

English Local Government

Too Big to be Local. Too Little Power to be Government
(despite devolution promises)

LPSA Local Democracy, Inclusive Governance &
Community-led development Open Working group
meeting Wednesday, 4th March 2024

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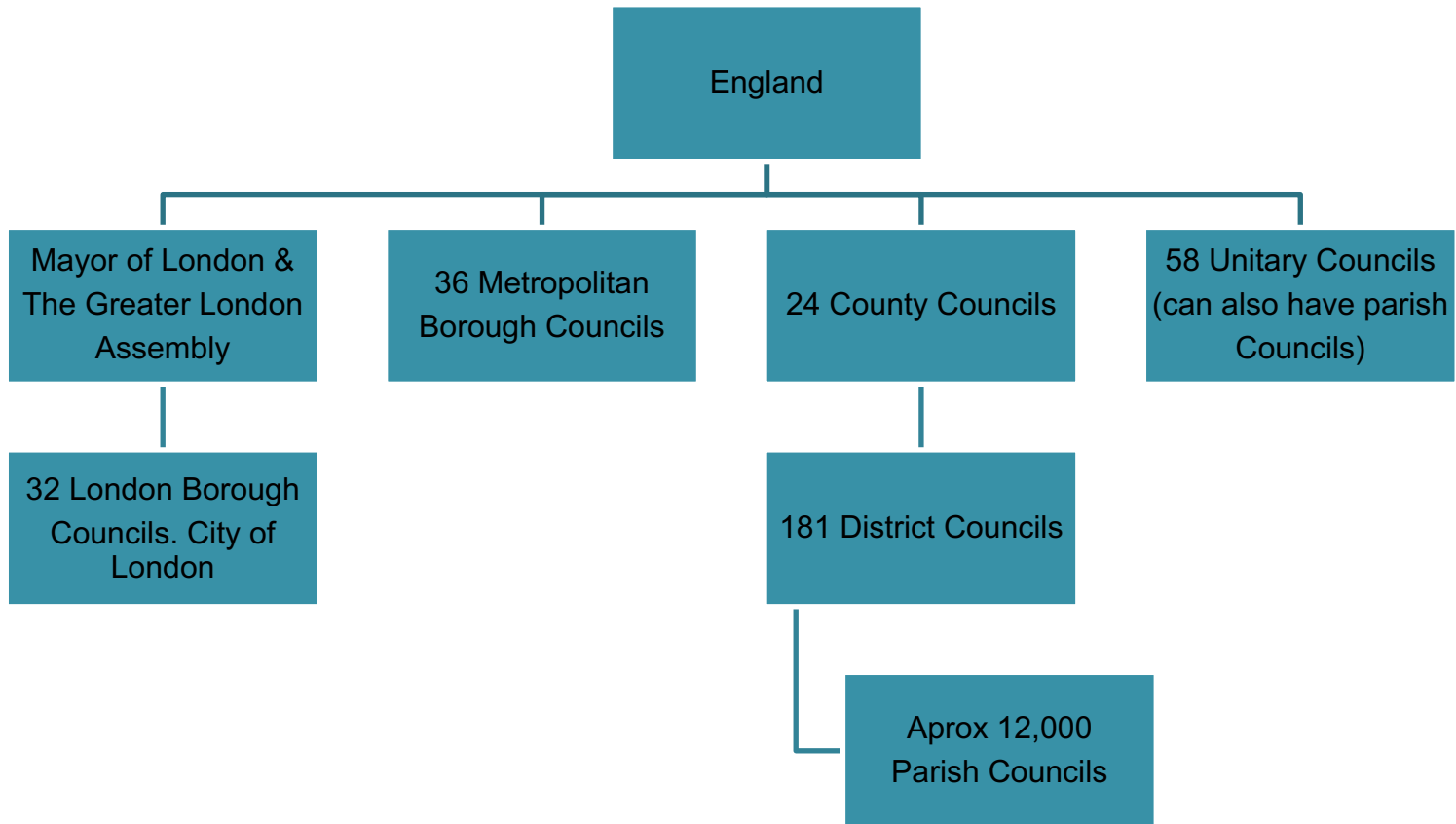
Characteristics of English Local Government

- Creature of statute
- No independent or constitutionally protected right to exist
- Boundaries, shape, size, structure, powers, roles, responsibilities and functions are set by central government
- *Ultra-vires (local government can not act beyond its legal powers)**
- Funded locally and by central government
- Very big – the largest units of local government in Europe; size of English councils represents the victory of technocracy over democracy.
- Can't tax – much – 2 main taxes only one is truly local – council tax (part property / part individual tax)
- Can't spend without the centre saying so, checking and setting limits

More Characteristics of English Local Government

- Synonymous with service provision, rather than political representation and government
- Not seen as a competitor to central government, more an agent of central government
- Dominated by the three main parties
- Run on party lines
- The party group system: councillors meeting in private to decide what they will do in public and discipline members who do not comply or express dissent

The Structure of Local Government in England



England: 331 councils for a population of 56,000,000
Average council population: 169,000

Councillors in England May 2023:

Type of Council	Con	Lab	LD	Gn	Others
County	903	172	199	44	88
Unitary	1301	1227	676	123	374
London Borough	402	1144	180	18	71
MBC	399	1528	244	96	125
District	2322	1602	1536	451	893
Totals	5,327	5,673	2,835	732	1,551

Councillors in England (rounded figures):

Three main parties

- **13,835 councillors**
- **85.8%** of England's total councillor population

Party Politics in Local Government



A recent example of Size Increases

1st April 2023 we lost:

- 20 councils abolished
- Around 626 councillors disappeared (net loss)
- Replaced by Four new unitary councils
 - North Yorkshire 90 cllrs
 - Somerset 110 cllrs
 - Cumberland Council 46 cllrs
 - Westmorland and Furness Council 65 cllrs

Local Resistance: We're in the wrong place!! We're Cumberland Not Westmoreland

CUMBRIA AXED

□ Historic boundary □ Current boundary



A 24 hour-a-day job

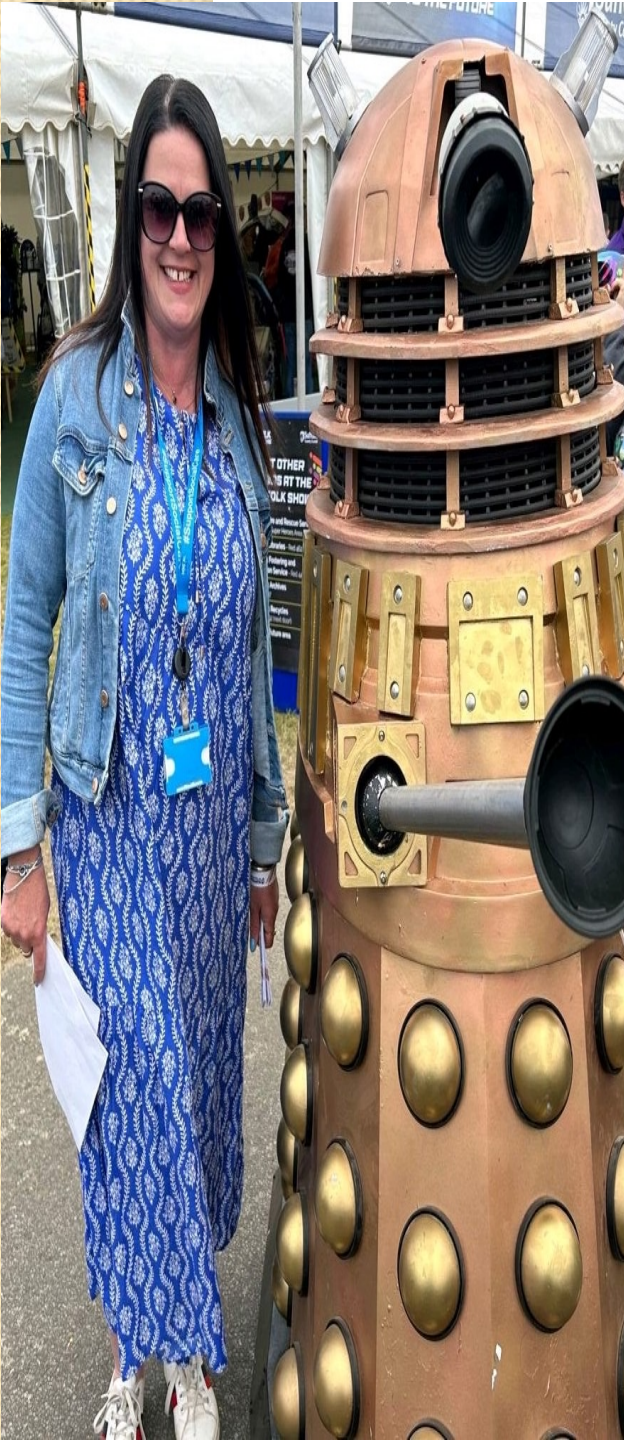
- Proximity to the community
 - Based within the community (but may be not the ward or division)
- Ease of access for citizens
 - Visible, contactable, approachable
- Few boundaries between personal, political, council, social or work life
- Use of proximity as a representative tool
- Underestimates of the hours councillors work
- But there's always the 'A' team councillor











Devolution or decentralisation?

In his forward to the White paper the Prime Minister states:

- *We'll usher in a revolution in local democracy. Harness the incredible power of data not just at a national and regional level but all the way down to neighbourhoods. Introduce a whole new way of thinking in central government, recognising that national success alone is not enough if it masks local failings.*

Devolution or decentralisation? Much is promised...

- Strategic role in delivering services
- Supporting local businesses
- Local control of sustainable transport
- Investment spending
- Adult training
- Local control of infrastructure decisions
- Public safety and health
- Financing local initiatives for residents and business
- But where will it all go?

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Devolution or decentralisation? What's coming to local Government?

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Devolution or decentralisation? What's coming to local Government?

- Structural change
- New Combined Authorities with a devolution framework based on:
 - A single institution or County Council with a directly elected mayor (DEM), across a Functional Economic Area (FEA) or whole county area
 - A single institution or County Council without a DEM, across a FEA or whole county area
 - Local authorities working together across a FEA or whole county area e.g. through a joint committee

Summary

- Large remote councils
- Mixture of a two-tier and unitary system
- Mainly a service providing body
- Little real political power either locally or in the national setting
- Too big to be local; too little power to be government