

Trailblazer devolution deals: The next oxymoron in the policy litany of sub-national governance in England?

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Janice Morphet 

Bartlett School of Planning, UCL, UK

John Denham

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton, UK

Abstract

Here, we examine the continuing UK centralising trend for local government in England and the effects of changing accountabilities through the pathway of devolution narratives. We set out the key characteristics of policy change since 1992 and then analyse the most recently announced model Trailblazer Devolution Deals (TDD) single settlements for Mayoral Combined Authorities announced in the UK Budget 2023. We consider how far these TDD confer more devolution on CAs through the proposed creation of a single settlement for an integrated budget within the context of two previous government initiatives that were focused on the same approach, Government Offices for the Regions (GoRs) (1994–2010) and Total Place (2009–2011). We consider what occurred in practice and reflect on their demise as examples of institutions established by the UK government's approach to transitional territorialism. We conclude with the view that these initiatives represent devolution in name only (DINO).

Keywords

devolution, England, combined authorities, centralising the state, trailblazer devolution deals, single settlements

Introduction

The history of devolution policy in the UK has been asymmetric in its design (Curtice 2006; MacKinnon 2015), performative in its narrative and staccato in its delivery. The initial thrust of increased devolution or local autonomy as part of the New Labour agenda in 1998/1999 was delivered through delegation of central powers to sub-national government institutions, by the creation of the devolved administrations (DAs)

for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Greater London Authority (GLA). This has not been accompanied by subsequent devolution in England, which has remained a

Corresponding author:

Janice Morphet, Bartlett School of Planning, UCL, Central House, 14 Upper Woburn Place London, WC1H 0NN, UK.

Email: j.morphet@ucl.ac.uk

matter for central government policy and action through Whitehall-led narratives based on funding deals. These have been described as a form of ‘elite co-option’ (Richards and Smith 2015), where Westminster and Whitehall have placed emphasis on the practical maintenance of central control through limited and centrally approved programmes accompanied by specific competences and functions (Morphet 2022).

The episodic narrative of English devolution has displayed several key characteristics. Central government policy has remained *discretionary* and tied local government conformity to groupings and leadership models rather than the creation of a devolved system of English local governance. Central government has resisted *constitutional powers* for sub-national government and, apart from the creation of the GLA as a local authority in 1999, the *scope of devolution has been limited* in both competences and resources. It is much less than would be required to reverse the growing recentralisation of the state in England since 1992. This is reflected in the stated ambitions of the Conservative Government 2019–2024 such as ‘levelling-up’, that introduced government missions and targets to all UK local authorities regardless of existing devolved settlements (DLUHC 2022; Morphet 2023). Local government reform in England has also concentrated power *in the hands of fewer elected representatives* who have enjoyed an increasingly close relationship with central government ministers while their staff members are drawn from former or seconded civil servants (Anderson 2024; Roberts 2020). Local authority *accountability has increasingly been directed towards the centre*. Attempts at devolution have been marked by *short-term policy and short-lived institutional change*. Notwithstanding the influence of EU treaties and policies, England remains *an international outlier* in its lack of local power and autonomy for sub-national government (OECD 2015).

The purpose of this article is to examine the continuing UK centralising trend for sub-national government in England. We first set

out the key characteristics of policy change since 1992. We then analyse a recent model of Trailblazer Devolution Deal (TDD) Single Settlements for finance, which the Conservative government committed to include in their proposed 2025 Spending Review. These were announced in the UK Spring Budget 2023 (DLUHC 2023) and were followed by Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) (HM Treasury 2023b) that established their centralised operational control. We will examine the proposed creation of this Single Settlement as an integrated budget for Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) areas within the context of two previous government initiatives that were focused on the same approach – the establishment of Government Offices for the Regions (GoRs) (1994–2010) and Total Place (2009–2011). We consider these approaches, what occurred in practice and reflect on their demise as examples of the institutions established by the UK government’s approach to transitional territorialism in England (Pemberton and Morphet 2014). We conclude with a consideration of devolution in name only (DINO) that exists in England.

Devolution narratives – short-termism in policy and institutional change

Since 1972, there have been multiple, short-lived, policy approaches to creating more devolution in England. Some of these have been through local government reorganisation to create larger authorities (Rippon 1973) and unitary authorities from 1992 onwards. Other initiatives were set within a narrative of devolution such as Single Regeneration Budgets (SRBs) (Rhodes et al., 2007) and Government Offices for the Regions (GoRs) both from 1994. While the role of GoRs was stated by the then Secretary of State John Gummer to ‘simplify the government machinery and improve value for money’ (Gummer 1993) both they and SRBs were primarily established to manage EU funding and delivery (Spencer and

Mawson 2000). From 1997, New Labour's plethora of initiatives included Regional Assemblies (RAs) (Pearce and Ayres 2007) and Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) (Danson and Lloyd 2012), both established in 1998, the creation of a new Greater London Authority in 1999 and the referendum for a directly elected assembly for the North East in 2004. Within local government there were initiatives to create joined up government (JUG) (Clark 2002; Pollitt 2003), the introduction of councillors with executive responsibility (Morphet 2007), devolved decision making (HM Treasury 2004a; 2004b), new localism (Lodge and Muir 2010), Local Public Service Agreements (Boyne and Law 2005), Local Area Agreements (LAAs) (Gillanders and Ahmad 2007), Multi Area Agreements (MAAs) (Harding et al., 2009) and Total Place (Bolger 2009). The Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration (HM Treasury 2007) led to subsequent proposals for Leaders' Boards and Combined Authorities (Roberts 2020) by the Labour Government. After 2010, the Coalition Government abolished the regional structures and replaced them with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) from 2010 to 2023 (Broadhurst et al., 2023) and devolution, city and growth deals from 2012 (Morphet 2022).

In this litany of policy initiatives, there were some which were concerned with the principles and objectives of devolution such as new localism from 2004 and the Treasury's Devolved Decision Making Reviews (HM Treasury 2004a; 2004b), which linked strong economic growth with a pledge to devolve decision making to the most appropriate level including sub-regions. Other initiatives have been proxy contracts between local and central government for achieving common place-based objectives with an element of performance management such as Multi Area Agreements for sub-regional groups of authorities and Local Area Agreements and city deals for individual authorities (Alonso and Andrews 2024; Jones et al., 2017; Sandford 2017). In several cases new specific institutions including GoRs, RAs, RDAs, LEPs and deals have been established, to

act as intermediary mechanisms to control the use of EU policy and funding, while being set within a devolution narrative. Some, including GoRs, JUG, DDM, MAAs, Total Place and proposed Leaders' Boards for regions led by a local MP, have been used to establish more practical means of integrating silo departmental government budgets to improve the outcomes for places and people. However, they have all been short-lived (Pemberton and Morphet 2014) and replaced by new initiatives and institutions, deemed to have some improved and more devolved features but being consistent in their role of maintaining central control (Dahlstrom et al., 2011).

Central-local relations in England

What then are the essential principles within which devolution has been implemented within England?

A discretionary policy

The establishment of national Parliaments for Scotland, Wales and the Assembly for Northern Ireland since 1998 have provided *delegated* statutory autonomy from the sovereign Westminster Parliament, but no place within the UK Constitution for subsidiarity (Downs 2000; Scott et al., 1994). In England, there was no similar devolution moment but rather the creation of bespoke arrangements including Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Multi Area Agreements (MAAs) for sub-regional groups of local authorities culminating in the establishment of individual Combined Authorities (CAs) in 2010. This was achieved through bespoke secondary legislation for each CA but with no generic powers as is the case for local authorities. These CAs have been developed into 'tiers', defined by Whitehall. At the top of this range are MCAs for all Combined Authorities with directly elected mayors. Of these, Greater Manchester (GMCA) and the West Midlands (WMCA) have the premier positions with greater delegated specific funding programmes (Sandford 2023a) and promised single settlements for finance from

Government. Below this are MCAs for different parts of England which are described as being at Level 4, including West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Liverpool City Region and the latest MCA for the North East with delegated competences for allocating affordable housing funding, infrastructure, skills and transport. These deals act as stepping stones to the same level as Greater Manchester and the West Midlands with single financial settlements. Below this are Tees Valley, West of England, Greater Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, North Yorkshire and East Midlands followed by a tier for County Combined Authorities (CCA). These will not necessarily have a directly elected mayor. If not, they become a lower-level CA. Below this is a unitary authority with a 'devolution' deal, which will have a higher status if it has a directly elected leader (DLUHC 2023). Further, it was the Conservative Government's stated intention that all English local authorities should be included within a 'deal' area by 2030, as are those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (DLUHC 2022). While incentivising the democratically elected mayoral leadership model through this tiered structure, increased by the competition of differentiation in each bespoke deal, in practice being a MCA does not mean more devolution but rather increased control in the direct funding relationship with central government, where schemes and projects each require Whitehall approval rather than being examples of devolved decision making (Morphet 2022).

Resisting enhanced statutory powers for local and combined local authorities

All CAs are versions of joint committees, as originally set out in 1972 Local Government Act s101-103, and extended in subsequent legislation in 2004, 2010 and 2015 to be incorporated into individual bespoke arrangements through a Parliamentary Regulation. However, their collective legal status is not defined, with each being *sui generis*. They are not local authorities and do not include local

government powers for any directly elected mayors; nor do these mayors have defined rights to exercise these specified devolved competences, manage functions, have statutory rights to finance or defined levels of financial autonomy which is the case in local authorities. The exception is the Greater London Authority, which was established as a local authority in 1999 and where the directly elected Mayor of London (MoL) has use of all the local government powers available, in addition to specific powers included within legislation that established the GLA and subsequently.

Limited scope

Before the Coalition Government came to power in 2010, English local government was subject to a target culture set by central government (Coulson 2009). After 2010, an extended period of central government applied austerity had a controlling effect on local authority activities that replaced targets (Gray and Barford 2018; NAO 2021). This has affected all local authorities, whatever their political majority (Lockwood et al., 2022). Any additional resources made available to local authorities singly or in groups in this period, through devolution deals, city deals and other initiatives, have been significantly less than previous local government budgets and grant distribution. The extent of England's inter- and intra-regional equalities, whether measured by income, productivity, health or educational attainment, were set out by central government (DLUHC 2022). As a recent assessment of all government spending at local authority level by the Institute of Fiscal Studies has found (Ogden et al., 2023), this does not reflect these needs and it was unlikely that the scale of resources and powers exercised in England's regions and localities by the Conservative government were sufficient to make a significant impact on social redistribution (Ralston et al., 2022; Westwood et al., 2023).

Concentration of power

The nature of democratic accountability has been shifting upwards from locally democratically elected councillors towards central government. The changes in the role of councillors began with the reforms in the 2000 Local Government Act, where directly elected mayors were introduced after a long campaign from local authority think tanks (NLGN 1999) and internal council responsibilities changed from a distributed committee system to one where powers were focussed through the executive members of the council that formed its Cabinet. This change in the role of councillors has led to criticisms of the concentration of control of power in the hands of a few councillors and their chief officers (Ferry et al., 2022). While intended to develop a Whitehall model at the local level (Gains 2009), the 2000 reform process has reinforced the narrowing of relationships between local authorities and central government, which Roberts (2020) argues in turn has reduced Whitehall's knowledge of the detailed issues which local authorities face day to day, by making its relationship with English local government more strategic. A trend for fewer, larger local authorities is seen to be more convenient to the centre of government and has been reinforced through the creation of CAs.

In establishing the first CA in Greater Manchester there were no proposals for a directly elected mayor or for additional Government funding through 'devolution deals'. Both features were introduced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne (Henderson and Paun 2023). Subsequently, more MCAs have been sought by local authorities, in an attempt to reduce any territorial advantage gained by those areas with these governance arrangements, to obtain more resources and to start more direct discussions with Whitehall. However, their design is a Whitehall creation. As Roberts (2020) states:

'Some interviewees observed how the CA was becoming more *'them'* than *'us'* with CA officials seen to act as if they were a *'cut above'* local authority colleagues and Whitehall civil servants seen to view CAs as *'their creatures'*, not dissimilar to the old Government Offices of the Regions' (p 1004).

This relationship between MCAs and Whitehall has been reinforced through the recruitment of staff to support them from former or seconded civil servants who are strengthening mayoral links with ministers (Anderson 2024) while potentially distancing them from the leaders of their constituent authorities.

Accountability to the centre

In English sub-national government, accountability remains with Whitehall. Within MCAs, where democratically elected councillors from the constituent authorities form the Combined Authority, the distribution of accountability between the mayor, constituent authorities and the electorate is less clear. The English Devolution Accountability Framework (DLUHC 2023) set out to codify this MCA accountability through Government's requirements:

- **Local scrutiny and checks and balances** – focused on the processes by which local stakeholders (inside and outside of the organisation) ensure that there is good governance and value for money
- **Accountability to the public** – how government and local areas ensure that the public understand what the institutions do and how they are performing to inform their decision at the ballot box
- **Accountability to government** – the monitoring and intervention done by individual departments for specific funding streams and by DLUHC as ultimate owner of the system

([DLUHC 2023](#) para 1.18)

This set of accountabilities gave equal weight to the responsibilities to government as to public and local stakeholders. It included the introduction of a fiscal agreement between MCAs and the government with intervention powers for the management of Central Government funds provided by departments, including investment funds to the higher tier MCAs. This reinforced the existing Accounting Officer responsibilities of departmental Permanent Secretaries for all expenditure within their budgets to Parliament, even where delegated to democratic bodies ([HM Treasury 2023a](#)). Other centralised methods for offering accountability to stakeholders and the public were included in the framework such as government interventions through the use of performance frameworks, their metrics and reporting to a newly formed Office for Local Government (OfLog).

There have been other proposals for changing accountability within MCAs ([Newman et al., 2024](#)) but these remain within the current deal framework which retains power in Whitehall. These do not provide any generic powers as exist in local government or a place for sub-national government in the constitution although proposed reforms for the House of Lords comprised of representatives of DAs and MCAs ([Balls 2024](#)) and included in the Labour Manifesto come closer to achieving more permanent structural change. There are also proposals to formalise devolution in England through an English Devolution Act ([Labour Party 2024a](#)).

The range of competences in decision making for MCAs was still much less than for the Mayor of London ([Sandford 2022; 2023a](#)). However, in the Accountability Framework, the Government elided the methods of accountability for all tiers of CAs with those for the Greater London Authority (GLA), as if they were the same kind of institution. The Mayor of London (MoL) has executive powers rather than competences and controls a range of bodies within the GLA family including police,

fire, ambulance service, transport, strategic planning, the affordable housing programme and regeneration. The MoL is already held to account by members of the GLA, meeting as the London Assembly as part of its constitution and is only required to receive their approval for his annual budget. The MoL had responsibility for the use of EU funding before Brexit.

International outlier. While a member of the EU, pre-Brexit, UK sub-national government benefited from the amended and enhanced provisions for local and regional government contained in the Treaty for the EU (TfEU). This was amended ([Arribas and Bourdin 2012](#)) after nearly 10 years of discussion on new governance principles including for local and regional government. Following the TfEU amendments in 2009, an extended principle of subsidiarity was put into effect through EU programmes and, particularly that for Cohesion 2014–2020 ([Moodie et al., 2022](#)). These revisions changed the legal status of sub-national government in the UK. The implications for the UK constitution of these TfEU treaty amendments appear to have given Whitehall particular pause for thought with the practical consequence of the introduction of increasingly centralising policies set in a narrative of devolution ([Morphet 2021](#)).

Devolution deals for CAs were introduced by the Government in 2014, at the same time as the EU 2014–2020 Cohesion Framework Partnership Agreements ([HM Government 2014a](#)). This directly coincided with the creation of the GMCA with an elected mayor, enabling Chancellor George Osborne to make some nod towards UK responsibilities under its stalled EU Cohesion Programme Partnership Agreement ([HM Government 2014b](#)) and responding to the O'Neill Review of city responsibilities ([Helm 2014](#)). The European Commission (EC) determined that there were insufficient devolved responsibilities in the first draft of the UK Partnership Agreement and so did not meet the new terms of s5 of the TfEU. The revised Partnership Agreement, drafted by the Treasury, was approved by the EC at the same time as Osborne

announced the deal for GMCA (HM Treasury 2014). Since then, despite Brexit and no continuing need to comply with Article 5, devolution deals have been through subsequent iterative rounds but not accompanied by any expression of post-Brexit devolution policy (Sandford 2017).

After Brexit, the government established the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to replace EU cohesion funding, which Prime Minister May promised would be retained at the same level. The fund was introduced in 2022 and allocated rather than being through bids as all the other deal and post-Brexit funds (Atherton and Le Chevalier 2023) and absorbed into Combined Authority budgets where they exist (Liddle et al., 2022). However, the amounts of funding are much less than local authorities received from the EU. In the 2024 General Election campaign, Prime Minister Sunak announced that the Fund would close in 2027 and with its budget channelled into his proposal to reinstate National Service for young people (Philips 2024). There is no mention of the future of the Fund in the Labour Manifesto (2024b).

This UK narrative is also set in a wider context of practical devolution in the international community. The OECD defines devolution as ‘a subcategory of the decentralisation concept. It is a stronger form of decentralisation as it consists of the transfer of powers from the central government to lower-level autonomous governments, which are legally constituted as separate levels of government’ (OECD 2019). Using this approach, the OECD finds the UK to be one of the most centralised states within its membership, a particular challenge when the OECD has also set out an economic, research-based argument for the role of devolution as enhancing national GDP (Ahrend et al., 2014; OECD 2015). The extent of UK state centralisation has been acknowledged since the introduction of EU structural funds and it was an objective of the New Labour Government to sign the Council of Europe’s Charter of Local Self-Government, which it did in 1998. However, it is now the opinion of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which is

part of the Council of Europe, that the UK does not meet the requirements for this charter:

‘as the principles of local self-government are still not recognised in domestic law, local authorities cannot rely on the Charter as a source of substantive rights and cannot perform their tasks effectively, since financial resources available to them do not meet the requirements of the Charter’ (ECLRG 2022 para 261).

Will trailblazer devolution deals single settlements change the character of English devolution?

Having set out the characteristics of English devolution to date, we now examine Trailblazer Devolution Deal settlements in the context of two earlier devolution initiatives – Government Offices of the Regions and Total Place and what can be learned from the experience of these two policies.

Trailblazer devolution deal single settlement

When TDD Single Settlements were announced for GMCA and WMCA in the 2023 UK Budget (HM Government 2023a; HM Government 2023b), there was general support for their introduction from these areas and other parts of local government in England (Sandford 2023b). They were indicated as the next type of devolution deal in the Levelling Up White Paper (LUWP) (DLUHC 2022). For GMCA, this followed five earlier deals that have included a range of functions such as police, fire and waste together with a housing investment fund and brownfield loan fund. While the inclusion of health was anticipated in 2015, this has yet to be fully implemented. The WMCA has followed the same pattern as GMCA, although it remains slightly behind the same range of deal content.

The 2023 TDD comprised some specific new elements including the Affordable Housing

Programme, non-apprenticeship adult skills, piloting net zero funding, allocating 100% business rates in a pilot for 10 years, test bed programmes for flood risk management and establishing a new digital high speed infrastructure group. The government also stated an intention to work with the GMCA to streamline data through a new partnership and some health functions for WMCA. The main, unexpected and innovative component of the TDD was the provision of a single settlement as an integrated budget for each MCA which the Conservative Government proposed to introduce in a planned Spending Review 2025. It was not anticipated that the provision for the single settlement would be included within legislation, making it similar to other sub-national deal programmes in the UK, demonstrating the proposed retention of the Government's discretionary power over its nature, content and operation. The allocated funds were proposed to be brought together with existing GMCA devolution deal programmes and set within the new accountability framework that included a commitment to investigating the potential for public service reform. The TDD for the WMCA (HM Government 2023b) was similar with the addition of the relocation of government functions from Whitehall through the Places for Growth programme, part of the government's wider property strategy (HM Government 2018) with Heads of Place in each region (Cabinet Office 2023a). It is unclear how these Heads of Place will interact with the MCAs and they appear to be parallel silo initiatives. The proposed single settlements were subject to Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) from the Treasury which established the role of a project board which would be responsible for funds and chaired by a senior civil servants from Whitehall, reporting to their Permanent Secretary accounting officers (HM Treasury 2023b). This is the same decision making structure as operates across the deals with local authorities in the rest of the UK (Morphet 2022).

Press reports before the TDD single settlement announcement stated that they were 'plans to treat devolved city administrations like "mini government departments"' (Smyth

2023:10) for which they would be accountable to Parliament (Sandford 2023b). Each MoU made clear that the Accounting Officer role would be maintained by the Permanent Secretary to DLUHC and not devolved to the Mayor of the MCA. The proposed approach was set within a complex Whitehall back-office decision making framework which maintained separate accountability lines to Government Departments contributing funding. The different departmental allocations within the single settlement were proposed to be coordinated by DLUHC, with their potential power of intervention, as set out in the Accountability Framework (DLUHC 2023). The introduction of scrutiny of the proposed single settlement was a new element of Government devolution policy for England. Each MCA would be obliged to introduce a range of scrutiny functions which it will be required to fund. These included the introduction of a mayor's question time, reports to Parliamentary Select Committees, and the establishment of a committee of local MPs who could scrutinise the mayor and portfolio holders, albeit within a local setting rather than through a Parliamentary framework.

This transfer of fiscal and political accountability directly to the centre through the operation of the MCA Programme Board for day-to-day expenditure appears to be a radical and centralising trend. For the single settlement, there has been no assessment of the scale of the funding to be included or its proportionate size in comparison with public sector expenditure in the same administrative area. The task of identifying total public expenditure by place has always been regarded as difficult but, in 2023, the Institute for Fiscal Studies introduced a tool that allowed this expenditure allocation assessment to be undertaken (Ogden et al., 2023). As proposed by the Conservative Government, the TDD single settlement demonstrated many of the characteristics of previous devolution initiatives. It was a discretionary policy with its content determined centrally. The TDD single settlement has no statutory basis, and there are

no clear mechanisms that might guarantee extension to other parts of England. The scale of devolved activities and associated budgets appears to be modest (Sandford 2023b) and proposed accountability towards the centre has been intensified.

The introduction of TDD Single Settlements reflect earlier Government approaches to integrating Government expenditure and devolution for specific local authority areas and including regions in England dating back to at least 1992 (Mawson and Spencer 1997; Leadership Centre, 2010). We now compare TDD single settlements with two earlier models of devolution, which were established to fit within the narrative of devolution and that focused on the integration of budgets at the local level – the role of GoRs and Total Place. These have been selected from the litany of English devolution initiatives because their emphasis was on the central/local pooling or integration of public expenditure across services at a local or regional level. In this they had similar intentions and some common structural mechanisms to TDD single settlements and provide parallels to the current proposals.

Government offices for the regions. Government Offices for the Regions (GoRs) were announced by John Gummer, Secretary of State for the Environment in 1992 and were described as being ‘sweeping measures to shift power from Whitehall to local communities and make government more responsive to local priorities’ (quoted in Spencer and Mawson 2000: p 231). The GoRs did not have a comprehensive coverage of ‘relevant policy fields’ (Spencer and Mawson 2000: p 228) but included an attempt to create an integrated Government budget for each English region for those issues included within the GoR programmes. No specific integrated budget was set and there was a reliance on 11 central departments to make funding allocations for prioritisation by the GoRs. Behind this was a network of cross-Whitehall working groups and reporting arrangements (Mawson and

Spencer 1997) and the GoR Directors, who were senior civil servants, met monthly with their main sponsoring departments.

From the perspective of local authorities, while being initially encouraged to regard the GoRs as their gateway to central government, they soon learned that they needed to keep their longstanding networks with civil servants in central departments as well as maintaining good GoR relationships. As Spencer and Mawson (2000) state, while GoRs were seen as performing a useful intermediary role between local authorities and Whitehall, they were not about transferring power or responsibilities as Gummer had stated. The potential for GoRs to develop a more holistic approach to joined up government within the English regions was also undermined by the later introduction of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in 1998, to which GoR staff were transferred and then a plethora of Departmental Regional Plans published after 1998 (Glasson and Marshall 2007). These initiatives provided an opportunity for government departments to reassert their own priorities and regain control over their expenditure by creating frameworks which constrained GoR actions (Mawson 2009).

These regional institutions introduced between 1994 and 1998 also included Regional Chambers, known as Regional Assemblies (RAs), which were advisory, comprising of local authority councillors and other regional bodies and interests. They were established in part to provide some oversight and scrutiny of the RDAs which was not available to local authorities in the work of the GoRs. These regional institutions – GoRs, RDAs and RAs were reviewed after the Sub-National Review (HM Treasury 2007) and proposed to be reformed and replaced by new structures in 2010 through the provisions of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. There was also an emergent Government focus on functional economic areas for sub-regions as the preferred spatial scale (DCLG 2010). Through these new institutions, central and local government in

England was expected to work in a more integrated way and support the delivery of local authority objectives set out in Local Area Agreements for individual local authorities and Multi Area Agreements for sub-regional areas (DCLG 2008). Leaders' Boards, Economic Prosperity Boards and CAs were proposed as mechanisms to engage local political leaders. However, both existing and anticipated regional structures were abolished by the Coalition Government, being replaced by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in 2010 and deals from 2012 onwards.

The GoRs initiative did not discuss local accountability and the devolution offered was within central government structures rather than to local authorities. The GoRs operated as local agents of their departments rather than as midwives of more local decision making, despite the wider Government narrative of freedoms and flexibilities in the local state. GoRs became an incorporated part of government apparatus, better understanding their regions and its leaders over time but were undermined by being viewed as 'central' government by local authorities and too 'local' by Government departments. Looking back to their introduction, the GoRs were expected to change the nature of the local state. They were led by Regional Directors, who were senior civil servants and had some indirect responsibilities for central government departmental budgets. Their roles were gradually undermined as their responsibilities for funding were reduced by the creation of the RDAs and the restoration of Departmental priorities for expenditure. Yet, these GoR Regional Directors were initially anticipated to evolve to have an increasingly strong regional government profile like *prefets* in France (Barter 2002). The Conservative Government's 'Places for Growth' programme (Cabinet Office 2023a) includes new Heads of Place for English Regions and each of the DAs whose roles are coordinating government departments in their areas but without any apparent powers (Cabinet Office 2023b). Are these new GO-lite?

The new TDD, single settlement is set within a Memorandum of Understanding (HM Treasury 2023b), that includes a Whitehall controlled programme board. The chair of this board is a senior civil servant who will operate within the existing Accounting Officer rules for Permanent Secretaries set by the Treasury (HM Treasury 2023a) and has no apparent accountability to the directly elected mayor. The devolution accountability framework (DLUHC 2023) might result in being nearer the anticipated model for GoR Regional Directors in 1993 as *prefets* than was understood in 2023.

Total place. A second initiative which attempted to bring together budgets from different government departments and local authorities to improve public expenditure outcomes in one locality was through the Total Place programme. This was introduced in 2009 with 'the aim of understanding how local public service is funded, designed, joined up and delivered, in order to make links between services and public value and to see where public money can be spent more effectively' as part of the Operational Efficiency Review (HM Treasury 2009). It was designed to consider how public funding could be used more efficiently and effectively through supporting co-design of public services to support these ends. Total Place included three strands – counting, culture and customer insight and was particularly focused on the local level. Counting was concerned to identify both broad public expenditure in places and to take a deep dive into specific policy fields. Secondly, there was a consideration of the role of organisational cultures when joint working between public bodies was involved (Toynbee 2023) and customer insight was an investigation into citizens' needs with subsequent co-design of public services to meet them. There were 13 Total Place pilots across England comprising a range of councils including those that subsequently become CAs – Birmingham and the Manchester City Region including Warrington. It was supported by a practitioner's guide (Bolger 2009).

In March 2010, the government reported that the 13 pilot areas had mapped £82bn of spending and had explored a wide range of service improvement and cost savings (HM Treasury and DCLG, 2010). These ranged across reforms to service access, public sector estates, shared services, procurement, joint commissioning, preventative action and unemployment. Acknowledging that estimates of savings were still tentative, the government argued that a 2% improvement in efficiency would release £1.2bn of public spending.

In principle, Total Place was one of the more radical devolution narratives, allowing for local re-design of service provision, albeit subject to achieving outcomes that were shared with Whitehall Departments. It was grounded in a theoretical underpinning as a systems intervention to add public value. While the Practitioner's Guide (Leadership Centre, 2010) focused on how local authorities could think differently and more collaboratively, the section on the role of central government appeared to depend on local authorities working to meet the needs of Whitehall. Local authorities were required to identify a civil service champion who could support them in finding ways to encourage Government Departments to participate in pilots and support their requests for help in the achievement of the programme's objectives. The issue of differences in cultures between central and local government was not addressed and despite its branding as a joining up of central and local government to improve efficiency and effectiveness, the descriptions of its functioning and the advice provided to pilot authorities on how it should work, remained one sided, with the onus on local government to secure Whitehall implementation. Total Place was short-lived, lasting little more than 18 months, and any assessment of its impact must be set against the challenge of making rapid change in policy and delivery across services with different structures and cultures.

What did Total Place identify as the key benefits and barriers to integrated central/local budgets and co-design of services which could

inform public service reform? These benefits were identified through the Local Government Association rather than by central government departments. The pilot local authorities demonstrated a range of ways that local and central government could work together in more integrated ways to provide improved services more efficiently (Burton 2010). However, there was no inclusion of a central government view in this review of outcomes. Further, the NHS centrally found no compelling evidence provided for place-based working in the Total Place programme despite a considerable input into the initiative and some benefits of working together better and improving relationships being identified (Humphries and Gregory 2010) such as joint working on health and social care within the pilot areas including Torbay. In principle, Total Place was one of the more radical devolution initiatives, allowing for local re-design of service provision, albeit subject to achieving outcomes that were shared with Whitehall departments. It was also unusual as it was supported by the Treasury in addition to its sponsoring department (HM Treasury and DCLG, 2010).

After the general election in 2010, the Coalition government stated that 'There is an overarching commitment in the government's programme to a radical redistribution of power away from Westminster and Whitehall to councils, communities and homes across the nation' (HM Government 2010). However, in successive Conservative-led governments since 2010, there have been no statements on longer-term objectives for devolution nor the principles on which it is based. Total Place was abolished by the Coalition government and replaced by Community Budgets that, in some areas at least, built on lessons learnt from Total Place. Both initiatives were studied in an assessment of 59 different attempts to join up public services between 1997 and 2015 (Davison et al., 2015). Barriers to success included short-term policy and funding cycles, misaligned geographies, commissioning, funding and regulatory processes; cultural

differences between professions and organisations; barriers to data sharing and limited sharing of 'what works'. This and other studies concluded that the key to success was local leadership able to communicate a compelling vision and narrative for change, giving permission and encouragement to partners and front-line staff to work differently, building strong and trusting relationships between organisations, and sustaining momentum and buy-in from all those involved. However, national political support was also identified as a significant factor in signalling the importance of and building momentum to achieve a collaborative agenda.

Will TDD single settlements be a better model than previous examples of unified place budgets?

The introduction of single settlements for the GMCA and WMCA appears to be a radical initiative and one that other MCAs would seek if implemented. However, their scope was far from the total of public spending within each MCA and restricted to a range of functions primarily associated with economic development – 'local growth and place; local transport; housing and regeneration; adult skills; retrofitting buildings'. The ambition of the single settlement to influence local public spending is significantly narrower than Total Place. The single settlement would still require joint working across the different services they fund, whether provided by government agencies or other parts of local government. At the same time, the upwards accountability of the single settlement to central government will work against the development of strong and inclusive local leadership that has been central to the more successful earlier attempts to join up public services such as Sure Start children's centres (Cameron et al., 2009; Davison et al., 2015).

In the policy design of the single settlement, it is hard to discern whether any previous lessons have been learned (Bailey and Lloyd 2017). If new governance and accountability

structures for single settlements are fashioned in the style of mini-Whitehall departments, there may be Whitehall expectations that these will be short-term initiatives like others in the past. If so, Whitehall departments will not wish, nor see any need, for their funds, policy preferences and accountabilities to be transferred to these new single settlement arrangements. There is no suggestion that these single settlements represent a change in the Machinery of Government. The MoUs indicate that there would be a formula adopted that identifies the portion of funds available from government departments expenditure in the areas of their functional responsibilities but this could include other funding already being used by central departments at the local level. If these new mini-Whitehall departments are to replicate those already in existence, with the same lines of accountability to Parliament, they will be responsible to a Cabinet Minister and Accounting Officer rather than the MCA or elected mayor. The Accountability Framework (DLUHC 2023) would appear to place them within the remit of the newly established Office for Local Government (OfLog), but it appears unlikely that Whitehall would wish accountability for its performance to be assessed alongside that for local authorities. Finally the architect of this approach, Michael Gove, left Parliament in 2024 and it is unclear as to who might be a new champion for such an approach.

Overall, these new integrated budgets fit within the limited, discretionary, non-statutory, transitional devolution narrative in England. Yet why are they welcomed by local leaders and local government commentators as extensions of devolution? Firstly, any move to allocate more local funding is welcomed in a time of continuing severe cut backs in public expenditure allocations to local government and other local service providers. Secondly, devolution and the provision of local decision making for key priorities is a continuing objective of local government, so this narrative is welcomed no matter how small its offer. However, what is less discussed is the growing

centralisation of the state that this would bring. The Accounting Officer role is a part of the constitution as expressed through the Westminster Model (Beer 1955; HM Treasury 2023a) and, as such, is a determinant of central-local relations, whereas this proposed administrative control over local government, as set out in the TDD MoU, is more transparent and explicit than it has been before. It also reflects the experience of the Devolved Administrations. In Scotland and Wales the powers devolved to them between 1999 and 2014 have subsequently been eroded (Morgan and Wyn Jones 2023; Morphet 2021). This has been through a range of measures including deals and the missions set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 to be applied to all UK local authorities regardless of the devolved status of their policy content.

The mayors of the West Midlands and Greater Manchester Combined Authorities welcomed single settlements as opportunities to gain greater influence over the application of the funds that central government is making available to them. They are seen as the next step in local decision making and sought by other MCAs. While being welcomed, the TDD single settlements do not appear to offer any further devolved or delegated powers and could be a pathway for more central control of local funding. This is evidenced by the determination of local projects that will form part of the single settlement that would be accountable to the Programme Board chaired by an appointed senior civil servant. It is unclear how these appointed officials would relate to the directly elected mayors of the MCAs. Both the MoU and the Devolution Accountability Framework appear to restrict the role of the mayor in relation to the single settlement and wider financial decision making. Further, as mayors have emerged as sub-regional spokespeople (Kippin and Morphet 2023), there are many incentives to talk up the extent of their powers and influence. Although the CA mayors will sometimes be critics of central decisions, as expressed through the handling of COVID-19

or HS 2, when it comes to their own powers, they do not want to be constantly reminding their areas of how powerless they are.

The second issue relates to the likely success in creating a single settlement. The reliance on pooled budgets from existing departments did not work well in the GoRs and their success was undermined from within Government Departments. The initiative to consider policies, programmes and expenditure for localities as initiated through Total Place was a second short-lived attempt to give local authorities some power to combine central and local public expenditure to improve local outcomes. There was little government departmental support for these initiatives and, as the supplicant partner, local authorities were expected to persuade central departments to work with them rather than these departments being directed to do so from the Cabinet Office or Treasury.

Thirdly as these initiatives are not included within legislation, like other previous centrally introduced devolution initiatives, there are no guarantees of the length of their policy life and they will have no *de jure* commitment from any future government, of whatever party. The Conservative and Labour manifestos for the 2024 General Election suggest a continuation on the same trajectory. The Conservatives will offer a level 4 deal for their only Conservative run MCA for the Tees Valley and others with directly elected leaders, with all councils being offered a devolution deal by 2030. They suggest no further powers for the DAs but more Whitehall control of performance (Conservative and Unionist Party 2024). The Labour Manifesto associates devolution with improving economic growth which is associated with new local industrial and skills strategies supported by proposed legislation on 'Taking Back Control' (Labour Party 2024a; 2024b). However, it is not clear whether these represent any significant change from previous such initiatives, such as Local Industrial Strategies under Greg Clark. More fundamentally, there is nothing in the manifesto to suggest any significant changes to the

accountability arrangements that are at the centre of our critique here.

It moves the language of devolution away from deals to settlements, with partnerships for energy management with other proposals for devolved services include health, probation, child poverty and skills. Perhaps the most significant proposal for a change in devolution across the UK in the Labour manifesto is the reform of the House of Lords to reflect nations and regions and institutional collaboration between First Ministers and mayors of English CAs led by the Prime Minister.

Conclusion: Devolution in name only

At the heart of this constitutional knot that is seldom discussed and appears to inhibit devolution in England, is the role of the Accounting Officer (HM Treasury 2023b; Kaye and Powell 2024). This means that devolution to create more local, democratically controlled decision making is potentially stymied until this aspect of the constitution is reformed and replaced. In all the quasi-devolutionary initiatives since 1992, there has been an element of government ‘gaslighting’ local government, promising more devolved decision making but using mechanisms that reduce existing budgets and local determination of priorities. Each stage of the English devolution narrative that has been introduced by central government since 1992 appears to be more centralising than the last and this is the case for all governments, of whatever party, since then. The short-term life of these institutional structures within a devolved narrative do not give confidence in the longevity of substantive changes in power allocations of any specific initiative, including TDD single settlements. However, they may be welcomed by local authorities and MCAs as providing another step within an incremental narrative that is at heart illusory but considered to be better than nothing. In practice this is DINO – devolution in name only.

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ORCID iD

Janice Morphet  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5406-7193>

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