

CRITERIA FOR UNITARY GOVERNMENT

On 5 February 2025 the Secretary of State issued the following criteria and guidance in respect of LGR proposals, following their outlining in the English Devolution White Paper.

Single Tier of Local Government for the Whole Area

- 1) A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.
 - a. Proposals should be for sensible economic areas, with an appropriate tax base which does not create an undue advantage or disadvantage for one part of the area.
 - b. Proposals should be for a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs.
 - c. Proposals should be supported by robust evidence and analysis and include an explanation of the outcomes it is expected to achieve, including evidence of estimated costs/benefits and local engagement.
 - d. Proposals should describe clearly the single tier local government structures it is putting forward for the whole of the area, and explain how, if implemented, these are expected to achieve the outcomes described.

Right Size to Achieve Efficiencies, Improve Capacity and Withstand Shocks

- 2) Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.
 - a. As a guiding principle, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more.
 - b. There may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal.
 - c. Efficiencies should be identified to help improve councils' finances and make sure that council taxpayers are getting the best possible value for their money.
 - d. Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition costs, including planning for future service transformation opportunities from existing budgets, including from the flexible use of capital receipts that can

support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects.

- e. For areas covering councils that are in Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, proposals must additionally demonstrate how reorganisation may contribute to putting local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing and what area-specific arrangements may be necessary to make new structures viable.
- f. In general, as with previous restructures, there is no proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation. For areas where there are exceptional circumstances where there has been failure linked to capital practices, proposals should reflect the extent to which the implications of this can be managed locally, including as part of efficiencies possible through reorganisation.

High Quality and Sustainable Public Services

- 3) Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.
 - a. Proposals should show how new structures will improve local government and service delivery, and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services.
 - b. Opportunities to deliver public service reform should be identified, including where they will lead to better value for money.
 - c. Consideration should be given to the impacts for crucial services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness, and for wider public services including for public safety.

Collaboration Informed by Local Views

- 4) Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.
 - a. It is for councils to decide how best to engage locally in a meaningful and constructive way and this engagement activity should be evidenced in your proposal.
 - b. Proposals should consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance.
 - c. Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, an explanation of the views that have been put forward and how concerns will be addressed.

- 5) New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.
 - a. Proposals will need to consider and set out for areas where there is already a Combined Authority (CA) or a Combined County Authority (CCA) established or a decision has been taken by Government to work with the area to establish one, how that institution and its governance arrangements will need to change to continue to function effectively; and set out clearly (where applicable) whether this proposal is supported by the CA/CCA / Mayor.
 - b. Where no CA or CCA is already established or agreed then the proposal should set out how it will help unlock devolution.
 - c. Proposals should ensure there are sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority, with timelines that work for both priorities.

- 6) New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.
 - a. Proposals will need to explain plans to make sure that communities are engaged.
 - b. Where there are already arrangements in place it should be explained how these will enable strong community engagement.

Developing Proposals for Unitary Local Government

The following matters should be taken into account in formulating a proposal:

Boundary Changes

- a. Existing district areas should be considered the building blocks for your proposals, but where there is a strong justification more complex boundary changes will be considered.
- b. There will need to be a strong public services and financial sustainability related justification for any proposals that involve boundary changes, or that affect wider public services, such as fire and rescue authorities, due to the likely additional costs and complexities of implementation.

Engagement and Consultation on Reorganisation

- a. We expect local leaders to work collaboratively and proactively, including by sharing information, to develop robust and sustainable unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area to which this invitation is issued, rather than developing competing proposals.

- b. For those areas where Commissioners have been appointed by the Secretary of State as part of the Best Value Intervention, their input will be important in the development of robust unitary proposals.
- c. We also expect local leaders to engage their Members of Parliament, and to ensure there is wide engagement with local partners and stakeholders, residents, workforce and their representatives, and businesses on a proposal.
- d. The engagement that is undertaken should both inform the development of robust proposals and should also build a shared understanding of the improvements you expect to deliver through reorganisation.
- e. The views of other public sector providers will be crucial to understanding the best way to structure local government in your area. This will include the relevant Mayor (if you already have one), Integrated Care Board, Police (Fire) and Crime Commissioner, Fire and Rescue Authority, local Higher Education and Further Education providers, National Park Authorities, and the voluntary and third sector.
- f. Once a proposal has been submitted it will be for the government to decide on taking a proposal forward and to consult as required by statute. This will be a completely separate process to any consultation undertaken on mayoral devolution in an area, which will be undertaken in some areas early this year, in parallel with this invitation.

Interim Plans

An interim plan should be provided to government on or before 21 March 2025. This should set out your progress on developing proposals in line with the criteria and guidance. The level of detail that is possible at this stage may vary from place to place but the expectation is that one interim plan is jointly submitted by all councils in the area. It may be the case that the interim plan describes more than one potential proposal for your area, if there is more than one option under consideration. The interim plan should:

- a. identify any barriers or challenges where further clarity or support would be helpful.
- b. identify the likely options for the size and boundaries of new councils that will offer the best structures for delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services across the area, along with indicative efficiency saving opportunities.
- c. include indicative costs and arrangements in relation to any options including planning for future service transformation opportunities.

- d. include early views as to the councillor numbers that will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas, in line with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance.
- e. include early views on how new structures will support devolution ambitions.
- f. include a summary of local engagement that has been undertaken and any views expressed, along with your further plans for wide local engagement to help shape your developing proposals.
- g. set out indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team as well as any arrangements proposed to coordinate potential capacity funding across the area.
- h. set out any voluntary arrangements that have been agreed to keep all councils involved in discussions as this work moves forward and to help balance the decisions needed now to maintain service delivery and ensure value for money for council taxpayers, with those key decisions that will affect the future success of any new councils in the area.