

# Lib Dems 2014: City-regions and counties best devolution model, says communities minister

7 October 2014 by John Geoghegan , [Be the First to Comment](#)

**The current structure of local government is not 'fit for purpose', a Lib Dem communities minister has said, as he called for Whitehall powers to be devolved to city-regions and counties.**

Stephen Williams (pic courtesy Policy Exchange)

Stephen Williams, a parliamentary under-secretary of state for communities and local government, also told a fringe event at the Lib Dem party conference in Glasgow yesterday evening that many cities needed to be able to expand their boundaries.

Williams was speaking about English devolution at the event hosted by urban growth think tank the Centre for Cities.

He said: "I don't think the existing [local government] structure is fit for purpose - the mish-mash that we have between shires and counties and unitaries and metropolitans [councils]."

"We don't believe in regionalism - that's my personal opinion. I don't identify with the South West. I do identify with greater Bristol.

"You have to find the smaller building blocks, city regions or counties, natural places that people can identify with."

Williams went on to say that many cities, such as his own constituency of Bristol as well as Oxford, need expanded boundaries and are "ridiculously constrained".

He said: "In a number of cases, they don't reflect their whole urban area at all.

"We need to have meaningful city boundaries that are genuinely the city in terms of postcode and identity.

"But even then that probably won't be big enough to match the travel-to-work areas that a

city region represents."

Williams called for partnerships between local authorities, such as combined authorities in Greater Manchester and the North East, adding: "There doesn't have to be a certain size that we can latch on to. We can be flexible."

Williams also said that building new garden cities are only "part of the answer" to meeting the housing crisis.

Williams said: "I don't think anybody is saying that garden cities are the answer.

"They are part of the answer to the new challenge that faces us in building enough homes in volume and in terms of quality.

"The last time the country built huge volumes, the quality was not great and there was no comprehension at all in the 1960s and 1970s about climate change and sustainability going forward.

"So garden cities are part of the answer but you need to have infrastructure to support them as well.

"They can make a contribution, as can self build and custom build and affordable housing.

"There isn't a single magic bullet but garden cities are part of it."

Yesterday, deputy prime minister and party leader Nick Clegg told the conference that he wanted to build "at least ten" new garden cities if the Lib Dems formed part of the next government, with five along a re-opened Oxford to Cambridge rail link.

The Centre for Cities published a manifesto at the conference to lobby the three main parties which calls for greater devolved powers for city regions. It also calls for such areas to draw up "strategic economic plans" outlining land use, transport and housing goals that local authority local plans would have to conform to in the manner of the Greater London Authority's London Plan.