

Devolution and Unitary Councils

**What might Unitary Authorities mean for
local Councils**

With a particular look at Milton Keynes

Devolution and Unitary Councils

Members need something to do

- The Story from Northern Ireland (and Wales and Scotland)
- Too many members to remain strategic?
- The tendency to meddle
- The case for devolution goes all the way to the doorstep
- Brexit: Does it support devolution?
- Subsidiarity doesn't stop at a particular level
- The Principle of General Competence. Does it support or hinder devolution?

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Issues facing Parish and Town Councils

- Size and capacity. Huge range
- Funding Model. Major disparities between Councils (eg Council Tax base)
- Capping (Referenda requirements)
- The need for clustering, shared services, spoke and hub approach
- Unparished areas
- Improvement, development and peer challenge
- Image and history. Traditional model of Parish Councils
- Strategic Capacity
- The Governance model
- Officer Structures

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Issues Facing the Local Government Sector

- Years of Austerity
- Abolition of Revenue Support Grant
- Reliance on Economic Growth
- Business Rates .. Still an uncertain end game
- Social Care (and Children's Services) Crisis
- Combined Authorities and Elected Mayors
- Places in the shadow of City Regions
- There is no money left

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However

- **The Vacuum needs to be filled**
- **Parish and Town Councils are responsible for everything (or may be held responsible)**
- **Advantages of transparency and being local.**
- **Public more likely to support taxation for local services and facilities**
- **Community management, ownership and engagement**
- **The growth of parishes even in the Urban areas**

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Unitary Councils

- Reduce the number of members at Principal Council level
- Have a very heavy strategic agenda
- May be more willing to let go
- The Public Realm is particularly prone to be a low priority
- Statutory services dominate
- In the 90's most new Unitaries arose out of City Districts
- Since then the County Unitary model more common (or as in Cheshire split counties)

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Best time to do a deal

- Is simply when Principal Councils are seeking your support
- And when Principal Councils need to share costs and devolve functions

Issues to Consider

- Is a parallel community governance review required?
- Do Parish and Town Councils need to review their internal governance arrangements?
- The need for expertise that is not currently in the Parish sector (IT, Treasury Management, Estate Management, HR, Engineers, etc)
- Assets and liabilities. Income raising assets. Community Asset Transfer

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Some examples

- Most of the Unitary Districts did not have a History of Parishing
- Milton Keynes is the best example.. Fully parished. Elsewhere Swindon has just approved parishing
- Still only 1 Parish Council in London (Queens Park but two or three more in progress)
- Sutton Coldfield (Birmingham)
- Cornwall, Wiltshire, Cheshire and Durham in the Unitary County areas

Devolution and Unitary Councils

Milton Keynes

- Fully parished since 1999 (Unitary since 1997)
- Massive range of size and scale (largest over 25,000 population)
- Collective Precept is £6.5million
- Average Band D £72 but range from Nil to £165.47
- 3 Councils potentially affected by capping
- Landscaping, Play Areas, Youth Services, Public Toilets, Dog Bins, Local Grants, Libraries, Community Asset Transfer
- New Areas include street cleansing, salt bins, pest control.

Devolution and Unitary Councils

Milton Keynes (2)

- Parish Charter
- Parish Forum
- Good relationships at member level. Less so at officer level
- Wide range of Council tax base. Average across MK is 75p but range in the parishes is from 45p to £1.28
- LCTRS. £530,000 in LCTRS grants. Pledged to retain without cuts for two further years (but uncertain after that) Some Councils very reliant on this