

Local Government and NAC's (rough draft version 1 March 2026)

UK Govt white paper on LGR

The UK Govt white paper is primarily concerned with the removal of tiers of government and the replacement of that with a unitary authority. It also states that Parish and Town Councils are not in the scope of LGR other than that they may take on additional services and that Parish & Town Councils must be recognised by and engaged by the unitary to enable more local representation. It does not define how this must happen but leans toward NAC's.

NALC response from Aug 2025 stated.

Effective devolution and local government reorganisation must recognise the role of parish and town councils as the community tier of local government. They can be a strong voice for local neighbourhoods and help address fears of remote government resulting from the establishment of new strategic and unitary authorities. By strengthening their role and expanding their coverage, the government can ensure devolution does not stop at the regional or subregional level and delivers tangible benefits for communities nationwide.

East Sussex Proposal for Neighbourhood Governance (extract paragraph 4.1.6).

Proposals defined in the business case (Assuming One East Sussex) is approved must broadly drive the principles that guide the implementation by the Unitary.

- Neighbourhood governance The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill propose to introduce a requirement on all local authorities in England to establish **effective neighbourhood governance**, with details of this obligation to be set out in regulations that will be made after the Bill is made an Act of Parliament.
- For councils in East Sussex, the matter of how best to ensure genuine and meaningful local influence over decisions in a bigger unitary authority is a priority due to the strength of feeling expressed about this issue during engagement about reorganisation, not just because it could become a statutory obligation. Although more clarity on Government thinking in this area would be welcome following its intended review of good practice, any guidance must not be prescriptive, and no structures should be unilaterally imposed or abolished by central government. It should rest with the councils undergoing reorganisation to determine what would be most effective locally, recognising that neighbourhood governance structures need to be designed so they are valued by communities, not simply to function as a delivery mechanism for the new unitaries.
- Government signals about the potential role of town and parish councils in future neighbourhood governance have been ambiguous, but these should remain part of the suite of options available for consideration. This would be particularly important for areas like East Sussex which already have a number of local councils in operation.
- The six councils in East Sussex have agreed the following principles to guide the assessment of future neighbourhood governance models:

1. Building on foundations: There are a number of existing structures to enable resident and community engagement in place across East Sussex. Those that have 20 One East Sussex: Building the Future successful track records and local buy-in could potentially act as building blocks for a future model.

2. Sustainability: For any new model to work in practice and not just on paper, which is what residents rightly expect, significant investment of member and council staff time will be required. Ensuring that appropriate resourcing can be maintained over time will be critical.

3. Fit for the future: The new unitary will have a wider set of functions than any of the existing councils currently have so consideration needs to be given to how neighbourhood arrangements can meaningfully shape delivery and decisions about matters of community interest including regulatory functions e.g. planning.

4. Fairness: East Sussex has a mixture of sparsely populated rural areas, market towns and continuous urban development along the coastal strip, each of which comes with its own challenges and opportunities. As a result, it may be that there would be value in allowing some variation in the structures that are set up, but there would at the same time need to be transparency and consistency in how these bodies are able to interact with the new unitary and the level of influence they are offered.

5. Collaborative leadership: Many public service outcomes are not delivered by local government alone and rely on partnerships with other public sector organisations, some of which (health and police in particular) are considering their own service footprints at neighbourhood or community level. While strict alignment of geographies may not be possible or desirable, it would be helpful to ensure there is some degree of coherence across East Sussex, which could be particularly critical to unlocking the potential of public service reform to improve outcomes and drive out costs. It is anticipated that the preferred models to maintain public accessibility and democratic accountability as well as find the appropriate balance between the two will be set out in the final proposal for LGR in East Sussex. These are intended to reflect fair representation ratios, investment in digital and in-person engagement tools, and options for embedding local accountability into the governance framework of the new authority. Together, these measures are designed to ensure that the new unitary council not only maintains but enhances its role as a trusted, responsive, and locally rooted institution one that reflects the diversity of East Sussex's communities and empowers them to shape their future.

Neighbourhood Area Committees – Success of implementation to date.

NAC's have been set up within the UK by authorities transferring to a Unitary with varying degrees success. Cornwall, Somerset, and Northumberland have set up NAC's or similar. Surrey is in the process of doing so. These have attempted to create a forum for local groups, service providers, P&T Councils and Unitary Councilors intended to enhance local engagement and plug a gap between P&T Councils (The lowest level of Govt) and the Unitary and engage with more local voices.

Problems have been found in the administration of the NAC's, possibly because with a ratio of about 50,000 residents to each NAC, the number of NAC's becomes at the same time too cumbersome to manage by the unitary and not flexible enough to engage across a range of subjects.

The pilot NAC's for Surrey use the 50000:1 ratio and are expected to have 21 attendees each. A meeting held by North Cornwall (North Cornwall Community Area Partnership), 19 Dec 2025 about Housing and Planning had 50 persons from Gov & other organisations invited to attend and 2 members of the public. That in itself is a logistical challenge regardless of deciding on or managing outcomes.

Further issues in our view include a lack of Governance with many NAC members not being elected, and no auditable governance procedures. (given that the NAC's are not part of the Govt structure). It is also not clear how decisions taken at NAC level will result in change, or how they may be funded or administered. There does need to be scrutiny of whatever committee or similar are formed.

What is not clear is what the outcomes of the NAC's is meant to be or how any findings from meetings will result in action unless there are informed, authorised decision makers included in the process. This does therefor risk setting up a new tier of meetings without clear authority, outcomes, governance or funding. Talk shops.

It is also our view that by inserting another layer of Government (NAC's) which has the aim of engaging at a local level with NGO's, local groups and Authority service providers, will significantly reduce the ability of P&T District and County Associations to remain relevant because the P&T's district associations already have much of the same aim as the proposed NAC's plus important communications, training and governance functions that enable P&T Councils to work transparently and consistently across District, County and National Levels.

Rother District

If we take Rother District as an example, using the 50,000:1 ratio there would be 2 NAC's. Given that Bexhill is 50% of the population of Rother that would presumably be one NAC for Bexhill and one for everyone else. For East Sussex that would require 7+ NAC's (excluding the current Boroughs), each meeting 6 to 10 times per year. That is a significant admin load on the unitary, who would be responsible for setting these up, managing meetings, and coordinating and summarising outputs across the regions and with the other unitary regions in Sussex.

An alternative to stand alone NAC's

Outcomes must first be defined to understand what the NAC's aim to achieve. What is the NAC expected to deliver? On what range of subjects? We also need to re assess outcomes (in the context of P&TC direct delivery, and local engagement) we expect from P&T Councils, District Associations, County Associations, and their links to NALC and strategically to the Mayoral team. This will then allow us to establish what the most appropriate new structure should be to deliver the aims of NAC's and the aims of P&TC and their associations.

It is our view that the most effective structure will include the merging of District Associations and NAC's to provide a democratic, accountable and multi functioning framework that is flexible enough to engage at the local level, with all stakeholders, be consistent in its approach, have auditable governance, be cost effective and provide a transparent and auditable link between all stakeholders from Parish level through Districts to County, Unitary and potentially Mayor levels.

Key Roles and Outcomes. (Context of effective neighbourhood governance).

Stakeholder	Role	Outcome	Engagement level
Unitary Cllrs & Officers	Decision makers and primary service provider across the County.	Able to understand and deliver local needs, directly or with partnerships. To receive feedback on service delivery. To work across / with other Gov service providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P&TC for specific projects. • District/NAC for combined projects with relevant or all stakeholders, communications, and delivery monitoring. • County level for more strategic projects,

			executive direction & scrutiny
Town and Parish Councils	Decision makers and primary service provider at Parish level. Representative of residents views and needs from services delivered by the Unitary and other Gov providers.	Able to understand and deliver local needs, Directly or with partnerships. To receive feedback on local service delivery and delivery by the unitary. Effective comms with the unitary To effectively engage with the public and other stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents, Local groups, and NGO's • Other P&TC for specific projects. • District/NAC for combined projects, communications. (this could be beyond regional boundaries where common interest in clear
P&TC District Assoc and NAC's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forum for establishing combined efforts/projects within the region. • Forum to review and define issues and ideas common to P&TC in the region. • Working with the District/unitary Council on communications, info sharing. • Working with the Gov service providers and other stakeholders. • Provision of admin, services to P&TC. • Monitor Governance and Capability. 	<p>Able to understand and deliver local needs of P&T Councils in the region.</p> <p>To coordinate if needed actions for groups of stakeholders</p> <p>To receive feedback on local service delivery and delivery by the unitary.</p> <p>To effectively engage with the District/Unitary on service and Gov matters.</p> <p>To effectively engage with the public and other stakeholders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gov Service providers, Local groups, and NGO's. • Unitary for services, legal, Gov matters and regional projects. • P&TC for specific projects. • P&T Councils for training and Governance • County Associations for County wide opportunities, issues, governance, training, legal updates. communications,
P&TC County Assoc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forum for combined efforts/projects within the region and with the district/unitary Council on opportunity and issues across 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to identify and understand opportunities, issues, and project within the districts. • Good governance at district and P&TC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unitary for services, legal, Gov matters and cross regional projects. • P&T Councils for training and Governance and services provided. • National Associations for UK wide opportunities, issues, governance,

	<p>district boundaries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of Training for P&T's. • Provision of admin, legal and recruitment services to • Represent County at National levels. • Receive & distribute advice from National Assoc and from UK Gov. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To receive feedback on local service delivery and delivery by the unitary. • To effectively engage with the District/Unitary on service and Gov matters. • To effectively engage with stakeholders. 	<p>training, legal updates. Communications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor and Unitary for Strategic.
Emergency Police & Fire	Provide police services, Road Safety, Community Policing, advice general and responses to planning.	To advise on Police matters at levels appropriate. To receive feedback and information from levels as appropriate.	P&TC's local policing. District Assc / NAC for common advice / issues and feed back. At County level for more strategic or County wide issues.
Health Providers	Provision of local health services and health emergency	Advise on and understand local needs. Feed back and action to NHS at relevant levels	P&TC's possible at local levels. District Assc / NAC for common advice / issues planning and monitoring and feed back.
Housing providers	Build large scale housing. Provide local housing/affordable.	Stakeholder at a strategic level. Identify opportunity and need at local level and build housing needed working in partnership with stakeholders.	Unitary & Mayoral levels. P&T's and public for specific applications. P&TC's for local needs. District / NAC's to support development
NGO's & Charities	Identify and provide specific needs.	Stakeholder at a strategic level and at district/NAC to identify opportunity and need at local level	Very dependent on the NGO/Charity Aims but at Unitary & Mayoral levels or District / NAC's to support needs or possible at P&TC's
Energy / Facility Providers	Provide Power, Gas, Water	Input at strategic level, district/NAC for major projects and advice on planning.	Very dependent on the NGO/Charity Aims but at Unitary & Mayoral levels or District / NAC's to support needs or possible at P&TC's
Telecoms Providers	Provide access to telephone and data services	Input at strategic level, district/NAC for Advise on service provision and	Unitary & Mayoral levels for major project oversight.

		feedback on quality of provision.	District/NAC for common interests. P&T's and public for specific provision levels..
Members of the Public	To have a voice and receive the services they need.	There is a place where they can engage,	P&T Councils for local needs and representation to the unitary. District/NAC's if they wish to engage where interest and common beyond local.

The outcomes expected of NAC's align with the aims of the existing local government Associations structure that already exists, but as noted earlier delivering those aims for NAC's has proven difficult, and lacking accountability. Some of the aims can currently also be difficult to deliver for District Associations because there is no requirement for District Councils or other service providers to engage with the Associations. Not all District or County Council decision makers are effectively working with the Associations.

These difficulties can be overcome by using the existing governance and accountability structures in place with P&T Councils and their Associations, by changing the constitution of the Associations to have a dual role that includes all of the aims of the DA's and NAC's and to include Unitary Members and officers in the District Association and County Association meetings with Voting rights.

The final decision makers for Unitary provides services will remain with the Unitary, but as with other committees widely set up within District and County Councils the output of the District Association /NAC while advisory would have a strong influence and be subject to the scrutiny usually applied for Council committees.

We can assess the viability of this proposal by reference to the six principles defined in the One East Sussex Bid can

1. Building on foundations: Use and adapt the existing structure rather than introduce and new layer. The proposal would create a stronger link between local needs and P&T's using an enhanced exiting structure.
2. Sustainability: This proposal does not require substantial new admin structures. It could be improved by increasing and redefining the admin support needed at District and County level for both personnel and IT capability.
3. Fit for the future: The proposed structure is more flexible than the NAC's set up in other regions. NAC only solutions would be costly and limit engagement to large groups, which could risk missing local needs. East and West Sussex are close to 100% Parished which would enable working groups as a subset of a District Association/NAC to form to fit the size and frequency needed to achieve the outcome required. Control of working group set up and aims would need Unitary and District Association/NAC to agree defined procedure and have data sharing (e.g sharepoint) capability to manage ambitions and delivery. This would enable local and a birds eye view of engagement across the County.

4. Fairness: The proposed structure would allow the larger towns to manage their selves if they chose to and also combine where needed with others while rural Parishes can group together if needed for projects either in clusters for local delivery or at district level as appropriate.

5. Collaborative leadership: The proposal would link Parish & Town Councils through districts to the County/Unitary with all the elected and accountable member and officers collaborating to enable the Unitary to ultimately take properly informed decisions, with the support of all stakeholders in a transparent and collaborative process.

Advantage of this approach are:

- Does not replicate but uses an existing structure with local knowledge and good governance to reach the goals indicated for NAC's in the Govt white paper.
- Gives a voice to residents either through the P&T council or directly into the Association/NAC.
- Enhances the role of P&T Councils and its links via the Associations to the Unitary decision makers. (Should also help P&TC recruitment by recognition of their relevance by residents)
- Increases transparency and audit trail of actions from identifying local priorities to actions by the unitary. (using consistent and appropriate governance and process).
- Reduces the admin burden on the Unitary who are far removed from local levels to properly understand or apply this in a local context.
- Enables a tiered and County wide approach to address local and common agendas using a defined and consistent approach.
- A raising of engagement and of standards of competence and effectiveness at all levels.
- Avoids single issue groups dominating agendas in NAC's.
- This a scalable approach across Counties.

What is needed to implement this.

- District & County Associations need to have a defined level of competence and auditable governance. (Similar to P&T Councils)
- A change to the constitutions and terms of reference for District & County Associations to enable them to combine the aims and manage the additional work intended of NAC's.
- Embed with voting rights , Unitary members and officers as needed into the new structure.
- Use IT for the collection and distribution of information. One system across the County. E.G Sharepoint set up to manage activity across all levels rather than just minutes.
- Some funding from the Primary to professionalise the administrations and competence of associations/NAC's.
- Clear application of scrutiny to the admins and outcomes of the Associations/NAC.

Please note this report is not final – it is work in progress but sufficient for a first review by RALC members. A later draft may replace this before that April RALC meeting.