

# Why is running the North so complicated?

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*Devolution has evolved into an uneven process, with much greater progress achieved in some parts of the country compared to others. But why is the North so difficult to govern? [John Fenwick](#) offers some key explanations.*

English devolution continues to be an uncertain process, with very different degrees of progress in different areas. Running the North presents an especially complicated picture. For instance, despite historical rivalries between towns such as Bury, Bolton and Wigan, the governance of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority seems, for now, relatively settled. It has a rapid local integrated transport system, stable leadership from its elected mayor, Andy Burnham, and was given attention by central government as the focus of its Northern Powerhouse initiative.

Across the Pennines, Yorkshire still has some unresolved complexities. In particular, the 'One Yorkshire' plan campaigns for a devolution deal for the whole county and has the support of the overwhelming majority of Yorkshire councils, but this proposal conflicts with the aspiration of a small group of south Yorkshire authorities to pursue a Sheffield City Region arrangement. Beneath the surface, differences exist in all parts of England. But North-East England seems particularly complicated with some intractable differences of view about devolution and about governance of the area. Why is this and what are the alternatives on offer?

A particular problem in considering the North-East is that, despite one of the strongest regional identities in England, there is no real agreement about where it is. The northern border with Scotland might be clear enough, but the Western border with Cumbria is fairly arbitrary and the southern border is very unclear: for instance, parts of the area subject to the referendum in 2004 on whether to establish a directly elected assembly for the region are now in the Tees Valley area. Tees Valley itself is Conservative led, a surprise to some but in fact the area takes in swathes of countryside historically in Yorkshire as well as towns that have always been politically mixed such as Darlington. The Tees Valley area also covers one area, Middlesbrough, that already has its own directly-elected mayor. The Tees Valley mayor, Ben Houchen, has a clear agenda of policies for the area, including a mayoral development corporation, securing the future of the local airport, and finalising a second devolution deal.

Elsewhere in the North East the problems become more complex. The North East Combined Authority (NECA) for the seven relevant councils (Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Gateshead, Sunderland, South Tyneside and County Durham) covers a large geographical area and is a potentially powerful regional body, but the four constituent councils south of the River Tyne could not agree to mayoral governance and the NECA has therefore been prepared to forego the resources on offer from government.

The three councils north of the river resolved to go ahead and have since pursued a plan for a devolution deal, and an elected mayor, for these three council areas only. This seems to have reached fruition in the recent announcement of a budgetary allocation – and an elected mayor – in the 2017 Budget. Yet to complicate matters, one of these councils, North Tyneside, has an elected mayor in place already. Such details might seem arcane to readers from beyond this area, but there are important general lessons to be learned. One is that historical divisions may strongly reassert themselves when there are potential disagreements about something as important as power; another is that dominance by one political party may be a barrier rather than an aid to reaching agreement.

What are the implications of this for English devolution as a whole? A report by Localis (2017) for the County Councils Network in November 2017 recommended the creation of 47 'Strategic Authorities' for the governance of England, varying greatly in size and to some extent recalling the proposals of the Redcliffe Maud Report (1969) for a nationwide system of unitary councils – an idea that was never implemented despite successive waves of local government reorganisation since then. For the North East, such proposals involve the recreation of something akin to the late and largely unlamented cross-river Tyne and Wear County Council (1974-1986) and

seem unlikely to gain widespread political support.

In a national policy context of inconsistent moves toward devolution, with great progress in some parts of the country rather than in others, what positive conclusions are to be drawn? First, although the proposals by Localis, brokered by the County Councils Network, are arguably unlikely to impact greatly on the actual organisation of councils, they do constitute an attempt to think afresh about the question of how we organise English sub-national governance and to that extent are welcome.

Secondly, attention is due to the importance of place in making arrangements for devolved authorities. Yorkshire, Manchester and for that matter London are places with objective boundaries as well as subjective identities. The North-East, by contrast, has a strong subjective identity – it is a ‘belonging community’ in the parlance of the New Labour years – but its objective boundaries are unclear and have been altered many times by government. For that reason, its governance has evaded clear definition and is likely to continue to do so.

Thirdly, party politics may obstruct effective planning of local devolution: in this respect, the Cabinet for the Tees Valley area is an interesting, and in time perhaps will become an instructive, example of cross-party cooperation in taking devolution forward.

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**References:** Lord Redcliffe Maud (1969) Royal Commission on Local Government in England Cmnd 4040; Localis (2017) In Place of Work: Influencing Local Labour Markets.

### **About the Author**



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