

Gloucestershire's Unitary Authority: The Local Earthquake That Signals a National Democratic Crisis

Adam Tugwell | 17 July 2026



The decision to abolish Gloucestershire's six district councils and replace them with a single unitary authority is being presented as modernisation - a way to save money, streamline services, and "bring power closer to people". But what is happening in Gloucestershire is part of a much bigger national pattern, and its consequences reach far beyond council boundaries.

This is not just administrative reform. It is the removal of an entire layer of democratic representation. And it is happening without a mandate, without a plebiscite, and without meaningful public consent.

The sales pitch: cost savings and efficiency

The Government's argument is simple:

- One council instead of seven
- Fewer managers
- Shared back-office functions
- Lower overheads
- "Joined-up services"

But Gloucestershire has already been delivering shared services for years. Ubico, shared legal teams, joint waste contracts, pooled planning policy work - these arrangements already exist and already save money.

So the real question is this:

If shared services save money, why abolish the councils themselves?

This is where the core truth sits:

Public services are a cost to be saved. Democracy is not.

Supporters of unitarisation argue that residents care more about effective services than institutional structures, and that streamlined governance can reduce duplication and improve outcomes.

That argument deserves consideration. But efficiency and representation are not interchangeable values. A system can be administratively cleaner while being democratically weaker.

The democratic layer being abolished is one that people can actually reach

People rarely contact MPs for everyday issues. They sometimes contact county councillors. But they *do* contact district and borough councillors - because they are accessible, local, and directly connected to the issues that shape daily life.

Planning. Licensing. Housing. Environmental health. Local development. These are not abstract policy areas. They are the things people feel.

District councillors are among the most accessible and consequential democratic representatives in England. Abolishing them anywhere removes one of the few layers of democratic power that people can routinely reach, challenge, and hold to account.

Parish and town councils: accessible but powerless

Parish and town councillors are arguably the most accessible representatives of all. But they do not hold meaningful authority.

They deal with dog bins, bus shelters, flower beds, small grants, and being “consulted” on planning applications they cannot decide.

This is not power. It is administrative housekeeping.

And while parish and town councils *should* be dealing with more, they aren’t - because their powers have been systematically stripped away.

Removing district councils leaves a democratic vacuum that parish councils cannot fill.

As argued in the linked Cheltenham town council piece, parish and town councils may be necessary if borough-level representation disappears, but they are not an equivalent democratic substitute. They can help preserve local civic identity, but they cannot replace the statutory powers, responsibilities, and political weight of district councils.

Fewer political posts means fewer choices - and fewer independents

A unitary authority means:

- Fewer councillors
- Larger divisions
- Bigger campaign areas
- Higher barriers to entry
- More professionalised politics
- More reliance on party machines
- Fewer independents
- Fewer small-party candidates
- Less diversity of representation

This is not good for democracy. It is not good for communities. And it is not good for anyone who believes politics should be open to ordinary people, not just those backed by national party resources.

The fewer the seats, the fewer the voices.

The direction of travel: regionalisation

County councillors are more accessible than MPs - but they are still far less accessible than district councillors. And once districts are gone, counties become the natural building blocks for the next stage of restructuring:

Regional mayors. Regional authorities. Regional governorships.

This is already happening across England:

- Greater Manchester
- West Midlands
- West Yorkshire
- Tees Valley
- North East
- East Midlands
- Liverpool City Region

Critics of regionalisation argue that many of these arrangements began with the language of shared services and combined authorities, before moving towards directly elected regional mayors and larger strategic bodies with significant executive influence.

Gloucestershire may now be being positioned for the same trajectory.

Unitarisation is not the end. It is a stepping stone.

This is the concern set out in the linked piece on Regional Centralisation: that the language of devolution can conceal the movement of power away from local communities and towards larger, more remote political structures.

The biggest democratic problem: no mandate, no plebiscite, no consent

This is the heart of the issue.

Local people did not vote directly for this. The public was not asked through a referendum or plebiscite. Voters were not given a clear democratic choice on whether this layer of representation should disappear.

The “consultation” was lip service - a procedural box-tick that allows officials to say:

“We asked, and you had the opportunity to speak.”

But the public did not get a real choice. They did not get a referendum. They did not get a plebiscite. They did not get a meaningful democratic process.

This is the removal of integral parts of the democratic system. It is constitutional change because it alters who citizens can elect, how close decision-makers are to the communities they serve, the number of elected representatives available to scrutinise power, and the scale at which local decisions are made.

It is structural change. It is irreversible change.

And it is being done without the one thing that makes change legitimate:

The informed consent of voters.

There is one democratic reform that does not require direct public consent in the same way: genuine devolution of power from the centre to communities. If Whitehall gives people more power, more control, and more local choice, that is an expansion of democracy.

But this is not that. This does not move power downwards. It removes a local democratic layer and concentrates authority further away from the people affected by it.

Politicians should not be deciding this. Voters should.

The truth: this is not reform - it is centralisation

The Gloucestershire unitary authority is being presented as modernisation. But it is part of a national pattern:

- Fewer councils
- Fewer councillors
- Fewer elections
- Larger authorities
- More distant decision-making
- More insulated leadership
- More regionalisation
- Less accountability
- Less representation
- Less choice
- Less democracy

This is not bringing power closer to people. It is removing it from the places where people can actually reach it.

And the core truth remains:

Public services are a cost to be saved. Democracy is not.

Conclusion: Gloucestershire is the warning - England is the subject

What is happening in Gloucestershire is not unique. It is not isolated. It is not accidental.

It is part of a national restructuring of English democracy - one that is happening quietly, without a mandate, without a vote, and without the public understanding what is being taken away.

The question is no longer whether shared services can save money. They can. They already do.

The question is whether democracy should be sacrificed in the process.

The debate is not really about council structures. It is about who should decide how local democracy is organised.

If elected layers of government can be abolished without direct public approval, the question is not merely what kind of councils England wants. It is what role voters themselves are expected to play in determining the future of democratic representation.

Further Reading:

The arguments above draw on two earlier pieces that explore the same democratic problem from different angles: first, what should happen locally if borough-level representation disappears; and second, how the language of devolution can be used to justify regional centralisation without a direct public mandate.

[If the Borough Goes, Cheltenham Must Have a Town Council](#)

This piece argues that if Cheltenham Borough Council is abolished, a town council becomes necessary to preserve civic identity and local representation. However, it also makes clear that town and parish councils are not a full substitute for borough or district councils because they lack the same statutory powers and democratic weight.

[Regional Centralisation: The Rewriting of England's Democracy Without a Mandate](#)

This piece examines the growth of regional mayoralities and combined authorities, arguing that what is often described as devolution may in practice become regional centralisation. It develops the point that genuine devolution means transferring power downwards to communities, not replacing accessible local democracy with larger and more distant political structures.

Further Information

To explore more of Adam Tugwell's writing, including the online edition of this post, please visit:

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