Your Region, Your Choice
Revitalising the English Regions
A Summary
This White Paper is a great opportunity for the English regions.

It delivers on our Manifesto commitment to provide for directly elected regional assemblies in those regions that want them.

It gives people living in the English regions the chance to have a greater say over the key issues that affect them as well as the power to devise tailored regional solutions to regional problems.

And it builds on the success of devolution elsewhere in the UK – offering people more accountable, more streamlined, and more joined-up government.

This White Paper is about choice. No region will be forced to have an elected assembly. But where there is public support for one, we believe people should be given the chance to demonstrate this in a referendum.

We have already done a lot to decentralise decision-making to the English regions. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) have been established to help strengthen the building blocks for economic growth
in all regions, with a network of regional chambers to scrutinise them. We are also giving extra resources and greater freedom and flexibility to the RDAs, and – as we promised in our Manifesto – we will further strengthen the regional chambers and the Government Offices in all regions.

For some regions this may be enough. But other regions may want to go further than this and grasp the opportunities offered by an elected regional assembly.

These proposals will not mean creating more bureaucracy. In regions where people vote to have an elected regional assembly, we will move to wholly unitary local government to ensure that government remains streamlined.

Devolution has strengthened Britain because it has allowed the different parts of the UK to give expression to their diversity whilst celebrating the values that bind us together as a nation. We believe that devolution can offer the same benefits to the English regions.

But in the end, it is down to the people in each region to decide. It is your region and your choice.

Tony Blair
The White Paper Your Region, Your Choice signals the beginning of a new era for the English regions. It sets out our plans to decentralise power, strengthen regional policy and enable directly elected assemblies to be established in regions where people want them.

The English regions have been neglected for too long. At times national policy simply ignored them. At others it tried to determine everything from Whitehall. Our new approach to regional policy offers the prospect of our regions once again playing their proper role in the strength of the UK.

We want to build on the success of devolution elsewhere in the UK to give English regions greater powers to govern themselves, to tailor services better to regional needs, and to deliver greater prosperity and opportunity for all.

But there is little point in devolving power if you impose a solution from the top. So what this White Paper offers is an opportunity for change

Foreword

by the Right Hon John Prescott MP, Deputy Prime Minister, and the Right Hon Stephen Byers MP, Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions
and a choice for local people. No region will be forced to have an assembly. But where there is public support, we want to put that to a test in a referendum. We intend to give those regions who want it the opportunity to hold a referendum in this Parliament.

We believe there can be real benefits for regions from successful elected assemblies. By taking powers from Whitehall and Government quangos assemblies can reduce bureaucracy, enhance efficiency, improve co-ordination, bring decision-making under closer democratic control and offer the regions a distinct political voice and a real say over decisions which matter to them. But in the end, the decision is down to people in the regions themselves. It is your region and your choice.

John Prescott          Stephen Byers
The White Paper sets out a new regional policy for England. It explains how we will decentralise power and strengthen existing regional structures. And it offers people living in England the chance to have an elected regional assembly.

An elected regional assembly will give people more say about the issues that affect their region. It can make government more effective and efficient. And it can enable regions to build on their unique strengths, to improve economic performance and quality of life.

**Devolving power**

Britain has had one of the most centralised systems of government in the western world. Decisions affecting our regions are often taken far away from the people and places they will affect. But there must be real doubt whether this has led to better government.

In a geographically small country, we have also seen wide economic disparities both between regions and within them. Regions have not had the chance to build on their strengths or to tackle their weaknesses. If we are to enjoy increasing prosperity in the UK we need strong economic growth in all our nations and regions.

This means a new approach:

- strengthening the building blocks for economic growth in all regions; and
- strengthening regional leadership – giving the regions powers to address their particular needs.

Decisions on issues which affect a region, such as planning and how to generate economic development, are often best dealt with in the region itself. Decisions made at the regional level can take better account of the unique opportunities and challenges faced by an individual region. This can lead to better results both for the region in question and the country as a whole.

This Government has worked hard to decentralise power and decision-making. Power has already been devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and London-wide Government has been restored to the capital. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) have been created in England as economic powerhouses in each region with a network of regional chambers to scrutinise them.

We believe that successful solutions to regional problems need to be rooted in the regions themselves. We are therefore:
improving co-ordination of Government policy in the regions and joining up regional strategies to provide for more efficient and effective delivery;

• bringing decision-making closer to those it affects, by giving more responsibilities to the regional chambers and the regional Government Offices;

• improving arrangements for regional planning;

• ensuring a stronger regional input into national policy-making and spending decisions, thus adding to the extra resources and greater freedom and flexibility we have already given to the RDAs.

But some regions may want to go further than this, and may judge that an elected regional assembly will allow them the best chance to improve decision-making and accountability. We believe regions that want that chance should be given it.

A step further – elected regional assemblies

We believe elected regional assemblies can improve both the accountability of government and also its efficiency and effectiveness.

They will improve accountability by:

• making the existing government bodies in the regions more accountable to people in the regions;

• decentralising more power from Whitehall and bringing decision-making closer to the people; and

• revitalising democracy and giving the regions a new voice, both within the UK and in Europe.

They can improve effectiveness because they will:

• be able to join up – and where necessary rationalise – the many strategies and partnerships in the regions;

• have powers to offer tailored solutions that meet the particular needs of their regions;

• make it easier for regional stakeholders to contribute to decisions; and

• have greater freedom through their block grant to allocate resources and determine priorities in their region.
What will elected regional assemblies do?

Elected regional assemblies will develop a **strategic vision** for **improving the quality of life** in their regions, in particular improving **economic performance**.

They will be responsible for **setting priorities, delivering regional strategies** and **allocating funding**. In addition, elected assemblies will have a significant **influencing** role, including scrutiny powers and making appointments to regional public bodies (‘quangos’).

Subject to agreeing a small number of key national targets, an assembly will have complete freedom over how to spend the resources at its disposal.

There are many areas of policy where a regional dimension could improve both the decision-making process and successful implementation.

Among those areas where the regional assembly will have specific responsibilities are:

- **economic development**
- **skills and employment**
- **housing**
- **sport, culture and tourism**
- **transport**
- **land use and regional planning**
- **environmental protection, biodiversity and waste**
- **public health**

**Delivering in the region**

Successful redevelopment of an area depends on an integrated approach that provides jobs, homes, transport links and other facilities.

At present, responsibility for these issues rests with a number of different bodies, including the Regional Development Agency, the Government Office, the regional chamber and the Housing Corporation. This can mean duplication, disagreement and delay.

An elected regional assembly will produce integrated strategies covering all these issues. It will have direct responsibility for the Regional Development Agency and influence over other regional agencies and public bodies. It will also have money and other powers to help it implement its strategies.
As well as drawing up – and delivering – regional strategies for each of these individual policy areas, their task will also be to ensure they all fit together effectively so they improve people’s living standards and quality of life. This is where we believe elected regional assemblies can have an important new role. They will be able to look at ‘cross-cutting’ issues such as sustainable development across the region.

**Your region, your choice**

Before an elected regional assembly is established in a region, a referendum must be held and a majority of those voting must be in favour of having an assembly.

Interest in elected regional assemblies varies across England. So we won’t require referendums to be held in all eight English regions outside London at the same time. Instead, we will hold a referendum in a region when we consider there is sufficient public interest in one.

We will gauge that interest by taking into account the views of members of the public and those of the regional chamber, local authorities and other key stakeholders in the region.

**Democracy, not bureaucracy**

Elected assemblies will provide direct accountability over key regional public bodies (‘quangos’). Almost all of their functions will be taken from central government, not from local authorities. By providing stronger scrutiny and improving co-ordination between existing bodies, they should reduce bureaucracy, not add to it.

Even so, in areas that currently have a county and district council, a regional assembly would add a third tier of elected government below the national level. We believe that moving to a single tier of local government would:

- simplify relationships for both local authorities and regional assemblies; and
- make it much clearer to the public who does what.

So in any region where the Government decides that a referendum on an elected assembly should be held, there will first be an independent review of local government structures. The review will recommend the most effective wholly unitary local government structure for the region and will be carried out by the Boundary Committee for England. But restructuring of local government would only take place if
the region votes for an elected assembly.

Size and constitution of assemblies

The Government wants elected regional assemblies to be:

- democratic and responsive;
- inclusive and representative;
- small and streamlined;
- effective and efficient.

We envisage assemblies will have between 25 and 35 members. They will have a leader and cabinet of up to six members chosen by – and fully accountable to – the full assembly. It would be the task of the cabinet both to develop policies and, after gaining approval for them from the full assembly, to implement them.

Regional assemblies will be based on the existing administrative boundaries used by the Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies.

Stakeholder involvement

The aim of the elected regional assemblies is to improve local decision-making. So they will need to ensure they harness the experience, expertise and commitment of others in their region. We want to see them making full use of all stakeholders – including the business community, trade unions, social and environmental partners, and other elected representatives.

Close working with regional partners should ensure that an assembly’s policies are soundly based and have widespread support. Such stakeholder forums (such as the Scottish Civic Forum and similar arrangements in Wales and London) have worked well.

We would like to hear your views on how prescriptive the Government should be in setting out how regional assemblies should involve key stakeholders.

Elections

The voting system for elected regional assemblies will be the **Additional Member System** (AMS) form of **proportional representation** (PR). This is the system already used for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Greater London Authority. It ensures the overall composition of an assembly would broadly reflect the votes cast for the different parties at the assembly election.
This leaflet is a summary of the Government’s White Paper Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions. Copies of the full document are available from The Stationery Office, priced £14.75.

If you would like further copies of this leaflet, contact:

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Both documents are also available on the internet at http://www.regions.dtlr.gov.uk/governance/whitepaper/index.htm and are available in versions accessible to blind and partially sighted people.

Copies of this summary leaflet are also available in Bengali, Gujerati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu from the free literature address above and on the internet.
Funding of assemblies

Most of an assembly’s money will come through a single Government grant. The assembly will decide how it should use this to address key regional priorities. Based on figures for 2001/02, an assembly in the North East would be responsible for around £350 million. And it would influence decisions on how more than £500 million more is spent by its key partners.

Assemblies will be able to raise additional funds through the council tax. The money will be collected on behalf of the assembly by the local authorities in the region as part of their existing arrangements for collecting council tax. Non-domestic rates will not be affected.

The contribution of council tax-payers to the running costs of the assembly would be equivalent to around five pence per week for a Band D council tax-payer in any region. An elected assembly would be allowed to set a higher charge to fund additional spending if it considered this desirable. We will, at least initially, limit this amount through arrangements comparable to the existing local authority capping regime.

Timetable

We intend to introduce a Bill to provide for referendums and associated local government reviews when Parliamentary time allows, with the aim of enabling the first referendum to be held during this Parliament. Once at least one region has voted for an elected assembly, we intend to introduce a further Bill allowing them to be set up. Elections for these assemblies, in the regions where there has been a ‘yes’ vote in a referendum, would be held within months of the Bill becoming law. In practice, this would allow the first regional assembly to be up and running early in the next Parliament.

Sending us your views

We want to hear your views on the proposals on stakeholders set out in the White Paper. Please let us know if you wish your response to remain confidential. You can email responses and any other comments to regions.whitepaper@dtlr.gov.uk or send paper responses to:

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