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**CENTRE  
FOR THE  
SOUTH**

How do we solve a  
problem like devolution:  
**The case of the  
Central South**

By Prof John Boswell, Dr Hannah Dalglish,  
Dr Max Stafford, and Gareth Giles

**Insight Paper #1**



# About the Centre for the South

The Centre for the South (CftS) is a policy institute founded under the University of Southampton. The CftS uses equitable approaches to stimulate cross-sector collaboration across the Central South, mobilising knowledge and using evidence to drive more informed place-based decision making, for mutual prosperity. The Centre is focused on addressing six overlapping priorities:

- The identity of the region and pride in place
- Power structures, devolution, and community resilience
- Mental health, wellbeing, and health inequalities
- Local skills and (future) labour needs
- Infrastructures (e.g. transport and housing) and net zero
- The role, use of, and access to green/blue spaces



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# About the authors

**John Boswell** is a Professor in Politics whose interests centre around democratic governance and public policy. He is keen to work on challenges related to transport infrastructures and the role of libraries for communities. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3018-8791>

**Hannah Dalgleish** is a Knowledge Exchange Fellow, establishing networks and mobilising knowledge across the academic-policy sphere. She is eager to address science-based challenges around work and skills, as well as explore human-nature awareness as an essential aspect of a green recovery. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8970-3065>

**Max Stafford** is a Teaching Fellow in Politics and has ample experience working for former cabinet ministers and policymakers. He is especially interested in research regarding the role, evolution, influence, and significance of the Downing Street Chief-of-Staff; and the leadership of directly-elected mayors. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0698-0770>

**Gareth Giles** is the head of Public Policy | Southampton, bringing a wealth of knowledge from previous experience gained in central and local government. He is excited about finding solutions for the future of work in the central South, as well as improving power structures in the region. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0155-2408>

# Thank you

**This work is the result of discussions with several policymakers from local authorities across the Central South. We are very thankful for their time and candid answers to our questions.**

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# Executive Summary

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This Insight Paper is the first in a series of pieces looking to shine a light on the key challenges of our region. Here, we focus on the prospects for local devolution in the Central South. We draw on contemporary research on the ‘devolution revolution’ in England to ask what local leaders can learn from experience elsewhere.

The key insights from our narrative review of the relevant literature are as follows.



The official Westminster story of convergence around an institutional pathway towards devolution is at odds with research. In practice, local deals have demanded greater contingency and complexity.



The challenges of political, social, and economic geography that have prevented a deal in the Central South thus far are far from unique to our region – other regions have successfully overcome these same challenges on the path to devolution.

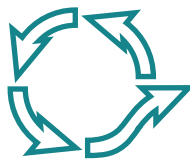


There is no single model to follow, either as a blueprint for devolved arrangements or as an ideal process to develop a deal, but experience elsewhere points to key ‘arts’ that enable creative and lasting solutions.

Our recommendations, on the basis of these insights, are that:



Local stakeholders should get poised to take advantage of the ‘window of opportunity’ likely presented by a change of government in Westminster;



A ‘circuit breaker’ is needed to drive discussions forward quickly;



Reaching a deal cannot rely on any magic solution, and will require clever craft and hard graft on the part of local leaders.

## The purpose of this paper

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The paper is aimed at policymakers and other stakeholders in the Central South. Its focus is the prospect of devolution in the region, but **the paper does not seek to promote a particular blueprint or geography on which any deal ought to be predicated**; the emphasis is on process, not outcome. The paper reviews emerging evidence on the experience of planning, negotiating, and executing devolution deals across England in the last decade to draw lessons from the country’s recent ‘devolution revolution’. We then lay out a practical guide for what getting to an acceptable deal in our region might involve, and how local policymakers and stakeholders might best go about navigating this process. The paper, we hope, will help to drive forward a local deal that can convince Westminster to unlock resources and devolve autonomy to promote prosperity in the Central South.

# The background:

## Why a local devolution deal hasn't happened – and why it needs to now

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Devolution in the Central South has been an awkward political challenge for the region over the last decade. In light of central government commitments to decentralisation and 'Levelling Up', multiple attempts have been made to package and sell a devolution deal to the government in Westminster. None have been successful. One stumbling block has been around the precise geography involved, with competing proposals envisaging the region in different ways (Knott, 2023; Paun et al. 2023) – the different geographies speak to anxieties that key local stakeholders have concerning jurisdictions (such as the county) being split, or others (such as the districts) becoming marginalised. Another obstacle has been the diverse economic profile of the Central South, spanning as it does from 'left behind' places to inner-cities to relatively affluent hubs like the rural and peri-urban regions of Hampshire (see Boswell et al. 2018). A final stumbling block has been the institutional arrangements that Westminster requires, with pockets of strong local opposition to the prospect of a directly elected mayor (Clayden, 2016; Zodgekar, 2023). The legacy of this challenging recent history is an environment of low trust among key regional figures.

But, despite these challenges, there is equal recognition that reaching a devolution deal remains an important aspiration. Indeed, in our recent report (Lord, 2023), **solving the devolution problem is identified as an urgent priority for the region.** The primary push factor is the financial strain facing local authorities after years of austerity and recent inflationary pressures (see Bradley et al. 2023). Southampton City Council was very recently granted up to just over £120million in additional financial support (financed through capital receipts), in order to assist budgetary pressures in the short-term (Gov.uk, 2024a) – other local authorities are showing similar signs of financial distress. Devolution represents one obvious way of unlocking the additional resources urgently needed to attract growth and run essential public services in the region, as well as opening up potential to benefit from efficiencies associated with economies of scale.

Another key element is impending change in the wider political context. While it is unlikely that the recent local elections will prompt major changes in the region's political terrain, there will be some refreshing of personnel, subtly shifting the dominant ideas and relationships involved in local negotiations. More importantly, the polls are consistently and strongly

pointing to a change of national government when a General Election is called, with potential flow-on effects for negotiations between devolved regions and Westminster. First and most obviously, this prospect 'wipes the slate clean' after a difficult history of failed negotiations between Westminster and local authorities in the Central South region in the search for a deal. Just as importantly, though, a change in government opens up wider possibilities. The clear focus of devolution policy under successive Conservative-led governments has been the combined mayoral authority model. As forecast most clearly in the Brown Commission on constitutional reform, a Labour government is firmly committed to pushing forward the devolution agenda further still – getting "The Right Powers in the Right Places" (White et al., 2023) and "widening devolution to every town and city in England" (Labour, 2024). As Labour's vision on devolution develops further, **a change in government certainly opens up potential for greater local autonomy over the exact nature of institutional arrangements** and, moving forward, over the powers and responsibilities that might come under local control.

**"...despite these challenges, there is equal recognition that reaching a devolution deal remains an important aspiration."**

This confluence of developments and alignment of incentives add up to a 'window of opportunity' for the Central South region. Now is the time to rethink regional coordination so as to be in the best possible position to lobby for a favourable devolution deal after the next General Election. But the scars of previous failures remain, and trust between some key parties in the region is low. How, then, can efforts towards coordination be mobilised?

# Approach:

## Learning from experience elsewhere

In this paper, we look to evidence from successes and failures in developing and delivering devolution deals across England. There is a decade of experience of the ‘devolution revolution’ elsewhere in the country to learn from. And, while every region has its own unique background, **the Central South is far from alone in experiencing the difficulties that have inhibited a deal so far**. The challenges that our region faces around geography, economy, and politics – even the strained relationships resulting from recent failures – all bear a strong ‘family resemblance’ to those faced in places as diverse as Greater Manchester (see Gains 2015), the Liverpool City Region (Jeffery 2023), and the West of England (Ayres et al. 2018). In our analysis we ask: how have they managed to negotiate these challenges, and what can leaders in the Central South learn from those experiences?

Our approach is to conduct a narrative review of the evidence that has emerged from this decade of experience. This approach is the norm in scholarship focused on learning from similar experiences in political science and policy studies – variously dubbed ‘policy transfer’, ‘evidence-informed policymaking’ or ‘policy

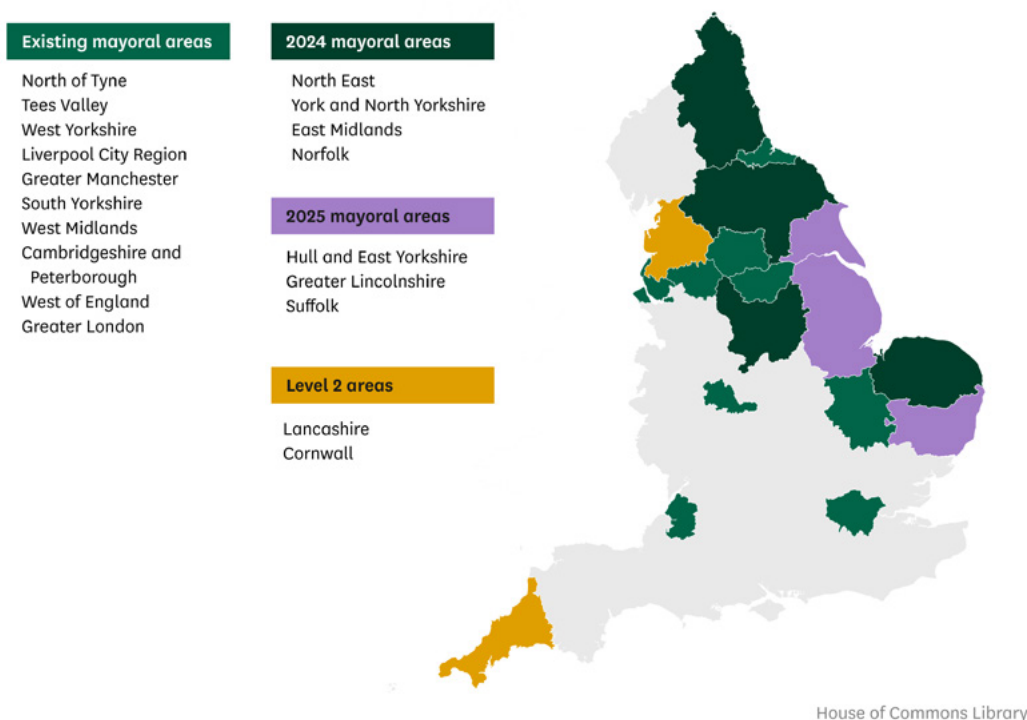
learning’ (see Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Cairney 2016 for reviews). Narrative reviews enjoy this prevalence in the field for two reasons, both of which also apply for our purposes:

- 1** One is that narrative reviews are the ideal approach for pulling together deep insight from rich but heterogenous sources. In the case of lessons from devolution in the last decade in England, the evidence base is highly varied in nature, with research articles, grey literature, and testimony on the public record.
- 2** Two is that narrative reviews are a method designed to cut through complex experience and deliver key conceptual and practical insights. Our purpose here is to deliver meaningful guidance that can be picked up and used by local stakeholders in practice, rather than to present dry, abstract, or technical descriptive detail.

We then draw on this broad understanding to outline a practical guide for reaching a devolution deal for policymakers in the region.

**Figure 1.** Credit: House of Commons Library (2023). Figure accurate as of November 2023

## English devolution: current and future



# England's Devolution Revolution: The story so far

In the last decade, successive Conservative-led governments have promoted devolution to city-regions as a key mechanism for promoting economic growth in England outside London (see Tomaney 2016; Giovannini 2021; Sandford 2023). More than 60% of the English population are now covered by a devolution deal, and rising (Gov.uk 2024b). Devolution deals include mayoral areas with considerable local autonomy, as well as a handful of recent County Deals with more limited devolution of powers (see Figure 1). In this context, **the Central South lags behind the majority of the country, representing one of the most populous regions in England not to have any sort of deal yet.**

The perception locally tends to one of exceptionalism – that the political, social, and economic geography of the Central South presents unique challenges relative to the more cohesive communities of the North of England and Midlands (e.g. Powell 2023). This perception makes sense in the context of the official account of the story so far, but is not borne out by evidence from grounded research in policy studies and political science on the challenges of realising the ‘devolution revolution’ elsewhere in practice.

**“the Central South lags behind the majority of the country, representing one of the most populous regions in England not to have any sort of deal yet”**

On the one hand, the official story points to broad convergence in overall outcome in ‘successful’ cases (e.g. DLUHC 2022). In this narrative, the first and best-known of the devolution deals was the Greater Manchester Combined Mayoral Authority. In the subsequent decade, another eight devolution deals that broadly fit the same combined mayoral authority model (post facto dubbed ‘Level 3 deals’ in the Levelling Up White Paper of 2022) have gone ahead, with another three having just recently come into being (North East,

York and North Yorkshire, and the East Midlands). Two combined mayoral authorities – Greater Manchester and West Midlands – have progressed to ‘Level 4 deals’ which enable the apparent Holy Grail of a ‘single pot’ that grants further autonomy over key portfolios and unlocks strategic resource. Level 4 powers have since been offered to an additional four areas: Liverpool City Region, North East, West Yorkshire, and South Yorkshire. These greater powers include: skills & employment; housing & land; transport; net zero & climate change; innovation, trade & investment; culture & tourism; and public health (Gov.uk, 2024c) – albeit in practice, away from the national headlines, the promise of autonomy in these portfolios conflicts with Westminster demands for accountability across targets and benchmarks. In blunt terms, nevertheless, this official story asserts convergence around an institutional pathway towards more effective local autonomy.

On the other hand, in-depth academic research reveals a more complex, less linear story. In these more critical accounts, broad claims of conformity to a specific blueprint or model disguise a great deal of heterogeneity in the specific forms and functions of these devolved bodies, which are a product of contested and complex origin stories grounded in local context (see Sandford 2017). In their landmark analysis, Lowndes and Lemprière (2018) draw on sophisticated institutionalist theories to explain and show how local government reform in England occurs against a challenging background of rivalries, relationships and ‘sticky’ legacies of past arrangements and ongoing service provision. They point to a constellation of local factors that shapes subtle differences in how devolution manifest across context: ‘animation’ (the role of key agents), ‘nesting’ (the relationship between local and national institutions) and ‘embedding’ (the link between new proposals and place-specific institutional legacies and identities). Their explanatory model has been applied to understand case study ‘deals’ including the successes of Greater Manchester and the West Midlands and the initial failure of the North East Combined Authority (see Lemprière and Lowndes 2019). Other research in the field uses slightly different theoretical lenses and explanatory jargon, but reaches much the same conclusion – in-depth studies based on deep understanding of the process of devolution invariably speak to a delicate balancing act of quelling local political rivalries, merging different organisational cultures, and managing relationships with stakeholders outside government and in Westminster (see Ayres et al. 2018; Roberts 2020; Paun et al. 2023).





The key insight from this deeper dive into relevant academic research is not just that no devolution process is exactly alike, but that local contingencies inform both success and failure in conceiving and negotiating a deal, and the institutional legacies of devolution in place. These complexities make it impossible to point to a particular institutional blueprint for devolution in our region, or even a model process from elsewhere to replicate exactly. The Central South story will inevitably have its own idiosyncrasies. Nevertheless, insights from elsewhere provide a valuable bank of experience to draw from, with many existing deals emerging from contexts that bear important ‘family resemblance’ with the challenges and obstacles in the Central South.

We move now to turning these experiences and insights into useful advice for stakeholders in the Central South region. We structure our account around the five key ‘arts’ of ‘conceiving a devolution deal’ identified in Paun et al. (2023). We do so because these ‘arts’ offer a useful narrative device to break down broader insights and translate them in ways that, we hope, are easily digestible for local policymakers and stakeholders.

**“local contingencies inform both success and failure in conceiving and negotiating a deal, and the institutional legacies of devolution in place.”**

# A practical guide: How to craft a devolution deal

**Paun et al.'s (2023) analysis is based on the deepest and widest set of interviews yet conducted with leaders in local government about the 'devolution revolution'.** By necessity, their findings relate to the experience those leaders have of navigating a wider political environment set by the Conservative-led government in Westminster – one typified by a consolidating and narrowing institutional pathway, frequent processing bottlenecks, and – for our region – regular frustration. The environment for devolution under a Labour-led government might differ. It is not clear from public pronouncement, for instance, whether Labour will commit to the narrow 'city-region' model or stepwise institutional 'Levels' outlined in DLHUC's official narrative, or whether they will seek to reform or refine those models and pathways. In our guide below, we proceed on the assumption that the overall environment will remain largely similar, but we also speculate where appropriate on what opportunities and challenges a change in government might throw up.

## 1 THE ART OF ESTABLISHING A DEEP AND WIDE COALITION

The first point that Paun et al. (2023) reflect on is the importance of establishing a deep and wide coalition within a given region – the more successful attempts to build the case for devolution have **involved collaboration across key local political powers and other stakeholders in the private and third sectors** who are based in the region. The logic here is to surface and head off potential conflict early, before plans become too advanced, and parties feel their interests have not been taken into account.

In the Central South, this would of course mean coordination with the main unitary/county councils involved in any potential deal (Hampshire County Council, Southampton City Council, Portsmouth City Council, and Isle of Wight Council) – they will be required to ratify and carry out a deal. But Paun et al.'s point is that those outside the official tent, but with an obvious stake, need to be involved too. In the Central South, that would mean also including the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council whose interests are firmly connected to the region. It would also mean engaging with:

- up to 11 relevant district councils;
- local Members of Parliament across as many as 19 constituencies stretching from Havant in the east, potentially as far as the New Forest in the west, and from Aldershot in the north, to the Isle of Wight in the south;
- and key stakeholders across the region's business and voluntary sectors.

That is not to say that all stakeholders will have an equal say or that all parts of this broad region will be involved in an eventual deal. Instead, it is to say that **coordination groundwork is essential to better understand the enablers and barriers and build relationships with key parties.**

How? It is not necessary to look outside the region in search of a good model for stakeholders in the Central South to draw on. Prominent previous efforts that tap into central resources have involved just this sort of ground-up coalition building work, albeit at a slightly smaller scale. For example, prior to the 'devolution revolution' that kicked off towards the end of the Coalition government, partners in the Solent region banded together effectively to capture central grants from Osborne's City Deals initiative, enabling investment in civic infrastructure in Southampton and Portsmouth that local residents are enjoying today. The more recent Solent Freeport investment offers a similar case in point. There is a longer history of collaboration via the Partnership for South Hampshire (formerly Partnership for Urban South Hampshire) in working together on planning, transport, and sustainability policy. This strong local track record suggests that coordination capacity is there, but needs to be tapped and expanded for the more ambitious still devolution agenda.

**“The environment for devolution under a Labour-led government might differ.”**

## 2 THE ART OF CONVEYING COHERENT (ENOUGH) GEOGRAPHY

Paun et al. (2023) also stress the importance of conveying a coherent geography for a regional devolution deal. The background here is that the long history of authority concentrated in Westminster and Whitehall means that England does not split naturally into obvious or 'natural' geographical sub-units (see Richards and Smith 2015). Devolution regions are therefore artificial constructs imposed on messy realities, inevitably cutting across in one way or another, traditional boundaries of community identity, public infrastructure, and service delivery. The key lies in telling a story about this geography that rings true enough for key internal stakeholders, but that – more importantly – convinces decision-makers in Westminster and Whitehall.



**The Central South acutely exhibits the problem of messy geography.** There is a legacy, through restructuring of local responsibilities and public investment in regional initiatives, of overlapping administrative territories across different sectors. The region has also seen significant growth of peri-urban settlements and commuter towns which means that residents in everyday life are often cutting across jurisdictions for work, education, and leisure (e.g. Zodgekar 2023). Differing perspectives on the appropriate geography has been at the crux of the failure thus far to get a devolution deal.

#### CASE STUDY: THE NORTH EAST

It is perhaps useful to look at a cautionary tale from one of the messiest and most protracted battle over geography: the North East Combined Mayoral Authority. An earlier pitch for a North East Combined Authority – one widely thought to accord with an obvious identity – fell through in 2016 because of failure to agree terms with Westminster (including especially the question of a directly elected mayor, which local leaders in parts of the region were strongly opposed to). A breakaway pitch for North of Tyne, involving only half the original constitutive authorities, then emerged as a politically expedient alternative. Local Professor of Planning, Jonathan Tomaney (2016), colourfully put local controversy over this re-framing in a critique at the time:

*In the festive period, as I went about my Christmas shopping and socialising in Newcastle and environs, I conducted my own (unscientific) opinion gathering in shops, bars, buses, and taxis. I asked two questions “Where is the North of Tyne?” and “Have you heard there’s going to be a new mayor for it?”. I hardly need to report that there were few clear or affirmative answers. In fact, “North of Tyne” is a misnomer; one of the principal settlements in Northumberland – Hexham – is located south of the Tyne. Defining sub-national identities in England is notoriously difficult, but “North of Tyne” seems uniquely contrived and opaque.*

Yet, even in this context – half a decade later – the North of Tyne Deal has allowed local authorities to tap into over £20 million in centralised funding, gain autonomy over the direction of that funding, and deliver efficiencies in some local services. Moreover, the everyday governance challenges associated with this stop-gap – in, for example, a messy transit network that did not fit the new jurisdictional map – and the ad hoc workarounds this necessitated kept public debate and private discussion about the need for a larger North East authority alive. A North East CMA is finally set to go ahead as the region transitions to new arrangements at time of writing.

The lesson is that putting perfectly logical lines on a messy regional map is not always feasible. It might be necessary to make a **pragmatic and provisional set of decisions about geography just to access resources and shift the terrain for future conversations** – moreover, we stress that previous assumptions about a suitable geography, based on decisions made by the Conservative-led government, may no longer hold under a change to Labour.

**“The task is in moving beyond zero-sum assumptions and assuring all parties that benefit to one will not mean disadvantage to another”**

#### 3 THE ART OF CREATING A NARRATIVE OF SHARED BENEFIT

Part of getting to that settled geography, according to Paun et al. (2023), is developing a **convincing narrative of shared benefit for all** those inside the purported devolved region. The challenge here is that the city-region model invariably incorporates distinct communities with distinct economic profiles and social needs: rural versus urban populations, affluent versus deprived areas, local economies dependent on different industries, and so on. The task is in moving beyond zero-sum assumptions and assuring all parties that benefit to one will not mean disadvantage to another.

Here, the diversity of the Central South once more represents an acute case. The priorities of the Solent region centre around marine and maritime industries, while other parts of the region look to support a more diverse economy, particularly in knowledge intensive sectors such as aerospace, defence, bio sciences, information technologies, and digital services. Thus far, the Levelling Up agenda has conspicuously favoured ‘left behind’ regions in the North and Midlands, while the relative affluence of parts of the Central South masks important pockets of deprivation in inner cities. The Isle of Wight has long been promised an ‘island deal’ to help with its unique social and economic problems (something that, at the time of writing, finally seems to be coming to fruition). The longstanding and legitimate fear is that any devolution deal will help some of these causes but not others, creating clear regional winners and losers.

An important model here is the West Yorkshire Plan where, facing similar intra-regional inequalities, local leaders have been able to turn this perceived weakness into a strength. In this framing, diversity across the region has been seen as a valuable asset for two reasons:

one, it has enabled access to continued central funding of ‘place-based’ initiatives targeted across the full spectrum of economic regeneration plans; and, two, it has provided opportunities for ‘levelling up’ within regions by tapping into the very different resources, capacities and opportunities that already exist in these communities. In the Central South, this would mean a narrative that can meaningfully promise a ‘rising tide’ from attracting business investment, but that can also position pockets of deprivation in the region in places like the Isle of Wight or in inner city areas to access central funding to address urgent social needs. The exact focus of Labour’s regional economic development policy remains unclear (see Herbertson 2024), and so **the region needs to have this sort of shapeshifting narrative that can best tap into and align with the direction of travel centrally.**

**“the region needs to have this sort of shapeshifting narrative that can best tap into and align with the direction of travel centrally.”**

#### **4 THE ART OF POOLING RESOURCES FOR AN EFFECTIVE EVIDENCE-BASE**

Another key issue identified in Paun et al. (2023) is bringing together analytic capacity within the region to evidence the benefits of devolution. The point here is to lay the groundwork for more than just the initial cash injection associated with Westminster’s incentives for reaching a deal. Poised appropriately, devolved regions are in an advantageous position to access centralised funds devoted to economic growth or addressing social needs on an ongoing basis and, eventually, push for stronger devolved rights and responsibilities. But that sure footing requires generating and maintaining **an effective evidence base that optimises – rather than duplicates – resources** which constitutive local authorities already have to draw upon.

Merging and optimising analytic capacity is famously a challenge in public policy (see O’Flynn 2009; Boswell 2023). The history of integration and collaboration is one fraught with technical obstacles and political tensions. These issues have arisen in some of the devolution deals already, and seem unlikely to be any different in the Central South. More fundamentally, long-term austerity and recent financial pressures facing local authorities have seen a reduction in staffing and expertise to capture and capitalise on available evidence. Pooling resource looms as one way out of these challenges.

For a model, it is useful to look at efforts at coordinating analytic capacity at local level in health. Even in a sector characterised by frequent bouts of reform, the shift to the new ‘integrated care’ model that links local authorities

and myriad NHS bodies has represented a sudden and disruptive challenge for those charged with overseeing, commissioning, and providing health services. By way of example, policy actors in primary care and public health in a number of Integrated Care Systems have been able to adapt to these reforms, especially when **effective approaches to data sharing** across health services and institutional jurisdictions have been implemented (Ham 2023). Although it is too soon to pronounce any decisive successes in our region – where the bedding in of the new structure has not been seamless – the principle remains the same. It is possible for integrated approaches to evidence and data to allow for more efficient targeting of resources, but also to enable long-term monitoring and evaluation to inform future bids for promised funding and support. The lessons of this integration of analytic capacity around integrated care systems suggest that scaling these practices across sectors can have similar benefits for the prospects of successful local devolution.

#### **5 THE ART OF BUILDING TRUST**

The last of Paun et al.’s (2023) categories concerns the art of building trust. The point here is that devolution typically emerges from a complex political terrain of local rivalries. ‘Getting to yes’ both in terms of having a plausible offer to Westminster, and then in terms of getting agreement necessary to push any deal forward, requires careful navigation of these sensitivities. Although last in their account, **building trust is in many ways the most fundamental**. Everything else – the building of a wide coalition, the effective storytelling around geography and shared benefit, and the pooling of analytic capacity – all depend on fragile relationships of trust.

In the Central South, a lack of trust has been an important factor, driven largely by partisan divisions across local authorities in the region. The legacy of failed attempts to promote alternative geographies of a deal, including the lack of dialogue surrounding some of those pitches, is felt in strained relationships among key players. Though upcoming local body elections may see some refreshing of personnel, there is unlikely to be much change. So how might trust be built?

Success elsewhere points to the importance of baby steps in shifting relationships – in successful cases, **the sense of common cause and the need for closer day-to-day integration has the organic effect of bringing rival parties closer together**. The obvious case in point is Greater Manchester. Celebrated now both locally and in Westminster as the poster child of the ‘devolution revolution’, DevoManc was not always a natural or given regional identity built on intrinsically close relationships. It was the product of years of collaborative engagement behind the scenes as local leaders experimented with new ways of working together that could build internal trust and enable a more powerful regional voice (see Gains 2015). The Central South does not have that bedrock to draw on, however. So where might the circuit-breaker come to reset relationships instead? We turn to this question in our conclusion below.

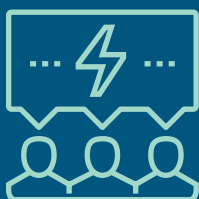
# What next for local devolution in the Central South?

**Having surveyed and drawn key lessons from England’s ‘devolution revolution’, our final task is to outline potential next steps to make best use of this knowledge. The ‘window of opportunity’ looks set to open with a likely change of government in Westminster, but what would it take to be in position to take advantage of that window?**

The immediate problem in this context is that local negotiations have stalled. Our key recommendation therefore is to **engage in a ‘circuit breaker’ that can go some way to resetting the fractious political history** around this issue. In the language of the institutional analyses in our review, there is the need for an act of what Lowndes and Lemprière call ‘animation’ to drive discussion forward. What might that look like in practice?



One approach would build joint expert taskforce or even a joint officer team on the prospects for devolution in the region. Observers of the original DevoManc deal point to the importance of the forerunning expert commission set up jointly by local authorities across the region to explore the possibilities for devolution (see Gains 2015). The work of this commission served to construct an output – a report that conveyed a coherent story and geography for the region – that everyone could get behind. But the process itself also helped to build backroom rapport and trust among local parties along the way, breaking down old barriers and tensions. In the Central South in recent years, we have seen different parties hire their own expert analysts to build the different cases independently, which has exacerbated political tensions. The ‘circuit breaker’ here instead would be to **come together and commit a fair share of resources to a combined expert body that can offer greater neutrality.**



Another potential ‘circuit breaker’ might look more like the sort of ‘stakeholder summit’ that has proven useful in breaking deadlocks across a range of different policy contexts and sectors (see Lees-Marshment 2015). Here, the logic is again a dual one founded in rich understanding of the challenges of steering policy networks and managing political diplomacy. The ‘summit’ itself operates as a public event and shop window, but more valuable still is the **backroom negotiation and relationship-building surrounding the set-piece.** In private is where leaders can discuss their limits and red lines without the glare of publicity. Analysis reveals that political tensions across the Central South region are often more about principle than about practice (see Southern Policy Centre 2020) – and that events that can get people together in a room are therefore liable to work together collaboratively and effectively in this more pragmatic orientation.





Alternatively, a solution could lie in embracing democratic innovation as a mechanism to push discussions forward. We have in mind here institutional innovations that bring together everyday citizens to discuss the complexities of the issues involved, elicit informed views, and alight on constructive solutions. (The most popular model in the UK is the Citizens' Assembly, comprised of 50-150 citizens randomly selected to ensure a cross-section of the population). The best ask in this case would not be for a magic bullet to deliver a complex deal. Instead, research shows (e.g. Boswell 2021), **democratic innovations are better targeted more specifically at knotty or difficult choices that are stumbling blocks to action.** One reason to be enthusiastic about this novel potential is that the region already has a distinctive pedigree in democratic innovation. Assembly South, the very first Citizens' Assembly in the UK in 2015 was an academic 'proof-of-concept' exercise that helped to inspire practical experimentation (see Prosser et al. 2017). Subsequent Assemblies in Romsey and Southampton on planning and environmental issues have further cemented this reputation of the region as an early adaptor. But turning to democratic innovation could also be hugely helpful in building a narrative to convince Westminster, especially if the contours of any local deal are to differ from the blueprint or template laid out in the Levelling Up White Paper (2022). Recent reports suggest that Starmer's presumptive chief of staff, Sue Gray, is an enthusiastic advocate of novel democratic innovations like Citizens' Assemblies (Baldwin, 2024; Markson, 2024); it would be harder politically for a Starmer-led government to push back on a deal that stemmed from any process.

**We want to conclude by stressing that taking any of these steps would only be the first of many.** The academic literature makes it clear that innovations to inject expertise, collaboration or participation need effective integration with existing politics and policy (Boswell 2023), just as there is no single 'magic bullet' for local devolution generally. There is a lot of hard policymaking graft and astute political craft that needs to go on before or after any 'circuit breaker' to realise the benefits. We hope this report is helpful in preparing local stakeholders for the challenges ahead.

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