

COUNCILLOR BRIEFING NOV. '24



DEVOLUTION / REORGANISATION

Labour look set to push ahead with their version of devolution. There are threats and opportunities for Greens. This briefing provides some Green principles as apply to devolution, and provides some ways for us to respond.

It is our role to both work to shift the plans as they emerge - promoting a better way to genuinely devolve and democratise power - and to maximise the benefits to communities and to future generations that can be won within the likely outcomes from Labour's plans.

WHAT IS LABOUR PLANNING?

We await the English Devolution Bill promised in the King's Speech, but expect the push to be for Combined Authorities (CAs) with a directly elected Mayor, and for more unitary councils, further reducing the overall number of councils as well as removing two-tier arrangements.

CAs will be given a mandate to drive growth. Labour's thinking is not hugely different from the Conservatives in this respect; 'levelling up' and regional economic growth are not so very different in policy terms.

A clear intention is for CA Mayors to overpower 'the blockers' - to use their words - to development. Whether districts, counties or unitaries, the constituent councils will likely lose control of strategic planning to the CA, and perhaps other powers too.

However, Rachel Reeves has said that long-termism, prevention, managing demand, devolution and local integration of services, are priority themes for the Comprehensive Spending Review (which is due in the Spring). This signals strong Treasury support for devolution arrangements that are also about delivering public service reforms, some of which we would welcome.



Local Government Chronicle's suggestion of the shape of the possible combined authority map

GREEN PRINCIPLES

SUBSIDIARITY FOR SUSTAINABLE PLACES

"Nothing should be decided at a higher level if it can be decided at a lower one". The principle of subsidiarity enshrined in our philosophical basis holds that social and political issues should be dealt with at the most immediate (or local) level that is consistent with their resolution. Currently, local government in the UK is weak by international standards and is [regarded as 'non-compliant' with regard to powers and independent fund raising by the Council of Europe](#) (to which we still belong).

The current debate is too often framed as only about efficiency and scale. The case for larger councils and for 'simplification' (e.g. creating unitary councils where there had been county and district councils) being more efficient isn't proven, but even if it was, this ignores the true case for local government: that the places we identify with should have significant democratic autonomous powers to shape, create and reinvent themselves. Greens want to see inclusive, resilient, healthy places with vibrant cultures, effective levels of social solidarity and environments and habitats that are healthy, or at least recovering and that are transitioning to 'net zero'.

Returning to efficiency: creating sustainable, resilient, inclusive, vibrant places will, we believe, actually reduce the demand for services largely designed around repairing the damage done when places do not nurture and support local wellbeing sufficiently.

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GREEN PRINCIPLES CONTINUED

To deliver this we want to see better fundraising powers in local hands, combined with redistribution measures to overcome inequalities between different areas of the country.

Achieving local change requires popular support based on a sense of shared place identity. Without this voters are likely to feel disengaged, even alienated, reducing the democratic legitimacy needed. We enter this debate already concerned with the loss of local government identity (beyond the town/parish level) for places as significant as Carlisle, Barrow-in-Furness and Shrewsbury, all of which have been subsumed in larger 'unitary' authorities. Set that against the background of weak local government in the UK compared to comparable nation states, and it's clear there is a problem.

Of course places exist in a wider context, so 'strategic' decisions and services may well be better organised on a larger scale - but with proper 'downwards' accountability based on partnerships of equals, not take-overs. Otherwise Combined Authorities will look - from a town or district viewpoint - more like centralisation than devolution.

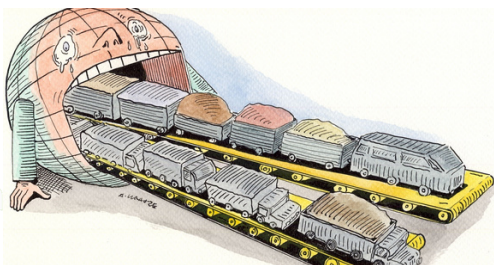
Devolved power is only real if it includes rights that can be enforced, so we want to see councils able to hold the central government to account for the delivery of the support needed for local change. If devolved authorities are just there to do the government's bidding then, once again, that is 'decentralisation' not devolution.

SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY VS 'GROWTH FIRST'

Labour's primary goal is 'growth' as measured by GDP. New powers in combined authorities may well include the ability to overrule 'the blockers' at a more local level, especially those standing in the way of infrastructure and building. But we believe communities can understand and manage the need to balance the competing demands of food, nature, energy, homes and infrastructure for a green transition. Reducing local democratic influence will put more power in the hands of corporate developers with no interest in striking the right balance.

'Growth' as a stand-alone objective can increase carbon emissions, pollution and excessive resource use, without delivering better communities and wellbeing. We will always push for sustainable,

mission-led investment for communities, for wellbeing, to tackle inequalities, and for the environment.



SYSTEMS THINKING

Local places cannot become resilient, sustainable and prosperous through the work of councils alone. 'System-wide' solutions are needed for everything from health and social care to nature recovery. Currently neither the geography nor the decision-making culture of local government aligns with those of the health service, the police, the probation service, even the net zero hubs. Reorganisation shouldn't force councils into the command and control world of other parts of the public service. Instead we need to see 'place-based' system wide partnership arrangements, focused on meeting locally determined needs and aspirations, democratically managed.

This is most evident in health and social care. A prevention and wellbeing approach to health and social care needs a system wide approach. Currently we face the funding paradox that whilst investing in better preventative or upstream services does produce longer term savings and better outcomes, the costs fall on one service area (often the council's) but a different public service (often the NHS, but this also works in reverse) reap the financial reward, so there is no financial incentive to do better - in fact there is a cost. Pooled responsibility and funds should allow local leaders to get past these barriers. Economies of scale might also enable public investment which can drive out profit seeking corporations from care services (though not necessarily good quality local private providers).

The evidence also supports a public approach to both violence reduction and wider crime prevention, resting on integrated local services: bringing health, education, social services, probation and policing under local control supports prevention and the overall reduction in demand.



COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

Rather than working to attract 'extractive' corporations that will use local people and resources but then extract or export much of the created wealth, we envision building better local economies by using the combined spending and resources of the local authorities and other 'anchor' institutions in an area to shape, strengthen and make more resilient the local economy, building wealth for the community. Devolving powers could accelerate community wealth building successes.



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WHAT MIGHT BE WINNABLE

There are gains to be made by bringing together – as partners – neighbouring local authorities, and granting them significantly more powers over fund-raising and decision making. These include opportunities to:

- Accelerate decarbonisation, climate adaptation and nature recovery work across integrated geographies and communities where this makes sense. Greens have modelled this in the Greater Brighton economic area, bringing together neighbouring authorities to accelerate retrofit in council homes.
- Invest in integrated public transport and active travel across wider areas where people regularly travel.
- Create a new deal for health and social care which provides for genuine, local, system wide working with ‘place-based budgets’: The Kings Fund says of the NHS that it is “not prioritising prevention, not acting sufficiently on health inequalities, excessively focused on the short term, and being a poor partner for other sectors, all made worse by over-centralisation.” There is an opportunity to overcome these weaknesses.

There is plenty of evidence that ‘size isn’t everything’; that devolved power can work effectively at a smaller scale, and - importantly for us - that real success comes from the relationships developed *within* the devolved areas. So it’s not just about size, mayors and powers, it’s also about governance within combined authorities.

WHAT WE SHOULD PUSH FOR

- **No Local Growth Plans without Net Zero Plans.** Local growth and infrastructure plans are expected to be required for each area. We must insist that net zero and nature based recovery are key drivers, with a ‘just transition’ for workers and communities . The powers to deliver on net zero should be enabled by a specific statutory duty for devolved and local authorities, just as Labour intend for ‘Growth’. ([See model motions in this here](#))
- **Defend true Local Government.** Decisions should be devolved to the most local practical level. In the current context this means resisting forced unitarisation as well as calling for the subsidiarity principal to be built in to new combined authority governance arrangements. *We may well call for a national debate / commission / citizen’s assembly on this.*
- **Make accountability a two-way street.** Devolved regional authorities should be accountable to their constituent councils and citizens. They should also be able to hold central government’s feet to the fire to ensure Whitehall delivers the support and powers needed to effectively shape local matters.
- **No imposition of Mayors** which risks putting too much power in the hands of one person, reduces pluralism and diversity in decision-making and places power at a greater distance from voters.
- **Create genuine new local health and social care partnerships.** Arrangements should pool resources and devolved powers - including down from NHS England - to address the twin health and social care crises. This should include the power to bring private services back into the public sector and commission new services together.
- **Create local wealth and keep it there.** Enable local growth plans to work on local community wealth building principles to support local skills and employment and develop circular economies, with the power to repurpose public assets otherwise intended for commercial disposal so that they can be used to meet local needs for affordable housing, renewable energy and nature recovery.
- **Expand local fiscal powers.** The debate on devolution and reorganisation should include discussion of better ways to fund local government, including local fund raising powers. Government should take this opportunity to properly consider replacements for council tax such as Land Value Tax, but also look at expanding local powers around, for example: borrowing; surcharges on second and holiday homes; tourism taxes; road pricing; pollution and carbon charging.