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Prime Minister

ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

You have suggested in your Private Secretary's minute of 26 April a stock-taking meeting to review the general role of local authorities in the 1990s in the light of all the changes we have made in the last few years. I hope that as a background to this meeting you will find it helpful to have my views on the main issues and the way forward, which I set out below. I also attach relevant facts and figures about local authorities at Annex B.

2. I do not think it would be desirable to impose a further round of radical changes on local government before it has had time to digest the present series of major reforms. During the last five years the Department has seen through legislation which:-

- abolished the GLC and the Metropolitan Counties;
- imposed compulsory competition on the delivery of many local authority services;
- made new rules following the Widdicombe Report on the composition and organisation of authorities;
- will end the near-monopoly of public sector housing by local authorities and give more and more tenants the freedom to choose their landlord following the great success of our right-to-buy policy;



- will transform the basis of local finance from 1 April 1990 with the introduction of the community charge, the national non domestic rate and the new grant arrangements;

3. The Government has also promoted legislation which has made radical changes to the educational and transport functions of local authorities, and is well advanced with legislative proposals to revise their planning and waste disposal functions. Social service and transport functions will be affected by the review of community care and possible new traffic management arrangements in London.

4. This major programme of incremental reform of local government is now resulting in a seachange in attitudes in the majority of local authorities, whatever their political control. There is a much greater readiness to recognise that councils exist to serve their community and not the other way around; and that councils must secure value for taxpayers' money. There is still a handful of left-wing councils in the 'deep' inner cities who resist the implications of our reforms; even though they are now severely constrained. It is essential that we do not lose what we have gained after a very hard-fought ten years against reactionary attitudes, and that we give local government as a whole time to consolidate the changes.

5. For this reason I would advise against another wave of radical reform in the immediate future. We will however need to counter whatever the Opposition puts in their shop windows for the General Election. In some cases this need involve no more than making very clear what things should not be done, and how misguided the Opposition Party's approach is. In other areas it may be worth exploring the possibility of further reforms that will run with the grain of what we have already achieved.



Structure

(i) Changes we should resist

6. At the top level of local government we should resist very strongly the creation of any regional authorities in England. There is no true basis of local feeling or community to support the creation of such bodies. And they would undoubtedly be a major irritant and obstruction both to central Government policies and to those of the operational tier of local government beneath them. There are no local or central Government functions that require to be operated at a regional level.

7. Similarly I think we should resist strongly the pressures which have been stirred up by the ADC and others for the abolition of the counties. The historic shire counties are the most deeply entrenched units in the country in terms of real identity and community of interest. It would be enormously unpopular to attempt to do away with them. Moreover the various service reforms of the last few years and now in prospect will give the counties a very major series of tasks and new responsibilities during the years ahead. They will have to carry through the education reforms, perhaps take over new responsibilities for care in the community, adapt to major changes in planning, in waste disposal, and transport functions, and cope with the introduction of competition and compulsory tendering for a wide range of their services. This should be quite sufficient to keep them fully occupied for several years to come. Talk of significant erosion of the substance of their responsibilities as opposed to the way in which they are required to discharge their duties is greatly exaggerated.



8. In the metropolitan areas most of the metropolitan districts are functioning well, and have a reasonable coherence and identity. Some of their names reflect uneasy local compromises and might be looked at again, but apart from fairly cosmetic changes of this kind I do not see any case for major changes to the structure of authorities in the metropolitan areas. They already have the strength of being unitary authorities responsible for the provision of all the main services.

9. Similarly in London the majority of the London boroughs are reasonably well related to the communities and neighbourhoods within the capital City, and are delivering services adequately. There are 6-10 boroughs mainly in inner London which are much more problematic. We must recognise that they do face acutely complex problems - which have been exacerbated by their dogmatic approach - with large concentrations of ethnic and other disadvantaged groups, and deteriorating infrastructure and services. Politically they are still held by far-left Labour groups excessively dominated by the unions and other producer interests, and suffering from a chronic mismanagement and loss of senior staff. We may well have to tackle the management problems of some of these areas directly in due course, but I do not think structural change or fiddling with the boundaries of these areas would help much.



(ii) Possible Changes

10. The worst feature of the 1974 reorganisation of local government was that it paid insufficient attention to people's sense of place. The changes were made on the basis of what has turned out to be a mechanistic analysis of the size of area and population needed to support the various local functions. If we are to contemplate any further changes they must above all be based on people's own sense of where they belong and the restoration of local civic pride. With this as our touchstone, I suggest that there is a case for further incremental change which gives full recognition to

- the historic shire counties - as we have recently done in the case of the Boundary Commission review of Humberside;
- the major towns and cities, particularly those which used to be county boroughs;
- and parishes, villages, smaller towns and neighbourhoods within cities and the larger towns.

11. This points towards 3 major types of change over time:-

- re-creation of some of the major county boroughs as free standing unitary authorities administering all the services in their areas, and giving expression to the strong sense of identity of some of those major towns and cities of the kingdom. (The note at Annex A explores some possibilities for unitary authorities);



- in parallel, abolishing Avon and Cleveland, the two new 1974 counties which like Humberside have not taken root;
 - allowing larger parishes and small and medium sized towns to exercise a greater range of minor powers now exercised by districts, though under a regime of competition and contracting out that will prevent them becoming substantial employers of staff. We might also consider giving small neighbourhoods and communities within larger towns and cities the right to establish parish style assemblies or councils, primarily for representational or consultative purposes so as to strengthen the hands of local people?
- Such changes would respond to the widely felt aspiration for more community and consumer representation and participation at the most local grass roots level.

Functions

12. I do not see any case for any major change in the range of functions of local government in the next few years, or for any major redistribution between tiers in the shire county areas. The role of education authorities may diminish in time as more responsibilities are delegated to school governors, and there may be a need to consider in due course the further development of our educational reforms. But for the moment the role of education authorities remain important and significant. We are developing new responsibilities for authorities for care in the community. The reforms in prospect for waste disposal will reduce local authorities direct role in service provision, but will increase their regulatory functions. Other regulatory functions in the environmental health field are also expanding.



13. The general picture on the functions of local government is therefore that there will continue to be a gradual process of change with some functions growing and others contracting according to the changing needs of society and new thinking about the best way to arrange and deliver services. I do not think however that this pattern of functional change need in itself imply any pattern of structural change beyond the suggestions I have made above.

14. As to service delivery, I see great scope for further development of our very effective competition legislation. Competition is achieving very substantial efficiency savings in some of the services affected. But at this stage too high a proportion of the contracts is still going to in-house bids. We shall need to do more to convince outside competitors that they have a real chance, and also to extend the range of services subject to competition. As the private sector gradually gains more of the contracts we shall see the numbers directly employed by local authorities begin to shrink further, and authorities will be able to concentrate more on their essential public sector role of enabling positive development in their areas and regulating activities where this is necessary.

Finance

15. The new financial arrangements coming into effect on 1 April 1990 will clearly make local authorities much more accountable as the full impact of the discipline of community charge feeds through with the withdrawal of the 'safety net'. I see no case for any further major changes in this area for some time to come.



Constitutional Arrangements

16. There is a long-standing dilemma between involving large numbers of people as members in order to strengthen the representative and democratic base of authorities, and cutting down the numbers of members to secure more executive efficiency in the conduct of business. Unless we make the radical change of giving majority parties in local government executive authority on the "Westminster" model - which I think would be premature - a dramatic reduction in the number of councillors would cause more trouble than it is worth. Nevertheless some enhancement of the role of the key decision makers may be achieved by the reforms we have in hand for councillors' allowances, which will distribute more of the available resources to leading councillors as special responsibility allowances and keep ordinary "backbenchers" to a much smaller flat rate sum.

Conclusion

17. The performance of local government is improving in most parts of the country following the various reforms made by the Government. There is no case for major structural reform at the present time, and some of the ideas being pedalled by Opposition Parties should clearly be resisted. We will need to counter whatever the Opposition puts in their shop windows for the General Election. If it is some form of regionalism, I see no great difficulty in countering that with all we have done to make local government more responsive and efficient and to place the citizen as taxpayer and consumer in charge.

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But it would be worth thinking about moderate incremental change that runs with the grain of historic loyalties and communities, including recreating some of the larger county boroughs, abolishing two of the 1974 new counties, and strengthening the most local parish and community level. Various service changes will continue to be necessary during the next few years, and there is still a good way to go in promoting competition and privatisation of some services. At the constitutional level a stronger role for the leading councillors could make for more executive efficiency.

18. If any of these ideas are to be pursued we should need some more detailed studies during the next few months to work them up properly.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'NR'.

N R

25 May 1989

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AREAS WHERE UNITARY AUTHORITIES COULD BE CONSIDERED

<u>Area, Status and Population</u>	<u>Comment</u>
1. Bristol DC (391,000)	Remaining population of Avon CC at 550,000 would be viable as county but preferable to return former areas to Gloucestershire and Somerset and dissolve Avon.
2. Leicester DC (281,000)	Remaining population of Leicestershire at 596,000 viable as county.
3. Nottingham DC (277,000)	Remaining population of Nottinghamshire at <u>728,000</u> viable as county.
4. Hull DC (258,000)	leads to dissolution of Humberside and would rule out creation of E. Yorkshire as an option: instead remaining area north of Humber would be added to <u>N. Yorkshire</u> .
5. Plymouth DC (256,000)	Remaining population of Devon CC at <u>743,000</u> would be viable as county.
6. Stoke-on-Trent DC (247,000)	Remaining population of Staffs CC at <u>774,000</u> would be viable as county.
7. Derby DC (216,000)	Remaining population of Derbyshire CC at <u>700,000</u> would be viable as county.
8. Southampton DC (200,000))	Population of Hampshire, now <u>1,528,000</u> , would still make it the fifth largest county at 1,141,000 after losing Southampton and Portsmouth.
9. Portsmouth DC (187,000))	

10. Isle of Wight CC (125,000) Consists now of a county and two districts; a strong case for a unitary authority or abolishing the county and making the area one District in Hampshire.
11. Cleveland CC (557,600) Stockton-on-Tees DC (174,000) and Middlesborough DC (147,000) would probably unite as Teeside County Borough, with Hartlepool DC reverting to Durham CC and Langbaugh DC reverting to N. Yorks CC.
12. Northampton DC (172,000) Secession would leave Northants CC with population of 382,000 making it also 37th in size.
13. Luton DC (166,000) Secession would leave Beds CC with population of 350,000 making it 37th among present counties.
14. Thamesdown DC (162,000) Secession would leave Wilts CC with population of 383,000 making it 36th among present counties.
15. Peterborough DC (148,000) Secession would leave Cambridgeshire CC with population of 461,000 which is viable.
16. Southend-on-Sea DC (160,000) Remaining population of Essex CC at 1,352,000 would be viable.
17. Norwich DC (124,000) Remaining population of Norfolk CC at 590,000 would be viable but Norwich would need to expand boundary to be viable as county borough.

ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND

Factual note by the Department of the Environment

Local Authorities in England

There are 405 principal authorities in England, and nearly 10,000 minor authorities of various kinds. A full list and classification is at Appendix I.

Structure of Local Government

2. The present pattern of principal local authorities derives from three main Acts -

The London Government Act 1963,
The Local Government Act 1972 and
The Local Government Act 1985.

3. The London Government Act of 1963 merged the former smaller London authorities into the present 32 London Boroughs, and created the Greater London Council as a strategic upper tier authority. The GLC did not however have a sufficient identity or range of responsibilities to sustain it, and the 1985 Act abolished it, passing most of its functions to the London Boroughs, but a few to joint special purpose authorities for London wide functions.

4. The 1972 reorganisation outside London similarly merged over 1200 ~~small~~ towns and rural districts into the ~~343~~³³² larger districts. It abolished 79 all purpose county boroughs and created a two tier structure everywhere. In the metropolitan areas the upper tier metropolitan counties had only a limited range of strategic functions similar to those exercised by the GLC. In the non metropolitan areas the upper tier counties had the major share of the local authority functions, leaving a more limited range of functions to the districts. As with the GLC the metropolitan counties failed to establish a strong identity, and their range of functions was too limited to sustain them; so they too were abolished in 1985.

Local Authority Services

5. The group of services provided or arranged by the different tiers of local government has remained fairly stable since local government reorganisation in 1974.

Services in Shire County Areas

6. The following table shows the distribution of services between the tiers in the county areas:

County Services

Education, police, fire,
Social services, transport
planning, highways, traffic
regulation, strategic
planning, waste disposal,
consumer protection,
libraries.

District Services

Housing, Refuse collection,
planning applications, leisure
services, parks, environmental
health.

7. Parish and community councils have powers to perform certain district council functions appropriate to the very local level, such as recreational provision and cemeteries, concurrently with their district councils.

Services in the Metropolitan Areas and London

8. In the Metropolitan areas and London (following the abolition of the metropolitan counties and the GLC and, in 1990, ILEA) most services are provided by the single tier metropolitan districts and London boroughs. But a small number of services which require a statutory authority over areas wider than the boroughs and districts are now run by joint authorities composed of elected councillors nominated by the borough or district councils. These include:

- the police and fire services, including civil defence, and public transport in all metropolitan counties
- the fire service, including civil defence, in London
- waste regulation and disposal in certain areas.

9. A breakdown of expenditure by service and tier is at Appendix II.

Trends in Expenditure and Manpower

10. The graphs in Appendix III show trends in local authority expenditure in relation to GDP over the last forty years, and total manpower employed by local government since 1975. During the 1960s and early 1970s local authority real expenditure and manpower grew strongly both absolutely and as a share of the Gross Domestic Product. But from the mid 1970s onwards tighter controls and financial disciplines restrained the growth of manpower, and stabilised the local authority share of the GDP.

11. Looking ahead to the 1990s for some of the services there will be demographic pressures for increases (e.g. education as the birthrate expansion of the last few years comes through and social services as the numbers of very old increases). For others there may be economic pressures for increased expenditure (e.g. roads, environmental protection, economic development). The demand for other services may however continue to decline, e.g. housing (as the private sector and housing associations provide more and more of the need), transport subsidies, etc.

The Scope of Local Government Functions

12. Some services have been removed from local government during the past ten years while the scale of others has been reduced. The most significant are:

- the polytechnics
- schools opting out
- transfers of housing stock to the private sector through Right to Buy and, in future, by tenants choosing new landlords.

13. Local authorities role in other areas has also been diminished as their members have been removed from water authorities, health authorities etc. In some areas authorities have also been supplemented or partially replaced by Urban Development Corporations. On the other hand local government has during this period developed an additional role in the economic development field.

Methods of Service Delivery: Competition and Diversity

14. Until the 1980s local government carried out most of its functions in-house with directly employed staff and labour. And for many services it was a monopoly supplier.

15. During the 1980s this pattern has begun to change, and the process is likely to go much further in the 1990s on present policies. Local authorities are being required to subject a substantial proportion of their services to competition between now and 1992, and the private sector is winning a share of the tenders. Management buy-outs by local authority staff appear to be gaining momentum. Significant savings (up to 20%) are being achieved in services subject to competition.

Finance

16. Local authority current expenditure is financed from a number of sources. The following table shows the breakdown in 1988/89:

	Domestic rates	25%
	Non domestic rates	30%
Aggregate	(Rate Support grant	33%
Exchequer	(Specific and supplementary	
Grant	grants	12%

17. There has been a tendency for specific grants to grow faster than the general or block grant during the past 10 years, from 17.6% of Aggregate Exchequer grant in 1981/82 to 26.6% in 1988/89. The largest specific grants are for the police and home improvement grants. But there are also important new specific grants for new initiatives and training purposes in the education field and social services, and a variety of other purposes.

The Constitution of Local Authorities and the Role of Members

18. Most local authority decisions are taken by full council or by service committees. For decision making bodies councils have a very large number of members (average 55), as compared with the boards of companies or quangos. Figures on the numbers for different types of council are at Appendix IV. The system tends to encourage debate of detailed issues and excessive involvement in day to day management. But as services are increasingly provided on a contractual basis (whether by in-house units or private contractors) greater attention needs to be given to specification of standards, monitoring and strategic direction of services.

19. Some authorities are already streamlining their organisations to adapt to these changes by reducing the numbers of their committees substantially, and encouraging back-bench members to concentrate more on their representational and monitoring role. One factor which has been inhibiting rationalisations of this kind is the present system of attendance allowances for members. Following the Widdicombe Report the Department of the Environment is now discussing with the local authority associations proposals for replacing attendance allowances with a modest flat rate allowance for all members (perhaps varying by type of council), supplemented by a more substantial special responsibility allowance for a few leading members who have more executive responsibilities as chairmen of committees or other leading roles.

TYPES OF LOCAL AUTHORITY AND THEIR POPULATION RANGE

PRINCIPAL AUTHORITIES

Population Range

County councils	39	121,000 - 1.5m
Metropolitan district councils	36	158,000 - 1m
London borough councils	32	134,000 - 319,000
Shire district councils	296	25,000 - 392,000
Common council of the City of London	1	4,300
Council of the Isles of Scilly	<u>1</u>	1,900
	405	

MINOR GENERAL-PURPOSE AUTHORITIES

Town and parish councils	7 949	
Parish meeting (where no parish council)	1 448	
Charter trustees	<u>22</u>	
	9 419	Under 200 - 50,000

SPECIALISED AUTHORITIES FOR
MAIN FUNCTIONSDirectly elected

Inner London Education Authority	1	
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Joint authorities(a) Metropolitan joint
authorities

Police authorities	6	
Fire and Civil Defence Authorities	7	
Passenger Transport Authorities	6	
Waste Disposal Authorities	6	
Other successor authorities	1	

(b) Other joint authorities

Combined Police authorities	6	
Cremation authorities	3	
Port Health Boards	13	

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APPENDIX II

LOCAL AUTHORITY CURRENT SERVICE EXPENDITURE BY CLASS - ENGLAND 1988/89

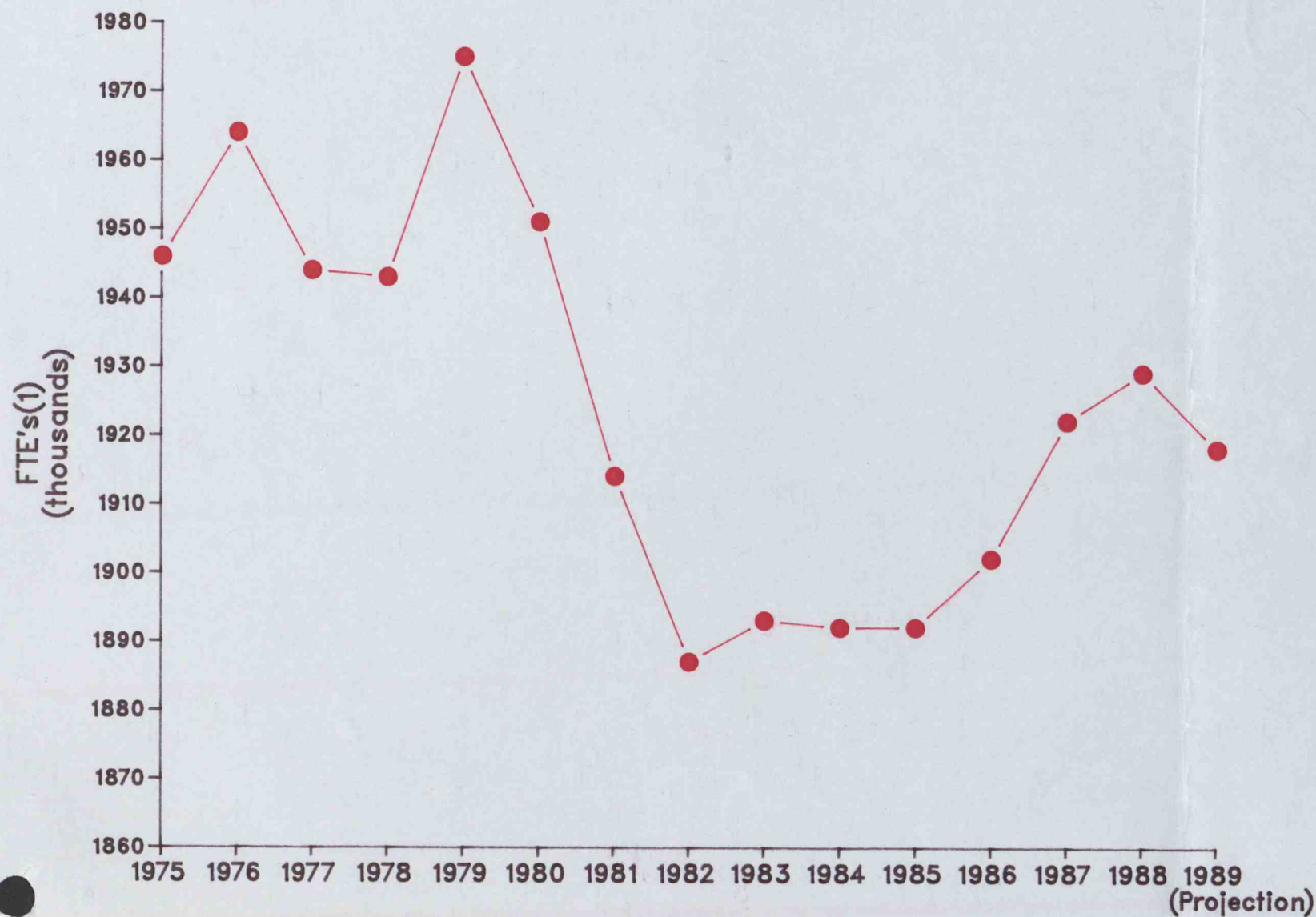
£m

	Shire Counties	Shire Districts	Met Districts	Inner London {including {City of London} {and ILEA	Outer London Boroughs	Other Authorities ¹	All Classes
Education	8070	-	3433	943	1339	-	13785
School meals and milk	221	-	144	37	40	-	442
Libraries, Museums etc	230	31	128	58	57	-	504
Personal Social Services	1522	14	869	444	392	-	3241
Police	1663	-	-	34	-	1797	3494
Fire	412	-	-	-	-	357	769
Other Home Office	230	20	127	7	45	57	486
Local Transport	945	85	289	112	181	317	1929
Refuse Collection & Disposal	98	259	182	70	82	-	691
Recreation, Parks etc	26	370	216	89	86	-	787
Town & Country Planning	74	157	64	26	26	-	347
Other Environmental Services	79	636	305	229	152	7	1408
Other ²	168	180	163	135	86	-	732
Net Current Expenditure Total ³	13,738	1752 ⁴	5920	2184	2486	2535	28615

1. Joint Authorities for Police, Fire and Civil Defence, Transport, Metropolitan Police.
2. Other services includes Non-HRA Housing, Housing Benefit, Consumer Protection, Employment and Agricultural services.
3. As reported by authorities in budget return RER 89.
4. Parishes expenditure is included within the district total, and accounts for £69M. There is no available breakdown of this between services, but most of it will be in the last three categories of recreation, parks etc, planning and other environmental services.

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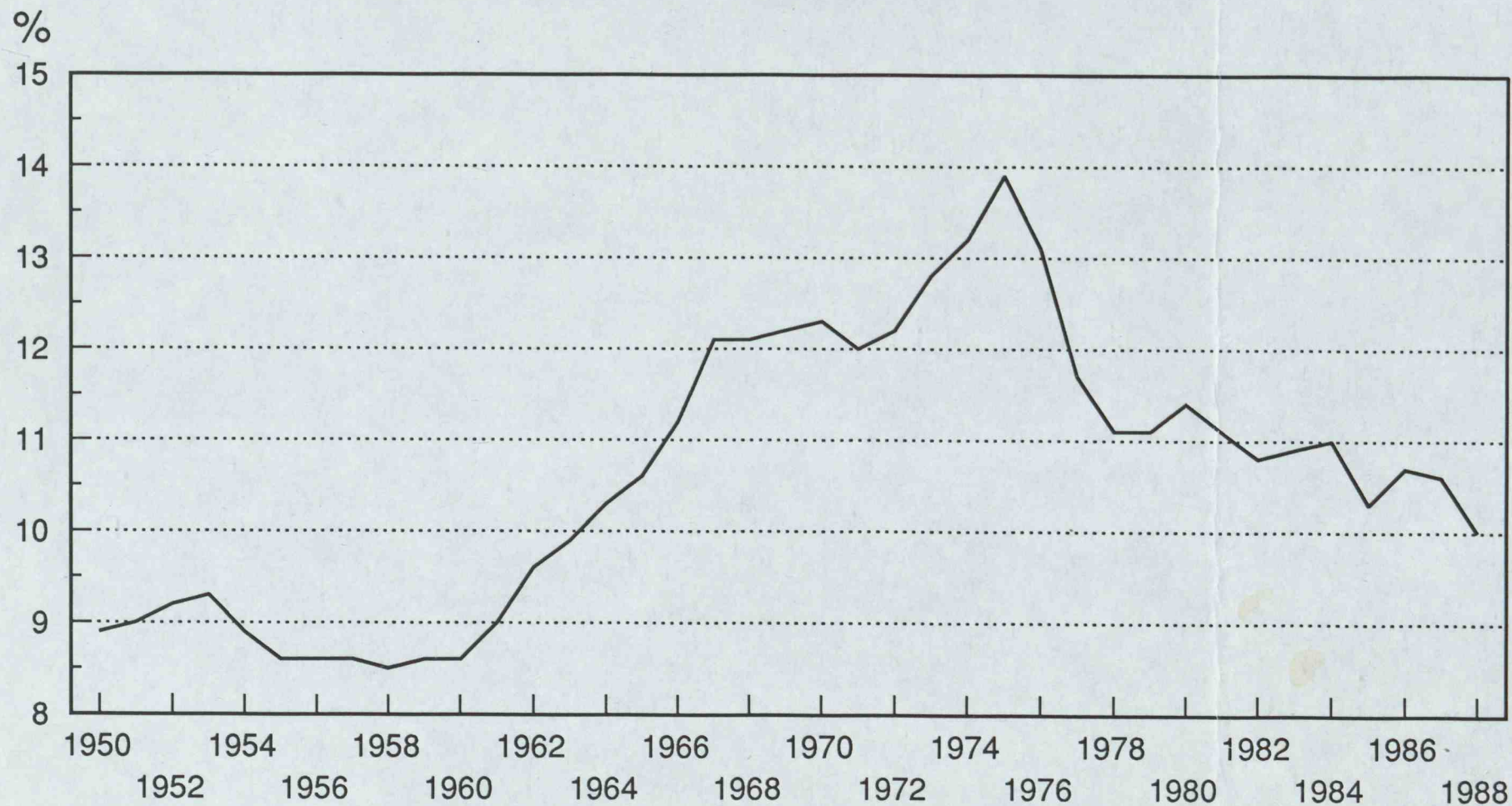
LA Manpower (at June of each year) – England



(1) Full-time equivalents

Local Authority Expenditure As A Percentage Of Gross Domestic Product

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NUMBERS OF LOCAL AUTHORITY MEMBERS

	Number of councillors	Number of councils	Average size of council	Range of size of council	Average number of constituents per councillor
<u>Principal Authorities in England</u>					
Shire County Councils	3,005	39	77	43-106	9,280
Shire District Councils	13,455	296	45	20-68	2,140
Metropolitan Districts	2,481	36	69	48-117	4,540
London Boroughs	1,914	32	60	48-70	4,530

Parish Councils	about 70,000	7950	about 9	n.a.	about 300 but much less in rural areas

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PRIME MINISTER

ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

After your VFM Seminar with Mr. Baker you were struck by the extent to which the responsibilities of local authorities had been pared back. The privatisation of bus services, self-governing schools, and self-governing polytechnics all reduce the role of the counties; right to buy and HATS on that of the districts. At that time the review of Community care seemed likely to continue this trend. You felt, therefore, that it was time to have a look at the role of local authorities. Could, for example, two-tier authorities continue to be justified? Attached is the paper we commissioned from Mr. Ridley. It represents very much his own views, and has been discussed only within a limited circle. You too will want to discuss it in a restricted forum, perhaps bringing in John Gummer and Terry Heiser. I will also seek an input from Brian Griffiths. Meanwhile, you may like to glance at the paper before you see Mr. Ridley on Sunday.

His main conclusions are that:

- the counties still have plenty to do (the Community Care Review seems likely to leave more work with them than was once thought);
- the guiding principle should be that the structure of local government should give greater ^{weight} ~~help~~ to people's perception of where they live;
- the Government should oppose regions, restore some of the county boroughs, and permit some of the larger towns a separate existence within districts.

AT

26 May, 1989.

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PRIME MINISTER

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ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

[Minute from Secretary of State for the Environment of 25 May]

1. The central issue raised in Mr Ridley's minute is how future Government policy on the role of local authorities should develop and over what timescale. You may find it helpful to work through the conclusions in his paper, summarised below, one by one.

CHANGES TO BE RESISTED

2. Mr Ridley's first main conclusion is that the Government should not impose a further round of radical changes on local government before it has had time to digest the present reforms (paragraph 2). In particular, he concludes that:

i. the Government should resist strongly the creation of any regional authorities in England (para 6);

ii. the Government should also resist strongly pressures to abolish the counties (para 7);

iii. there is no case for major changes to the structure of authorities in the metropolitan areas, except perhaps for cosmetic changes to some of their names (paragraph 8);

iv. there is no case for structural change or fiddling with the boundaries of the London boroughs, although he notes that the Government may have to tackle directly the management problems of some areas in due course (para 9);

v. there is no case for any major change in the functions of local government in the next few years or for any major redistribution between tiers in the shire county areas (para 12);



vi. there is also no case for any further major changes in local government finance for some time to come (para 15). (This might presumably have to change if local government expenditure were to continue to rise by 3% per annum in real terms for a period of years; but you may feel that this is not an issue for the present exercise.)

You will wish to decide whether you agree with these conclusions.

POSSIBLE CHANGES

3. Turning to possible changes which the Government might make, Mr Ridley identifies a number which he would support. You may wish to concentrate on the following:

i. major county boroughs (para 11). Mr Ridley proposes that some of the major county boroughs should be recreated as free-standing unitary authorities administering all the services in their areas. You may find it helpful to look at Annex A which sets out what this would mean in practice.

ii. abolition of certain counties (para 11). In parallel with this he proposes the abolition of Avon and Cleveland as well as Humberside, counties which have not taken root. You will wish to decide whether this should be pursued.

iii. larger parishes (para 11). He proposes allowing larger parishes and medium-sized towns to exercise more minor powers now exercised by districts on the basis that they would contract out the services concerned, without building up substantial staff; and also possibly giving larger towns and cities the right to establish parish-style assemblies or councils, primarily for representational or consultative purposes. You may wish to explore precisely what this would mean. On the face of it it could result in a weakening of district councils and the creation of a new tier of bureaucracy. It would be important to be clear about



the benefits.

iv. competition (para 14). Mr Ridley sees great scope for development of competition legislation, leading to a further reduction in the numbers of staff directly employed by local authorities (although the graph at the back of the paper appears to show a rising trend in their manpower from 1985 to 1988). You may wish to explore what the legislation would do.

v. constitutional arrangements (para 16). Mr Ridley refers to the problem of reducing the number of councillors on local authorities so as to secure more executive efficiency in the conduct of business. He proposes paying more money to leading councillors as special responsibility allowances, keeping ordinary "back-benchers" to a smaller flat-rate sum. You will wish to consider whether this is enough or whether more radical change is needed - as with district health authorities - to improve their effectiveness.

NEXT STEPS

4. Finally, there is the question of timescale. You may wish to discuss whether whatever proposals are agreed should be implemented in this Parliament, perhaps the fourth Session beginning in November 1990, or whether the aim should be to put together an attractive package for further development of local government policy in the next Parliament. You may wish to commission further work and discuss the timescale.

RTW.

R T J WILSON