



Looking to 2050

The future of local government in England

A report by the
Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)



Jonathan Carr-West
Chief Executive
LGIU

Change and challenge – two concepts that local government is both familiar with and consistently responds to with vision, resilience and efficiency.

And, now, change is coming swiftly to the very fabric of local government in the shape of the biggest set of reforms that local authorities in England have faced for a generation.

The Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill foreshadows a world in which we have a single tier of local government, and above that, mayoral strategic authorities, everywhere – creating a new layer of government across the whole of England.

Like us, many of you will have been intently focused on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). However, devolution is profoundly important in its own right and will forever change the landscape. We need to pay more attention to how it will operate, how local authorities and strategic authorities will cooperate, what their respective roles will be, and how this structure will ultimately deliver desired outcomes for local government and communities.

That is why we are proud to be collaborating with Local Partnerships on this critical research. Looking to 2050: The future of local government in England captures the perspectives of individuals already working within combined authority areas. Understanding what does and doesn't work now is a prerequisite to determining how structures, relationships and frameworks must evolve and develop in the years ahead.

And, what we've found is hugely significant as we work together to create a more coherent system capable of meeting the challenges of the next 25 years. It is clear from our research that Strategic Authorities need a purpose, not just powers.

While there is enormous potential to drive growth, reform public services and give voice to all of England's regions through devolution (and our research shows real enthusiasm for this), there's a worrying lack of

definition. We need to be clearer not just about how devolution will work but what it's actually for.

To achieve long-term reform, devolution must be built on four pillars.

First, strategic authorities must be defined as system leaders, coordinating regional functions such as transport, housing, climate, economy, and skills – not as delivery bodies.

Second, we must clearly establish a functional division of responsibilities: councils for people-centred services, strategic authorities for regional coordination, and central government for frameworks and fiscal architecture.

Third, a long-term pathway for devolution to 2050 must be established that addresses constitutional choices: ambition for regional governance, fiscal autonomy, and representation. The current Bill is a start, but the destination must be set to ensure ongoing public confidence in these reforms.

Finally, these structural choices require strong enabling frameworks, including resilient governance, mature relationships, stability, and practical tools, underpinned by flexible, multi-year, outcomes-based, integrated fiscal settlements.

We have the building blocks, but we now need intention. Choosing clarity, purpose, and long-term design over drift, incrementalism, and short-term fixes will build a settlement that empowers local leaders, strengthens economies, and delivers better outcomes for 2050 and beyond. We look forward to working closely with councils, sector leaders and the government to achieve this ambition.



Adele Gritten
Chief Executive
Local Partnerships

England is in the middle of the most far-reaching changes to its local governance system in a generation. Taken together, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, Local Government Reorganisation, and a raft of place-based policy reforms represent a genuine opportunity to reshape how power, services and accountability operate across the country. But presently, the system does not yet add up to a coherent design. The reforms risk hard-wiring ambiguity into the next 25 years of public service delivery unless government and the sector take a more intentional approach to partnership working and accountabilities.

That is the central message of this report. And it is a timely one.

The challenges facing England to 2050 are structural, long-term and cross-boundary: productivity stagnation, widening health inequalities, climate adaptation, an ageing population, chronic pressures in social care and temporary accommodation, the urgent need for more affordable homes, and real strains on fiscal sustainability. None of these map neatly onto administrative boundaries. They demand a system capable of acting at the right scale – local where appropriate, regional where necessary, national only where unavoidable.

Yet English governance is still largely organised around short-term financing and thinking, partial settlements and successive rounds of institutional re-wiring. Devolution as set out in the Bill makes progress, but it will not on its own deliver the transformative redesign that the next generation of challenges requires. The findings in this research underline that reality. Sector support for devolution is clearly strong. But confidence that the current model can genuinely shift outcomes remains limited.

If we want a system fit for 2050, we cannot leave the next phase of devolution to chance. It has to be purposeful, designed, and anchored in a clear view of who does what – and why.

Design, not drift

The starting point is clarity. Combined Authorities have a strategic purpose. This research shows strong agreement on the areas where scale matters – transport, housing, public health, economic development – and far less confidence that regional structures can or should take on people-centred frontline services. Yet in practice, boundaries between “strategic” and “local” remain blurred, and the Bill does little to resolve that.

Equally, the move to unitary councils offers a once-in-a-generation chance to create strong, capable delivery institutions. But their role in a devolved system needs to be understood explicitly, not inferred. Frontline services, particularly social care and children’s services, must rest with councils. That needs to be stated plainly and designed into the operating model, not treated as an assumption that may or may not hold.

At present, neither role – regional nor local – is defined with the precision needed for stability, accountability or public confidence. The risk is a governance landscape built on good intentions but lacking the functional settlement required to make it work.

A pathway, not a patchwork

One of the most striking findings in the report is the mismatch between the scale of England’s long-term challenges and the incremental, deal-driven approach that still characterises devolution. If the ambition is truly to rebalance power, drive growth, improve public services and deepen democratic legitimacy, then England needs a long-term pathway, not a series of episodic bargains.

By 2050, we need to know where we intend the system to land. Do we stop at the Bill? Do we move toward a more federal-style settlement? Or do we build something between the two, where strategic authorities have meaningful powers but local government retains primacy over delivery?

Right now, that destination remains undefined. Without clarity, reform risks becoming a perpetual process rather than a purposeful one.

Relationships, governance and resilience

This research also makes a clear point: relationships have carried the system further than its structures. Collaboration between councils, mayors, chief executives and central departments has often substituted for formal clarity. That is admirable – but it is not resilient. As new mayors are elected, unitary councils come into being, and national priorities

shift, the system will need structures and governance that can withstand turnover and turbulence, contradiction and convolution.

Strong relationships will always matter. But they must be supported by shared evidence bases, agreed roles and responsibilities, joint planning, and governance mechanisms that do not rely on individual personalities. Stability and resilience will be essential if the system is to deliver visible outcomes rather than simply manage institutional change.

A practical framework for the next phase

One of the strengths of this report is that it does not just diagnose the problem. It sets out the practical building blocks for a more intentional approach:

- ▶ A clear typology of what Combined Authorities are for
- ▶ A functional settlement mapping who does what
- ▶ Future-state scenarios for English governance to 2050
- ▶ Pathways for deepening devolution
- ▶ Tools for improving collaboration, governance and institutional resilience

These components matter. They give central and local government a shared frame for designing the system England actually needs, rather than the one it happens to inherit.

Local Partnerships will be working with the sector to develop the toolkits and collaborative principles to allow Strategic Authorities, Unitary Authorities and Central Government to work together constructively. We are already helping both councils and Whitehall navigate the complexity of major reform programmes. The next phase will require even more: structured change management, system design methodologies, collaboration toolkits, fiscal readiness assessments, investment frameworks and governance models that help places move from theory to practice.

A call to action

Devolution is at a crossroads. We can settle for a map-based expansion that replicates the same uncertainties in more places. Or we can use this moment to build a system that is genuinely designed for England's future.

Combined Authorities should provide strategic leadership, particularly where scale matters.

Unitary councils should deliver responsive, place-based services.

Central government should support via clear, long-term pathways – financial, mission and vision.

The choice ahead of us is not administrative. It is strategic – and it will shape outcomes for communities for decades.

If we get the design right, devolution can become one of the most important public sector reforms of the 21st century. If we don't, we will spend the next 25 years managing the consequences.

Let's choose design over drift. And let's build the system England genuinely needs for 2050.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

England's governance landscape is undergoing profound change. When the Government's reforms reach their conclusion, the whole country will, for the first time, operate under a single tier of local government, while combined authorities – now evolving into strategic authorities – are being extended nationwide. These reforms represent a **once-in-a-generation opportunity** to move power closer to people, strengthen democratic accountability and create a more coherent system capable of meeting the challenges of the next 25 years.

But opportunity does not guarantee success.

Even after the Bill becomes law, and if the Government meets its clear ambition to introduce mayoral strategic authorities across every part of England, the country will retain its status as one of the most centralised large democracies there is. Our ambitions should go further, to unlock growth and revitalise local and regional democracy across the country.

This report, supported by Local Partnerships, draws on a sector-wide survey of 67 respondents across all current combined authority areas and 10 in-depth interviews with senior officials, leaders and mayors. The message is consistent: the potential of strategic authorities is widely recognised, but their strategic purpose remains undefined. The system lacks clarity, coherence and a long-term plan.

Our problem is not just a shortage of evidence about what works and what doesn't work today. It is a **lack of strategic clarity** about what this system is for, and how it should evolve. Local leaders clearly tell us:

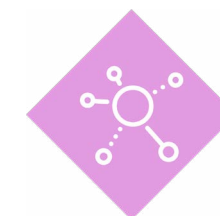
- ▶ There is strong support for a strategic regional tier.
- ▶ But there is **no settled understanding** of its core purpose or how it should differ across geographies.
- ▶ Existing Strategic Authorities have raised the profile of their regions and secured investment, but have not yet become the strategic system leaders many hoped for.
- ▶ The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill offers greater consistency, but provides limited new powers and does not articulate a long-term destination.

There is a clear pathway forward if we choose to take it: powers should be built from the bottom up, not handed down as rewards or withheld as punishment. The starting point should be that frontline, people-centred services sit with local authorities by default; strategic authorities focus on the things that require scale and coordination; and central government sets broad frameworks, standards and long-term funding, stepping in only where necessary.

We can build a model of governance that improves regional economic outcomes, strengthens climate resilience, supports housing growth, tackles inequality and embeds fiscal sustainability. But doing so requires a purposeful design of roles, responsibilities and long-term direction.

This report proposes a reframing of England's emerging settlement around three strategic imperatives underpinned by two enabling frameworks:

1. Clarify the core purpose of Strategic Authorities



Strategic authorities cannot fulfil their potential if their purpose remains implicit or ambiguous. They require a clear role, understood nationally and locally, within a system of empowered unitary councils. Based on extensive sector insight, we outline five core strategic functions of this tier of government:

a. Strategic Convenor

Bringing together stakeholders to plan and pursue genuinely regional priorities: transport networks, spatial planning, housing growth, economic development and climate resilience.

b. Prosperity Engine

Coordinating investment, aligning innovation, capital funding and skills development for the regional labour market, and taking responsibility for long-term regional economic strategies.

c. Collaboration Platform

Providing a platform for evidence gathering and sharing, building understanding of the regional economy, supporting cross-boundary planning, and enabling coherent and collaborative transport and infrastructure decisions.

d. Regional Champion

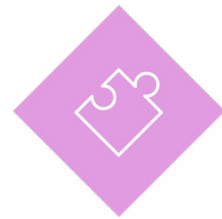
Acting as a visible, democratically accountable voice for the region, strengthening public participation and institutional trust.

e. Bridge Between Local Government and the Centre

Negotiating devolution settlements, mediating tensions, aligning national and regional goals, and helping reshape how Whitehall works with places.

Crucially, strategic authorities should not deliver day-to-day services. Their purpose is strategic, connective and enabling.

2. Establish a Clear, Functional Division of Responsibilities Between Strategic Authorities and Unitaries



The next phase of reform must provide a clear and lasting allocation of responsibilities. England needs to move from deal-based pragmatism toward a functional settlement guided by a simple principle:

Local by default, regional where it adds value, national only where necessary.

In practice, this means:

- ▶ Local (councils) lead on frontline, people-centred services: adult social care, children's services, housing allocations, community wellbeing and local public health.
- ▶ Regional (strategic authorities) take on the functions where scale matters: transport integration, strategic planning, housing growth, skills pipelines, regional climate and nature policies and regional economic development.
- ▶ National government provides long-term frameworks, fiscal architecture, regulation and oversight, not micro-management.

This division of labour must be supported by practical mechanisms between strategic and local authorities: memoranda of understanding, shared accountability frameworks, joint evidence bases, transparent decision-making protocols and agreed methods for resolving conflicts when regional and local priorities diverge.

A functional settlement also requires a serious funding and accountability framework. Integrated settlements, multi-year budgets and clearer statutory fiscal powers across each level of government will be essential if strategic authorities and unitaries are to plan with confidence and take responsibility for outcomes.

3. Create a Long-Term Pathway to 2050: Three Future-State Scenarios



If devolution is to be more than a series of piecemeal reforms, we need a shared view of where this journey leads. We set out three credible scenarios that illustrate how strategic authorities and unitaries could evolve:

a. Integrated Regionalism

Strategic authorities with stronger statutory powers, fiscal flexibility and coherent regional strategies, working with streamlined unitaries.

b. Localist Reset

Enhanced subsidiarity: unitaries remain the primary leaders of services and place, with strategic authorities acting mainly as convenors and brokers.

c. Connected Governance

Joint service platforms, pooled budgets for cross-cutting challenges, shared accountability and formalised cross-tier collaboration.

These scenarios do not predict the future; they define the choices ahead. The Government now needs to articulate its long-term ambition for devolution and the route for achieving it. Crucially, the strength of local, and regional, government is in its diversity, and it is perfectly possible that a "one size fits all" approach based on the current powers of established strategic authorities – those based in large metropolitan areas – will fail to make best use of the opportunities present in other geographies. Whatever pathway we define should take into account the importance of regional variation.

Enabling Frameworks

These three strategic imperatives: clarity of purpose, division of responsibility and vision of the future, must be underpinned by essential enabling frameworks which will give them the best chance of success.

Strengthen Governance, Relationships and Institutional Resilience

The first decade of devolution has relied heavily on goodwill, political consensus and individual relationships within the new authorities. That is not a sustainable operating model in an era of political change. The next phase requires:

- ▶ Clear, collectively agreed regional priorities
- ▶ Regular, structured cross-tier leadership forums for officers and politicians
- ▶ Transparent accountability arrangements
- ▶ Shared metrics for public outcomes
- ▶ Robust mechanisms for public participation between elections
- ▶ Clear dispute-resolution processes
- ▶ Governance structures capable of withstanding political turnover

This is how we build a system that endures beyond electoral cycles and continues to deliver for residents.

Equip Areas With Practical Collaboration Tools

To support implementation, this report proposes a light-touch Collaboration Toolkit including:

- ▶ Templates for joint strategic plans
- ▶ Model governance arrangements for shared services
- ▶ Partnership maturity indicators
- ▶ Joint accountability and dispute-resolution protocols
- ▶ Minimum standards for collaboration
- ▶ Shared outcomes metrics and principles for data sharing

This is not a prescriptive manual, but a practical foundation for making collaboration real.

Conclusion - A System Ready for 2050

England now has the building blocks of a more coherent governance model. But the long-term impact of these reforms depends on intentional design. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill provides the starting point. The question is whether we use it to build a system that is clear, resilient and capable of meeting the country's long-term challenges.

Our message is straightforward. Strategic authorities must be empowered and expected to lead where scale matters. Unitaries must be equipped to lead where proximity to communities makes the difference. The Government must provide the clarity, funding and frameworks that enable both to succeed.

This report sets out how that system can be built – with 10 clear recommendations for Government on how, by 2050, England can develop a governance framework that is coherent, durable and genuinely capable of delivering for citizens.





Introduction

Unlocking the role and purpose of Strategic Authorities in a reformed local government landscape

Local governance in England is at a pivotal moment. Reorganisation will create a national map of unitaries, while strategic authorities led by a directly elected mayor expand across the country. There's a lot of change but **what is missing is a clear strategic purpose**.

This is a generational opportunity, but realising the potential of this new model requires:

- ▶ A clearer articulation of the purpose of Strategic Authorities (SAs)
- ▶ A functional division of responsibilities between local, regional and national tiers
- ▶ Long-term clarity about England's preferred future-state by 2050
- ▶ Enabling frameworks that ensure the system works in practice, not only on paper.

This report, built on a foundation of conversations with sector leaders, argues that combined authorities must evolve into true regional system leaders – leading services where scale matters and cross-boundary challenges exist, such as transport, housing, growth, climate resilience – while unitaries retain responsibility for frontline services by default.

We set out a typology of SA roles, a functional division of labour, and three scenarios for how the system could evolve to 2050. Devolution now requires intentional, long-term design: **local by default, strategic where scale matters, national only where necessary**. To fulfil the potential offered by devolution, we offer 10 clear recommendations to the Government which, if implemented, would deliver a system of strong, resilient and stable local governance.



Chapter 1: Clarify the core purpose of Strategic Authorities

Defining the strategic purpose of Strategic Authorities in a reformed system of local government

Combined authorities (CAs) and metro-mayors have become an established feature of England's governance landscape. Since the creation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in 2014, this tier of government has demonstrated the art of the possible. But the roll out has ultimately been piecemeal and inconsistent. Although the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill seeks to create a framework underpinned by uniformity, there remains a patchwork of different Strategic Authority types – spanning City Region, Metropolitan, County and Coastal. At present, it is unclear to what extent the Bill will succeed in standardising this variety.

The Government, when outlining their devolution ambitions, talks about strategic mayoral authorities driving growth, representing their place on the national and international stage, planning and delivering transport services as the Local Transport Authority, and leading a co-ordinated approach to local public services.

Our research reveals a wide variation in how leaders, officers and mayors understand the role of their current CA and the purpose of SAs in the future, ranging from investment broker to convenor of collaboration to regional advocate. This reflects the currently mosaic of current combined authority structures. This ambiguity weakens the model and inhibits the full potential of devolution.

To address this gap, we propose a more sophisticated, future-focused typology of five strategic roles that strategic authorities must fulfil within a system where unitaries deliver frontline services and central government sets national frameworks. These roles provide the coherence necessary for long-term system design – and offer CAs a clearer mandate as strategic authorities.



Strategic Convenor

Strategic Authorities should lead on functions that require scale and issues whose success depends on cross-boundary coordination, long-term planning and integrated infrastructure.

“Take a strategic view of key infrastructure such as transport, housing, energy and waste.” (Top-level director)

Core functions

- ▶ Regional transport strategy and network integration
- ▶ Spatial planning and strategic land use
- ▶ Net-zero and climate resilience planning
- ▶ Economic development and industrial strategy
- ▶ Regional housing markets and infrastructure corridors
- ▶ Energy systems, waste and environmental planning where scale is essential

Why this role matters

Fragmented local approaches cannot deliver integrated transport networks, energy transition, or economic growth at scale. A SA acting as Strategic Convenor ensures alignment across constituent unitary councils while speaking with a single voice nationally.

Implication for councils

Local delivery continues, but within a regional strategic framework that reduces duplication and embeds coherence. Crucially, councils should be integral to the development of these strategies, hence our designation of the strategic authority as “convener” rather than “planner”.

Case study: integrated transport in Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority, together with its constituent councils have developed an evolving integrated transport network, known as the “Bee Network” which brings together bus franchising – the first city region to do so – metrolink, and plans to integrate rail networks across the region. The councils each have their own local transport plans which take account of the Greater Manchester 2040 plan, allowing the combined authority plan to act as the guiding light across the constituent councils, while granting local authority autonomy in delivery.

These integrations have resulted in tap-in tap-out ticketing and fare caps across the integrated network, as well as a more holistic method for developing local transport plans that take into account regional economic geographies.

Prosperity Engine

SAs increasingly act as the primary interface between central government and the regions where they exist on large-scale capital programmes, regeneration plans and local growth funding. This role should be formalised and expanded.

“To attract funding into a region and then to work with local authorities to spend that funding on mutually agreed priorities.” (Council leader)

Core functions

- ▶ Managing large-scale investment funds
- ▶ Securing and aligning multi-year capital programmes
- ▶ Leveraging private finance and anchor institutions
- ▶ Coordinating innovation zones, freeports and economic clusters
- ▶ Developing region-wide business cases and investment propositions



Why this role matters

Regions need long-term, coherent investment, not fragmented pots of funding. A SA can allocate capital efficiently, target growth assets and industries and reduce churn in the system.

Implication for central government

A single, accountable regional partner enables streamlined investment flows and more consistent delivery of national missions tailored to regional strengths.

Case Study: West Midlands Futures Green Paper

In 2025, the West Midlands Combined Authority published the West Midlands Futures Green Paper, which includes a detailed growth plan, taking into account the strengths and economic opportunities in each part of the region: “Birmingham is a resurgent core city, our engine for growth and agglomeration, complemented by Solihull, home to the airport, the NEC and the new HS2 interchange station. Wolverhampton and the wider Black Country are our corridors for green innovation with unrivalled transport connectivity to the UK’s second city, while Coventry and its links into Warwickshire benefit from deep knowledge capital and highly- value manufacturing.”

This type of detailed growth-focussed planning with a strong understanding of place is only possible with a regional lens developed by a strategic authority in partnership with councils and in collaboration with their local partners. Together, this type of planning allows for the development of local growth strategies that can unlock regional potential.

Collaboration Platform

Many of England’s most complex challenges – ensuring public service quality, workforce gaps, housing need,, public health inequalities, the net-zero transition and climate adaptation – cut across administrative boundaries. SAs should become the default collaboration platform for these shared agendas, and the structure that drives data sharing to tackle these complex challenges.

“Bring regions together, to strengthen regions, [and to ensure] an equal share of monies, opportunities and outcomes for all citizens.”
(Deputy council leader)

Core functions

- ▶ Shared evidence base and regional data observatory
- ▶ Workforce planning (social care, construction, green skills)
- ▶ Coordinating multi-area partnerships (health, education, FE/HE, business)
- ▶ Joint initiatives on climate adaptation, flood risk, air quality
- ▶ Pooled programmes where economies of scale add value

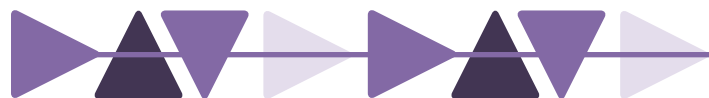
Why this role matters

A structured regional platform prevents the “lost opportunity” of uncoordinated initiatives and enables policy coherence across unitaries, public services and anchor institutions.

Implication for councils

Local delivery remains primary, but unitaries benefit from shared intelligence, aligned priorities and pooled innovation.





Case Study: Liverpool City Region Economies for Healthy Lives

The economies for Healthy Lives programme was developed by The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, together with the University of Liverpool, Liverpool John Moores University, the City Region's 6 local authorities, the city region's 6 Public Health Departments and Jobcentre Plus and funded by the Health Foundation. The project brought stakeholders together to develop a **toolkit** for understanding the links between health and the local economy. Key in their programme was the development of a shared method for linking data – across health, local authorities and other stakeholders – to understand the scale of the public health issues and design methods for tackling them.

Regional Champion

Devolution only succeeds if people recognise who leads their region and trust the system. SAs must strengthen regional identity, voice and legitimacy.

“To be on the ground in our communities, to be present, and to show people that we care and we are here to make a difference.”
(Combined authority mayor)

Core functions

- ▶ Regional public engagement and consultation
- ▶ Fostering collaboration across councils on joint goals
- ▶ Transparent reporting on outcomes and progress
- ▶ Convening anchor institutions and civic partners
- ▶ Acting as the visible democratic representative for the region
- ▶ Building trust, participation and clarity in multi-level governance

Why this role matters

Trust and legitimacy are the conditions for successful collaboration. Without a clear regional democratic presence, devolution risks being technocratic and invisible.

Implication for the public

Citizens gain a clear, accountable figurehead and better visibility of strategic regional priorities.

Case Study: the Covid-19 response in Greater Manchester

During the Covid-19 pandemic, regional mayors, and particularly the mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham, played a significant role in representing their regional priorities. They argued that the pandemic response was being developed based primarily on the needs and experiences of London, whereas elsewhere the lockdowns and their easing were having significantly different effects. This effective regional representation became an important part of the national conversation, and elevated the importance of considering regional priorities during an essentially centralised pandemic response.

Bridge Between Local Government and the Centre

SAs must be the mechanism through which devolution becomes a coherent system – not a patchwork of ad-hoc deals.

“To devolve strategic oversight on key areas for development in our regions, and give such authorities the money and resources and to make positive change for its residents in many aspects of their lives.”
(Council deputy leader)

Core functions

- ▶ Negotiating powers and flexibilities with central government
- ▶ Mediating tensions between unitaries and the centre



- ▶ Aligning national missions (e.g., net-zero, housing) with regional context
- ▶ Developing regional positions on fiscal devolution or system reform
- ▶ Ensuring coherence between unitaries, LEPs (where relevant), health systems and national agencies

Why this role matters

Without a structured interface, England's multi-tier system risks duplication, misalignment and friction. SAs should be the system integrator, translating national priorities into local practice – and local priorities into national policy.

Implication for central government

Fewer fragmented conversations; clearer accountability; better delivery assurance.

Case study: Mayoral Council for England

The Mayoral Council for England was set up in Autumn 2024 to bring together Combined Authority Mayors, central government and the Mayor of London. The body, together with the Council of Nations and Regions, are designed to increase partnership working and represent regional interests on the national stage. At this point the council is only a year old, but organisations like this are an essential starting point for ensuring regions and national governments are working together towards their shared goals.

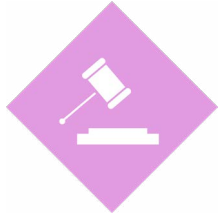
What Strategic Authorities Should Not Do

It's tempting to focus on all the exciting things that strategic authorities can do, but that creates a risk of "scope creep", so it's also important that we also have a clear account of what SAs should not do:

They should not:

- ▶ Deliver frontline, people-centred services (social care, children's services, homelessness)
- ▶ Replace unitaries as the primary democratic authority for place
- ▶ Operate as administrative intermediaries or "funding funnels"
- ▶ Take on functions solely because they are high-profile

SAs succeed when they focus on scale, strategy, coordination and system leadership, not operational delivery.



Chapter 2: Division of Responsibilities in England's Emerging Governance System

A system that is local by default, regional where beneficial, national where necessary.

England now has the opportunity to pin down a governance architecture that has been evolving – unevenly – for more than a decade. As local government reorganisation creates a single layer of unitary authorities and strategic authorities are rolled out across the country, we have a rare chance to design a system built on clarity, confidence and long-term purpose.

That means answering a foundational question: who does what, and why?

The answer is not complicated, but it is profoundly meaningful. Some services depend on relationships with communities that only local government can sustain. Others rely on strategic capacity, long-term planning and the ability to think across functional geographies. And a small number require national consistency, fiscal authority or regulatory power that only central government can provide.

The principle that follows from this: local by default, regional where beneficial, national where necessary, is not a slogan but a design discipline. It recognises that effective government is not about creating tidy boundaries but about aligning democratic accountability, effective public service delivery and the lived reality of place.

Unitary authorities, with their proximity to communities, are the natural home for frontline services. Strategic authorities exist to do the things that no single council can do alone: coordinating transport, shaping housing markets, designing economic and skills systems, and planning for climate resilience. Central government sets the enabling framework within which those functions operate.

A clear, durable division of responsibilities is not a tidy administrative diagram set in stone forever more. It is a theory of the state that prioritises proximity, accountability and purpose, while allowing for evolution over time and regional variation where necessary.

Local - What Should Sit at the Local (Unitary) Level?

Councils are where most people experience government. They have the local intelligence and the everyday relationships that shape service outcomes. They are institutions embedded in the everyday of people's lives.

They should lead on services where:

- ▶ relationships matter,
- ▶ variation in need is high,
- ▶ integration with local partners is essential, and
- ▶ accountability must be visible.

Local functions (by default and by design):

- ▶ Adult social care and support
- ▶ Children's services, safeguarding and early help
- ▶ Homelessness, housing allocations and prevention
- ▶ Libraries, leisure, culture and community services
- ▶ Local planning
- ▶ Public health delivery rooted in place
- ▶ Local roads, neighbourhood mobility and highways maintenance
- ▶ Local economic development and business development
- ▶ Local regulatory functions



Why these stay local

“Local authorities are best placed to deliver local services ... combined authorities should not get involved with the day-to-day running of services.” (Council leader)

“These services operate on the basis of local need; delivering them at a strategic level would lose the local connection.” (Chief executive)

These services succeed when they are configured around people and communities, not administrative convenience. Moving them to the regional level would diminish not just accountability but effectiveness. Relational services require relational governance.

Regional - What Should Sit at the Regional (Strategic Authority) Level?

Strategic authorities create value where scale, integration and coordination are the difference between fragmented provision and coherent systems. Their role is not to substitute for local authorities but to enable them by shaping the strategic environment in which local services operate.

“Activities like transport, regeneration and skills can and should be commissioned on a regional basis.” (Senior council director)

Regional functions (where scale adds value):

- ▶ Regional transport strategy and integrated public transport systems
- ▶ Strategic planning and development orders
- ▶ Regional housing market planning, land acquisition and development
- ▶ Industrial strategy, innovation ecosystems and inward investment
- ▶ Skills pipelines, LSIPs and workforce planning
- ▶ Climate resilience, net-zero pathways and regional energy systems
- ▶ Strategic investment
- ▶ Regional data, insight and evidence platforms
- ▶ System-wide public health strategy and health inequalities reduction

Why these sit regionally

These are the big, structural questions that determine economic opportunity, resilience and long-term prosperity. They transcend individual local boundaries. They require convening power, shared data and the ability to take decisions at the right scale, across local authorities rather than within them.

“Combined authorities are only relevant ... where strategic vision at regional scale is important.” (Council deputy leader)

National - What Should Remain National?

Some functions are inherently national, either because they require consistency, fiscal control or the ability to manage externalities that cross all sub-national boundaries.

National functions (framework-setting, regulation, funding architecture):

- ▶ Fiscal policy and the design of devolved funding regimes
- ▶ National standards for health, education and safeguarding
- ▶ Legislative frameworks for planning, transport, climate and growth
- ▶ Redistribution, equalisation and macro-economic management
- ▶ Large-scale national infrastructure of strategic importance

Why these remain national

These functions underpin the integrity of the state and the cohesion of the system. They must be national to be effective – but they must also be limited to their proper scope.



Worked Examples: How Responsibilities Interlock

A mature governance system accepts that responsibilities intersect. The point is not to eliminate overlap but to make it deliberate.

Function	Unitary Authorities (Local) “Proximity Matters”	Strategic Authority (Regional) “Scale Adds Value”	Central Government (National) “Frameworks & Necessity”	Relevant legislation
Adult Social Care	Lead commissioner and provider; safeguarding; partnership with local NHS	Cross-boundary workforce strategy; market shaping (where appropriate)	Funding framework; regulatory standards	Care Act (2014), any relevant legislation embedded after Casey Commission review
Children’s Services	Statutory responsibility; early help; local safeguarding; SEND provision	Shared specialist services; workforce coordination	National curriculum; statutory duties; SEND funding	Children Act (2004)
Housing Allocations & Homelessness	Allocations; prevention; local priorities	Housing market strategy; growth zones; regional land assembly	National housing standards; major programmes	Planning and Infrastructure Bill; Homelessness Reduction Act (2017);, Housing Act (1996)
Spatial Planning & Land Use	Local plans; development decisions	Regional spatial frameworks; strategic sites; infrastructure sequencing	National planning policy; regulatory regime	Planning and Infrastructure Bill; English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill
Transport	Local highways; active travel; neighbourhood mobility	Regional networks; rail and bus integration; key route networks	National frameworks; rail regulation; major schemes	English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill; Transport Act (2000)

Function	Unitary Authorities (Local) “Proximity Matters”	Strategic Authority (Regional) “Scale Adds Value”	Central Government (National) “Frameworks & Necessity”	Relevant legislation
Economic Development	Business support; regeneration; town centre planning	Regional economic strategy; inward investment; clusters & innovation	National industrial strategy; trade policy	English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill
Skills & Labour Market	Local employability services; FE provider relationships	Regional skills strategies; LSIPs; workforce pipeline	Qualifications system; national funding	English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill; Skills and Post-16 Education Act (2022)
Public Health	Community health and wellbeing programmes	Regional determinants-of-health strategy; shared intelligence, health inequality duty	National health security and standards	Health and Social Care Act (2012); English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill
Climate & Net Zero	Local adaptation; enforcement; community energy	Regional energy and decarbonisation planning	National regulation; carbon budgets	Environment Act (2021)
Waste & Environment	Waste collection; environmental health	Strategic waste disposal; regional ecology and water management	National environmental regulation	Environmental Protection Act (1990)



Function	Unitary Authorities (Local) “Proximity Matters”	Strategic Authority (Regional) “Scale Adds Value”	Central Government (National) “Frameworks & Necessity”	Relevant legislation
Fire, Police & Emergency Services	Local resilience forums	Optional PCC/ fire functions; regional resilience coordination	National resilience frameworks	English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill
Funding & Fiscal Powers	Local tax-setting (within national rules)	Integrated settlements; multi-year capital strategy	Fiscal framework; distribution mechanisms	Local Government Finance Acts (various); English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

The responsibilities of strategic authorities are at risk of falling into the same trap as local authorities, where the diffusion across different legislation, plans and strategies effectively confuses who is responsible for what. Strategic authority functions will be split across the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, the Planning And Infrastructure Bill, the 10 Year Health Plan for England, Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and doubtless many other laws and plans as time goes by. The response to this confusion for local authorities has been the announcement of a review of statutory responsibilities.

This review should be expanded to also include strategic authorities, and to outline the overlaps and distinctions between who is responsible for what.

Deep dive: Transport

In established strategic authorities transport operates as a fully integrated Regional Transport System, managed by the strategic authority with minimal need for central government oversight.

In our vision for 2050, these systems will be fully integrated and tailored to local preferences for residents in all regions across England. It will support both commuting and leisure, and actively drive Net Zero goals, regional economic growth and access to opportunity.

The SA would take overall responsibility for system performance, planning and integration, while unitaries would maintain local assets and act as the link between neighbourhoods, local employers and the strategic network.

1. Service Management and Strategic Development.

The Strategic Authority acts as the unified transport provider or commissioner, using the powers described in the Enabling Frameworks to achieve seamless travel across the region.

N.B This framework is not intended to be an absolute binary of roles and responsibilities, moreover it is contained here to denote the types of emphasis of roles for the future.

Aspect	Role of Strategic Authority (SA)	Role of Unitary Authorities
System Operations	Integrated Public Transport: Statutory control over bus franchising, local rail services, and the unified ticketing and pricing system across the region. There is autonomy over transport assets in the region, without unnecessary control from central government.	Local Roads and Highways Maintenance: The LA is no longer hampered by extensive competitive bidding for capital improvements. A sustainable financial model allows for high quality highways and streetscene. Management of street scene, fixing potholes, street lighting and winter services is done to a high standard for all neighbourhoods and communities.

Aspect	Role of Strategic Authority (SA)	Role of Unitary Authorities
Strategy & Infrastructure	Creates the Regional Transport Strategy, selects and sequences major strategic projects (e.g. tram/rail lines, regional road corridors), and ensures alignment with the Net Zero strategy. Connects with regional investment strategies and pipelines to ensure accessible commuting opportunities. Transport development reflects economic and demographic changes.	True ownership of Active Travel (e.g., cycling lanes, footways), linking neighbourhoods to transport hubs, promoting connectivity with local employers to ensure effective pathways to work. Ensuring more complex needs are met through integrated commissioning and sustainable finance for all communities and key sites (e.g. SEND school transport, Hospital transport routes). “Last mile” connectivity is actively developed through local infrastructure. Through connected data sets with the SA, the Local Authority is able to develop detailed and responses local traffic management improvements – traffic calming, school run routes and active development of low traffic neighbourhoods.
Economic Connectivity	Works with major employers, health bodies and education providers to design transport corridors that improve mobility for all segments of society.	A community leader, leading on co-productive relationships with businesses, anchor institutions and schools to identify gaps in access.
Investment & Funding	Allocates consolidated multi-year funding through Integrated Settlements, manages, long-term capital programmes and technological upgrades.	Is the custodian and leader of local assets, managing parking revenue, developer contributions (e.g. Section 106/CIL levies), and small-scale local improvements. Devolution allows for local experiments of new transport initiatives and approaches, evaluated locally, owned by the LA working with affected communities.

2. Clarity through Enabling Frameworks

The **Enabling Frameworks** empower SAs and unitaries to transform transport delivery:

- **Unified Control:** The SA acts as the single commissioning body for bus and rail services, ending fragmentation and ensuring service integration and consistent standards across the region. This is foundational for achieving Net Zero.
- **Longtermism through Funding Security:** Because funding is multi-year and consolidated, the SA can coordinate transport, housing, and skills. Infrastructure (bus priority, rail stations, active travel routes) is delivered before development, unlocking growth and avoiding future congestion.
- **Embedded Collaborative Decision Making:** The regional transport system will be developed in a systematic, evidence-led process involving local councils, operators and communities. Decisions will be based on: real travel patterns, demand modelling, carbon impact, local accessibility needs.



Deep dive: Housing

In established strategic authority areas, housing and planning already operate through more coordinated regional systems. We have seen strategic authorities in established areas such as Greater Manchester, the West Midlands or the North East take an active role in strategic housing decisions, demonstrating the value of a model that could be productively expanded. The convening power these authorities already have, together with strategic planning roles and powers they will gain over land acquisition make them ideally placed for large-scale housing plans, such as the Social and Affordable Homes Programme.

In our 2050 vision, strategic authorities and councils work together to create a fully aligned Regional Housing and Planning System that ensures homes are delivered in the right places, supported by the right infrastructure, and shaped by local needs. The SA provides long-term spatial planning, strategic land assembly and the ability to unlock major development sites, while unitaries retain responsibility for local planning decisions and democratic accountability. This combination helps overcome the inertia and conflict that often characterise housing and planning, enabling faster delivery, better-quality places and more affordable homes.

N.B This framework is not intended to be an absolute binary of roles and responsibilities, moreover it is contained here to denote the types of emphasis of roles for the future.

Aspect	Role of Strategic Authorities	Role of Unitary Authorities
Planning	Strategic planning, responsibility for spatial development strategies, and power to issue mayoral development orders	Local planning, decision makers on individual non-strategic planning applications informed by local consultations.
Meeting demand	Apportion and distribute housing to the most appropriate locations, including with necessary infrastructure requirements	Democratic local control, contributor to spatial development strategies with local knowledge

Aspect	Role of Strategic Authorities	Role of Unitary Authorities
Investment and development	Winning private investment through convening function, and delivery through the use of mayoral development corporations.	Responsibility for building, and liaison/organisation with private developers
Representation	Representation of regional housing priorities to national government, to explore national priorities and their interaction with local requirements	Representation of local views on planning applications and developments, as well as local housing need through data sharing
Knowledge	Data platform for regional housing markets, need, demographics, development opportunities, affordability, spatial planning and infrastructure requirements	Data on housing use and demand, local and relational knowledge, building and adaptation data and planning consultation information.

Meeting demand for housing will require every part of the state working together. The strategic authority has been envisioned by the government as providing that unique, missing, piece of the puzzle with their responsibilities for strategic planning, but this can go further. The strategic authority can become the key mediator between national priorities – for housing development, net zero, transport and growth – and local capacity and democratic accountability.



Funding the System: Integrated Settlements and Fiscal Alignment

*“More thought needs to go into the purpose and not just the funding.”
(Combined authority mayor)*

A functional division of responsibilities will not succeed without a fiscal framework that supports its ambition. For too long, England’s funding system for local and regional authorities has been fragmented, short-term and overly centralised. Local authorities face unsustainable financial pressures that undermine frontline delivery, while strategic authorities rely on a patchwork of competitive pots, ringfenced grants and one-off programmes that make long-term planning difficult. National government, meanwhile, struggles to hold the system to account for outcomes when the means to deliver them are dispersed across dozens of disconnected funds.

Integrated settlements begin to address this structural weakness. By consolidating multiple funding streams into a single multi-year agreement between central government and an established strategic authority, they offer a route to clarity, predictability and strategic planning. But at present only a handful of areas benefit from these arrangements, and even the most advanced settlements remain constrained by ringfencing, limited revenue flexibility and upward-facing accountability. Government has committed to rolling these out further and this needs to be urgently prioritised.

Why Integrated Settlements Matter

Funding should follow function. Without alignment between powers and resources:

- ▶ **Councils** cannot sustain the people-centred services that must sit locally by default.
- ▶ **Strategic authorities** cannot design or sequence long-term transport, skills, housing or climate programmes.
- ▶ **Central government** cannot meaningfully judge system performance or progress against national missions.

Integrated settlements support the system by:

- ▶ **Providing multi-year certainty** – enabling both SAs and unitaries to move from reactive financial management to long-term planning.

- ▶ **Reducing fragmentation and churn** – replacing dozens of competitive funding mechanisms with negotiated, purpose-driven investment frameworks.
- ▶ **Enabling joint planning and shared accountability** – where regional strategy and local delivery are underpinned by a coherent investment architecture.
- ▶ **Creating the foundations for fiscal maturity** – offering a stepping stone towards more meaningful fiscal devolution.

What a Next-Generation Integrated Settlement Should Include

To underpin a functional system to 2050, integrated settlements must evolve beyond their current scope. A next-generation model should include:

- ▶ **Consolidated capital and revenue funding** across transport, housing, regeneration, net-zero, FE/skills and elements of public health.
- ▶ **Shared regional-local funding frameworks** that align regional strategy with local delivery and set out jointly agreed priorities.
- ▶ **Greater flexibility over spend**, with ringfencing used only where essential to national objectives.
- ▶ **A route map toward fiscal devolution**, including expanded local tax tools, retention of regionally generated revenues, or new regionally designed levies.
- ▶ **Strengthened accountability**, focusing on transparent outcomes, regional scrutiny and public reporting rather than compliance.

This would give the councils the financial stability they need to safeguard people and place based services, SAs get the ability to invest for the long term and national government can hold the regional and local authorities accountable for outcomes and step back from unnecessary and time consuming micromanagement.

Managing Tensions in the Strategic Authority Model

Even the clearest settlement cannot eliminate tension. Instances where tensions may emerge in strategic authority working include where:



- ▶ A unitary rejects or resists a regional spatial or transport priority
- ▶ A strategic authority adopts a direction that conflicts with local plans
- ▶ Political turnover disrupts established relationships
- ▶ National missions exceed regional capacity or contradict local priorities

Recognising that these tensions are inevitable, the key question is how they are managed. Based on the insights of those working to alleviate tensions in the strategic authority at present, this report proposes the following mechanisms for resolving potential sources of conflict:

- ▶ **Joint Strategic Frameworks** to anchor shared regional and local priorities
- ▶ **Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)** codifying roles, responsibilities and non-negotiables
- ▶ **Regional Partnership Boards** for regular leader- and CEO-level engagement
- ▶ **Joint Accountability Frameworks** with shared metrics and transparent reporting
- ▶ **Escalation routes** to central government, used only in extreme cases when collaboration fails to resolve disputes.

The special case introduced by local government reorganisation (LGR) – which will transform the shape of local government and the environment in which strategic authorities operate – requires additional management to address any emerging tensions.

Strategic authorities with reorganising local authorities will need to:

- ▶ work with newly formed unitaries as they establish capacity and identity
- ▶ update governance arrangements to reflect new partners
- ▶ co-design joint planning frameworks during the transition period
- ▶ use LGR as a chance to reduce duplication, not entrench it

“If we have disagreements, we’ll get in a room. We line them out... We’ve been clear from the outset that we’ll resolve things together.”
(Council leader)

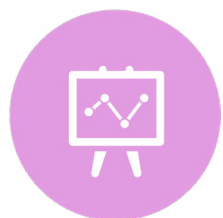
Summary: A Functional Settlement Sustained to 2050

“Combined authorities cannot get involved with everything... They need to stick to strategy or become another local authority.” (Director of finance)

A clear division of responsibilities is the backbone of a governance model capable of addressing England’s long-term economic, social and environmental challenges. The task is not to design a neat organisational chart, but to build a coherent, durable system where roles are intelligible, delivery is effective and accountability is visible.

- ▶ Local government delivers services.
- ▶ Strategic authorities design and coordinate the system.
- ▶ National government sets the enabling environment.

This clarity is strategic, not administrative. It is how England equips itself for the next 25 years – not just the next political cycle and how we move from devolution as a series of deals to devolution as a genuine localisation of power.



Chapter 3: Create a Long-Term Pathway to 2050: Three Future-State Scenarios

3.1 Future State Scenarios

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill establishes the foundations of a new governance landscape. But it does not define a destination for this system. Unless there is a clear long-term trajectory, devolution will remain incremental, reactive and vulnerable to political reversal.

If we are serious about devolution helping us to meet our most pressing challenges we need a clearer vision for how we want local and regional government to look by the middle of the century.

There are two dimensions we need to consider: What powers we are looking to devolve and the balance of power between the regional and local governments we are devolving to.

Firstly, we have to decide how radical we want devolution to be in four key areas; economic growth, regional representation, public service delivery, and fiscal autonomy - for each of these we can envisage a sliding scale from **least radical to most radical reform**.

	Growth	Regional Representation	Public service delivery	Fiscal autonomy
Least Radical	Expansion of the mayoral investment funds across areas of agreed strategic importance and consolidation of local growth funds	Legally entrenched council of mayors and council of nations and regions.	Direct delivery powers devolved from central government over environmental policy and bus franchising	The power to alter the scale of existing local taxes
	Devolution of relevant Whitehall functions across DBT, DEFRA, and other departments.	Legal requirement for central government to gain local/strategic authority approval on regional decisions.	Political representation of the local/strategic authority across other services (health or environment agency)	Power over new local taxes to be defined by central government, such as a visitor levy or licensing charges.
	The power to delineate and create new investment and renewables investment zones, freeports or "industrial strategy zones."	Full establishment of, and election of regional bodies across England, e.g. London Assembly.	Strategic/local authority responsibility for wider frontline service areas.	Removal of all ringfencing and directed spend over core functions.
	Regional investment/infrastructure banks controlled by the relevant governments	Regional/local permanent citizens assemblies integrated into regional decision-making, as in Paris.	Full responsibility for all local government functions held at the regional level, as with federal states in Germany, or the Scottish government.	Retention of regionally or locally generated portions of a national tax, such as VAT or income tax
Most Radical		A council of strategic/local authorities integrated in the British or English parliamentary system with legislative powers.		Regional/local government with control over the distribution of funds to local authorities.
				The power to design and introduce new local taxes, as in Japan.





For each layer of government: local, strategic or national, the powers above and which should be devolved to which level represents a major challenge, and opportunity, for how to reimagine government for the future.

We need to think about the shape of the future state to which we are devolving these powers. This chapter sets out **three credible future-state scenarios**, showing different ways England's system could evolve. These are not predictions; they are strategic choices based on a different centre of gravity between strategic authorities and councils. Each scenario interacts differently with the four core purposes of devolution and each sits at a different point on our sliding scale of radicalism.

"It's always a journey of trust, relationships and clear understanding of different responsibilities." (Director of public health)

Scenario 1: Integrated Regionalism

Stronger statutory strategic authorities with fiscal powers and streamlined unitaries

2050 Vision

A coherent system of strategic regional governance. Strategic authorities hold the major strategic levers for transport, spatial planning, economic development, climate resilience and skills. They have consistent statutory powers, expanded investment authority and partial fiscal autonomy. Unitaries are stable, capable delivery bodies focused on local public services and place-based leadership.

Key features:

- ▶ Regional governments coordinate transport, housing and investment through statutory regional strategies.
- ▶ Unitaries lead on frontline service and local democratic accountability.
- ▶ The centre sets national frameworks, distributes resources, defines legal powers and obligations and manages system standards.
- ▶ Regional assemblies or enhanced scrutiny bodies ensure democratic legitimacy and oversight.

Purpose Profile: Where It Sits on the Radicalism Scale

Growth: High – consolidated regional investment powers and strategic planning

Representation: Medium – formal regional bodies and statutory regional voice

Public Services: Medium – strategic system leadership, local delivery remains local

Fiscal Autonomy: High – partial retention of national taxes, reduced ringfencing

Integrated Regionalism sits in the **upper middle** of the radicalism scale for regional authorities: more ambitious than the current Bill, but far from a full federal model, and with limited new powers for local authorities.





Scenario 2: Localist Reset

*Strong subsidiarity: unitaries lead most services;
Strategic Authorities convene and coordinate*

2050 Vision

England evolves around a principle of radical subsidiarity. Unitaries become powerful, financially resilient organisations responsible for nearly all public services. Strategic authorities exist as lean strategic convenors, coordinating evidence, voluntary collaboration and long-term planning rather than delivering services.

Key features:

- ▶ Unitaries deliver the full range of local public services, including the most complex people-focused systems.
- ▶ Strategic authorities provide cross-boundary intelligence, convening and forward planning.
- ▶ Central government legislates to protect subsidiarity and ensure national minimum standards.

Purpose Profile: Where It Sits on the Radicalism Scale

Growth: Medium – collaborative regional strategy without major statutory powers

Representation: Low–Medium – regional forums, not elected regional institutions

Public Services: High (local) – “local by default” becomes the organising principle

Fiscal Autonomy: Medium – stronger local tax tools, limited regional discretion

The Localist Reset sits at the **least radical** end of the spectrum on regionalism, but at the **most radical end of local empowerment**.

Scenario 3: Connected Governance

*Shared platforms, pooled budgets and joint
accountability across tiers*

2050 Vision

England adopts a hybrid, networked model. Unitaries remain the primary delivery agents, but strategic authorities and local government work through shared platforms, pooled budgets and jointly agreed outcomes for complex, cross-cutting systems such as care integration, climate adaptation and public health inequalities.

Key features:

- ▶ Joint regional–local boards govern pooled budgets.
- ▶ Shared service platforms support procurement, data, evidence and workforce planning.
- ▶ National government focuses on coherence, standards and funding architecture, not micromanagement.
- ▶ Accountability is shared: outcomes are jointly agreed and publicly reported.

Purpose Profile: Where It Sits on the Radicalism Scale

Growth: Medium–High – joint investment vehicles and shared platforms

Representation: Medium – strong regional–local governance, not full assemblies

Public Services: Medium – shared accountability without wholesale reallocation of functions

Fiscal Autonomy: Medium – pooled budgets and reduced fragmentation

Hybrid Collaborative Governance sits at the **centre of the radicalism scale for both strategic and local authorities**: more transformative than today, less structurally disruptive than Integrated Regionalism.



3.2 A Strategic Choice: How Far Up the Radicalism Scale Do We Need to Go?

These scenarios illustrate different institutional models, but they also highlight the fundamental question: **what is devolution for, and how ambitious do we want to be?**

“It is just fundamentally true that this is a weak mayoral model... more about dialogue than genuine devolution.” (Senior director)

Our sliding scale of radicalism highlights four distinct areas where choices must be made:

1. Economic Growth and Strategic Capacity

Do we want modest expansion of mayoral investment funds, or a more radical move towards regional investment banks and full strategic control of industrial strategy zones?

2. Regional Representation

Should we stop at stronger mayoral forums or move toward elected regional bodies and statutory approval requirements for central-regional decisions?

3. Public Service Delivery

Are strategic authorities primarily convenors, or should they hold responsibility for strategic public services such as climate resilience, transport, skills, or even wider systems? Where do we draw the line between what local authorities do and what strategic authorities should deliver?

4. Fiscal Autonomy

Is the government's appetite limited to small adjustments to local taxes, or is there a willingness to retain portions of national taxes or introduce new regionally designed taxes? To what extent do we want regional and local government to have fiscal autonomy beyond the grants determined by central government?

These choices are independent but intertwined. Moving towards greater radicalism in one area may require corresponding movement in others (e.g., expanded public service functions may need to be supported by more meaningful fiscal autonomy).

3.4 Where Does the Bill Take Us?

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill **nudges England toward the least-radical end of Integrated Regionalism**. It envisages:

- ▶ stronger statutory powers and responsibilities for strategic authorities
- ▶ expanded but still limited functions, mainly aimed towards economic growth
- ▶ more consistent structures, implemented across England
- ▶ not much new fiscal autonomy
- ▶ no major strengthening of regional democratic representation

In other words, the Bill **gestures toward regionalism but stops far short of a transformative redesign**. It does not make substantive changes to local authority functions or powers outside of the local government reorganisation process.

If we really want to achieve the ambitions set out in the White Paper – a rebalanced state, strong regional economies across England, resilient public services – **it will not be enough**.

The next phase of reform will require explicit decisions about how far along the radicalism scale government is prepared to move across the four purposes. Unless we are clear and purposeful about that, the system will drift, not evolve.





The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill				
	Growth	Regional Representation	Public service delivery	Fiscal autonomy
Strategic authority impact	Strategic authorities gain responsibility for local growth plans, adult skills, strategic planning and transport functions, local growth fund control.	Intention and framework for mayors to be introduced across England, elected by the supplementary vote Mayors granted powers for simple majority voting	SA responsibilities for transport, strategic planning, public health inequalities.	Integrated settlements for established strategic authorities. General power of competence for mayors.
Local authority impact	Local authorities retain local business development responsibilities	District and county council levels merged to create new unitary authorities	Local authorities retain responsibilities for frontline services	No additional fiscal powers for local authorities

3.5: Choosing England's Governance Future

By 2050, England could operate a more coherent, resilient and balanced system of local and regional government – but only if the next decade is shaped by intentional choices, not incremental adjustments.

- ▶ **Integrated Regionalism** offers clarity and capacity but only becomes transformative if we are willing to move into the upper tiers of representation and fiscal autonomy for strategic authorities.
- ▶ **Localist Reset** delivers strength at the frontline but risks losing strategic coherence.
- ▶ **Connected Governance** is pragmatic but may lack the power to shift long-term outcomes without deeper reform across the system.

The Bill gives us a foundation. It does not provide a destination. The choice between these scenarios is ultimately a choice between:

- ▶ How much power England wants to shift from Whitehall
- ▶ How strategic regional governance should become
- ▶ How much autonomy unitaries should hold
- ▶ How risk and accountability should be shared
- ▶ How fiscal reform aligns with governance reform

Put more plainly, government (and all of us) must decide:

How radical do we want to be – and in which dimensions?

That is the central strategic question for the next phase of devolution.





Chapter 4: Enabling Frameworks: Governance, Relationships and Collaboration

The success of local and regional governance will not be determined solely by the design of the structure. It will also depend on the strength of its enabling frameworks: **governance, relationships, institutional resilience**, and on the **practical tools** that shape collaborative behaviour and impact. These frameworks determine whether strategic clarity becomes institutionalised, and whether the system endures through changing leaders or political cycles.

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill gives Mayors the power to convene local partners and to formally request collaboration from other Mayors, but these tools will be too blunt and ineffective unless they are underpinned by a more granular set of collaboration tools.

Strengthening Governance, Relationships and Institutional Resilience

Institutional Resilience

Where Combined Authorities have worked well they have benefitted from pre-existing strong relationships and high levels of political consensus about the overall project. Yet these foundations cannot be taken for granted, nor can goodwill or consensus be inherently expected to always come to pass. Even longstanding combined authorities are relatively new organisations, and many have not been tested by significant political or personnel changes: Greater Manchester, pointed to by respondents as the most successful combined authority, is still on its first elected mayor. As elected mayors change, as new unitaries form, and strategic authorities mature, governance needs to evolve beyond relationship driven collaboration to become an embedded, system-wide discipline.

Key elements of resilient governance

- ▶ **Shared strategic goals** agreed between SAs and unitaries, grounded in evidence and transparent outcomes.
- ▶ **Formalised decision-making arrangements** clarifying roles and responsibilities.

- ▶ **Consistent executive forums**, bringing mayors, leaders and chief executives across wider public institutions together in formal, regular structures.
- ▶ **Long-term regional plans** aligned with national missions, but locally owned and developed through collaboration.
- ▶ **Clear public accountability**, supported by open data, transparent reporting and participatory engagement.

Strong governance creates continuity during leadership transitions and enables the long term planning essential for complex public policy goals.

Embedding Strong Working Relationships

Relationships remain the most powerful – and most precarious – asset in the system of strategic authorities. The evidence we have gathered in this research consistently shows that progress often comes down to trust, time and shared purpose. But trust alone will not be enough to support the next 25 years of devolution.

“Regular exec-to-exec briefings built on trust, relationships and mutual respect.” (Senior director)

Features of resilient relationships

- ▶ **Codified expectations** about how partners across local and strategic authorities work together.
- ▶ **Consistent investment of time** between senior leaders not just in moments of crisis.
- ▶ **Joint problem-solving culture**, based on shared evidence sets and towards shared goals.
- ▶ **Mutual recognition of sovereignty**: unitaries retain primacy over place; SAs over strategy.
- ▶ **Multifaceted and networked**: relationships are not just 1:1 but allow for multiple connections across institutions and systems
- ▶ **A shared public narrative** that explains collaboration as a benefit to citizens, not a bureaucratic requirement.



The goal is a **high-trust, highly-structured partnership** in which relationships are both strong enough to navigate conflict, and structured enough to endure leadership change.

Institutional Resilience Across the System

The decade ahead will test the durability of emerging structures. Fiscal pressures, organisational ambiguity, external shocks, and political change will expose any weaknesses in institutional design.

Foundations of institutional resilience

- ▶ **Leadership continuity and succession planning**, especially in mayoral offices and SA senior teams.
- ▶ **Financial resilience**, including multi-year settlements, consolidated funding streams and coherent capital strategies.
- ▶ **Boundary and function stability**, avoiding unnecessary reorganisation that drains capacity.
- ▶ **Networked leadership**, allows the SA to convene across public sector anchor institutions, the private sector and wider civic society.
- ▶ **Robust scrutiny arrangements**, capable of holding SAs to account without undermining collective ownership.
- ▶ **Enduring problem solving**, with clear change management methodologies, dispute resolution and escalation routes.
- ▶ **Scenario planning and stress-testing**, anticipating the pressures of the 2030s and 2040s.

A resilient system is one the public recognises, understands and trusts over time.

“As people inevitably come and go, new consensus is formed... we created an open culture where we can raise issues and deal with them.” (Chief executive)

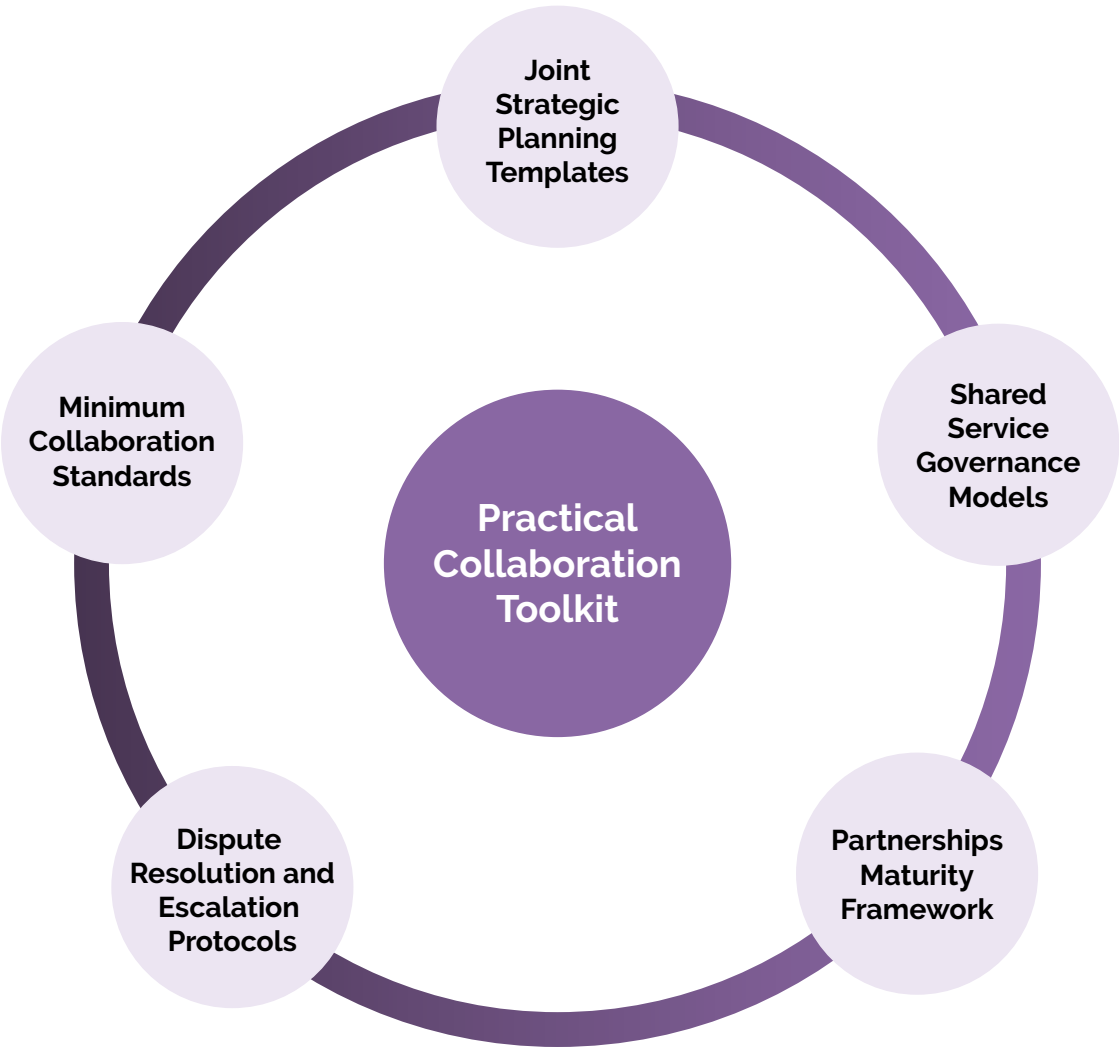
Practical Collaboration Toolkit

“We used to stick all the leaders and chief executives together to thrash stuff out... You’ve just got to spend time with each other.”
(Chief executive)

To move from principle to practice, SAs and unitaries require operational tools that enable consistent, structured collaboration. This chapter outlines the sort of **Collaboration Toolkit** that could be developed to support this.

In developing any of these proposed tools and approaches, we must also build on the best practice that exists already within the CA and LA environment.

As a starting point for further discussion, we suggest the following:





1. Joint Strategic Planning Templates

Tools to support shared vision and delivery, including:

- ▶ Regional–local planning matrix
- ▶ Shared outcomes frameworks
- ▶ Infrastructure sequencing models

2. Shared Service Governance Models

Blueprints for joint delivery or coordination of functions such as climate, skills, digital or transport, including:

- ▶ Decision pathways
- ▶ Accountability structures
- ▶ Resource and risk–sharing agreements

3. Partnership Maturity Framework

- ▶ A diagnostic tool assessing collaboration readiness across:
- ▶ Trust and behaviours
- ▶ Governance and decision–making
- ▶ Shared outcomes and evidence
- ▶ Operational integration
- ▶ Public engagement and accountability

4. Dispute Resolution and Escalation Protocols

- ▶ Clear processes for resolving disagreement:
- ▶ Evidence requirements
- ▶ Staged negotiation
- ▶ Escalation thresholds
- ▶ Target timescales for resolution

5. Minimum Collaboration Standards

- ▶ Routine expectations for system partners, including:
- ▶ Regular executive–level meetings
- ▶ Shared regional datasets and evidence portals
- ▶ Joint communications principles
- ▶ Outcomes–based reporting cycles

These practical tools could support the enabling infrastructure required for success in any of the future–state scenarios we have outlined.



Summary of recommendations

Based on the analysis in this report we propose a ten step road map to fulfil the potential offered by devolution.

1. Define a clear, national strategic purpose for all Strategic Authorities.

Set out a defined role for SAs as regional system leaders, coordinating policy where scale adds real value. This should be formally published to ensure national consistency, while making clear the distinction between expectations across geographies (urban, rural, coastal) and avoiding scope creep.

2. Map a functional division of responsibilities that endures.

The principle local by default, regional where beneficial, national only where necessary needs to be embedded in a cross-sector agreement between local authorities, strategic authorities and the centre.

3. Modernise Whitehall around devolution.

Central government's role should shift from direct management to leadership: set frameworks, monitor outcomes and develop policy missions, all in partnership with strategic authorities and councils.

4. Establish a statutory Mayoral Council for England.

Legally entrench a strengthened forum for strategic engagement between ministers and mayors..

5. Roll out integrated funding settlements nationwide.

Make multi-year departmental-style integrated settlements the default funding model for all established strategic authorities.

6. Consolidate growth and investment programmes under strategic authorities.

Expand mayoral investment funds and bring local growth funds into a single regional investment fund for each strategic authority which will support long-term planning and be more accountable to the public.

7. Build shared regional-local governance and accountability frameworks.

Each strategic authority, together with councils, should work towards data harmonisation, aligning outcomes frameworks, sharing evidence bases, and embedding proportionate scrutiny to align SA and council priorities.

8. Strengthen institutional resilience and system stability.

Support succession planning, multi-year budgeting, stable boundaries, robust scrutiny, and workforce planning across SAs and unitary councils to build more resilience into the system.

9. Develop a shared Collaboration Toolkit to support consistent practice.

Develop shared strategic planning templates, governance models, maturity diagnostics, dispute-resolution protocols and common data infrastructures to make collaboration systemic not dependent on personalities.

10. Set a clear pathway to 2050 using a sliding scale of ambition.

Define a long-term trajectory for England across four dimensions: economic powers, regional representation, public service responsibilities, and fiscal autonomy.





Conclusion

A System Designed for the Next Generation

We have opened the door to a new era of local and regional governance. Local government reorganisation and the extension of strategic authorities present us with an opportunity to build a system that is coherent, resilient and capable of addressing the deep structural challenges that will define the next 25 years. But this opportunity will only be realised if we seize it boldly.

Our message in this report is clear. England needs a governance settlement that is **local by default, regional where scale adds value, and national only where necessary**. That requires three deliberate choices.

First, **we must define the strategic purpose of strategic authorities**. They are not delivery bodies or funding funnels; they are system leaders. Their job is to coordinate the functions that no single council could achieve alone: transport, housing growth, climate resilience, economic development and skills. A clear, shared understanding of this role – nationally and locally – is the foundation on which long-term reform must be built.

Second, **we must embed a functional division of responsibilities that can last**. Councils remain the democratic and operational leaders for people-centred services. Strategic authorities provide regional capacity and long-term coordination. Central government sets frameworks, standards and the fiscal architecture. Without this clarity, collaboration becomes fragile, accountability becomes confused, and delivery becomes inconsistent.

Third, **we need a long-term pathway for devolution through to 2050**. The choices ahead are not technical; they are constitutional. How ambitious do we want regional governance to be? How much fiscal autonomy do we need? What level of regional representation will support the social and economic transitions ahead? The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is a first step – but it does not set out the destination. The next phase has to do this.

Finally, these structural choices will only succeed if supported by **strong enabling frameworks**: resilient governance, mature working relationships, institutional stability and practical tools to make collaboration real and impactful. Integrated settlements – multi-year, flexible, outcomes-based – must become the fiscal backbone of this system.

So we now have some of the building blocks for a more coherent model of devolved governance. What is needed is intention.

If we choose clarity over drift, purpose over incrementalism, and long-term design over short-term fixes, we can build a settlement that empowers local leaders, strengthens regional economies, and delivers better outcomes for citizens. A system that works for today and for tomorrow, for 2050 and beyond.



About Local Partnerships

Local Partnerships is an in-house public sector delivery partner jointly owned by the LGA, HM Treasury and Welsh Government. We work solely for central government departments, the Welsh Government, councils and combined authorities. Local Partnerships is a key interface between local and central government, providing expert advice and practical resources alongside project and programme delivery support, enabling public services to thrive.

Local Partnerships

18 Smith Square,
London SW1P 3HZ

localpartnerships.gov.uk | LPcomms@localpartnerships.gov.uk

LGIU

About LGIU

The LGIU - Local Government Information Unit - is a not-for-profit, non-partisan membership organisation. We are for local government and anyone with an interest in local democracy and finding local solutions to the challenges that we all face. Our resources, innovative research and connections are relied on by colleagues across the globe.

LGIU

251 Pentonville Road

London N1 9NG

lgiu.org | info@lgiu.org

November 2025

