

# Will Devolution Deliver Diversity and Equality of Opportunity for All in Liverpool City Region – or just more of the same?

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Diversity in the boardroom is increasingly recognised by governments, companies, customers and investors around the globe as an essential component of good governance that ultimately leads to better organisational and business success and sustainability. There is a growing body of research that makes the link between diversity at all levels of an organisation and enhanced creativity, performance, cohesion, innovation and increased employee and customer engagement. Given that diversity in the boardroom makes good business sense, it would therefore be wise to consider diversity in the context of devolution within the Liverpool City Region. There is a need to go beyond a 'boxticking' or 'cut and paste' exercise and engage in a meaningful discussion about how to bring a diversity of people and perspectives into the strategy development processes, institution and implementation structures in a way that serves the best interests of all stakeholders.

Devolution offers Liverpool City Region an ideal opportunity to be fully inclusive and instil public confidence in the integrity and fairness of the process. It also provides LCR the opportunity to address a recurring theme of

weak capability to conduct and secure effective and efficient selection and representation that pays attention to the diversity of the candidate field and wider community. There is a current trend that those being appointed to roles and involved in representation are still more likely to be white, male, able-bodied and older. If devolution is to succeed and have the desired impact for the City Region there needs to be a concerted attempt to widen the involvement and to attract a more diverse talent pool such as women, young and disabled people to draw in different types of experience from the norm. There is an urgent need to remove the barriers which currently discourage those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds from involvement in the devolution debate and processes by actively reaching out and enabling positive action initiatives to promote meaningful involvement.

All this requires more than a bit of tinkering around the edges and will mean thinking much more widely about the kind of skills and experience, which the devolution process could benefit from and the need to reflect the communities that the LCR devolved institutions will serve. The Combined Authority in its role as lead for the devolution process have a number of solutions and options open to it, in order to effectively adopt and embed diversity into its structure, strategy and day to day work. The adoption of such practices would improve the devolved structures effectiveness and decision-making by tapping into a broader range of perspectives. It would help counter the weakness that any institution that is made up of similar individuals and profiles is vulnerable to groupthink and will naturally want to maintain or promote harmonious relations and try to avoid confrontations by conforming or even going as far as agreeing with poor decisions. While this may lead to less conflicts and faster decision-making, it risks resulting in a less thorough analysis of need, and a tendency to overlook alternative and more appropriate actions.

Liverpool City Region devolution structures will therefore need to;

- consider, take account and accept that not everyone involved in the process needs to be senior in the private or public sectors
- adopt the use of quotas as they are an effective and powerful tool to help make the question of inclusion and exclusion more visible whilst widening awareness of the issues that need to be addressed in policy development
- be committed to gender parity in leadership roles, structures, decision making and monitor data on participation at all levels

- promote and champion achieving a better work-life balance in the vision, strategy and day to day work of the devolved structures and challenging the view that “supply-side” issues explain the under-representation of women, BME and disabled peoples involvement
- conducting gender audits which will require the devolved structures and policy makers to address explicitly the likely impact of a policy on women and men, and to demonstrate that they have taken this into account

Given the strengthen of the evidence that when organisations better reflect the community they serve there are clear benefits for effective policy making, implementation and impact, it would make sense for Liverpool City Region to signal from the outset a more progressive approach to equality and diversity. The Combined Authority has the responsibility to set the tone at the top by working proactively to improve diversity and set the best practice standard for diversity at all levels from strategy to implementation. If Liverpool City Region and devolution is to win the war for competitive advantage, economic and social prosperity, talent retention, development and deployment it will need to grasp this opportunity to delivery change through diversity because if it chooses not to, the result will be no doubt be more of the same!