

decentralising governance in england

Andy Pike, Mike Coombes, Louise Kempton, Danny MacKinnon and Peter O'Brien consider the UK2070 Commission's initial proposals for decentralising governance in England through trans-regional 'provinces', and argue for clarity on what decentralisation is for, what powers and resources it comprises, and how it works in England

The UK and, especially, England are among the most highly centralised major countries internationally.¹ The UK had a relatively stable level of decentralisation between 1950 and 1986, underwent further centralisation until the late 1990s devolution, and has settled at a relatively higher level. In addition, the UK and England have long-standing and persistent geographical inequalities in economic and social conditions that are high in an international context. While the causal relationship between centralised governance and spatial inequalities is not clear and direct, it has been a persistent association in UK political-economic and geographical history.² The need to find appropriate forms of decentralised governance for England has been a recurrent concern.³ In the post-war period, decentralisation resembles a pendulum swinging between different geographical scales and institutional arrangements at the local, sub-regional and regional levels.

The limited decentralisation since 2010 has been ad hoc, incremental, and piecemeal. Multiple rationales have been presented, pulling decentralisation in different directions and muddling its objectives. These motives comprise local growth, public service reform, expenditure reductions, democratic renewal, and addressing societal challenges such as ageing and climate change. This episode has been based on the informal governance of deals and deal-making in negotiated central-local government agreements on decentralised powers, responsibilities, and resources. Differentiated combinations of powers and resources have been allocated to different areas. This kind of decentralisation has created a

complex map and patchwork of different governance arrangements across England.

Addressing the central problem of highly centralised governance and marked geographical inequalities, this article sets out the definitions, rationales, benefits and costs of decentralisation, and considers the UK2070 Commission's initial proposals for decentralising governance in England. Specifically, it examines the establishment of trans-regional 'provinces' by situating them in their national and international context in Europe and assesses their appropriateness as governance arrangements alongside mayoral and combined authorities. It argues for a more comprehensive and strategic approach to clarify what decentralisation is for, what powers and resources it comprises, and how it works in England. A clearer and more transparent policy is needed to articulate and progress this agenda.

Definitions, rationales, benefits and costs of decentralisation

Decentralisation is defined as the allocation of powers and resources from national to sub-national levels of government. There are different kinds of decentralisation, distinguished by their powers and resources, ranging from the highest level, devolution, to the lowest level, administrative (see Table 1). What is called 'devolution' in the discussions about decentralised governance in England is more accurately termed 'delegation' because of the limited nature of the powers and resources involved.

The main rationales for decentralised governance are better matching of public expenditure and services to local preferences, mobilisation of local knowledge

Table 1
Forms of decentralisation

Level	Form	Characteristics
Low ↓ High	Administrative	Administrative functions and responsibilities undertaken at the sub-national levels
	Deconcentration	Dispersion of central government functions and responsibilities to sub-national field offices. Powers transferred to lower-level actors who are accountable to their superiors in a hierarchy
	Delegation	Transfer of policy responsibility to local government or semi-autonomous organisations that are not controlled by central government but remain accountable to it
	Political	Political functions of government and governance undertaken at the sub-national level
	Fiscal	Autonomy over tax, spending and public finances ceded by central government to sub-national levels
High	Devolution	Central government allows quasi-autonomous local units of government to exercise power and control over the transferred policy

Source: *Decentralisation: Issues, Principles and Practice*⁴

Table 2
Potential benefits and costs of decentralisation

Potential benefits	Potential costs
Devolved policies better reflect territorial preferences (allocative efficiencies)	Additional administrative costs of additional layers of government and/or governance institutions
Improved knowledge of territorial economic potential (productive efficiencies)	Loss of scale economies in policy formulation and delivery
Democratic accountability improves efficiency of policy formulation and implementation; fosters innovation	Increased 'rent-seeking' by interest groups better able to influence sub-national territorial rather than national institutions
Fiscal autonomy provides hard budget constraints, and (where applicable) tax-varying power allows marginal changes to taxation and spending	Weaker disciplines of monitoring and evaluation (national finance ministries as tougher drivers of efficiency than territorial institutions)
Lower co-ordination and compliance costs vis-à-vis the rest of the national territory	Budget constraints increasingly tied to territorial fiscal capacity
	Weak incentives due to lack of a mechanism linking public spending with tax revenues raised within sub-national territories
	Reduced co-ordination with the rest of the national territory, with possible negative spillover effects both on and from sub-national territories

Source: Adapted from BK Ashcroft, JK Swales and PG McGregor: *Is Devolution Good for the Scottish Economy? A Framework for Analysis*. Devolution Briefings No. 26. ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme, Mar. 2005.

https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/15669/1/Briefing_26_McGregor.pdf

on economic potential and costs, and increased accountability of local governments to citizens. Depending upon its form and combination of powers and resources, decentralisation can generate potential benefits and costs (see Table 2). While there are other countries, such as France, Italy and Spain, that have asymmetrical or geographically uneven decentralised governance systems with different powers and resources allocated to different areas, the degree of asymmetry in England is acute. Asymmetrical forms of decentralisation have specific potential benefits and costs, too (see Table 3).

The UK2070 Commission's proposals for decentralisation

Addressing the problem of intermediate governance in England and the complex patchwork of current arrangements, in the UK2070 Commission's first report⁵ proposals for 'effective devolution' comprised:

- increasing devolution of powers and resources to the 'local' level, to a 'comprehensive framework' of mayoral and combined authorities and rural counties;
- setting up four new 'trans-regional arrangements' for 'provinces' for the North, the Midlands, the

Table 3
The benefits and costs of asymmetrical decentralisation

Potential benefits	Potential costs
Accommodating diverse preferences for autonomy across regions	Lack of accountability and transparency
Adapting the institutional and fiscal frameworks to the capacities of sub-national governments	Complexity and co-ordination costs
Advanced form of place-based policies	Lack of clarity for citizens
Experimenting	Potential risks of increased disparities (in capacities)
Sequencing decentralisation	Secession and autonomy
Providing the enabling institutional environment to design territorial development strategies more targeted to local needs	
Tailoring solutions for special challenges	

Source: Adapted from *Asymmetric Decentralisation: Policy Implications in Colombia*. OECD, 2019. www.oecd.org/colombia/Asymmetric_decentralisation_Colombia.pdf

South East, and the South West, constituted from existing local leaders and aiming to 'complement' strategic planning for pan-regional issues at the local and joint or combined authority level; and

- decentralising national government functions, responsibilities and budgets covering England to 'align with' the 'local and trans-regional devolution'.

Similar proposals were originally outlined in the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Commission on Economic Justice recommendations to create a 'new tier' of 'English regional authorities' or 'economic executives' that would be 'responsible for regional economic and industrial strategy' and 'able to deploy significant assets and capabilities'.⁶ The proposed Northern and Midlands Economic Executives would be created from the existing Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine institutions.⁷ National consultation was suggested for the new South East and South West Economic Executives.

Focused on economic development functions at the regional level, the proposed responsibilities for the Economic Executives included:

- regional industrial strategies, including innovation clusters, supply chains and inward investment, and regional infrastructure planning, including transport, energy, communications, and environmental and resource management;
- regional immigration policy, and regional spending of a new 'Inclusive Growth Fund';
- oversight of inter-city rail networks and franchises, and a proposed new 'major road network'; and
- oversight of the regional divisions of a new 'National Investment Bank'.

The proposed Economic Executives were seen as large enough to represent their regions internationally in order to attract investment and people, exercise a political voice to secure resources from central government, borrow to invest through the National

Investment Bank's regional arms, and, following the examples of the Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine, overcome lower-scale rivalries between cities and towns. In terms of governance and democratic accountability, the proposal is that each Economic Executive would be governed by a new Regional Council, elected indirectly from their constituent local authorities. Proposed funding arrangements would be based initially on a block grant from the UK Treasury and then a new and more decentralised fiscal framework for England.

English 'provinces' in context – regional governance geography in Europe

In the context of past regional governance geography in England, the proposed 'provinces' are remarkably large. This can be demonstrated by comparing them with the nine standard regions, now only used for statistical purposes but until 2010 constituting the regional tier of decentralised institutions in England. Two of the provinces (North, South East) each group three standard regions, and one other (Midlands) combines two. This geography raises the question of whether such large provinces are out of line in comparison with regional institutions with similar economic development responsibilities in comparable countries in Europe. Table 4 identifies the five larger European Union countries comparable to the UK in terms of size measures of population, economy, and land area. Table 5 then identifies each country's regional tier of institutions with decentralised economic development responsibilities, reporting their number and their average size on each of the three parameters.

This comparison suggests that the English provinces, when taken along with the other UK nations (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) which they are proposed to sit alongside, are rather out of line when their average size values are compared with those of the principal regional institutions in

Table 4
Selected size measures of the UK and five broadly comparable countries

	Population 2019, million	GDP 2018, billion euros	Area, square kilometres
France	67.0	2,346	635,300
Germany	83.0	3,387	354,800
Italy	60.4	1,756	296,900
Poland	38.0	490	307,200
Spain	46.9	1,216	506,300
United Kingdom	66.6	2,399	244,700

Source: Calculated from Eurostat data

Table 5
Average size of regions with devolved economic responsibilities

	Number of regions	Population 2019, million	GDP 2018, billion euros	Area, square kilometres
French mainland regions	13	5.2	180.5	48,900
German Länder	16	5.2	211.7	22,200
Italian regioni	20	3.0	87.8	14,800
Polish voivodeships	16	2.4	30.6	19,200
Spanish autonomous regions	17	2.8	71.5	29,800
UK nations/provinces	7	9.5	342.8	35,000

Source: Calculated from Eurostat data

the five comparator countries. The key reason is that there are only seven provinces/nations, whereas the other countries are divided into around two-to-three times more regions. The one size measure on which the UK regional average is not larger than all the comparators is land area: the highest average is that of the French regions, while the Spanish equivalent is close to that of the proposed seven authorities in the UK.

Although land area size might not seem very relevant to economic development policy, its significance stems from the long-term trend for the integration of previously distinct local economies. An authority with a narrowly defined area, such as a single city, might independently deliver some economic development policies (for example land use), but delivering a comprehensive regional economic strategy (and perhaps having some tax-raising powers) is usually given to an authority covering a larger and self-contained territory, such as Scotland. This is the economic geography of subsidiarity: the appropriate size of regions depends on the extent and nature of the powers which are to be devolved to them. The high level of interactions across the boundary of a geographically small region, such as London, means that policies operating solely within that boundary are unable to match the scale of the key relations and processes determining regional economic development.

Table 6 ranks by population the seven proposed provinces/nations, alongside all the regions with devolved economic development responsibilities in the five comparator countries whose populations are 5 million or above. France has seven such regions, Germany five, Italy four, Spain three, and Poland just one. This might suggest that the proposal for the UK is not out of line with practice elsewhere, as not only Germany but also France has more regions with over 5 million residents than would the UK, with its four English provinces together with Scotland. It is significant that France has the highest number of larger-population regions: several of these are recent amalgamations of previously separate smaller regions, and this is an example of a trend towards larger regions that is in part a response to economic relations and processes operating over wider areas.

Table 6, taken together with the count of regions in Table 5, offers some support for an alternative interpretation. Only two of the seven proposed UK provinces/nations – and none of those in England – have fewer than 5 million residents, whereas in four of the five comparator countries over two-thirds of their regions are of this smaller size. Even in recently reorganised France the proportion is almost half. At the other end of the scale, three of the four provinces proposed for England have populations of 10 million or more, a proportion unmatched in any comparator

Table 6
Regions with devolved economic responsibilities and populations of more than 5 million people

Country	Regions/UK provinces/ nations	Population 2019, million	Area, square kilometres
UK	England: South East	22.7	39,800
Germany	Nordrhein-Westfalen	17.9	34,100
UK	England: North	14.9	38,200
Germany	Bayern	13.1	70,600
France	Île-de-France	12.1	12,000
Germany	Baden-Württemberg	11.0	35,800
UK	England: Midlands	10.1	28,600
Italy	Lombardia	10.1	23,800
Spain	Andalusia	8.4	87,300
Germany	Niedersachsen	7.9	47,600
France	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	7.9	69,700
Spain	Catalunya	7.5	32,100
Spain	Madrid	6.7	8,000
Germany	Hesse	6.2	21,100
France	Hauts-de-France	6.0	31,800
Italy	Lazio	5.9	17,200
France	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	5.9	84,100
Italy	Campania	5.8	13,700
France	Occitanie	5.8	72,700
France	Grand Est	5.6	57,400
UK	Scotland	5.4	77,900
Poland	Mazowsze	5.4	35,600
UK	England: South West	5.3	23,800
Italy	Sicilia	5.0	25,800
France	Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur	5.0	31,400
UK	Wales	3.1	20,800
UK	Northern Ireland	1.9	14,100

Source: Calculated from Eurostat data

country. All these three provinces also have land areas whose sizes put them at the upper end of the range among the large-population regions in Table 6.

England has been 'regionalised' by government several times previously, but none of these regional boundaries have been widely accepted, partly because none had the historical authenticity and cultural and political identities of regions such as Bayern, Lombardia, or Catalunya. The relatively large population and area size of the proposed English provinces might be seen as a realistic structure designed to tackle processes operating over large areas in a highly integrated national economy. Yet it is also arguable that the provinces are a technocratic proposal that is fated to fail as a result of a lack of popular identification with its new amalgamated regions.

Finding the appropriate balance and geography is challenging. Drawing lines on maps to limit jurisdictions is relatively straightforward, but creating meaningful local and regional boundaries is more

difficult. Since 2010 in England, the approach has been to prioritise 'functional economic areas', for example reflecting 'travel-to-work areas'. However, effective regional governance requires the support of citizens. Questions of local and regional identity matter because boundaries need to pay attention to a shared sense of place and patterns of belonging and attachment.⁸

Successful democratic polities operate across territories that are understood to have real meaning to citizens and voters. Where this is not the case, it can be a recipe for indifference, discontent, or dysfunction. Centrally determined boundaries, which may make sense in national government departments in Whitehall in London, can produce regions that have little popular affiliation. Such regions may dispense large amounts of tax-payers' money in ways which appear opaque, distant, and unaccountable. Equally, the deal-making approach to decentralisation can produce regions that are neither functional nor popular,

setting back the aims of democratic decentralisation. The recent experience in France demonstrates considerable dissatisfaction at the amalgamation of historic regions (for example Alsace, Lorraine and the Champagne becoming the new region Grand Est).

The conclusion is that while the proposed English provinces are relatively large on average, the only one notably out of line with regions in comparator European countries is the South East (as it includes both London and its wide hinterland). It is critical to recall that the appropriate size of regions depends on the extent and nature of the powers that are to be devolved to them. Large regions such as the proposed provinces may be appropriate for a highly integrated economic geography such as that of England, but perhaps only if each province is entrusted with powers similar to those of Scotland, including the ability to raise its own taxes.

Mayoral and combined authorities and rural counties and trans-regional 'provinces' as governance arrangements for England

The UK2070 Commission's initial proposals for decentralisation aimed to move from the current patchwork towards a kind of multi-level governance system in England that is evident in other comparable countries. The proposals would effectively fill in the map of England with mayoral and combined authorities and rural counties at the 'local' level and introduce a new level of trans-regional economic executives at the level of the four new provinces. This reform would potentially create a more comprehensive and even coverage of governance arrangements across England. What kind of decentralisation this represents depends upon the powers and resources decentralised to the existing and new mayoral and combined authorities and the rural counties and provincial economic executives (see Table 1). Questions of the size of the regions would then need to be related to their purpose, powers, and resources.

Evaluating the potential effectiveness of decentralisation confronts difficult issues. Establishing whether or not decentralised governance enables better decision-making and generates benefits for economic and social outcomes and delivers on public policy objectives is not a straightforward question. This is because of numerous problems: the development of appropriate proxies relevant to particular national contexts; assembling available data of appropriate quality, historical coverage, and international comparability; disentangling and isolating the specific effects of decentralisation; and attributing causation among decentralisation's multiple relationships with broader economic and institutional change.⁹

Key questions emerge in considering the proposed new governance geography for England. Can these new arrangements maximise the benefits and minimise the costs of decentralisation, and what would the net outcome be? Could they better

match public expenditure and services to citizen preferences at the local and trans-regional levels? Would they gain enhanced knowledge on economic potential and costs? Would the arrangements increase the accountability of local governments to citizens? Indirect election is a feature of the proposed new arrangements at the local and trans-regional levels, potentially echoing the charge of weak accountability and scrutiny levelled at the Regional Assemblies/Chambers in England during the early 2000s.

Considering the political feasibility of the proposals raises difficult issues given the history of decentralisation in England and its ad hoc and piecemeal evolution of institutional arrangements since 2010. The pendulum swings have created churn and disruption, described as 'compulsive re-organisation' and 'perpetual restructuring'.¹⁰ Further reforms and the establishment of new mayoral and combined authorities and rural unitary counties in areas currently without them may encounter resistance and would take time. Changing current two-tier local authority areas into single-tier unitaries will face political resistance, potentially from shire counties confronting reorganisation and especially from shire districts facing abolition and amalgamation. In other countries with asymmetrical decentralisation, such as Spain, the evidence is that areas seek the powers and resources they see granted to other places; and as new areas gain, the existing areas push for even greater levels of decentralisation.

Setting up new executives at the trans-regional level would be similarly challenging. While building upon existing institutions in the Northern Powerhouse area is a potential way forward, this is likely to be more difficult for the Midlands Engine, which lacks an institutional and legal basis and capacity in its current form. Crucially, this approach would be much more problematic in the South East and South West, given their histories and more recent antipathies to trans-regional collaboration. Existing co-operation – such as the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford Arc – is thematically focused and working on different and fuzzier geographies. Indeed, the description of the regional executives as a 'new tier' of institutions and administration would likely attract criticism from opponents who may characterise it as another layer of administration and bureaucracy and a talking shop for politicians – re-using the arguments from the campaign against the elected Regional Assembly in North East England in 2004.¹¹

The proposed arrangements would encounter the issue of how to align, co-ordinate and integrate the new institutions between and across different spatial levels. How will their aspirations and visions, strategies and spending plans be aligned, co-ordinated, and integrated? Where will the legitimate locus of power to prioritise reside? How will new institutions and activities mesh with existing institutions? If the new

regional executives are tasked with writing a set of economic and spatial strategies, how will they connect with the existing institutions and plans? The fundamental test is whether the new governance arrangements would make people's lives better.

Future decentralising of governance in England

Given the ad hoc, incremental and piecemeal nature of the recent episode of decentralisation in England and the difficulties in assessing its impacts, a more comprehensive and thoughtful approach is needed to thinking through and implementing further decentralisation in existing and new areas yet to be allocated powers and resources if the potential benefits are to be maximised and the costs and risks reduced. There is a need for clarification of the rationales and principles of decentralisation, with a road map and process to provide some clarity to the vision, direction, purpose, principles and strategy for decentralised governance of England in the round.⁴ The current ad hoc, incremental and piecemeal governance needs to move towards a more planned, transformative and comprehensive approach. It will, however, need to resolve the patchwork of the different geographical scales, institutions of governance and funding streams that have emerged in England since 2010.

'Where decentralisation in England goes next – its form, nature and resources – is critical'

This is not an argument for a top-down blueprint designed and delivered from Whitehall. It is a call for an open, transparent and systematic approach. Such a road map would provide greater fairness and equity in setting out what kinds of powers and resources are on offer for places. For those areas in the early stages of thinking about what decentralisation might mean for them, it would provide a normative sense of the kinds of powers and resources that specific types of areas *should* be seeking. Such a road map would remove the existing opaqueness and lack of accountability of the current deals designed, formulated and made between particular political leaders and senior officials at the local and national levels at specific points in time. Otherwise, the problems and costs of co-ordination, integration and alignment between governance actors and institutions will be reproduced and, potentially, multiplied as further pieces are added to the existing patchwork.

Given the changes in government in 2019, the impact of the 2020 pandemic, and Brexit, it is difficult to assess the current administration's commitment to decentralisation in England. Decentralisation slowed following the EU referendum in 2016 and

general election in 2017, afflicted by 'Brexit blight' and lack of political and administrative capacity in Parliament and Whitehall, and despite the appetite for decentralisation in parts of England. A 'Devolution Framework' could have provided some elements of a road map. Meanwhile, further devolution deals were agreed with the government in 2019-20.

The new government formed in December 2019 stated its ambition on 'levelling up' economic and social conditions across the UK. This includes 'levelling up' the powers and resources of decentralised governance institutions, enabling more to benefit from the mayoral combined authority model deemed successful in London and Greater Manchester and to exercise their voice in housing, infrastructure, public services, and transport policy. A new Devolution White Paper was in the Queen's Speech in December 2019 and was under development as the Brexit transition period started and the pandemic struck in early 2020, delaying its potential publication into 2021.

Where decentralisation in England goes next – its form, nature and resources – is critical. There is a need for the meaningful decentralisation of powers and resources to enable places to tailor place-based institutions, policies and public services to address their particular combinations of aspirations and needs.

Evident in government's moves on devolution policy, the current episode of decentralisation in England and its deal-making approach are reaching their zenith. First, areas that secured deals in earlier waves are increasingly seeking further deals in a bid to acquire additional powers and resources, reproducing governance by deals with all its benefits and costs.¹² Second, areas putting forward deal proposals are having to wait for Ministerial and civil servant consideration and response, demonstrating the lack of political prioritisation and administrative capacity at the national level, or receiving rejections for not meeting unstated criteria. 'One Yorkshire' proposals in 2018, for example, were rejected by the then Secretary of State James Brokenshire because they did 'not meet our devolution criteria'.¹³ Yet no such criteria have been published.

Third, knitting together the strategic aims and work of the decentralised institutions and their differentiated powers and resources within the broader patchwork is becoming more difficult as it becomes more complex and heterogeneous. While there is evidence of co-operation and joint announcements among the higher-profile metro-mayors,¹⁴ evidence is limited that the overall system of governance in England is working as coherently and effectively as it might in improving public policy outcomes and people's lives.

Conclusion

The argument here is not against further decentralisation, especially given the highly centralised system in England and the UK. Nor is it a call for

further caution and a slower approach, or for a faster, radical and revolutionary ‘big bang’ strategy. Instead, the analysis highlights the need comprehensively to think through and clarify what decentralisation is for, what powers and resources it comprises, and how it works in England, and then set this out in a clear, open and transparent road map.

This task is especially important following the disruption of the 2020 pandemic, recession and economic recovery, as well as Brexit. Calls to ‘build back better’ following the crisis include the need for a more decentralised and even federalised polity in England, effectively to tailor local and regional economic recovery plans to the needs of places and cope better with any future public health emergencies than does the present more centralised system. Indeed, at the time of writing, the government is still planning to release an English Devolution and Economic Recovery White Paper, although it has been delayed to 2021. Decentralisation may also provide a ‘golden thread’ to Brexit and an opportunity to reverse centralisation and ‘take back control’ of local affairs from a distant and unresponsive national government and political establishment.¹⁵

There are political risks in limiting decentralisation, too. The lack of economic opportunities and voice for so-called ‘left behind’ people and places and its perceived unfairness has fuelled discontent and political fragmentation and division in recent years across the UK.¹⁶ The current government’s ambition of ‘levelling up’ economic and social conditions across the UK is vital for future prosperity and wellbeing, but whether the powers and resources to address the scale and long-term nature of the task will be put in place remains in question.¹⁷ Lack of public engagement and interest in the current episode of decentralisation is already evident – for example in turn-outs in devolution deal ballots and in metro-mayor and police and crime commissioner elections. Engaging the public more effectively suggests the need to decentralise governance in England in a different way.

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Notes

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