

GOVERNANCE

Devolution deals at risk without serious scrutiny



Lord Kerslake, chair, Centre for Public Scrutiny

Good governance has a critical role to play in ensuring that devolution makes a real difference to people's lives.

Local leaders need to know decisions they are making are robust and evidence based, and the public need to have confidence that decisions made in their name are value for money.

It is surprising that, to date, there have been comparatively few detailed discussions about governance and scrutiny as a critical element of devolution deals, or the settled governance frameworks of

combined authorities.

The focus has been on mayors. Mayors can provide an individual local leader who is visible and democratically accountable for their decisions in a very direct way. However, this does not replace the need for local leaders to have serious discussions on the governance systems that will surround the mayor.

The risks of not having these discussions are significant. The perception could develop that decision making is in the hands of a small local elite, remote from local people. This would work against the whole principle of devolution.

Leaders need the constructive challenge from

strong and effective governance to hone and refine their plans, to reflect on their priorities and to ensure what is happening on the ground reflects local people's needs.

Without this, there is a risk that the potential benefits of devolution could remain unrealised.

The most obvious group of people to provide this robust but constructive challenge are non-executive councillors.

Combined authorities will, under the Cities & Local Government Devolution Bill, need to have overview and scrutiny committees. The integral role of these committees to the success of devolution needs to be taken account of, and local leaders

need to seriously think about their role.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny is proposing amendments to the bill to enhance the role of combined authority overview and scrutiny committees.

The CfPS's intention is to provoke those in leadership positions to think about three issues in particular – how they will develop policy openly, how they will transparently monitor performance and improvement, and how they will involve the public.

Overview and scrutiny committees should then be seen as playing a supportive role to combined authorities as they put those plans into practice.

DEVOLUTION

Back to the noughties: how place-based working needs a revamp



Adam Fineberg, analyst and adviser on public services and growth

In the context of devolution, the government is minded to introduce single 'place-based budgets', which will leave different local service providers supposedly sharing budgets and agreeing on provision at a time when overall public sector funding diminishes.

Authorities' moves to combine in order to access government funds and obtain the devolution of Department for Work & Pensions resources have seen activity around supporting people's routes to employment. This work,

integrating a limited range of services, re-establishes the principle of locality working driven by noughties-style service provision around housing management, safer neighbourhood policing, neighbourhood management and children's centres work with families.

The economic crisis and the de-investment in public services commenced just at the time when those latter pieces of work had the potential to coalesce.

However, the government's de-ringfencing of the early intervention grant, formed to foster children's centres work, led councils to run down this provision rather than attempt to safeguard it by realising

efficiencies arising from this coalescence.

The Devo-Manc deal is based on a top-down, managerialist rebuilding of local infrastructure, which originally evolved as a result of frontline experience and responded to need. The challenge now is rebuilding this delivery architecture in more complex geographical and challenging political and economic contexts.

The noughties' 'growth coalitions' addressed the role for local authorities in promoting growth through the services they and partners offer and the role they could play in developing growth economies. Central government would provide

funding through a single growth coalition. Citizen-centred, local, integrated and strengths-based services were the outcomes.

The local authority's role should be as the first among equals in the growth coalition, being the source for all local public expenditure. This is the only way the work of local public service providers can be truly incentivised to integrate.

The current pointers for services indicate that devolution will take public service providers further away from realising their public service remit. There is a risk that there will soon be a significant crisis in service provision.