



Local democracy

A Yes vote this September is an opportunity to spark a revival in our local democracy.

Scotland's local governments provide public services we value highly and use daily: children's education, road repairs, care-homes, social housing, designing our cities and towns, buses and public transport, parking, waste collections, cultural events... the list goes on. Despite this, less than 40% of us vote in elections and local governments have been largely ignored by the debate on Scottish independence.

The Scottish Greens believe there is an urgent need to return power and status to our local councils and to fund vital public services sustainably. A Yes vote in September will bring significant new powers to Scotland and provides the opportunity to deliver a better local deal.

This briefing is designed to contribute to a national debate and describes our ideas for reforming and empowering local government.

Size matters

Scotland has the most concentrated local government in the whole of Europe. In the last 60 years there has been a 92% reduction in the number of local councils. Our council areas are enormous when compared with the average in the

European Union. 'Local government' in Scotland is really a misnomer!

We need a system of smaller truly *local* Councils. Our research suggests these **new municipalities should each serve approximately 20,000 people**. At this smaller scale democratic accountability and the power of individual voting would be clearer. In Europe, municipalities average around 5,600 people.

What would this look like? Scotland's larger cities could each form a city municipality or a set of smaller institutions tied together by a strategic body. Towns and rural areas would then form around 180 other local institutions. These local councils would be free to work together on the "lego brick model" (see below) to deliver services but would remain accountable and connected to their electors.

Coordination across larger regions would be needed on issues such regional health, economic development, large-scale transport and college education. This could be delivered by roughly ten strategic regions.

"Everywhere should have a local democratic body to take decisions on local matters. This is what our friends across the rest of Europe take for granted."

Councillor Maggie Chapman, Scottish Greens

Local tax

In 2007 the only local tax raising power left with Scottish Councils was frozen. Local Governments are now largely treated like children: a child is given pocket money to spend, whereas an adult is allowed to earn a wage for their keep.

It's time to treat local government with more respect and return a level of financial independence. **Municipalities and Regions should raise at least 50% of their own revenue** through a range of tax raising powers such as land or property taxes.

Local government could also be given a fixed statutory share of national income tax. For example, 50% of proceeds raised by income tax could be guaranteed to municipalities and regional councils. This would provide funding for public services based on population and an incentive to attract people to their area with local improvements.

Lego brick efficiency

Councils have been made larger over time in the belief that "bigger is always better"; but there is no perfect size. Swimming pools and care-homes operate on a different scale to waste collections and transport networks.

Councils also need flexibility to adapt to people's changing needs, for example an ageing population or new industry that attracts people to the area. It should be easy for new municipalities to collaborate on the delivery of health, leisure, environmental and other services – we call this the "Lego brick model".

A Lego brick model would see councils have the ability to quickly and easily join forces to deliver whatever functions they deemed appropriate. These collaborations could be easily re-configured if needed

and councils would remain accountable to their electorate they serve.

Written constitution

A Yes vote provides the opportunity to embed local government's power and status in a new written constitution for the first time.

Local governments have been pulled apart in recent decades – institutions have been merged, abolished and new amalgamations created. This churn does nothing to connect people to local governance and accountability or give the stability councils need to grow great quality public services.

In other European countries local government's power and finance is protected in a written constitution. In Scotland the Parliament could, if it wanted, abolish councils altogether. It is important to give local democracy the freedom and protection it needs to flourish. Only a Yes vote will create a modern written constitution for Scotland.

'Double devolution'

Whether we form a new country or remain in the UK, a stronger local democracy must be delivered in Scotland. However, a Yes vote that resolves the long-standing question of whether more powers should come from Westminster to Scotland opens up the space to decide how we should share those powers across the country. A Green Yes vote in September is for a 'double-devolution' of power - bringing far more power and money to communities.



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