasons why I think these proposals are right and why I think they would improve the quality of governments in England and in the United Kingdom as a whole first, because I believe that what we are offering will help to overcome what has is a visible and deepening public alienation from political institutions and political processes that affect voters lives.

Poll after poll he's showing a widespread sense of disaffection.

And while I do not claim that these proposals represent a panacea, I do believe that locating decisions closer to the people whom they affect and having those decisions taken by people who are elected by and directly accountable to electors within a definable area with which those electors feel affinity and identity will help to overcome that sense of alienation.

I think that by strengthening local and sub regional scrutiny and accountability of decisions, we can additionally help to rebuild public confidence in the political and democratic processes.

Secondly, these proposals disperse power overcentralization is unhealthy and I would argue to my fellow Conservatives that the conservative tradition in particular is rightly skeptical of government and supportive of vigorous, independent institutions that are not wholly dependent upon the whims of a particular central government, dispersed sources of power, or as a source of strength and dispersed Power.

Been that we can have the more effective use of those powers and to impedes that would mean MP as time goes on, people get used to these new ways of doing business.

MP should find themselves under less pressure to act as the Court of Appeal against

local council decisions.

I've lost count of the proportion of my constituency caseload that was about local authority matters.

People would not go to their councillors, they would go to the MP they often and I I make a lot of criticism of hard work councils, but people did not know who their counselors were.

I think if you have a more visible and more powerful unit of government at some regional or enhanced local level.

Umm, but that clarity and that greater power will actually cause members of the public to look more to those people, and it will also make it easier for Members of Parliament to say, look, this is a matter on which you need to go to speak to your your mayor or your Council chair or your local representative over.

And it would then over time free MP to do what they need to be spending more time on, which is the scrutiny of legislation.

We time it takes me in 12, you know, so different political debate that IFG has been, you know, promoting for, but for some years now.

But but I do think that there's a a beneficial effect on how we do politics.

If we take these proposals through 3rd the proposals will drive improvements to the quality of public services and deliver greater value for money something that again both conservatives and labour supporters should want to see particularly in straightened times?

The national government and its agencies are too often slow to learn from and to disseminate best practice throughout their organizations.

And I mean one see what can point to examples.

I remember government in health service, for example, where some trust will be performing exceedingly well, others repeatedly not matching those standards.

And yet it was really sticky and difficult to get.

The lower performing ones to actually learn from what the best performing traps were achieving, and I think that and what we are putting forward here, the scheme for the reform of local regional governance will allow local initiative and experiment and innovation to flourish.

And that means that we will have a basis of evidence which both Ministers of visual centrally, but also voters locally can point to and say, well, we want some of that if if, if authority X is is succeeding and and we don't seem to be matching their standards, anybody who has read ASA Briggs's seminal work on Victorian cities will know that if

you unlock the dynamism, all local and civic energy, then you can achieve results that you would achieve far more slowly, if at all.

If you kept on looking back to White, all the Westminster to come up with the answers for you and it will mean it will be in a variety of outcomes.

It will mean some experiments don't work, but anybody looking at private sector experience in any democratic country around the world's no, we'll know that that is how you actually drive improvement by establishing evidence base with people being able to choose different ways of operating and trying to get desired outcomes. And when the evidence comes in, you adapt and you copy the see the system that seems to be working best and delivering best results for this scheme will provide greater accountability and more effective scrutiny of public expenditure.

I believe will lead to a greater focus on outcomes.

What to John mentioned was a mechanism to devolve funds and also that we write in the paper to to provide a means by which powers and funding and therefore staffing currently run from central government, could be devolved further to a combined or or or unitary authorities.

I like learning government the the idea that you can effectively run an industrial strategy or net zero for the country.

Or the a hole selling provement in on technological skills.

Or a successful plan to reduce reoffending through the country could be done by some dedicated officials sitting in a small office in Whitehall, with the occasional cabinet committee or Task Force meeting where we could get dowries to align of the ministers concern is fanciful.

You actually need central government, yes, to be helping to drive the strategy.

But then local government in the new world should be acting in partnership with empowered, local and combined authorities to try to deliver outcomes that, frankly, regardless of political control, everybody is going to share.

And my final fifth point is this.

I think that the one outcome of this is not central to the argument we make in the paper that I think a desirable outcome he's actually going to be the strength of Union of the United Kingdom at the moment.

We have this situation whereby Umm Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland have devolved.

Parliament devolved governments with assigned powers and England has none of that.

And you have this sort of binary tension between Westminster wait for the one hand and hollyrood Stormont, Cardiff Bay on the other.

I actually think that as, as a convinced unionist that if we can move into a world in which the United Kingdom consists of a number of different entities with significant devolved powers, we each of those national or regional local government to learning from each other's practice and experience, establishing dialogues and networks between them, as already happens now between the three devolved parliaments and governments in the UK, then we think we will be in a much healthier place and I think that the argument for the Union, the will be easier to make and that people in Scotland.

Wales and Northern Ireland will feel that bit more comfortable about living in a United Kingdom where devolution is a part of the norm, and it's a way of perhaps helping to overcome some of those binary tensions that at the moment are still tend to play at the constitutional debate in this country.

Thank you very much indeed, yeah.

Well, thank you, both, very distinguished authors and over to you.

We have a number of people online who, sadly, I think technically can't take part, but I hope that they can hear what's going on and we obviously love to hear instant reaction and comment.

Yes, Sir.

If I may take him first.

I'm good morning.

My name is Hockman Stephen Hoffman, and I'm I'm a barrister specializing in part in town and country family, and I just wanted to highlight the potential importance of these reforms in relation to the planning system and by the way, the importance of the planning system, among other things, is precisely to help towards the attainment of the economic objectives or sorry, that you quite rightly mentioned at the very outset of being the long term game that could be a few, and I merely wanted to point out that in the planning system we already have some elements of.

What these excellent proposals refer to, so, for instance, we have a national planning policy framework and not saying that it it it, it performs the same wide ranging function of these proposals.

But it is a national planning policy framework and it could be used to accelerate economic growth, among other things, and we have a system in which planning powers devolved.

So I think it might be important for those propounding these proposals to explain a little more fully how they would relate to the existing banning system or to any reform planning system that we might aspire to.

That's an extraordinary important point and I think we all agree, don't that the planning system, if we can label it as such.

The moment is one of the great drags on economic points at the moment.

I'm because people with understandable worries about development and stop everything, and it's a circle which we're very difficult to to square.

The man you see planning adopted plans failing to be adopted throughout the country.

With delays of decades doesn't come to set it.

Sorry, but don't get me on that hobby horse.

John feet Steven just said a couple of quick things.

I mean two areas that come to mind and these are actually the sort of things that need to be thrashed out.

I think between local authorities and central government in the national the Evolutional Framework spatial planning, most combined local authorities don't have spatial planning.

Those that do haven't managed to make it work because the way it's been done so far effectively allows a single work authority within a combined local authority or mayor authority to veto it.

So we'll either hit now critical thing about regional economic development.

If you haven't got spatial planning, it's not going to happen because all of the other things that fit with it.

So that's the sort of thing I think where we can say the current system hasn't delivered what we wanted.

But rather than try and have an ad hoc fix for Greater Manchester or West Midlands or whatever that needs to be a consistent approach, and local authorities in this process would have to be confronted with what are you prepared to do to make this work?

The second thing I think that I've I've come up with here and I'm not planning person, but there's a sort of was aware of attention between the sort of, you know, you're building a blocker type of argument or the one where which you hear very often from local authorities, which is if we had a bit more influence about the proportion of social housing or the housing mix or whatever, it would be much easier

to get this over the line.

The local communities that we represent, so I think there are two areas there at least within this overall framework where we could identify problems and find ways of improving the current system.

But probably the most important.

My understanding of people we talk to in this process, you've gotta get spatial planning sorted out as a combined local authority level.

Otherwise it's going to be very hard to drive the rest of your regional economic development strategy into the date.

Don't want.

I mean very, very, very briefly that I, in my my experience, I used to represent and they were just outside the London green belts with which which was there before and the maximum pressure and actually have one passed fastest house building track records of any in the country.

What would come up from my constituents again and again was we want the infrastructure plan.

We're gonna have to accept new housing.

We want the infrastructure plan for and coming in there for beginning and I think the beauty of of 1 of views of of this proposal is that it, we do envisage that the combined authorities would have greater saying substrates of infrastructure planning and actually you would be able to align that with your housing plans.

And too often, these decisions have to be taken in in different silos and the infrastructure follows sort of in an episodic way.

So in the 10 to 20 years after the house building started again, anything I don't, if I may very quickly is.

I think that local consultation very often works because my my experience in these matters tells me that one of the main fears that the people who don't want development is that there are bitter experience.

Over 30 years is that development means rubbish, people struction and communities.

So if you can involve them in this, it's remarkable how sensible public are.

So that's the only thing I could.

Yes, Sir.

Back, thank you very much, Simon Kay, that policy director at the think tank reform. I'm thank you so much for this document and thank you so much for your your

comments at the beginning.

I think it's a hugely useful contribution to the policy discussion I'd like to probe a little bit on the subsidiarity point and on the kind of what I think is sort of the other half of what you're talking about, which is that smaller scale of Governance having to subsidiarity principle embedded into this is incredibly welcome.

It's something that we're thinking about a lot of reform to what we look at this area of policy.

But the reality is that in many parts of the country, having established this more uniform layer of regional authority and having the upper tier strengthened in the way you described, there will be very little to be subsidy arrows and down to below that layer.

So figuring out that lower scale that more granular scale of Governance I think is also an important part of the picture in my view is it's something that needs to be prioritized as well.

The only bit of context that add for that remark is that I'm aware that in many other European countries, the basic unit of local governments, as it were, is an order of magnitude smaller than the basic units of local authority in this country.

Thank you, John.

The answer is that we're we're trying to meet three objectives which are often pursued separately in public debate.

One is that we want to involve communities far more where they live.

There's a whole body of work now about involving people in engage with the design of health services, support for families in difficult for the rest of it, which is actually needs to be quite a micro level at which you get people engaged in shaping the services in their area.

There's a broader area which is about the ability of local authorities to play that role and then these strategic regional economic development issues and we put this in the paper.

The problem with the devolution debates, if you often end up talking about one of the two or three things without knowing which one is you're talking about, and secondly, you have to have a policy approach that integrates all three and we came down to the subsidiarity approach as probably the best legal vehicle for doing this. It becomes very difficult to identify a discrete role for district councils in two tier areas that doesn't exist somewhere else, and the nature of communities is different. So yeah, I I agree with you about the importance on this.

But I think what we proposed here, which is that these bodies have to produce a Community empowerment plan, it's a statutory document on which they have consulted.

It could be challenged.

It was set out exactly how everything from the most micro or hyper local through to the District Council tier, where it exists as it does where I live in Hampshire, up to the combined local authority area, is the key statutory mechanism.

Now behind that there's a whole load of professional practice.

But you know, I had the advantage of that.

I worked with new local which as an organization very much focused on community empowerment and did a webinar for 60 or 70 local government officers working at the frontline.

Outside of this paper, there's a whole developing professional expertise on how to work better with local communities than we did 15 or 20 years ago.

So that's part of the picture, but obviously we haven't tried to cover everything.

I think the the what the paper does is is, but you know it's to to suggest a framework to insist on subsidiarity being applied at all levels, but we don't insist on a particular pattern.

This is something that would have to be discussed, negotiated and agreed at local level, and that reflects the fact that the umm needs of particular errors are going to be very different.

I mean that that how one make subsidiarity real in right of Manchester is gonna be different from how you would apply to Dorset or in depth and the the you might notice look to the metropolitan boroughs as in in the metro areas as as your local news.

But of course, the metropolitan powers themselves usually replaced, and the sort of heath Walker reforms two or three.

The historic towns or small cities, each with its own identity and and and and I think we we don't have a as a doctrinaire view about what the patterns should be.

See, I think it would be a mistake to try to.

Uh to impose a new pattern in one fell swoop?

We need the framework first and then it is for local and combined authorities to explore together how this might evolve over the over the years based on on experience of based on demands of of local elections.

Thanks, David.

Yes, yes.

I brought you go.

And the leader of King County Council.

And I because I think this is a tremendous piece of work.

And I think what is interesting is that there does seem to be a degree of cross party understanding that this is a direction we need to go in.

But the devil lies in the delivery, as we've seen over the last couple of years, and I think this sets out a way to get through it.

I think it's absolutely tremendous in those terms.

Couple of points if I made one is picking up on some of the points that already been made.

I think strengthening on the one side and being quite clear on this, what is strategic and what is Community focused coming out with first two comments and questions seems to me to be absolutely right at the moment.

We have a tremendous weakness certainly in the non metropolitan areas in terms of that strategic spatial planning.

And so now that some elements of that do actually need to go up a bit, but then there's got to be a quid pro quo of ensuring that you don't have things simply function or focused on what can be very large and otherwise somewhat alienating authorities about general point that you've addressed to a degree in the report capacity.

And I think this is really critical.

Umm, I think there were one two suggestions in there about ensuring that there was an.

Indeed, there have been in some of the DEVO initiatives, attempts to look at building and a little bit of that capacity.

I think it's important that that is done because what has happened to certainly upper tier authorities, I think over the last 15 years, there's been an erosion of funding capacity, headspace and so on by the fact that the people led services, the adult social care, children services, etcetera.

Obviously, eating those authorities alive and you need something that provides a kind of fire break from that.

Now, over the time, I think it's got to involve and it's way outside the scope of this report.

Seriously, addressing what those underlying drivers of an unsustainable financial

position in those areas is.

And I think without it's gonna be very hard for those authorities to be able to operate.

But I do think if there's any area that which might devolve be developed a little further in terms of what's in the report, I think it is that question of capacity and how we can ensure that authorities are strong enough to be able to really do that strategic spatial economic development type function when they've got the wolf at the door in terms of some of those other areas of expenditure.

David want to comment.

I I'm at the point.

Yeah, I think it's all it's it's, it's not there.

I I think the one thing I and I don't think Roger would disagree on on this is, is that those words of sort of caution of perfectly correct, but nonetheless.

We mustn't succumb to the risk of that.

We sort of hold up.

Wait until all the present is in in in place.

That's even before we, I think perfectly reasonable, Roger.

Say that's one of the the things that got to be addressed in terms of making these feats form successful.

Yes.

And I, you know, I, Philip, Philip, right across, for example, former permanent secretary, he has advocated on more than one occasion.

I'm a ballpark figure, the transfer of about 20,000 civil servants from White law into local government, whether that's the individuals physically or the staffing or the numbers or whatever.

So I think there's a recognition if you're going to devolve more then quite clearly some of the jobs done at the center don't need still to be done at the center.

And I think it's a complex managerial process, David, nicely different to go and sorted out it's.

But yeah, your point.

Your point is absolutely right, as is your broader point that that in a sense, if local authorities have driven over the Cliff by adults and children, social care, none of this is really going to work.

But I think in the paper we say this is beyond the scope of our.

Basically, there is absolutely key point.

Yeah, and yes, ma'am.

So Mr.

Brown from the apartment for levelling up OK and really interested in your proposals. Lots of lots of rich content in there and one of the things like Tom and I were talking about yesterday about this was trying to chart the sort of the gap from where we are now to what gives proposes.

And I think as gentleman up front said some of the devil is in the detail in how this what powers you would sit at what level and one of the.

Elements say that jumps out is slightly more sort of different from what we had.

The moment is the mayoral weight and the role of the mayor, and I'm just interested to prove a little bit you're thinking behind.

So I think what you're proposing is a mere could be a sort of a voluntary addition if you like and you've you've sort of rightly stated, the proponents of mayors state that they're important for driving, decision making and accountability.

And I just wondered if you could reflect a bit more on what is the, what is the sort of element in the system that we have at the moment of mail teams that you think I think implied in here perhaps isn't working, that you would prefer a system where there were fewer mayors and what would be sort of alternative route through on decision making and accountability thing?

And you've proposed some local accounts committees and the like.

Take this one first one.

OK, quickly some of the methods have been remarkably effective.

Some have been controversial.

Some have been banned from Stanley again by their own party, and some have a totally dysfunctional relationship with their combined authorities.

So the idea that mayors work is a very partial view of things which takes nothing away, particularly from, I think the mayors and you're a number of the major city mayors have been affected.

So I don't want to deny that.

Secondly, I think there are some weaknesses in the current model where the woods state crafted rarely used these days.

Important expenses enormously important, it's not just about which in House devolved, but how different layers of power work together.

And so if you have a combined authority, if you have a mayor, their relationship with the local authorities is absolutely critical.

And one of the things that does worry me about the devolution badge is when people talk about mayors up here, as the people you devolved to because the local authorities aren't really very effective.

And that will never deliver effective devolution.

The state craft, the relationship between center combined local authority mayor local authorities is critical and there are elements of the male model which that makes it very difficult.

I come from Hampshire, Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight.

It's very difficult for people to see that a mayor would not make relationships worse between the local authorities and the mayor rather than better.

So I think that's the choice that should be exercised at local at local level.

So it stems, I think, very much from a view that every system of this, every layer of this system has to work well together.

So I'm always worried when people say we want mayors because they're separate.

You know, they got their own accountability, their own electorate.

They don't have to bother about the local authorities.

That's a lot of that rhetoric around in discussion of mayors.

That's a dysfunctional system you're describing there.

You're setting up something to fail, so I think we're not place the developers who want to keep them.

That's absolutely fine, right?

But it should be, I think, a decision that can be judged locally and I I am uncomfortable with the system where we know there are places that have got a a mayor only because it was the way they could get a deal and that's it.

An odd way of describing a democratic Innovation.

Yeah.

And I I would, I would I I would go further.

I would say that is to build in an element of political instability to a devolved model, and mayoral too evolved in cities.

You know, that's the the history in in the sort of Middle Ages and it's a natural fit and the title of this, this fixed cities or towns with a distinctive civic identity of their own, very difficult to apply to non metropolitan areas.

Umm I I like.

I think what we've, we've, I would, I would, uh, just just challenge the the the the word is when you you you you read the papers as meaning we called for fewer so

I think we're not saying that what we're saying is that the mayoral model should not be the only one available and one of our concerns is that at the moment either as John said the mayoral tea is being accepted reluctantly as a means to get devolved powers or the imposition of the mayoralty becomes an obstacle do local authorities coming together and agree.

To a combined authority with that greater strategic weight than the current setup and and I think one saw some of this and proceeded Hampshire and one one you saw it in the Norfolk, Suffolk debate as well because one of the things we advocate is that it should be possible for upper tier authorities to form a combined authority not to everything they choose not to but to exercise particular functions it might just be highways or it might be planning in a particular part of the country tailored to what they want and and the mayoralty would not be.

Appropriate to that I come back, I think, of my allergies.

I think they're a hypothetical combined authority of either, but him to Hartford Shire venture or 10s Valley 3, the three counties there, I don't see a mayoral model as a natural fit where you'd have arguments over the various actually three boxer and Slough, or from reading or Milton Keynes, so that that sort of you, I think, make reliable Reeves a bit worse rather than than transgender.

Now we have the room until 10th that day.

I think we have room for perhaps three very quick questions, Andrew.

First, if I may.

Thank you very much, Andrew.

Large.

You're being like Sierra, Gene, I I'd like to go to the question of the importance of this for the future of the UK, which should you are Burke to, I think all of us can see the importance of this happening in England.

But is there some way of putting some fresh on to that in the sense of involvement of the other nations in this, either in terms of what can be learned from the way that local government?

Occurs that or the other way around.

You rather refer to this?

Yes, then yes and I I think I, yes, I would.

I would certainly encourage local Anatolian authority leaders in England to look at the experience with all three divulged, but I I should also say that the argument works the other way too.

The big unfinished undelivered item from the Smith report, Umm is devolution within Scotland and certainly you go and if you go and talk to leaders in Aberdeen, Umm the, the, the, the the decisions taken Hollyrood seem all rather distant from then North Wales.

Is a long language, so if you're trying to drive it, I'm very long way from Cardiff Bay and in north north and we're going to Northern Ireland and talking to civic and business leaders in Belfast and in Derry.

Londonderry.

What they were very clear about, we both cities was that they wanted the city deal, but it shouldn't be like the other ones that they had.

They had particular needs and specific ambitions of their own, and so I think that the I think there are things that Scotland, Wales and they give the sectarianism of book on history in Northern can be sufficiently overcome, can learn from the successful development of effective devolved subregional government within England.

But if it works both of two way channel, let's talk about the dialogue that that is that is interesting you there is a pattern now into which officials and ministers in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland do talk to each other, visit each other and try and learn from each other's experience.

So I think that that's Matthew technically we're going forward.

Thank you.

Them you know, a lot of sensory so late.

Everyone always pleased to see you.

Yeah.

Anyway, nice to see you too.

And looking at this from the both in the ministers, the Parliament and central government level upwards, you're basically how difficult it is for government of any party or none to get involved in everything.

So recently the government announced it was going to bang was thinking of banning floating bus lanes or floating bus stops or whatever, you know, and cattle grids get discussed on the floor of the House of Commons.

So is there some way?

And I think I once heard in this very building.

So Bernard Jenkins suggests that speak at the House of Commons should rules out of order.

Anything that was on the local government responsibility being discussed on the

floor of the House there, is there some way of constraining the inevitable desire of ministers and MP's to get involved in everything?

Given how centralised England that you're right, also Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are again, David, you you addressed this known careless where because I think you suggested that this would make it easier.

But I think I don't think you'll have a night the cultural change, but the cultural change I would want to see, he's MP feeling that they are able to say to constituents in a way that they don't feel confused about doing now that is a matter for local gumball from mayor.

And this is somebody whose name you know.

Here's their email address, and there's their office deal with them.

And for government, it refers to political courage.

Governments to to to be saying to MP's and MP's to accept that that the scrutiny of legislation is something that we are not doing well enough in this country at the moment we need to improve too much.

Half baked legislation that still gets into law and and then has to be amended if they get it later.

So the actually a positive case can be made that this is.

Freeing MP to do the job that they really were elected to.

Do I don't think Tony's gonna be if it's not going to be easy because there will be the temptation to for a candidate and MP to the photograph pointing at the potholes and you're actually on the but I think there's also a there is and it's got worse since the pandemic of real concern amongst NP's about the sheer volume of stuff, largely about local matters.

But pause into their inboxes every day, and at the moment the it's a one way St just bought bigger and bigger budgets to hire more staff to try and free the MP's to any sort of thinking or other activity at all.

So suddenly had to be bolded up to actually say this is a broken model.

Where I'm John, but I can say very, very quickly.

One of the reasons that we need to legislation along the lines with opposing just there has to be a definitive moment.

Yeah.

Where government and Parliament says we are changing the way that England is governed, there is attempting argument.

So we've got a levelling up film.

We've got other things you can sort of cobble all of this together out of everything we've got.

Why bother to go through?

This if the answer is this is a, it's effectively a constitutional change and that requires a constitutional piece of legislation.

That enabled Minister say this is going to say that local government has agreed with central government what powers and responsibilities lie when and by laying that down in statute, it it won't totally change the centralized political culture every night. It's, but it it's there's key symbolic moment, and that's why you actually need the legislation rather than simply opposed to change at the sent.

Yeah, certainly.

If my experience as an MP, which is now in the prehistory, there's a strong incentive to take an interest in local methods for electoral reasons, rather than doing what should be a potential part of your job.

So if we can remove that incentive, very helpful.

You've been very patient, could be very quick.

Ohh sure.

Thank you.

Yeah.

So Akash Paun from Institute for government.

So I mean, first of all, really welcome the report and the fact that you're launching it here a good to see you all.

And yeah, I mean, in terms of recommendations, there's there's a huge amount there.

That, umm I agree with and and it does align with.

You mentioned over recent report Lord Salisbury on a similar topic.

I just was a question about the process as you see it for forming new combined authorities in areas where they don't exist, which is still around, you know, half the country as you said, because I think the way you envisage the process is very much bottom up, a right four places to form, combine the floaties and therefore to Jordan powers on that basis.

But you also referred to the objective, which I think we certainly think is an important one for the next government of of completing the map and ending up at something that does cover the whole of England is not the risk.

If if you do it in an entirely bottom up way that just for reasons of local political disagreement and whatnot, you'll end up with like little random bits of the country

left out, which you know to some extent has happened already.

Like, why is North Somerset not in the West of England deal?

Plymouth has been left out of the new Devon deal.

It cetera.

There's other examples, but besides so I mean, having thought this through from Arthur, we ended up concluding that if you do want to reach that complete map, which we think is the right objective in the end, the center might have to take a little bit of a firmer line.

And despite its better when things are agreed bottom up, intrinsical in practice, sometimes ministers and vital will have to say you only getting this deal if you do bring in place X or Y.

OK, so when the missions in Hampshire over the Christ Church and pulled said we think we're part of the southern England economy, the three cities, Southampton, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Pool Port Deal just said no, you can't.

You're in Dorset now.

Both Christchurch, from Paul, has spent ten years getting out of Dorset to be told by Whitehead.

You're going to mess up our map.

You're in Dorset.

So everyone, Hampshire told, don't talk to them anymore.

You're not part of the picture now.

I'm not entirely sure that that fits with devolution, so I think the approach that we take here is 2 fold.

Yes, of course.

They've got to be minimum size, period, but beyond that it's probably better to let people go bottom up to have sufficient incentives is at the moment the incentives are formed by a local authority, are too low to overcome some of the local hostilities. And yes, you might end up with some anomalies at the end of the day, which will then need to be resolved in the next time we present one of these papers in five years time.

But actually we do come down on the on the basis it is better to let people form what they think is going to work for them than it is to have a map in Whitehall that people have actually got to work to, which simply creates resentments that they're actually trying to fit into somebody else's plan.

So we're very clear in the paper there is some basic may take poor decision, but

they're not likely to be worse than the decisions that are effectively written for them before they start.

Now that's a political that's a political judgment.

But if you want the complete the map, my belief is you will complete it much faster in that way and eventually that's making it hard for somebody who is a minister.

But has worked a lot with local government people in local government actually mainly much better than people in Whitehall think they are.

Yes, they are fractious and disputations, but actually a lot of them are really, really sensible.

I I wrote one to report about Hampshire for a think tank that I used to be involved in where we did a series of in-depth interviews with local authority leaders.

Of course, Hampshire.

The White 2 cities form of question, but our conclusion was these were people that collaborate much better in practice than they do in principle.

So in other words, when they have a common task, they were really good at guessing on and doing it.

The abstract discussion and they were much less good at.

So it's a political judgment that's in the paper and our political judgment is very much run this for five years.

See where you get to?

My guess is they'll be relatively few places.

The patient portal Will problem, but we've never got over in Dorset being numbered with Bournemouth and pressure makes fun.

They the time contact, but I agree with it with what?

What John said, I can see the attraction of trying to just imposed solution but but I think that one of the points we make is that this is going to take longer than five years and one of my worries about trying to impose a pattern from the center is that you'll get as as happened with the press conference is that it immediately becomes the subject of a vigorous party political contest with in many parts of the country local government rule the moment because I've party, if you're opposition, say role, when we come back to office.

We're going to reverse all of this and once those commitments start to be loaded at national level by political party.

It's very difficult then to row back from those and the civil servants when they prepare the color coded folders for potential incoming governments will have

trawled through previous speeches and they will come up with legislative proposals to deliver what somebody might have said three years ago about their policy objectives.

I think political party political consensus is much more likely to be obtained if we if we have this broadly bottom up route, but within the within the statutory framework, yeah, which which would impose its own disciplines and incentives, right?

I'm afraid I'm gonna have to bring this quick infusion.

There are lots of people who haven't managed to get in and I apologize to them.

I'm that doesn't mean to say the debate is over.

If you go to our website, you have the opportunity not only to download the document, but also the.

I'm just the ability to to comment so.

Firstly, thank you all very much for coming.

I get a general warm feeling that you think that the direction of travel is the right one.

Uh, and we would very much like to hear more from you.

This is the the provisions are not perfect.

We will continue to try and improve them.

I in my worst nightmares, I sometimes think that this country is in danger of becoming a sort of Austria Hungary in the 21st century, which I define as some brilliant people ruined by rubbish administrator, and it seems to me that what we're proposing here may be a partial answer.

Not gonna hold answer, of course to how you could put that situation and my nightmare right?

Umm, after all you referred, David, I think quite rightly we've all experienced and we know it's true of the disenchantment of the population of this country with our national institutions.

It's partly because of the rapidity of change.

What happened, technologically?

And so on.

But it's there, and if this is going to survive and prosper, we need to make sure that the nations institutions work and how we administer local government is an absolute essential part of that.

I'm and of course I suspect that if we ask Whitehall to do less, it would do it better, and one of the things that the politicians have to do is if we're going to take this

forward, whoever the next government is, I hope in general terms with the support of whoever is in opposition at the time is to make sure that Whitehall lets.

Yeah.

And the transfer of people is extraordinarily important, given the difficulties that local government is experiencing at the moment, as I'm sure you know, you can't.

Certainly true elsewhere as well, and and that in itself will help.

I suspect the capacity point and the flexibility which both John and David you have emphasized about, I think you referred to as I'm powers which go up and powers which go down is much more easier to achieve if you accept that this country and one of its great strengths is its infinite variety and and imposition of a single sort of rather French administration from Whitehall really doesn't work.

What are we going to do?

Umm well, of course.

The other thing is resource is in the broadest sense, but that we'll come back to that at another time.

Well, in the past we have produced a bill partly for the reason to show that what we're proposing can be translated into legislative form, that it actually can be made work.

And in a previous attempt thinking about relations between the devolved countries and Whitehall, Robert Lisvane, who sadly has not had to leave us, has kindly introduced a bill into their Lordships house which provoked debate.

And I haven't yet asked him, but he doesn't.

Yet know.

But he's going to be asked.

I do ask him whether he might be prepared to do that again, having long retired. From that lordships, I'm not in the position to do that myself, but somebody might be able to, and that and itself, I hope, will not only get on the record a response from the government, but also which could be Reddit but nevertheless could be.

A equally and more important from the opposition.

Uh, but meanwhile, thank you all so much coming, and please keep your positionally and congratulations to you too.

Thank you. Thanks.