

Institute for Public Policy Research



# THE SHAPE OF DEVOLUTION

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December 2024

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Registered charity no: 800065 (England and Wales), SC046557 (Scotland)

This paper was first published in December 2024. © IPPR 2024

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Arianna Giovannini (University of Urbino Carlo Bo) and Luke Raikes (The Fabian Society) for their invaluable feedback to this paper. We also extend our gratitude to our colleagues at IPPR North—Zoë Billingham, Marcus Johns, India Gerritsen, and Abi Hynes—for their insightful contributions and support throughout the development of this work.

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Lockwood R and Swift R (2024) *The shape of devolution*, IPPR North.

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**Ours is a country with deep divides – borne largely from our uniquely centralised system of governance. Devolution offers a powerful tonic. Yet the process of devolution in England outside of London has been slow and opaque, leaving a patchwork quilt with gaping holes in it.**

Starting with Greater Manchester in 2014, combined authorities formed of local councils working together have been created and taken on powers, mostly through devolution deals with central government. The negotiations for these were conducted behind closed doors.

The “debate over the appropriate geography for devolution deals has been muted” (Sandford 2019). Finding the right shape of the footprints to devolve power to is a complex exercise that requires consideration of a wide range of issues including economic, functionality, populations, public services, places and identities as well as institutional practices and memory and policy development. More often than not, resorting to the principle of ‘administrative convenience’ (ibid) has been common practice.

Yet, with a new government pledging to widen and deepen devolution (Raynor 2024), and the idea of ‘completing the map’ coming to the fore, the question arises again: how do we create transparent, fair and practical footprints for local power across England? In a landscape dotted with ad-hoc political geographies and ‘devolution deserts’, what geographical shape should devolution take?

Well, humans are messy (Bauman 2000). So too are the places we live. We don’t fit into neat boxes, and drawing lines that often feel artificial on a map can create more problems than it solves. But if we want to build a functional system of empowered devolved governance, we need to get serious about how subnational governance, and the communities that it is made of, are organised.

It’s time to explore what a practical, holistic, people-focused footprint for devolution could look like.

## **ECONOMY, FUNCTIONALITY AND POPULATIONS**

Devolution, as initiated under the coalition government was largely an economic project (Osborne 2014), focussed on enabling city regions to boost productivity and competitiveness through agglomeration economies. This can be seen in the shape of earlier devolution settlements like those in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire, and West Yorkshire, which reflect some form of city region economic geography. These deals are largely based on the geographies of former metropolitan counties (Parr 2020) and are arguably a form of functional economic area, based loosely on people’s travel to work patterns.

The last government focussed primarily on these places individually, but recognised they are intimately linked with the Northern Powerhouse agenda (Swift 2022). There are major economic benefits to linking city regions to forge new functional economic areas – or at

least facilitate travel-to-work patterns between major population centres. Indeed, looking internationally, we see that the scale of these larger sub-national units makes them well suited to coordinating specific policy areas such as infrastructure planning, inward investment, regional industrial strategy, public investment and banking (CEJ 2018). While devolution deals in England have focussed on smaller spatial scales, thinking about how they connect and interact as part of larger pan-regional economies is important.

There is a persuasive theory to designing devolution around functional economic areas – they aren't based on something intangible, but on the real world and economy. Many existing devolution deals, however, have overlooked other key functional interactions, such as where people go for leisure and social activity. Harrogate, for instance, has strong ties to West Yorkshire; High Peak looks towards Greater Manchester; and Chesterfield has deep links with South Yorkshire – but these considerations are excluded from those devolved footprints. These types of boundaries are fluid and don't work in the same way for all places; yet they provide a clear reminder that drawing a line on a map, has an impact on what's on the other side.

Part of the issue is that devolution in England lacked a clear roadmap from the start. It evolved from an economic project with some degree of democratic accountability into a more complex process, and is now being met with growing concern with 'completing the map'. Along the way, some of the earlier deals as well as more recent ones have adopted 'fuzzy' boundaries, and do not neatly map onto clear functional economic geographies. For example, the North East Combined Authority (NECA) is home to the large conurbations of Newcastle and Sunderland but also covers a vast geographical area encompassing rural Northumberland and the former Durham coalfield. Remarkably, it does not include an important part of the traditional North East region (Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, or Stockton-On-Tees), which are part of the neighbouring Tees Valley Combined Authority. NECA is a large area – as is the footprint covered by York and North Yorkshire's new combined authority. However, both have population sizes smaller than urban areas like Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire.

Size and population matter. Sparsely populated rural areas and densely packed urban centres often have very different needs and priorities, yet the population size of a devolved area needs to be workable for governing. There is a balance to strike between the voices of urban and rural communities, and how people live, work and move between these places. Similarly, devolved areas with smaller populations are at risk of having 'weaker voices' (Shaw 2024), a lesser ability to take on new powers, as well as to raise and receive funding than larger footprints, potentially putting people in those areas at a disadvantage. Devolution should be able to encompass and embrace diversity through flexibility.

## **PUBLIC SERVICES AND COOPERATION**

Three Shires Head, the meeting point of Cheshire, Derbyshire, and Staffordshire, offers a perceptive lesson about boundaries. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when police forces were restricted

to their own county lines, it became a haven for criminal activity. People would gather to brawl, knowing they could simply step across a border to evade one constabulary's jurisdiction. While this is an extreme case, it highlights why aligning public services – like the NHS, police, and transport – with devolved powers is important.

Liverpool City Region's mayor often talks about the adage that a Scouser can learn to read between the lines before they read, saying that: "I've checked my devolution agreement, and it tells me the things that I can do, but nowhere does it tell me the things I can't do" (O'Donoghue 2021). Although the powers afforded to mayors remain largely economic, that isn't stopping them from acting beyond the confines of their deals. For example, the North East's new mayor (among others) has indicated that her priorities extend beyond the formally economic by enacting policies like the rollout of baby boxes for low-income families (BBC North East 2024). Proper alignment of public services could support this work and foster better coordinated, effective decision-making. Yet England's public services operate within a tangle of overlapping boundaries, making alignment challenging. Internationally, this is unusual (Kenny and Newman 2023). Even where there is coterminosity between devolved boundaries and public services – such as where mayors have devolved health powers – they are somewhat restrained (Shaw 2024), highlighting the challenge of achieving true integration.

## PLACE AND IDENTITIES

People are shaped by the places they live (and vice versa), and places are shaped by their natural environment. Geography has an intrinsic relationship with history and identity. Collectively, these are powerful forces in shaping communities and places. For centuries, landscapes like the North's uplands and rivers – have shaped livelihoods, industries, and communities, and in turn, people have left their mark on the world around them. This matters when it comes to creating effective governance geographies.

Regional identity – or belonging – is an important component in understanding how people interact with geographies and social and political institutions (Paasi 2009). A notable critique of prioritising forms of functionality when determining devolved footprints is that they can 'lack historical lineage' (Mycock 2016) and therefore may fail to reflect existing place-based identities.

When it comes to the role of identity in debates about administrative geographies in England, the place of the historic boundaries of traditional county areas is often centred (Sandford 2019). Proponents of historic counties being the natural footprint for devolution argue that there "is greater public understanding of what a county is, and the public can easily identify with counties" (Henham Strategy 2020). This appeal was perhaps best typified in the One Yorkshire campaign for a devolution deal covering all of the historic county. Advocates suggested that Yorkshire as a whole is a recognisable 'brand' (Steer Economic Development 2018), a diverse yet interconnected economy, and holds greater attachment in terms of identity than the city regional level. It is currently divided into three, soon to be four, combined authorities.

The challenge for devolution policy is that identities are often personal, fluid, and multi-layered. Moreover, the paucity of existing evidence on people's perceptions of their place-based identities makes it difficult to assess the extent to which current devolved footprints map onto existing identities. The line must be drawn somewhere, but to ensure that devolution is meaningful for people going forwards, we must better explore how it relates to people's sense of place and identity.

Where deep-rooted identities are less clear, however, devolution does afford new institutions and mayors the opportunity to seek to build a sense of identity and attachment in their area (Roberts 2020) through place shaping initiatives like the Bee Network in Greater Manchester which creates an identifiable symbol across the whole of the region's transport network. The role of mayors in utilising their soft powers and the performative element of their political leadership also has the potential to forge new political identities around existing devolved footprints (Giovannini 2021). An example of this was mayors across the North standing up for their communities regarding tiered restrictions during the pandemic (Blakeley 2020).

It may be that as devolution develops and embeds, that identity attachment to these areas strengthens, particularly for younger people who may naturally feel less attached to more historically rooted identities.

## **WHAT IS DEVOLUTION FOR?**

So what shape should devolution take if the government is to deliver on its promise to widen and broaden it? That depends on what you believe devolution is for.

Devolution means different things to different people. For us, it's about bringing power closer to people where they are, to create the conditions for everyone to live a good life (Johns et al 2020).

It is something that shouldn't be done to people, but with them. So an effective devolution strategy should be designed, not solely by civil servants, ministers, or London based think tanks, but with local places. Leaders and citizens, working together to form footprints that will enable places to take their first step onto the devolution ladder.

Devolution is a promise that must be delivered, and it's better to open up a flexible approach to get each footprint right to unlock its full benefits, than to rush get it wrong (again). So local leaders should form local citizens juries to work with them as they collaborate with government (EJC 2021) – opening up a devolution dialogue to strengthen the ties that bind the devolution quilt together locally as well as building democratic legitimacy and a sense of attachment to the new areas in the process. One size won't fit all, and it will be impossible to please everyone – that's ok.

Of course, devolution must be both democratic and pragmatic. Its shape needs to work so that local places can receive the powers and wield the voice needed to innovate and deliver the conditions for people to live better lives – from reduced inequalities, to

thriving public services and infrastructure that works. So boundaries will need to be drawn at suitable scales for each consideration set out in this blog, as well as be flexible, to adapt to change as future need requires. Collaboration will be needed too between devolved areas, at the regional level, as we are already seeing in the North (Savage 2024).

Ultimately, shaping devolution must be about creating a system that works for all of England to move along a framework at the pace that works for them – and which enables empowered places and regions to cooperate to build a stronger, fairer country. The path to this future will require flexibility, care and collaboration. We mustn't assume that neatness or convenience are best, or that the map can 'be completed' solely on tidy functional economic geographies, but instead use the process to enable regional conversations about the multiple factors and identities at play. When every thread of the quilt is thoughtfully woven, the nationwide benefits of devolution could really take root – and every place can take its rightful seat at the Council of Nations and Regions.



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