

Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution

Local and strategic planning as an enabler

Research and guidance from Planning Officers Society

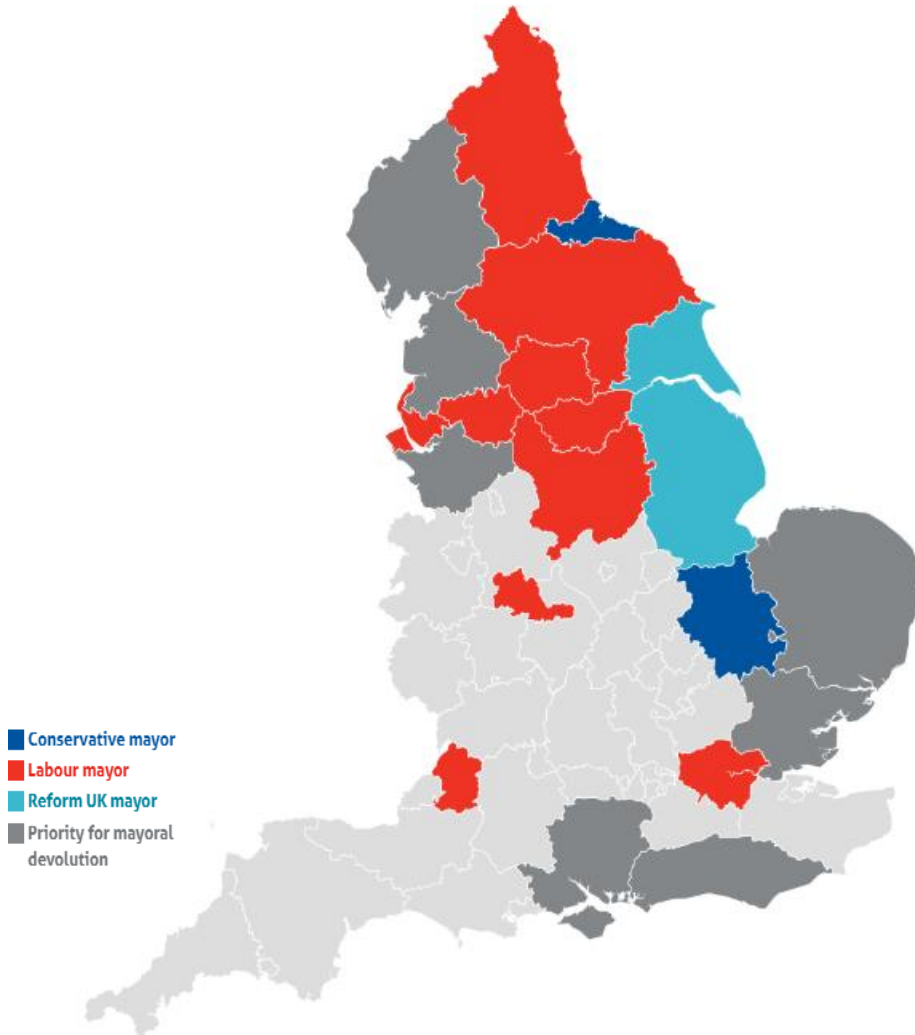
January 2026 v.1

What is Local Government Reorganisation?



- Government process to replace all two-tier authority areas with unitary authorities by 2028
- Map shows those areas invited to submit proposals to government (May 2025)
- Reforms are focused on simplifying the structure of local government, improving service delivery and enhancing efficiency

What is Devolution?



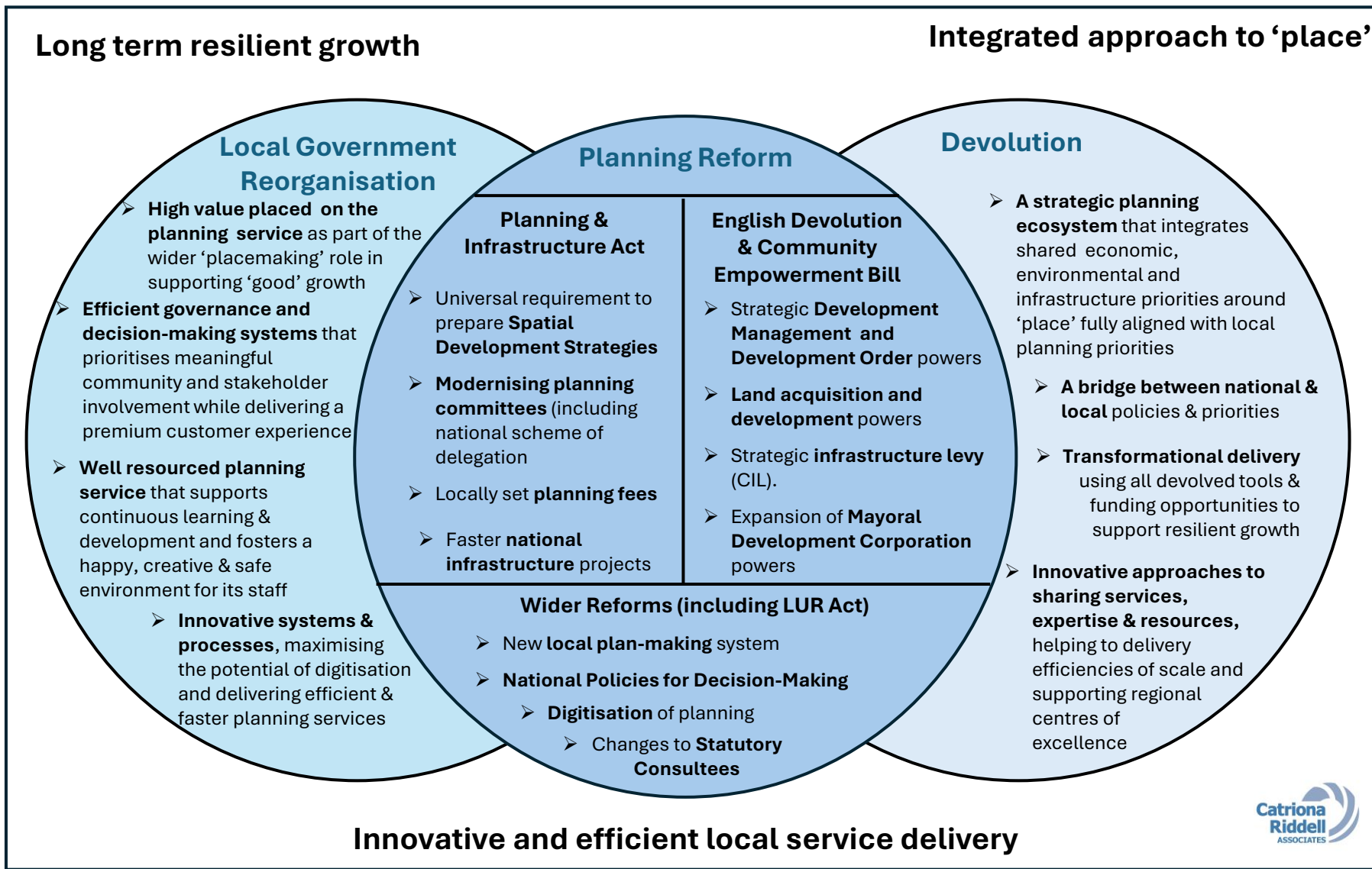
- Government is continuing to decentralise decision making powers and funding to local areas through the devolution programme
- Key service areas being devolved include transport, housing and skills
- Areas that have already gone through devolution are led by elected mayors – shown on the map with the political party of current mayor highlighted
- The map areas in grey are those on the current priority programme, with elections for Mayors to take place in 2028
- In advance of these mayoral elections the priority areas will be established as Strategic Authorities (SAs)

Key changes to English planning system

In addition to LGR and devolution, government is currently taking forward a number of major changes to the planning system. These include:

- A new plan-making system (local and strategic spatial plans)
 - Requirement for the preparation of Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs) – geography to be defined but Strategic Planning Authority will be combined authorities or existing county/unitary councils). SDSs will plan for coordinated growth, delivery of the 1.5m homes target across England, and integrated transport, infrastructure and environmental policies and project delivery. See both Planning and Infrastructure Act <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2025/34/enacted> Additional strategic planning 'delivery' powers will be introduced through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act. <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/4002/stages>
- A revised National Planning Policy Framework which will include new National Policies for Decision Making
 - Government consultation on revised version of NPPF issued 16th December 2025, closing date 10th March 2026
 - <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-proposed-reforms-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system>
- Proposals for modernising planning committees
 - Consultation issued May 2025, closed July 2025, with new provisions included in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2025/34/enacted>
- Digitisation of planning, national data sets and increased national standardisation

Planning, LGR & Devolution – how it all fits together



Who is this resource for and how to use it?

- POS has undertaken this research and prepared these guidance sheets to be used by:
 - Planning teams in district and county councils currently going through local government reorganisation and / or devolution
 - Planning teams operating in unitary authorities and strategic authorities
 - Current and future Chief Executives and Place Directors
 - Members, particularly Planning Committee and Cabinets
 - Wider staff within councils and partner organisations (e.g. health, infrastructure bodies)
 - Developers, land promoters and house builders working with local planning teams
 - Local communities, town and parish councils and wider stakeholders
- Research will be kept up to date via the POS website with sessions throughout 2026 to hear from those implementing the changes and update this guidance
- At this time, we anticipate holding an online workshop following the May 2026 elections and a further session in September.

Key messages

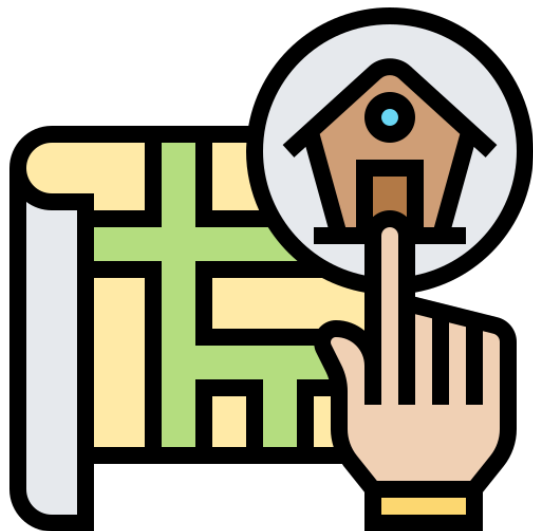
The next five slides set out the key messages derived from the research undertaken. The final slides summarises key learning from those councils who have already gone through LGR and or devolution.



Planning teams should recognise the potential benefits of LGR and planning reforms

*The combination of LGR and planning reform offer an **opportunity** to introduce innovative practices and to rebuild skills and capacity.*

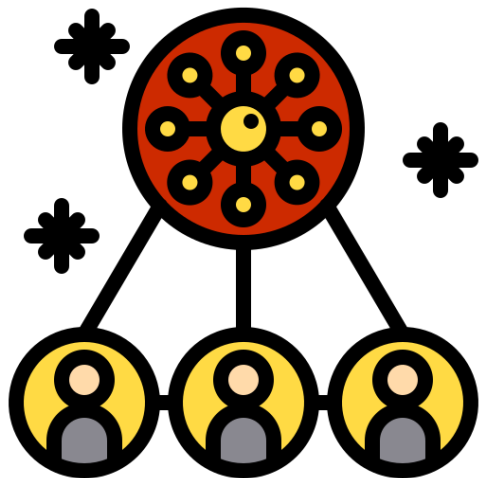
Previous experience highlights the need to consider all planning functions, not focus solely on development management role and income generation opportunities.



Planning is an enabler to achieving wider societal outcomes

The wider value of planning in supporting good place-making (beyond regulation) must be considered in relation to both structure of the new council and within the Strategic Leadership's responsibilities.

Best practice shows role of planning in improving health & wellbeing, supporting sustainable economic growth, delivering new infrastructure and maximising the benefits from our natural environment.

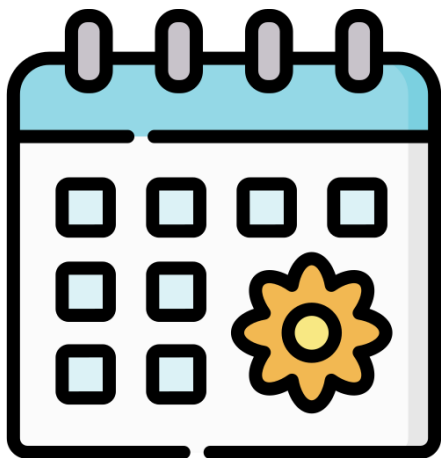


LGR is about creating new authorities

*LGR is about **creating a new local authority** with its own culture and values, not simply merging teams or committees from existing authorities.*

Focusing on creating a new authority reduces the risk of culture clashes (e.g. urban and rural authorities, pro-growth and development neutral authorities) and builds consistency in all services (planning, housing, community etc) approach to e.g. innovation, customer service and stakeholder engagement.

Previous experience shows using legacy council areas for new planning committees can lead to inconsistent approaches in decision making. Under the National Scheme of Delegation committees will be considering fewer applications and there is unlikely to be a need for more than a single committee.



Change takes time – operational processes and cultures need time to be developed

Organisational and cultural change takes time and will have to be supported well beyond Vesting Day.

Previous experience shows IT and procurement systems are critical to delivering service quality and **must** be considered across the entire council.

Learning from previous experience

- Reorganisation and devolution are not straight-line processes, expect change and anticipate where local risks may expedite or delay proposals
- Current processes and timelines may change at national, regional or local level
- Continue to do what you do – and make sure you do it well
 - If this is delivering a robust regulatory service, then make sure you continue to deliver a robust regulatory service
- Do not underestimate the amount of time and resource that is required
 - Staffing pressures are significant across all council teams, and recruitment and retention is a daily struggle
 - Technology can help, but there are major gaps in data coverage across England and systems do not always easily integrate

Key tasks

The following tables set out a number of key tasks to be considered in the lead up to local government reorganisation and devolution as identified through the research.

The tasks have then been expanded by POS to outline who should take the lead, the outcomes that could be secured and where further information can be found. POS will regularly review and expand these key tasks as members feed in their experiences of LGR and devolution.

Key tasks

Key task	Lead	Details	What this delivers?	Further support
Establish Place Leadership as core corporate responsibility within new LGR authority	Chief Executive / Council Leader	<p>Preparatory work to start before Vesting Day, job descriptions to be finalised with planning function included in senior Place Leadership roles.</p> <p>Clearly set the tone and culture for the new organisation – one that sets out how place leadership will deliver wider outcomes and improve collaborative delivery.</p> <p>Integrate community engagement processes on policy development (e.g. social policies, health and wellbeing) with place making and Local Plan policies.</p> <p>Having all council services provided via a single authority should support greater integration of delivery and a more cohesive place-based approach.</p>	<p>Planning teams are better integrated within corporate structure with a leading role in place-shaping.</p> <p>Planning for Place becomes the focus for service delivery with cost-efficiency measures introduced across the board, not solely focused on where greater income can be achieved through DM work.</p>	POS is currently considering further research and guidance in this area.
Establish the Planning Committee	Chief Executive / Chief Planner	<p>As a result of changes to legislation, planning committees will consider significantly fewer applications, and these will tend to be more strategic in nature.</p> <p>Review previous geographies and determine new “best fit”. Take care not to simply align to legacy councils. This will enable a greater opportunity to build a shared culture from the outset.</p> <p>Deliver mandatory training to all members regardless of whether they are on Planning Committee. Include detailed training on how the development industry works.</p> <p>New Constitution to reflect new national approach to officer delegation, committee size and structure.</p> <p>Ensure all planning decisions can be taken in a “safe and legal” manner.</p> <p>Manage Member expectations on their role on Planning Committee and clearly set out where their input will be required.</p>	<p>Members understand the development journey and the role that local planning plays.</p> <p>New national scheme of delegation will enable Members to focus on those applications where their input is needed.</p>	<p>POS Response to the recent consultation on committee reform: https://www.planningofficers.org.uk/government-consultations</p> <p>POS guidance is available on involving committee members in constructive planning policy discussions https://www.planningofficers.org.uk/pos-publications-and-guidance/pos-archive/good-practice-archive/strategic-applications</p> <p>POS can support with Member training https://www.posenterprises.co.uk/training</p>

Key tasks

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Prepare project plan to deliver the new Local Plan	Chief Planner	<p>Reinforce the need for a plan-led system in England. Set out the links where adopted plans are in place and new plans that require preparation.</p> <p>New 30-month timeline shared across all departments and members</p> <p>Integrate role of local plan into wider corporate planning function and ensure policy alignment – e.g. health, social and environmental policies</p> <p>Map engagement with Strategic Planning Authority and coordination and alignment with Spatial Development Strategy and Local Growth Plan</p>	<p>Improved delivery of Local Plans, ensuring England can return to a plan-led system and more certainty is provided for customers</p> <p>Capture institutional knowledge before experienced staff leave the organisation</p>	<p>See MHCLG Local Plan support Create or update a local plan using the new system - GOV.UK</p> <p>POS Guidance: https://www.planningofficers.org.uk/pos-publications-and-guidance/pos-archive/good-practice-archive/good-practice-member-liason-forum</p> <p>See PAS SDS Readiness support Welcome to the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Local Government Association</p>
Corporate IT, finance and procurement systems	Chief Executive / CMT leads	<p>Review and map the systems used in planning teams (GIS, developer contributions, procurement etc) and make sure these are considered at corporate level.</p> <p>Clearly set out current and future licence requirements for all software programmes, current work programmes with Land Registry and current / future requirements for infrastructure mapping tools. Put costs against these and detail risks if IT is not there to support.</p>	<p>County systems have previously focused on social care and education. LGR offers opportunity to integrate all systems into a place-based approach for data collection and analysis, leading to better evidenced policy development and outcomes.</p>	<p>POS to work with MHCLG to identify further support for IT and data programmes</p> <p>Local digital leaders must connect devolution and deliver reorganisation benefits, Localis study advises – Localis</p>

Key task	Lead	Details	What this delivers?	Further support
Evidence base for new Local Plan	Chief Planner	<p>Update and expand the evidence base for the new Local Plan (and align with emerging SDS evidence where appropriate)</p> <p>Engage with all technical consultees e.g. Highways Authority, Lead Local Flood Authority</p> <p>Work with other departments to ensure collection and analysis makes best use of available GIS data and can support aligned policy development across social, environmental and wellbeing outcomes</p>	<p>Ensures Plan will be fully digitised in line with government requirements (see also Council’s Project Definition Document)</p> <p>Clearly identify where evidence can support the development of the SDS and achieve efficiencies across the plan-making functions.</p>	<p>POS will continue to develop guidance in this area as strategic planning progresses.</p>
Planning functions review	Chief Planner	<p>Map existing processes and charging schedules across LGR partners, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pre app process & fees - Validation process & charges - Developer contributions (S106 / CIL) <p>Include engagement with customers to determine good practice both within existing council and other areas</p> <p>In partnership with asset teams undertake infrastructure and asset mapping (existing assets and future needs) on a pro-active basis, do not wait for others to outline investment needs</p>	<p>Clarity on who has responsibility for compliance and enforcement of planning obligations and where developer contributions will be used</p> <p>Council can issue a clear statement of intent on how service levels will be maintained during transition period</p> <p>Agreed list of who owns which assets and where investment is needed will be available to support LGR discussions.</p>	<p>POS can support with service level reviews https://www.posenterprises.co.uk/development-management</p>
Chief Planner Groups	Chief Planners	<p>Establish Chief Planner groups across SDS areas to ensure regular communication, alignment of Plan timelines and potential for shared evidence.</p>	<p>Maintains operational progress and focuses on delivering against timelines. This can help to mitigate risk of delay in areas of mixed political representation.</p>	<p>POS can support through regional planning groups: https://www.planningofficers.org.uk/pos-networks-and-events/pos-networks</p> <p>Engagement with both the CCN and DCN planning groups</p>

Key task	Lead	Details	What this delivers?	Further support
Staffing	Chief Planner with planning service leads and CMT	<p>Chief Planners to review the need for and availability of specialist skills (ecologists, minerals and waste, urban design etc) and map needs across their own authority</p> <p>Chief Planners to work across strategic planning geography to consider how to retain and / or procure staff. Look at shared services / jointly hosted teams where appropriate.</p> <p>Prepare and deliver a shared team building programme</p> <p>Recognise that building a team to deliver a significant volume of strategic applications will be very different from what has been delivered previously</p>	<p>Early consideration of shared teams / joint service delivery will enable planning teams to better prepare for the longer term – where possible aim to develop multi-disciplinary teams that can work across both policy and DM. <i>Allow the conversation within planning teams to move from ‘we do either or discussion’ to ‘we do and discussion’.</i></p> <p>Ability to set clear and consistent working practices for staff, e.g. virtual working, training and development practices, relationships with Members and customer service at an early stage could help with retention and progression concerns.</p>	<p><u>Public Practice</u></p> <p>POS can provide guidance on building planning teams to meet future needs</p> <p><u>State of the Profession 2025: England Championing the power of planning</u></p> <p>See North Wales Shared Planning Service as an example <u>North Wales Planning Service (Minerals and Waste)</u></p>
Community engagement	Chief Planner / CMT leads / Place leads at Strategic Authority	<p>Shared stakeholder forums to be established if not already in place, with consideration given to new models of engagement (e.g. citizens assemblies)</p> <p>Developer forums to be set up at the Strategic Planning Authority level and include core infrastructure providers (transport, water, utilities, health)</p> <p>Consideration of community engagement events to support development of new Local Plan – will depend on current adoption status</p>	<p>Opportunity to re-set relationships with communities and stakeholders, offering a more proactive and positive engagement across the whole of the planning system.</p>	<p><u>https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/devolution-and-lgr-hub/devolution-and-lgr-lga-support/local-government-reorganisation</u></p> <p><u>Citizens' assemblies Institute for Government</u></p>

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Capital investment and asset management programme	CMT leads	<p>Agree a combined capital investment programme for the new authority</p> <p>Clearly identify all CIL and S106 income and ensure this is ring-fenced in LGR discussions to meet legal restrictions on spend, existing commitments and agreed projects. Reflect this information in the Infrastructure Funding Statement for the legacy council.</p>	<p>Clarity over which infrastructure projects will be prioritised and when delivery is expected.</p> <p>Legal spend of CIL and S106 funding</p> <p>A prioritised list of investments that can be shared with the Strategic Authority / Mayor</p>	<p>Delivering an infrastructure mapping platform Local Digital</p>
Minerals and waste planning	Chief Planner	<p>Consider the preparation of a joint minerals and waste plan across SA geography, or wider if appropriate.</p> <p>Consider shared service to support minerals and waste planning functions, including both plan-making and development management.</p> <p>Agree with the new Strategic Planning Authority what minerals and waste planning (if any) will be managed through the SDS.</p>	<p>Retention of key skills across minerals and waste planning, and shared services to promote improved planning.</p>	<p>North Wales Planning Service (Minerals and Waste)</p>
<p>Prepare a Spatial Development Strategy</p> <p><i>Work on the SDS is expected to be initiated now with full coverage by 2029</i></p>	Strategic Planning Authority	<p>SPAs will lead on preparation of SDS but will need to work closely with local plan teams if integrated growth is to be achieved. Where there is no devolved Strategic Authority, strategic planning responsibility will sit with the new unitary authorities and managed through a Joint Board.</p> <p>Consider working arrangements with the National Park Authority where relevant.</p> <p>Map engagement with Strategic Planning Authority and coordination and alignment with Spatial Development Strategy and Local Growth Plan</p>	<p>An integrated approach to PLACE, with key plans and strategies aligned.</p> <p>A long-term spatial investment framework to support resilient growth and infrastructure prioritisation.</p> <p>SDS will provide a key component of the ‘planned’ system, supporting local plan preparation, providing confidence for investors and certainty for local communities and customers.</p>	<p>https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-infrastructure-and-service-transformation-authority/about</p> <p>See PAS SDS Readiness support Welcome to the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) Local Government Association</p>