



Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

Intergovernmental Relations in England: Bridging the Central-Local Divide

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Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

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Key takeaways

1. COVID-19 and its economic fallout have placed significant strain on relations between central and local government in England. The pandemic has exposed Westminster to the consequences of recent sub-national devolution.
2. The poor communications between UK Government and local leaders, exemplified by recent high profile interventions from England's Metro Mayors, highlight how a decade of institutional churn has hollowed out intergovernmental structures that could help to co-ordinate responses to health, economic and environmental crises.
3. Intergovernmental relations are fundamental to multi-level systems of government, but are now underdeveloped in England. The 2014 Scottish independence referendum and Brexit have prompted renewed focus on intergovernmental relations between UK Government and the devolved nations. A similar debate should now follow on the appropriate mechanisms to manage relations between central and local government in England.
4. Proposed institutional fixes could include an English Leaders' Forum, incorporating mayors and combined authority leaders from across the nation, along with UK Government ministers.
5. Government should also seek to move away from "deal-based" approaches to local funding, which are hugely time consuming for all parties and encourage central-local friction. More comprehensive devolved funding arrangements have potential to be more efficient and provide freedom for local leaders to direct resources where they are needed.

1. Introduction

The rollout in autumn 2020 of restrictions on social interactions across large parts of Northern England and the Midlands in response to rising COVID-19 infections has placed significant strain on relations between central and local government. Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham became something of a poster boy for the fatigue and frustration felt by those in regions that have faced some form of local lockdown since the summer. His comments, at an extraordinary press conference outside Bridgewater Hall, that "this is no way to run a country in a national crisis", reflected too the bubbling anger within local government about increasingly poor communications between Whitehall and local councils seemingly hampering the response to the pandemic.

Amongst the political theatre of a stand-off between local and central government not seen since the battles waged by the likes of Liverpool's Militant and Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council in the 1980s, it would be easy for this story to become one of personalities and geography: Burnham as the "King of the North" defending his people against a cruel, London-based elite.

However, I argue here that the breakdown in central-local relations witnessed in recent months is the result of longer-term institutional faults in England's sub-national governance arrangements, and that these problems have been exacerbated over the last decade due to rapid churn in regional and local governance arrangements. I suggest there is an urgent need for a sustainable institutional fix to improve



Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham addresses the media outside Bridgewater Hall, 20 October 2020 (Credit: [Sky News 2020](#))

intergovernmental relations between Whitehall and England's nascent combined authorities. The recommendations made in this policy briefing draw on international experiences, devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and attempts by the last Labour government to bring greater central co-ordination to locally delivered services.

2. A decade of institutional churn

Since 2010, numerous reforms of local and sub-national government in England have been undertaken. These include the abolition of Regional Development Agencies, the establishment of Local Enterprise Partnerships, City Deals, and the introduction of city-regional combined authorities and elected "metro" mayors. Further reform is proposed in the forthcoming [Devolution White Paper](#) which, it is promised, will "shift power from Whitehall to people on the ground who know their areas well, understand their priorities, and are empowered with the mandate, levers and agency to act upon them" (Clarke 2020).

The role of local and combined authorities is not, however, confined solely to delivery of services over which they are directly responsible. Along with their role as democratically elected administrations in their own right, local governments are also tasked with managing programmes designed and funded by central government. Indeed, since the mid-20th century, this has arguably been the main role of local authorities, representing the organising bureaucracy of the centralised English state and operating a wide variety of local public services in partnership with Whitehall. Yet, outside of academic circles, relatively little attention is paid to the intergovernmental mechanisms that shape these dynamics, and the last decade has witnessed the removal of various intermediate bureaucratic layers (John 2014).

An example is the somewhat unfashionable (both in local government and Westminster) [Government Offices \(GOs\) for the Regions](#), established in 1994. Announcing their abolition in 2010, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric

Pickles, described them as “agents of Whitehall to intervene and interfere in localities... a fundamental part of the command and control apparatus of England’s over-centralised state” (Pickles 2010). Each of England’s nine regions had its own GO, which were designed as “the primary means by which a wide range of government policies and programmes are delivered in the English regions”. By 2007, the GOs were managing or influencing £7.7bn of central government expenditure, much of this accounted for by transport (31% of annual GO spending) and the Department for Communities & Local Government (28%) (Mellows-Facer 2010).

GOs played an important role in responding to emergencies such as the Fuel Crisis (2000), Foot and Mouth Disease (2001) and Swine Flu (2009), acting as an intermediary between central and local government. Regional Resilience Teams (RRTs) operated within each GO to assess potential future threats and work with central government and local authorities to develop appropriate responses. While these have been replaced to an extent with Local Resilience Forums, the latter operate more as informal partnerships between various local stakeholders than an official intergovernmental body, and do not have anything like the operational resources or official remit of RRTs. It is notable that Scotland has retained elements of the regional resilience model, establishing three Regional Resilience Partnerships in 2013, with 12 Local Resilience Partnerships operating at the lower tier.

3. Intergovernmental relations: international best practice

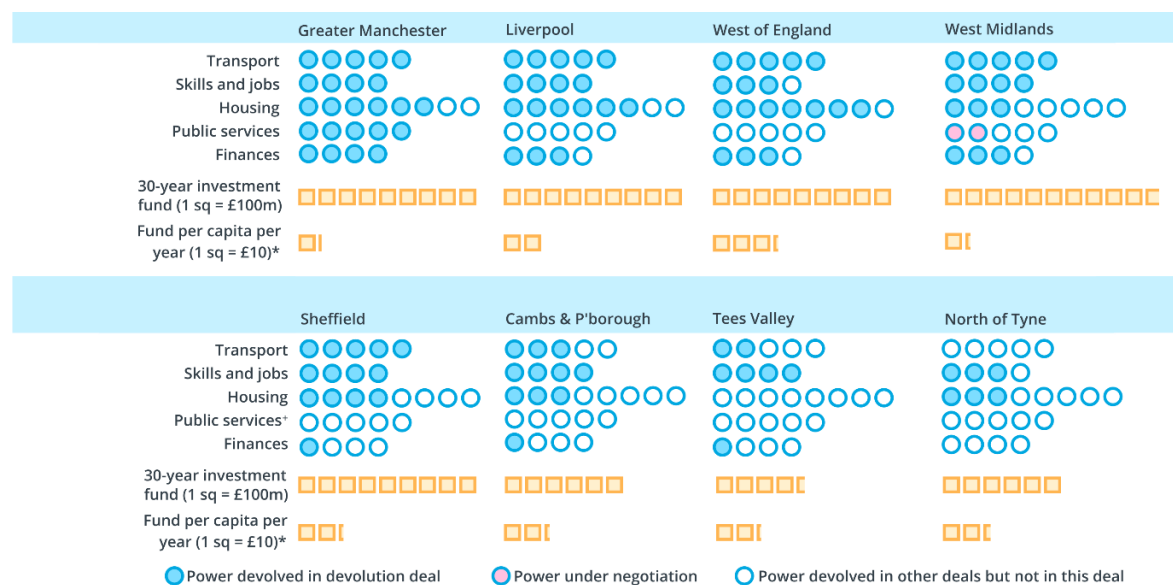
Intergovernmental relations are fundamental to multi-level systems of government common in the majority of

democratic nations. In some cases, the principles and structures shaping relations between central and sub-national government are articulated explicitly in the constitution, particularly in federal or highly decentralised states such as Belgium, Italy and Spain (McEwen et al. 2020). In others nations, such as the USA and Canada, intergovernmental relations are more flexible and informal.

Intergovernmental forums are a common institutional fix for coordinating relations between national and state governments, with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) one of the most comprehensive examples. However, such arrangements are inevitably reliant to an extent on the enthusiasm of the national executive, and are criticised by some for slowing down decision-making (Phillimore 2013). Earlier this year, in the midst of the pandemic, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison abruptly abolished the COAG after 18 years of operation, citing his frustration with “the formalities, staging... and endless meetings” (Hitch 2020).

Even in federal systems in which regional and local government have extensive autonomy, a level of friction between different levels of government is inevitable and arguably healthy. In Germany for example, several Länder (federal states) have diverged from the national strategy. The Prime Minister of Saxony-Anhalt has been a prominent critic of Angela Merkel during the coronavirus pandemic, arguing consistently for social distancing measures to be relaxed despite sharing a political party (the CDU) with the Chancellor. However, international experience suggests intergovernmental structures can help to alleviate conflict and mediate between central and local interests.

Figure 1. Devolution deal coverage in England, indicating number of powers devolved by subject



Source: Institute for Government analysis of House of Commons Library, Devolution to local government in England report, May 2019. The shaded circles represent the number of powers devolved in each deal. *Public services includes powers over health and social care integration, children's services, and those transferred from the police and crime commissioner. *Funding per capita is based on ONS population data for the years in which deals were introduced (other than the North of Tyne, for which the most recent data is from 2017).

(Credit: [Institute for Government 2020](#))

4. Intergovernmental relations in the age of COVID-19

The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and tensions over Brexit have prompted renewed debate in recent years about intergovernmental relations between Westminster and the UK's devolved nations. A 2018 report from the Bennett Institute of Public Policy and the Centre on Constitutional Change (McEwen et al. 2018) argued that it is now essential to recognise the political reality that the UK is a multi-level political system and recommended a review of the "underlying principles" of devolution.

Here, I assert that the establishment of elected mayors, a decade of austerity cuts to local government, and the geographically uneven health and economic effects of COVID-19, require a similarly urgent review of the structures shaping coordination between national and sub-national government within

England. Possible institutional fixes could focus on the following.

The appropriate funding model for combined authorities

The deal-based system currently in place involving extensive negotiations between central and local government over relatively small amounts of money, is hugely time consuming. It should be replaced by more comprehensive long-term devolved funding arrangements over which local leaders have greater control.

Clarification of devolved responsibilities

Combined authorities have differing devolved responsibilities and powers, with Greater Manchester, for example, having full control over health and social care while other combined authorities (such as Liverpool City Region) cover more limited policy areas such as transport and skills – see Figure 1. Standardisation of the role

and responsibilities of sub-national government could reduce confusion and improve efficiency.

Creation of an English Leaders' Forum

Such a forum was suggested in the [Bennett Institute of Public Policy and the Centre on Constitutional Change](#) review. Membership of the forum could be linked to the local government reforms proposed in the forthcoming Devolution White Paper to ensure representation from across the nation. In Northern England there is already a de facto regional council in the form of the Transport for the North board that meets monthly.

Formal structures to improve co-ordination between Whitehall and local government

This could include, for example, regular meetings between ministers and local leaders to discuss centrally directed but locally delivered policy areas such as concerning public health, education, housing, transport and social care.

Review of the Strategic Coordinating Groups

These groups currently co-ordinate local responses to emergencies. Whether this model could be adapted to management of longer term health, economic and environmental crises, as well as developing resilience to future shocks, is worth exploring.

5. Conclusion

Elected Metro Mayors, such as Steve Rotherham in Liverpool City Region and Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, have demonstrated their extensive soft power over recent weeks, frequently appearing on national media to represent the interests of their city regions. However, the dispute over

lockdown measures has reemphasised the need to consider more comprehensively how Westminster and Whitehall interact with relatively new English sub-national institutions. Burnham, and his London counterpart, Sadiq Khan, have called for “[strong co-operation between regional and national authorities](#)” to tackle COVID-19. Current coordinating structures are too informal to achieve this, and too reliant on the enthusiasm of a small number of individuals within central government.

The establishment of the [Northern Research Group](#) of Conservative MPs also demonstrates frustration from within the governing party itself. There will be no return of the Government Offices for the Regions, but some form of more comprehensive structure to coordinate intergovernmental relations in England is necessary to alleviate future crises. The alternative is a constant and damaging state of central-local friction.

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