

LOCAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION UNIT
NEWS RELEASE
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'Super-size' local government looks Gerry-built

The Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) today criticised proposals, published in a thinktank pamphlet, from Professor Gerry Stoker for a rethink of the purpose and structure of local government.

The LGIU claims that the changes suggested would concentrate power, restrict local choice, further undermine the frontline councillor role and see many functions removed from local government control. Professor Stoker's ideas were published on 8 March in a New Local Government Network (NLGN) pamphlet entitled *What is local government for?*

Dennis Reed, LGIU Chief Executive, said: "Professor Stoker's scheme would mean that the exercise of any real political power remaining in local government would be more remote from local communities and in fewer hands.

"Stoker advances the idea of replacing all existing local authorities, and possibly parish councils too. In the mooted two-tier model, 'super-size cities' would be more regional than local in scale. Meanwhile, ultra-local neighbourhoods would have with little power, few functions and cover such small geographical areas that it would sacrifice local government's existing strength of being sufficiently strategic to join up local services.

"The proposed neighbourhood councils, even the 'super-size' authorities, would be left with few functions that extend beyond woolly aspirations and scrutiny over service providers. Although Stoker is unclear about exactly who would provide services, I suspect that in practice it would mean a further push towards outsourcing services.

"Frontline councillors representing wards are virtually abolished under Stoker's scheme. The elected mayor model would be imposed uniformly for 'super-size councils', with a handful of elected representatives existing to do no more than scrutinise mayoral decisions and services that would be largely provided by others.

"This 'one size fits all' approach on mayors and neighbourhood structures seems to tolerate no local choice or diversity over local governance structures. It would be a further discouragement to involvement in local government. Moreover, the recent north east regional referendum demonstrated that the public is sceptical about establishing tiers of government that are merely seen as 'talking shops'.

"Professor Stoker's views on local government finance reform are more localist than certain of his previous contributions in this area. However, the LGIU would oppose the suggestion to link increases in a relocalised business rate to hikes in council tax, at least until there has been an opportunity to reverse the fall in the business contribution to council services that has taken place since this tax was nationalised and linked to inflation in 1990. Otherwise, the unfair pressure on council tax payers of recent years that the declining business contribution has helped to cause would be set in stone and one of the merits of relocalisation - creating a closer dialogue between businesses and councils - would be lost.

"The LGIU hopes that the next government will pursue the sensible course established by recent statements on local government reform and neighbourhood devolution from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and work to improve and empower the established structures of local government, rather than undertake a process that Stoker admits will be 'time-consuming and potentially messy'.

"This means that ministers should press ahead with reforming the balance of funding to give councils the means of raising most of their revenue locally; use the failed regional referendum to explore what power could be devolved to local government and away from unelected quangos; act upon the measures suggested by the LGIU to encourage people to volunteer for local government roles; and face down Whitehall resistance to progressive initiatives such as Local Area Agreements (LAAs)."