

Local Government in England: why is change needed and what it means for education.

It would be difficult to deny that local government in England is in a mess of historic proportions.

Broadly there are two reasons for this:

- The centralisation of decision making, in respect of both policy and resources, that has been driven by successive governments since the 1980's. Increasingly local authorities have been reduced to being the implementation arm of central government with little or no ability to depart from a national template. Key local services have been removed entirely from local management and have been handed over to various forms of quango or to the private sector.
- Ad hoc decision making about the structure of authorities has left a state of total confusion. The almost random distribution of district, unitary and county councils is the result of uncoordinated decision making driven by local lobbying and supposed political advantage. On top of that we have a new but very incomplete layer of combined authorities created by individual agreements with central government and all with different responsibilities and reliant on the goodwill of member authorities and central government.

This state of affairs is, I would argue, a significant factor in creating the alienation that can be seen in many parts of the country, especially in those furthest from London. Hospitals can be closed, schools privatised, planning decisions overturned, all by decision of a minister in London 200 miles away.

The reality is that bad decisions get made when ministers try and control things but do not have the detailed understanding or local input that is needed.

This is a situation that needs addressing. It is not just a matter of bureaucratic tidiness but **rather a fundamental element in the process of restoring power over their lives to local communities**. It should be a central part of a Labour government's programme.

Any restructuring inevitably has costs – both financial and by distracting people from the day job. Moreover, there is a temptation to listen to local lobbying which is how confusion and inconsistency creeps into the system. An incoming government should only do what is essential but it should not shy away from doing that much.

The essential principle should be the creation of strong multi-purpose authorities able to see the whole picture and ensure that local policies and programmes are co-ordinated. Only such an authority, with its own clear democratic mandate, can stand up for local communities against the encroachments of central government.

The destruction of local government's independence began because the Thatcher government found opposition from Labour councils intolerable. But the same case can be heard on the left – why should a Labour government hand local services over to Tory councils? I would make three points in response:

- First, all public authorities should have to adhere to the basic principles of good government.

- Secondly, central government is entitled to lay down basic duties and principles that all authorities must adhere to. And it should be able to put in place systems of arms-length inspection/ monitoring that will inform local electorates.
- Thirdly, beyond this we do have to respect democracy and diversity.

One view of what needs to be done

1. Establish throughout England a strong tier of regional authorities, comparable in size (though not in the range of their responsibilities) to the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They should have the strategic responsibility for most public services in their area and for promoting the economic development and well-being of that area. Much of what they do would be devolved from central government.

The nearest existing examples are London and Manchester. Although different in structure and powers, they both have a wide range of responsibilities and provide a focus for the development of their region.

These should be the centrepiece of our offer to the English regions – it will be essential to go beyond the small number of cities that have been the focus of devolution so far and give smaller towns and the countryside a real say in their own future.

2. Establish consistent boundaries across the whole of government – in particular Local Economic Partnerships and health bodies such as Clinical Commissioning Groups should be consistent with local authority boundaries so as to improve collaboration across services and to enable local authorities to provide strategic leadership and scrutiny.
3. Tempting though it might be to tear up the map of district and county councils, this would be both hugely disruptive and unpopular. Smaller steps would be to address the number of very small unitary authorities which are increasingly finding it hard deliver the whole range of services expected of them. This could be done by either moving some services back to the relevant county (eg Torbay back to Devon) or, where there are clusters of small unitaries, requiring joint working (eg Teeside or Berkshire).

What does this mean for Education?

I think SEA would take it as given that the planning and oversight of education should be in the hands of locally elected bodies of some kind. We must be clear that this applies to all state funded education (probably except universities). In his paper for this seminar, Richard Hatcher summarises the role of the local authority in respect of schools as:

“Firstly, to coordinate, develop, hold to account and be accountable for the local school system. Secondly to play a coordinating role connecting the local school system to the other institutions and actors at the local level of the National Education Service, ranging from pre-school to further and higher education and work-based learning.”

Going beyond schools, I would want to go further and say that the role should be to “coordinate, develop, hold to account and be accountable for” all educational provision in the area, with the possible exception of higher education where many institutions have a genuinely national reach.

In more detail, the role of local democratic bodies in relation to schools should be to:

- Plan school provision so as to ensure that all learners have access to high quality provision including having the sole responsibility for opening and closing schools and changing their size and nature.
- Manage school admissions including setting admission criteria for all schools.
- Monitor the educational performance, governance and financial management of all schools.
- Ensure the needs of all vulnerable pupils are met including those with SEND and those excluded from schools.
- With local Schools Forums, allocate funding to individual schools.
- Ensure the provision of independent transition and careers advice and information.
- Promote collaboration between local schools and ensure all schools have access to the support they need to maintain high quality education for all.
- Ensure that all school staff have access to the full range of professional development opportunities.
- Intervene when there is evidence that schools are not meeting expected standards in educational performance, governance or financial management.
- Manage major capital programmes.
- Co-ordinate the involvement of parents and the wider community.
- Champion the rights of all children and young people and their families including addressing complaints.

This list does not of course cover the responsibilities that would flow from a wider definition of the National Education Service from cradle to grave.

Richard addresses comprehensively issues around how local government needs to work differently. In this paper I just want to consider what the structural options are for the local management of education. The choices would seem to be as follows:

Nature of the education authority	Pros	Cons	Mitigation
The current structure of 150+ county, metropolitan and unitary authorities	<p>These authorities already exist so there would be no need for any restructuring.</p> <p>People are familiar with them</p>	<p>Currently, a significant number are small and have found it difficult to maintain the required specialist staff and capacity.</p> <p>Significant investment would be needed to enable them all to be effective.</p>	Substantial investment in local capacity.

		Would feel like the return to the ways of the past.	
A reduced number of larger local authorities achieved by a combination of mergers and joint committees where current authorities are too small.	Builds on the existing pattern of authorities but a smaller number of larger authorities would have greater capacity and would be more cost effective.	Political and cultural differences could make joint working difficult (eg joining a Labour city with a Tory county). Negotiating local arrangements could be time consuming.	Create incentives (eg more devolved powers) for LAs to work together.
A smaller number of larger regional authorities such as Greater Manchester (or harking back, the ILEA)	More cost effective, would be able to afford greater specialist resources and would have greater political authority vis a vis central government . Able to plan provision more effectively across current local authority boundaries. Better placed to deal with further education, skills and apprenticeships which don't follow local authority boundaries.	Too distant from the front line. Risk that they would not be sufficiently in touch with local needs and opinions. Would need to be part of a substantial initiative in devolving power from London. Would take some time to put in place.	For some purposes could operate more local clusters (eg for SEN and school to school collaboration) like ILEA divisions Local authorities could have a scrutiny role and could establish local education forums
Free standing education authorities run by directly elected members, perhaps along with councillors, professionals and community representatives	Relatively easy to establish because they would be new bodies. No need to negotiate mergers or joint arrangements. As a single issue body would develop specific expertise in education	More difficult to work with other services such as health and social care. Would weaken and divide the local leadership role of local authorities	Ensure consistent boundaries with local authorities. Include local councillors on the boards rather than directly elected members.

It will be apparent from section 2 above that my preferred option would be regional authorities. However this would only work if there was a substantial commitment from the party more broadly to embrace this kind of radical approach to devolving power in England.

If that is not forthcoming, the second or fourth options could be pursued. A lot of authorities would be unchanged – mainly the counties and larger cities. Where change is needed, it would be a pragmatic process making use of existing examples of joint working and legislation that is already in place. A big advantage is that it could be done more quickly.

John Bolt