Should England, Wales and Northern Ireland be offered the level of devolution that has been discussed in relation to Scotland?

The DCN believes that devolution to Scotland should be accompanied by devolution to England’s local communities, neighbourhoods and towns. England has one of the most highly centralised systems of government in the developed world. We believe that devolution will deliver a greater level of joined up decision making, locally relevant services and ultimately better outcomes for residents. We believe that devolution will be different in different places and that is acceptable and healthy. Whilst some areas may take longer than others to establish plans for devolution, devolution for each local area must become the accepted norm that all areas are moving towards.

In England the DCN wants to see funding and powers for transport, skills and economic development devolved to sub-regional areas that can take a strategic view about local economies. This would be at an appropriate functional economic area level, and would build on existing local partnership arrangements, such as LEPs, combined authorities, clusters of districts and joint working with county councils. We believe appropriate structures and geographies need to be developed by local partners which do not necessarily reflect traditional local authority boundaries.

We believe that devolution should encourage even greater integration of health and social care, and we will continue to demonstrate the contribution that district councils make to this agenda through housing, leisure and other services.

We want to see the devolution of an appropriate share of the tax base to pay for these devolved services, and are committed to working with the County Councils Network to establish how this would work in two-tier areas. Once devolved, local government must have the ability to determine local taxes locally.

At a national level, we want to see a fairer share of tax and spending across the four countries of the United Kingdom, and want to see recognition of the additional challenges of delivering services in rural areas for dispersed populations.

Finally we recognise that there are areas that central government should retain responsibility for such as defence, international development and foreign affairs. We seek to engage in constructive dialogue with central government about the services that should remain centrally administered, and those that can be devolved, with a presumption in favour of the latter.

1. If so, what should be the next stages to take forward devolution in a) Scotland, b) Wales, c) Northern Ireland, and d) England?

As the DCN represents only district councils in England our comments relate to England only.

The DCN wants to see central government set out the general framework within which devolution should take place for consultation, with a presumption in favour of devolution. Local areas must then be enabled to explore how devolution will work for them and set out their proposals to government. A quality check involving central and local government and the LGA should take place with areas not
'passing’ at first given time to refine their proposals. Local areas should be given the time they need to prepare proposals without losing the right to devolution at a subsequent time.

District councils have a proven track record of delivery, strong partnership working and innovation. We have been quick to adapt to adapt to change, quicker than other parts of the local government family. Any framework therefore needs to take into account the strong foundation that district councils have established in their areas and build on those rather than attempting to ‘reinvent the wheel’.

2. To what extent is the Government’s timetable for considering the future of devolution realistic?

The pace of devolution should be determined by the local area and not imposed by central government. If the process is forced through too quickly then local government will not have the necessary time to prepare. At the same time central government must not lose interest and penalise those who have taken longer to prepare plans. Central Government needs to work with local government and the LGA to establish realistic timetables that help to ensure the success of devolution for the benefit of all.

Whilst we appreciate that Central Government will be keen to ensure high quality devolution settlements, we do not want to see excessive requirements or continuous piloting that delay the process and cause uncertainty.

Determining what works locally should be left to local politicians. The DCN strongly believes that there is no one size fits all solution and the arrangements need to be developed to meet the local circumstances.

3. What measures, such as a written constitution, could most effectively entrench future devolution settlements?

The DCN would welcome the opportunity to enshrine in a constitution the powers and responsibilities of local government following devolution settlements. This would give local government the reassurance to know that these settlements will not get eroded over time. This will provide a firm foundation which would allow us to be even more innovative, collaborative and deliver increased savings.

Central government must allow local politicians to pursue what is right for local areas without undue influence, ensuring appropriate scrutiny and accountability measures are in place at a local level.

4. Given that different parties have put forward different proposals for further devolution to Scotland, what is the best way forward?

Local government, and in particular District Councils are the closet democratically elected bodies to residents. As such, Districts need to be a key stakeholder in the devolution debate for England and have a big role to play in future devolved powers, both independently and in collaboration. There is a clear evidence base for why Districts can realise benefits for both the public sector as a whole and their residents by the devolution of powers:

- As the planning authority for 67% of England and often covering those areas of the country where England’s future global attractiveness for inward investment is found, increased freedoms and flexibilities could support District to un-lock economic growth in their local areas and in turn the whole country.
• Districts deliver close to 90 services for an average council tax of £3.27 a week, increased flexibilities and powers will enable Districts to work in more efficient ways, reduce their dependency of government grants and delivery long term savings.

• Districts have often been at the forefront of working in new and innovative ways. With close to 700 shared service agreements in place involving Districts, and many quick to take the lead in the development of the commercialisation of services, it is more than likely that the way Districts are working now will act as a model for the delivery of public services in the future. By devolving increased responsibilities and freedoms, Districts can continue to develop collaboration and new local delivery models.

We believe that local government is the right place to devolve power to, and local politicians and local people know what is best for their local areas.

5. **What implications does further devolution to Scotland have for how the House of Commons should deal with legislation that deals with only part of the UK?**

Due to political party differences on the ‘English question’, the DCN does not have further comments to make.

*22 October 2014*