Devolution, local growth and public service reform: What now and where next?

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Abstract This paper advocates for a deepening of the English Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) model as a mechanism for achieving better economic and social policy outcomes. It argues for greater alignment of financial resources with long-term goals, fostering co-creation and upholding democratic accountability. It explores the origins of the MCA model set within the context of wider UK devolution and successive waves of English government reform, identifies some key benefits of the MCA model such as scale, democratic legitimacy and potential for collaboration, before proposing some key areas for further development. The paper recommends a strategic focus on evolving the relationship between the MCA and public service reform, particularly in health, education and employment support. The story of North East devolution is presented as an important case study that provides lessons for the future trajectory of English devolution as a whole, while highlighting the necessity of continuous adaptation to achieve sustainable regional development.

Keywords: *combined authorities, English devolution, decentralisation, governance, public services*

INTRODUCTION

In January 2023, the political leaders of seven local authorities in the North East of England signed a deal to create a new North East Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA).[1] The new body supersedes the North of Tyne Combined Authority, comprising Newcastle, Northumberland and North Tyneside, and adds the authorities of

Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland to create the new entity. The new combined authority takes effect in May 2024 following the election of the first North East Mayor.

The North East MCA becomes one of the largest bodies of its type by population, and by far the largest by geographical footprint, stretching from Berwick at the border with Scotland down to the southern border of County Durham, some 87 miles away (or a car journey of around 2 hours and 12 minutes). This is a substantial portion of what would have been the first of New Labour's regional assembly areas, had a 2004 referendum produced a different result.[2] The Tees Valley Mayoral Combined Authority (part of the original proposed assembly area) is now disaggregated from this North East bloc and lies directly to the south.

The North East region — as defined by this devolution deal — is a unique mix of urban, coastal and rural settings — with three cities, numerous towns and a substantial rural hinterland. It is a region with internationally recognised heritage (including Hadrian's Wall, Durham Cathedral and the Angel of the North), globally facing businesses (such as Nissan, Greggs and Newcastle United), vibrant towns and cities and a strong and renowned cultural identity.[3] It is also a region with considerable social challenges and an industrial legacy that is arguably still being navigated, particularly in those parts of the region that John Tomaney and colleagues call 'places left behind'.[4] The nature of the North East geography — and the attendant economic model that will be needed to service it — makes its new combined authority a distinct 'regional' construct, rather than a uni-polar city region in the manner of Greater Manchester.

It is axiomatic that devolution has 'not been an easy journey for the North East',[5] so the creation of the new MCA and election of a North East Mayor marks an important moment in the evolution of the combined authority (CA) model, in addition to its significance for the region. It offers an opportunity to take stock of its development, the potential for future delivery, and the barriers that can stand in the way of success and scale-up. It also gives a chance to explore policy areas that have been underdeveloped within current uses of the model — including areas such as culture and creative sector growth, rural development and the emergence of a new public service reform narrative.[6]

Drawing on a brief snapshot of theory, practice and comparative analysis with devolutionary frameworks and delivery learning in Wales and Scotland, this paper makes the case for deepening and strengthening of the model of MCA-led English devolution, building on the tentative start that has been made over the last ten years. Influential commentators like Andy Haldane,[7] Jim O'Neil, the City Growth Commission and others have argued that this deepening of devolution is a critical component in stronger and more sustainable local economic growth, and has the potential to support more collaborative public services that are better adapted to shifting patterns of demand.[8] While we are in the foothills of this long-term project, the current moment offers a timely opportunity to think about what works, how we can grow and scale, and what barriers are emerging to the MCA delivery model in a post-COVID-19 context.

THE DEVOLUTION JOURNEY SO FAR

The MCA model has been developed in the context of wider sub-UK devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — a story of much progress but also contests for national recognition, failed (but not lost) referendums, territorial

distinctiveness and the maintenance of existing policy and institutional differences.[9,10].These aspirations were largely (notwithstanding the complexities of the Northern Irish case) realised with the creation of directly elected legislatures in Labour's first term.

The establishment and consolidation of distinctive national political institutions posed a question for England, the country's largest nation by territory, population and share of the economy. An English Parliament has been suggested, but makes little sense, given the country's political dominance of Westminster.[11] Various solutions have been floated, with (broadly) the right favouring the institutionalisation of English control of Westminster (English Votes for English Laws — see, for instance, the work of Michael Kenny[12]), and the left preferring some form of regional devolution within England or leaving the West Lothian question unanswered. These debates around the English question have influenced the trajectory of the country's local government reform.

In England, most of the land is governed by two-tiered local authorities (eg areas in which district and county councils operate concomitantly), whereas much of the population is governed by single-tier metropolitan councils. Waves of local government reform, most notably in the 1940s, 1970s and 1980s, saw different structures and configurations — including metropolitan counties such as Tyne and Wear — come and go. The pendulum has swung between localism and regionalism in economic development, and with it, local governance structures.[13] The economic planning regions of the 1960s differed from the standard regions of the 1970s. In turn, these were different from the 1980s Urban Development Corporations.[14]

A distinctive new phase emerged with the New Labour government's agenda to decentralise power in the UK and the embrace of a regionalist programme, matching changes which had and were occurring in other European countries such as Italy and France.[15] Directly elected Regional Assemblies — which would be responsible for elements of economic development, spatial planning, transport and housing, among others — were proposed by the Labour government. The North East region was seen as one of the most cohesive, with the most to gain from devolution, and was consulted in an ultimately unsuccessful referendum in 2004.[16] The agenda was thus scaled back considerably. For instance, rather than the planned directly elected Regional Assemblies, Regional Development Agencies were overseen by bodies that bore the same name and were made up of local government and interest group representatives,[17] and finally by Local Authority Leaders' Boards.

In 2010, the Coalition government announced the abolition of this architecture and its replacement by a patchwork quilt of private sector-led Local Economic Partnerships, which took on some but not all of the roles of the predecessor bodies (and which are now being integrated into 'local democratic structures' after a Ministerial decision in 2022). These came alongside the creation of Police and Crime Commissioner posts, mirroring the overlapping but distinct police authority areas, and a push towards localism.[18] In 2009, the outgoing Labour government had paved the way for the creation of MCAs through the 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act. It was not until the Conservative–Liberal Coalition government came to office in 2010, however, that serious moves would be taken to support the creation of such a model for Greater Manchester, England's second-largest conurbation, and designed to enact a 'northern powerhouse' agenda

and eventually to create a northern economic rival to London.[19] It was joined by others MCAs such as the West Midlands, West Yorkshire, Liverpool City Region and North of Tyne. By 2020, most of England's largest urban centres were covered by MCAs.

Progress on the devolution agenda has been achieved through a mix of local agency, economic logic, policy influencing and incremental change within government.[20] The economic case (principally based on agglomeration economics and championed by Diane Coyle, Ed Glaeser, Henry Overman, Richard Florida and others) was summarised well for a UK policy audience by the Royal Society of Arts' (RSA) City Growth Commission in 2014.[21] The Commission was chaired by economist Jim O'Neil, who subsequently worked with George Osborne, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, to sponsor the agreement of devolution deals from within the Treasury.

The principle of 'earned autonomy' that underpinned these early devolution agreements means that the responsibilities enjoyed by MCAs have been determined on a case-by-case basis by Westminster, in negotiation with local stakeholders. Indeed, to date it has made sense to talk of MCAs as enjoying a mix of 'responsibilities' and 'powers', conditional on agreements with local government, with the more mature MCAs such as Greater Manchester being granted a substantial role in delivering over public health, transport, housing, police and fire services and economic development, with the smaller or more recent MCAs enjoying responsibilities beginning with powers over economic development, skills and strategic planning.[22] This modus operandi is evolving somewhat following the publication of a 'Level Four' framework for further devolution as part of the 2023 Autumn Statement.[23]

THE VIRTUES OF THE MCA MODEL

The government has alighted on a governance system for local economic development, and regional governance, which purports to use existing local government structures to harness the benefits of economic agglomeration, generates a degree of democratic legitimacy, and secures stakeholder participation and buy-in.

Local councils, as *de facto* 'shareholders' of MCAs and signatories of devolution deals, have understandably engaged with the model cautiously at times — conscious of issues such as a potential dilution of power, imbalanced economic policy or 'role creep' in terms of the activities of MCAs as they have developed. Notwithstanding these concerns, in most MCA areas there is a tangible sense of shared benefit from collective strength, increased capacity to deliver regeneration, skills and economic development activities, and the development of a more coherent relationship with central government and the private sector, which has been further reinforced by recent government openness to 'deeper devolution' powers since the publication of the 2022 'Levelling Up' White Paper.

The MCA model thus has the potential to act as a bridgehead to a more profound shift in the governance of England, offering a better-than-previous balance between democratic legitimacy, regional scale, and the potential to achieve the necessary degree of collaboration in a way that recognises place and people, unlike perhaps the Regional Development Agencies and Local Enterprise Partnerships they have displaced. As Jeffrey argues,[24] however, despite strong regional identities, the 'process of city region devolution is not necessarily supported by a pre-existing ''demos''' with devolution agendas resulting from the identification of 'functional economic areas' in

combination with geographic, party-political and ideological factors.

Public awareness of MCAs has arguably been enhanced by the presence of a high-profile and visible 'metro mayor' who is publicly accountable for the decisions of the MCA. The increase in Andy Burnham's profile and his tongue-in-cheek designation as the 'King of the North' during the COVID-19 pandemic is testament to the potential for the model to generate interest from the public.[25] Further, the design of the model, with the MCA Cabinet consisting of the leadership of the constituent authorities (in addition to legal and constitutional checks), ensures that it should be beyond the capacity of any one individual to act unilaterally or against the wishes of its key stakeholders, whatever their electoral mandate. As well as creating constraints and building oversight into the governance structure, it embeds collaboration, bringing not only the authorities themselves but also their own local networks and stakeholders into the process. By creating policy and decision-making scaffolding around local authorities, this ensures that powers are exercised in their name, and institutional incentives to engage constructively and to collaborate rather than compete. These mechanisms have felt sufficient to date, but will need to take account of recent Government dialogue with some MCA areas and new academic insights into future governance.

The effect of this collaborative model could be seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some MCAs played a role in coordinating between constituent local government bodies and stakeholders, contributed to agenda-setting to ensure a region's voice was heard during the fraught and complex policymaking environment of the pandemic (particularly in relation to issues such as regional restrictions), and planned for a post-pandemic economic future.[26] Several mayors became more visible during this period, often using their distinctive electoral mandate to challenge the government or their own national party leaderships. Despite some disquiet in Westminster, this has not disrupted further steps towards deepening the model and enhancing its status and its range of responsibilities, with the government's Levelling Up Secretary (at time of writing), Michael Gove, emerging as a policy champion and his Labour Shadow Angela Rayner has pledged to 'broaden and deepen' English devolution.[27] There is, however, the potential to go further, by creating a greater degree of autonomy from central government and with it the potential to diverge meaningfully in key policy areas.[28]

EXPLORING FUTURE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR MCAS

Successive UK governments have been wary of handing power away as it dilutes their own capacity for control, but they should not fear doing so. As Hooghe and Marks argue, systems with more multilevel components, particularly at the regional level, provide more opportunities for citizens to engage, for problems to be dealt with at the appropriate level and enhance collaboration.[29] MCAs represent a means, therefore, of scaling policy problems to policy solutions and emulating some of the successes of regional tiers of government in Europe.[30] Further, they provide an opportunity to reinvigorate local and regional democracies through bridging the gap between national government and local communities which is evident in many areas of the country. Steadily growing voter turnout numbers in Greater Manchester, Tees Valley and other devolved areas suggests progress is being made: turnout in Greater Manchester increased from 28.6 per cent in 2017 to 34.2 per cent in 2021; in the

Tees Valley CA from 21.0 per cent in 2017 to 33.7 per cent in 2021; and in the Liverpool City Region from 25.9 per cent in 2017 to 29.5 per cent in 2021.[31]

The 'Trailblazer' deals in Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and the North East are important because they signal a direction of travel whereby local actors can better align finance with purpose (for example, through the development of 'single settlements', which consolidate fragmented funding streams into a more coherent long-term funding package)[32,33] and create long-term plans that have a chance of enduring against an uncertain and fragile economic backdrop. They also edge MCAs into the territory of public service reform, opening up potential for different ways of designing and delivering services across and within regions. This will be important in an era of ongoing fiscal constraint, a sluggish macro-economy (see for instance the Resolution Foundation's 2022 report, 'Stagnation Nation'[34]) and sustained high social demand that local authorities consequently struggle to meet.

An expanded role in the design and practice of public service reform could include, for example, more influence in the design of out-of-hospital and prevention-based health services (elements of which are already underway in Greater Manchester[35]) or to support quality improvement and greater collaboration across an arguably fragmented school system (as pilot work in the North of Tyne has shown[36]). Early-stage pilots show the potential of reducing competitive pressure across social care recruitment[37] and collaborating on multidisciplinary, place-based ways of addressing multiple needs.[38] There is clearly scope for greater local determination of 'work and health' policy and the way in which national employment support programmes tailor to local needs — leading, ultimately, to a different settlement with the Department of Work and Pensions in terms of future benefits policy. The North East devolution deal opens up the potential to explore these policy threads using policy vehicles such as a prevention fund and public service reform programme.[39] The North East deeper devolution 'Trailblazer' deal further reinforces this commitment.

None of the above will (or necessarily should) happen overnight — particularly where new ways of working imply a fundamental shift in the role of the state and the need to develop new delivery arrangements. For example, the progress in setting up Social Security Scotland demonstrates that easy-on-paper transfers of power can be more difficult to achieve in practice than might initially be thought.[40] Enthusiasm for greater involvement in the delivery of key public services must be balanced by a sensitivity to overburdening relatively young institutions with the demands of additional delivery — albeit recognising the collaborative nature of the model.

An increasing focus on public service reform reflects the truism that economic progress is unsustainable without commensurate investment in the social infrastructure underpinning it. The latter has atrophied through years of fiscal constraint, demand pressure and crisis response. The effects of this have been felt unevenly across the country and its institutions; the long years of austerity are being felt particularly hard in the large post-industrial city regions of the North, such as Newcastle and Manchester.[41] The UK's ageing society is already placing additional demands on the health and social care systems.[42] Young people struggle to access housing and face the prospect of low pay and precarity, entering the labour market burdened with huge debts.[43] The pandemic created immediate costs and lingering after-effects across the economy and society more broadly.

British society was already profoundly unequal, and recent years have accelerated many of these trends.[44,45,46,47] With the potential for big increases in public spending seemingly off the table to address this, the government (be it the present or a hypothetical future one) will need to think creatively about how to address complex issues within a constrained context. A blueprint for future devolution should therefore incorporate a substantial focus on prevention, human capital and public service reform. This must supplement, rather than replace, the focus on local and regional economic growth that animates the model.

Oversight and accountability of MCAs will also need to move with the times and are indeed under review by central government currently. Commentators have suggested that MCAs granted more power (eg in public services and social policy) would need to look at ways of strengthening accountability and/or visibility. For instance, there are already suggestions of introducing regional Public Accounts Committees[48] (PACs) that would oversee an increasingly complex local government landscape, similar to the role that the House of Commons PAC plays in monitoring the government's spending. Such bodies could also incorporate functions of the Public Administration Committee, which performs a similar function but with a focus on ensuring good governance. A useful principle is that as the powers of MCAs (or indeed any public institution) increase, so too should aspirations for oversight and accountability.

As decisions made in Edinburgh and Cardiff have become more consequential in Scotland and Wales, politics has increasingly oriented around them, with territorial policy communities made up of active stakeholders strengthening their role.[49] It is yet to be seen whether MCAs will become as influential as the seats of the Scottish or Welsh governments, but an increasing focus on the region as a locus of politics is desirable and heightens the likelihood of good governance and of further transfers of responsibility. While there are mechanisms to hold local institutions accountable through the organs of Westminster, the days where Nye Bevan's famous maxim about the clang of a bedpan dropped on a hospital floor in Tredegar echoing around Whitehall — suggesting that policymakers in Westminster should be firmly held accountable for goings on in the National Health Service (NHS) — are over. This sentiment was right for its time, but as the 2020 Commission and others have argued,[50] this highly centralised form of accountability needs updating for a new era. In future, as the CA role hopefully evolves, other innovations may be required, such as increasing deliberative and consultatory activities. Some have argued for a reconsideration of whether a directly elected oversight body, perhaps along the lines of the Greater London Assembly, might be desirable.

WHERE NEXT?

The underlying ethic of effective MCAs is one of collaboration and place-based working, alongside a pragmatic approach that recognises that devolution is sometimes a sliding scale or a mix of direct and indirect policy levers.[51] For instance, devolving funding and powers (such as with adult education or elements of transport planning or delivery) will represent the optimal model. In other areas, a more *sui generis* approach will be required, which might see Whitehall and local areas (including MCAs and their formal and informal stakeholders) work together to achieve jointly agreed outcomes in place. There is no 'one size fits all' approach, and whatever achieves the maximum desired impact within our

regions should be the objective. Even this more piecemeal and tailored approach requires a substantial shift in the mindset of some government departments. Some are borderline hostile to the notion of any power being exercised outside of Whitehall.

Considerations around accountability, the unintended consequences of policy divergence and the potential to undermine economies of scale are meaningful and need to be worked through seriously — but as one the most centralised countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),[52] there is plenty of room to manoeuvre. Indeed, the dispersal of power across a policymaking system tends to produce better results in the round, due in part to the potential for experimentation, intra-country transfer and enhanced policy learning. Further, it is more democratic, with local areas given the powers to diverge when there is consensus to take a different path. While the answer to each and every policy area is not and cannot be to simply devolve it, there does need to be space for a constructive discussion about how some policy areas that have hitherto been 'third rail' issues for government in terms of local influence are brought into scope. Our recommendation would be to start with the areas of focus, such as welfare policy, employment support and school-age education, explored above.

THE TASK FOR CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Any government that takes or resumes office after the next general election will face a daunting in-tray, including international conflict and national tensions. These challenges are compounded by long-term structural challenges, such as climate change, the pace of change in the tech sector (including developments such as artificial intelligence [AI]), shifting citizen expectations and (in common with other similar countries) a rapidly ageing society. The macro-economic picture is likely to perpetuate fiscal constraint, particularly for local government. These trends challenge the very basis on which our system of welfare operates, both in terms of the fiscal construct and the entitlements that citizens have come to expect. Set against this are new insights into what actually works in terms of delivering public services from practitioners such as Hilary Cottam and Victor Adebowale (echoed by academic literature from Elinor Ostrom to Toby Lowe and others),[53,54,55,56] who have focused on addressing root causes, prioritising relationships and reducing reliance on centralised infrastructure.[57] Wi-Fi has emerged as a basic human need, the absence of which risks cutting off individuals and families from the essentials of life.

Factors like these undermine the viability of a classic New Public Management mode of reform, particularly in a climate in which further capitalising our current public service delivery model will be difficult. More feasible is using all the levers for change that do exist, such as bolstering the MCA model and exploiting the ability to achieve economies of collaboration and scale, to link economic growth and public services and to develop new models of public–private social intervention.

Growth is the key priority for all the parties. A regionally based and led growth strategy (or indeed an industrial strategy) offers the best opportunity to achieve this. It would focus on human capital, sustainable housing growth, transport infrastructure and triggering private sector economic growth (enabled by public sector risk capital) in key economic sectors. Traditional economic plans tend to underemphasise place, culture and community at the expense

of sectoral strategy. A standard economic growth plan will often not feature culture, tourism or social care; however, these not only provide vital social functions, but are at the core of many local regional economies, including the North East. An effective regional growth strategy needs both strong identity and a future for communities, linked to an overarching economic strategy that is inclusive. This cannot be done from Whitehall; it must be shaped and co-created with local stakeholders and communities in partnership with an enabling public bureaucracy.[58]

Any government in office following the next general election should build on the MCA model in order to deepen and evolve it over time. It should exploit the opportunity to build a more collaborative, networked system in which the centre, the locality and stakeholders are working together to deliver a shared set of outcomes. This takes devolution beyond a 'zero sum game' and starts to utilise the 'whole of government' in greater alignment. This would include continuing to consolidate funding mechanisms and encourage fiscal innovation, building a long-term, sustainable and flexible model of funding whereby localities can develop preventative models of public service reform and invest with more certainty in social and economic infrastructure.

In 1997, the Secretary of State for Wales remarked that devolution was a process, not an event. The journey of English devolution to date demonstrates that there is no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to creating change, but that the MCA offers a powerful new framework for devolving powers and delivering at a local level. In this model, Westminster policymakers may have hit upon a meso-level unit of governance that suits England's fragmented polity, unequal political economy and strong regional (and sub-regional) identities.

The next stage of this process involves building the evidence base, identifying best practice, and working together to overcome barriers in order to grow and scale the MCA model and deliver more fully upon their promise. The new North East MCA will be an experiment in applying this model to a more geographically large and disparate territory with the potential to learn quickly from the journey taken by others so far.

The next steps will be worth watching closely.

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