

A community empowerment duty

The Government's English Devolution White Paper makes clear commitments to involving local people and communities in decisions that affect their lives. While much important detail will be in a forthcoming 'communities strategy', the expected English Devolution Bill creates an opportunity to ensure that Mayoral Strategic Authorities and Local Authorities also have a responsibility to engage positively with local people on local decisions and the reform of public services.

In this note we make the case for Local and Strategic Authorities to be placed under a duty to consult on and publish community empowerment plans.

The tension in devolution

There is an inherent tension in devolution policy between scale and geography. Strategic Authorities need to cover sufficiently large populations to exercise strategic economic development powers, but new large authorities will not necessarily empower people to address the issues they care about locally.

The Government also intends to enable Mayors to act with the support of only a simple majority of local authorities on a Strategic Authority. Though intended to facilitate decision making, this could also see power move up from local communities and authorities towards to Mayors. In many parts of England smaller local councils are also being reorganised or merged into larger authorities.

The White Paper makes welcome commitments to more engagement by and with people at a very local level, but these need some statutory backing.

The Government's commitment to local communities

The English Devolution White Paper is clear about the aim to empower local people well below the level of local and strategic authorities

'Communities need power returned back to them. We want to support local people – those with skin in the game – so that they can better affect the decisions impacting their areas.... the government's approach to community empowerment will focus on putting people in control of their own lives, alongside devolving power away from Westminster. We will create new opportunities for communities to have a say in the future of their area and play a part in improving it.'

'Decisions with purely local implications should, by default, be taken locally, within a clear, streamlined national framework.... which makes clear that local leaders' decision making over local issues is paramount.'

Making a difference to people's lives

The Government is clear that giving local people a say in their areas is of limited value '*if people are not supported to live lives where they can contribute to this decision making*'

This makes an essential connection between devolution and the chance to transform lives. It will only be fully effective if local people can influence the services on which they rely and on the issues that are shaping their neighbourhood.

Local authorities and community empowerment

The White Paper also recognises the responsibility of local government to community empowerment.

'Local government plays an essential role in convening local partners around neighbourhoods to ensure that community voices are represented and people have influence over their place and their valued community assets.'

In the areas undergoing local government reorganisation, it suggests embedding this responsibility from the outset. It wants '*new unitary councils to enable new and innovative community level and partnership working*'. And promises to '*strengthen expectations on engagement and community voice*'.

The principle of embedding the responsibility to engage local people should be extended to new Strategic Authorities and the established Authorities and their members.

A duty of devolution and empowerment

A uniform approach to engaging local people across England's diverse cities, town and villages is unlikely to work well anywhere. However, there is a large body of good practice on community empowerment, including that gathered by NewLocal. Ideas for the 'hyper local state' have been proposed by think-tanks including Re:State and IPPR North. Mayoral Authorities including Greater Manchester and Liverpool have pioneered community engagement to improve health and school attainment.

Creating a statutory duty to consult with and publish a community empowerment plan would provide a framework within which Strategic and Local Authorities could develop an empowerment strategy suited to their area. It would enable them to learn from best practice while tailoring the approach to their communities.

The English Devolution Bill should ensure that community empowerment is built into the design of new Strategic Authorities and unitary councils and apply the same duty to existing devolved bodies and local councils.

