

Growing pains

Councils need to take advantage of the current openings to promote growth, productivity and efficiency through local government devolution. **Adam Fineberg** explains

The notes accompanying the recent Queen's Speech state that one of the main benefits of the ensuing Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill will be 'boosting growth and increasing productivity and efficiency in local government'.

Immediately post-election and prior to the 2010 Spending Review I was invited to lead a workshop for the benefit of the Department for Communities and Local Government and HM Treasury entitled *A total framework to realise localism, enhanced outcomes and necessary efficiencies*. We discussed in detail 'a whole-systems approach to addressing the existing architecture – making things work better for local people, under the overarching economic development objective'.

My work on the 'growth coalitions' project addressed the universal role for local authorities in promoting growth through the services that they offer and the role that they could play in developing local, sub-regional and regional economies in association with the private sector. Citizen-centred, local, integrated and strengths-based services were seen as the outcomes, making the system work better for local people.

Councils and their partners are navigating potential combined authority territories and geographies in order to continue to address the challenge to deliver better and more cheaply locally, with the new emphasis on growth and productivity. Devolved budgets and responsibilities will form a part of this.

The Government is supporting the 'Northern Powerhouse' proposals based on a business case produced on the back of historical work locally. This included revisiting *The Northern Way*, ex-Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's attempt to drive growth in the North West during the noughties.

The South East, for various reasons, cannot drive the growth that is required nationally. A national plan that promotes growth elsewhere is the requirement.

Local authorities can see this as the opportunity to realise the next round of required efficiencies. A collaborative redesign of local public services provision – with provider organisations restructured to make them fit for purpose – is a key part of the challenge in terms of improving outcomes and efficiencies. This, combined with an overarching growth objective, working as appropriate at scale and building in effective leadership are the components to make up a considered and realisable business case and plan.

Bottom-up proposals for combined authorities can be the worked-through result from this process – a careful one that maps out and take a futures view to developments. Perhaps this would be localism in action, reconfiguring the local architecture – including local government structures – in a way that central government would find it hard to do.

We now have a Minister for Efficiency and former Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill (who chaired a commission into devolution last year) joining the Treasury to drive the devolution agenda. The engaged authorities will be those that help write their script and develop appropriate methodologies to be promoted by the Government. These councils will follow on and see through the required steps on the roadmap, starting in good time to feed into the difficult local budget planning process that they're about to embark on. The Governments' national Budget on 8 July may be a significant pointer in this respect. ■

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A shared responsibility

Caroline Davis and **Jovian Smalley** present the highlights from a workshop

Over the past two years, the failure in some local places to safeguard children and young people has been brought to the fore. High profile crises, such as those in Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford, led the Government to write to local leaders, highlighting the critical role that information sharing plays in protecting vulnerable young people.

In a number of places, local partners have established a MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) to work together to more effectively safeguard children and young people.

Yet many localities have recognised that better information sharing could help improve outcomes for vulnerable people whose needs do not currently meet safeguarding thresholds – and that earlier intervention, based on information sharing, could even prevent cases becoming a safeguarding concern.

Working together in a multi-agency environment relies on appropriate and timely information sharing, so the Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing provided local places with an opportunity to share experiences, exchange good practice, and explore common themes around information sharing for the protection of vulnerable people.

The one-day workshop saw representatives from across the country, from Lincolnshire to the West Midlands and from Bath to the London boroughs, come together to discuss the challenges they face and the key learning to date.

Representatives from the Home Office, which has led much of the work on MASHs, were also able to join the day, with input from Department for

Education and others helping to shape the day.

One of the key areas of learning emerging on the day is that each locality interprets, designs and implements a MASH-type approach differently.

While a number of places have the most well-known focus of child protection, localities also reported broadening the scope to include vulnerable adults, domestic violence, and children and families further down on the spectrum of need. This range of approaches led participants to focus on the factors common to all.

Transparency is not just confined to service users – there needs to be transparency between partners, too

Participants highlighted the impact of improved information sharing on the ability of practitioners to deliver the right intervention at the right time.

Attendees on the day felt that information sharing enabled practitioners to understand the holistic context for an individual or family, pinpointing the right support and limiting unnecessary duplication.

Practitioners benefit from a better understanding of each other's roles, and also want to help design any information sharing report, so it meets the needs of each practitioner.'