

UNISON Local Government's Position on Local Government Reorganisation and English Devolution

Overview

This document outlines UNISON Local Government's position and demands regarding the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (EDCEB) and the significant reorganisation of councils across England. The Bill effectively consists of two parallel workstreams running at pace. Workstream one involves devolution to Strategic Authorities covering around 1.5 million people, and workstream two consists of the reorganisation of local authorities into new unitary councils covering approximately 500,000 residents.

UNISON members are committed to ensuring high-quality public services, and there is genuine concern about the potential impact of reorganisation on day-to-day council services, particularly workforce capacity and retention. The government must provide additional upfront funding and capacity support to ensure that reorganisation changes do not negatively affect the delivery of essential services. Adequate resources will be key to maintaining stability and supporting the local government workforce through this transition period, ensuring that service standards remain high for our communities.

With the right support (and funding), the devolution process can result in positive outcomes for workers, local authorities, and the public. Therefore, councils must be well-resourced for devolution to be effective and ensure their workforce is supported, well remunerated, and trained. Devolution is not the cure for austerity. It can work as long as the vision of English local government is one where power is devolved from Westminster, decisions are made locally, and services are fully funded. Councils are essential for sustainable economic growth and can make a significant contribution to regional prosperity.

General Concerns & Key Messages

- The EDCEB will have a significant impact on the employment of our members across England.
- Proposals will diminish the role of district councils in strategic governance by consolidating most or all of them into unitary authorities.
- Any remaining district councils will be expected to focus on hyper-local services and work closely with new Mayoral Strategic Authorities.
- County councils will also be affected.
- Employees will be left uncertain about:
 - Their employer's identity
 - Their job roles
 - Their pay, terms, and conditions
 - Their training needs for changing and widening of their roles.

Implications

- English devolution differs from the devolution of powers to Scotland, Cymru/Wales, and Northern Ireland.
- We will need to be vigilant for any threats to members covered by the National Joint Council (NJC), particularly in regions where local bargaining has led to members being excluded from the NJC.
- Reorganisation could provide an opportunity to bring non-NJC authorities back into national bargaining structures.

UNISON Demands

Local government finance, LGR & English devolution

Local government is currently experiencing a financial crisis. Council workforce numbers have declined dramatically, and there are significant recruitment and retention problems. Meanwhile, councils are at breaking point after years of austerity. It is therefore vital that investment in services and staff is central to any reforms. Central government must make sure:

- Devolution empowers local communities, not reduces their influence on the decisions made about their local services.
- The £3.39 billion funding gap identified by UNISON should be closed, and the changes proposed in the EDCEB must not be used as a pretext for job cuts or the erosion of pay, terms, and conditions.
- No reorganisation takes place until adequate funding is provided to reorganise local government in England.
- Devolution and reorganisation deals include predictable, secure and sufficient funding based on local and regional need.
- No new unitary authorities should start with debt. Wiping the slate clean and giving a new council the best possible start from vesting day will enable communities to flourish.

Impact on services and democracy

- The phasing out of smaller district councils must not undermine local decision-making or lead to increased central control from Whitehall.
- The government's agenda to oversee the 'biggest wave of insourcing of public services in a generation' can be realised by utilising English devolution and reorganisation to bring services in-house, whether they are currently in Local Authority Trading Companies, shared between existing councils, or outsourced contracts.
- Devolution deals should be developed from the bottom up, driven by local communities and staff, rather than through backroom deals.
- Devolution should improve the coordination, quality and efficiency of local services.

Employment

The devolution and reorganisation proposals cannot be a way to reduce workforce terms and conditions. Any proposals must include:

- A commitment to national bargaining with no detriment to the workforce.
- No compulsory redundancies.
- No loss of pay or reduced conditions for any staff affected.
- TUPE protections for all transfers.
- Moving to or remaining with the NJC job evaluation scheme.
- The use of the NJC for all unitary authorities, Strategic Authorities, Combined Authorities, and Mayoral Combined Authorities.
- Working with the recognised trade unions, new councils and Strategic Authorities to create a workforce development strategy.

Trade Union Representation

- Trade unions must be key stakeholders at local, regional, and national levels in the implementation of devolution or any local government reorganisation. This includes allowing trade union activists paid time off (facilities time) to work on reorganisation proposals.
- Local government workers must be involved in shaping the proposals and have their voices heard.
- As part of any devolution or reorganisation, union representation must be enhanced rather than diminished.
- The transfer of trade union recognition and facility time to all new unitary authorities, Strategic Authorities, Combined Authorities, and Mayoral Combined Authorities must be guaranteed.
- Recognised trade unions must negotiate directly with the mayors of Strategic Authorities to recognise the importance of the workforce.
- Trade unions must be represented on the boards of regional bodies with full voting rights to represent the concerns and issues of the workforce.

Equality

- Full equality impact assessments must be undertaken for all staffing changes.
- Devolution and reorganisation present an opportunity to identify and close the gender, ethnicity, and disability pay gaps; this should not be wasted.