The Devolution Revolution:
Empowering local communities to drive change
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Foreword
Professor Mark Shucksmith OBE

In Britain and around the world, economic instability, technological change and migration have presented governments and citizens with challenges to which there are no easy answers. We need fresh thinking on how to respond to problems of rising unemployment, inequalities in income and health and communities in decline. For many, our failure to adequately respond to these issues has exacerbated a sense of powerlessness, which in turn threatens to undermine the legitimate authority of government at both national and local levels.

The Newcastle University Institute for Social Renewal aims to help address these societal challenges by bringing together academics from different disciplines with partners from the private, public and third sectors to consider how people, communities and societies can thrive when faced with rapid, transformational change.

People will have their own views of what ‘thriving’ means, but we see it as involving social justice, prosperity and a high quality public sphere. Key to this is people being involved in shaping the places in which they live and work, coming together to imagine their future collectively and pursue a shared vision for their local area.

Devolution is often heralded as the solution to any and all of the challenges facing government and society today – from economic growth and better public services to democratic renewal and keeping the UK together. In recent years, outside London we have seen the abolition of the regional scale of governance, and large cuts in local government budgets continue, resulting in a significant centralisation of power. Nevertheless, strategies and targets set in Whitehall often fail to reflect or respond to the real challenges facing local communities.

But while properly-resourced devolution may be a tool to empower regions, a number of questions must still be answered if it is to succeed in addressing the challenges facing our country. How can authorities create economic growth that is sustainable and equal, rather than the preserve of the few? What can be done to ensure elected mayors and combined authorities have legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate? Can the devolution process enable creativity while still providing local democratic scrutiny and accountability? How can local residents be involved in making decisions about the areas in which they live and work?

This pamphlet seeks to address these questions in a series of short contributions from academics at the Institute for Social Renewal and our external partners. From putting strategic spatial planning at the heart of devolution deals to devolving education policy, from building community capacity to using universities to engage local communities, each article recommends practical steps that need to be taken to ensure devolution achieves its promise, for local communities and the country as a whole.

Done right, devolution can help transform our country, give people a greater say, and bring about increased prosperity for many more. I hope this pamphlet can play a part in enabling that success.

Mark Shucksmith OBE is Director of Newcastle University Institute for Social Renewal

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1. Devolution needs a more coherent approach from central government

Ed Cox and Anna Round

In theory the Government’s ‘deal-by-deal’ approach to devolution for the English regions creates a space for genuinely local forms of devolved power. It makes sense for regions with very different histories, opportunities and risks to shape their own lists of ‘asks’ and to negotiate these independently, instead of being shoehorned into a centrally-determined timetable or format.

However, this informal approach also brings a problematic lack of clarity. While the Government may not be imposing a ‘top-down’ framework, there is a sense in many areas that something is being imposed but it’s not clear what. This could limit the potential benefits of devolution, and has certainly played a part in the stuttering progress we have seen in recent months. We need a more coherent approach to devolution to strengthen the proposed new structures and improve buy-in from regional leaders and communities.

An important part of this coherence is clarity over the objectives of devolution, for both central government and the devolved regions. While there is broad consensus on the centrality of economic growth, somewhat less evident is the rationale behind devolving powers over some drivers of that growth (such as transport and post-16 skills provision) but not others (such as education and employment support), and there is ongoing debate over the place of key public services in devolution. Along with the insistence on the establishment of Metro Mayors, this raises the question of whether Westminster is aiming to use devolution as part of more general reform of local government.

It is vital that regions seeking devolution deals know what is and is not ‘on the table’ for inclusion, rather than having to second-guess government priorities. Developing a framework, and presenting it sensitively, would facilitate creativity, innovation and learning from good practice. In its absence, existing deals will inevitably act as de facto guidance and subsequent ones may replicate their features not because they represent the best option for a region but because they have already been agreed elsewhere.

Perhaps most problematically, the current lack of coherence has led to a feeling that the Government has been disingenuous in its dealings with regions, and that the process itself has not been entirely fair to different kinds of place. The ‘big city’ deals have for the most part been agreed at an early stage, but many in areas with more complex geographies or more peripheral status on the national map feel they are being treated with less urgency and simply expected to fall into line. For instance, in the North East leaders have raised questions reflecting the diverse, polycentric nature of the region. It is easy to criticise them for being less co-operative than those in Greater Manchester or Cornwall, but the North East deal covers a region six times the geographical area of the former and arguably even more economically and socially diverse than the latter.

The structures for devolved government in the UK need to follow the examples of other nations in accommodating significant variations in geography, culture and demographics. We need a coherent and collaborative process if we are to see the full benefits of devolution.

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2. Elected mayors and combined authorities must focus on inclusive growth

Professor Andy Pike

The idea that cities are engines of economic growth has become a central focus for policymakers across the UK and is core to the current devolution agenda. Yet in the wake of the global financial crisis, economic downturn and faltering economy, anxieties have grown about the kind of growth being pursued and its social and geographical character and reach. It is vital that devolution deals are focused on inclusive growth that is open and spreads prosperity to all.

International organisations such as the IMF, OECD and World Bank have raised concerns that policymakers are pursuing growth that is economically, socially and environmentally unsustainable and becoming more unequal between people and places.

While ad hoc, piecemeal and rapid, devolution in England is an opportunity to deliver new forms of growth that are more equitable, just and inclusive. This means creating economic opportunity in the form of decent, sustainable and productive employment that is accessible to people across society, regardless of economic status, ethnicity or location. The new governance institutions and spaces being opened up through devolution provide opportunities to think differently about growth, albeit in the context of austerity and a still highly centralised political economy.

International experience from the US, Europe and beyond suggests that there are three key steps that need to be taken to ensure devolution delivers the inclusive growth required.

Firstly, those running to be elected mayors and to lead combined authorities must set the agenda and set out a vision and commitment to inclusive growth. This requires recognising that inequality is a drag on further growth in our cities and generates huge economic and social costs both nationally and locally. Innovative solutions are required that are tailored to the local areas and address local challenges.

Secondly, combined authorities and elected mayors must work to remodel city development strategies and policies around inclusive growth. They should prioritise sectors such as construction and manufacturing in which more productive and better quality jobs with opportunities for development and progression can be pursued. Support can be provided by institutional reform of the local training and skills system.

Finally, authorities must open up their structures and processes to include a wider range of voices in formulating and designing locally appropriate inclusive growth strategies and policies. Community engagement is central to ensuring that a broader range of interests is involved in developing initiatives to create more and better jobs and ensure prosperity is spread more evenly across cities and regions. Such endeavours will also help increase the accountability and transparency required for devolution to have legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate.

Devolution offers a unique opportunity to improve the social character and geographical reach of economic growth. Elected mayors and combined authorities must grasp the potential of inclusive growth and remove the brake on the ambition of achieving more and better jobs for all.

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3. The long-term success of devolution requires pragmatism, not politics

Andrew Carter

Devolution has cross-party support, but there is still a significant risk that it will fail to deliver all that it could if it becomes a political football, open to significant change with every electoral cycle. For devolution to be sustainable for the long-term, we need leaders at all levels to put pragmatism above politics.

This will require forward-thinking politicians who are willing to cede power to others. It will also require local leaders to put what’s right for the local community above what the national party wants. We can see the value of adopting this pragmatic approach in London. Both current Mayor, Boris Johnson, and former Mayor, Ken Livingstone, at times, campaigned against their party’s official position in order to do what they felt was right for London. This has been critical to the success of devolution in the capital.

In addition to adopting a pragmatic approach, local leaders need to focus on ‘the basics’ – the issues that make the most difference to how people live their lives. This means focusing on issues such as where bus routes go, what sorts of houses are built and whether children can get a decent school education.

To really make the basics work for their communities, local leaders will also need the power to raise finances and use them strategically in the areas that will most benefit local communities. For example, much of current national housing policy was designed with an average place in mind which, as we all know, simply doesn’t exist. This means cities such as Oxford, Brighton and Cambridge are facing serious housing shortages because local councils are not rewarded for permitting more homes to be built and are not able to borrow to build more housing themselves. In places such as Liverpool, Burnley and Newcastle, where demand for housing is relatively lower, the national focus on increasing housing supply means they are less able to prioritise improving the quality of their existing stock.

Devolution has the potential to make a big difference to communities across the UK, but it won’t work unless everybody involved takes a long-term, pragmatic view. Nor will it work perfectly from day one; devolution is an evolving process. Leaders at all levels of society must recognise this and give the policies and initiatives started under the current deals time to mature.

Having political commitment and leadership – national and local – is critical but politicians need to avoid using devolution for political point-scoring. It is vital that business and residents know that their investment will not be wasted if a new leader is elected in the future. This requires leaders to be pragmatic in thinking strategically about housing, transport and infrastructure and then developing policies that will provide the best outcomes for their community.
4. Public engagement is vital to ensure new structures of devolution have legitimacy

Dr Alistair Clark

Devolution has been talked about so much it is easy to assume that everybody is aware of the concept and supportive of the idea that power should be transferred from Whitehall to those with more local responsibilities. But the debate on devolution has been conducted almost entirely at the elite level. Ask somebody on the street what the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ means to them, or whether they believe combined authorities should have responsibility for health and social care, and you will probably receive a blank look. We urgently need to engage the public in real discussion and help them understand the impact that devolution will have on them.

Public engagement is vital if devolution is to have legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate. Many areas have previously rejected the idea of an elected mayor, but now find one thrust upon them as a condition of devolution. Unless the voters are brought into the debate, we are likely to see a repeat of the Police and Crime Commissioner fiasco in which national turnout was low and in some places non-existent, and the public felt those elected had no real mandate for change.

Double devolution will be key in engaging the public. Combined authorities and elected mayors will need to give increased power and responsibility back down to local authorities and clearly demonstrate how people can make a difference in their local area. Research shows that people are more engaged with small units of government, and more loyal to local councillors than members of Parliament, because they understand their roles and responsibilities better and see the results of their actions. The public will experience the tangible impact of policy decisions, but to be delivered to suit local needs this means devolving power down to the local authority level not only scaling it up to combined authorities.

And the responsibility for public engagement is a joint one. National government must stop preaching to the choir and instead reach out to those who are not already part of the political bubble. This means not waiting for local communities to bring forward proposals but reaching down and explaining what the new structures of devolved power will really mean for them. Local authorities and mayoral candidates, and the parties they represent, also have a responsibility to provide opportunities for the public to find out what devolution will mean for them and ask questions of responsibility and accountability. And grassroots groups cannot be passive; they too must work at an individual level to build demand and demonstrate to regional and national government what local communities want devolution to achieve.

The examples of other nations – and even our own experiences in devolving power to national governments in Scotland and Wales – show that devolution can increase political accountability and allow local challenges to be more efficiently overcome, but public participation is vital. National and local government and community groups must work together to engage the public on the concept of devolution and overcome the current disconnect between the elite and the voters. Only then will we see long-term success of devolution.

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5. Building community capacity is vital for devolution to lead to inclusive growth

Professor Simin Davoudi

The concept of localism is core to the current debate around devolution and has become a popular agenda across the political spectrum, despite its multiple and contested meanings. While devolution and localism have broad support among both politicians and the public, there is a risk that without investment in building community capacity, localism and devolution deals will exacerbate rather than solve the challenges facing local communities.

As a progressive agenda, devolution has the potential to improve democratic representation by putting decision making power in the hands of local communities. Localism could enhance civic capabilities and social innovations by encouraging new ways of thinking and acting, and can facilitate increased community self-organisation.

However, devolution could also fragment strategic decision making into disjointed practices. Localism could lead to narrow local self-interest being prioritised above the interests of society as a whole, and generate inward looking and territorialised places. Importantly, it could also widen the equity gap between the most- and the least-advantaged communities and their ability to react to future events.

We have already seen this occur in the implementation of Neighbourhood Planning. In an historic move, communities were given statutory powers to shape their locality by creating forums and developing plans for their areas. We saw high levels of enthusiasm, engagement and democratic experimentations among local communities as well as capacity building across the Neighbourhood Planning areas. However, four years later only a few of the adopted Neighbourhood Plans are in the 30% most deprived areas in England.

While the process is ongoing, the example of Neighbourhood Planning shows the risk of creating an uneven geography of localism where disadvantaged communities with less time and resource are less able to participate.

For decentralisation, devolution and localism to be forces for good it is vital that the focus is on sustainable, fair and inclusive growth. National government and local authorities must work closely together to ensure that there is parity of participation and investment in building community capacity in the deprived areas of the country where it is most needed.

Devolution must not be allowed to maintain established privileges or lead to exclusionary practices of keeping out the ‘other’. Instead we need to see genuine empowerment so that communities can help transform their local areas and shape region-wide strategic decisions.

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6. Devolution requires a new form of neighbourhood governance

Tony Armstrong

A core purpose of devolution must be to give people more power to shape and transform where they live. The current debate on devolution is an important chance to reimagine our local democracy, economy and public services, but it will only succeed if it puts communities in control and enables local people to set priorities for the areas in which they live.

The promise of increased community empowerment is tantalisingly close, but it requires a clear commitment to ‘onward devolution’ within devolution deals. Without this, there is a real risk that devolution settlements will simply shift marginal responsibilities between different parts of the public sector, adding new layers of sub-regional governance which actually push influence, power and resources away from local people.

To ensure that devolution reaches the neighbourhood level and increases community agency, new models of neighbourhood governance are needed. The Government, combined authorities and local authorities must strengthen community decision-making forums and put these at the heart of devolution deals.

One way to achieve this would be to expand the model of neighbourhood forums, as established through neighbourhood planning. Currently, in areas without parish councils, local authorities are able to devolve planning powers to the community through neighbourhood forums, including powers to establish general planning policies for the development and use of land in their neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood forum model provides a useful blueprint for how further powers around spending and service delivery could be devolved to communities. This would include enabling existing community organisations to become designated forums, with access to a set of rights which they could trigger following negotiations with the local authority. For example, communities could have the power to shape local public services by giving designated neighbourhood forums the ‘right to review services’. This could lead to forums taking on delivery of particular services or setting up a joint working group with the local authority to make recommendations and develop a plan on how services could be improved.

Empowering neighbourhoods in this way is essential to making sure that devolution works for people and communities. The potential devolution brings to drive the social economy, for example, will only be achieved if economic growth and new investment is driven by local priorities. Giving local areas real control over decision making and spending will help to ensure that economic growth prioritises social inclusion, creating economies which truly work for the people in them. Likewise, for devolution to transform our public services local authorities must work with people and local community organisations to co-design and co-produce services which provide better outcomes and better value for money.

Ultimately, devolution will do more for people and communities if it genuinely strengthens their involvement in decision making. The potential for devolution to bring about a renaissance in neighbourhood-level governance – and deliver the so-called revolution we have been promised – must not be missed.

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7. Devolution could be transformational if leaders have long-term vision

Alison Seabrooke

We are constantly told that devolution is needed to give power back to local communities. While an admirable statement, it implies that communities are currently disengaged and unable to affect change. This is not the case. Local communities are already actively shaping the places in which they live. What’s needed from devolution is greater investment in building social capital to allow communities to do what they do best more effectively — find innovative solutions to local challenges.

Those leading on the devolution agenda could learn a lot from existing initiatives such as the Department for Communities and Local Government’s First Steps and Community Economic Development programmes, or Big Local, a £200M programme managed by Local Trust and funded by the Big Lottery. Here, local people in 150 areas in England come together to take responsibility for priorities for their area. This is firmly resident-led, based on an inherent belief that those who live in an area have the capacity to identify and address their own local issues. Big Local takes a contemporary approach to development, recognising that building community capacity is vital to ensure projects are sustainable. The second differentiator is that the areas have until 2027 to spend the money they have been allocated.

It is this long-term view which is essential for devolution to be a success. Building social capital and empowering local communities must not be subject to short-term political and budgetary whims. We need to ensure that programmes designed to benefit the community have longevity beyond the next election. For this to work local authorities, as well as national government, will need to let go of both power and money. They must allow communities and grassroots organisations in their area to take responsibility for solving local challenges, support them to do this and act as equal delivery partners.

This requires those acting at a local government level to believe that grassroots community organisations are the ones who can genuinely affect real change. As Big Local Partnership plans are demonstrating, grassroots groups are able to get to the heart of community needs and develop activities across multiple policy areas, from housing standards to healthcare to entrepreneurship. Devolution is a huge opportunity for local government to achieve its challenging goals, but it must look beyond the town hall.

Most of all, for devolution to be a success we need visionary leaders at all levels. We need members of Parliament, mayoral candidates, local councillors and community representatives to champion devolution as a way, perhaps the only way, to achieve genuine transformation. Too much of the current discussion is focused on the details of processes and policies, which leaves most people feeling uninspired and disengaged. We need leaders with real vision and passion who can build bridges between different groups, who will encourage creativity and take action, and who can concede power as well as use it responsibly. Ultimately, we need leaders who can look beyond what is achievable or popular in the next few years to what a community could become in the long term, and then give everything they have to achieving that goal.

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8. Strategic spatial planning must be at the heart of devolution deals

Professor Mark Tewdwr-Jones

The planning system is far from perfect; it has been criticised by government ministers almost as a matter of course for the last 35 years for being slow and bureaucratic, failing to deliver housing and infringing on personal liberties. However, planning is still a vital part of policy making and one of the few areas of public policy that provides a direct voice to members of the public to shape their local areas. While it may seem anachronistic, planning is recognised at a local level as an effective mechanism and as such, should be at the heart of devolution.

As politicians at all levels of government have sought to abolish elements of the planning system, they have failed to understand why the houses we need are not being built, why it is difficult to build new railway lines, why playing fields are not always protected, and why any building on the urban fringe is ferociously resisted by the public. They have failed to recognise the importance of strategic spatial planning and genuine public consultation.

Society has an insatiable demand for land, which enables us to have homes, shops, hospitals, schools, transport facilities and places of work, but also provides us with water, food, energy, biodiversity and minerals. Whether land is urban or rural, on the coast or in a valley, it supplies us with the essential needs and quality of life. But we cannot easily create more land; there is a finite supply and so as our appetite for services and improvements to quality of life increases, we need a system that addresses the challenge of how to manage the way land is used.

Cities are grappling with the challenges of an ageing population, precarious economic growth and major infrastructure decisions made at a national level, and yet these issues are too often treated in isolation from each other because that’s how national government and local authority departments are structured. Devolution is the opportunity to change this and create an effective and efficient planning system, but this requires planning to be given a prominent role by the new combined authorities and elected mayors.

It is no coincidence that London has not suffered from the same problems as other regions when it comes to planning after the Mayor of London retained his London Plan, a regional spatial strategy for the capital, when the rest of the English regions lost their strategic frameworks in 2011. Strategic spatial plans are an effective way of generating public involvement in debate about change and what future the community wants for their local area, more so than any other government system. The plans allow local authorities to treat policies and places holistically and to identify the potential results from policy change before intervention.

Many of the new combined authorities seeking devolution are committed to preparing new strategic spatial plans as frameworks to shape their cities and regions for the better, but not all. Development of these plans should be a minimum requirement for all devolution deals agreed by the Government. Strategic spatial planning benefits public and business engagement, and provides vital certainty for investment.

We cannot allow combined authorities to get away with not thinking about their long term future and not paying attention to public involvement in their planning activities. Yes planning may be a governmental mechanism of convenience, but it is better than allowing authorities to embark on a vision-less, pragmatic and highly exclusionary form of devolution.

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9. Devolve education powers to address the skills gap

James Ramsbotham

While employment may be rising across the UK the statistics hide some structural issues in certain parts of the country. The North East is experiencing record levels of employment and the fastest rate of fall in unemployment, but this disguises serious skills gaps being felt by employers and unacceptable levels of out-of-work young people. Businesses are struggling to find young people with the necessary skills to do the jobs that are available. While devolution is being put forward as a solution to our nation’s economic struggles, unless comprehensive powers over education policy are included in devolution deals made with combined authorities we will continue to see too many young people struggle to obtain meaningful employment and businesses hampered through lack of skilled labour.

The jobs available in regions such as the North East and the Midlands are often different from those in London and the South East. Yet the national curriculum and education policy are centrally driven and overly focused on providing purely academic knowledge. While this is a boon for those looking to work in sectors such as finance and professional services, this system has consistently failed to deliver the skills that are needed for many of the employment opportunities in areas such as the North East. While some colleges are working to provide courses tailored to fill the technical skills gap, more needs to be done.

Combined authorities should be able to set their own education priorities, focused on training our young people with the skills they need to get jobs in the industries in their region over academic ability where appropriate, and develop their own curriculums. The North East needs a raft of skilled engineers, computer coders and other practical and technical skills but national government has shown itself incapable of differentiating the needs of different regions. The local authority level is too low scale to effectively address this challenge: having a curriculum for Newcastle or Sheffield, separate to other cities in the North of England, would be nonsensical. Combined Authorities, however, could develop a region-wide curriculum that looks beyond achieving A* grades at GCSE and instead focus on producing talented students ready to enter the local workforce.

Combined Authorities also need the power, and responsibility, to encourage businesses to take on more apprentices who have not achieved the highest grades at GCSE. Regional economies across the UK would benefit from apprentice schemes which are tailored to the local needs, so authorities need to ensure that the right number of apprenticeships are funded in the right industries.

There is considerable earning potential for skilled workers in all regions of the UK, but they are being failed by a system that does not provide them will the skills they need to work in their local area. This isn’t just a North-East issue; it’s something that affects us all.

The current trend towards devolution is an opportunity for businesses and communities to highlight the needs of their particular region and for Westminster to act. But this action must include steps to devolve education powers so that authorities in regions outside the South East can address the skills gap, otherwise devolution will fail to achieve its promise.

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10. Communities must be at the heart of an open infrastructure planning process

Professor Richard Dawson

Infrastructure may not be the first thing people think of when they consider the changing political governance of the country, but infrastructure is inherently political. Choices about infrastructure made today will impact the lives of future generations and fundamentally alter the social and economic fabrics of communities. However, while some national oversight is needed, it is the people living in an area that know theirlocality and its infrastructure best so devolution is an opportunity to involve them and ensure that the choices being made are the right ones for both the community and the country.

Current mechanisms for local input to infrastructure decisions are inadequate, and this is leading to missed opportunities to improve local economies, provide wider social benefits and take action to mitigate any potential negative impacts of infrastructure investments. Devolution offers a place-based focus for infrastructure delivery that is unachievable at a national level. However, the devolution deals being agreed need to include stronger requirements to ensure local people are consulted before infrastructure investment decisions are made if they are to fulfil their potential.

Firstly, the role of local and combined authorities must be strengthened. Central government agencies must be required to consult with them as a material consideration in the identification and delivery of infrastructure, and utility and transport companies and their regulators should have a duty to cooperate with them.

Secondly, the decision making process should be opened up to local people so that the voice of communities is strengthened. Local people need to be involved in shaping what their infrastructure achieves both now and in the longer term. This will be crucial for the success of devolved infrastructure powers. Only by understanding the purpose and desired outcomes from infrastructure can we develop creative approaches to deliver them.

This should not extend the process of infrastructure delivery; rather by involving communities in strategic conversations from the outset we are more likely to end up with the infrastructure society needs. And it is not just about building more infrastructure; the UK already has a substantial number of assets, and devolution could empower communities to use what they already have more efficiently and imaginatively.

Well-designed infrastructure can provide a variety of benefits by creating jobs, improving air quality, tackling fuel poverty and enabling active models of transport. However, combined authorities will need to make some tough decisions too: they will have to decarbonise, make more efficient use of resources, be digitally connected and build resilience to climate change.

Devolution must be about much more than local transport routes and tax rates. It is an opportunity for a more democratic and accountable infrastructure planning process, with communities at its heart. By taking steps now, we can ensure that infrastructure delivers the full range of economic, environmental and social benefits to the local people it serves.

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11. Make use of universities to engage local communities and make devolution a success
Emeritus Professor John Goddard OBE

Both national and local government have put considerable political capital behind the devolution agenda and need it to be a success. However, they are not involving a broad enough range of institutions, and in particular are ignoring the considerable role that universities can play in engaging communities in shaping their local areas and generating long term economic, social, cultural and environmental development.

The continuing austerity agenda means that the combined authorities will not have considerable sums of money available for investment, so there is a real risk that giving them power and responsibility will not be enough to achieve the promises of devolution. In order to address these challenges, combined authorities need to engage universities as partners. Universities have significant funding available which could be used to address some of the challenges local authorities are facing.

Universities have long been recognised as key players in the cities and regions in which they are based. But where they have traditionally been primarily seen as educators or accommodation providers, devolution is an opportunity for them to be accepted as sources of strategic thinking, insight and expertise to promote inclusiveness and citizen participation and help solve some of the most pressing issues facing local communities.

The short-sighted decision to divide the position of Minister for Universities, Science and Cities held by Greg Clark into the separate roles of Minister for Universities and Science and Minister for Cities demonstrates the challenge facing universities in being recognised as fundamental to the development of thriving cities. For universities to support combined authorities effectively, they will need to be recognised as sources of knowledge beyond the traditional science, engineering and medical departments. For instance, within the health sector universities could not only provide research and testing of new drugs but their social scientists could also help the NHS and local authorities understand the beliefs and values that drive patient behaviour, contributing vital understanding that could make the health system more effective. They could also provide new ideas of ways to create a city that supports healthy and active ageing.

As well as helping to address local societal challenges, universities can also provide a way for cities to engage in policy discussions on an international level. By using a university’s network city leaders will be able to take a place on the global stage, interacting with policymakers from around the world and benefiting from shared experiences and best practice. This not only aids a city’s cultural development, but will also help it attract businesses, tourists and students from around the world.

However, it will not be easy for combined authorities to engage universities and there will be some challenges ahead. For instance, universities have complex governance structures and there can be competing interests and tensions within the institution. In addition, there will be challenges when multiple universities in one region are required to work together, especially where this includes both large established institutions and smaller, newer universities.

Developing stronger relationships between universities and combined authorities will take time, but it can bring significant benefits. As evidenced in Newcastle University’s recent City Futures report, universities play a crucial role in providing the space for discussions around devolution to take place. Engaging universities as ‘anchor institutions’ will enable authorities to drive local growth and ensure citizens are fully engaged in making devolution a success.

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Newcastle University Institute for Social Renewal

The Institute for Social Renewal is Newcastle University’s response to the challenges facing society today. NISR brings together research with a social purpose. We aim to help individuals and communities thrive in times of rapid transformational change.

NISR engages in the process of renewal in three main ways: first, as a thought leader; second, through the production and dissemination of high quality research and scholarship that informs policy and practice; and third, by working on selected projects on a co-production basis with partners. Our intention is to explore new ways in which a research intensive university – its staff and students – can connect with society in order to make a difference.

Social Renewal is one of Newcastle University’s three Societal Challenge Themes. It brings to life the University’s vision of a civic university with a global reputation for academic excellence.

Our research strengths span many disciplines, from history to new business models, from film and media to geography, from health inequalities to legislative review. We use our research findings to inform, influence and involve a variety of sectors of society.

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