

Size Doesn't Matter – but they keep telling us it does

Professor Colin Copus



Size Doesn't Matter – but they keep telling us it does – In this article Professor Colin Copus argues that the obsession held by Welsh policy-makers with increases in council size as a way of securing enhanced efficiency and effectiveness flies in the face of evidence and such size increases could fatally undermine community cohesion and engagement.

Devolution to Wales, through the creation of the Welsh Assembly, which was meant to be a great reforming adventure to shift power down from Westminster, has become a case study in centralisation. Not because Westminster has sought to draw powers back, but rather because of the treatment of Welsh local government by the new centre at Cardiff Bay. The centralising tendency, ironically born from devolution, is nowhere more obvious than with the treatment of Welsh local government under the current proposals for forced mergers of councils. Indeed, the idea of 'carving up the map of Wales' has become a reality with the publication of an outline of the possible boundaries of the proposed new eight or nine super councils that will replace the existing 22 unitary councils (formed in 1996). Those 22 unitaries themselves grew from 37 districts and eight counties (formed in 1974). Those claiming that the current proposals for forced mergers are a return to the pre-1996 days, ignore the inconvenient existence of the 37 districts.

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As with most local government reform, the most depressing element of the situation in Wales is the stubborn, folk-lore like attachment to the perceived benefits of big local government which is consistently displayed by policy-makers. But, it has been known for fifty years that increases in council size do not automatically guarantee that the resultant new administrative units will be more efficient, more effective, and cheaper or lead to service quality improvement. It has been known for the same period however, and with more consistency, that increases in council size can and often do damage the democratic health of local communities. What that means is that as local government gets less and less local, trust in councillors and officers declines and that community engagement and cohesion deteriorates. That is not to say that increase in size cannot and has not brought about improvements; rather, that it is simply not a guaranteed outcome of re-organisation or increases in council size.

Another obvious result of the forced mergers of councils is the decline in the

number of councillors. A recent example of how re-organisation has brought about a councillor cull was on April Fool's Day, 2009 when the latest raft of unitary councils came into existence in England. The 3.2 million residents in those counties, who had hitherto been governed, served, and allegedly confused by 7 county and 37 district councils and 2,062 councillors, were given 9 unitary councils and a mere 751 councillors to represent them, a reduction of over 1,300 councillors or a 63 per cent loss in the number of councillors. Increases in size mean a cull of councillors and those remaining must cover larger areas, look after the interests of more citizens, care and respond to the individual problems of more and more constituents and struggle to oversee massive budgets as well as monitor and hold to account the activities of large bureaucratic organisations spending public money. They must do all that while not full-time salaried politicians in the same way as Assembly Members and Members of Parliament.

What often gets missed in re-organisations of local government is any serious addressing of the question: what is the purpose of local government. Or, worse, that an implicit assumption is made by the centre and those reviewing local government, that its purpose is to do what it is told by the centre and get on with the delivery – or nowadays, more likely the oversight - of public service provision. The issue of whether the size of local government units is settled in any one country, or not, relates to the role of local government as either a territorial governing body with a relationships to recognisable communities of place where the council

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and local political leadership is expected to represent the community to higher levels of government and to act politically; or, whether it is seen primarily as an agent for the delivery of public services. If the centre sees local government as the latter, then the term 'government' in local government can

become redundant – especially where the centre displays centralising tendencies. What the centre requires is for councils to be organised and structured so as to be easy to control and so it can gain the often inflated claims of economies of scale. Moreover, the fewer units of local government there are the easier they are to manage from the centre.

But, the larger local government becomes, not only does the word 'government' become redundant, so too does the word 'local'. Casting an eye over the proposed new administrative map of Wales – for that is what it is, a map created for ease of administration, not community governance – what is glaring is the demise of any notion that this is 'local' government or a level of sub-national government that has any relationship to real communities of place. Rather, we see vast tracks of the country drawn together, as a result, one suspects, of many late night negotiations about which party is likely to end up running the resultant monsters that could be created.

Another common theme of those demanding council mergers is to make often overblown claims for estimated savings, a tactic enhanced by austerity where the simplistic view that if there was less local government it would be cheaper, can easily gain purchase. What such claims often forget, among many other things, is the notion of the diseconomies of scale and as units become larger and larger costs can and do rise. Simplistic ideas that if we have fewer councillors and fewer officers (quite apart from redundancy payments, increased welfare payments and

damage to local economies) things will get cheaper, make good sound bites when shaping the rhetoric of a debate but the reality does not match that rhetoric.

Similarly, policy-makers – both politicians and civil servants - often overlook, and it can only be deliberately, that in explorations of the impact of council size on questions of performance, service quality and management the literature is inconclusive and contradictory on the matter of economies of scale. Such economies that do or can accrue do so for different services at different organisational scales. Moreover, the literature also shows that the relationship between size and performance is a particularly complex one and that any one council, large, medium or small in scale, can perform at a better or worse level compared with councils of different scales; simply put: no one size has a monopoly on quality or performance. Indeed, if different services require different populations to be effective and efficient – something the Redcliff-Maud committee grappled with back in the 1960s – then what service should dominate the final decision about reorganisation in the effort to ‘go large’ or ‘supersize’?

But, why the obsession with super-sizing councils when so many other countries make small local government work perfectly well? Take Slovenia as an example; a country with a population of just over 2 million (smaller than Wales), an area of 7,827 sq miles (again smaller than Wales). Yet, Slovenia has 211 municipalities, the smallest of which is Hodos with 340 inhabitants and a council with seven councillors. All Slovenian municipalities have the same responsibilities, but there is no clamour to merge these into super-councils, quite the opposite: citizens feel connected to and part of their municipalities because they govern areas of real place and municipalities are not over-sized artificial units of administration. Highlighted here again, is the vital question about the purpose of local government – is it about the government of real places, or about carving out some administratively convenient unit on some spurious reasoning that efficiency and effectiveness will flow from it, then giving that new unit some made up name or merely referring to it as a point of the compass? Both of which exist in England: Newham, Three Rivers, Kirklees, to name a few, simply do not exist as places; North East Derbyshire, East Sussex and North Warwickshire, lazily named because they sit at a certain compass point in their respective counties. At least Wales seems to be avoiding, for the time being, the complete disconnection from any notion of location that has been inflicted by the toponymy of English local government.

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So, we know that size and service improvement are not automatically linked and that savings can be illusory or at worse a means of deceiving citizens and are no more than a rhetorical tool. Yet, the sad fact is that policy-makers seem wedded to increasing the size of Welsh local government and they do that because when developing solutions to contemporary problems, what often occurs is not the search for evidence-based policy, but policy-based evidence – if that were not the case the head-long pursuit of forced council mergers would not be the case in Wales. It could be worse of course, the four Police and Crime Commissioner areas or the three Fire and Rescue areas could have been the model for a reformed and re-organised set of forced council mergers; or, the Assembly might just as well have said – blow this, lets scrap all local government and do it all our-self.

Authors Biography

Professor Colin Copus is the Director of the Local Governance Research Unit in the Department of Politics and Public Policy, De Montfort University where he is a Professor of Local Politics. His academic interests are central-local relationships and the constitutional status of local government, localism, local party politics, local political leadership and the changing role of the councillor. Colin has worked closely with policy-makers and practitioners in central and local government and he was an advisor to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee and is working with the Communities and Local Government Committee on the role of the councillor.

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