REFORM

LOCAL, ACTUALLY
Establishing hyperlocal governance in England

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April 2025

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Reimagining the Local State is one of the major work streams within this programme.

ABOUT REIMAGINING THE LOCAL STATE

This paper is part of the *Reimagining the Local State* work stream. English local and regional government stands at a turning point. There are signal opportunities for local innovation, close community engagement, and ambitious devolution of powers and responsibilities from the centre. There are also unprecedented challenges, driven by years of fiscal retrenchment and rocketing service demand. This programme will develop policy ideas for the future of devolution, the role of communities, and the structures, practices, and leadership of local government itself. This paper sets out policies to establish new hyperlocal structures across England in the context of ongoing local government reorganisation and devolution.

Reimagining the Local State Advisory Group

Reform is grateful to the expert members of the *Reimagining the Local State Advisory Group* who provide invaluable insight and advise on the programme. Their involvement does not imply endorsement of every argument or recommendation put forward.

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Rob Walsh, Chief Executive Officer of North East Lincolnshire Council

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

External reviewers

We would like to express our gratitude to our external reviewers for this report: Professor Colin Copus, Vanessa Lowe, and one reviewer who wished to remain anonymous. Their generous input has significantly strengthened the final paper.

The arguments and any errors that remain are the authors' and the authors' alone.

Interviewees

We would like to thank 13 anonymous interviewees for giving their time and candid insights to support this research paper, and several others who submitted written information to inform our work.

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Central government should set a requirement that Neighbourhood Councils or Combined Neighbourhood Councils are expected to form in every part of England, creating a hyperlocal governance framework to set the requirements and incentives for change, setting out a timeline for establishment, and creating new duties on Strategic and Local Authorities to enable the development of the hyperlocal tier as part of reorganisation and the rollout of devolved powers. Local Authorities should be responsible for implementing this rollout in areas with no existing parishes. Strategic Authorities should be responsible for gauging readiness and eligibility of different hyperlocal entities for progression through the framework.

Recommendation 2: Neighbourhood Councils and Combined Neighbourhood Councils should operate as legal entities with a General Power of Competence. They should be empowered to draw funding from a council tax precept. They should become the default recipients of community-targeted government funding streams (in place of local authorities).

Recommendation 3: The Community Governance Review (CGR) process should be updated, with changes to the underpinning legislation to make CGRs more streamlined, formally recognise the involvement of existing community groups, and ensure that communities and local authorities can use them to create new Neighbourhood Councils that meet the requirements of the hyperlocal governance framework.

Recommendation 4: Central Government should create an explicit duty for local authorities to proactively map, enable, and drive the mobilisation of community-scale and neighbourhood activities in 'unparished' places, with the goal of identifying and mobilising a network of active communities as a basis for establishing a Neighbourhood Council. This activity should be resourced through the addition of a 1% precept on locally raised council tax, match-funded by central government from an expanded Community Wealth Fund, which would ultimately then be used to finance Neighbourhood Councils once these are established.

Recommendation 5: The collective population of a new CNC or NC should stand at between 20,000 and 50,000. The local authority should work with the Parishes and community to determine the exact appropriate number.

Recommendation 6: In order to qualify for 'established' status – and therefore be able to request draw down of powers – CNCs and NCs must fulfil a more advanced set of conditions to demonstrate sufficient maturity. These conditions should be published by central government and the process supported by the relevant Strategic Authority.

1. Introduction

The neighbourhood is the backdrop for much of daily life. Whether walking through the park, volunteering at a community charity, or waiting for the local bus, everyday experiences unfold within the hyperlocal boundaries of England's communities. These interactions shape lives and form connections to the places people call home.

Central Government recognises the importance of this hyperlocal scale for the flourishing of communities, publishing a 'Plan for Neighbourhoods' that builds upon the 'Levelling Up' programme that has dominated discussion since 2019. The stated goal of this plan is to "empower local people to take back control of their future".[1] However, amid the announced funding and projects, the plan barely mentions the existence of the smallest operational scale of local government in England, mentioning only two town councils, and no parishes.

The reason is that hyper-local governance in England remains inconsistent, with parish, town and Neighbourhood Councils covering only 36 per cent of the population – mostly located in rural areas.[2] These councils (hereafter referred to collectively as 'parishes', unless in reference to a specific organisation) vary widely in size, resources, and effectiveness, with some actively shaping their communities while others are largely dormant.[3]

As two-tier county and district authorities are reorganised into new unitary authorities and regional governance expands — a trend super-charged by the English Devolution White Paper — a governance gap grows at the hyperlocal level and decision-making is being taken further from community activity.[4] The abolition of longstanding district authorities in some areas has spurred efforts to establish new parishes and it will be important that these new parishes are able to meaningfully represent the interests of their communities.

Meanwhile, larger local authorities face significant pressure to meet statutory service demands, such as social care and temporary accommodation.[5] This leaves inadequate capacity for non-statutory services like libraries, community planning, green spaces, and neighbourhood resilience — areas critical to local wellbeing which are best managed at a hyperlocal scale.[6]

1.1 The hyperlocal state as it stands

England has over 10,000 parishes, comprised of elected councillors and a clerk. These councils are largely concentrated in rural areas, while major urban centres – such as Liverpool,

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[1] Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 'Plan for Neighbourhoods: Prospectus', 12 March 2025.

[2] Mark Sandford, 'Why Do Parish Councils Only Exist in Some Parts of England?', Web Page, House of Commons Library, 8 June 2022.

[3] Mark Sandford, *Parish and Town Councils: Recent Issues* (House of Commons Library, 2021).

[4] Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*, 2024.

[5] Simon Kaye et al., *Back from the Brink: Radical Ideas for Sustainable Local Finances* (Reform, 2024).

[6] CDALC, 'Powers and Duties of Local Councils', Web Page, n.d.

Manchester, and Birmingham – have very few. In London, the only parish is Queen's Park Neighbourhood Council, in North West London.

Parishes vary significantly in scale, income, and effectiveness. Funded largely through a council tax precept, income varies widely. For example, in the financial year 2024-25, 124 parishes reported raising a precept of at least £1m,[7] while others receive far less than £100.[8]

In some communities, parish councils serve as vibrant community hubs, delivering responsive hyper-local services and contributing to the health and wellbeing of residents. Many became the home of rapid, essential action during the COVID pandemic lockdowns.[9] Yet in other parts of the country, issues of inadequate organisational capacity, poor behaviour, misconduct and lack of diversity undermine their effectiveness.[10]

Where parishes are absent, particularly in urban areas, other forms of hyper-local engagement have emerged. Neighbourhood forums, for example, often lead local planning processes and convene communities around specific issues.

The current role of the council is undefined and dependent on the ability, resource and willingness of the council in question, as well as the extent and difficulty of the relationship with the local authority in the area – an idea reinforced by several interviewees. One characterised the role of a parish as one of primarily "signposting": pointing people in the right direction for services provided by other public authorities. Another interviewee reflected that there is a lack of vision for what the optimum role of the council should be, and that not having a standard is an issue for the tier.

The sector's National Improvement Strategy sets out four themes for the activities of parishes: "service deliverer, culture creator, place shaper, builder of community resilience".[11] A survey of local councils in England and Wales demonstrated that spending "coalesced around four functional areas: the custodianship of local community assets; the management of the public realm; support for communities; and running costs of the authority itself".[12]

Beyond this, parishes have, since 2011, been able to obtain a legal 'general power of competence', enabling them to participate in activities beyond their usual core duties. They are not obligated to exercise their powers: 13 per cent of local councils do not levy the council tax precept they are entitled to collect.[13] Furthermore, whether councils take on further responsibilities often depends on the willingness of the local authority to delegate responsibilities. According to one interviewee, local authorities are often reluctant to

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[7] NALC, 'NALC Publishes Analysis of Local Council Tax Levels for 2024/25', 7 August 2024.

[8] House of Commons Library, 'Unitary Authorities: The Role of Parish and Town Councils', Webpage, 16 December 2020.

[9] Luca Tiratelli and Simon Kaye, *Communities vs Coronavirus: The Rise of Mutual Aid* (New Local, 2020).

[10] Jane Martin, '#JackieWeaver – a Catalyst for Change in Local Government Standards', *Committee on Standards in Public Life*, 8 February 2021.; Adam Carey, 'Standards Regime Needs More "Teeth", Town and Parish Councils Say', *Local Government Lawyer*, 19 June 2024.; Jessica Hill, 'Concerns over Proposals to Devolve Power to Town and Parish Councils', *Local Government Chronicle*, 17 November 2021.

[11] NALC, 'National Improvement Strategy', 28 March 2017.

[12] *The Future of Local Councils* (The Society of Local Council Clerks, 2023).

[13] 'Parish Precepts 2023-24', *Society for Local Council Clerks*, 14 June 2023.

collaborate directly with parishes, and tend to pass down responsibilities they perceive "don't matter".

However, with financial crisis and soaring service demand affecting the whole sector, some examples have emerged of parishes working in close partnership with local authorities to deliver services. North Somerset Council, to take one example, is partnering closely with town councils to fund and deliver key local services, with the aim of bringing decisions closer to communities while easing financial pressures.[14]

Reorganisation has similarly led to some parishes explicitly taking on new responsibilities, and increasing their precept as a result. In the words of one interviewee: "as unitary authorities become more strategic commissioning authorities with less discretion over services, there is a feeling that these services should be devolved down."[15] If this is to happen, there will need to be strong institutions at the hyperlocal scale to devolve services down to – and this, in so many parts of the country, is simply not the case.

1.2 A new approach

To bridge this governance gap, this paper proposes a variety of measures, aimed at achieving three interconnected objectives. English hyperlocalism should be:

1. Universal: Spread and 'fill in the map' of English hyperlocal governance, so that it is a consistent tier and a clear route for community representation

2. Capable: Achieve the organisational scale required so that hyperlocal governance has the capacity and footprint it needs to fulfil its role

3. Empowered: Evolve these organisations so that they can contribute fully to the local government system, draw down appropriate powers, and work closely with the communities they serve

This paper sets out a framework to indicate how this hyperlocal tier can be rolled out.

Where parishes exist already, this will mean a process where neighbouring councils pool their resources and share back-office functions, achieving together what would be impossible for them singly. These Combined Neighbourhood Councils (CNCs) would serve populations of at least 20,000, creating the foundation of a credible and capable organisation able to operate more ambitiously and take on additional responsibilities and resources, while respecting the identities and places that underpin their constituent parishes.

Larger and more established town councils would be able to use the same framework to themselves embody stronger hyperlocal governance, enabling the rollout of a consistent tier across England.

Places with little or no parish-scale governance will be supported to take on this new framework as the best route to the powers and resources needed to mobilise and enable

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[14] North Somerset Council, 'Town Councils and North Somerset Council to Fund and Deliver Services Together', *Clevedon Town Council*, 7 February 2025.

[15] Neil Merrick, 'Parish Councils and the Devolution of Services', *Local Gov*, 6 June 2018.

community activity. In this, they would be assisted by new duties on local government to identify and support community groups to become the core of new Neighbourhood Councils.

These new hyperlocal institutions would be explicitly tasked with managing local assets, responding to local issues, and serving as a conduit for community input into important region-wide plans as devolution sees local systems taking on growing powers.

2. The need for change

"Toxic, dysfunctional and outdated."[16] Fairly or unfairly, this local news headline captures the stereotypical view of parish councils. High-profile incidents, such as the infamous Jackie Weaver viral zoom meeting, and the recent Darlington wrestling match, paint a picture of parish councils that are unfit for purpose.[17]

Yet, as argued in *Reform's* 'What powers where?', there is a clear role for a hyper-local structure. Governance at this level has immense potential to strengthen communities by enabling swift, tailored responses to local needs. The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the crucial role of town and parish councils, as many rapidly mobilised to support their residents. With minimal bureaucracy, parishes were able to set up delivery services for vulnerable individuals, establish Community Hubs, and provide essential social infrastructure.[18]

A strengthened, appropriately-scaled, and universal hyperlocal tier could create more resilient, community-driven solutions that address local needs more effectively than top-down approaches, effectively compensating for the distancing effect that will play out as current plans for reorganisation and devolution unfold.

2.1 The need for universal hyper-localism

64 per cent of England's population lacks access to hyper-local government.[19] As noted, parishes are far more common in rural areas, while urban areas, characterised by denser, more diverse, and more mobile populations, present a more complex environment for establishing and sustaining hyper-local governance.

Areas with active parishes benefit from proximity to representatives, forums for rapidly discussing immediate local concerns, and are more likely to possess the assets associated with a strong social fabric, such as shared spaces, social infrastructure, and high levels of political engagement.[20] Urban contexts often enjoy a higher geographic (and lower per-capita) density of socially participatory local businesses and charities – a key way in which such places may be able to quickly play host for more organised and systematic hyperlocal governance.[21]

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[16] Kate Moore, 'Parish Councils – Toxic, Dysfunctional and Outdated', *East Anglia Bylines*, 2 June 2024.
[17] Kaleigh Watterson, 'Handforth Parish Council: Jackie Weaver "Did Not Have the Authority"', *BBC News*, 29 March 2022. ; Mark Brown, 'Two Darlington Councillors Investigated after "Wrestling" in Parish Meeting', *The Guardian*, 13 February 2025.
[18] Hurstpierpoint & Sayers Common Parish Council, 'Covid-19 Community Hub', Web Page, 20 December 2021.; National Association of Local Councils, 'Farnham Town Council, Surrey', Web Page, Star Council Awards, 2021.
[19] Mark Sandford, 'Why Do Parish Councils Only Exist in Some Parts of England?'
[20] Jenevieve Treadwell et al., *Double Devolution* (Onward, 2021).
[21] McDonnell et al, 'Charity Density and Social Need: A Longitudinal Perspective', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 49, no. 5 (March 2020).

For example, Falmouth Town Council communicates effectively with its population via a range of digital and in-person channels, innovates to preserve local assets, and contributes to local culture by organising major festivals and events.[22] Contrastingly, cash-strapped local authorities, absorbed by the demands of statutory duties, would not have the capacity to invest in communities in this bespoke, community-led way.

Subsequently, communities without this tier of government – or with only 'sleepy' parishes – miss out on such benefits. Interviewees reflected on the unfairness of the patchy distribution of hyper-local government, with one stating that it was important for local representation to have an "organisational identity" and "common statutory footing" in order to be effective.

The ability for hyper-local systems to play an important role as larger tiers of government are reorganised or abolished suggests a deeper demand for governance that maps with communities' sense of place and identity. While unitarisation can improve efficiency, it also creates a physical and democratic distance between residents and representatives, with councillors representing larger and more dispersed populations.[23] When the consolidation of local authorities happens, new parish or town councils are often set up in response.[24] For example, following the creation of North Yorkshire Council, which consolidated eight district councils, two new town councils were agreed for Harrogate and Scarborough.[25] In addition, in light of upcoming reorganisation, Winchester Town Forum voted to establish a new parish due to "the potential loss of representation […] under local government reorganisation" and the increased distance of decision-making on local matters.[26]

2.2 The need for greater scale and capacity

Where they exist, parishes vary hugely in size, wealth, geography and demography. To an extent, this is desirable. A crucial element of the hyper-local tier is that it is well-placed to be a bespoke organisation tailored to the specific needs of the area and residents within its jurisdiction. However, this can also lead to significant disparities in the experience of communities. Due to the nature of the council tax precept, wealthier areas raise more funds and can invest more in community amenities and local projects, while poorer areas struggle with limited resources, perpetuating inequalities between neighbourhoods.

Additional income can be generated through sources such as car parks and markets, if these are operated by the parish, as well as through bids for funds from central or local government and other grant-making sources. Parishes can also benefit from developers' agreements to contribute to local infrastructure and services when they undertake building in an area, and from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). The CIL is managed by the local authority and a parish may receive between 15 and 25 per cent depending on whether it has a

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[22] NALC, 'Star Council Awards: Finalists', n.d.

[23] *Learning from the New Unitary Councils* (Grant Thornton, 2024).

[24] Simon Kaye, India Woodward, and Giorgia Vittorino, *What Powers Where? Achieving the 'Devolution Revolution'*, 2024.

[25] North Yorkshire Council, 'New Town Councils for Harrogate and Scarborough', n.d.

[26] Winchester Town Forum, *Winchester Town Forum: Printed Minutes*, 2025.

Neighbourhood Plan.[27] However, these sources of funding are time-limited and modest, making it difficult to plan long-term and build capacity.

Currently, most parishes do not have the scale to carry out the duties which would most appropriately sit at their scale of operation. Larger parishes – for example, town councils with a considerable population – tend to be commensurately better-resourced – due to the assets economy, and larger tax base that accompanies a larger footprint.[28]

A crucial resource to the parish – emphasised repeatedly in the interviews – is the clerk. Clerks are parish employees who not only manage administrative tasks but are also responsible for finances, operations, legislative compliance and much more.[29] They are the equivalent of the civil service official or local authority officer. One interviewee said that in some cases the clerk can act as chief executive, chief financial officer, and chief operations officer simultaneously, and sometimes work their role part-time between several parishes. Their workload can be large and complicated and is hard to manage in the context of limited resource. Tight budgets often mean clerks work with minimal or no support, outdated technology, and insufficient training opportunities.[30]

In 2017, the average turnover rate of the clerk was between 25 and 30 per cent which is high (the average UK employee turnover rate was 12-15 per cent).[31] Recruiting and retaining skilled clerks is challenging, particularly for smaller parishes that may struggle to offer competitive salaries or career development opportunities. Given the key role that clerks play in their council – a local government environment where politicians outnumber officers – this presents a significant capacity challenge.

In response to such pressures, hyperlocal governance in many places do find routes for establishing a larger 'footprint' that enables greater capacity, pooled resources, and ongoing respect for any highly localised sense of identity.

In France, there are 35,498 very small *commune* authorities – the most by far in the European Union.[32] Given this granularity, there is explicit support to cooperate, pool resources, and manage services in more efficient ways: a variety of 'intercommunal' approaches. Direct mergers of communes remain rare due to strongly-held local identities, so the collaborative models are robust, and include urban areas such as Lyon and Marseille, where the associations operate services such as transportation and waste management and routinely take on powers that are transferred from larger *departements*.[33]

In Germany, *Verwaltungsgemeinschaften* (VGs) and other intercommunal structures play a similar role. These are administrative communities which allow for pooling of administrative tasks, with a central administrative office, allowing for constituent municipalities to preserve

[27] Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 'Community Infrastructure Levy', Web Page, Guidance, 26 April 2024.

[28] NALC, 'Star Council Awards: Finalists'.

[29] *The Essential Clerk* (National Training Strategy for Town and Parish Councils, 2016).

[30] *The Future of Local Councils*.; LRALC, 'Parish Councils and Technology', Web Page, Supporting Local Councils in Leicestershire & Rutland, n.d.

[31] Society of Local Council Clerks, 'Standards & Behaviour', Web Page, 2017.

[32] Jumelages & partenariats, 'France, the European Champion of Municipalities', 19 April 2023.

[33] Hertzog, R., 'Inter-Municipal Cooperation in France: A Continuous Reform, New Trends. In: Teles, F., Swianiewicz, P. (Eds)', in *Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Europe. Governance and Public Management.* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

their autonomy. In some regions, these structures are reinforced by the leadership of a directly-elected mayor.[34]

There are cases of resource sharing and cooperation in England. For example, it is common for clusters of parishes to share clerks. More consistently, county-scale parish associations demonstrate the potential of inter-council cooperation. These groups vary in terms of role but, generally, parishes pay to be members and, in return, associations facilitate communication, provide training, and support the operational capabilities of the parish.[35] Very often, these associations are further broken down into sub-groups to coordinate activity and representation at the County level.

Interviewees involved in associations reflected on the benefits for their parish and community, for example by improving the skills of councillors and clerks and providing convening opportunities. They also noted that associations, while valuable, are too weak, often lacking the funding or standing to coordinate efforts at larger geographies, and frustratingly only able to offer limited corporate support for members.

2.3 The need for genuine community engagement

Despite being the smallest scale of governance, many existing parishes are not the primary vehicle for the support or enablement of more informal community-led projects or efforts in their areas. Interviewees from community organisations shared that they sometimes bypass the local parish and interact directly with the local authority instead, because they can depend on receiving a response, can navigate the bureaucracy more easily, and have a better chance of getting the support that they need.

There are several reasons for this. The first is that participation in, or interaction with, a parish council is not guaranteed to be a positive experience. The review of Local Government Ethical Standards reported from a survey of over 800 parish clerks that 15 per cent of parishes have experienced "serious behavioural issues", such as bullying or disrespect, and that some 5 per cent of parishes see misconduct on sufficient scale to make them unable to undertake core functions.[36] This contributes to strained relationships, poor mental health, high staff turnover, and a range of other cultural challenges.[37]

Second, parishes – consciously or otherwise – often prize bureaucratic procedure over accessibility and transparency. Their use of unnecessarily strict rules and lengthy procedures hampers their ability to move swiftly or interact informally with residents. Simple decisions may require multiple meetings and adherence to rigid agendas. Tellingly, several interviewees from within parishes reflected on this challenge. One interviewee from a more newly established council noted that a willingness to take actions, and worry about the correct procedure afterwards, had led to an easier relationship with communities. Another reflected that the use

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[34] G Schwarting, 'The Role of Associations of Municipalities in the Process of Decentralisation: Some Preliminary Ideas' (Universität Speyer, 2008).

[35] Notts ALC, 'Nottinghamshire Association of Local Councils', Web Page, n.d.; County Durham Association of Local Councils, 'CDALC', Welcome to our website, n.d.

[36] *Local Government Ethical Standards* (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2019).

[37] Helen Bojaniwska, *The Impact of Stress on Parish, Town And Community Council Staff in England and Wales* (De Montfort University, 2018).

of the General Power of Competence had, since its introduction, helped to prevent unnecessary, bureaucratic meetings where councillors were forced to get bogged down in the legislative detail of various actions.[38]

More broadly, parishes face their own democratic and representational 'deficit'. Parishes are often dominated by older, white, and relatively more affluent individuals, with far less representation from younger people, ethnic minorities, or those from disadvantaged backgrounds.[39] This homogeneity reinforces a *status quo* where decision-making is driven by limited perspectives, potentially discouraging those with different backgrounds or ideas from engaging. Evidence has shown that a more diverse organisation tends to be more resilient because of broader knowledge bases and varied perspectives, which improve their ability to identify risks, prepare for uncertainties, and adapt effectively to crises.[40]

A survey of 2,821 parish councillors revealed that fewer than a third had achieved their position following a contested election: 38 per cent were co-opted, 33 per cent elected unopposed, and 29 per cent won a contested election.[41] Co-option is the process of adding a councillor by invitation, bypassing the election process. Uncontested elections – where the number of candidates matches or falls short of the available seats – deprive residents of meaningful choice, as voters are unable to compare competing visions, policies, and priorities.[42] The reality that many councillors are only elected in a technical sense undermines the democratic legitimacy of the parish, and implies low public interest in, or even tolerance of, this tier of governance.

To properly engage communities, build capacity, and 'fill in the map' with consistent hyperlocal institutions, a new model will be required. More efficacious and self-evidently useful hyperlocal institutions will in turn encourage participation and engagement from the public. Achieving this will require a combination of approaches: strengthening existing parishes, where necessary formalising them into clusters with stronger operational capabilities, and promoting the mobilisation of similar institutions in places where there is no hyperlocal governance at all.

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[38] SLNC, 'The General Power of Competence England', n.d.

[39] Joanie Willett, 'Parish Councils Are a Vital Space for Participatory Democracy – but They Are in Crisis', *LSE Blog*, 2018.; Ryan Swift and Zoe Billingham, *Handforth in Hindsight* (IPPR North, 2024).

[40] Sophie Duchek, Sebastian Raetze, and Ianina Scheuch, 'The Role of Diversity in Organizational Resilience: A Theoretical Framework', *Business Research* 13 (2019): 387–423.

[41] *Local Council Elections* (National Association of Local Councils, 2020).

[42] Clayton Covington, *Competition, Wealth, and Education: Explaining Uncontested House of Representatives Elections* (College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Political Science, 2022).

3. A new framework for hyperlocalism

There is need for credible, capable hyperlocal government across England, able to effectively carry out the duties best suited to its scale. Governance at this scale can form a distinctive part of the local State, as it does in many other countries: positioned to convene local stakeholders, bridge the neighbourhood and national voice, protect and invest in community assets, and rapidly respond to local issues. By being present and equal to these tasks, constituting a better and more efficient scale for community mobilisation activities, the attention of larger authorities and other parts of the local State can also become more focused.[43]

The core of a reimagined model would revolve around a framework for hyperlocal institutions, an example of which is set out in this chapter. Places with existing parishes could engage with this framework by grouping together to form 'Combined Neighbourhood Councils' (CNCs); places with larger-population parishes could satisfy the thresholds of the framework without needing to do this, forming Neighbourhood Councils (NCs); and places without any formal hyperlocal governance would be supported by local authorities to create new NCs based on the same principles.

This model, inspired by the clustering of hyperlocal councils in other countries as well as existing sharing of resources in many parts of England, aims to address the need for hyper-local governance structures that bridge the gap between larger-scale authorities and individual neighbourhoods.

This tier would become a crucial part of the rationalised local government system in England: a formal, recognised part of state infrastructure, a community enabler, and a new footprint for local government appropriate for a diversity of contexts.[44]

3.1 Neighbourhood Councils

Figure 1: Combined Neighbourhood Councils and Neighbourhood Councils

Combined Neighbourhood Councils are new hyperlocal organisations formed by groups of existing parishes that have come together to pool resources and organise shared services and activities over a larger geography, in line with a new hyperlocal governance framework.

Neighbourhood Councils are a new type of individual hyperlocal governance organisation that operate at the same larger footprint as CNCs, in line with a new hyperlocal governance framework.

CNCs are proposed as a key way that many 'parished' areas will be able to work together to build their ability as cross-cutting hyperlocal institutions. They would be run by a board

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[43] Kaye, Woodward, and Vittorino, *What Powers Where? Achieving the 'Devolution Revolution'*.

[44] G Pearce and S Ellwood, 'Modernising Local Government: A Role for Parish and Town Councils', *Local Government Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002).

composed of the leaders of the constituent parishes – similar to the Combined Authority model that has defined the last decade of regional-scale devolution in England. The Chair of the board, serving on a rotating basis from the pool of leaders from participating constituent parishes, would ensure that the CNC is maturing, setting standards, and delivering effectively upon its role.

Where no hyperlocal governance currently exists, CNCs will be of sufficient scale to support the mobilisation of communities and support Community Governance Reviews to establish new NCs, bolstered by the shared resources that the CNC can provide. Existing parishes will be incentivised to shift their practices to become professional, responsive organisations immersed in the community as part of the framework for formation of a CNC. CNCs will have the scale and position to provide strength and credibility to the hyperlocal tier.

By uniting to form a CNC, individual parishes would gain greater resources and capacity – not only by pooling resources and gaining efficiencies from shared back-office functions, but by qualifying to be the default 'holders' of funding and resources intended for community support and mobilisation. These additional resources can be reinvested into both the organisation and the wider community – for instance, by hiring skilled staff to fill expertise gaps, improving service delivery, and driving forward local projects.

There are existing parishes that already fit the description of a NC, as set out in this paper. They operate at a larger footprint and use their resources to deliver a range of services, engage with other tiers, and respond to local need. These parishes would already be positioned to take on more responsibility if the system allowed it.

Such parishes typically serve larger populations, with more diverse local economies, benefiting from greater business activity, higher tax revenues, etc. For example, Braunstone Town Council located in Leicestershire has a population of over 17,000; it runs several parks, a community library, administers is own community grant, and publishes business plans and policy strategies for a range of different priorities, including climate change and equality and diversity.[45] During the pandemic, the council initiated a comprehensive support service (supported by the district council) to provide residents with essential needs. It worked with its Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to set up a GP branch surgery in a strategic location which alleviated accessibility issues facing residents.[46] This would be a strong candidate for direct participation in the framework as an NC, and indeed to begin working toward 'established' status to qualify for even greater powers.

As a more established and structured body, the council will be perceived as more credible by higher tiers of government and potential partners. This enhanced reputation increases opportunities for collaboration with both public and private sector organisations, unlocking new possibilities for local development, funding, and strategic partnerships.

Furthermore, stronger governance and accountability will foster greater public trust, encouraging more community members to engage in decision-making and local initiatives. With increased participation, the council can better reflect and respond to local needs, reinforcing its role as a trusted and capable representative of the community.

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[45] Braunstone Town Council, 'Policies & Strategies', Web Page, n.d.
[46] National Association of Local Councils, 'Class of 2023 Council of the Year', Webpage, 2023.

3.1.1 How the rollout would work

The framework in this chapter sets out the conditions for the formation of CNCs and NCs. These will be legally recognised governance entities with the same General Power of Competence as existing parishes.

Central Government would first establish a timeline for the achievement of a strengthened and universal English hyperlocal tier. Alongside this, new duties for Strategic and Local Authorities will support the identification and enablement of community activity in currently 'unparished' places.

Parishes wishing to form a CNC will be expected to collectively satisfy a set of conditions that demonstrate organisational maturity. Many parishes will only be able to satisfy these requirements by working together and pooling resources.

Then, to advance further and be able to fully participate in the regional planning process laid out in 'What powers where', the CNC would need to fulfil a further set of conditions which demonstrate an advanced level of maturity to achieve 'Established' status.[47]

The largest existing parishes (usually town councils) may be able to meet these conditions without the need to combine efforts with others, since they will already have the relevant footprint and population size to operate in more ambitious ways.

Together, these examples also offer a template for establishing hyperlocal governance at a larger operational scale in currently totally 'unparished' places, such as urban contexts where bigger population sizes will be needed for sustainable organisation. Existing parts of the local government system will be responsible, in concert with any active community – or neighbourhood-scale groups in a given area, for establishing a Neighbourhood Council that meets the requirements of the new framework. Where a strong established NC or CNC neighbours unparished areas, the local authority can assess if the council is well positioned to help support the mobilisation of community activity in the unparished area, or absorb the areas into its jurisdiction.

3.1.2 Why form a NC or CNC?

Joining with other parishes to form a CNC, converting an existing large parish, or forming a new NC in an area with no existing parishes, would immediately unlock new routes to funding, greater default control of local assets, and more established participation in the wider local government ecosystem, with the ability to request the draw-down of services, budgets, and powers.

'Established' NCs and CNCs that meet more stringent requirements in the new framework (as evaluated by the local Strategic Authority) would gain further powers, and would be the natural next step for almost all CNCs. They would, by default, directly hold and distribute any Community Wealth Fund, when introduced.

As participants in the regional planning process, these institutions would be placed in the regional conversation about the drawing up and down of powers. This means the power to request draw-down of further responsibilities and services suited to scale, with a parallel duty

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[47] Kaye, Woodward, and Vittorino, *What Powers Where? Achieving the 'Devolution Revolution'*.

on the part of local and strategic authorities to formally consider the proposition.

The CNC or ECNC would be responsible for carrying out the strategic and corporate functions for itself and its constituent councils. This means that human resources, legal advice, and audit would be held centrally in the organisation, ensuring that such things are carried out consistently with the right skills and knowledge. This also liberates the constituent parishes themselves, enabling them to carry out the activity they are best suited for: engaging with residents, identifying local need, organising community events, and managing community assets.

Recommendation 1: Central government should set a requirement that Neighbourhood Councils or Combined Neighbourhood Councils are expected to form in every part of England, creating a hyperlocal governance framework to set the requirements and incentives for change, setting out a timeline for establishment, and creating new duties on Strategic and Local Authorities to enable the development of the hyperlocal tier as part of reorganisation and the rollout of devolved powers. Local Authorities should be responsible for implementing this rollout in areas with no existing parishes. Strategic Authorities should be responsible for gauging readiness and eligibility of different hyperlocal entities for progression through the framework.

3.1.3 What would they do?

The responsibilities for the hyperlocal tier, which will ultimately be composed of a combination of clustered parishes in CNCs and standalone NCs in places with no pre-existing parish traditions or highly established larger Town Councils, will consist of core powers revolving around the coordination, resilience, and mobilisation of communities, and the upkeep and management of social infrastructure. They will function as explicitly enabling organisations, with a greater degree of responsiveness and direct connection with the communities they serve by their proximity and increasingly open, accessible practices. Figure 2, below, summarises the responsibilities which will sit at this tier by default under a new system.

Under a fully reorganised system with a parallel, universal tier of Strategic Authorities at the regional scale, there should also be mechanisms in place for these hyperlocal entities – like every other tier of local government – to participate in a full regional planning process and propose the draw-down of specific powers from other tiers. This means that some established hyperlocal councils will ultimately operate larger budgets and participate more in wider public service delivery, if this is appropriate in a particular place.

Figure 2: Key responsibilities of the hyper-local tier
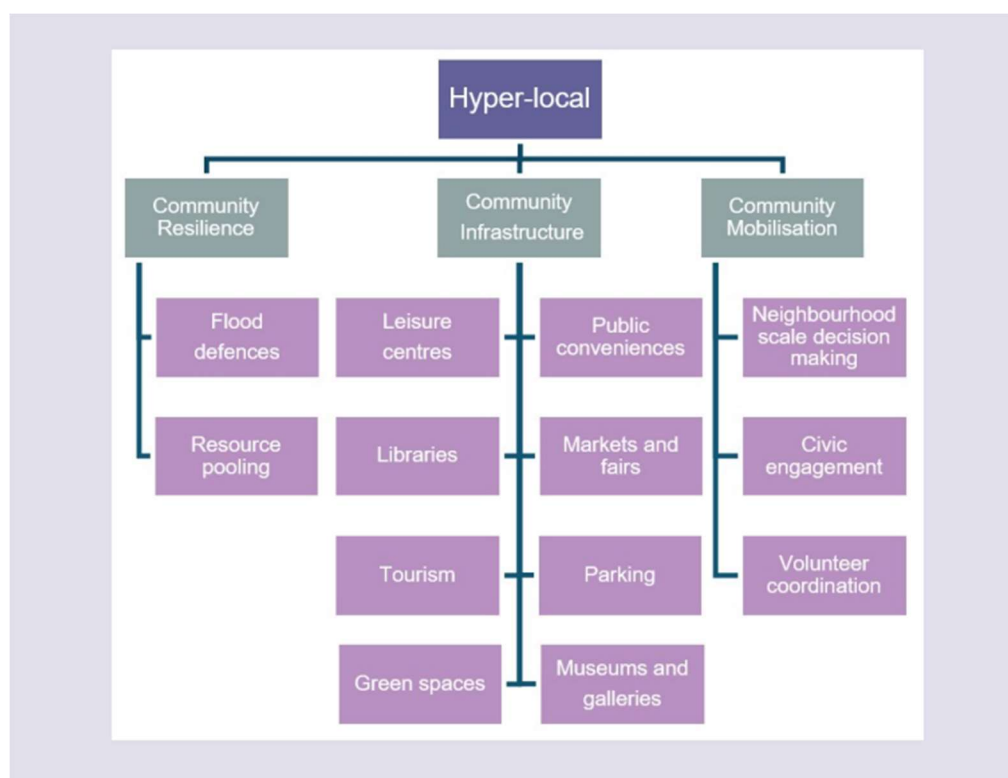
3.1.4 How would they be resourced?

The establishment of these councils positions them to directly manage community-targeted funding streams, for example becoming the default holder of a Community Wealth Fund, when established. They would stand to benefit directly from a share of the CIL.

Additionally, CNCs and NCs will inherit the same ability to request a precept to council tax that existing parishes enjoy, providing a steady revenue stream. When this precepting power is used by CNCs, a cap on the total value of the precepts received by hyperlocal entities within the relevant jurisdiction should then be agreed between constituent parishes and the local authority (with monitoring from the Local Audit Office).

The hyperlocal tier is also expected to operate and manage community assets and facilities, such as parking and local amenities, which can serve as independent revenue sources. Beyond these avenues, CNCs and NCs will be positioned to explore community-targeted grants and revenue streams emanating from non-government sources, such as the National Lottery Community Fund.

> **Recommendation 2:** Neighbourhood Councils and Combined Neighbourhood Councils should operate as legal entities with a General Power of Competence. They should be empowered to draw funding from a council tax precept. They should become the default recipients of community-targeted government funding streams (in place of local authorities).

3.1.5 What happens to the constituent parishes of CNCs?

Over time, the larger footprint and more sustainable financial base for CNCs and NCs will lead them to become the 'default' holder of core hyperlocal powers, and the only hyperlocal entities capable of requesting draw-down of other, additional responsibilities. Constituent parishes, however, will offer an even-more-granular scale of governance in rural and low-population-density areas. They may reserve a share of the precept and coordinate with the CNC to maintain 'ownership' of some key hyperlocal functions, and to continue to embody the identity groups which may literally exist at the scale of neighbourhoods, representing these interests by contributing to decisions at the CNC. In some cases the creation of CNCs would lead naturally to formal merger of some or all of the constituent parishes.

3.2 Hyperlocal everywhere

There is an important role for local authorities in promoting the spread of this hyperlocal tier.

To ensure that newly formed NCs are effective, cohesive, and reflective of local needs, local authorities must take an active role in mapping out community activity across their areas, working closely with community actors. This will involve identifying existing governance structures, grassroots organisations, resident associations, and community service providers. The aim of this engagement is to facilitate these groups to participate in a fresh Community Governance Review (CGR) process, updated to reflect the new hyperlocal governance framework so that this can become a rapid way to establish new NCs. By conducting thorough community mapping, local authorities can ensure that emergent NCs align with real social and economic geographies, avoiding arbitrary boundaries that could hinder cooperation.[48]

This process will also help to prevent fragmentation or unnecessary duplication of effort, ensuring that councils work in harmony rather than in competition. Furthermore, mapping will highlight areas with strong local engagement, where Neighbourhood Councils could take on more ambitious roles, and areas that require additional support to build civic participation. Through this strategic approach, local authorities can help create a network of Neighbourhood Councils that are not only geographically logical but also positioned to work effectively with one another, fostering a more integrated and resilient system of hyperlocal governance.

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[48] Luca Tiratelli, 'Community Mobilisation: Unlocking the Potential of Community Power' (New Local, 29 July 2020).

Recommendation 3: The Community Governance Review (CGR) process should be updated, with changes to the underpinning legislation to make CGRs more streamlined, formally recognise the involvement of existing community groups, and ensure that communities and local authorities can use them to create new Neighbourhood Councils that meet the requirements of the hyperlocal governance framework.

Recommendation 4: Central Government should create an explicit duty for local authorities to proactively map, enable, and drive the mobilisation of community-scale and neighbourhood activities in 'unparished' places, with the goal of identifying and mobilising a network of active communities as a basis for establishing a Neighbourhood Council. This activity should be resourced through the addition of a 1 per cent precept on locally raised council tax, match-funded by central government from an expanded Community Wealth Fund, which would ultimately then be used to finance Neighbourhood Councils once these are established.

3.2.1 A template for the urban hyperlocal council

Establishing hyperlocal governance in urban areas with high population density and community churn will be a significant challenge. While hyperlocal governance in England has traditionally been concentrated in rural areas, this new model presents a scalable, adaptable template for urban areas where parishes are often absent. In urban areas, local engagement structures often exist – in the form of ad hoc community groups, Neighbourhood forums, or voluntary organisations – but lack formal authority, continuity, or access to decision-making processes.

This model provides a structured way to introduce formal hyperlocal governance where no parish currently exists; a platform to mobilise and coordinate existing community organisations, integrating them into a recognised governance framework with electorally legitimised representatives; and a mechanism for localised decision-making that aligns with the specific needs of urban communities. Existing local actors should be actively supported to combine efforts and participate in CGR processes.

Figure 3: Queen's Park Community Council

Established in 2014 and representing more than 14,000 residents, Queen's Park Community Council (QPCC) is the first new parish to be established in London since 1936.

QPCC employs a small team of officers including a Chief Executive (Clerk) and dedicated Community Development Officer. Among other functions it coordinates voluntary activities; supports local community organisations, community businesses, and other groups; operates an environmental management service (including air quality monitoring); and operates a cross-cutting community engagement strategy.

3.3 Shifting to maturity

The framework below details the conditions for the formation of the new hyperlocal tier. As discussed, parishes must fulfil a set of conditions singly or, much more likely, in groups – as shown in figure 3 – in order to form a Combined Neighbourhood Council.

3.3.1 Population size

To satisfy the new hyperlocal framework, the combined population of constituent parishes should stand at between 20,000 and 50,000, while allowing for participation by outliers, such as exceptionally large existing town councils, if this is the most sensible geography. This aligns with evidence suggesting that governance becomes progressively more efficient and cost-effective at larger population sizes until this plateaus at population sizes of around 25,000 or above.[49] This is tacitly reflected in the approach taken in other countries: for example, Spanish municipalities unlock more responsibilities once their population exceeds 20,000.[50]

As it is crucial this new model remains enmeshed in the community, the lower end of the size-efficiency scale will be most appropriate, particularly in regional areas. Therefore, a population of 20,000 – 30,000 is recommended to be the ideal population size of the hyperlocal organisation. At this size, the council has the capacity to pool resources, coordinate services, and collaborate effectively with other tiers. It would not be conducive to the wider project of establishing a consistent hyperlocal tier for this requirement to be too inflexible, however.

> **Recommendation 5:** The collective population of a new CNC or NC should stand at between 20,000 and 50,000, with exceptions granted for challenging geographies or larger, long-established parishes. The local authority should work with the parishes and community to determine the exact appropriate number.

3.3.2 Capacity, capability, and professionalism

Due to the significant role of the clerk, a national benchmark to clarify and ensure the skills and abilities of clerks is necessary. As such, clerks that operate within the new hyperlocal tier must at least be embarking on the Certificate in Local Council Administration qualification, or equivalent.[51] The qualification itself would ultimately be updated to keep up with the evolving context of the hyperlocal tier.

As the organisations advance and take on more responsibility, it is imperative that they have strong performance management in place to hold them accountable and encourage continuous improvement. Therefore, councils must demonstrate a commitment to performance tracking and reporting. As such, each CNC will be required to produce an annual report that details outcomes, financial accounts, audits, and other relevant governance metrics

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[49] Marc Holzer and et al., 'Literature Review and Analysis Related to Optimal Municipal Size and Efficiency', *Local Unit Alignment, Reorganization, and Consolidation Commission*, 2009.
[50] European Committee of the Regions, 'Spain', Division of Powers, n.d.
[51] Michael Woods and et al., 'Research Study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme to DEFRA' (Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2006).

as a qualifying factor for Established status. In producing such reports, the councils demonstrate the ability to reflect on progress, challenges, and areas for improvement.

Furthermore, parishes must demonstrate a commitment to improving governance. For example, each constituent parish should have an actionable plan to reduce the percentage of vacant or co-opted seats to no more than 20 per cent. High levels of vacancies or co-opted members can weaken democratic representation and reduce the legitimacy of councils.

Additionally, parishes must ensure that key documents – including reports, audits, and account summaries – are publicly available and the statement of accounts must be in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003. Transparency is a fundamental principle of good governance, ensuring that communities can scrutinise decision-making processes and financial management.

Figure 4: A new framework for English hyperlocal governance

Dimension of maturity	Hyperlocal governance (to be met by new CNCs or NCs)	Established hyperlocal governance
Capacity	Minimum combined population size of participating parishes/ new councils should be 20,000 (allowing for outliers when necessary). Clerks must at a minimum be embarking on the CiLCA qualification (or equivalent) Councils must prepare financial statements that accurately reflect their income and expenses Councils must have an actionable plan to reduce vacant and coopted seats to 20 per cent	Clerks must be qualified A workforce plan must be published for the jurisdiction and signed off by all local councils The council must create a medium-term financial plan that projects income and expenditure over at least three years In each constituent local council, no more than 20 per cent of council seats can be vacant or filled by co-opted members

Performance	Required to publish an annual report summarising local activities, outcomes, accounts, and audits.	Required to produce a medium-term, costed, community plan with specific priorities and plans for evaluating outcomes The established council produces an annual report which assesses the outcomes of the council against its community plan – publicly available and accessible to the lay community The community board is involved actively in the community plan and issues a response to the annual report
Governance	Councils should be able to demonstrate best efforts to engage with and reflect the views of local residents. They must have a formal process for dealing with resident grievances, and a consistent conflict resolution mechanism in place that draws in a higher tier of local government. They must prepare a statement of accounts in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003	Established Councils will be subject to the same single, streamlined accountability framework outlined in the White Paper for other parts of the local government system Established Councils (with the principal authority) must loop in the Strategic Authority with escalated to mediate Established Councils must present the annual report to their Principal Authority to discuss progress and identify gaps Community perspectives are routinely integrated into the council's decisions, e.g. through the creation of a neighbourhood board
Culture	Councils must adopt the Code of Conduct set out in the Local Government Act	Established Councils must conduct a professionalism review to identify ways to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, formalities, and inject proactivity and co-productive practices into the day-to-day behaviour of the council

3.3.3 How to become 'Established'

The 'established' status marks an organisation which has reached a high level of maturity and is performing its hyperlocal role effectively. This means that the organisation is positioned to be part of the inter-tier conversation about devolution and the distribution of responsibilities. Organisations wishing to become 'established' must demonstrate additional, advanced conditions. NCs and CNCs that achieve 'Established' status will gain greater autonomy,

reduced bureaucracy, and enhanced credibility. Councils meeting the required conditions will benefit from increased decision-making powers, a more direct relationship with higher authorities, and greater influence within both their communities and government structures. Examples of the potential advantages include:

Figure 5: Potential powers for Established Neighbourhood Councils and Established Combined Neighbourhood Councils

Expanded decision-making powers	Greater input over local planning and ability to approve some categories of local planning applications without requiring intervention from higher authorities.
	Direct oversight of public spaces and facilities, including full authority over parks, community halls, and public amenities, such as the ability to adapt their usage in line with community need.
Greater representation and influence	Stronger voice in regional governance – increased involvement in decision-making at local and regional scales, such as the 'Regional Plans' process, ensuring local priorities are heard.
	Ability to formally propose 'draw-down' of specific powers, responsibilities, or resources from other tiers of government
Growth and financial flexibility	Power to set and manage small business levies – creating funding streams for local economic improvements
	Greater freedom to generate income – Increased flexibility to raise funds through community services, facilities, and local initiatives

All clerks in these organisations must be qualified. The organisation must have produced and be enacting a workforce plan which assesses the current workforce, forecasts future staffing needs, identifies skill gaps, and develops strategies to address any gaps, aligning it with the strategic objectives of the organisation. For CNCs, this workforce plan must be signed off by the constituent councils to reflect their participation in the plan.

In addition, NCs and CNCs must have published a neighbourhood plan (inheriting this responsibility from parishes). Embarking on a neighbourhood plan requires resource, vision, strategy, and community participation which is therefore indicative of the council having sufficient capacity. The CNC is responsible for ensuring the plans within its jurisdiction fit together harmoniously and are correctly budgeted and financed. Furthermore, the CNC or NC must ensure full compliance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003, providing a clear statement of accounts that aligns with statutory financial regulations. This requirement strengthens financial transparency and ensures that the CNC operates with a high level of accountability.

Recommendation 6: The collective population of a new CNC or NC should stand at between 20,000 and 50,000, with exceptions granted for challenging geographies or larger, long-established parishes. The local authority should work with the parishes and community to determine the exact appropriate number.

4. Conclusion

As local government structures shift and decision-making is pulled further from communities, the absence of a credible, capable presence for every English neighbourhood risks deepening the democratic and service gaps that already exist.

A new hyperlocal governance framework would provide a way forward: a model that enables parishes to pool resources, raise standards, and play a more strategic role, while ensuring neighbourhoods have the tools they need for flourishing. This upgraded layer would be built to be as responsive, professional, and embedded in the communities it serves as the very best current parishes. To roll out a new system of Neighbourhood Councils and Combined Neighbourhood Councils, the process should be supported by a new mandate on local authorities to mobilise and support communities.

This paper has set out both the challenges and the opportunities. The current system is fragmented and uneven, with some parishes delivering real value while others lack the capacity, clarity, or democratic legitimacy to be effective. The new framework offers a structured path to improvement, providing councils with the tools to mature, take on meaningful responsibilities, and engage with wider regional planning. The goal is that every community, rural or urban, will be represented by a recognised, capable, and representative body acting on its behalf, at a population scale that makes sense for local identity and allows for meaningful decisions to be made and resourced.

Embedding NCs and CNCs within the wider local government system would help to bridge the gap between neighbourhoods and the unitary and strategic tiers that are now being established across England. By balancing local responsiveness with the efficiencies of working at scale, this approach would create governance that is both grounded in community life and equipped to engage with big challenges.

With the right support and implementation, NCs and CNCs could become a cornerstone of more resilient, democratic, and even self-governing communities, ensuring that more decisions are made with, rather than for, the people they impact.

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