

NALC Power Shift 2025 Conference 23 June 2025 – Conference Notes – Phil Miller

Introduction

Power shift refers to the devolution of governmental power away from central government to local authorities. It is recognised that there is a difference between Rural and Urban environments and this will influence how devolution is implemented.

The basic structure is to have an overarching Strategic Authority generally under a mayor. The responsibility of this authority is to provide plans for : -

1. Transport and local infrastructure
2. Skills and employment support
3. Housing and strategic planning
4. Economic development and regeneration
5. Environment and climate change
6. Health, wellbeing and public service reform
7. Public safety

Below this is a number of Unitary Councils who run the services complemented by a number of Parish/Town Councils.

Talk 1 : - What will the New Bill Mean for Parish and Town Council : - Baroness Sharon Taylor

Baroness Taylor opened her talk by introducing herself. Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, is a British politician and life peer who has served as a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing and Local Government since July 2024. She was a member of Stevenage Borough Council in Hertfordshire from 1997 to 2024, and served as the leader of the council from 2006 to 2022.

The role of devolution is to allow for local decisions to be made, giving people more control over their lives. The voice of local government will allow the appropriate authority to deliver what the community needs in a cost effective manner.

The Devolution Bill is now in the House of Lords for scrutiny.

Questions after the talk included: -

What do you do if you feel as a Town Council that the Unitary Council is blocking the transfer of services and assets to the Town Council? The answer was to get the NALC involved to see if they can help to get local services out to Local Parish/Town Council.

Is there guidance on how services should be split? The answer was there are no guidance from the department on how services should be split. Each service should be negotiated on a case by case basis.

How do we overcome the fact that people are unhappy that money is not being transferred. The answer was that the Government are still working on this problem.

Talk 2 : - Do Devolution Deals Still Matter – Mark Sandford, Senior research analyst, Parliament and Constitution Centre and Melanie Brain, Service Director for Communities, Cornwall Council

Since being in office, the government has already approved devolution deals in Greater Lincolnshire, Hull & East Yorkshire, Devon & Torbay, and Lancashire. Devolution deals have been negotiated on a one by one basis with the government. However the deals have a lot in common with each other and look less like deals than contracts. The Government wants Mayors to generate Economic Growth and increase (affordable?) House Building. Mayors are supplied with a certain amount of money to spend where the Government wants it spent. The Mayoral Role is to work with central government and to promote government requirement.

This is a requirement for Urban Areas as Rural Areas have Local Government. Mayors can however set up small areas working with local Government.

Melanie Brain has experience of devolution in her role as Service Director for Communities on Cornwall Council. She made the following points: -

1. In devolution money and decision making go to local levels.
2. There is devolution for minor highways improvements. Of the 27 libraries in Cornwall, 23 have been devolved to town and parish councils, a community group and a social enterprise. The council has retained four libraries and runs a mobile library.
3. A devolution deal has been struck between Norfolk and Suffolk where there will be a Mayoral Strategic Authority and the two tier council model will be replaced by a unitary council. I think this is to highlight the similarities with the devolution of Cornwall although it was pointed out again that there is a difference between Rural and Urban Models. An objective of the Rural Model is to ignite (?) NHS Services, Policing and Job Opportunities.
4. Unitary council development and devolution of services are developing in tandem and this may not work. It will need implementing and sorting out bit by bit.

5. Money is going to decide how devolution is organised and how it is going to work.
6. Partnerships between Unitary Councillors and Local Government will utilise that LG are also local experts. Help will local support will also depend on sustainability in the long term.

Talk 3 Devolution in Action – Amanda Card, Clerk, Yeovil Town Council

The back ground to this talk was that the Unitary Yeovil council ran into monetary problems and went to the Yeovil Town Council to help. This is a different situation than usual and the lack of funds may have help their hearts and minds on which services/assets to transfer to the town council, allowing them to set their budgets and precepts.

This talk was delivered at a high speed with a lot of data. If interested, further information is available on the Yeovil Town Council website.

One of the background recommendations was to be 'cheeky' in your negotiations and do not hang back on your requests.

Amongst the services transferred were: -

1. Yeovil Recreation Centre
2. Yeovil Country Park
3. Westlands Entertainment Venue (Split between Somerset Council and Yeovil Town Council)
4. Yeovil in Bloom which had a £132k budget which was reduced to £76k. This task used community engagement.

Challenges experienced were: -

1. The Time Frame involved
2. One of you in the negotiating time, but many of them
3. People – TUPE requirements
4. Setting Budgets
5. Legal Requirements
6. Equipment needs
7. Services
8. Back Office Support and IT.

Novation of Contracts : -

(Novation of a contract is the process of replacing one party in an agreement with a new party, with the consent of all involved.)

1. Transfer of Legal Titles –
 - a. Yeovil County Park had 28 titles

- b. Yeovil Recreation Centre had 8 Titles
- 2. Westlands

Learning

- 1. Agree time frames
- 2. Accept there will be issues
- 3. Balance of power – be in control
- 4. Don't trust all you have been told
- 5. Use Legal Support – it saves money in the long term
- 6. Be visible to all staff and maintain communications
- 7. Get advice when needed.

Talk 4 The Financial Challenge of Devolution - Helen Ball Clerk, Shrewsbury Town Council, Dr Jonathan Carr-West Chief executive, Local Government Information Unit and Philip Clifford Senior advisor, Local Government Association

This was a difficult session as it was a panel of people who made points that appeared to contradict each other.

The problem is that one in four local authorities will be facing a financial crisis in the next five years, the question is could devolution offer a lifeline? Will greater autonomy and resources from devolution help parish and town councils tackle funding challenges and maintain essential services, or could it deepen inequalities among councils with different levels of power? In this session, we'll explore whether devolution can bridge financial gaps, empower councils to meet local needs and provide new tools for resilience.

One of the points that was made is that when services are taken over, as long as people understand what is involved, it is possible to raise the precept to pay for them as people will understand why this has occurred.

Helen Ball also made the point that if the choice is between losing a service and taking it over, the choice may be Hobsonian in nature.

As money is in short supply, this probably explains the complaints made that Unitary Councils are reluctant to hand over services, especially those that generate income. However, if councils run into financial troubles, the situation seen with Yeovil Council may apply and it may be an opportunity to expand the services that a Town/Parish Council can run.

Talk 4 Engaging Metro Mayors and Combined Authorities – Prof. Steven Griggs, University of Staffordshire and Simon Kaye Director of Policy, Re:State

This provided a more sideways (academic?) look at the role of devolution . A moment of humour was injected when Simon pointed out that Re:State had changed its name about a month ago. Before that it was known as ReForm.

To introduce the topic, a metro mayor is the directly-elected leader of a big city. They have executive powers and funding available to make strategic decisions over a range of issues including skills, public transport, planning, and in some cases crime and health. Metro mayors' powers stem from being the chair of the city's combined authority, which is a structure composed of the borough councils of each city that allows them to work together with the metro mayor.

A number of points were made during the presentation: -

1. Devolution is about economic growth and creating Strategic Authorities.
2. Strategic Authorities and Local Government work in different Government spheres.
3. There are two types of Strategic Authority, Mayoral Strategic Authority and Foundation Level Strategic Authority. The Foundation Level Strategic Authority does not have an elected mayor. The Mayoral Model is for Cities. They do not appear to work so well in Rural Environments.

We were told through the conference that devolution was a golden opportunity for Local Councils that needs to be grasped with both hands and made to work. Questions during the conference pointed to there being a number of difficulties that need to be confronted. However in terms of this talk, it would seem that the primary point of contact for Local Governments will be the Unitary Councils. Contact with Metro Mayors is likely to be something that is done for a specific purpose.