

Understanding Local Government Reorganisation and What it Means for Our Communities



The structure of local government in England may appear straightforward at first glance, but the reality is often more complex. Responsibilities are shared across several tiers of government – including county councils, district/borough councils, and parish/town councils – each with different statutory functions and discretionary powers.

While some services – such as education, social care, or waste disposal – sit firmly within the remit of county (or unitary) authorities, others may be provided at the more localised levels, depending on community needs, historical arrangements, or formal agreements.

Devolution, both formal and informal, has allowed for greater flexibility. It enables some functions to be transferred to lower tiers through delegation arrangements, especially where local councils are best placed to deliver services due to their community knowledge. However, such devolution is not uniform and depends on local context and partnerships between the tiers.

Although not exhaustive, this table provides an idea of who does what across the different levels of government – Gloucestershire County Council, the city/district/borough councils, and parish/town councils. It highlights both the statutory and discretionary responsibilities held at each tier, and how these can shift or blend depending on local arrangements and evolving governance models.



County Council	District/Borough Council	Parish/Town Council
Strategic planning	Local planning and development	Statutory consultee on planning Neighbourhood plans
Waste disposal	Household waste collection Litter and dog bins	Local litter and dog bins
Libraries		
	Leisure facilities	Leisure facilities
	Galleries and local theatre	Village halls
	Public toilets	
	Parks Playgrounds Allotments Sports Pitches	Parks Playgrounds Allotments Sports Pitches
	Benches, noticeboards, bus shelters	Benches, noticeboards, bus shelters
	Cemeteries and crematoria War memorials	Cemeteries and closed churchyards War memorials
	Car parks	Car parks
Highways and transport Adult Social Care Education Children Public Health	Housing/homelessness Environmental Health Licensing	Community engagement/development Community events



Unitary Authority		Parish/Town Council
Strategic planning Local planning and development	←	Statutory consultee on planning Neighbourhood plans
Waste disposal Household waste collection	←	Litter and dog bins
Libraries	↔	Libraries
Leisure facilities Galleries and local theatres Public toilets	↔	Leisure facilities Galleries and local theatres Public toilets Village halls
	→	Parks Playgrounds Allotments Sports Pitches Benches, noticeboards, bus shelters Cemeteries War memorials
Highways and transport Adult Social Care Education Children Public Health		Community engagement/development Community events
Housing/homelessness Environmental Health Licensing	←	



3

Models Proposed

*Regardless of the model, service merging and devolution to parishes and towns still happens



1



A single unitary
authority



2



Two unitary
authorities on former
district boundaries



3 To be developed*

A city-based unitary council based around a 'Greater Gloucester' area along with one or two unitary authorities for the rest of the county area (i.e. two or three unitary councils in total). Any proposal for this option would set out the rationale for it, relying on the statutory guidance that “there may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution”

*No map has been developed for this option at this time.



Possible Pros and Cons of Unitary Authorities



✓ Possible Pros of Unitary Authorities

1. Simpler for Residents

- One council = one point of contact for all local services
- Reduces confusion over who does what (e.g. waste, roads, planning)

2. Streamlined Decision-Making

- Faster decisions with fewer bureaucratic layers
- Easier to coordinate strategy and policy countywide

3. Cost Savings

- Potential to streamline back-office and other functions
- Shared services and management may save money in the long term

4. Stronger Strategic Leadership

- Better placed to manage large-scale infrastructure, housing, and economic planning
- More coherent voice when working with central government

5. Potential for Better Service Integration

- Health, education, transport, and social care can be more joined-up
- Holistic approach to complex social and environmental issues



⚠️ Possible Cons of Unitary Authorities

1. Loss of Local Accountability

- Larger authorities may feel remote or disconnected from residents
- Risk that local needs, especially in rural areas, are overlooked

2. Disruption and Complexity in Transition

- Reorganisation can be costly and time-consuming
- Risk of service disruption during structural changes

3. Reduced Local Identity

- Fewer councils means fewer opportunities to preserve distinct local voices
- Communities may lose a sense of democratic closeness

4. Risk of Centralisation

- Decision-making may be drawn into urban centres or areas with greater influence
- Smaller towns and parishes may be marginalised without strong devolution

5. Requires Strong Parish Sector to Offset Loss of Districts

- Without well-resourced and empowered parish and town councils, community-level services may suffer
- In areas with no parish council (e.g. urban centres), democratic gaps may widen



Why Devolve Power?



Reasons you'll hear:



1. To Bring Decision-Making Closer to the People

Better understanding of community needs

2. To Improve Local Services

Decision-making can be quicker and service delivery cheaper

3. To Encourage Local Involvement

People are more likely to volunteer and have their say

4. To Share the Workload

Unitary authorities cover large areas and many responsibilities

5. To Support Local Democracy

It strengthens democratic engagement by allowing elected parish and town councillors to have real influence

6. Because It's Encouraged by National Policy



What else?

- 1. Devolution passes on responsibility, but not always full funding**
When a unitary authority devolves a service the associated budget may not transfer in full. This means local councils may need to adjust their precept to continue delivering services at the expected level.
- 2. It helps manage budget pressures**
Principal authorities operate under tight financial constraints. By working in partnership with local councils to share service delivery, essential services can be maintained in a more sustainable way for the wider area.
- 3. It shifts service delivery closer to the community**
When services are devolved, it leads to greater local control and more direct accountability, enabling decisions to be made by those closest to the issues.
- 4. It encourages innovation and flexible delivery**
Local councils often find creative, cost-effective ways to deliver services, often driven by funding realities, leading to more community-led, tailored solutions.



Introducing Neighbourhoods



Why we need them

Neighbourhoods (sometimes called areas, partnerships or networks) are local partners, including town and parish councils, working together on services and issues that matter to them. They ensure rural and small communities have a voice.

- Deliver joined-up services at local level
- Share resources and reduce duplication
- Support voluntary and community sector collaboration

Governance:

- Not a new authority, but a partnership
- Could include parish/town councils, schools, PCNs, VCSE groups
- May be written into Unitary Constitution for formal influence



Case studies

Cornwall's Community Area Partnerships

<https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/people-and-communities/community-area-partnerships>

Wiltshire's Area Boards

<https://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/article/6142/Introduction>



A Neighbourhood IS NOT:

- ❌ Not a new tier of government
- ❌ Not a statutory or legislative body
- ❌ Not a replacement for parish or town councils
- ❌ Not a decision-making authority (on its own)
- ❌ Not fixed in size or structure
- ❌ Not limited to councils



A Neighbourhood IS:

- 🤝 A partnership of local organisations working together to make life better for their shared area
 - 🤝 A way of bringing people and services together at a local level
 - 🤝 A joined up, local, relevant way of working for communities
- 🤝 An opportunity to think about shared challenges and to solve them collectively, potentially sharing resources



Where does its POWER come from?

Even though it doesn't have formal legal power, a neighbourhood's influence comes from:

- **Partnerships** – getting the right people around the table
- **Local knowledge** – understanding community needs and strengths
- **Collective voice** – representing many councils and organisations together
- **Being recognised in the unitary council's constitution** – giving it formal status in planning and decision-making
- **Relationships** – building trust with the unitary authority and other services

It's **influence, not authority** – but influence can go a long way when people work well together.



How can Neighbourhoods benefit communities?

- ✓ **Better local decisions** – shaped by people who know the area best
- ✓ **More joined-up services** – councils, health, police and schools working together
- ✓ **Greater influence** – a stronger voice when engaging with the unitary authority
- ✓ **Shared resources** – pooling expertise, staff, or funding
- ✓ **Less duplication** – tackling issues together, not in silos
- ✓ **Support for parishes** – especially smaller councils or parish meetings that may struggle alone

Think of it as a **community network with purpose** – flexible, collaborative, and focused on what matters most to local people



What can you do now?

- ▶▶ Create your own council devolution working group
 - ▶▶ Respond to the GAPTC consultation survey
 - ▶▶ Decide what services your council might take on
 - ▶▶ Write to your district/borough council
- ▶▶ Let GAPTC know what support and resources you will need
- ▶▶ Connect with your neighbouring councils via your Council HUBs
 - ▶▶ Talk to your community and start local conversations
 - ▶▶ Watch for updates on our website

<https://gaptc.org.uk/devolution-lga>



