



Local Government Reform

Introduction

The Scottish Government has opened the debate about local government reform in Scotland with a bold initial [proposition](#) to replace the current 32 councils with 6-10 regional authorities and 120-160 community authorities.

Reid Foundation papers have long argued that power should be shifted away from our large councils to [communities of place](#), so we welcome reform. In this briefing, we examine the proposals and look at how they could support stronger communities.

Initial Proposition

The Scottish Government's proposition is intended as a starting point to facilitate debate and discussion, with the objective of establishing a measure of shared agreement on the scale and broad shape reform could take. They argue that "Scotland is fortunate, because of our size, that some priorities are best delivered at a national level; others are best delivered regionally; and some at a level closer to communities. What we must now do is get that balance right."

The proposal is that councillors would continue to be elected at the current ward level, sitting on both the Community authority and on the associated Regional authority. The same overall Regional administrative or corporate structures would support both Regional and Community authorities. The aim is greater subsidiarity and more local decision-making, supported by efficient delivery through regional structures.

Regional authorities could have powers currently performed by quangos, as part of the wider public service reform proposals. This could include regional economic development, housing and transport. This makes more sense than simply [merging quangos](#), which rarely achieves the efficiencies or the devolution of decision-making needed.

The balance of powers and financing between regional and community authorities will be the key issue in these proposals. The initial proposition says, "Functions for Community authorities would focus on those decisions which are most effectively made closest to their impact, such as householder planning applications, community

planning, licensing decisions, as well as management of the historic environment and open space and greenspace, the regeneration of local town centres and the provision and maintenance of local leisure, sport and culture facilities.

The proposition says nothing substantial about financing both levels of councils. The Council Tax is in any case in urgent need of [reform](#), as valuations are still stuck at 1991 levels. There is a strong case for raising additional taxes locally. The Council Tax raises only 20 per cent of council finances. Similar European councils raise 50-60 per cent locally, giving them real power to improve their communities. It is unclear why the Scottish Government is linking its proposals to the Scottish budget process. A change at this level will take much longer than one year to organise, and savings, if any, will be medium-term at best. As the [trade unions](#) have pointed out, change should be driven by creating better outcomes, not financial savings.

These proposals also cover social care management. The paper is less clear on the First Minister's previous 'preference' for the NHS to run social care. As many have [argued](#), social care is a different culture from the NHS and needs to be linked up to other council services such as housing. These proposals do not justify the highly centralising plans for [cutting](#) the number of health boards.

Number of authorities

The precise number of regional and community councils will require careful consideration. Scotland currently has the largest councils in Europe with an average population of 170,000. The average in Europe is 10,000. The Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy [suggested](#) a fundamental review of boundaries. Scotland used to have over 400 councils representing communities of place. 150 community councils would average 36,000. In practice, they would be larger depending on what happens to cities. Do they remain one council, or split into separate communities?

One example in the Scottish Government paper is Kilmarnock, with a population of 46,000. This gives a good idea of the sort of towns that could have their own councils. Another issue is how much of

the surrounding rural area is included in the community councils. Some of these decisions can be driven by travel to work, leisure and retail travel, as well as transport services. However, the data is far from perfect on these issues, and local residents will have their own view. We tested AI on the task, and the output was not encouraging!

Powers

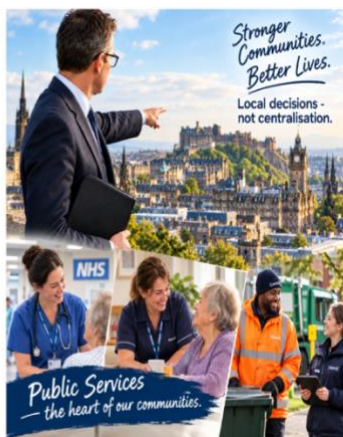
Given the Scottish Government's long-standing preference to centralise services, many will be cynical that community authorities will be little more than slightly more powerful versions of the current community councils. The real power will be at the regional level. This will be a crucial part of the upcoming debate. The key principle should be subsidiarity: decisions should be handled by the local authority best able to address them effectively, rather than by a centralised power.

Stronger Communities

Jimmy Reid, in his alienation address attacked the contemporary local government proposals saying,

"Local government is to be restructured. What an opportunity, one would think, for decentralising as much power as possible back to local communities."

"Where and how in your calculations do you quantify the value of community?"



Some functions are obviously best delivered at a regional level. These include large-scale regional development, much of which is already covered by national planning guidance, or will be soon, such as AI centres. Trunk roads will be another, as they will cross the community boundaries. Public transport, such as buses, is another, while ScotRail is probably best left at national level.

Some functions can, and typically are in Europe, be delivered locally by a council of between 30,000 and 50,000 people. These include local planning permissions within a local plan, building warrants and similar services. Local roads, street lighting, bridges, etc. Managing household waste collection, recycling, street cleaning, and environmental protection. Running local libraries, sports facilities, parks, and museums. Recording births, deaths, marriages, and civil partnerships.

This does not mean that each community authority must manage these services locally. For example, some services may be very small in a community authority, such as trading standards. In Europe, and already in Scotland, smaller authorities often share services, but local authorities decide on the

type and delivery options, not central government. Technology could also support staff networks.

The Scottish Government suggests that regional authorities could provide corporate services, a form of shared services that has had mixed outcomes, but as technology develops, it may be a valid option. We have previously suggested that much of the necessary administration could be part of [national frameworks](#) covering areas such as human resources and procurement. The Christie Commission proposed the idea of a single public service worker.

The Scottish Government paper suggests that housing could be a regional function. It is hard to see why social housing could not be run locally. That leaves the two biggest services, education and social work. In similar European countries, schools are run locally, although within national policy frameworks. Some support services may be too specialised for a community authority, and they could be shared, or regions manage them. The same applies to social work. Most social care and social work services are already delivered by local teams or facilities and can be managed locally, with specialist services run on a larger scale.

Elected representatives

In the previous regional/district structure, councillors were elected directly to both forms of council. The Scottish Government is suggesting that councillors will serve on both. It is difficult to see how this is practical, as regional councils would have far too many councillors. It is also undesirable. The attraction of community authorities is that councillors would be largely part-time, encouraging a much wider range of people to serve on them.

Conclusion

The direction of travel towards councils based on actual communities of place, with shared and regional functions within national frameworks, reflects the many papers we have published in recent years. However, the key issues will be getting the balance of services right, with subsidiarity as the principle. Services must be properly financed, and this must also be part of the discussion.

Jimmy Reid Foundation

The Jimmy Reid Foundation is a think tank which brings together different voices from across Scotland to make the case for economic, environmental, political and social equity and justice in Scotland and further afield.

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