IPPR North

MAKING THE MOST OF IT

UNITARISATION, HYPERLOCAL DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

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SUMMARY

This report looks at the democratic implications of the government's agenda for local government unitarisation under the English devolution and community empowerment bill. While proposals to simplify governance and support mayoral devolution have been broadly welcomed, the planned abolition of remaining district councils – affecting around 29 per cent of England's population – has resulted in concerns about the future of local democracy, representation and community voice.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the report argues that unitarisation presents a rare opportunity for democratic renewal at the local level if accompanied by intentional reforms. Drawing on insights from case study research with Brereton and Gaunless Gateway Big Locals, as well as existing examples and evidence of good practice in local government, it identifies three key areas for democratic innovation.

• Reforming and expanding hyperlocal councils to ensure democracy 'within walking distance'.
• Establishing inclusive, empowered and well-resourced neighbourhood boards with 50 per cent or more community representation. In the same way that mayors will be granted the right to request powers from central government, communities themselves – in the form of hyperlocal councils and newly established neighbourhood boards – should have the right to request powers from unitary and strategic authorities.
• Councils adopting bold participatory democratic practices. For councillors, the government should legislate to enable remote, digital voting. For the public, councils should increasingly use approaches such as co-production, participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies as new default ways of working.

The government's wider plans within the English devolution and community empowerment bill will move powers out of Westminster, not least with the rollout of new strategic mayoral authorities across the country. Local government reorganisation need not result in a weakening of democracy at the local level; its democratic consequences will depend on the choices made during implementation. If power is meaningfully passed down to local communities and they are effectively engaged, unitarisation can serve to strengthen local democracy and herald vital democratic renewal at the local level. This opportunity must be grasped.

1.
INTRODUCTION: THE UNITARISATION AGENDA

Since the Labour government took office in July 2024, the rollout of devolution in England has continued apace. One of the first bills to be consulted on following the election was the English devolution and community empowerment bill. While the bill's proposals to broaden and deepen devolution have been broadly welcomed, plans for the unitarisation of the remaining two-tier county-district authorities – covering around 29 per cent of England's population – have inadvertently come to dominate the narrative. This has renewed attention on the hyperlocal tier of governance, particularly the role of community groups and local institutions in community empowerment within a unitarised setting.

The government's reorganisation plans set out a clear direction of travel. In practice, this will mean effectively removing the 164 district councils in England that currently sit below county councils. New unitary councils will then be formed in these areas. They are expected typically to serve populations of 500,000 or more, with some flexibility where appropriate (MHCLG 2024).

Reforms are intended to be sequenced alongside the further rollout of devolution and to prioritise the delivery of high-quality, sustainable public services (ibid). The government has indicated that it will actively prioritise reorganisation in areas where existing structures are seen to be failing or inefficient, with strong unitary councils framed as essential building blocks for effective devolution (ibid).

In terms of implementation, the timescales for local government reorganisation are relatively well established. The typical period from initial proposal to full implementation is 2–2.5 years (Fright and Routley 2025). Recent reorganisations in Cumbria, Somerset and North Yorkshire have broadly followed this pattern, suggesting a similar trajectory is likely for any forthcoming changes.

Indeed, unitarisation is not new and there is precedent. The current proposed round follows a trend of recent decades of moving towards larger single-tier local government in England. Previous rounds of restructuring took place in 1992–1995, 2008–2009 and 2018–2021. Currently, 71 per cent of all local government in England is, in effect, unitarised. In recent years we have seen the establishment of new unitaries in North Yorkshire, Somerset and Cumbria (into two unitaries) in 2023, and in Cheshire (into two unitaries), Northumberland, Durham, Cornwall, Shropshire, Wiltshire and Bedfordshire (into two unitaries) in 2009.

FIGURE 1.1: MAP OF COUNCIL TYPES IN THE UK

County council areas highlighted in dark blue will be going through the local government reorganisation process.
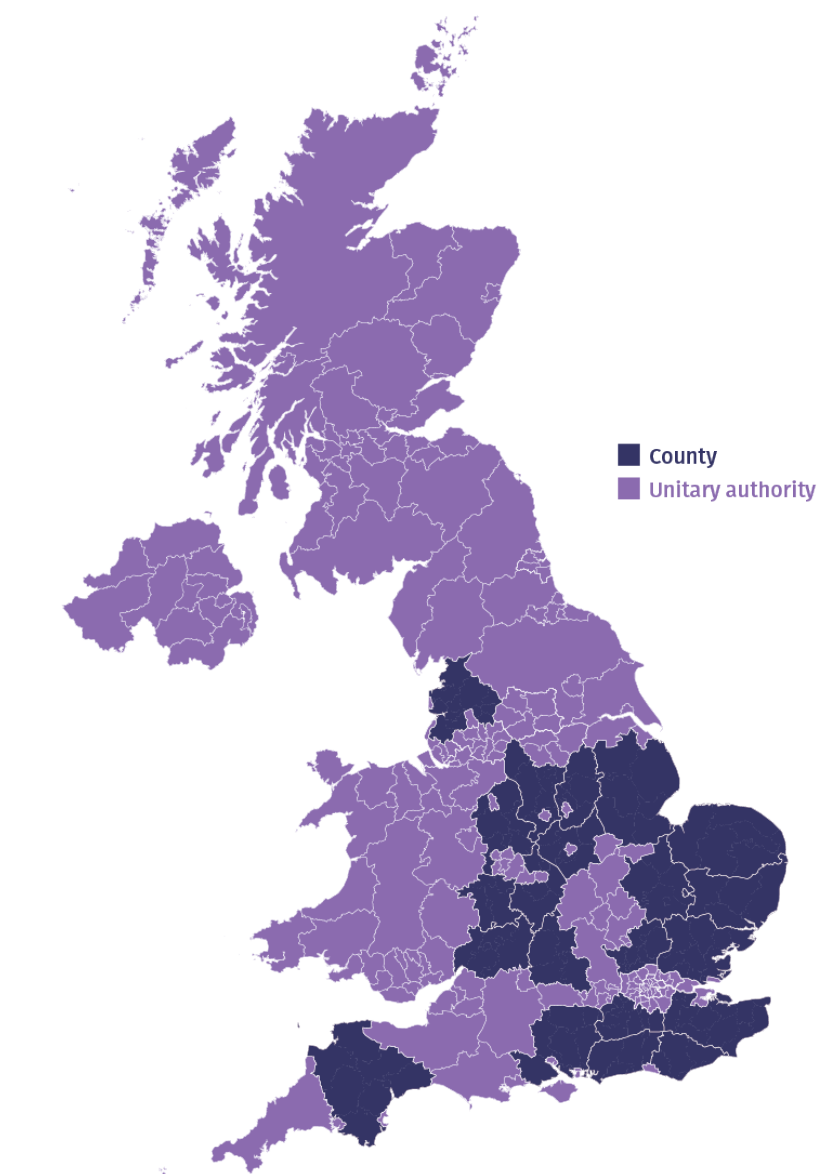
Authors' analysis

RATIONALE FOR REFORM

A range of arguments have been advanced in support of the current government's unitarisation plans, particularly in the context of the increased devolution of powers and resources to strategic mayoral authorities. Proponents point to potential efficiency gains and cost savings, reductions in the number of elected politicians, clearer and more comprehensible local government structures, enhanced accountability, and the simplification of forming new strategic authorities (without at the same time adding an additional tier, but one-tier-in-one-out). There are arguments both for and against their likely impact in practice.

The case for unitarisation most commonly rests on claims about efficiency and service improvement in the context of devolution, which has introduced the mayoral strategic authority tier. By reducing duplication across county and district tiers, it is suggested that unitarisation offers the potential for significant long-term savings (MHCLG 2024). Bringing services together within a single authority is also seen as enabling more holistic and preventative approaches to service delivery, particularly in complex policy areas such as health, social care and economic development (ibid).

Workforce pressures are another key consideration, with fewer councils expected to reduce duplication in senior leadership roles and competition for staff across neighbouring authorities (ibid). From a democratic perspective, it is argued that simpler governance structures will make accountability clearer for residents, who may otherwise struggle to understand where responsibility lies (ibid). Finally, unitarisation is framed as offering strategic benefits by making collaboration with other public services and combined authorities more straightforward (ibid).

International evidence on local government mergers provides a more nuanced picture. Some studies suggest that larger authorities may benefit from economies of scale and enhanced strategic capacity, particularly in planning and coordination (Sandford 2025). However, there is no consistent evidence that mergers lead to overall cost savings, with some international research finding no systematic relationship between the size of a jurisdiction and the effectiveness of service delivery (Blom-Hansen et al 2020).

Evidence from previous waves of unitarisation in the UK similarly point to conditional rather than universal benefits. Research drawing on interviews with senior local government leaders from unitary councils created in the 1990s and in 2009 suggests that the effectiveness of unitarisation depends on a combination of factors, including scale, geography, and a shared sense of place (Swann 2016). While larger councils may be better positioned to achieve economies of scale and manage strategic functions such as health, care and economic development, size alone is not sufficient to guarantee improved outcomes (ibid).

DEMOCRATIC CONCERNS

While the merits of efficiencies and savings can be debated, the case for simplifying local government in England and expanding mayoral devolution and powers across the country is powerful. Yet one issue that has so far received insufficient attention in discussions about unitarisation concerns how people and neighbourhoods at the hyperlocal level can be adequately represented and empowered as the district council tier is removed and mayoral tier introduced.

The English devolution white paper which preceded the bill acknowledged this challenge, stating that the government "will… want to see stronger community arrangements when reorganisation happens in the way councils engage at a neighbourhood or area level", and that it will "rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal local authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice". While these commitments are welcome, there remains a clear need for greater detail on what strengthened hyperlocal governance will look like in practice, both in newly proposed unitary authorities and in areas that already operate under unitary arrangements. This is particularly important for more deprived communities, which more often lack formal hyperlocal governance structures or strong social infrastructure, yet face the greatest risks of marginalisation as local government reorganisation proceeds. Polling suggests most people are concerned that unitarisation may diminish opportunities for local residents to shape their areas (We're Right Here 2025).

Moreover, the transition away from two-tier to unitary councils is likely to result in fewer local elections, typically held once every four years, rather than more frequent electoral cycles (Fright and Routley 2025) due to elections at different tiers often being held on different cycles. Reduced election frequency, it is suggested, risks weakening the ongoing relationship between councils and residents, diminishing opportunities for democratic engagement and accountability (ibid).

Unitarisation is also associated with a significant reduction in the number of councillors, continuing a trend evident in local government reorganisations since 2008, which have substantially reduced both the number of councils and the number of elected representatives (ibid). The government's own estimations suggest that up to 5,000 councillors may be lost as a result of reorganisation (MHCLG 2026). This is likely to further weaken the diversity of political representation in local government. This could be compounded in more rural areas, where distances travelled in areas with a population of 500,000 may, for example, make impossible the participation of those with caring responsibilities.

Additionally, international comparative research indicates that the UK is already highly under-governed, with very large populations per local authority, and exhibits comparatively low levels of local autonomy relative to other countries (Jeffery 2025). UK councillors also already represent significantly more residents than their counterparts in much of Europe, raising concerns about capacity, accessibility and democratic connection (Leach and Copus 2021).

As such, the District Councils' Network has argued that very large unitary councils risk becoming geographically vast and remote from the communities they serve (DCN 2024), particularly in more rural areas. Similar concerns have been raised elsewhere, with scholars warning that larger councils risk diluting local democracy by reducing proximity between citizens and decision-makers (Giovannini 2025). In a broader context characterised by low voter turnout, declining trust in political institutions, and rising populism, there are concerns that further distancing local government from communities may have serious democratic consequences (ibid).

A substantial body of evidence supports these concerns. Research suggests that larger local authorities are associated with negative impacts on trust in councillors and officials, levels of public engagement and participation, community identity and cohesion, and voter turnout (Leach and Copus 2021). By contrast, smaller authorities tend to foster stronger community bonds and higher levels of political efficacy and engagement (Sandford 2025). Further findings indicate that larger councils can be associated with widening gaps between national and local turnout, declining satisfaction with advocacy and engagement, and falling electoral participation as population size increases (ibid). Additionally, there is evidence from Wales linking smaller local governments with higher levels of citizen political efficacy – citizens' trust in their ability to influence decision-making (Andrews et al 2018). Taken together, it is argued that the combined effect of fewer councillors and weaker links to place and community identity have the potential to pose a significant threat to local democracy across England (Leach and Copus 2021).

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LOCAL DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

Despite this, it must be recognised that the status quo is far from ideal. Even in areas currently served by two-tier authorities, turnout in local elections and overall political satisfaction remain relatively low. Across the country, the vast majority of people believe they have little or no control over important decisions that affect their neighbourhoods and local communities (We're Right Here 2025).

While there is a clear need to be alive to the dangers that unitarisation may pose for local democracy if done badly, given the wider benefits of the English devolution and community empowerment bill – paving the way for the extension of strong, place-based leadership across the country – we should instead consider how the process can serve as a starting point for renewing democracy from the bottom up, particularly as more powers and resources come down from central government to forthcoming new mayoral strategic authorities.

Seen as part of the wider English devolution agenda, unitarisation is an opportunity to create new democratic touchpoints to replace those lost through the removal of district councils. There is a chance to forge new approaches to community-level governance arrangements and innovative democratic practices that can maintain and strengthen local voice and democratic legitimacy during and after the current wave of local government reorganisation (Fright and Routley 2025). These new practices can be applied not only to those newly formed unitaries but also to existing ones across the country.

The government has explicitly recognised the importance of community voice and hyperlocal governance within the context of local government reorganisation and devolution. The English devolution white paper framed local government as essential to convening partners and representing community voice, and it committed to reviewing and strengthening existing community partnership structures (MHCLG 2024). It also emphasised the need to improve engagement between town and parish councils and principal local authorities, and it acknowledged that community-scale governance must be strengthened during reorganisation in order to avoid the loss of local voice (ibid). In addition, it made clear that councils will be expected to innovate in neighbourhood involvement and community governance as part of the transition to new governance arrangements (ibid).

Yet while the government has clearly acknowledged the importance of community engagement, empowerment and accountability within a new single-tier local authority system, its proposals so far have been criticised for lacking sufficient detail on how meaningful community engagement would operate in practice (Ali 2025). This absence of clarity raises questions about how commitments to strengthening community voice will be translated into concrete institutional arrangements and everyday governance processes.

The government now has a significant opportunity to develop and clearly set out how the unitarisation agenda can serve not only as a technical reform to ease the path towards mayoral devolution in England and to improve the efficiency of service delivery, but instead also serve as a powerful vehicle for the democratic renewal of local government. While unitarisation inevitably involves the upward transfer of powers from district councils to larger unitary authorities, it also creates space for a complementary and intentional shift of power back down to communities. If approached creatively, this reform can enable new and more meaningful forms of local influence, participation and accountability. We must make the most of it.

Drawing on case study research with two community organisations – Brereton Million Big Local and Gaunless Gateway Big Local – and existing examples and evidence of good practice in local government, this report sets out three key areas of opportunity for democratic innovation to enable the strengthening of hyperlocal governance and the empowerment of communities across the country through the current unitarisation agenda.

First, the reform and expansion of hyper-local councils to give communities direct powers and a stronger voice over the issues that affect their daily lives. Second,

the establishment of innovative and inclusive neighbourhood boards across all unitary areas that provide new forums for collaboration between residents, civic organisations and local government. Third, bold and meaningful approaches to participatory democracy to ensure that local people are directly involved in shaping decisions, priorities and spending.

Many of the mechanisms needed to deliver these changes already exist. Across the country and internationally, there are examples of good practice that demonstrate how community-centred democratic renewal can be embedded at the local level. These models can serve as inspiration for clear action to ensure that unitarisation strengthens, rather than diminishes, local democracy and community power.

CASE STUDY LOCATIONS

This report draws on research from two Big Local case study areas. Big Local is a programme that has been run for the last 15 years by Local Trust. It has provided grants of over £1 million each to communities in 150 neighbourhoods across the country, enabling long-term, resident-led, non-prescriptive resources and opportunities for communities. It has since served as inspiration for the government's Pride in Place funding.

FIGURE 1.2: LOCATIONS OF THE CASE STUDY SITES

Bishop Auckland, County Durham

Brereton, Staffordshire

Authors' analysis

We visited and spoke to workers and volunteers in Big Locals in Brereton in Staffordshire and at Gaunless Gateway Big Local in Bishop Auckland, County Durham. These sites were chosen not only to understand more about the work of community organisations in these places, and their experiences of and ambitions for local democracy and community empowerment, but also to learn from experiences and practice in both a soon to be unitarised area (Staffordshire) and an area that has had unitary government since 2009 (Durham).

2.
'DEMOCRACY WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE':
THE REFORM AND EXPANSION OF HYPER-LOCAL COUNCILS

To bridge the democratic gap that may emerge between large unitary authorities and the communities they serve, there is a significant opportunity to reform and expand hyperlocal councils so that communities have a stronger voice over the issues affecting their daily lives. As local government in England increasingly moves towards universal unitary authorities, the importance of governance that remains close to residents has grown. King (2025) argues that this shift heightens the need for what he describes as 'democracy within walking distance', a principle also promoted by the Society of Local Council Clerks as central to effective local governance. Keeping councils close to residents strengthens the relationship between communities and government by enabling greater public engagement, making it easier for people to raise concerns, and increasing their influence over local decision-making. In this way, proximity helps ensure that governance is more responsive, accountable and rooted in community priorities.

In areas that have moved from a two-tier to a unitary system in recent years, parish councils have indeed taken on a more prominent role. Jane Wills (2020) has highlighted the case of Cornwall where parish councils have worked cooperatively with the unitary authority to take on more responsibility and run more assets like libraries, parks and public toilets. This shows that hyperlocal councils can play a key role in taking on management responsibilities for assets and institutions once more commonly associated with other tiers of government. In part, this situation has emerged from necessity, with parishes stepping in to run and fund services through the hyperlocal precept (ibid), and is part of a broader trend across the country (LGA 2021). But it is a notable example of successfully reconfiguring governance at the hyperlocal level, with positive cooperation between different levels of government that should be used as a model with the creation of an increasing number of unitary councils.

Building on this logic, some have advocated for the creation of a universal hyperlocal tier of governance across England. Kaye and Woodward (2025) propose that central government should require the establishment of neighbourhood councils or combined neighbourhood councils nationwide, embedding hyperlocal governance within processes of local government reorganisation and devolution. Under this model, local authorities would lead implementation in areas without existing parish structures, while strategic authorities would assess readiness and support progression.

This would be a neat and uniform solution to improve democratic representation at the hyperlocal level. However, in practice, there are important practical challenges associated with universalising hyperlocal governance. Not least the issues that some places, particularly more deprived urban areas, may lack the social infrastructure and civic capacity needed to sustain effective neighbourhood

councils at present. In such contexts, initial focus on building on civic infrastructure and capacity should be prioritised. Using some of the funding provided through the Pride in Place programme could be an initial means of achieving this in some areas. As such, we recognise that a one-size-fits-all model of hyperlocal governance may not be right. But given that only around 38 per cent of England is currently covered by parish or similar arrangements, there is a strong case for expanding hyperlocal government beyond its existing footprint.

Yet there remain significant weaknesses within the current parish council model that must be addressed if expansion is to deliver meaningful democratic benefits. At IPPR North, we have previously made the case that England's parish council system requires substantial reform to strengthen democratic legitimacy and effectiveness (Swift and Billingham 2024). At present, low levels of participation, limited representativeness, uneven powers, insufficient and insecure funding, patchy geographical coverage, and weak coordination with other tiers of government are hallmarks of hyperlocal councils.

We have made the case for a number of reforms to address these challenges. These include exploring the possibilities of remote voting and improving the openness and accessibility of hyperlocal councils to increase participation, taking action to improve the diversity of representation within local councils, and creating pathways for community leaders to enter local government. Additionally, we have made the case for strengthening the powers and responsibilities of hyperlocal councils by improving cooperation between parish councils and higher-tier authorities, encouraging joint working across parish boundaries. We have also suggested introducing a 'right to request' that allows hyperlocal councils to take on additional responsibilities where they have the capacity to do so, as well as improving the funding settlement for hyperlocal councils, alongside exploring opportunities for new revenue-raising powers through fiscal devolution.

Not only would these reforms make the hyperlocal council model more democratic, but they would also deliver further powers to the community level – as the Cornish example above suggests, unitarisation provides significant opportunities for hyperlocal councils to take on more powers should they wish to do so. Alongside these reforms, the coverage of hyperlocal councils could then be expanded through the establishment of new parish councils where communities want them, coupled with targeted investment in disadvantaged areas to build local capacity and participation.

Taken together, these proposals envisage a reformed system of hyperlocal governance in which parish and neighbourhood councils act as hubs of democratic innovation and engagement. We argue that if adequately empowered and resourced, such councils could play a central role in strengthening democracy by anchoring decision-making at the most local level while ensuring effective integration within wider systems of governance (Swift and Billingham 2024).

Lessons from one of our two case study areas, Brereton, highlight the role that democratic and representative parish councils can play in local communities. Historically, engagement between the Big Local and the parish council was strained, while relationships with the district and county councils were comparatively stronger. However, this dynamic changed significantly following the first parish election in over a decade, when members of the Big Local were elected to the parish council. This resulted in a community-led council made up largely of local volunteers.

Since this transition, tangible improvements have been evident. The community centre, once boarded up and inaccessible, is now open on a regular basis, and parish council processes have become faster, more responsive, and more effective.

These changes have highlighted the contrast between formal council structures and community-led approaches. Bureaucracy and rigid procedures are widely seen as discouraging community participation, whereas taking the ethos of a community group into the parish council setting has enabled a more flexible and approachable council, with decision-making grounded in everyday experience. Notwithstanding this success, we heard how rigid and formal approaches to parish council proceedings can still pose challenges to effective action and delivery.

Despite the clear benefits that reformed and expanded hyperlocal councils may bring, there is a danger that merely handing more powers and responsibilities to parishes may recreate a two-tier dynamic in all but name which may not be desirable in some areas, while the creation of new hyperlocal councils may not be feasible in some places. Simultaneously pursuing other democratic reforms such as the creation of inclusive neighbourhood boards and taking more participatory approaches to local democracy is therefore important.

3.
THE CREATION OF INNOVATIVE AND INCLUSIVE NEIGHBOURHOOD BOARDS IN ALL UNITARY AREAS

Another way to bridge the gap between large unitary councils and the communities they serve is through the creation of effective and inclusive neighbourhood boards or neighbourhood area committees. The former local government minister Jim McMahon previously signalled that neighbourhood area committees led by ward or 'frontline' councillors would be the government's preferred model for improving local links and voice within new unitary settings (Calkin 2025).

Neighbourhood area committees operating along this model are not an innovation; they were enabled under the Local Government Act 2000 and can cover up to half of a council's geography or population, allow for the delegation of functions, and typically include all councillors representing the area. Existing examples include Durham County Council, which since 2009 has operated 14 Area Action Partnerships involving communities alongside police and health partners, and North Yorkshire Council, which in 2023 established six area committees aligned with parliamentary constituencies and holding planning powers. Such committees may also include town and parish councillors, MPs and community organisations.

While this direction is welcome, there is a danger that a councillor-dominated approach to neighbour area committees runs the risk of limiting the role of ordinary residents and communities, and that it does little to bridge the gap between unitary authorities and citizens. Indeed, the extent to which some of these models have been effective in bridging the gap between unitary councils and communities remains unclear. In Durham, we heard from those involved with the Gaunless Gateway Big Local that the there is some scepticism about the effectiveness of the county council's Area Action Partnerships model. Some argued that the Area Action Partnerships have become outdated and overly restrictive. It was suggested that community voice initiatives often suffer from a lack of trust and poor follow-through, reinforcing public cynicism in the local authority. It was also noted that decision-making at town board level can feel disconnected from hyperlocal realities.

To be effective, such bodies should combine diverse representation with meaningful powers, enabling them to both hold councillors to account and to actively shape and invest in their communities. There are already a number of innovative neighbourhood-style governance models operating within unitary authorities across the country from which important lessons can be drawn. These range from councillor-led approaches such as those in place in Manchester (LGA 2025a) and Oldham (LGA 2025b), to models that bring in a wider range of stakeholders in some of the more newly established unitary authorities.

The recently unitarised authority of Cumberland, for example, has set up eight Community Panels intended to bring decision-making closer to residents. Each panel includes between five and seven elected councillors and can co-opt local,

non-voting members selected through local application processes (LGA 2025c). Significantly, the panels are supported by a £750,000 Neighbourhood Investment Fund to be spent on local priorities. Moreover, efforts have been made to ensure that the panels undertake wide-ranging engagement through Community Network activity in accessible local venues beyond formal meetings (ibid).

Similarly, Buckinghamshire Council, which became a unitary authority in April 2020, has developed eight community boards which seek to maintain strong links between the council, councillors and local communities (LGA 2025d). Membership of these includes all unitary councillors in the area, all town and parish councils, voluntary and community organisations, and any interested residents or groups, with each board supported by a senior council service director to provide leadership and help resolve issues (ibid). Board sizes vary to reflect community geographies rather than equal population, and boards share a £250,000 budget allocated partly equally and partly according to population and deprivation, giving each board between £29,000 and £32,000 (ibid). These boards have sought to shift from formal meetings to workshops and community-based conversations, which has improved engagement and attendance (ibid).

Wiltshire Council, which underwent unitarisation in 2009, operates a similar model with 18 local area boards with delegated powers and devolved funding, created specifically to keep decision-making close to communities following reorganisation (LGA 2025e). While boards comprise three to 10 local councillors, they bring together a wide range of partners, including voluntary organisations, emergency services, health bodies, businesses, schools, housing associations and residents (ibid). Boards receive annual devolved funding across multiple streams and focus on four core outcomes: community engagement, strong local partnerships, community resilience, and local leadership and decision-making (ibid).

Learning lessons from these and other varied approaches will be crucial to the effective rollout of neighbourhood boards across the country. If neighbourhood governance is to fulfil the government's ambitions, consideration should be given to how unitary authorities can be required not only to establish such bodies, but to ensure they are diverse in representation and adequately equipped with the powers and resources needed to genuinely represent, support and improve their communities.

When it comes to the makeup of such boards, it is crucial that they include not only local councillors but other key stakeholders and service providers, parish councillors and, vitally, representatives from community organisations and interested citizens. Boards made up solely or predominantly of councillors run the risk of merely recreating a two-tier dynamic that leaves little space for community input.

Moreover, limiting the role of councillors on these boards would guard against the problems of disruption and lack of continuity due to political change highlighted by the community in Brereton. Based on our work for this project and elsewhere, IPPR North recommends that such neighbourhood boards should consist of at least 50 per cent community representatives. This should include interested members of the community and representatives from community organisations. They should also include the participation of young people, in line with the government's plans to enfranchise 16- and 17-year-olds. The remainder of the boards should comprise ward councillors, parish councillors and representatives from local public service. Polling for We're Right Here (2026) finds that there is strong support for neighbourhood boards being made up of both local people and community groups, alongside elected representatives. In more deprived areas that lack existing forms

of hyperlocal governance, this model would be particularly effective in bringing local people into community decision-making.

The government should also work with existing and soon to be formed unitary councils to ensure that neighbourhood boards can be properly empowered under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 and crucially, resourced to deliver on community priorities. When it comes to powers, these should be as flexible as possible so communities can shape their own areas and deliver on local priorities and concerns. We heard from groups we spoke to that while there is an appetite for increased powers for communities, there is little support for additional regulation or bureaucracy. We therefore suggest that, similar to hyperlocal councils, neighbourhood boards should have a 'right to request' powers and responsibilities from the unitary authority.

As highlighted above, a number of examples can be learnt from on funding, including a long-term commitment to the provision of funding for boards based on levels of deprivation and needs. Allowing flexibility in how these resources are spent is also vital for real community empowerment. Learning from the Big Local model, the benefits are clear. Those involved with Gaunless Gateway Big Local noted that their funding model has proved far more flexible than traditional local government funding, allowing space for experimentation and learning. This continuity, and resistance to unnecessary churn driven by government reforms, was seen to have been a key strength of the model.

We suggest that new neighbourhood boards should be established on this basis from the outset in all areas currently going through unitarisation. The government, in collaboration with local authorities, should then explore how this model can be extended in existing unitary authority areas.

4.
BOLD AND MEANINGFUL APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY

In addition to improving community voice and representation through bodies like hyperlocal councils and representative neighbourhood boards, local government reorganisation presents a significant opportunity for democratic renewal at the unitarised local authority level. It gives councils space to think more innovatively and creatively about how participatory approaches to democracy can help bridge the gap between elected representatives, citizens and communities. Evidence from Wales suggests that the presence of participatory mechanisms such as citizen panels has improved external political efficacy, particularly in larger local governments, highlighting the potential role of institutional design in mitigating democratic deficits (Andrews et al 2018).

At present, approaches to community engagement and participation in some areas of England are perceived as being inadequate for the needs of communities. In Bishop Auckland we heard that in particular, elderly residents and those without internet access increasingly feel left behind, especially as organisations such as Durham Council move towards digital-first engagement. Approaches like this, it was suggested, have created significant barriers to participation and reinforced a sense that engagement is often top-down, with local people's voices not always genuinely reflected in outcomes.

Moreover, it was noted that the structural distance between residents and higher tiers of local government contributes to mistrust and disengagement, many residents feeling reluctant to approach councillors directly with concerns. It was suggested that there is a clear need to involve people with lived experience more meaningfully, while also building residents' confidence and capacity to contribute.

Indeed, wider evidence suggests that citizens increasingly want greater involvement in decisions that affect their lives (INLOGOV 2025). Councils could be well placed to lead a renewed, community-centred approach to governance – and the current wave of unitarisation and the continued rollout of devolution offers a timely opportunity to do so. Within this context, there are a range of opportunities for strengthening civic participation.

Councils can play an important convening role by establishing deliberative forums that rebuild trust and enable meaningful dialogue between citizens and institutions (ibid). Such spaces can support the co-production of services by involving service users directly in their design and delivery, improving responsiveness, innovation and overall service quality (ibid).

Reforming how council meetings operate is one important avenue for democratic renewal. Councils should rethink the design and culture of meetings to make them more welcoming and participatory for both councillors and the public (Hambleton 2024). When it comes to councillor participation, the government should legislate to enable councillors to attend meetings and vote remotely if required. This is particularly important in new unitaries, given the increased size of areas represented and distances some councillors may need to travel. The government has consulted on this idea and agreed to take it forward (MHCLG 2025). It should now do so as an addition to the English devolution and community empowerment bill.

When it comes to improving access to and participation in council meetings for the public, measures that councils should consider include holding some meetings at family-friendly times and giving citizens a voice in setting agendas, shifting the focus of meetings towards community-wide issues rather than solely internal council business, and ensuring public forum spaces allow residents to ask questions and receive formal responses (Hamilton 2024).

Unitary authorities may also wish to consider the merits of the wider use of citizens' assemblies on particular issues, the use of which are becoming increasingly common within local government in the UK. Since 2019, more than 40 local citizens' assemblies or juries have been held, with further examples planned (Preller and Renwick 2025). Assemblies have been held in both urban and rural areas such as Devon and Herefordshire, by larger and smaller councils and by combined authorities. Many have focussed on issues concerning climate change, though not exclusively. Importantly, the evidence so far suggests that where they have been held, councils have generally taken assemblies seriously, issuing formal and sometimes detailed responses to recommendations, and in several cases reusing assemblies or expanding participatory decision-making more broadly (ibid). While by no means a panacea when it comes to long-term citizen participation, these findings do suggest that local citizens' assemblies are now a widely used and increasingly trusted tool for participatory democracy across a range of geographies, political contexts and policy areas, and can be used effectively (ibid).

In addition to spaces for citizen input and dialogue, effective and sustainable citizen and community participation should involve granting communities genuine power and control over decision-making and investment. This would require a democratic offer that goes beyond traditional consultation methods. Indeed, we heard from citizens in Bishop Auckland that currently, public consultations are often poorly publicised and rarely provide visible feedback, leaving people uncertain about whether their input has made any difference. Councils should prioritise these types of approach, which give citizens real decision-making powers, rather than those that are merely consultative.

There are already some established examples domestically and internationally of how this can be achieved. Citizen-led commissioning and co-production have seen councils redesign commissioning processes to give residents greater influence over service delivery, including commissioning for outcomes and embedding co-production within contracts (LGA nd). Community Chest funding is another widely used mechanism, with many councils allocating small discretionary budgets to councillors to support voluntary and community group projects. In some areas, participatory budgeting approaches enable residents to help decide how funds are spent (ibid). While not widespread in England at present, there are notable examples internationally of participatory budgeting being used in transformative ways, benefiting communities and local democratic participation (Kilpatrick 2025). Local authorities should also prioritise these approaches that give citizens power in council spending.

While there are a range of approaches that new and existing unitary councils could consider for improving participatory democracy, and citizens' and communities' roles in decision-making, the case for embracing participatory democracy is supported by a substantial evidence base. A significant body of evidence demonstrates that participatory and deliberative approaches can improve policy quality and contextual sensitivity, build mutual understanding across different perspectives, reduce prejudice and social division, and increase public support when engagement is inclusive and representative (INLOGOV 2025). From a governance perspective, democratic innovations help public institutions harness community knowledge and resources, design policies grounded in lived experience, and strengthen trust and legitimacy, leading ultimately to more inclusive, resilient and effective local governance (ibid).

5.
CONCLUSION: MAKING THE MOST OF IT

The new wave of unitarisation being pursued under the English devolution and community empowerment bill represents one of the most significant shifts in England's local government landscape for a generation. While the government's objectives of simplifying governance, improving efficiency, and enabling more effective devolution are clear and welcome, potential implications for local democracy, community voice and hyperlocal governance cannot be overlooked.

Nevertheless, this report has made the case that unitarisation and local government reform creates a rare and valuable moment for wider democratic renewal, both in the soon to be formed unitary authorities and in existing ones across the country. There is a clear opportunity to reimagine local democracy in ways that are more participatory, inclusive and rooted in place. Rather than accepting the idea of hyperlocal democratic loss as an inevitable trade-off for structural reform and the benefits of mayoral devolution, government and councils can choose to embed democratic renewal at the heart of the reorganisation process.

This report has identified three key and mutually reinforcing areas through which this can be achieved.

- Reforming and expanding hyperlocal councils to ensure democracy 'within walking distance'.
- Establishing inclusive, empowered and well-resourced neighbourhood boards with 50 per cent or more community representation. In the same way that mayors will be granted the right to request powers from central government, communities themselves – in the form of hyperlocal councils and newly established neighbourhood boards – should have the right to request powers from unitary and strategic authorities.
- Adopting bold participatory democratic practices in local government. For councillors, the government should legislate to enable remote, digital voting. For the public, councils should increasingly usse approaches such as co-production, participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies as new default ways of working.

Ultimately, whether unitarisation weakens or strengthens local democracy will depend on the choices made during its implementation. If treated solely as a means to streamline structures and facilitate mayoral devolution, it risks exacerbating local democratic deficits. But if it is accompanied by a serious commitment to shifting further powers and resources downwards to neighbourhoods and communities, local government reform can serve as a catalyst for hyperlocal democratic renewal and community empowerment.

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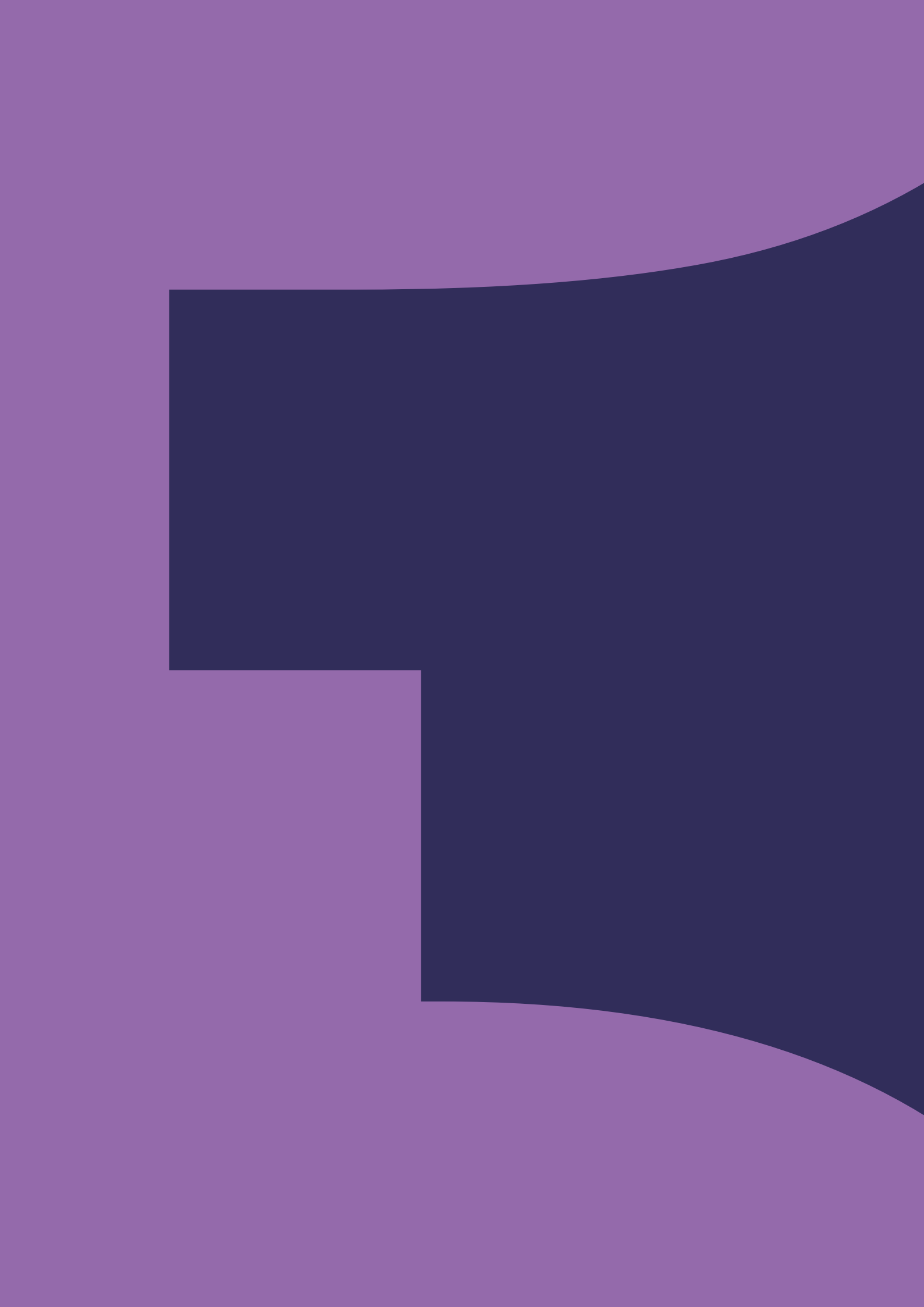
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