



## Local Government Reform and Devolution – February 2026

### Introduction

Local Government in England is undergoing a significant transition. Historically complicated, local areas currently operate either in a two-tier structure (district and county councils) or as unitary authorities. In addition, some areas sit underneath combined authority structures. The Government is now pushing ahead with reforms designed to standardise local government across England, abolishing district councils and creating one level of local government across all areas, as well as to spread regional governance, previously limited to just a few areas, to all areas of England.

While local responses to this have been mixed, the reforms have significant implications for how local areas respond to multiple disadvantage. The provision of housing and homelessness services, adult social care, some community mental health provision, and drug and alcohol services all sit within local government.

In some areas, like Greater Manchester, very little will change, as there are already ten local authorities<sup>1</sup> and the already-embedded regional governance of Greater Manchester Combined Authority.; In other two-tier (district/county) areas, mostly rural “shire” counties, big changes are on the way. These changes are also happening against a backdrop of change in other public services, such as [Integrated Care System](#) area consolidation.

### History and Legislative Background

Previous governments have attempted to regionalise government, with **combined authorities** introduced in some areas following an initial trial in Greater Manchester in 2011. However, this has led to a patchwork of regionalised government, with each authority having slightly different devolved powers and responsibilities. Further legislation from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (2023) introduced the concept of **county combined authorities**, further complicating the patchwork of devolved powers

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<sup>1</sup> These are officially called “metropolitan boroughs” in Greater Manchester.

and geographies. Some rural “shire” areas were also unitarised during this time (e.g. North Yorkshire, Somerset).

Early into its current term, the Government published the [English Devolution White Paper](#), which set out much of its thinking, particularly around the effective abolition of two-tier local government in England (and unitary authorities to replace them). It subsequently introduced [The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#) into Parliament in July 2025. As of writing, this is still going through Parliament and will form the legislative framework for the changes to local government.

The Bill introduces the idea of a “**strategic authority**” as a form of regional governance to cover areas in England that do not have a combined / combined county authority at the moment. In the same way as combined authorities, strategic authorities<sup>2</sup> will cover multiple local authority areas and will have competence over housing and planning; skills and employment support; and health, wellbeing and public service reform, amongst other things.

Strategic authorities may or may not have a mayor, and over time could accrue an integrated devolution settlement and negotiate further powers with central government. This [briefing from the House of Commons Library](#) gives more information. The Government will pursue its objective of unitarisation through existing legislation.

#### Next steps and rollout

The process of “unitarisation” (abolishing two-tier local government and replacing it with a single institution responsible for all local government functions) has already begun. In February 2025, Government invited all two-tier areas (and small neighbouring unitary councils) to make proposals for new unitary councils. Six areas have subsequently been accepted onto a [Devolution Priority Programme](#): Sussex and Brighton, Hampshire and the Solent, Norfolk and Suffolk, Greater Essex, Cheshire and Warrington, and Cumbria. Surrey is also undergoing an accelerated reorganisation process. In Summer 2026, there should be clarity for other two-tier areas about new groupings and geographies; and, once the Bill clears Parliament, further information on the timing of rollout of strategic authorities will become clearer.

Priority areas will start to properly operate in their new forms from 1 April 2027, and other areas are planned to begin in their new forms from 1 April 2028.

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<sup>2</sup> For example the Greater Essex Strategic Authority is intended to cover the areas now administered by Essex County Council (and the district councils within it), and Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea Councils.

*How might this impact on how we respond to multiple disadvantage locally?*

While the full impact on services and systems supporting people facing multiple disadvantage is not clear, there are some emergent challenges that will need to be managed and addressed, particularly as two-tier council arrangements are abolished:

- Some local geographies will change and this may impact the footprint and make-up of partnerships working in any area.
- The abolishing of two-tier councils means that local connection tests for homelessness support will apply to a much larger unitary geography (potentially offering more housing options to consider), but this may also cause challenges for local knowledge and for strategic capacity for housing / homelessness, as there are fewer responsible institutions.
- On the other hand, for public health and adult social care strategic capacity, (currently the responsibility of a top-tier council in two-tier areas), this will likely increase as replacement unitary bodies will be smaller (i.e., Surrey will likely be split into two, each requiring institutional capacity)
- For newly-formed strategic authorities, there is the potential for the emergence of regional political and technocratic leadership on multiple disadvantage, and strategic authorities' competencies in public health, planning and public service reform maybe be fruitful spaces to develop systems leadership on multiple disadvantage.

*How can MEAM Approach and Changing Futures areas navigate this change as partnerships?*

This transformation will be an unsettling time for people working in local government, and it is important to acknowledge this and be prepared for significant change within local partnerships. Voluntary Sector partners may need to play a stronger than normal role in helping maintain partnership momentum during this time.

It will be vital to follow developments closely, and take advantage of emergent opportunities to input into strategies – particularly in new homelessness, public health and adult social care strategies that will need to be developed quickly in new institutions, and there may be appetite to revisit Joint Strategic Needs Assessments or other bodies of evidence / needs analysis that supports local interest in multiple disadvantage. The updated Local Outcomes Framework will highlight multiple disadvantage and will ask local authorities to describe and report on the work they are doing.

Local partnerships should maintain relationships with current post holders and work hard to build relationships with new post holders as they emerge. A particular focus on directors of public health, directors of housing/homelessness and directors of adult social care will be helpful. Within a two-tier environment, it's not just district councils

disbanding; the county council will also be disbanding and new institutions will be emerging. It is a key time to influence culture and focus on multiple disadvantage.

Where appropriate, partnerships should engage in consultation events around local government reorganisation and ask questions around continuity of existing partnership arrangements and provision of elements of support that are the responsibility of local authorities.

When these are operational, partnerships can advocate for key operational case conference / cohort discussion spaces to be retained, possibly with some of this work held by the criminal justice system, health or voluntary sector organisations whose institutions are not changing. Partnerships may need to re-establish strategic spaces (potentially on new geographies if this makes sense) if these are lost in the transition process.

MEAM will continue to advocate for multiple disadvantage to be a key focus for local government and explore the role of regional government in catalysing and funding local work on multiple disadvantage.

*How will partnerships remain members of the MEAM Approach network after reorganisation?*

We will keep a watching brief on this as legislative changes take place.

As areas that are current MEAM Approach areas transition into new local governance arrangements, we will be in contact to better understand what this looks like and what this means for changes to the local partnership.

As always, continuing membership of the network requires a continued demonstrable commitment to multiple disadvantage across a local partnership.

**Read more:**

The Local Government Association has a constantly updated FAQ page on its [devolution and local government reorganisation hub](#).