

Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution

Managing the impact and maximising the potential for planning and place-making services

January 2026



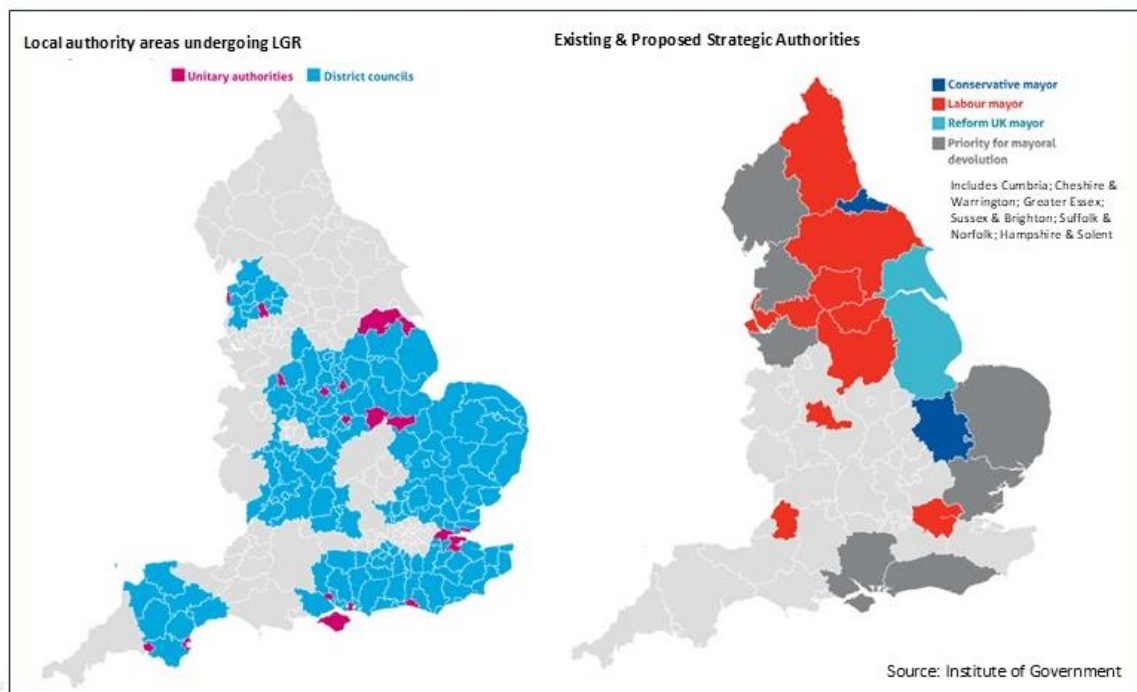
Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution: Managing the impact and maximising the potential for planning and place-making services

INTRODUCTION

The context

1. The Government has initiated a process of replacing all remaining two-tier local government structures (counties and districts/boroughs) in England with unitary authorities by 2028. In some places, Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) will be happening at the same time as devolved Strategic Authorities (SAs) are being established, although the timelines and processes for this vary across the country. Some Strategic Authorities already exist¹, some are being created in 2026 but for other areas, the approach to Devolution is currently unclear with no specific timetable. Both Devolution and LGR will lead to significant structural changes across a large number of local authority areas (see Figure 1) but also fundamental changes to how local services are delivered. Through the Devolution process, local areas will receive more powers from Central Government and more flexibility and responsibility for how government funding is spent in local areas. Both LGR and Devolution will impact on how planning services are delivered with significant opportunities to redesign this, but there will also be major challenges as local authorities go through the transition.

Figure 1: Areas impacted by LGR and Devolution



¹ Strategic Authorities include all Mayoral and non-Mayoral Combined Authorities and County Combined Authorities and should not be confused with the emerging Strategic **Planning** Authorities.

2. Alongside structural changes, the Government is implementing a major programme of planning reforms throughout 2026² which will impact on all local authorities in England and will also lead to some structural changes. Again, this will initially be challenging but offers huge opportunities to rethink service delivery and manage increasingly scarce resources, experience and skills within the planning ecosystem. Key changes include:
 - A new plan-making system (including the re-introduction of a strategic planning tier)
 - A revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which will include the introduction of national policies for decision-making
 - Proposals for modernising planning committees
 - Digitisation of planning, national data sets and increased national standardisation
3. Many local planning authorities³ already face significant challenges in relation to maintaining an effective service due to the pressures on resources. This is impacting on morale and the retention of planning professionals as well as the wider place-making skills needed to deliver a well-functioning service.⁴ LGR and the Government’s approach to rolling out Devolution will provide an opportunity for a re-set in the longer term, with larger LPAs offering better resourced teams and more diverse and interesting workloads. In the short term, however, these changes will undoubtedly add to the existing challenges on recruitment and retention, particularly with concerns about job security during the transition period.

About this report

4. This report has been prepared by Catriona Riddell & Associates on behalf of the Planning Officers’ Society (POS) to support the development of a dedicated Resource Hub for local authorities going through LGR, Devolution or both. It is based on extensive research and engagement with local authorities and other stakeholders (see Annex 1 for further details). It aims to support those working within local authorities to navigate the challenges of change, especially the transition into new and generally much larger authorities. It is based on the experience from those that have already undergone LGR as well as input from a range of stakeholders that interact with the planning system. Vitaly, it provides advice on how to maximise the potential benefits of both LGR and Devolution, re-imagining what ‘good’ might look like on the other side. It is divided into two main sections, the first considers the potential implications arising from planning reform and the second sets out the key learning from those that have already experienced LGR.
5. In preparing this report, POS has worked closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the District Council Network (DCN), County Council Network (CCN) and the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) to ensure that the various workstreams to support LGR are aligned. POS is also part of the Planning Alliance, a cross sectorial group of built environment stakeholders who have come together to help reinvigorate public sector planning and support recruitment and retention.⁵ The information within this report has been used to establish the POS Resource Hub which will be updated throughout the LGR process (see POS website - [POS](#)). Keeping it up to date and capturing all the learning will, however, rely on the interaction of all those working within and with local

² Planning reforms are being implemented through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (2023), the Planning and Infrastructure Act (2025), the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (to be enacted 2026) and revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

³ Includes both district/unitary Local Planning Authorities and county/unitary Minerals Planning Authorities for the purposes of this report

⁴ See the Royal Town Planning Institute’s [State of the Profession 2025 | Championing the power of planning](#)

⁵ For more information on the Planning Alliance see [The Planning Alliance](#)

authorities. If you would like to contribute or provide any advice/examples of good practice, please contact POS at the following address projectmanager@planningofficers.org.uk.

LGR and Devolution: The Headline Messages

6. The information and advice provided to inform this report has been gathered through extensive interviews and workshops. Throughout this process a number of key cross-cutting themes came up on a consistent basis, both from those that have gone through LGR and those preparing for it. In summary, these are:
- **The combination of LGR and planning reform offer an opportunity to introduce innovative practices and to rebuild skills and capacity.** The creation of new Strategic Planning Authorities (SPAs), the introduction of more innovation around digital capabilities and data management, and access to some of the wider skills needed to support place-making through larger teams, all offer opportunities for ongoing service improvement. However, to maximise the potential from this and ensure continuous service delivery throughout the transition, some external/additional resources will be needed to focus on service improvement.
 - **LGR is about creating a new local authority with its own culture and values, not the merging of existing authorities.** LGR provides an opportunity to build a new culture with shared values across both Members and officers, with all council services provided under one roof which will help to strengthen relationships and support a ‘place based’ approach to service delivery. A new authority with a new approach can facilitate new ways of working, maximising the potential from good practice and relinquishing poor practice and habits, and can help build new relationships with stakeholders and communities. As far as possible, new structures (especially governance arrangements) should be considered afresh to limit the transfer of legacy authority cultures, values and ways of working.
 - **The wider value of planning in supporting good place-shaping (beyond regulation) must be considered in relation to both the structure of the new council and within the Strategic Leadership’s responsibilities.** Strong Place Leadership within the new authorities will require a good understanding of the role the planning system plays in supporting all the other services to deliver good economic, health, environment and social outcomes for the people and places they represent. The value of a good planning service in relation to spatial planning (and the priority given to a ‘plan-led’ system) and its delivery tools needs to be a foundational corporate priority which supports an integrated ‘place-based’ approach to service delivery. There should therefore be a senior leader contributing to the LGR steering process that can advocate for effective planning and champion the role planning plays in the wider service delivery of the new authority.
 - **A clear vision for the new authority should be set out as soon as possible before Vesting Day⁶.** A period of major change is unsettling for staff who will be worried about job security as well as how the future council might operate. In many authorities this is likely to exacerbate the significant recruitment and retention challenges already faced. A clear organisational vision will keep staff interested in being part of the new authority but will also help them see where they fit in. The vision should include clarity around how the

⁶ Vesting Day is when the former councils cease to exist and the new unitary authority legally takes over responsibility for the council. It usually falls on the 1st of April. The Local Government Association has prepared a useful list of FAQs that explain some of the LGR/Devolution terminology that can be viewed [here](#).

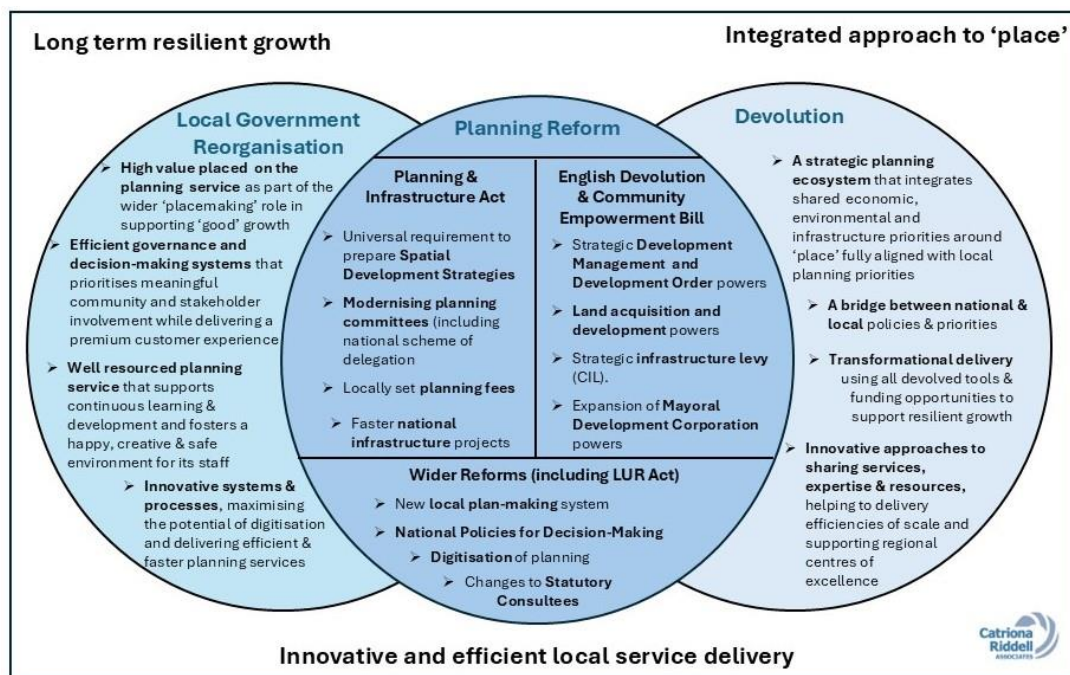
planning service will fit within the organisational structure and how staff will be supported throughout the transition and beyond, especially in relation to working arrangements.

- **Organisational and cultural change takes time and will have to be supported well beyond Vesting Day.** Whether it is building new teams that work effectively together or putting new systems in place, LGR will take time, but maximising the period during the shadow year leading to Vesting Day will smooth the transition for all involved, including customers and local communities. Expectations will have to be properly managed during this period of transition, therefore engaging stakeholders and using existing networks effectively throughout the process is likely to be critical (especially chief planners' groups and developer forums).

PLANNING REFORM, LGR AND DEVOLUTION

7. The planning system in England is supposed to be ‘plan-led’ with most of the key decisions made through the local plan process, providing certainty and confidence for communities, applicants and investors. However, with less than 30% of plans considered to be up to date in England⁷ most of the strain, both in terms of decision-making and resources, has been focused on the Development Management functions in planning authorities. A key message arising from the research is that it will be very challenging for those authorities without an up-to-date local plan to progress a review at the same time as they move forward through the LGR transition process. This will be particularly challenging for the Surrey Authorities as they are going through LGR a year ahead of others, with shadow elections for the new councils taking place in May 2026 and Vesting Day 1st April 2027. This section sets out what the key reforms are and how these should be integrated into the LGR and Devolution process to maximise the full potential of the aligned timetables (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: How LGR, Devolution and Planning Reform fit together



8. County councils have historically had responsibility for minerals and waste planning in two tier areas therefore this is one of the planning functions that could be disaggregated to a smaller geography through LGR. As this has a number of specific implications and risks, the future of minerals and waste planning is considered separately in Paragraphs 14 to 18.

A new approach to plan-making

9. The Government is introducing a new approach to plan-making with the intention being that this will lead to more extensive plan coverage and more regular local plan updates, therefore getting the ‘plan-led’ system operating effectively and reducing pressures at the decision-making stages further downstream. The new system will include:

⁷ [Savills UK | Planning Data Update](#)

- The *re-introduction of a strategic tier of plan* through Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) which will be required across England (as set out in the Planning and Infrastructure Act). These will provide a long term spatial framework for growth and investment and will therefore be focused on a relatively small number of key policy areas that impact on more than one local planning area. These will include setting housing targets and distributing to each local planning area and supporting the delivery of the economic and infrastructure priorities of each sub-region (as set out in the recently published proposed updates to the NPPF⁸). SDS will be prepared by new Strategic Planning Authorities (SPAs) which will either be Devolved Strategic Authorities or Upper Tier Authorities (initially counties and unitary authorities pre LGR) depending on the arrangements in each area.
- *Vision-led/outcome focused local plans* where community engagement and Member involvement is focused on the plan preparation process, reducing the need for extensive engagement at the decision-making stage.⁹
- *Nationally prescribed local plan project management processes* with the introduction of a statutory 30 month timetable and more formal independent checks throughout the plan-preparation process.
- *Digitally enabled plans* with a high level of national prescription, standardisation and templating.
- The introduction of *supplementary plans* which will have the same legal status as local plans and will provide a targeted approach to planning for large sites or specific areas.

A quicker and more efficient approach to decision-making

10. With the expectation that the plan-led system will work more effectively ‘upstream’ in future with much more extensive coverage of local plans, the Government is introducing a number of changes to streamline and improve the decision-making process ‘downstream’. Key changes include:

- *National policies for decision making* set out in the NPPF to help reduce duplication of policies in local plans and to provide a more consistent ‘rules-based’ approach to planning decisions.
- *Modernising planning committees*¹⁰ with the introduction of a National Scheme of Delegation which categorises planning applications into two tiers, more national control of composition and size of planning committees and mandatory training for councillors. All of these are prescribed in the Planning and Infrastructure Act.

A streamlined approach to national infrastructure

11. The Government is changing the way national infrastructure is planned and delivered, with an emphasis on streamlining the process for *Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects* (NSIPs), speeding up the consenting regime, providing more certainty for infrastructure providers and local communities, and reducing the opportunities and risks from legal challenge. Changes will include keeping National Policy Statements for critical national

⁸ An update version of the NPPF will be introduced in Spring 2026 following consultation - [National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system](#)

⁹ [Create or update a local plan using the new system - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁰ [Reform of planning committees: technical consultation - GOV.UK](#)

infrastructure up-to-date and offering alternative consenting routes outside of the existing NSIP regime.

A more comprehensive approach to Devolution

12. The Government has ambitions for all parts of England to be devolved with new Strategic Authorities taking on a number of different powers and functions to support growth, as set out in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. There are already a number of Strategic Authorities in England (see Figure 1) but the process towards Devolution is progressing on different timescales outside of these areas, with some local authorities yet to set out any expressions of interest.¹¹
13. As well as having responsibility for preparing the new Spatial Development Strategies for their areas (see Paragraph 9), Strategic Authorities will also have access to a range of powers and funding opportunities to support delivery of strategic planning priorities, the extent of which will depend on whether the Strategic Authority has an elected Mayor or not (see Table 1). The full range of ‘Mayoral’ powers on offer are consistent with those that the Mayor of London currently benefits from.

Table 1: Proposed planning powers for Strategic Planning Authorities

Table 1				
Statutory Function: Housing and Strategic Planning	Single Local Authority Foundation Strategic Authority	Non-Mayoral Foundation Strategic Authorities	Mayoral Strategic Authorities	Established Mayoral Authorities (including Mayor of London / GLA)
Duty to produce an SDS	X	X	X	X
Housing and land powers, concurrent with Homes England	X	X	X	X
Housing and land powers, concurrent with local authorities	X	X	X	X
Mayoral Development Corporations			X	X
Strategic Development Management Powers			X	X
Mayoral Development Orders			X	X
Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy			X	X

Source: Summary of the housing and planning powers in the [Devolution Framework Explainer](#) tables (10 July 2025).

¹¹ For information on Devolved Authorities see Institute of Government’s Interactive Map - [Devolution to England | Institute for Government](#)

Delivering an effective approach to Minerals and Waste Planning

14. Minerals and waste planning has always been considered a strategic matter, especially in relation to managing the supply of aggregates. The existing minerals planning system has been operating since the mid-1970s when the Managed Aggregate Supply System (MASS) was introduced to ensure that the country could meet its supply and demand needs for aggregates and other minerals. This meant planning for minerals has always been at a larger scale to ensure that the geography of the minerals planning authority (MPA) is aligned with the geology of the area and effective decision making could take place at that strategic scale, without risk of parochial decision-making at a lower level.
15. Whilst some areas have managed to successfully integrate the minerals and waste planning function into a smaller geography through LGR, in many cases they have adopted approaches which allow them to continue addressing some critical matters on a strategic basis. For example, MPAs have continued to benefit from strategic co-ordination provided by the Regional Aggregates Working Parties (RAWPs) which are resourced jointly by the Government and MPAs. These play a critical role in monitoring aggregate supply and demand nationally, working closely with the minerals industry and reporting back to the Government annually.¹² However, it is also evident from previous rounds of LGR that the lack of understanding around the specific specialist role of minerals and waste planners has resulted in the reduction in resources across the board in policy, development management and enforcement (and site monitoring)¹³.
16. In previous strategic planning systems (structure plans and regional spatial strategies), some aspects of minerals and waste planning were picked up through the strategic plan, such as minerals apportionment to each local authority and strategic waste infrastructure needs. At the current time, it is not clear whether any part of the minerals and waste planning system will be managed through the new Spatial Development Strategies process or not.¹⁴
17. The challenges around recruitment and retention of planners in the public sector are well evidenced but within the minerals and waste services, the lack of skilled planners is even greater due to the specialist nature of this part of the profession.¹⁵ This has led to new and innovative practices. For example, Hampshire County Council currently operates as a Traded Service for a number of other MPAs and provides the secretariat services to the South East England AWP, and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority prepares the Local Aggregates Assessment (LAA) on behalf of the MPAs in its area¹⁶. In some areas MPAs have prepared joint plans to ensure that planning is managed at the appropriate scale and geography necessary.¹⁷

¹² [Aggregates working parties: annual reports - GOV.UK](#)

¹³ Waste site monitoring is a statutory requirement in under the Waste(England and Wales) Regulations 2011

¹⁴ Proposed Policy PM1 of the draft NPPF ([National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system - GOV.UK](#)) states that SDS should set out “the type, extent and broad location of strategic infrastructure needed to enable development and serve existing communities, including ... waste infrastructure ... and, where considered appropriate, the provision of minerals”

¹⁵ The LGA Workforce Strategy (2024) specifically identifies planning officers within county councils as the most difficult role to recruit to - [LGA Workforce Strategy Survey 2024](#)

¹⁶ West Yorkshire Combined Authority Local Aggregates Assessment - [Planning and strategic sites](#)

¹⁷ Examples of joint plans include: Hampshire (with Portsmouth City Council, Southampton City Council, New Forest National Park Authority and South Downs National Park Authority); Essex and Southend on Sea; Central & Eastern Berkshire Authorities; and Greater Manchester (joint M&W Plan for 10 unitary authorities).

18. The North Wales Shared Minerals and Waste Planning Service, hosted by Flintshire County Council, provides a range of support offers to local authorities around Development Management, monitoring and developing evidence for local plans.¹⁸ This was established in 2011 following an independent review of how Devolution and LGR had been working in Wales after ten years, concluding that some issues would benefit from a joint approach/ shared service.¹⁹ The support for local authorities is via a contract and fee system. This has allowed the Shared Service to expand its role into supporting other planning functions including national infrastructure applications and current discussions with the Welsh Government may lead to establishing a ‘skills hub’ to support renewable energy proposals.²⁰

Critical issues to consider in relation to planning reform

19. There are a number of critical issues to consider in relation to LGR, Devolution and planning reforms. These are summarised below.

Supporting a plan-led approach

- **Plan-making should be considered as a corporate priority** within the new councils, with the appropriate strategic political and officer leadership to maximise the potential of having a clear council ‘vision for growth’, supported by an up-to-date local plan prepared in conjunction with local communities and stakeholders and fully aligned with the priorities of the wider functions of the council. To support the new ‘vision-led’ local plan process, it will be vital that all Members have an opportunity to input into the process from the start through debate and consideration of options. New mechanisms for community engagement should be explored, for example, the establishment of a citizen panel/assembly²¹
- Where all or some of the legacy councils’ local plans are out of date, **a project plan for a new local plan should be prepared before Vesting Day** which sets out the timetable, budget (for the full cost of preparation), governance and other resources needed to prepare the plan, especially in relation to communications and engagement. This should also include costs for ensuring that the new plan is fully digitised in line with government requirements (this should incorporate the council’s Project Initiation Document for the local plan which is a new national requirement).
- As soon as the geography of the new authority is known, **the evidence base should be updated to support both the new local plan and to inform the new SDS**. This should consider how data is collected and managed, including the integration of GIS systems to support the new digitally enabled local plan process.
- Given the new prescribed 30 month timetable for local plan preparation, **the new local plan should be prioritised and all other council services should be informed about the importance of their contributions to its preparation and delivery**. This should specifically include the wider technical consultees within the organisation, such as the Highways Authority and Lead Flood Risk Authority, but also the communications

¹⁸ [North Wales Planning Service \(Minerals and Waste\)](#)

¹⁹ The Beecham Review (Beyond Boundaries) was a Welsh Government review of performance after 10 years of Devolution and LGR. It concluded that capacity and efficiency problems should be addressed by much more joint working, including the establishment of more shared services.

²⁰ The Welsh Government is introducing a new regional tier of plans – Strategic Development Plans – which will be similar to the emerging SDS. These will be key to the delivery of the National Plan for Wales and will be prepared across Wales by Corporate Joint Committees and cover energy, mineral resources, and waste management. See [Future Wales: The National Plan 2040 | GOV.WALES](#) for further details.

²¹ [Citizens’ assemblies | Institute for Government](#)

resources given the investment required to support the upfront engagement for the new 'vision-led' plan.

- Inevitably the resources and focus within local authorities going through LGR will not be on setting up arrangements to prepare the new SDS. Nonetheless, the Government expects work to progress on SDS preparation urgently given the void in effective co-ordination in many areas over the last fifteen years and has committed separate funding to support this. Whilst it is important to recognise the pressures on local authorities who are dealing with LGR and have responsibility to implement the new planning system, preparation of the new SDS system will be incredibly valuable, especially where there is likely to be lack of progress in local plans during this time. Outside the devolved areas, therefore, the **local authorities should prioritise the establishment of a separate resource to focus on strategic planning activities**, isolating this resource from the distractions of LGR and helping to provide strong foundations for all new authorities as they move forward through the transition.
- An **early mapping exercise should be undertaken to identify the key skills and resources needed to support spatial planning and the shared evidence that will be needed to support local plans and the SDS**. This should then lead to a clear route forward for how this will be managed across the new Local Planning Authorities and the Strategic Planning Authority.

Modernising decision-making

- **The new legal requirements for modernising planning committees should be introduced during the shadow period to ensure they are fully operational on Vesting Day**. This should include clear arrangements around officer delegation, committee structures and mandatory member training. A new planning committee will need to be set up so that it is in place and the Members on it are suitably trained for Vesting Day. This will be a very different committee from most of those which existed within the previous councils. It will effectively be a Strategic Planning Committee dealing with strategic (Tier B) applications only, as required by the new National Scheme of Delegation. POS will be producing further guidance on this when the new rules are in place.
- **An independent review of all existing practices and processes to support Development Management functions should be undertaken before Vesting Day** to ensure that a 'new council, new approach' is active from as early in the transition period as possible. This should include aligning fee charging for discretionary services such as pre-application enquiries and Planning Performance Agreements. It should also include engagement with customers to determine 'good practice' both from within the existing councils and from other areas, and a clear statement of intent around how the services will be managed throughout the transition period.

Supporting a culture of collaboration

- Full advantage should be taken of the alignment between the LGR timetable and the establishment of new Strategic Planning Authorities to support collaboration and critically, to prevent the loss of valuable skills, experience and expertise that support place-making. Particular **consideration should be given to whether the new Strategic Planning Authorities could host shared resources to support minerals and waste planning and specialist place-making skills** (e.g. ecology, urban design, land economics).

- **Consideration should be given to creating a dedicated resource to support national infrastructure projects that is shared across a number of council areas** and potentially hosted by the Strategic Planning Authority. Responding to national infrastructure projects currently requires a significant resource at both the county and district/borough level and given the expanding scope of national infrastructure, this is likely to require an increasing level of resource within the new authorities. LGR offers an opportunity to establish dedicated specialist teams to manage national infrastructure but it could also lead to inefficiencies if the county resources and specialists are disaggregated to service the new unitary authorities.
- **Opportunities provided by Devolution and the Strategic Planning Authorities for the creation of ‘centres of excellence’ should be fully explored**, especially in relation to national infrastructure, renewable energy, new towns or other specialist areas of policy.²²

Delivering effective minerals and waste planning services

- There should be a **clear way forward for how minerals and waste planning services will be managed** which includes consideration of joint minerals and waste plans (or embedding minerals and waste policy into a new local plan), shared resources/services to support development management, technical evidence, monitoring and the potential role of the new Strategic Planning Authorities (especially where there is an existing or emerging Devolved Strategic Authority).

²² The GLA supports wider range of specialist skills which LBs can access e.g. on viability (5 in a viability team), BNG, urban design and wider sustainability issues like circular economy, energy, SA) – many are necessary to implement London Plan policies but they also facilitate joint working across the London Boroughs- [Planning | London City Hall](#)

EXPERIENCE FROM PREVIOUS ROUNDS OF LGR

20. As part of the research undertaken to develop the new POS Resource Hub, several people were interviewed about their experience of going through LGR. Despite the fact some had gone through LGR ten years ago, some five years ago and some two years ago, many of the lessons learned and issues identified were consistent. The following paragraphs summarise their advice having had the benefit of experience and time to reflect with the two key overarching messages being:
- The LGR process takes time but a robust approach to preparation as early as possible before Vesting Day will help manage service delivery throughout the transition period and support the early establishment of a stable, well performing service.
 - Staff will need significant support during the whole process with a clear direction of travel for the new organisation set out as soon as possible and constant re-assurance of their value from both the leadership of the legacy and new authorities.

The value of planning in supporting a good place-based approach to service delivery

21. Planning functions will be part of a much larger authority and will therefore have to compete for both the right status within the structure and appropriate resourcing. It will therefore be important to set out clearly what the value of well-functioning and resourced planning and wider place-making functions are to the organisation as a whole, and to the overall quality of life for local communities. Key things to emphasise include its role in relation to improving health and wellbeing, supporting sustainable economic growth, delivering new infrastructure and maximising the benefits from natural environment assets (including nature recovery).
22. To deliver this effectively, the value of a good planning service in supporting all the other core services and in its wider place-making role must be fully understood by the Corporate Leadership and factored in at the start of the LGR process in relation to form and function. One of the key drivers of LGR is efficiency savings and the focus will inevitably therefore be on core functions, especially those that are income generators or where performance is measured nationally with penalties for the authority attached to them.
23. Experience from those that have already gone through the process of LGR indicates that from a planning perspective, this has resulted in Development Management functions being prioritised over others, especially plan-making, because of the incomes streams (planning fees and other applicant income, developer contributions) and national performance frameworks. This has been a particular priority where one of the legacy councils is under special government measures due to poor performance. This has not been helped by the fact that the plan-led system has been eroded over the last decade with little priority given to it. This has also had an impact on the retention of specialist skills and expertise (e.g. ecologists, urban designers) that are often very difficult to procure but are vital to a good planning service.

Critical issues to consider

- The new local authorities should **establish an integrated place-based approach to service delivery from Day 1**, with robust Place Leadership being a core corporate responsibility and the role of the planning functions clearly defined within this.
- There should be a **strong case for setting out the wider value of a good planning service** (beyond regulation) presented throughout the LGR process to support other services within the authority in delivering good outcomes for local communities and in supporting a proactive and positive service to long term place-shaping.
- There should be a **clear link within the authority between the planning service and the wider place-making functions**, supporting a shared culture with the same values towards things like customer care and innovation (e.g. having a shared culture of innovation across Planning and Highways Services or approach towards economic development/ regeneration and planning).
- **Planning policy (and local plan preparation) should be part of a corporate approach to policy development** to support an integrated place-based approach to service delivery, with clear links between planning policy objectives and wider corporate objectives (especially in relation to health, social and environmental objectives; to infrastructure prioritisation and capital programmes; and to plans and strategies aimed at building long term economic and climate resilience).
- **Consideration of how specialists and experts within the existing planning services can be retained in some capacity** should be factored in from the start of the LGR process. These specialist skills are increasingly difficult to find and procure so it will be important to consider all retention options, including whether there is an opportunity for the new Strategic Planning Authorities to host on behalf of a few new councils. This is also an opportunity to identify any skills gaps and to consider different ways of filling these, including opportunities offered by organisations like Public Practice which is dedicated to supporting these wider skills within local authorities.²³

Culture, values and structure

24. From the very start of the process, the emphasis should be on establishing a new authority and not merging existing authorities with their established culture, values and ways of working. This will be key to reducing the risks of culture clashes (e.g. rural authorities v urban authorities; county v districts; traditional authorities v more progressive and innovative authorities; pro-growth authorities v those that have a track record of being less supportive of development). This mindset will help ensure consistency across the different services in relation to culture and values, ensuring that all the services that interact with planning have the same attitude towards things like innovation, customer service and stakeholder engagement.
25. There will be a temptation to align planning committees with the geography of legacy councils, especially to manage existing local plans in advance of a new local plan being prepared on the new geography. However, this has led to inconsistent approaches to decision-making across Area Committees, especially where the majority of Members and officers servicing the committee came from the legacy authority. The Government's proposed new approach to committee structure and size (as set out in the Planning and Infrastructure Act) will help avoid this as there will be less planning applications considered by committees and there is unlikely to be a need for more than a single planning committee due to the decreased workload.

²³ For more information see [Public Practice](#)

26. The new organisations will be established at the same time as reforms to the planning system are being implemented. This should be factored into the structure, especially in relation to how the planning service is represented within the Corporate Leadership and in relation to how decisions are made. The new National Scheme of Delegation makes it clear that, with a well-functioning plan led system and therefore an up-to-date local plan in place, there is less need for Members to engage in the decision-making process through the development management functions. However, this will place more responsibility on the professional chief planner in relation to officer delegation and the support of the Leadership for the professional planners within the council.

27. It is vital that the new Leadership sets out a clear vision for the organisation which should be realistic and honest with the aim being to help staff understand how they fit into the new organisation and how it will impact on their day job. As far as possible, this should be developed in collaboration with staff which will help build confidence, reduce anxiety and ultimately limit the loss of experienced and valued staff. This should include expectations around working arrangements (especially in relation to virtual working), what the training and development offer is (including the approach to succession planning), the relationship between officers and Members and customer care.

28. LGR offers an opportunity to re-set the relationships with local communities and stakeholders and establish new arrangements early on to support this. For customers and stakeholders this could mean setting up developer/ stakeholder forums where they do not currently exist or renewing the relationship with existing networks on the basis of it being a new relationship with a new council. Re-setting relationships will also help support the new plan-making system which is likely to be much more engagement-heavy and will therefore rely on a proactive and positive (and structured) approach to engagement.

Critical issues to consider

- To support the development of a new culture for the new authority, the **use of legacy council geography or established practices (unless they have gone through an independent evaluation process) should be avoided**, especially in relation to governance structures.
- **Training for members should be made available to all councillors, regardless of their involvement in the planning committee structure.** This training should clearly outline the broader values and functions of the planning system in supporting a ‘place-based’ approach across all services and the relationship with emerging Strategic Planning Authorities. It should also raise awareness of the council's new geography and spatial priorities, for example, by organising tours of the area and site visits, and holding early meetings with key stakeholders (including developer forums where they exist).
- The new **council leadership should set out a clear vision for the organisation** with a road map of the journey, including key timescales and targets, starting from the shadow year, through to Vesting Day and beyond.
- The council's new **Constitution must reflect the new national approach to officer delegation and committee size and structure from the start** (as set out in the Planning and Infrastructure Act) with full support and appropriate protection given to the chief planner and recognition of this key role in supporting strong place leadership.
- Ensure that **Members are involved in the formulation of planning policy** through the local plan in a way that enables early and effective debate and consideration of options.

- The **use of existing networks (especially county based Chief Planners' groups) should be part of the formal LGR process** using them to directly inform the structure and shape of the new authorities and act as a sounding board.
- To reset the relationship with local communities, **new models of engagement should be explored** (e.g. citizens' panel or assemblies) at the start of the LGR process and factored into how these can support planning and wider place-based services.
- As part of the LGR process, **all key functions and relationships should be mapped out** with a clear response to how each will be integrated into the new authority and how external relationships will be managed. This should take into account other key functions and relationships within the council including County Development, Minerals and Waste Planning functions and internal Technical Consultees (e.g. Highways Authority, Lead Flood Risk Authority); the relationship with other bodies with a statutory planning role (e.g. existing or emerging Development Corporations, National Park Authorities and the new Strategic Planning Authorities); and how the role of Parish and Town Councils should be factored into the planning process.

Systems & processes

29. Getting the back office processes and systems ready for Day 1 and ensuring that service delivery is continuous and disruption during the transition is minimised, has been challenging for those that have already gone through the process of LGR. Key systems such as IT and procurement are vital in keeping the show on the road during this time yet having an integrated approach which supports the planning services is not always a priority where the focus is on supporting the large 'people' services such as Adult and Children's Social Care.
30. LGR offers a major opportunity to improve service delivery and to maximise the potential from digital innovation and data²⁴ as well as opportunities to build on good practice from elsewhere around processes, improving the overall quality of the service and delivering efficiency savings, enhancing the overall customer experience. The Government is already supporting a wide range of initiatives on digital planning and there is significant learning emerging from these. However, an important lesson from those that have already gone through LGR is that it is very difficult to manage core service delivery throughout the transitional period and implement service improvements at the same time. A dedicated service improvement resource is therefore needed both during transition and on an ongoing basis.
31. There are a number of key lessons from those that have already transitioned but tackling some of the challenges require support from others outside of the councils, particularly in relation to procuring an IT system that can support place-making services as these are limited by what is currently on offer on the market.²⁵ However, the key message is not to leave this until the new authority is established but to get new systems in place during the shadow year or as early in the first year as possible.
32. There will be particular issues to address in relation to the management of developer contributions, through both Section 106 Agreements and, where relevant Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) payments. Councils will have to have a proactive approach to this

²⁴ The significant benefits arising from digital technology and opportunities through LGR and Devolution are explored in the research - [Local digital leaders must connect devolution and deliver reorganisation benefits, Localis study advises - Localis](#)

²⁵ MHCLG is aware of the limited IT offer and are working with service providers to expand this.

with systems in place to spend that money and deliver the infrastructure, with robust cooperation between the tiers of existing local authorities, as well as an agreed approach to spending priorities across different departments. Different authorities have different ways of managing developer contributions and it can take years before a unified system is in place post LGR.²⁶ It will therefore be important to have an agreed approach in the lead up to LGR which is consistent and provides clarity to customers in terms of how developer contributions will be managed under the new authority and within the new geographical context. For example, commuted funds to deliver affordable housing contributions set out in s106 cannot be redistributed to the wider area of the new authority unless this is written into the agreement pre LGR. CIL is used only in the charging area but under the Regulations, could be used in the wider area than the legacy authority. Importantly, the legal restrictions on how s106 and CIL monies are spent need to be respected in the new authority.

Critical issues to consider

- If possible, **establish a dedicated resource to manage service delivery and improvement** in the lead up to LGR and throughout the transition. This will allow others to focus on maintaining service delivery during this time (especially those in senior leadership positions). This should include handling of data, both from the legacy local planning authorities and the county minerals and waste authority.
- **Do not wait until the new authority is established before deciding on systems to be used**, especially in relation to IT, finance, procurement and legal support. These need to be brought together and unified so they are both ‘safe and legal’ on Vesting Day and are appropriate going forward.
- **Look at IT systems afresh with a focus on an integrated place-making system** as merging systems has proved challenging but be aware that procuring a new system can take a long time so early thinking in advance of Vesting Day will be essential.
- **Work with existing networks such as Developer Forums to identify good practice and support innovation**, especially in relation to standardised templates (s106, validation etc) and streamlining processes, and to help manage expectations around service delivery during the transitional period, recognising that the priority will be to provide customers with as much consistency and predictability during this time.

Capital programmes and infrastructure funding

- **Use LGR as an opportunity to rethink how planning obligations are managed** with a shared vision across the existing councils around how developer contributions will be managed in future, with agreement on what systems are to be used as early on as possible. This should follow through to the financial and legal systems underpinning this process. Authorities need to keep wording in agreements flexible throughout transition but this would need to be legally tested.
- CIL contributions will be a core part of the funding so **make sure any plans for using CIL receipts are included within the budget of the existing authority** as new councils will have to respect these commitments. It will otherwise be down to the new authority to decide how to use it within the legal confines of the CIL Regulations.
- Make it a priority in the lead up to LGR to **have clear records which are centralised as soon as possible** with clarity of what each of the legacy councils have committed in

²⁶ Note that the Government is aiming to encourage the use of standardised approaches to conditions and S106 through templating as part of the wider planning reforms. There have already been some attempts to do this – see for example the template suggested by Town Legal- [Simplifying & Standardising Section 106 Agreement Processes: Proposals for Reform - Town Legal](#)

relation to spending Developer Contributions. The legacy councils' Infrastructure Funding Statements should help with this exercise. There needs to be a clear understanding of what s106 contributions have been agreed and by when.

- There needs to be **clarity on who is responsible for monitoring of compliance and enforcement of planning obligations** as some councils may not do this as a matter of course. Identify who is doing this well and work with other services to ensure compliance (i.e. to make sure delivery services know what receipts they have and how to use it) to ensure there is visibility of what is to be spent and by which service at the very minimum. In doing this, it will be important to recognise the priority and specific issues related to monitoring and enforcement of waste and minerals developments.
- There needs to be **procedural and governance systems in place to pro-actively ensure that infrastructure is delivered and CIL & S106 commitments are spent and do not have to be returned** as some councils may not do this systematically.
- **The legacy authorities should agree a combined capital infrastructure programme before LGR** given the number of different funding streams (linked to Local Transport Plans and developer contributions), providing a clear understanding of what is coming forward and when, especially those programmes being delivered through transition period and immediately after.²⁷ This should include council owned property and asset management programmes, especially in relation to the disposal of property as a result of LGR.

Resources & skills

33. Planning services across England have suffered from significant resource challenges over the last decade with recruitment and retention of both planning professionals and those specialist skills that support good place-making a key barrier to effective service delivery. This has been compounded by the de-valuing of planning and planners by successive Governments which has had a significant impact on the morale of the profession within local authorities and a loss of experience.²⁸ The current Government has now put planning at the core of its ambitions to deliver long term economic resilience and is therefore investing heavily in public sector planning services and improving the pipeline of people into the profession through, for example, Pathways to Planning initiative²⁹. Improvements will take time, however, and will have to be addressed on a number of different levels.
34. LGR offers an opportunity to reimagine what a good service should look like within a much larger local authority context and with regards to the potential for shared resources provided by the emerging Strategic Planning Authorities. It also offers the opportunity to establish a new approach to supporting staff within the organisation in terms of learning and development and proper succession planning (especially as there will be an inevitable loss of experience through the LGR process), creating a culture around innovation and ongoing service improvement, which could lead to local planning authorities become the employer of choice. But there will be barriers, especially with the merging of different council teams each with a different culture and way of working.

²⁷ The Kent Infrastructure Mapping Tool is a good example of an integrated approach to infrastructure programmes- [Delivering an infrastructure mapping platform | Local Digital](#)

²⁸ [State of the Profession 2025: England | Championing the power of planning](#)

²⁹ [Pathways to Planning | Local Government Association](#)

Critical issues to consider

- **Prepare and implement a training and development programme during the shadow year** which sets out working arrangements, opportunities for training and development (and approach to for succession planning which will be important in retaining more junior staff members, as well as backfilling loss of experience during LGR) and has a clear structure around team building. Be clear how this will be implemented and any phasing, for example, with regards to the extent of office based working which will be important in the early stages to support team integration and more junior/less experienced members of staff.
- **Capture any ‘institutional memory’ from those experienced planners** who are not moving to the new organisation to ensure the knowledge does not leave with the person, especially around processes that are not written down anywhere.
- **Make sure any potential short to medium term vacancies within the new authority are highlighted at an early stage** so that the proper procurement processes and budgets are in place to fill any gaps in the short term through agency staff and consultancies and minimise disruptions to service delivery during the transition period.
- **Identify key specialist skills and agree early on how these will be provided in future**, which should include consideration of how these could be hosted for the benefit of a number of new authorities and therefore deliver efficiencies through economies of scale (e.g. in a devolved authority or new Strategic Planning Authority, or through a shared service model) as well as the role of organisations like Public Practice in bringing specialist skills into the public sector.
- **Use the LGR process to introduce new and innovative approaches to service delivery** which will help lift morale and re-enforce the fact it is a new organisation with a new culture and purpose.
- **Work with stakeholders, especially through private sector networks such as Developer Forums and through the various POS groups³⁰, to support a culture of continuous learning** and knowledge sharing, helping to build capacity and skills within the new organisation, as well as a ‘can do’ attitude.

³⁰ See POS website for more details of the POS member groups and the support offer provided by POS Enterprises - [The credible voice of public sector planners in England](#)

ANNEX 1: List of organisations involved in the research

Planning Officer Society Groups

Minerals and Waste Learning Group

Policy Forum

Development Management Learning Group

Development Management Network

Stakeholder workshops and group discussions

District Councils Network

County Councils Network

Customers and Stakeholders

Norfolk Heads of Planning

1:1 Interviews

Greater London Assembly

SOLACE

North Wales Planning Service (Minerals and Waste)

Local Authority Officers

Individual Interviews were held with people that have already experienced LGR. All views expressed during these interviews were personal and provided under the Chatham House Rule. The officers (and former officers) came from the following local authority areas:

Buckinghamshire

Cheshire

Cumbria

Northumberland

Somerset

ANNEX 2: Further Information

Local Government Association

[The devolution and LG reorganisation hub | Local Government Association](#)

MHCLG

Planning Reform

[Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025](#)

[National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system - GOV.UK](#)

[Reform of planning committees: technical consultation - GOV.UK](#)

LGR

[Local government reorganisation: Policy and programme updates - GOV.UK](#)

[Local Government Reorganisation Advisory Group - GOV.UK](#)

Devolution

[English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill 2024-25 - House of Commons Library](#)

Other Relevant reports and web resources

[Devolution to England | Institute for Government](#)

[State of the Profession 2025 | Championing the power of planning \(RTPI 2025\)](#)

[Local digital leaders must connect devolution and deliver reorganisation benefits, Localis study advises - Localis](#)

[Citizens' assemblies | Institute for Government](#)

[North Wales Planning Service \(Minerals and Waste\)](#)

[KPMG Closure Report - Glossy Summary Draft.pdf \(Cumbria LGR\)](#)

[The Planning Alliance](#)

[Public Practice](#)

Annex 3: About the Author



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Catriona is an independent consultant providing support on a wide range of spatial planning issues but specialises in strategic planning, working with a large number of local authorities across England, helping them develop their approaches to strategic planning and establishing new governance arrangements. She has authored several reports on the subject of strategic planning, most recently, as part of a small team researching strategic planning practice, published by the Royal Town Planning Institute in September 2025. She is currently chairing a national Strategic Planning Group which is helping to develop the approach to a new generation of strategic plans. In 2025 Catriona was voted as one of The Planner's Women of Influence for her work in strategic planning.

Catriona is the Planning Officers Society's Strategic Planning Specialist and Vice Chair of the Town and Country Planning Association. In 2022 she was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute and awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Oxford Brookes University for her contribution to planning. She is a regular columnist for Planning Magazine, a Judge for both the Planning Magazine Awards and is a Commissioner on the Radix Big Tent Housing Commission.

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