

The Impact of Unitary Authority Creation on Town and Parish Councils

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Abstract

This study set out to explore how the creation of unitary authorities impacts parish/town councils in England. A review of literature outlined that unitary local government is likely to be implemented across the remainder of the UK, but that little is known about how this affects the most local tier of local government.

Through a survey of clerks and councillors, interviews with CALC officers, collation of electoral data and original analysis of precept data, the study sought to identify how local government reorganisation (LGR) effects local councils and whether any effects are observed equally in smaller and larger local councils.

Whilst the questionnaire had a small response rate, the study found little evidence of an effect on small local councils whilst there was a measurable effect of LGR on devolution, staffing, precept and electoral contest at larger local councils; this highlights a growing diversification in the sector.

The study suggests that LGR does not significantly affect satisfaction with the principal authority which in both unitary/three-tier areas has declined. The findings suggest LGR promotes greater independence of local councils and there was evidence of differing perspectives from clerks and councillors on the whether the change to unitary local government is beneficial to local councils and communities with clerks more likely to see it as positive.

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List of Abbreviations/Acronyms

CALC	County Association of Local Councils
FTE	Full Time Equivalent Staff
LGA	Local Government Association
LGR	Local Government Reorganisation
NALC	National Association of Local Councils
SLCC	Society of Local Council Clerks

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Since the 1990s, the principal council tier of local government has been restructured in all but 21 counties of the UK (Sandford, 2021) through a gradual process of amalgamating councils into larger, all-purpose 'unitary' authorities. This process has ramifications for the local councils in these areas, which are left, to a greater degree, closer to the communities local government serves. Concurrently, pressure on local government finances has challenged the role of principal councils in serving communities.

Key Terms

The term 'unitary' to describe a council originated in the Redcliffe-Maud Royal Commission report on local government reorganisation in the late 1960s (Leach and Copus, 2023) and is used to describe an all-purpose authority which delivers the full range of local government services otherwise delivered by county and district councils (Chrisholm, 2000).

Throughout this dissertation, reference to principal councils/authorities refers to the tier of local government comprising unitary, county and district councils whilst reference to local councils refers to the parish/town council tier.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to better understand the impact of unitary authority creation on local councils and focuses on England, where unitary authorities cover approximately half of all counties.

The objectives of this study are to:

- 1) assess if the impact of LGR on local councils can be quantified/summarised
- 2) assess if LGR has a positive/negative/neutral effect on local councils and if this is affected by the size of the unitary authority
- 3) understand if the impact of LGR is significantly different in smaller vs larger local councils
- 4) understand the degree of impact of unitary council creation compared to the impact of austerity measures affecting principal authorities
- 5) identify matters local councils should be prepared for when going through LGR

Hypotheses

The hypotheses which will be examined under this research are:

- H1 There will be a discernible effect of LGR on local councils

- H2 The greater role of local councils within unitary areas will have resulted in greater electoral contest

- H3 There will be a lesser impact of LGR on smaller local councils when compared to the effect on larger councils

Structure

This dissertation comprises four main chapters. Chapter 2 is a literature review which examines the existing body of knowledge on LGR and its effect on local councils, this informed the objectives of this research. Chapter 3 sets out the research methodology and the challenges and limitations of this study as well as discussing ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents and discusses the results of the research and chapter 5 summarises key findings and outlines recommendations for further research.

Author's Positionality

The author has been a local council clerk since 2012, working for two councils within the Cheshire East unitary authority. He is also a Director of SLCC and board member of the Cheshire ALC.

His principal employment is as Town Clerk to Knutsford Town Council, a council which has undergone significant growth since 2012. The author also works for Gawsorth Parish Council, which has not changed significantly in this time. The author has been interested to understand the extent to which the growth in Knutsford is a consequence of local government reorganisation in Cheshire as opposed to the wider challenge to local government finance.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This review explores the existing literature on LGR and its impact on local councils. It covers a background to reorganisation and explores the motivations for and arguments against the creation of unitary councils. It further explores literature which references local councils and the likely impact of LGR before reviewing literature on the impact of austerity measures on local councils.

History of Upper Tier Local Government Reorganisation

Prior to local government reorganisation in 1974, cities and large towns were effectively unitary authorities, delivering the bulk of local government services in their areas (Leach, Coxall and Robins, 2011) and the 1969 Recliffe-Maud report favoured the creation of unitary authorities across the entire country. Whilst these proposals were not taken forward by the new Conservative government in the Local Government Act 1972, Emeritus Professor of Local Government at De Montford University, Steve Leach (2009) notes that unitarisation has been the consistent approach taken by the UK government since the 1980s.

The first all-purpose authorities were created through the transfer of powers to existing metropolitan district/borough councils upon the abolition of metropolitan county councils¹ (Leach, Coxall and Robins, 2011) and since this there have been three distinct waves of unitary authority creation in England² (Nice and Shepley, 2022) alongside the early 1990s implementation of unitary authorities across the entirety of Scotland and Wales (Leach, Coxall and Robins, 2011). It is notable that unitary councils are not common across other western countries where multi-tiered local government is prevalent (Leach and Copus, 2023; Stewart, 2014), yet as of 2023 only 21 counties in England remain in a three-tier system, with 128 unitary authorities having been created³ (Sandford, 2021).

The 1990s LGR created small, sub-county authorities with the stated objective of improving accountability and reducing bureaucracy (Newman and Kenny, 2023). The Labour government's 2006 white paper outlined the benefits of unitary councils to improve accountability, leadership, efficiency and outcomes for local people (DCLG, 2006) and since this time the prevailing model has been larger

¹ Through the Local Government Act 1985

² 1995-1998, 2009 and 2019 onwards

³ including metropolitan boroughs/districts

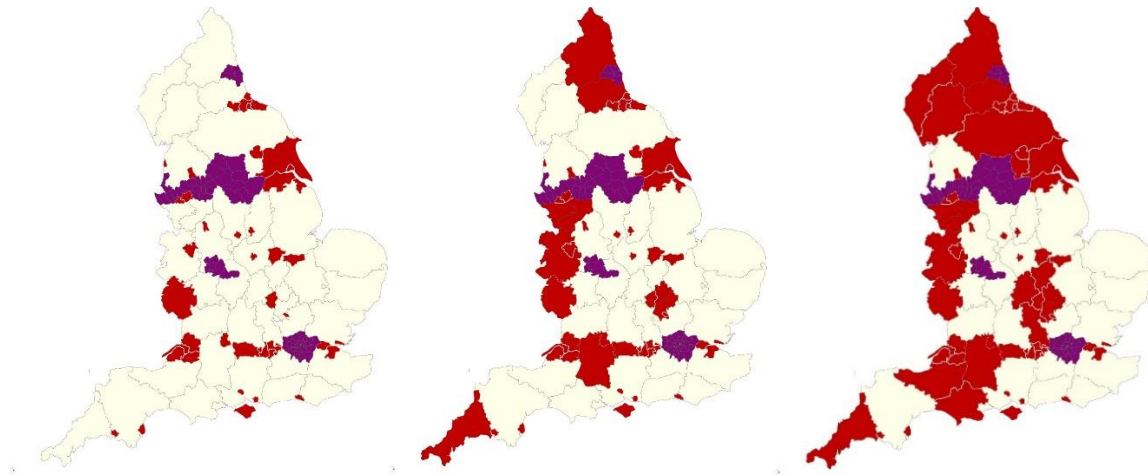


Figure 1: England following the 1990s, 2009 and 2019-2023 unitarisation programmes, showing unitary authorities (red), metropolitan districts/boroughs (purple) and three tier areas (cream) (adapted from Nilfanon and Greg, 2021)

unitaries based on county boundaries (Swann, 2016). More recently, Sandford (2021) reported the current Conservative government’s view that unitaries increase the efficiency of policy making, service delivery and planning. However, it is argued that the drive for LGR originates from the civil service and a desire to reduce the number of authorities in order to make them easier to manage and increase the ability for central government to direct the delivery of local government services (Copus, ND; Copus and Leach, 2023; Leach, 2009)

Whilst government has downplayed its objective of seeing the entirety of England under unitary councils (Sandford, 2021), it is widely considered it is the future of local government with claims that government just does not wish to face the challenges of undertaking wholesale reorganisation (Ignite Consulting, ND; Leach and Copus, 2023) and local government consulting firm KPMG (2020) has declared that three-tier local government will soon become a thing of the past. It is believed that the demand for unitary local government will continue with central government as its main proponent (Copus, Roberts and Wall, 2017).

Challenging the Zeitgeist

The primary criticism of transitioning to unitary local government is that too much focus is placed on the purported economies of scale achievable by larger authorities at the expense of a connection to geographic place (Ignite Consulting, ND) with a prevailing challenge to unitary councils that their remoteness makes them less responsive to local concern (Nice and Shepley, 2022). This is reinforced

by a study of city size and citizen satisfaction which found that smaller integrated communities are better placed to deliver public policy that satisfies more citizens (Mouritzen, 1989) and the results of referenda which, when held, have demonstrated opposition unitary authorities being introduced (Copus, ND) Andrews and Boyne (2009) notes contradictory arguments that power being focused in a single authority can both increase, by removing confusion of who delivers services, and decrease, through the link between taxation and service delivering being blurred as part of a larger authority, the capacity of the public to hold authorities to account.

Whilst the primary argument for unitary councils is reducing the cost of government, a literature review prepared for the District Councils' Network found inconsistent or non-existent evidence to support the argument that larger authorities are more efficient and economically effective than smaller units, suggesting other factors impact councils more than size (Copus, Leach and Jones, 2020). A report for the County Councils' Network following interviews with leaders and chief executives of unitary authorities found larger unitary authorities were able to more significantly cut back-office costs (Swann, 2016), however, analysis by Professor Rhys Andrews suggests that wider savings from other services are seldom achieved and that overall fiscal health of the authorities have weakened (2015). Furthermore, in a review of the 2009 LGR, Professor Michael Chisholm, former member of the Local Government Commission for England, casts doubt as to whether the transition to unitary councils generates financial savings, citing opaque government data and underestimated costs (2010).

A further criticism of unitary authorities is the impact the change has on local political representation. Copus (2006) suggests that unitarisation creates councils designed to run public services in accordance with central mandates rather than to deliver a wider political and representative role, arguing that this changes the role of the councillor from a purer political role as a representative to being immersed in public service delivery. Additionally, unitarisation results in a significant net reduction in the total number of councillors serving an area and increases the number of residents a councillor represents (Leach and Copus, 2021).

The Role of Local Councils in the new System

The common solution to the claimed weakening of principal tier proximity and representation is the strengthening of the local council sector in the new unitary area as local councils can bridge the gap created by more distant principal authorities. The *Stronger and Prosperous Communities* white paper required unitary proposals to demonstrate how communities would be empowered by LGR, including looking at the role of local councils in delivering local leadership and representation (DCLG, 2006)

and this continued through later governments with a former Secretary of State⁴ expressing that local councils must be empowered through the process (PWC, 2020) and the House of Commons briefing paper on unitarisation recognising the importance of local councils in tackling its challenges (Baker and Sandford, 2020). It is common for LGR to lead to the creation of new local councils for larger towns (often the seats of district councils) which were previously unparished (SLCC, NDa) and the LGA asserts unitary councils are often leaders in devolving services to local councils (LGA, 2021).

The process of bidding for a transition to a unitary system, and the subsequent debate over the model⁵, generates various reports and proposals on what LGR should mean for an area, some of which greatly emphasise the importance of local councils in the new system. Many reports highlight the demand and opportunity for devolution to local councils (Buckinghamshire County Council, 2016; Cornwall County Council, 2007; KPMG, 2020; Westmorland and Furness Council, 2020), plans for parishing unparished areas (Cornwall County Council, 2007; Northamptonshire Councils, 2018) or discuss the opportunity to improve the role of local councils (Allerdale and Copeland Borough Council, 2020; Lancashire County Council, 2020). A report by PWC (2018) for Northamptonshire LGR explicitly noted that empowerment of parishes is a way to combat concern about the loss of the voice of district councils and aid local accountability, whilst the recently created North Yorkshire Council has already commenced work focusing on local councils, developing a charter setting out a foundation for a relationship and a commitment to asset and service devolution (Eichier, 2023)

However, Copus, Leach and Jones (2020) dismiss suggestions that localism can be preserved in large unitary areas by strengthening the role of local councils, arguing it is unsustainable due to some local councils simply lacking the capacity or desire to do more. This is reinforced by Baker and Sandford (2020) that highlight many local councils have insufficient budgets or means to run public services and by PWC (2018) which questions the ability of those in the parish sector. The LGA (2021) notes that this perception of a lack of capacity is a major barrier to devolution and adds that the prospect of creating power bases in large towns may prevent some councils being created or their powers extended.

Additionally, the LGA (2021) argues that the lack of contested elections within local councils questions their representative value and is a further barrier to enhancing their role and Morphet (2008) critiques that there is often pressure against elections in local councils on cost grounds which

⁴ Robert Jenrick, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

⁵ Typically, county councils argue for a county wide unitary, whilst district councils argue for multiple smaller unitary councils within the existing county boundary.

in turn reduces the democratic mandate. This is principally a problem for smaller councils: analysis of elections between 1995-1997 found that contested elections were held in all local councils serving populations over 20,000 but in a minority of councils with less than 2,500 (Ellwood, Tricker and Green, 1998, cited in Pearce and Ellwood, 2002, p.37). Pearce and Ellwood (2002) discuss potential reasons for the lack of interest, suggesting the perceived lack of power councillors have to deliver service and influence policy or the lack of party-political involvement; these are matters which could be affected by LGR but to date there have been no studies to investigate this.

Indeed, there are few studies looking at the impact on local councils after LGR. A study of the 1990s wave of unitarisation by Fenwick and Bailey (1999) noted that not all of the newly made unitary councils had programmes focused on working with and bolstering local councils whilst some were creating parishes to cover unparished area; the study also noted that in some cases the principal authorities sought to centralise decision making and emphasised their primacy of budget and finance. In Milton Keynes, the council parished the whole area and explicitly sought to create a strong local council sector to balance its strategic functions (Godfrey, 2007). Elcock, Fenwick and McMillan (2010) interviewed leaders and senior officers from authorities at different stages of LGR, highlighting views that parishes are important but doubts that they have the capability to operate independently, and will require support from the higher tier. The study also highlighted the benefit to local governance from the checks and balances provided by two-tier principal authorities but did not discuss whether local councils replace this in a unitary system.

A study of Cornwall Council found the sudden organisational change to a unitary council resulted in existing staff cultures being fixed and taking time to change (Cresswell, Moizer and Lean, 2014) which suggests there would be a lag between LGR and new corporate cultures emerging, this could affect the development of the new authority's attitude to local councils and devolution. Interviews with leaders/CEOs of unitary councils also highlighted the potential of LGR resulting in the loss of experienced councillors and the negative affect on performance through the creation of turbulence this can have (Swann, 2016).

The *Future of Local Councils* report found engagement with principal councils in three-tier systems was notably higher than under a unitary council, with 65% vs 29% reporting regular engagement with their principal council respectively (Giovannini et al, 2022). The report also found almost 50% of parishes report no engagement with their unitary authority compared with just 15% (counties) and 19% (districts); the report does not discuss this finding, but it could suggest greater independence of local councils within the unitary system, the development of a disconnect between the tiers or a change in the position of local councils in delivering services directly rather than influencing others to

do so. A recent undergraduate study focused on the local council sector found a 2-to-3 point increase in the sense of purpose of local councils within unitary areas and suggested it was a result of local councils filling the void created by the increased remoteness of unitary authorities (Jacklin-Edward, 2022).

The Austerity Effect

Alongside the Localism Act 2011, the 2010-2015 coalition government introduced 'austerity' measures to reduce government expenditure. Local government received the largest proportional cuts of all areas affected, reducing funding by almost 10% whilst it also faced significant increases to social care costs and restrictions on the ability to increase council tax (Atkins and Hoddinott, 2020; Gray and Barford, 2018; Jones, 2020). Institute for Government analysis found district councils faced the greatest reduction in expenditure but unitary and counties faced greater challenges due to statutory responsibilities for social care placing pressure on other services (Atkins and Hoddinott, 2020).

These significant financial challenges resulted in principal authorities seeking to devolve assets and services to local councils to reduce expenditure. In a limited survey of 15 local authorities, masters student Sharon Clayton (2018) found over half had devolved services to local councils in response to austerity pressures. Jane Wills (2020), Professor of Geography at Exeter University, studied the changes at larger local councils within Cornwall following the creation of Cornwall Council, citing significant growth in the activity of these councils as a result of devolution and noting that it was the pressures of austerity faced by the unitary authority which was the major driver; a recent peer review by the LGA (2022) for Shropshire Council specifically recommended working with local councils as a means to reduce its financial challenges. However, there has been no analysis of the impact of austerity vs LGR on devolution to local councils.

Summary

The literature review has highlighted:

- Unitary councils are likely to be introduced across the remaining 21 three-tier counties
- Unitary councils are considered more remote from communities, creating an imperative to strengthen the local council sector to bridge this gap

- Approaches taken by principal authorities to local councils varies significantly and this will impact local council activity and performance
- Issues of capacity and lack of electoral contest are considered a barrier to the success of local councils and it is uncertain whether the greater sense of purpose for councils within unitary areas can overcome this
- There is little literature on the impact of LGR on the activity of local councils, but it is likely that unitarisation does impact local councils
- There is little literature on the impact of austerity measures, but it is likely that it both impacted local councils and contributed to the impact of LGR

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter sets out and justifies the chosen research methods and the methodology employed for undertake this research covering the research strategy and design, ethical considerations, data collection and problems and limitations of the data gathering.

Ethics

This research was subject to ethics approval through the De Montfort University Faculty of Business and Law and undertaken in accordance with the approved policies of De Montfort University.

In undertaking research, it is important to ensure the protection of those being studied, those contributing to the research and the researcher themselves (Harris and Nolan, 2016). Ethics in research extends to the research methods and how the results are communicated, with data being presented in an unbiased way which does not misrepresent the data or information presented by participants (Denscombe, 2017).

Fundamental to ethical research is the principle of informed consent and the right of withdrawal (Kumar, 2011); to enable participants to determine if they wish to participate and give informed consent, all potential participants were provided with a participant information sheet (see appendices 1/2) outlining the purpose of the research and their rights to withdraw. Survey participants had the option to remain anonymous and data was collected and stored electronically with suitable password protection. Structured interview notes were handwritten prior to being digitised and password protected. Data has been presented in an anonymous format where it should not be possible to identify participants.

Research Strategy

The objectives of a research project are central to determining research methods to ensure the collection of both meaningful and relevant data (Bryman, 2016). The research seeks to obtain data to enable a subjective measurement to be made of the impact that unitary authority creation has on local councils. Table One summarises the objectives and identifies data which would enable a conclusion to be drawn.

Objective	Desired Data
A - Summarise/quantify the impact on local councils of LGR	Change over time (precepts, services/assets, staffing, workload, complexity, elections)
B - Assess perception of local councils of LGR	Opinion of impact from councillors/clerks
C - Understand if the size of unitary has an impact on (a)/(b)	Specific unitary
D- Understand if the size of local council impacts (a)/(b)	Size of local council (contextual)
E – Contrast impact with three-tier areas	Comparison with non-unitary areas
F - Identify matters arising from LGR	Contextual, from open answers

Table 1: Research Strategy

Research Design

The research strategy identified desired data to measure the change in local councils, with two key variables needing to be ascertained: size of local council and type of principal authority. The literature review highlighted how the approaches taken by principal authorities to local councils within their area can significantly vary and it was therefore considered that to draw general comparisons, a broad range of local authority areas would need to be covered, therefore, to obtain a range of data points different research methods were employed.

Primary Questionnaire

A questionnaire was selected as the primary method. Denscombe (2017) notes that questionnaires are effective when seeking a large number of responses across a wide area to obtain quantitative and straight forward data. The survey was designed to obtain technical data about the council in 2023 and 2011. 2011 was selected as the year of the Localism Act and early in the austerity programme. To obtain views of respondents on changes during this period, a series of attitudinal questions were asked in the form of Likert scales, which enable a relational measurement of the difference in attitudes between groups (Kumar, 2011).

The questionnaire was designed for both officers and councillors to provide a further level of analysis on the perception of issues as it was postulated the two roles could have different experiences and views of matters affecting their councils. The questionnaires for each were adapted with minor variation to the questions. Technical data was only sought from officers, as it was considered they would more readily have this non-subjective information.

Consideration was given to sourcing the technical data through data published on council websites, such as minutes, governance returns and 'about us' texts. This was discounted as it was considered excessively time consuming to obtain and an exploratory sample demonstrated inconsistency with

the availability of data published which was likely to introduce a sampling validity issue as councils where the information is more readily available may exhibit factors which make them not be representative of the group as a whole. Interviews were considered as a means to obtain opinion from respondents, however it was considered this would also be excessively time consuming to obtain a significant amount of data compared with a questionnaire.

Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews enable greater exploration of opinion, experience, subtlety and complexity than questionnaires and a semi-structured interview enables flexibility and greater freedom of the interviewee (Denscombe, 2017). Semi-structured interviews with CALC officers were selected as a means to obtain an overview of the local council sector in each area and how it has changed over the past 12 years.

Election Contests

Within a unitary area, the reduction in principal councillor seats and increased role of local councils, may result in increased competition for seats at the local council level. Officially published documents can form a useful source of new primary data (Bryman, 2016) and for elections, data on candidates at local elections is published by district/unitary councils through official election notices. This was used to measure the number of electoral wards within unitary and non-unitary areas which were contested/uncontested at the last ordinary elections (2021-2023) and whether these were for parish or town councils. This data could have been sought through the questionnaire, or generally through the CALC officer interviews, however the ready availability of official sources would provide more robust data for analysis and enabled a marginally simpler questionnaire length.

Secondary Data

Since 2010, the UK Government has published datasets of parish precepts online⁶. The precept is the principal source of financial resource for local councils and in this instance is being used as a proxy for activity. Data for 2010, 2018, 2019 and 2023 was extracted to measure the change in precepts

⁶ From 2010-2012 this was published only in aggregate by local authority and since 2013 also by individual parishes.

across different principal authority types between 2010-2018 (90S/2009 LGR) and then 2019-2023 (2019- LGR). Further data was obtained for 2013 and 2022 for parish-level research in eight areas.

In analysing the results of the primary survey, further exploration of neighbourhood planning uptake was investigated using data published by Planning Resource (2023).

Data Collection

The questionnaire was developed online using WForm on the website of the author's employer. This was chosen as it enabled conditional logic to be applied which could present different questions to respondents based on answers to earlier questions which enabled councillors/officers and those in unitary/non-unitary areas to be presented with different/rephrased questions to ensure only relevant questions were presented. The survey was publicised via the *Community Clerks Network* an online forum of almost 2,000 local council clerks. Additionally, it was circulated to each CALC with a request that it be disseminated to councils via email to reach clerks and councillors across England.

The questionnaire responses from clerks within unitary authority areas were further separated into larger and smaller council categories based on the stated budget in 2011. A threshold of £200,000 was selected to define groups, this being the threshold used in legislation to denote a larger local council⁷.

Invitations to participate in an interview via Zoom were issued to 24 CALCs via email, sampled to provide coverage of unitary/three tier areas, including CALCs covering the most recently created unitary authorities. Six participated in an interview.

Election notices were obtained from election authorities across nine three-tier counties and 13 unitary areas. Areas were randomly sampled, and data was obtained through a combination of freedom of information requests and published election notices on the authority websites. Data was gathered based on electoral areas (whole parishes or parish wards as applicable) and compiled across 4,802 electoral areas, of which 2,021 were from unitary areas and 2,781 from three-tier counties. For each election authority a count was made of the total number of electoral areas which were contested and uncontested for both parish and town councils.

⁷ e.g. Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 and Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014

The precept datasets were amalgamated into a spreadsheet, each three-tier area was summed to a county level or, where they later became part of a unitary, the new unitary name. Each area was coded (90s-U/2009-U/2019-U/3T/MB) and a SUMIF calculation used to sum the aggregate precepts by local authority type. Further analysis was undertaken on a random sample of eight areas comparing parish level data in 2013 (first year parish level data was published) and 2022. The group was split into smaller and larger groups based on a 2013 precept threshold of £150,000, selected as 75% of the £200,000 gross budget threshold.

Issues and Limitations

As responses to self-administered questionnaires rely on the motivation of the respondent to complete the survey, they can present a self-selecting bias of attitude (Kumar, 2011).

In analysis of the electoral contest data, the style of the council as a parish or town has been used as a proxy for size. Whilst it is generally the case that town councils are larger organisations than parish councils this is not absolute, however the alternative to using this proxy would have been an extremely time-consuming crosscheck with parish websites and the benefit was not considered commensurate for the purpose of this study.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire response data was configured in a spreadsheet to provide averages/sums. Likert scale responses were grouped and graphically plotted to provide a visual comparison between groups.

Electoral contest data was subject to statistical analysis using the Chi-square test which enabled a determination to be made of the significance the observations with respect the effect of principal authority type (Bryman, 2017).

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study, outlining whether evidence has been produced in support of the research objectives.

Response Rate

The response rate to the questionnaire was extremely low, with only 68 responses received (summarised in table 2).

Respondent Type	Unitary	Three-tier
Councillor	21	13
Officer	26	8

Table 2: Survey Responses Summary

A poor response rate is characteristic of self-administered questionnaires (Bryman, 2017; Kumar, 2011) however a response rate ten-fold higher was anticipated based on similar sector surveys. There are three presumed causes for the low response rate. Firstly, some potential officer respondents stated they had not been in post for a sufficient period to draw a comparison from 2011/pre-unitarisation and it is noted that the average turnover rate in the sector is high (SLCC, NDb). Comments from some questionnaire recipients demonstrated that it was not understood that responses were sought from councils in three-tier areas, this affected both the clerks who received it and CALCs which were asked to disseminate it and it is notable 68% of responses were from unitary areas. Thirdly, it is not known whether all CALCs disseminated the survey: one explicitly refused and many did not acknowledge receipt. Whilst 85% councils are in CALC membership (Giovannini, 2022), non-circulation of the survey will have been a limiting factor.

It is notable that the officer responses were predominantly from larger councils with only two from councils with a turnover under £5,000. Responses from both councillors and officers were also poorly geographically distributed, with a predominance of three unitary areas. This could present a limitation in interpreting the data across a diverse sector. There were insufficient responses to enable comparison of responses between different unitary authority types.

The Impact of Unitary Authority Creation

Asset and Service Delivery

Officers were asked if the council had taken on devolved assets or services from the principal authority since 2011. 36% of councils within a unitary area had devolved assets and 44% had devolved services, compared with 25% of councils for both measures in non-unitary areas.

Officers were further to indicate from a list of 23 assets and services which services/assets were delivered by the council in 2011 and 2023. Selections were compared to identify the changes in service/asset delivery across the two groups. It is noted that this is a blunt method that would not recognise a change in scale of delivery. On average, the selection had increased 3.0 points in unitary areas and 1.4 in non-unitary areas, a two-fold increase in devolution in unitary areas. There were a number of areas where there had been no change in delivery in non-unitary areas (e.g. markets, allotments, tourism), however as noted in table 2, the pool of responses in non-unitary areas was only one third of the total from unitary areas and combined the sample was still very low, making definitive conclusions challenging.

In the interviews with CALC officers it was noted that in non-unitary areas (and in unitary areas pre-LGR) there had been little devolution; where it had occurred, it was usually confined to county council services (e.g. highway verge cutting, libraries) and only one CALC reported minor devolution of district assets. Verge cutting and libraries were not on the list of services/assets in the questionnaire and as such the data overlooks any devolution in these areas. The literature review noted that financial pressures had been particularly acute for county/unitary authorities, it was therefore not surprising to find limited devolution of district services in non-unitary areas. The data therefore suggests that devolution is more limited within non-unitary areas.

However, in both areas there was a similar level of councils starting or expanding existing services to fill gaps in principal authority service delivery (40% unitary respondents, 37.5% three-tier respondents), these were predominantly stated as street cleansing, verge cutting and general maintenance (e.g. bus shelter cleaning), so whilst services may not be devolved reduced standards lead to local councils stepping into 'top-up' provision.

Neighbourhood Planning

50% of unitary area respondents selected undertaking a neighbourhood plan compared with 37.5% of non-unitary area respondents. To explore this difference further, data on neighbourhood plans

across England as of April 2023 was analysed by principal authority area and the 2023 UK Government Precept Table was used to calculate the percentage of precepting parishes by local authority type to provide a comparator.

	% total started	% total made	% parishes	Diff.
Met / London Borough	9.22	4.97	2.44	6.78/2.53
Three Tier	58.51	58.61	67.18	-8.67/-8.57
Unitary	32.27	36.42	30.39	1.88/6.03

(Keppel-Green, based on Planning Resource, 2023 and DLUHC, 2023)

Table 3: Neighbourhood Planning by local authority type

Whilst neighbourhood plan areas are not directly comparable with local councils⁸, this analysis indicates a lower than expected level of neighbourhood planning within three-tier areas compared with unitary areas. The over-representation for metropolitan/London boroughs would be explained by these areas being predominantly unparished with plans being taken forward by neighbourhood forums. This data accords with the survey findings and, whilst a more precise study would be required to record a definitive conclusion, it highlights a lower uptake of neighbourhood planning in three-tier areas compared with unitary areas which could be explained by communities within unitary areas feeling a stronger need for neighbourhood planning due to the greater perceived distance from the planning authority.

Council Staffing and Workload

Officers were asked to indicate the number of hours worked by the clerk in 2011 and 2023 and how many full-time equivalent staff were in post; the average change in clerk hours for unitary areas was +3.6 hours compared with +5.3 in non-unitary areas. The average change in FTE was 4.73 in unitary areas and 0.46 in non-unitary areas; it is noted that due to the small dataset the unitary data was skewed by three FTE increases above 20 from large councils in Wiltshire, excluding these gave a mean increase of 1.23 FTE. All councils where there had been an FTE increase of 1+ were councils which had taken on devolved assets/services, indicating staff growth is directly attributable to devolution.

⁸ A neighbourhood plan area could be a parish, a group of parishes or an unparished area.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses to Likert statements in respect of workload and role complexity in unitary and three-tier respondents; on all statements, three-tier respondents indicate stronger agreement with statements denoting an increase in officer and councillor workload - this result was surprising. Interviews with CALC officers did not suggest any reason for increased workload in three-tier areas, but those in unitary areas highlighted an immediate increase in workload for clerks in the period following reorganisation through handling more public enquiries through uncertainty as to who to contact. The result is considered erroneous, and this is thought to be due to the framing of the question which differed slightly between the two groups. In unitary areas it sought comparison to pre-LGR and for three-tier areas to 2011 and since 2011 there have been a number of regulatory changes which have increased requirements of the clerk's role. Half of officer responses from unitary areas were from councils which have recently (<3 years) undergone LGR. They reported little change, in contrast with those which had been in a unitary area longer reporting a higher "strongly agree" response – this suggests there is an observable lag between LGR and a strong impact on workload at local councils.

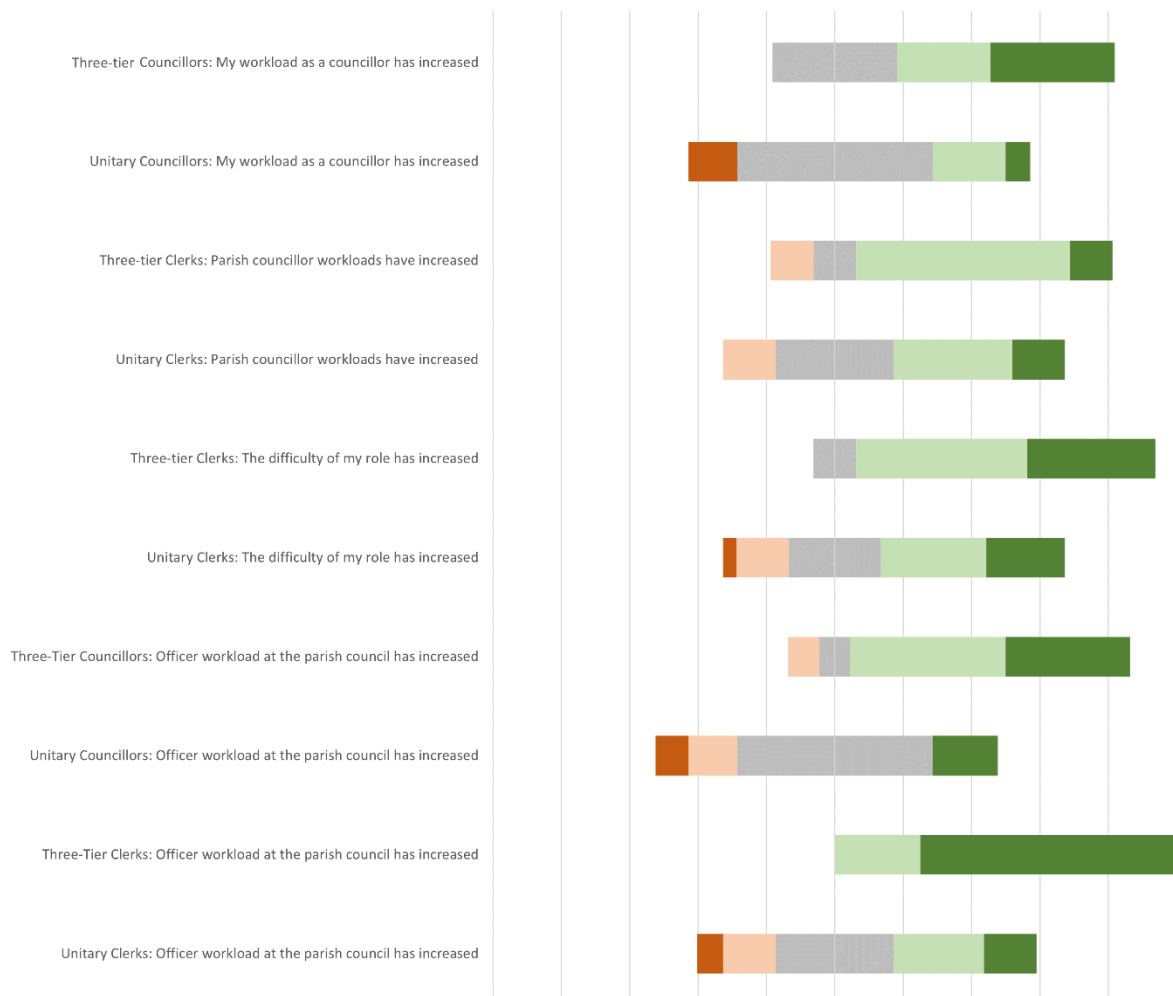


Figure 2: Views on change in workload

Councillors in unitary areas indicate disagreement with the statement that they hear from residents less often (figure 3), this contrasts with three-tier areas where approximately one-third indicated agreement. This would support a view that local councillors fill some of the void in democratic representation created by the abolition of district councils.



Figure 3: Councillor views: contact from residents

Precepts

Table 4 shows the percentage increase in total precepts raised by local councils within different types of principal authority in England between 2010-2018 and 2019-2023. Between 2010-2018, the increase in unitary authority areas was significantly higher than in three-tier and metropolitan borough areas. Between 2019-2023 a higher increase can be observed in the new unitary areas, but not in other authority areas.

Local Authority Type	Change 2010-2018	Change 2019-2023
2009 Unitary	59.84%	28.01%
Metropolitan Boroughs	39.97%	18.99%
Three-Tier	40.94%	27.16%
90s Unitary	51.76%	25.43%
Post-2019 Unitary	N/A	38.95%

(Keppel-Green, based on MHCLG, 2010 and DLUHC, 2023)

Table 4: Change in precept by principal authority type

This is further evidence that transitioning to a unitary authority increases council activity and it is notable that the difference was not apparent in the later years, which could suggest that the rate of growth is greatest in the years following unitarisation. However, the rate of growth in 90s unitary areas suggests that part of the explanation for growth in the earlier period is attributable to either increased activity as a result of changes to principal authority service delivery in response to austerity measures or the government’s Localism agenda. It is interesting that whilst metropolitan boroughs are all-purpose authorities, the change in local council activity in this time period was not

comparable to unitary areas, this may be reflective of the more urban nature of the areas which metropolitan boroughs cover.

Election Contest

Tables 5 and 6 show the number of contested electoral areas by unitary and three-tier authority, finding a higher percentage of contested elections in unitary authority areas.

	Contested	Uncontested
Towns	284 (62.0%)	174 (38.0%)
Parishes	159 (10.2%)	1,404 (89.8%)
Total	443 (21.9%)	1,578 (78.1%)

Table 5: Electoral Contest: Unitary Areas

	Contested	Uncontested
Towns	252 (51.3%)	239 (48.7%)
Parishes	184 (8.0%)	2,106 (92.0%)
Total	436 (15.7%)	2,345 (84.3%)

Table 6: Electoral Contest: Three-Tier Areas

To assess the statistical significance of the differences, the chi-square test of independence was used which confirmed the relationship between electoral contest and the variable of principal authority is significant, $X^2(1, N=4,802) = 30.50, p = <.00001$. Further analysis was undertaken to ascertain if the significant difference was present in the parish council and town council datasets. The difference for parish councils was not significant, $X^2(1, N=3,853) = 5.24, p = .022135$, whereas for town councils it was significant, $X^2(1, N=949) = 11.01, p = .000908$. It can therefore be concluded that whilst a unitary principal authority does increase electoral contest at town councils, it has no significant effect at parish councils.

There are three connected explanations for an increase in electoral contest at town councils in unitary authority areas. Firstly, within a unitary authority area, there are fewer principal authority councillors, reducing the opportunity for standing for election. Those who would have sought election to a principal authority may now instead seek election to a town council. Secondly, political parties have a role in determining candidates at elections and town councils are more likely to have political candidates than parish councils (Stapleton, 2011) thus there is a greater chance of political

candidates being displaced to town councils. Finally, serving as a town councillor is also likely to be seen as more comparable to serving as a principal councillor as town councils are more likely to have a greater range of services and assets (in the primary survey 70% of councils which had taken on assets/services post-unitarisation were town councils). Concurrently, the enhanced role for town councils may make seeking office more desirable for people who have not considered standing for election before. One CALC officer highlighted how pre-LGR the roles of county and district councillors were notably different, suggesting county councillors were more “corporate” whilst district councillors fulfilled a “man of the people” role – it is possible this district councillor role may be seen to shift to town councils post-unitarisation.

This offers partial support for the hypothesis that the greater role of local councils within unitary areas will have resulted in greater electoral contest – but that this is not proven for smaller local councils. Further research on the motivation for seeking election to local councils and how this may be affected by unitarisation would be warranted.

Relationship with Principal Authority

Figures 4-6 show councillor/clerk views on changes in satisfaction and perceived influence with principal authorities since 2011/reorganisation. Across all measures there is a negative trend indicating decreased influence and satisfaction with principal authorities regardless of the type of principal authority. Whilst noting the small sample size, there appears to be no difference in the measures across the two areas, therefore one can conclude the reduction in satisfaction and influence with principal authorities is not related to local government reorganisation. This echoes comments from one CALC officer who noted that whilst local councils complain about their new unitary authorities, the complaints are similar to those raised about the district/county before reorganisation.

Figure 6 suggests the perceived decline in influence with the unitary in comparison to district/borough councils is stronger than the decline with county councils. This is not unsurprising as it is the proximity of the district tier that is lost through reorganisation, and this reinforces the sense of distance between councils created through LGR.

The relationship between principal authorities and local councils was a theme in the interviews with CALC officers, where it was noted that the relationship with the large (2009 onwards) unitary authorities is seen to decline in the short term. It was suggested that factors such as loss of staff from the instability created by reorganisation (including job insecurity), a tendency towards group

mailboxes and the scale of the areas covered by unitary council officers result in less personal contact which is a barrier to strong relationships.

Time is likely to influence the sense of change in relationship and it is unfortunate that few CALC officers from unitary areas could be interviewed. In one 2009 unitary area it was reported that local councils waited for things to return to normal for six years before moving to “step up”, whilst in one post-2019 unitary there was reportedly no sense of councils feeling the need to change their role. It was notable that in the 90s unitaries, which cover much smaller areas, there is a sense of a stronger relationship and influence from the unitary to local councils; in some instances this is positive (empowering) and in others it is negative (paternalistic). One CALC officer noted that local councils in areas where the district was paternalistic had noticed a particular change to the relationship through LGR. The current trend for large unitary authorities is likely to promote greater independence in the local council sector and reduce reliance on principal authorities.

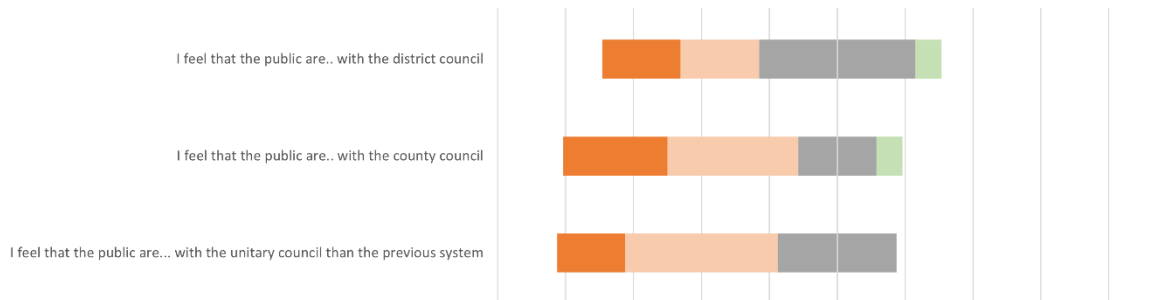


Figure 4: Councillor views: change in satisfaction with principal authority

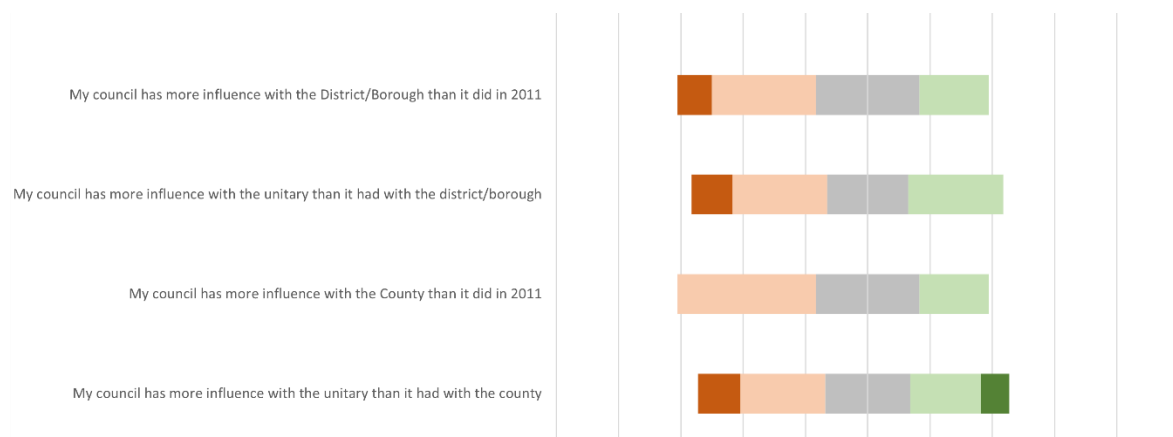


Figure 5: Clerk views: change in influence with principal authority



Figure 6: Councillor views: change in influence following reorganisation

Figure 7 shows no significant change in recorded satisfaction of being a councillor between the two areas and suggests little perceived change with the local council. Noting that 16/21 of the unitary responses are from recently created unitary areas this trend may not be fully reflective and will likely develop over time.

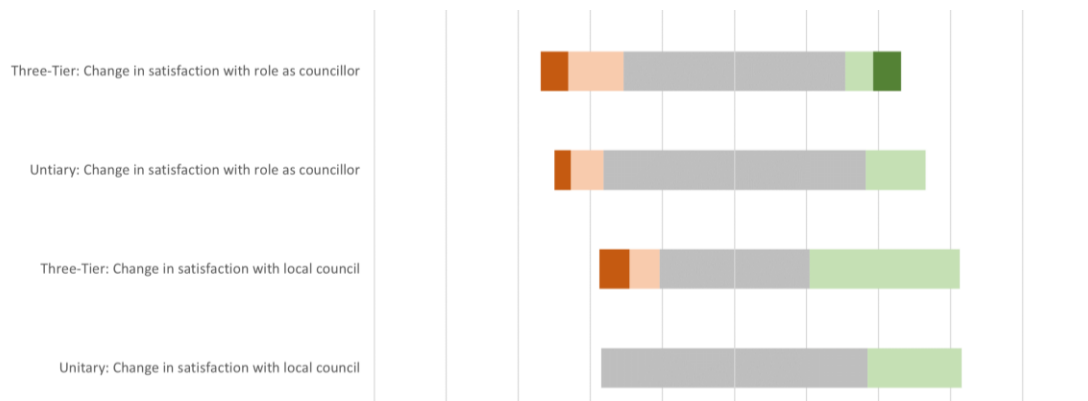


Figure 7: Change in satisfaction with local council and role of councillor

Implementation of Local Government Reorganisation

The literature review highlighted the plethora of proposals prepared in advance of LGR which often set out a vision for parishes, yet only 47% of questionnaire respondents reported their council was involved in discussions with principal councils prior to reorganisation (17% unsure, 34% not involved). 40.9% of respondents indicated the implementation of reorganisation, as it affected local councils, was as expected (31.8% mixed opinion, 27.3% not as expected). 24% of respondents indicated there were assets/services they expected to see transfer post LGR which did not with 32% currently/intending to be in negotiation for further transfers; a CALC officer noted that the guarantees of districts before reorganisation do not always translate into the priorities of the new larger unitary. It is reasonable to conclude that, as with any political decision, the impact of LGR on parishes cannot be fully known from the old authorities until it occurs, unless non-negotiable deals can be made prior to vesting day.

Figure 8 shows the views of clerks/councillors on the impact LGR has had on their council and community, showing that for both measures it is viewed more positively by clerks than councillors. It was not possible within this study to explore the reasons for this difference further but may be due to a difference in the way the two roles assess the impact, for example groups may weight different effects, such as perceived influence with the principal authority or change in responsibilities, differently.

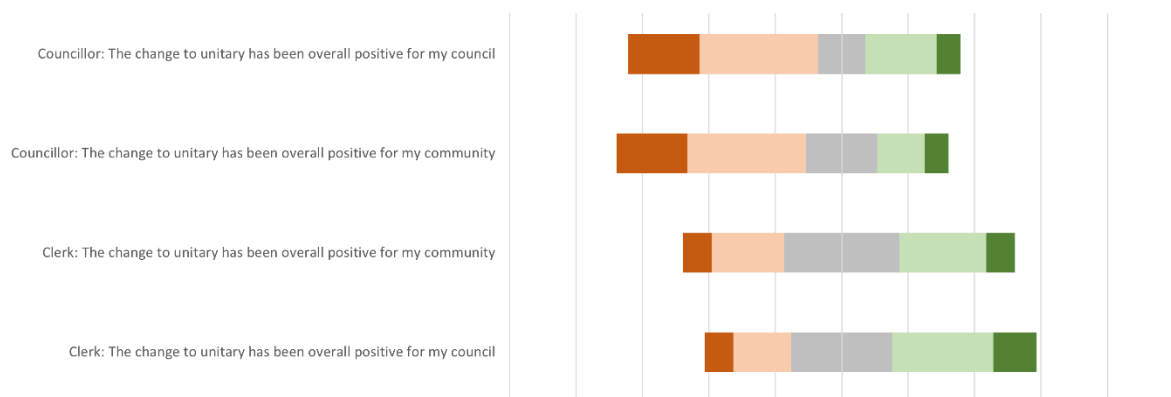


Figure 8: Views on effect of LGR on community and local council

Does Local Council Size Matter?

It was notable that the increase in staffing within the unitary group was almost entirely within larger councils, with an average increase of 4.33 FTE⁹ vs 0.15 in smaller councils. There was an average increase of 6.3 service areas in larger councils compared with 1.4 in smaller councils. Table 7 shows a majority of larger councils have taken on devolved assets and services compared with a minority of smaller councils. These findings are not unexpected as larger councils would have greater capacity to expand their service delivery and many assets which would be devolved from principal authorities would be within towns and larger villages.

	Larger	Smaller
Devolved Assets	90%	12.5%
Devolved Services	80%	25%

Table 7: Difference in devolution within unitary areas

⁹ When excluding the three Wiltshire extremes.

Table 8 further explores the changes in precept between 2013-2022 with a sampling of 1,436 councils across four three-tier and 2009 unitary areas¹⁰, it shows the change in smaller council precepts is comparable, whilst a notably greater increase is observed in larger councils within unitary areas.

Local Authority Type	Change, Smaller Councils	Change, Larger Councils
2009 Unitary	58.18%	82.73%
Three-Tier	59.41%	65.73%

(Keppel-Green, based on MHCLG, 2013 and DLUHC, 2023)

Table 8: Change in precept 2013-2022 by council size (sample)

Figure 9 shows the responses to Likert scales split by larger and smaller councils within unitary areas. Whilst recognising these are small groups (10 larger, 16 smaller), there were notable differences in the two groups across all measures with respondents from larger councils indicating greater change following reorganisation and a greater role for the local council; this accords with the findings of Jacklin-Edward (2022) that size affects a council’s sense of purpose. These findings further suggest support for the hypothesis that the impact of unitarisation on local councils is less observable in smaller councils than larger councils.

CALC officer interviews further highlight this divergence. An officer covering a post-2019 unitary area highlighted that it is predominantly the larger councils which are looking to progress devolution and that capacity issues hold back smaller councils, this reflects findings in the literature review that concerns of capacity within the sector are a barrier to increased roles for local councils. A CALC officer in a 2009-unitary area reported that the town councils are increasingly appearing to replicate former Urban District Councils and looking to support and work with their surrounding parishes.

¹⁰ Cheshire East, Central Bedfordshire, Wiltshire, Northumberland, East Sussex, Cambridgeshire, Staffordshire and Devon.



Figure 9: Differences in perception of large and smaller councils within unitary areas

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter assesses whether the study met the stated aims and objectives, outlines the key findings and identifies areas for further research as well as recommendations for sector bodies.

Review of Aims and Objectives

This study aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the impact of unitary authority creation on local councils and set out five main objectives.

Notwithstanding the low response rate to the questionnaire which hampered the drawing of conclusions in some areas, the study met the stated objectives. It identified a number of areas in which local councils are impacted by LGR, found that councillors/officers have differing views on the effect of LGR on local councils, found a discernible difference in the impact of LGR on larger vs smaller local councils and provided evidence to assess the different in the impact of LGR vs the impact of austerity measures. Whilst not conclusive, the study has identified a number of matters that will be of use for local councils when their county goes through LGR.

However, due to the low questionnaire response rate, the study was not able to fully assess the effect of the size of the unitary authority on the impact to local councils.

Key Findings

This study found that LGR leads to greater devolution of assets and services and increases in local council staffing, precepts and electoral contest, but that this impact is predominantly experienced by larger councils with smaller councils experiencing little organisational change. This is an important finding, as it highlights a greater diversification in the local council sector and may lead to a greater reduction in services in more rural areas. An unexpected finding was the difference in uptake of neighbourhood planning powers, with a greater number of neighbourhood plans being prepared in unitary areas.

The findings further suggest that there is not a significant difference in the relationship with the principal authority post-LGR, with local councils in three-tier areas reporting a comparable level of reduction in satisfaction. The study also suggests that the creation of larger unitary authorities promotes/results in greater independence of local councils; this can be positive for councils with

ambition and capacity but negative for councils lacking capacity and with greater reliance on principal authorities.

The study did not highlight significant change in councillor satisfaction or satisfaction with the local council. However, the study did suggest that clerks and councillors have different perceptions on the impact of LGR, with clerks viewing its effect on both council and community more positively than councillors. Further research to confirm this finding and better understand the reasons is warranted.

Additionally, the study highlighted that the impact of LGR cannot accurately be predicted from the pre-LGR discussions and proposals, with a majority indicating it did not go as expected or only partly as expected. It was also found that there is a delay between LGR and many effects being experienced at local councils whilst the new unitary establishes itself and clarifies its function and service delivery. Local councils should be aware that they may experience a greater degree of change over a longer period of time as a result.

Recommendations: Further Research

The study sought to assess the impact of LGR across a range of areas measured as interpreted at a fixed point in time; as unitary authorities become established the impact may evolve. A longitudinal study of a county area in the years before and after reorganisation would provide greater depth to the understanding of the impact on the sector.

The findings in respect of electoral contest warrant further investigation. Most literature on councillors is focused on principal authority members and a study exploring the changing roles, attitudes and satisfaction of parish and town councillors as the sector develops in different areas could glean interesting information on grassroots democratic engagement.

Furthermore, this study, and much literature on LGR, has focused on the views of councillors and officers, research on the views of ordinary residents on the changes LGR brings would greatly add to the body of knowledge, particularly their views on the effectiveness of local government with the greater devolution to larger local councils.

Recommendations: Sector Bodies

The study highlighted that it is larger councils which experience the greatest impact and change through LGR, leading to greater diversification of an already diverse sector where more large councils become major service providers whilst smaller councils experience little change. Whilst this is to

some extent inevitable with the communities served by larger councils being of a greater scale to operate assets and public services, there would appear to be a need to tackle capacity issues at smaller councils to enable them to take advantage of the opportunities of devolution. Sector bodies should help build this capacity; this could be through supporting larger councils in delivering services for neighbouring parishes, or greater support for clustering and partnership working between smaller councils to co-deliver services.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet (survey)

Title of Project: Understanding the impact of unitary council creation on local (parish and town) councils in England.

Name of Researcher(s): Adam Keppel-Green

You have been invited to take part in a research study. This information sheet explains why the research is being undertaken and what it involves so that you can understand if you wish to participate. If there is anything which is unclear or you have any questions or more information please ask.

This study is part of completing a BA award in Community Governance with De Montfort University.

The research is seeking to understand in more detail the impact that local government reorganisation (specifically the creation of a unitary council) has on parish and town councils and what factors affect the scale of this impact. The research aims to provide guidance for councils going through reorganisation in their areas.

What does the study / participation involve?

You are invited to participate in a short questionnaire which should take no longer than 20 minutes.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, this means you can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

This survey can be completed anonymously. All data will be anonymised but may be referenced to by locality e.g. "a large town council in Cheshire" or "a parish councillor from a rural village in Gloucestershire". Great care will be taken to ensure this does not impact anonymity. Where a survey is completed anonymously it will not be possible to remove your response if you later decide to withdraw.

The data you provide will be used for the purposes of completing the study. The results of this research will form part of my dissertation, which in time will be published on the SLCC website. I am also happy to share the results with anyone who requests them, and you can do this as part of the survey.

Data Protection and Sharing

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept on a password protected database and is strictly confidential. You will be assigned an ID code which will be used instead of your name. Any identifiable information you may give will be removed and anonymised.

DMU policy is that raw data is kept for 5 years after a study has been completed. Data may also be reviewed by my supervisor and members of the faculty human research ethics committee may require access to check that the study has been conducted in accordance with the approval given.

As you are sharing your details with DMU, we want you to know how we use your personal data and what your rights are. You can find this information at <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/policies/data-protection/data-protection.aspx>

If you have any concerns about this research, for any reason and at any time, you may contact my supervisor Angie Hurren. Her contact details are provided at the end of this information sheet

Ethics

This study has been reviewed and approved by De Montfort University, Faculty of Business and Law Research Ethics Committee

Further Information

If you have any questions with respect to this study please contact me at adam@keppel-green.co.uk

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet (interview)

Title of Project: Understanding the impact of unitary council creation on local (parish and town) councils in England.

Name of Researcher(s): Adam Keppel-Green

You have been invited to take part in a research study. This information sheet explains why the research is being undertaken and what it involves so that you can understand if you wish to participate. If there is anything which is unclear or you have any questions or more information please ask.

This study is part of completing a BA award in Community Governance with De Montfort University.

The research is seeking to understand in more detail the impact that local government reorganisation (specifically the creation of a unitary council) has on parish and town councils and what factors affect the scale of this impact. The research aims to provide guidance for councils going through reorganisation in their areas.

What does the study / participation involve?

You are invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. This will last approximately 30 minutes. Your participation is entirely voluntary, you can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. You can also terminate the interview at any time without giving a reason.

All data will be anonymised but may be referenced to by locality e.g. "a large town council in Cheshire" or "the county officer in a three tier area". Great care will be taken to ensure this does not impact anonymity. The data you provide will be used for the purposes of completing the study. The results of this research will form part of my dissertation, which in time will be published on the SLCC website. I am also happy to share the results with anyone who requests them, and you can do this as part of the survey.

Data Protection and Sharing

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept on a password protected database and is strictly confidential. You will be assigned an ID code which will be used instead of your name. Any identifiable information you may give will be removed and anonymised.

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If you have any concerns about this research, for any reason and at any time, you may contact my supervisor Angie Hurren. Her contact details are provided at the end of this information sheet

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Further Information

If you have any questions with respect to this study please contact me at adam@keppel-green.co.uk