



Regional Assemblies: recent developments

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On 8 May 2003 the *Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill* received Royal Assent. On 16 June 2003 the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, announced that assembly referendums would be held in the north-east, the north-west and Yorkshire and the Humber. At the same time he directed the Boundary Committee to make recommendations about the structure of local government in those regions. The reviews covered the existing two-tier areas of Durham, Northumberland, Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire and North Yorkshire county councils and final proposals were announced on 25 May 2004. This note discusses amendments made to the Bill during its passage through the House of Lords which provide for the Boundary Committee's review and for additional referendums on the outcome of the review. It also discusses the Deputy Prime Minister's statement, the results of the Government's soundings exercise, the recent launch of the Government's 'Your say' campaign, and the draft recommendations of the Boundary Committee. Standard Note No 2922 sets out the rules under which referendums will be held in the north-east, north-west, and Yorkshire and the Humber in the autumn of 2004.

Contents

A.	Local referendums	2
B.	The Deputy Prime Minister's statement	3
1.	Reaction	4
C.	Soundings Exercise	7
D.	Your region, your choice summaries	8
E.	The 'Your say' campaign	9
F.	The Yes and No campaigns	14
G.	Costs and grants	15
H.	Boundary Committee recommendations	16
1.	Yorkshire and the Humber	16
2.	North East region	16
3.	North West Region	16
I.	Indicative timetable	18

A. Local referendums

The *Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act 2003* received Royal Assent on 8 May 2003. Detail on the Bill and background to the Government's policy is available in Library research paper 02/62.¹ However, a number of amendments were made in the House of Lords – and accepted by the Government – that are not covered in the paper. In particular, the Liberal Democrats tabled an amendment to the Bill on Report stage in the House of Lords that allows for a second referendum in those areas that currently have two tiers - both county and district councils - of local authority. These referendums will allow local people in those areas the chance to decide on the structure of local government in their area. Areas with existing unitary authorities will not have a second referendum. The Deputy Prime Minister will put proposals to those voters based on recommendations from the Boundary Committee for England,² which had to first carry out a local government review of those areas to recommend options for unitary local government. The direction from the Deputy Prime Minister required the Boundary Committee to start the local government reviews by 17 June 2003 and to make their recommendations from those reviews not later than 25 May 2004.³

During the debate on the amendment in the House of Commons, Nick Raysnford explained the amendment:

As I have already explained, the Government accepted an amendment from the Liberal Democrats in the other place that those in two-tier areas should be given a say in the form of unitary local government arrangements that will be implemented if an elected assembly is to be established. As I have made clear on many occasions, we do not wish to see any increase in bureaucracy or duplication of tiers as a result of the introduction of elected regional assemblies. We believe that two tiers of government below the national level are enough. We also believe that unitary government will streamline government and lay the foundation for an effective working relationship between the regional and local tiers. Every citizen entitled to vote on a local government electorate basis within that region will be entitled to vote on that issue too.

There will be a second vote for people living in areas that have two tiers of local government—counties and districts—because implicit in the introduction of an elected regional assembly will be reorganisation of local government. They will have a vote about the preferred form of unitary local government for their area. That area could well be the county in which they currently live, or the counties that would be affected if proposals from the boundary committee suggested a form of local government reorganisation that crosses county boundaries, so provision must be made for that.

There will be a second vote, affecting all the people living in areas where there is currently two-tier local government, on their preferred form of unitary local

¹ Available at <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2002/rp02-062.pdf>

² Website available at <http://www.lgce.gov.uk/>

³ The policy and procedure guidance to the Boundary Committee for England is available at <http://www.regions.odpm.gov.uk/boundary/pdf/guidance.pdf>

government. That is the proposal. It gives people a say in the way in which we normally understand the term in this country: through the ballot box in a democratic election.⁴

A Library Standard Note on *Referendums for regional assemblies* is also available.⁵

B. The Deputy Prime Minister's statement

In making his decision on whether a region should have a referendum, the Deputy Prime Ministers has to consider the level of interest in the region in holding a referendum. The boundary committee for England must also have made recommendations on options for unitary local government in parts of the region that currently have two tiers of local authorities. On 16 June 2003 John Prescott made a statement to the House of Commons announcing his decision. This was based on the outcome of a soundings exercise, which began on 2 December 2002 in the eight regions outside London. This was to allow him to assess the level of interest in referendums in each of the regions. As a result of the amendments in the House of Lords, the soundings exercise ran until 6 May.

The results of the exercise were published in *Your Region, Your Say*.⁶ It estimated that at least 50,000 people were involved in the soundings exercise. The Deputy Prime Minister commented:

More than 7,000 direct responses were from individuals. The rest came from organisations or individuals responding in a representative capacity—for example, through surveys or petitions. Although those responses represented the views of many hundreds of individuals, they were each recorded as a single response.

It will not be a surprise to the House that levels of interest in a referendum vary between the different regions of England. In some regions interest was low. In the west midlands, only 16 per cent. of respondents said that that they wanted a referendum. In the east and south-east of England, about 35 per cent. said that they wanted a referendum, and in the south-west and the east midlands the figure was about 40 per cent. Taken together with other views, information and evidence, those figures show that there is insufficient evidence in the west midlands, the east of England, the south-east, the south-west and the east midlands to justify holding a referendum now. I am therefore not directing the boundary committee to undertake local government reviews in those regions.

The picture is quite different in the three northern regions. In the north-east and the north-west, more than half of respondents wanted a referendum. In my own region, Yorkshire and Humberside, almost three quarters said yes—although I am aware that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (David Davis) registered his

⁴ HC Deb 30 April 2003 c317-8

⁵ SN/PC/2922, available at <http://hcl1.hclibrary.parliament.uk/notes/pcc/snpc-02922.pdf>

⁶ Available at <http://www.regions.odpm.gov.uk/elected/pdf/choosing.pdf>

minority "no" vote. In all three northern regions, there was significant and widespread interest in holding a referendum from the business community, trade unions, local authorities and the voluntary sector. Taking all that evidence together, I am satisfied that interest in a referendum is high in all three regions. I am therefore pleased to announce to the House that it is my intention to hold referendums at the first opportunity in the north-east, the north-west and Yorkshire and the Humber. I expect that opportunity to come in the autumn of 2004.

At the same time, Mr Prescott directed the Boundary Committee for England to carry out a local government review in each of the three regions. Those reviews covered the existing two-tier areas of Durham, Northumberland, Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire and North Yorkshire county councils. The boundary committee was required to recommend at least two options for structural change in relation to each area, and voters in those areas will be given a choice as to which unitary option they prefer. Reviews in the three northern regions began on 17 June 2003 and were completed on 25 May 2004. Mr Prescott indicated that if there was a yes-vote in the referendum then the assemblies could be “up and running early in the next Parliament”.

The next stage will be the publication of a draft Bill setting out the powers and functions for elected regional assemblies in those regions that want them. In reaction to questions on the publication of the draft Bill, Mr Prescott said:

As for whether the Bill can be introduced before the date of the next election, it is highly questionable when that event will come—we all know about the problems of timetables in Parliament. We will certainly do our utmost to conduct the referendum, and I am committing myself to doing so. The timetable seems a little short in view of the fact that I have to bring a Bill before the House, but we will do all that we can to make as much progress as possible.⁷

In areas where there will be no regional assembly, the regional chambers, the regional development agencies and the Government offices “will all continue to ensure that there is a distinctive regional voice from every region”.

1. Reaction

The Conservative shadow Deputy Prime Minister, David Davis, said:

We believe that the Deputy Prime Minister has instigated referendums in the north-east, north-west and Yorkshire and Humberside that will deeply embarrass him and the Government. Such a measure will do little more than pour millions of pounds of taxpayers' cash down the drain as the Deputy Prime Minister blindly chases his obsession with what will undoubtedly become an expensive white elephant. Rather than a solution, it is a symptom of Labour's failure to deliver decent public services. It is a desperate attempt to create legitimacy for an idea for which there is no argument,

⁷ Ibid, c30

advantage or appetite. As Lord Whitty said, elected regional government is not an issue "in the pubs and clubs" of the north.

The Government received a dismal total of 8,000 replies nationally to their consultation on whether referendums were needed—surely even the Deputy Prime Minister could take the hint. That was after the Government extended the deadline for submitting replies from March to May because of lack of interest in the exercise. In March, they had received 5,500 replies—fewer than the number of people who voted for the Monster Raving Loony party at the last election. In May, the Deputy Prime Minister had received a mere 7,000 replies. However, when my office rang last week, we were told that 8,000 replies had now been received. It appears that the cut-off date for the replies has been extended yet again in a desperate attempt to stimulate interest. Will the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that? Is it now Government policy to leave the polls open until they receive a result that they like? Eight thousand replies after three attempts from a population of 42 million is a pathetic figure. The Deputy Prime Minister's dream appears to put everyone else to sleep.

Mr Davis pointed out that “in Yorkshire and Humberside, only 833 people out of a population of 5 million wanted a referendum and got it?”⁸

Edward Davey, Liberal Democrat Shadow Spokesman for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, welcomed the decision, although he said:

Does the Deputy Prime Minister realise that he could have given the "yes" campaign an even bigger boost had he proposed a far richer devolution than is proposed in the White Paper? Voters in the regions would be much more impressed by him if he could assure them that his regional devolution is about reducing Government control freakery, about cutting Whitehall down to size, and about voter power rather than ministerial power. Unfortunately, he cannot do that.⁹

The Local Government Association said:

The introduction of regional assemblies where they are supported through a referendum should take powers from Whitehall not local councils, the LGA said this week...Sir Jeremy Beecham the chair of the LGA said:

“I welcome the fact that the people in three regions will be given the opportunity to vote on the establishment of directly elected regional assemblies in referendums. But the association is concerned that local government in those regions will be faced with more reorganisation and distraction from the drive to improve services.”

The LGA Conservative Group has reiterated its opposition to the establishment of regional assemblies. Sir Jeremy continued:

“We are particularly concerned that elected regional government is being linked to

⁸ HC Deb 16 June 2003 c23

⁹ Ibid, c28

the re-organisation of local government and we will continue to use independent research which shows that there is no need to make this link, to lobby against this aspect of the proposals. If regional assemblies are going to be introduced it is important that their powers should be cascaded down from Whitehall and not taken away from local government and we will be working to influence the next government bill that will outline the form and function of elected regional government. The LGA will be holding the government to account on its regions white paper promise that no powers will be drawn up from local government, to ensure that local government is the front line deliverer of many of the proposed regional strategies and to ensure that communities have proper representation and involvement.”¹⁰

The Yorkshire and Humber Regional Assembly said:

The Yorkshire and Humber Assembly today welcomed the announcement that the region has been selected for a referendum on directly elected regional government. Chair Peter Box said the Assembly, which in February voted to support a referendum, believed the move was the most democratic way forward - by letting the people in the region decide through the ballot box. “During the Government’s soundings period we were involved in an extensive range of activities to tell people about the referendum issue and to gather views,” he added. “These views indicated people wanted a chance to vote on whether or not they supported directly elected regional government and as such, we’re delighted the Government has decided to give them that chance.” Deputy chair Clive Leach commented: “Individuals, businesses and organisations across the region fed their comments into the Assembly and today’s Government decision supports our view that every person living here should have the opportunity to vote on the issue.”¹¹

The Leader of the North West Regional Assembly, Cllr Derek Boden, said:

“I am delighted by John Prescott’s announcement. I am fully committed to the democratic process, and welcome the opportunity to put plans for regional government to the test of public opinion. The Deputy Prime Minister has offered the people of the North West the chance to look at both sides of the argument and choose for themselves whether they want to see a real devolution of power back to the region. I will happily respect their decision.”¹²

¹⁰ Local Government Association Press Release 085/03, *Regional reorganisation of local government should not inhibit councils' ambitions*, 17 June 2003, <http://www.lga.gov.uk/PressRelease.asp?id=SXA790-A7818F87>

¹¹ Yorkshire and Humber Assembly press release, *Vote for a referendum*, 17 June 2003, <http://www.rayh.gov.uk/index.cfm?routine=content&channel=Latest%20news&contentid=165>

¹² North West Regional Assembly Press release, *Devolution day North West wins right to choose*, 16 June 2003, http://www.nwra.gov.uk/whatsnew/pressreleases.php?full_article=yes&release_id=59&archive_start=0&page_number=1

A number of organisations have been set up to oppose regional assemblies, including *North East against Regional Assemblies* and *North West against Regional Assemblies*. They are listed on <http://www.regionallassemblies.co.uk>.

C. Soundings Exercise

The soundings document was published on 3 December 2002 and responses were originally requested by 3 March 2003. As a result of the amendments described above, the soundings exercise was extended until 16 May 2003. The results of the soundings exercise were published on 16 June 2003 in *Your region, your say*.¹³ Safeguards were built into the exercise to ensure that the results did not include duplicate responses. The main results of the soundings exercise were:

- 8,465 responses from individuals and organisations were included in the numerical analysis.
- 152 responses had name and address details which were too partial to enable checks to be made for duplication. These were not included in the numerical analysis.
- 8,344 indicated whether they personally were in favour or against holding a referendum.
- 6,526 provided a view on the level of interest in holding a referendum in their region.
- 28 separate opinion polls, providing quantitative data on percentages in favour of holding a referendum, were received.
- 9 relevant petitions were received.

Detailed figures are available in the report, but the main findings in relation to whether a region wanted a referendum was as follows:

	In favour (%)	In favour (total respondents)	Against (%)	Against (total respondents)
West Midlands	16%	58	84	297
East of England	33%	120	67%	239
South East	37%	239	63%	409
South West	40%	264	60%	397
East Midlands	41%	154	59%	219
North East	53%	474	47%	414
North West	56%	2202	44%	1699
Yorkshire and the Humber	72%	833	28%	326

¹³ <http://www.regions.odpm.gov.uk/elected/pdf/choosing.pdf>

D. Your region, your choice summaries

The ODPM has launched regional summaries of the white paper and what it will mean for the three regions chosen to undertake referendums.¹⁴ In the summary on the North East, John Prescott said:

The referendums could take place in autumn 2004. Should the North East decide in favour of establishing an elected assembly then it could be up and running early in the next Parliament. The assembly would be responsible for regional priorities including economic development, housing, planning, and culture, and would be democratically accountable to people in your region.

I 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. In the end, it is down to you to say whether there should be an elected assembly for the North East. It is your region and your choice.¹⁵

The summaries give more details about the likely responsibilities of any Assembly. Again, the summary for the North East:

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 regional 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 elected regional assembly will have specific responsibilities are:

- economic development
- skills and employment
- culture, tourism and sport
- land use and regional planning
- environmental protection, biodiversity and waste
- fire and rescue service

As well as drawing up - and delivering - regional strategies for these policy areas, assemblies will also need to ensure they all fit together effectively so they improve people's living standards and quality of life. This is where the Government believes

¹⁴ The summaries are available at http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_control/documents/contentservertemplate/odpm_index.hcst?n=2799&l=1

¹⁵ *Your region, your choice – summary: North East*, ODPM, p2

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.

Delivering in the region

Successful redevelopment of an area and the development of sustainable communities 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 within each region, including the Regional Development Agency, the Government Office, the regional chamber and the Housing Corporation. This has sometimes meant duplication, disagreement and delay. An elected regional assembly for the North East would produce integrated strategies covering all these issues. It would have direct responsibility for One NorthEast (the Regional Development Agency) and influence over other regional agencies and public bodies. It would also have money and other powers to help it implement its strategies.¹⁶

E. The 'Your say' campaign

On 3 November 2003 John Prescott launched the 'Your say' campaign.¹⁷ This was described by the ODPM in a press release:

A campaign to raise awareness and spark debate about an elected regional assembly for the three northern regions was launched today by the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. The 'Your Say' campaign explains what regional government would mean to people in the North West, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber so voters can make an informed choice in the referendums expected to be held next autumn. The campaign includes a new leaflet setting out what an elected regional assembly would mean for the three northern regions, a 'Your Say' website, and promotional material. Exhibitions and visits are planned over the next 12 months.

An elected regional assembly would improve democracy and bring decision making closer to the people. It would give regions a strong new voice, championing regional interests and priorities. It would have responsibilities on a range of issues from jobs, business and skills, housing and planning to culture, tourism and fire and rescue. Launching the 'Your Say' campaign today, the Deputy Prime Minister said:

"People in the north have a great opportunity to establish a new form of government that will bring choice, democracy and opportunity to their region. The information campaign I am launching today will ensure people are armed with the knowledge to choose whether they want to take this opportunity or not.

"I'm looking forward to taking part in the debate in all three northern regions over the coming year as part of our campaign. This is a historic time for these regions - the Great North vote - when voters will have the opportunity to establish elected regional government for the first time.

¹⁶ *Your region, your choice – summary: North East*, pp4-5

¹⁷ Mr Prescott's speeches about the campaign are available at http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_control/documents/contentservertemplate/speeches.hcst?n=18&l=2

"This is an important decision. It is vital the Government fully explains what an assembly would mean for each region and its people. I'm confident that 'Your Say' will bring the debate to the people, raise awareness and encourage people to have their say next year."

The three northern regions are the first to move towards referendums after the Government's soundings exercise indicated a high level of interest in holding a referendum in those regions. The Government has always accepted that regions would move at different speeds towards a referendum on elected regional government and that no region would be forced down that route if there were no demand for a referendum.

In tandem with its vision of elected regional assemblies, the Government is strengthening the ability of regions by looking at existing regional institutions. This has an important part to play in revitalising all eight English regions.

The Deputy Prime Minister said:

"The progression towards regional government in the northern regions in no way affects the Government's commitment to the development of a strong regional voice in all eight regions. The institutions that already exist - the Regional Chambers, the Regional Development Agencies and the Government Offices for the Regions - will continue to ensure that there is a distinctive regional voice from each region heard in Whitehall and elsewhere."¹⁸

Nick Raynsford reportedly said during the launch that ministers will not approve the creation of assemblies in regions where the turnout has been "derisory".¹⁹ However, the leaflets published as a result of the 'Your say' campaign state that the referendums will be decided:

By a simple majority.

The Government intends that if more than half of those voting say 'yes', Yorkshire and the Humber will get an elected regional assembly. If more than half say 'no', there will be no elected regional assembly and no change to local councils.²⁰

Following the launch of the 'Your say' campaign, the Government published two factsheets, one called *Assembly powers and responsibility*, the other called *Business and jobs*.²¹ The factsheet on powers and responsibility lists a number of areas where an elected assembly will have influence:

¹⁸ ODPM News Release 2003/0226, 'Your say' campaign launch heralds a new era - Prescott kick starts year of debate on the 'Great North Vote', 3 November 2003

¹⁹ See eg "Parliaments for the north: Prescott takes plans to the people", *the Independent*, 4 November 2003 p8

²⁰ 'Your say' campaign, Ibid

²¹ Available from

http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_control/documents/contentservertemplate/odpm_index.hcst?n=3937&l=2

Business and economy: An Assembly would have responsibility for Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)

Training, skills and jobs: An elected regional assembly would appoint two Board members to each local Learning and Skills Council in the region. It would be able to work with local training organisations, colleges and employers to ensure that the training is tailored to provide people in the region with the skills they need to take advantage of job opportunities.

Housing, planning and transport: Currently bodies such as the national Housing Corporation and the voluntary regional chamber carry out work on housing and planning for the region. An elected assembly would take over a lot of this work, so it could ensure that these issues are joined up and co-ordinated with plans for economic development and regeneration. An assembly would make plans about how land should be used...would be able to give money to local authorities and housing associations for new housing and the renovation of older properties. The assembly would also advise the Government on how funding for local transport would be given to councils in the region, so that local transport would be integrated with housing and planning developments.

Improving quality of life in the region

Fire and rescue: The assembly would be responsible for a new regional fire authority, and for ensuring fire and rescue services are organised in the most efficient way to protect people and property across the region...

Culture: An elected assembly would take over responsibility for regional cultural consortiums and be able to set the agenda for cultural activities in the region. The assembly would also promote tourism for the region.

Environment: An elected assembly ... would be able to work with national bodies such as the Environment Agency, English Nature and the Countryside Agency to ensure they reflect regional and local needs. An assembly could work with other organisations to improve air and water quality, manage waste, conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable energy and forestry policies across the region.

Public health: An elected assembly would be responsible for promoting the health of the population of its region; it would need to ensure that its policies work towards reducing health inequalities and improving public health in the region. And it could work with health bodies, local authorities and other regional partners to take forward a strategy for public health.

Sustainable development: Each assembly would be responsible for agreeing long-term action for improving the region's economy, environment, and social conditions, involving people and organisations in the region.

The *Business and Jobs* factsheet comments:

The RDA would become directly accountable to the elected regional assembly, and thereby to the people of the region. The assembly would:

- fund the RDA and the RDA would answer directly to it
- appoint the RDA's board members - half of whom would need to have recent experience of running a business
- approve the RDA's Regional Economic Strategy - the plan that sets out the vision for economic prosperity and how to achieve it
- oversee the actions and impact of the RDA to make sure it is working well

Improve learning and skills in the region

An assembly would aim to make sure people have the skills to take advantage of new job opportunities being created in your region. It would see that the RDAs, the local Learning and Skills Councils, local training organisations, colleges and employers work together so the right training is on offer for the workforce. An assembly would:

- appoint members to the boards of local Learning and Skills Councils

It could also:

- draw up and publish a regional strategy for learning and skills; and
- help develop plans at local and national level to improve skills and training

Boost the main building blocks of growth and prosperity

An assembly would be a strong voice for the region. It could represent the region in Brussels, lobbying for the region at the European level. It will have a budget to carry out its responsibilities, with flexibility about how to spend it and an influencing role on how other funds are spent. An assembly will also have wideranging powers to make decisions and take actions to deliver regional priorities.

An opposition day debate on regional assemblies took place on 11 February 2004. Opening the Debate, David Curry, then Shadow Secretary of State for Local and Regional Affairs, commented on the delay in producing legislation to set out the powers of the Assemblies:

When there is a decision to be made about the way in which we are governed, the debate ought to take place on the basis of a clear indication of what is at stake; the time scale; and the powers of the institution that we are debating. That will enable debate to be clear, above board, transparent and honest. The way to achieve that is to publish legislation as early as possible. In the course of debate in the House, legislation is amended, but those amendments are themselves subject to detailed scrutiny and analysis.

At the moment, there are proposals for regional assemblies, and there is a great deal of activity in pursuit of the case for or against them. However, we still do not have proposals about what the assemblies will actually do. If the powers of the proposed regional assemblies are to be closely based on the contents of the White Paper, "Your Region, Your Choice", it is difficult to see why the legislative propositions cannot be published at an early stage. If the powers are to differ substantially from that outline, the need for legislation is even more urgent, as our debate would be based on a false premise.²²

Hilton Dawson asked in an intervention, "Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that in certain circumstances, if he had the right information, he would be minded to support elected regional assemblies?", to which Mr Curry replied:

Until I have the right information it is premature even to ask such a question, because there is no basis on which I can come to a conclusion. The answer to the hon. Gentleman's is likely to be no, because I cannot conceive of circumstances in which the Government would be prepared to concede to any regional assemblies the powers that would make debate worth while.²³

²² HC Deb 417 c1475-536

²³ Ibid c1476

Noting that “in Yorkshire, about 1,200 favourable responses from a population of 5 million were interpreted as enthusiasm for a referendum”, Mr Curry went on to say that “for the overwhelming majority of people in the three designated regions, the assemblies will mean a new layer of politicians, partly funded by the council tax.”, and that “these politicians will be remote figures, elected by proportional representation.” He then concluded:

How will an assembly be financed? We know that it will be financed by Government grant and by a further raid on the council tax, or income tax if the Liberal Democrats were to have their way. We will have precepts for parishes, precepts for police, precepts for fire and rescue services, and precepts for regional assemblies. The public who, as we all know, are cheerfully happy to pay up the current levels of council tax imposed by the Government will get another little supplement to their council tax if they vote for these assemblies. At least with the fire and police services, people know what they are supposed to be there for.

What are the regional assemblies there for? The leaflets make them sound like powerhouses, yet how much public money do they control? It is about 2 per cent. of regional public spending. All this—with set-up costs and running costs of £30 million and £20 million a year—for sixpence in the pound. Will regions with an assembly be able to claim more money? Will they be able to change the balance of funding between the regions and parts of the United Kingdom? Will they be able to challenge—dare I say it?—the Barnett formula, because the Deputy Prime Minister has at least been giving the impression that if people vote for regional assemblies, there might be some rebalancing, to use the fashionable word, in relation to funding. I can find no evidence that that will be the case.

Will the assemblies bring power closer to the people? The answer is no. They are an out-of-date, bureaucratic, unimaginative idea. The political debate is about empowering people in their communities—the Prime Minister talks about giving them control of their lives. In this case, however, the Government seem to want to disarm the citizen, remove power from the community, and push power upward, not down. The local councils will go, and be replaced by PR politicians.²⁴

Responding to the debate, John Prescott said:

We believe in asking the people what they think, so my ministerial team and I will hold hearings in the three northern regions over the next few months. We will discuss with the people the powers that we have proposed for the elected assemblies, and we plan to publish a Bill before the House rises in July. I take on board that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon said that that should happen in June, but he only said that because he believes that we already know what those powers are. As I said, an active discussion is going on with the people at the moment, and we will present and reflect those views in our Bill.

We believe that elected regional assemblies offer a great opportunity for the northern regions. We want to take power from Whitehall and give it to the people of the

²⁴ *ibid* cc1480

regions. We want greater prosperity, more growth, more jobs and more investment in our regions. Elected regional assemblies represent a new form of government, which is smaller, more focused and involves elected and non-elected stakeholders in decision making; a new vision, strengthening the prosperity of the north, increasing employment and reducing the present and continuing economic and political deficit in decision making; and a greater democratic accountability, providing more democracy and less bureaucracy. They will give the regions a greater sense of pride and a new political voice, but it is up to the people to decide. It is not Parliament's decision. It is not the Government's decision. It is the people's decision—their say, their choice. Just as we did for the people of Scotland, the people of Wales and the people of London, we are now offering that choice to the people of the north.²⁵

F. The Yes and No campaigns

Yes and No campaigns have begun to take shape across the three regions chosen for referendums. In the North West, Sir David Trippier, former Conservative MP for Rossendale and Darwen, is the Chairman of the North West Says No campaign.²⁶ George Howarth, currently Labour MP for Knowsley North and Sefton East, is Vice Chairman, as is George Osborne, Conservative MP for Tatton. In Yorkshire, the BBC has reported that John Watson OBE, former Conservative MP, is the Chairman of the Yorkshire Says No campaign. There is also the North east No campaign.²⁷

In the North East, the Campaign for a positive vote in the referendum is headed by the Yes4thenortheast campaign, which is chaired by Professor John Tomaney.²⁸ Similar campaign in Yorkshire (Yes4Yorkshire²⁹) has recently begun and the campaign in the North West (Yes4theNorthWest) is expected to begin working shortly.

In launching its 'Your say' campaign, the Government stated that the campaign is a Government information campaign "so that people know about the issues and are encouraged to vote. It is not campaigning for a 'yes' vote nor for a 'no' vote." Responding to a question from Bernard Jenkin, Shadow Secretary of State for the Regions, on 15 March 2004, Nick Raynsford said:

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what representations he has received from the Electoral Commission concerning the publication of information by the Government during the period prior to the referendums on the proposed elected regional assemblies. [159825]

Mr. Raynsford: Sam Younger, Chairman of the Electoral Commission, wrote to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in January about the timing of the Government's information campaign about elected regional assemblies. He suggested that the

²⁵ Ibid c1495

²⁶ <http://www.northwestsaysno.org.uk/news.asp>

²⁷ <http://www.northeastnocampaign.co.uk>

²⁸ <http://www.yes4thenortheast.com/yes/main.php>

²⁹ <http://www.yes4yorkshire.org.uk/>

Government's information campaign should stop once the referendum period begins. In my reply, I have pointed out that during the course of the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister undertook to deliver a leaflet providing information about the referendum issues to every household in the regions affected. It is not feasible for us to print or deliver that leaflet before the referendums have been called and the date of those referendums is settled. This commitment to Parliament could not be honoured if Mr. Younger's suggestion was followed.

Section 125 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) requires the Government to stop providing information 28 days before the close of poll. However, we intend these referendums to be conducted by all-postal ballot, which means that voters will receive their ballot papers, and be able to vote, up to three weeks before close of poll. We have therefore indicated to the Chairman of the Electoral Commission our intention to stop our information campaign 28 days before the first day that ballot papers can be dispatched. This complies with both the letter and the spirit of the PERA and enables our commitment to Parliament to be honoured.³⁰

The Electoral Commission announced on 18 December 2003 that it intended to award grants of £100,000 to those leading the Yes and No campaigns in each of the regional referendums planned for the autumn of 2004.³¹

G. Costs and grants

The government has estimated that the overall costs of the Assemblies will be in the region of £30m for each assembly:

The costs of establishing elected assemblies will vary from region to region, mainly because of the different sizes of their electorates. But we expect these to be around £30 million for each region. This estimate includes all costs necessary to establish an assembly, including the cost of local government reviews, referendums and the first elections.³²

The Government plan to give grants to the regional assemblies, proposed at £780 million for the North West Region, £350 million for the North East Region and £570 million for Yorkshire and the Humber Region.

Nick Raynsford commented:

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister ... proposes to give regional assemblies a single block grant with freedom to spend money as they judge best.

³⁰ HC Deb 15 March 2004 c61-2W

³¹ For more information see SN/PC/2922, available at <http://hcl1.hclibrary.parliament.uk/notes/pcc/snpc-02922.pdf>

³² HL Deb 8 September 2003 652 c49WA

In return, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister will expect each assembly to help achieve in their region a small number of targets agreed with the Government and relevant to an assembly's responsibilities. Some additional money will be available to reward elected assemblies which achieve or exceed the targets.³³

Further details on set up costs is given in an answer on 12 May 2004.³⁴

H. Boundary Committee recommendations

The Boundary Committee's recommendations for the six northern counties were published on 25 May 2004. Most of the Committee's recommendations are contained within existing county areas, but they have proposed some cross-country options, including between one- and two- tier areas. The options can be summarised as follows:

1. Yorkshire and the Humber

North Yorkshire

- one unitary authority covering the whole of the county council area;
- four unitaries comprising Craven & Harrogate, Hambleton & Richmondshire, Ryedale & Scarborough, and Selby & East Riding of Yorkshire.

2. North East region

Durham

- one unitary authority comprising the whole of the County Durham county area;
- three unitary authorities based on combinations of existing districts in County Durham (Chester-le-Street and Derwentside; Durham City and Easington; and Sedgefield, Teesdale and Wear Valley).

Northumberland

- one unitary authority comprising the whole of the Northumberland county area; or
- two unitary authorities based on combinations of the existing districts in Northumberland County (Alnwick, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Castle Morpeth and Tynedale; and Blyth Valley and Wansbeck).

3. North West Region

Cheshire

- One unitary body covering whole of existing county council area;
- Three unitary authorities combining Chester City and Ellesmere Port and Neston districts, Congleton and Macclesfield (East Cheshire) and Vale Royal and Crewe & Nantwich (Mid Cheshire).

³³ HC Deb 15 March 2004 c62W

³⁴ HC Deb 12 May 2004 c333w. See also HC Deb 5 May 2004 c1604w and HC Deb! April 2004 c1651w

Cumbria

- one unitary authority comprising the whole of the Cumbria county area and;
- two unitary authorities based on the northern and southern areas in Cumbria, Morecambe Bay (Barrow in Furness and South Lakeland, and Lancaster City from Lancashire) and North Cumbria (Carlisle City, Allerdale, Copeland and Eden districts).

Lancashire

- two unitary authorities, one based on the majority of the Lancashire county area, the other comprising Blackpool and Fleetwood (Blackpool expanded to include Fleetwood and Thornton Cleveleys areas of Wyre district);
- seven unitary authorities: Blackburn with Hyndburn (combining Blackburn with Darwen with Hyndburn district); Blackpool and the Fylde (Blackpool plus Fylde and Wyre districts); Central Lancashire (Preston City, South Ribble, Chorley Districts); East Lancashire (Burnley, Pendle, Ribble Valley, and Rossendale); Morecambe Bay (Lancaster City with Barrow in Furness and South Lakeland districts from Cumbria); Sefton and West Lancashire (Sefton expanded to include parts of West Lancashire); Wigan (Wigan expanded to cover parts of West Lancashire).

Full details of the proposals are in the individual reports, including maps, are available on the Committee's website.³⁵ This also gives the draft recommendations which differ in some cases. Initial press reaction was that the preparations for regional assemblies had greatly increased momentum towards unitary government in England. Individual councils affected by the proposals, such as West Lancashire, are continuing to press for changes in the proposals.³⁶ A critique of the process was published in *Public Money and Management* in April 2004, which argued that the costing model used by the Boundary Committee was inadequate.³⁷ There was a written ministerial statement noting the no final decisions would be announced until 7 July:

The Minister for Local and Regional Government (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I have today received the independent boundary committee's final reports and recommendations on options for unitary local government for each of the existing two-tier county areas in the three northern regions. We welcome the completion of this significant step towards the holding of referendums for elected regional assemblies in the autumn.

We will now carefully consider the recommended options and any representations about them that are made to us before taking decisions about the options that will be included in a draft order. We do not intend to take decisions about the options until 6 July.

³⁵ <http://www.boundarycommittee.org.uk/our-work/LocalGovReviews.cfm>

³⁶ 'Unitary cause outstrips regional government' *Local Government Chronicle* 28 May 2004

³⁷ 'Reorganising two-tier local government for regional assemblies' Michael Chisholm *Public Money and Management* Vol 24 No 2 April 2004

In the meantime, those who wish to make representations to us may do so. We will have regard to those before deciding what options we propose to put to electors. These options, together with the date of the referendums, will be contained in an order to be made following parliamentary approval.³⁸

I. Indicative timetable

2 December 2002:	Soundings exercise began
8 May 2003:	<i>Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill</i> receives Royal Assent
16 May 2003:	End of extended soundings exercise
16 June 2003:	Announcement of assembly referendums in north-east, north-west and Yorkshire and the Humber
17 June 2003:	Beginning of Boundary Committee for England review of local government structure in these areas
3 November 2003:	Launch of 'Your say' campaign
1 December 2003:	Publication of Boundary Committee's draft proposals for the six affected counties
23 February 2004:	Last date for responses to the Boundary Committee's draft proposals
25 May 2004:	Boundary Committee's final proposals announced
Autumn 2004:	Referendums in north-west, north-east and Yorkshire and the Humber
2005/7:	First regional assemblies up and running?

³⁸ HC Deb 25 May 2004 c75WS