

## **English Devolution White Paper – MHCLG webinar on the Devolution Priority Programme**

**9<sup>th</sup> January 2025**

On 9th January, MHCLG held a short webinar to give a broad overview of plans for the Devolution White Paper, with specific focus on the priority programme.

The premise of the devolution priority programme is that the department is asking for councils interested in or who have proposals for mayoral combined authorities where they do not already exist. The deadline for submissions is 10th January.

This is the fastest timeline – those who submit their proposals, subject to approval, would be able to establish their new structure and hold mayoral elections in May 2026.

For areas to be accepted onto the priority programme, MHCLG will determine whether their proposals meet necessary criteria but a final decision is made by the Secretary of State.

The intention in establishing new structures needed for devolution is that once the English Devolution Bill has been given royal assent, that functions can be up and running from day one.

### Q&A:

#### **Is it the Government's intention that all areas will be unitarised by April 2028?**

Response: All two-tier areas are *invited* to submit proposals in January this year. The first unitaries will be running in the year 2027/28. The speed of progressing devolution is dependent on the proposals that are submitted and an assessment of how soon they can be achieved.

#### **What is the evidence underpinning the 500k population area?**

Response: PWC report sets out the evidence and found that greater efficiencies are available through reorganisation into single unitaries and simpler structures of local government focusing on delivering for residents.

#### **In order to be a part of the priority programme, do all upper tier authorities in an area have to 'make the ask', or is the majority enough to be considered?**

Response: The final point of consent for establishing a strategic authority is when the consent is given by councils to the statutory instrument that establishes that body – all of the constituent members have to provide that consent. So in the case of a combined authority, it would mean all the councils within that area, and in a combined county authority, it would be all of the upper tier local authorities in that area.

#### **How will the priority programme be run?**

Response: The priority programme is about extending mayoral devolution and as such, current mayoral institutions are not in scope. Those in the process of discussing devolution without a mayor are invited to be on the programme provided they are pursuing a mayoral structure. There is no limit on the number of areas to be on the priority list.

After the deadline has been reached, Civil Servants will advise Ministers whether those who have submitted proposals meet the necessary criteria. MHCLG will then run consultations for those places on the priority programme.

**What is the rationale for having accelerated timelines for areas not selected to be on the priority programme?**

Response: There are some areas of the country where local government reorganisation is required to unlock devolution – this is to ensure that those areas can unlock the benefits of devolution as soon as possible.

**Will Police & Crime Commissioners serve out their full term before powers are transferred to Mayors?**

Response: This will be worked out on a case by case basis for each area.

**What expectation that constituent councils engage with non-constituents on being part of priority programme, what happens if they do not engage?**

Response: Upper tier local authorities have to consent to establishing new institutions, however Government expect that areas can evidence that they have made efforts to engage with district councils.

**When devolution agreed for an area, what next?**

Response:

- Applications for the priority programme by 10<sup>th</sup> January
- There will be a few weeks of internal process of selecting areas to be in the programme
- Launch of government-led consultations to establish whether criteria has been met
- All constituent authorities will have to provide consent
- MHCLG will work with Councils who will form part of the future strategic authority
- Councils will appoint a returning officer – typically a Chief Executive of one of the constituent authorities

**Timeline for the English Devolution Bill?**

Response: Specific timeline is to be confirmed, however it is expected that the Bill will be introduced later this year. The Bill will enact the policy set out in the White Paper.

**On Mayoral powers: is there potential for upper tier local authority responsibilities to be transferred to Mayors?**

Response: There is scope to expand some functions at strategic authority level. For example in highways, oversight of the Key Route Network may be extended to Mayors. But overall there are no plans to move functions wholesale up to the strategic level. Local authorities will have the freedom to discharge their responsibilities.

**What happens to those areas not selected for the priority programme?**

Response: The door will not be closed, ministers are clear they want areas to move forward with plans for devolution and there will be later tranches to do this.

**Is there an expectation that all areas will undergo local government reorganisation at some stage?**

Response: All two-tier areas will be invited to develop unitary proposals in January, regardless of whether they are on the priority programme. Full proposals will be expected.

**Will planned or ongoing boundary reviews be halted in areas undergoing devolution process?**

Response: MHCLG is in conversation with the electoral commission. There will be clarity on this with relevant areas once proposals progress.

**There are some negotiations for non-mayoral devolution, is the expectation that they will migrate to mayoral strategic authorities by 2028?**

Response: The new Government's preference is for Mayoral strategic authorities across the country so that is the ultimate hope. There is no date currently set for that ambition. The WP is also clear that not every area will be ready for a mayor yet. The priority programme is for those areas that are.

For mayoral areas with two-tier authorities – the successor unitaries will become the constituents of the combined authority. The English Devolution Bill will grant the power to convert combined county authorities to combined authorities more simply.

**What is the process for assimilating Councils into existing mayoral combined authorities?**

Response: Some councils may wish to join neighbouring mayoral combined authorities where it would make good economic geographic sense to do so, and for the MCA boundary to be extended to include them. The work needed to do with this is out of scope of the priority programme, but the enthusiasm to pursue devolution through this route is recognised. There will need to be discussions between CS and Ministers on how this can take place. But for now the priority programme is the immediate focus.

**Is Local Govt Reorganisation mandatory or not?**

Response: The White Paper sets out the ambition and currently councils are invited only to submit proposals. They are expected, but remain an invitation only.