

IMPLICATIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM ON THE SIZE AND STRUCTURE OF THE COTSWOLDS CONSERVATION BOARD

Summary: To propose potential considerations with regards to the Conservation Board size and structure in the context of Local Government Reform.

Recommendation: That the Executive discusses the considerations outlined in this paper and determines the priority areas and/or gaps.

Report by: Bex Waite (Chief Executive)

BACKGROUND TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM AGENDA

1. The English Devolution White Paper is the Government's statement of plans to reform local government. It includes a wide range of proposals on devolution as well as wider plans on local government reorganisation and changes to local audit.
2. The Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) is for areas that wish to move towards devolution at pace. The Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution has outlined that participants must have local agreement to move forward around a sensible geographic footprint. The DPP is for areas pursuing establishment of a Mayoral Strategic Authority.
3. The Government has outlined plans to move away from the current two-tier system of district and county councils, indicating that for most areas this will mean creating councils with a population of 500,000 or more.
4. Councils have been asked to provide options for their proposed structure as requested by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.
5. There are different timelines for areas dependent on many factors including the complexities of transferring to the unitary authorities. The most ambitious indicative timeline is based on asking for proposals by 26th September 2025 for DPP areas and by 28th November 2025 for all other areas. This is with a view to holding inaugural Mayoral elections in May 2026 alongside other scheduled local elections; holding shadow unitary elections in May 2027; and the new unitary councils going live in 2028.

THE IMPACTS OF DEVOLUTION ON THE CURRENT LOCAL AUTHORITY STRUCTURES

6. The 'criteria for unitary local government' (as annexed to the 5th February 2025 letter from central Government to local authorities) implies the primary purpose of local government reorganisation is the achievement of financial savings. Due consideration will also need to be given to the criterion that 'new unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment'.
7. One possible impact of the structural reforms is the absorption of existing districts and boroughs into their upper tier structures. For instance, Gloucestershire County Council has proposed three possible options for forming or joining an existing Strategic Authority:

- i. Joining the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) to the south west of Gloucestershire, which comprises South Gloucestershire, Bristol City and Bath and North East Somerset (BANES) unitary councils.
 - ii. Creating a new Strategic Authority to the north by combining Gloucestershire with the county areas of Worcestershire and Herefordshire.
 - iii. Creating a new Strategic Authority to the east with the areas of Oxfordshire and possibly Swindon.
8. In the Context of the Cotswolds National Landscape, transitions such as this could result in a shift from the current 15 authorities within the boundary of the Cotswolds National Landscape down to 7-8. There may also be potential for some unitary authorities to have more than one representative in line with proportional representation.

FOUNDING LEGISLATION OF THE COTSWOLDS CONSERVATION BOARD

9. The Conservation Board for the Cotswolds AONB was set-up by the Secretary of State for the Environment under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) and the subsequent establishment order SI1777/2004 as amended by SI490/2008 in respect of structural changes to Wiltshire Councils and SI1579/2009 in relation to retirement benefits. The Board exercises all its duties and powers in accordance with the 2000 CROW Act and the 2004 Establishment Order.
10. The Board has a maximum of 37 voting members: 15 appointed by local authorities, 14 appointed by the Secretary of State and 8 appointed by Parish Councils. As per (the amended) Schedule 1 of the 2004 Establishment Order the specified local authorities on the Board (in alphabetical order) are:

TABLE 1

1	Bath and North East Somerset Council
2	Cheltenham Borough Council
3	Cherwell District Council
4	Cotswolds District Council
5	Gloucestershire County Council
6	Oxfordshire County Council
7	South Gloucestershire Council
8	Stratford on Avon District Council
9	Stroud District Council
10	Tewkesbury Borough Council
11	Warwickshire County Council
12	West Oxfordshire District Council
13	Wiltshire County Council
14	Worcestershire County Council
15	Wychavon District Council

11. Of these, there are five county councils, whereas Bath and North East Somerset is a unitary authority district as is South Gloucestershire. The remaining 8 councils are borough or district councils as shown in Table 2 below:

TABLE 2

Upper or Single Tier Authority	Second Tier
Gloucestershire	Cheltenham Borough Cotswold District Stroud Tewkesbury
Oxfordshire	Cherwell West Oxfordshire
Warwickshire	Stratford on Avon District
Wiltshire (Unitary)	N/A
Worcestershire	Wychavon
Bath and North East Somerset (Unitary)	N/A
South Gloucestershire (Unitary)	N/A

12. The CROW Act rationale behind the numbers of local authority, Secretary of State (SoS) and Parish members was to maintain balance between local and national representation with 15+8 local representatives and 14 national (SoS) representatives. If the new make-up of local authorities in the Cotswolds is 5 rather than 15, maintaining this ratio would require 2.6 Parish Members and 4.7 SoS members. This could equate to the following illustrative examples of Board membership balance by type:

TABLE 3

	Example 1	Example 2
Local Authority members	5	7
Parish members	3	4
Secretary of State members	5	7

CONSIDERATIONS TO ENSURE BALANCE AND EFFICACY OF BOARD MEMBERSHIP

13. To ensure the Board is sufficiently robust and contextually appropriate to weather the changes on the horizon resulting from the Local Government Reform agenda, there are various considerations that could be made around:
- i. The balance of membership “types”
 - ii. The roles and responsibilities of Board members and Working Groups
 - iii. The structure and focus of meeting agendas and associated papers.
14. The following considerations outlined in Table 4 are illustrative examples of potential channels to explore. It would be helpful to receive steer on the prioritisation and/or gaps.

TABLE 4

1	Reviewing the scope and role of existing Working Groups (currently Planning and Infrastructure, Climate Action, Wellbeing and Inclusion, and Projects and Fundraising) and considering the addition of a new Working Group on Nature Recovery.
2	Reviewing Board governance through drawing on the experiences of other protected landscapes, and liaison with current CNL Board members, staff and Defra colleagues.
3	Defining specific roles for existing Board members and co-opting non-Board members with required expertise onto Working Groups.
4	Reviewing role specifications for the three categories of Board member as well as ensuring consistency in relating to terms served.

5	Clarifying strategic accountability between Working Groups and the Executive and Board in terms of progress against delivery e.g. with regards to the Management Plan, Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework, CNL strategic plans, etc
6	Reviewing how Working Group membership is undertaken as well as considering length of appointment to provide greater continuity and closer relationships with CNL officers.
7	Holding an annual meeting of Working Group Chairs to share experience, ensure consistency and align annual workplans.
8	Exploring how to overcome barriers to inclusion. E.g. through an equity, diversity and inclusion statement to influence new appointments to both the Board and organisation.
9	Increasing diversity of experiences shaping CNL's work, including opportunities for diversifying new Board members as well as increasing diversity of engagement strategies, for example more targeted external fora, or more accessible documentation.
10	Expanding induction and progression processes and offering (possibly in partnership with the National Landscape Association) additional training in thematic areas such as carbon literacy, nature recovery, landscape sensitivity and land management, corporate governance and planning.
11	Ensuring full utilisation of networks to exploit engagement with council officers, local NGOs, landowners and farmers.
12	Conducting a skills audit to inform the appointment of SoS and council representatives, covering all skills, not just technical expertise.

RECOMMENDATION

15. The Executive is asked to consider the considerations made in the Table 4 of this paper and decide on the priority considerations as well as put forward new considerations.

Bex Waite, May 2025