

County mayors and a regional council could give us truly local government

As the end looms for Lancashire County Council, Preston's Andrew Harris FRICS FCIM - a former council chief officer, private sector chief executive and chair of charities in the north west - looks at the lessons we could learn from a previous county shake-up

The European Union is often portrayed as undemocratic, but one of its principles is 'subsidiarity', which means keeping the functions of government as close to the electorate as possible. This is probably what people want in our democracy, but we are about to have the opposite imposed upon us.

The county council is putting forward five options for reorganisation, with the authority's preferred choice seeing the county split in two.

A new North Lancashire Council would incorporate the existing Preston, Blackpool, Fylde, Wyre, Lancaster and Ribble Valley council areas – and serve more than 722,000 residents.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Ribble, South Lancashire Council would combine South Ribble, Chorley, West Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn, Rossendale and Pendle – and provide services to just under 888,000 people.

With that in mind, it might be worth taking a look back to 1974, when there was another large-scale local government reorganisation, to create bigger councils.

In Oldham, where I was a chief officer before and after reorganisation, the old County Borough and the five surrounding Urban District Councils merged to form the new Oldham Metropolitan Borough with a population of 226,000 people.

The new structure was thought to be more capable and economical,

but I dealt with the allocation of office space and the new organisation filled all six town halls. Only two years later, prime minister Jim Callaghan had to declare that 'the party was over' and we had to reduce expenditure.

No obvious savings were achieved and people living in the five surrounding urban districts regret their lost identity to this day!

Are we about to make the same mistake again, but with the new councils ideally serving a 'target' population of 300,000 people? Like the last time, local electors will not decide between the five options on offer. All options result in no county council and hugely bigger districts far more remote from their electorate.

One precedent is Cheshire, where the county and all the district councils were replaced by Cheshire East and Cheshire West Councils. One option on offer would be similar by creating just two super councils for North and South Lancashire.

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Andrew Harris was a council officer back in 1974, at the time of another council reorganisation

Lancashire differs from Cheshire as it comprises several distinctive cities and boroughs.

Lancaster, Preston, Blackpool, Blackburn and Burnley will be difficult to merge with each other or with other councils. Suggested combinations include Lancaster, Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde or Preston, Ribble Valley and Lancaster or Blackpool, Preston, Fylde and part of Wyre. Apart from the loss of local identity, there are likely to be local 'wars' over the naming of such hybrids.

Another option is to

merge Preston, South Ribble and Chorley. As the former chief executive of the Preston Partnership, I have the scars to prove that this will not be popular south of the Ribble.

Existing districts in Lancashire are pretty ideal for the services they provide. What the government is offering ignores a bigger opportunity. Why not have an elected mayor for each county (with a slimline staff) and merge the county councils to form a regional council for the north west?

With such a body,

issues in our region could be decided and implemented here rather than in Westminster and Whitehall. A North West Regional Council or Assembly could take powers from central government which would enable it to boost our economy and environment.

A consultation will give the people of Lancashire the opportunity to try to avoid losing truly local government and even achieving a degree of self-government for our region. Two prizes worth fighting for!