

APPENDIX 2 Literature Review

In accordance with the best practice of evidence based policy, we conducted a comprehensive literature review on local government amalgamations. The review considered evidence from England and from the global experience. The review focused on:

- The nature of economies of scale in public services
- The impacts on public service economy, efficiency and efficacy from local government amalgamations
- The relationship between size and local democratic health
- The practice and democratic potential of participatory and area decentralisation mechanisms

The review found:

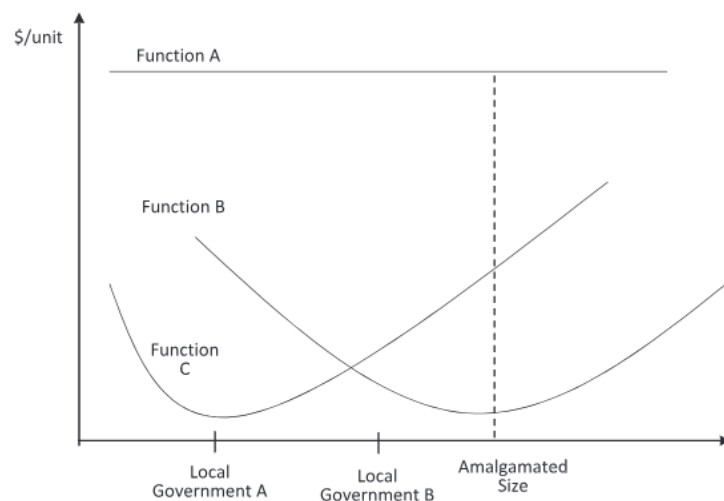
- As multi-functional organisations there is no optimal scale for local authorities. Services are best delivered at different scales.
- Amalgamation rarely delivers the projected benefits. The common experience is null net savings or service improvements. This is due to the multi-functional nature of local authorities. The OECD recommends that states treat amalgamation programmes with caution and advises that aligning administrative boundaries with economic geography is the most realisable benefit.
- The key indicators of democratic health scale poorly.
- The record of area decentralisation in English local government since the 1960s is at best mixed. Area committees are not an effective compensatory mechanism for an oversized authority. These mechanism must be treated as supplementary to an authority with a meaningful connection to the local.

We recognise that MHCLG officials will have reviewed the same literature when developing the territorial strategy of the English Devolution White Paper and subsequently designing the LGR programme and criteria. The purpose of the review is not to challenge MHCLG's judgement on the need for the LGR programme. Rather it is to identify the potential complexities, risks and trade-offs in large scale units, so that in applying the LGR criteria to develop our proposal, we can prudently navigate through the trade-offs and design out or at minimum seek to mitigate said risks.

Relationship of Municipal Size to Service Efficiency and Savings in the context of Local Government Amalgamations

Policy Response: Jurisdictional design should not seek to maximise scale in pursuit of projected savings with uncertain realisation to the known detriment of local democratic health and the connection to place that will unlock the real opportunities for public service reform.

The relationship between local government size and performance is deeply contested. A large body of literature has investigated the democratic and economic potential of increasing local jurisdiction size. A recent systematic review of seventy-nine empirical studies on the topic covering nineteen different countries published over the period 1990–2021 (Galizzi et al. 2023) found that despite widely held assumptions by policymakers of economies of scale, four decades of studies have yet to find the conclusive link between size and efficiency in local public administration to justify scale maximising amalgamations in all governance contexts. The empirical and theoretical evidence demonstrates that the track record of amalgamations in achieving the desired outcomes of reformers is poor. Principally because local governments are often so large as to have already exhausted the available economies of scale or because they are multi-purpose organisations that provide a different range of services, each with a different optimal scale. The literature is remarkably consistent on this point (Elston 2024). The same conclusion was reached by earlier reviews: Callanan et al (2012) and Dowding et al (1994).



There is academic consensus that there is no optimal size for local government for same reason there is no optimal size for the firm. The optimal size and internal organisation of a private firm depend on the particular demand conditions, production and transport technologies and contracting environment of a given industry (Treisman 2007). This is further complicated in local government as authorities are multi-functional bodies providing a highly diverse range of different services. This is important insofar as economies of scale usually relate to the nature of production processes. Thus, the optimal size of delivery organisations varies depending on the service area, each of which have their own production characteristics (Dollery and Fleming, 2006). In this simplified illustration, Function A is typical in having no scale economies, Function B yields maximum savings at size contrived by the amalgamations and Function C has large diseconomies at the amalgamated output size (Drew et al. 2022). To fully capture savings in one function will either mean that

savings in other functions are not fully realized or that additional expense will be added to the costs of fulfilling other functions. The aggregate result may be no local government level economies of scale at all, muted economies of scale or even diseconomies of scale.

Therefore, the theoretically most efficient solution is multiple local units of different sizes. In a multi-tier structure, functions can be assigned to the most efficient level. Each organisation, rather than trying to perform all the functions, does what it can do best. Smaller organisations can be aligned to local place, capturing heterogeneity in need and preferences for public goods, and delivering local democratic accountability and meaningful resident control and empowerment. The advantages of multi-level local governance are accepted by all schools of public management thought. An advocate for New Public Management (NPM), who desires lean and business like organisations focused on their core mission with waste minimised would recognise the superior allocative efficiency of a patchwork of smaller organisations, with the opportunity for continuous improvement through inter-municipal competition or a Tieboutian self-sorting of residents. Post NPM approaches that emphasise place and relational working to co-produce public value with communities, with the neighbourhood as a particular focus of intervention, would also embrace multiple smaller units to achieve the essential local connection for effective preventative policy (Torfing et al. 2020). In England, this is complicated by the absence of a regional tier (combined authorities are potentially this in embryo) and an underpowered hyperlocal tier.

The challenge and the case for unitary government is difficulty for service users in navigating between the organisations, where the division of functions can be opaque to even the most informed, loss of synergies with complementary functions in different organisations, and agency costs and coordination for central government. Hence the rationale for amalgamations.

Intermunicipal cooperation (IMC) arrangements (e.g. shared services) have been advanced as a solution to capture service specific economies of scale (OECD 2017 and Copus et al. 2020). Nevertheless IMC arrangements present their challenges and risks in additional bureaucratic layers, political control and transaction costs. So are best undertaken by mature not new organisations. Elston et al (2023) in an examination of IMC arrangements in English council tax collection found economies of scale would be exhausted with a service volume of around 40,100 dwellings, there were in fact no opportunity costs in failing to further up-scale tax operations across council jurisdictions, and in cases where the IMC is above the optimal scale for the service, then the costs of establishing and operating the IMC may outweigh the benefits. A similar effect was observed with Dutch municipal tax services (Niaounakis and Blank 2017).

Amalgamation programmes are principally justified by potential savings. A commonly observed result is expenditure reductions only in specific service areas post-amalgamation. There is broad consensus that scale leads to a reduction in administrative overheads, observed in Estonia (Reiljan, Jaansoo, and Ülper 2013), Australia (Aulich, Sansom, and Mckinlay 2014), the Netherlands (Allers and Geertsema 2016), Germany (Blesse and Baskaran 2016), Canada (Cobban 2019), Denmark (Blom-Hansen et al. 2016), Finland (Moisio and Uusitalo 2013) and Thailand (Lowatcharin et al. 2021). However, these reductions do not always result in net gains overall, as savings are offset by investment in other services or increased labour costs (excluding transition costs). This was observed in Australia and New Zealand (Aulich, Sansom, and Mckinlay 2014 and McQuestin, Drew & Miyazaki 2020), Finland (Moisio and Uusitalo 2013) and Denmark (Blom-Hansen et al. 2016). Following analysis of the impact of Danish

amalgamations Blom-Hansen concluded *'Re-examining the theoretical arguments invoked to justify these reforms, we find that, in fact, there is no compelling reason to expect them to yield net gains. Potential savings in, for example, administrative costs are likely to be offset by opposite effects for other domains. The result turns out to be null: cost savings in some areas were offset by deterioration in others, while for most public services jurisdiction size did not matter at all.'* However, a general decrease in expenditures was observed in Israel (Reingewertz 2012). Andrews (2015) notes that the Israeli experience is based on horizontal consolidations, rather than vertical as is common in the English context and in this LGR programme. Analysing the 'sales pitches' for reorganisation versus realisation in Australia (Drew et al. 2023) found that residents and central policy makers may be promised lower taxes, improved services, savings and better infrastructure in rhetorical exercises designed to incentivise the embrace of the proposed jurisdiction. The underlying complexity of scale economies in trade-offs and realisation, and the wider global experiences of amalgamations were disregarded. Sales pitches of this kind carry significant potential to entrench local fiscal illusion whereby residents struggle to understand their local government's fiscal condition, as well as the true cost of the services they consume, so increasing service demand. Drew et al. concluded that local and central policy makers must be far more circumspect and thorough with respect to their projections of expected benefits and costs in reorganisation proposals.

The impact of size post amalgamation on efficiency, defined as the ability of a municipality to provide either a fixed level of services using minimal inputs or the greatest level of services with fixed resources (McQuestin, Drew & Dollery 2018), was the only area with convergence in the results of studies in the 2023 Galizzi et al review. The empirical evidence from Canada (Mckay 2004), Japan (Haneda, Hashimoto & Tsuneyoshi 2012), Denmark (Blom-Hansen et al. 2016, and Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2021) and Australia (McQuestin, Drew, and Dollery 2018) was no effects or improvement post amalgamation.

The Council of Europe's Steering Committee on Local & Regional Democracy (CDLR) (2001 and 2017), the World Bank (2006) and the Organization for Economic Co-Operation & Development (OECD) (2017 and 2019) have separately considered the issue and each concluded that the theoretical and empirical evidence on economies of scale in local public services is inconclusive, that there is no optimal scale for local government and that there are inherent trade-offs, therefore amalgamation should be cautiously and carefully considered within each governing context and the territorial strategy of the central state. The World Bank noted that countries should not presume that amalgamation will solve common challenges in local public services (service delivery costs and quality, accountability and participation) because benefits and costs are situation specific. The OECD highlighted that the expected benefits of mergers do not always materialise or are overshadowed by shortcomings and warned of diseconomies of scale in some service areas and the negative impacts on local democracy. The OECD recommended that IMC arrangements be explored as an alternative to amalgamation to capture the proven economies of scale in administrative overheads. The review has been unable to locate any specific consideration of the topic by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The applicability of the international academic debate to English local government must be caveated, given that the size of current English authorities already outweigh the vast majority of international comparators and the absence of a regional tier of government. For example, Moisio, Loikkanen, and Oulasvirta's 2010 study that demonstrated the optimal size in terms of cost efficiency for Finnish municipalities was between 20,000-40,000 residents – an English town council. Hayashi (2002) identified 120,000 as the optimal size for Japanese municipality unit costs. Yoshida (2005) later refined the figure to 125,000 residents (both from OECD 2017). There have been multiple attempts to identify optimal size in a specifically English context. Travers et al (1993) concluded that there no optimal size of local authority that performs better across all services and it is difficult to assert whether larger or smaller authorities perform better even within specific service areas. Performance data from the Audit Commission suggested that larger authorities had lower unit costs for road maintenance and libraries, but worse costs and efficacy in waste collection and housing (Callanan et al 2012).

The most thorough investigation of the problem to date was undertaken by Andrews et al (2006) for the then Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG).¹ The study found that the *'balance of the evidence suggests that performance tends to be better in large (rather) than small authorities'* with strong statistical evidence that central administration costs fall with scale in alignment with the international findings. This specific finding on central administrative costs was used as the primary citation for the underpinning assumptions of the financial modelling in the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and County Council's Network (CCN) 2020 report *'Evaluating the importance of scale in proposals for local government reorganisation'*. It is widely considered in the sector that this report has decisively shaped MHCLG's LGR policy and programme design. To be clear the PwC/CCN report does not attempt to identify the optimal size of local government or engage with the significant body of literature on the topic, rather two population ranges of 300,000 to 400,000 and 300,000 to 800,000 are referenced. Andrew's 2006 study was significantly more nuanced in its conclusions, highlighting the continuity in findings with prior domestic and international research before concluding that *'the relationship between population size and performance remains a complex mosaic of insignificant, positive, negative and non-linear effects'*, noting that the *'direction and strength of that difference (size impact) is likely to vary across and within services, and to vary from place to place'*, therefore recommending that *'a universal size formula cannot be applied to decisions on reorganisation'*. Particular attention was drawn to the identification of inverted U relationships (improvement with size up until the point of diseconomy of scale then deterioration) in many service areas. This included decline in consumer satisfaction for district services and upper tier cultural services at populations above 100,000, while the turning point for value for money measures (2004/05 data) was identified at an average population of 480,000. Within that there was significant variation by service area, for example the turning point for waste collection was reached at 156,910 (2000/01) 305,470 (2004/05), 142,591 for Leisure & Culture, 106,530 for

¹ The study used 2001-05 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) scores, Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI), Audit Commission service inspections and consumer satisfaction data and RO data.

Public Protection, 355,538 for Housing and 383,652 for Adult Social Services. Meanwhile public transport entered into diseconomies of scale at 813,933.

Andrews returned to the issue in 2015, evaluating the post amalgamation performance of the 2006-09 reorganisation round unitaries. The statistical analysis suggested that few of the desired financial outcomes outlined in the business cases were realized, at least in the immediate aftermath of structural change. He concluded that it is possible that any economies of scale have already been exhausted within English counties and that the sheer magnitude of effort required for restructuring makes it difficult to capture further efficiencies.

In 2025, the Institute for Government (IfG) with Grant Thornton replicated Andrew's 2006 analysis. The IfG noted that the current district council services with lower optimal economies of scale e.g. waste collection are highly visible to residents and their performance can define how residents perceive the performance of their council.

This has wider implications for how residents perceive their local area and correspondingly their support for the LGR policy, which is primarily justified in instrumental terms by MCHLG, and the perceived efficacy of the Government's Plan for Change. The IfG therefore recommended that local authorities designing LGR proposals take into account the fact of diseconomies of scale, rather than attempting to maximise scale under the simplistic assumption that larger authorities will benefit all service areas.

The District Councils' Network (DCN) analysed the relationship between size and performance using twenty performance metrics of the former Office for Local Government (OFLOG). The DCN found that a population of 274,775 (median of current unitaries) correlated strongly with better performance for eight of the metrics and moderately with two. No meaningful correlation between size and performance was observed for the remaining ten.

The DCN concluded that:

1. There is little or no evidence to support the Government's preference for large unitary councils and no evidence to support the 500k population level.
2. The bulk of the data analysed show a non-existent or faint relationship between a council's population and its outcomes.
3. When there is an apparent link between population size and outcomes, it more often favours smaller councils.
4. The evidence gives no reason to assume that smaller unitary councils will be less efficient, sustainable or effective due to their size.

The County Council's Network (CCN) with Newton (2025) specifically analysed the relationship between service quality (as proxied through Ofsted and Care Quality Commission inspection results) and size for Adult Social Care and Children's Services. The analysis found that larger authorities

are more likely to receive a good or outstanding Ofsted rating for children's services. No correlation was observed between size and CQC rating for Adult Social Care, however there are significantly fewer datapoints available given that it is a new inspection framework.

The DCN and CCN analyses are reconcilable with each other and are both fully in line with the Andrew's 2006 findings and the wider global academic and practitioner debate. The optimal scale for performance and cost will vary between and within functions (depending on the activity). Therefore a multi-level division of functions is theoretically the most efficient approach. This is true regardless of whether one is designing jurisdictions for democratic local government, or the local agencies of a centralised government. The contested picture on size and efficiency combined with the academic consensus that democratic health and political trust scales poorly with size suggests that jurisdictions cannot be designed to optimise for a few functions that perform best at very large scales, unless one is willing to tolerate the democratic trade-off. The allocation of functions to local government (and the level within), and the scope and resourcing of said functions is not a problem that jurisdiction design can solve. It is a task for central government to consider.

Relationship of Scale and Local Democratic Health

Policy Response: Jurisdictional design should seek to minimise known scale disbenefits to local democratic health and maximise the success of supplementary democratic mechanisms through unitaries of appropriate size and with coherent footprints.

Negative impacts on the health of local democracy, as assessed by the key determinants of electoral & non-electoral participation, political trust, satisfaction and perceptions of influence, are consistently observed in larger units, reviewed in an English context by Copus et al (2017, 2020 and 2022). Internationally, the same effects have been observed in the United States (Oliver 2000), Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom (Denters 2002), Switzerland (Ladner 2002 and Baglioni 2003) and Sweden (Denk 2012). Nielsen (1981) found '*local distrust, local lack of efficacy, and local lack of saliency are systematically higher in medium-large (Danish) municipalities than in smaller ones*'. Kouba & Dosek (2021) concluded that there is an '*inherent trade-off in the consequences of scale on local democracy*' following analysis of fifteen Latin American countries. Gendzwill and Kjaer (2021) found the same in relation to size and local turnout following analysis of twelve European countries. In 2001, the Council of Europe's Steering Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR) considered the issue and noted that although larger jurisdictions may reduce individual participation, opportunities for organisational participation (parties, mass media, citizen's groups, non-governmental organisations etc.) are increased, thus overall democratic quality may be enhanced.

Specifically regarding amalgamations, Alexander (2013) found in Australia, resident sense of local identity was damaged by amalgamations, especially when forced. An effect also observed in Denmark (Hansen and Kjaer 2020). Reduced electoral participation and engagement following amalgamation was observed in Israel (Zeedan 2017), Austria (Heinisch et al. 2018), Denmark (Bhatti & Hansen 2019, and Houlberg & Klausen 2021),

Switzerland (Steiner 2003, and Koch & Rochat 2017), Finland (Lapointe, Saarimaa & Tukiainen 2018), Canada (Slack & Bird 2013), Japan (Horiuchi, Saito, & Yamada 2015) and Norway (Baldersheim & Rose 2021). Hansen (2013) found amalgamations lowered political trust in Denmark, linked with lower responsiveness from politicians now responsible for larger constituencies. Solvang, Saglie & Winswold (2023) noted that the decline in trust was not observed post amalgamation in Norway. The heavy use of referenda in the Norwegian amalgamation programme in contrast to Denmark was advanced as the leading explanation.

One could attempt to counter this weight of evidence on the deleterious impact of scale and top-down amalgamation on local democracy by arguing that English local authorities are already significantly larger than international comparators, thus findings derived from the study of small municipalities are not applicable to the English context. Alternatively one could challenge normative assumptions on decentralisation, civic virtue and participation (Treisman 2007), or accord with the CDLR that democracy is potentially more deliberative in larger and so less homogenous populations, due to greater diversity in interests. None of these arguments align with the vision for empowered neighbourhoods and civic renewal set out in the White Paper, the LGR Criteria and wider government policy.

Record of Area Decentralisation Policies in English Local Governance

Policy Response: Jurisdictional design should seek to mitigate against the significant risk of the failure of decentralisations mechanisms or abandonment by a future administration.

Decentralizing and devolving policies (meaning area committees/panels and similar) to sub-local scales below the Town Hall are not new to local government. Significant experimental area decentralization activity took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s and again in the early 2000s. In each round, the implementation of area decentralization to complement more strategic local authorities was seen as the key to delivering aspirations to join-up local service delivery to meet local need, improve public engagement in local decision-making, empower residents and facilitate democratic renewal, enhance community leadership, and think outside the box to find solutions to persistent local issues. **However, such practices have successively struggled to gain a foothold in contemporary local governance regimes, and, in broad terms, have endured a series of institutional failings (Johnston 2012).**

There is not a universal standard in theory or practice for the size or number of area decentralisation mechanisms. In 2008, SQW Consulting for the then DCLG identified populations of between 5,000 to 15,000 as the optimum scale for neighbourhood working. The LSE Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (2004) examined neighbourhood governance forms in a specifically urban context and found there was ‘no absolute size’, but rarely more than 5,000 households. Units of 1,000 to 2,000 households (approx. 6000 people) were recommended in more deprived areas for practical intervention purposes. This would become the blueprint for the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder programme during the 2000s. A survey of

practices by Griggs & Roberts (2011) found wide variation in the size of neighbourhood governance units across the UK, ranging from 1,000 to 72,000 people.

Reviewing contemporary global best practice to inform the Birmingham City Council (BCC) Shaping Birmingham's Future Together (SBFT) participatory initiative, Higuera and Bussu (2025) identified three challenges in embedding decentralisation and participation mechanisms:

- **Operating at the margins:** They often remain peripheral to core decision-making rather than becoming central to how councils govern (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014).
- **Recommendations ignored or cherry-picked:** Council decisions favour other competing priorities, or selectively use citizen input only when it fits existing political agendas, failing to challenge the status quo and at times entrenching power imbalances (Font et al., 2018).
- **Vulnerable to changes in political leadership:** Processes can be discontinued or weakened when they produce results that challenge existing agendas or power structures. Often if they are perceived to be closely linked to party political agendas, they might be vulnerable to political cycles and changes in government (Bussu et al., 2022).

An enduring challenge has been defining the core purpose and function of area decentralisation mechanisms: local democratic co-governance or local managerial coordination (Davies 2011). In the first conception they are intended to be political spaces that give residents real decision making powers to shape their area. If so how is the relationship with the existing democratic representative institutions in towns and parishes and the Full Council to be managed? Area decentralisation is to augment, not replace, but there is an implicit political challenge in the creation of a potentially new loci of power and associated questions of the mechanisms democratic legitimacy. In practice committees are generally cut off from mainstream council decision-making and have very little influence. If devolving into a pure talking shop is avoided, then the committee risks taking on a de-facto containment role of channelling resident anger away from the heart of the council (Burns et al. 1994). Further there is risk for inclusion. The Commission on the Future of Localism (2017), organised by Locality, found that *'Rights remain too dependent on local capacity and resources. A longstanding concern with localism is that it can actually entrench inequalities, strengthening the position of those with the resources, time and networks, whilst excluding the most marginalised communities'*.

In the second conception, the committee becomes a professional managerial space for the convening and coordination of local stakeholders and partners for delivering neighbourhood management. The committee can then provide a quantifiable function, however it will risk becoming alienating and disempowering to any attendant lacking a lanyard i.e. ordinary residents (Davies 2011). The participatory and transformative potential of the initiative is lost, as Wright et al. (2006) assessed early 2000s area decentralisation measures *'the (programme) is community led in the sense that government decides how the community will be involved, why they will be involved, what they will do and how they will do it.'*

Often, area decentralisation will be presented as delivering community co-governance, whilst in practice being a managerial space for stakeholder coordination. This can lead to mistrust and frustration on all sides. Evaluating community partnerships in Hull, Davies (2007) noted that the community groups and activists saw it as a resource to support community projects and so demanded looser financial control. Public managers saw it as a vehicle to deliver the strategic goals set out in the community plan, which were placed beyond deliberation, and demanded, required and established tighter financial controls and quality assurance pre-checks on community group presentations to ensure relevancy. The opportunity for a space that truly captured and empowered community voice was reduced, but the set strategic goals were delivered. The tension can create cynicism on the value of area decentralisation. Emblematic of the early 2000's initiatives was an overly candid remark by a senior Trafford BC councillor on the Salford Area Panels to a sector conference in 2005: (the attendees are) "*MAD, BAD and SAD – mad to attend, bad, as people think that they can get some money out of it, and sad as people have nothing better to do with their time*" (Johnston 2012).

Good practice can navigate these tensions, however successful community governance is a slow and bespoke process. Mutual Ventures, who have developed the boldest and most thorough prospectus for area decentralisation in this reorganisation round recommend that a piloting 'test and grow' approach be used. **This is not a policy domain with a tested, universal off-the-shelf solution to be applied.** The most successful contemporary example that is applicable to the Greater Lincolnshire geography: Wiltshire, is the product of nearly twenty years of careful practice and political and managerial commitment. This model can be adopted and tailored to Greater Lincolnshire, however we believe that success will be maximised by ensuring it is a supplement to fundamentally local jurisdictions. **The wider practice is too experimental and the track record too mixed to be relied on to maintain and enhance resident voice in a scenario where the jurisdiction scale is no longer meaningfully local.**

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