

The case for local devolution: community cohesion and self-determination

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1. Self-determination and community cohesion: a note on terms

Self-determination refers to the freedom of citizens ‘to live under laws of their own choosing’.¹ Applied to local government the concept refers to the scope for citizens to shape local policies and services and the direction of development for their locality. Self-determination is likely to produce different outcomes in different localities. Voting in local elections is a key instrument of self-determination, but so too is more direct participation in local policy-making and service delivery (e.g. citizens’ juries or neighbourhood councils), and the exercise of choice between possible service-budget packages (e.g. council tax referendums). The Home Office cites self-determination as a key objective of the civil renewal strategy.² The ODPM’s five-year plan, *Sustainable Communities*, links the themes of self-determination and devolution thus: ‘Our strategy is built on two main principles: the need to give communities more power and say in the decisions that affect them; and the importance of working at the right level to get things done’.³

The principle of self-determination establishes the freedom for localities to be different from one another, based upon the preferences of local citizens. But the idea of the ‘self’ in self-determination needs to be unpicked, in recognition of the fact that many distinct communities coexist within each locality. The concept of **community cohesion** focuses attention upon dynamics within localities rather than between them. Community cohesion refers to the degree of ‘togetherness’ experienced by different communities within the same locality. In policy terms, community cohesion is associated with objectives of race equality and social inclusion, and with initiatives designed to prevent any repetition of the disturbances in some Northern towns in 2001.⁴

The LGA offers the following definition of a cohesive community:

- A common vision and sense of belonging for all communities;
- The diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities;
- Strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds are developed in the workplace, schools and neighbourhoods.⁵

2. Devolution and democratic trade-offs

Devolution involves the delegation of power to a lower level. In a complex modern democracy like the UK there exists significant devolution: to the Scottish Parliament, to the Welsh Assembly, to regional offices in England, and to elected councils at county, district and parish level (or their equivalents). The concern of this seminar is not with devolution *per se*, but with **how much power is delegated, of what type, on what basis, and at what scale**. Power may be political (executive or purely representative) or managerial (regulating, commissioning or providing services). A ‘lower’ level may be defined on a functional or a territorial basis. As a relative term, it also

prompts the question: how low is low? In discussions of local government, the lower level is generally interpreted as a geographically defined and locally elected authority, exercising a range of political and managerial responsibilities across a range of functional domains. The possibility of other interpretations is important because they have policy correlates: foundation hospitals are examples of functional rather than geographical devolution; local public service boards combine devolved power of both a managerial and a political nature; neighbourhood councils devolve power to citizen representatives below the level of the traditional local authority. Policy solutions may also combine elements of different forms of devolution.

The outcomes of devolution depend upon the character of the governance system within which devolved units are inserted. Because democratic systems pursue multiple goals, there is no one optimal size of unit (smaller units are good for some things, bigger units for others). The most important task is to understand the scope and limitations of different sized units and, crucially, how they can be combined in such a way as to minimise prospects for governance failure. Trade-offs between democratic goals are inevitable in the design of governance systems, but choices can be made explicit - and the subject of open and accountable political debate (rather than technical adjustment).⁶

In this spirit, the paper considers the *potential* for devolution to enhance self-determination and community cohesion. Three propositions are presented that relate to opportunities for direct participation; common values and identities; and accessibility and responsiveness.⁷ Next the paper considers the trade-offs involved in each case, specifying limitations in relation to capacity, diversity and competence. It looks at institutional adjustments aimed at overcoming, or minimising, trade-offs within the governance system as a whole.

3. Can devolution enhance self-determination and community cohesion?

3.1 Opportunities for direct participation

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| Devolved units of governance provide more opportunity for citizens to participate effectively in decisions. |
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Why? Local units are more physically accessible to citizens. Local units contain fewer citizens and so direct participation is more practical. Distributing information about opportunities for participation, and communicating on options and outcomes, is easier. Citizens have incentives to engage with local units because they deal with services and issues that concern them on a daily basis.

What is the evidence? Most non-electoral participation takes place at the local level.⁸ Volunteering and community activity takes place at this level.⁹ Local authorities employ multiple and diverse methods of participation. The

volume and range of participation activities is increasing.¹⁰ Many participation initiatives are consultative only, but there are experiments with more radical forms (e.g. participatory budgeting, community ownership). There is evidence that citizens are prepared to take difficult choices over alternative service-budget packages (e.g. referendums on the level of council tax, citizen juries on 'wicked issues').¹¹ Black and minority ethnic citizens are more likely to be involved in micro rather than macro politics.¹² Women have a strong presence in informal community organising.¹³ Participation continues to be dominated, however, by middle aged and middle class people. It is also important to note that higher levels of participation do not automatically accompany devolution. The institutional arrangements *within* devolved governance are important if the potential is to be realised, as witnessed in the differing levels of participation across British local authorities.¹⁴

3.2 Common values and identities

Devolved units of governance make it easier for citizens to internalise norms and values, hence to increase voluntary compliance and reduce coercion.

Devolved units are likely to be more nearly homogenous with respect to beliefs, values and goals, making it easier for citizens to perceive a relation between their own self-interest and the public good.

Citizens of devolved units are more likely to invest civic relationships with a high level of affect, and are unlikely to regard community matters in an impersonal or emotionally neutral manner.

Why? Devolved units are smaller units. Logically they are more likely to capture within their boundaries relatively homogenous communities, particularly given settlement patterns (in relation to both socio-economic status and ethnicity). Where shared values exist, political conflict is less and governance arrangements and outcomes are less likely to be disputed. Solving 'collective action problems' is easier in the presence of small numbers and the absence of significant social or economic cleavages. Informal norms contribute to community cohesion, reducing the costs associated with official enforcement. Common identities foster loyalty and emotional commitment. The relatively *large* size of British local authorities means that many of these arguments are more properly associated with the potential for sub-municipal decentralisation (whether to new neighbourhood structures or through the empowerment of existing bodies, including parish and town councils).¹⁵

What is the evidence? More homogenous localities have higher levels of social capital (social networks and associated norms of trust and reciprocity).¹⁶ People prefer to live in more homogenous localities.¹⁷ Initiatives to secure voluntary compliance in relation to anti social behaviour appear to be effective at the very local level (e.g. a specific estate or set of streets).¹⁸ Street-by-street elections in some NDC areas have provoked higher turnouts than local government elections that cover larger and more diverse areas. Surveys find that people identify more strongly with towns,

neighbourhoods or communities than larger local authority areas (especially those with more 'artificial' boundaries).¹⁹ The 'emotional' nature of politics at the neighbourhood level is clear in protests against development, travellers' settlements and so on. More positively, it is at the very local level that many of the most robust institutions of civil society thrive, based upon shared values and identities (e.g. faith groups, neighbourhood associations, informal care-based networks). The mobilisation of social capital is dependent, however, upon institutional arrangements within devolved governance that ensure accessibility and responsiveness to citizen demands. Local authority areas with similar levels of social capital often have very different levels of citizen participation.

3.3 Accessibility and responsiveness

Devolved units of governance are more accessible to citizens. Citizens have greater opportunity to gain the knowledge needed for democratic decision-making by direct observation and experience.

Leaders in devolved units are likely to be more responsive to citizen views, and to have direct experience of the matters at hand.

Why? Devolved units are accountable to a smaller citizenry and are physically closer to the citizens they serve. They have the potential to be highly accessible, but only in the absence of bureaucratic, professional and party political obstacles. Citizens have first hand experience and knowledge of many of the issues at stake, enabling them to make informed inputs into policy-making and to hold representatives and service deliverers to account. Leaders are more likely to be known to citizens and they have more opportunities to communicate with citizens on an ongoing basis and to monitor governance activity in the locality.

What is the evidence? Citizens are more likely to contact local than national representatives and officials, and political participation (beyond elections) is concentrated at the local level.²⁰ Local authorities have pioneered innovative forms of citizen participation. Local authorities increasingly use one-stop-shops and neighbourhood arrangements to enhance accessibility and the joining-up of local services.²¹ Local authority websites provide citizens with access to other service providers in their locality and to information about their area. Research shows that citizens: (a) trust local government more than national government; (b) are more satisfied with local services than national services; and (c) believe they have a greater likelihood of influencing what happens locally than nationally.²² Local leaders are more likely to live and work in the locality than those elected to national office. Local leaders have extensive contacts with local community organisations, and are accessible to individual citizens via telephone, e-mail and traditional surgeries.²³

4. What are the downsides to devolution – and how can they be managed?

4.1 Capacity

Devolved units control fewer of the aspects of citizens' situation over which they desire influence. Is there a trade-off between the extent of participation and the scope of control?

This is the tension between 'citizen effectiveness and system capacity'.²⁴ In devolved, citizens can participate more but they can control less. Levels of turnout in local elections are considerably lower than for general elections: citizens recognise that key strategic decisions are located at central government level. Research shows that, while citizens have a well developed sense of duty in relation to voting in general elections, this does not extend to the local level. Those seeking to explain the decline in local election turnout over the last two decades argue that voting has fallen because the powers of local government have steadily decreased.²⁵ Instrumentally, the citizen is probably wise to focus their attention on direct participation at the local level to fine-tune the policy-making and service delivery that impacts upon their daily lives, expending their electoral energies at the national level where the big decisions are made. Historically, as the size of democratic polities has increased, the need for citizens to delegate authority to representatives has also increased. Devolved units remain important within any democratic system because of the opportunities they provide for direct participation, citizen education and pluralism (in the sense of preventing too great a concentration of power).

Perhaps low election turnouts at the local level are not evidence of the citizen effectiveness/system capacity trade-off, but of the evolution of different ways of 'being a citizen' within different units of governance. Dahl argues that democratic design should not seek to specify an optimal size for units of governance, but should focus upon the strengths and limitations of different units and the best ways in which they can be combined in order to avoid governance failure. We need to understand the nature of 'a good political life' in these different units: this includes the role of citizens and leaders, and the nature of functions and responsibilities.²⁶

We have additional reasons to think that 'system capacity' may not prove a significant obstacle to devolution within a modern governance environment. Partnership arrangements offer a way for devolved units to mobilise significant resources, for instance in pursuit of urban regeneration. Participation at neighbourhood level through such partnerships, while not without its frustrations, is not just practically possible but also potentially highly effective (with major consequences for their wellbeing and life chances).²⁷ Commissioning arrangements also suggest that the idea of a trade-off between participation and capacity may be outmoded. Small units do not have to themselves *deliver* services in order to influence them (as would be the case in a democratised PCT structure, for example). Neighbourhood

governance does not need to be about mini town halls (as conceived in the 1980s); rather, it is about providing a focus for local voice and choice. The delivery of services and the implementation of policies may involve a variety of agents (from the public, private and voluntary/community sectors), which may themselves be organised on quite different scales (e.g. a neighbourhood council may contract with a multinational company for refuse collection).

If the trade-off can be managed by increasing the capacity of small units, it may also be managed by increasing the effectiveness of citizen participation across larger units. Information and communication technologies provide opportunities for citizens to circumvent the democratic 'law of time and numbers'²⁸, making possible direct participation in non-local decision-making through a virtual agora or assembly. There remains, however, a long way to go in overcoming the limitations of the 'digital divide' (citizen access to technology) and in developing forms of e-democracy that can analyse and respond to citizen inputs, rather than just collecting and counting them.²⁹

4.2 Diversity

Devolved units exhibit less diversity and provide less opportunity for divergence of views on individual, group, and general interests and goals. There is a greater likelihood in a devolved unit that a single interest (or segment of citizens) will dominate the democratic system. Is there a trade-off between cohesion and pluralism?

Citizens in devolved units are likely to consider each other friends or enemies, according to whether they agree or disagree on political issues or community matters. Is there a trade-off between the intensity of relationships and the capacity for rational debate and problem-solving?

Devolved units are likely to be less able to address challenges to the community's way of life from outside. Is there a trade-off between fostering internal cohesion and managing external threats?

The association between devolved units, citizen homogeneity and community cohesion presents significant governance challenges, particularly in a society in which diversity is increasing and may be positively valued (for both economic and socio-cultural reasons). In the British context, existing local authorities are also too large to capture even relatively homogenous communities, whether on the grounds of socio-economic status or (particularly in urban areas) ethnicity. If we take seriously the advantages set down in 3.2, should we advocate further devolution (for instance to neighbourhood units) to improve prospects for community cohesion? The trade-offs noted above suggest that we should tread carefully.

The smaller and more homogenous the unit of governance, the easier it is for elites to dominate, and the harder it is for diverging views to be expressed and accommodated. A highly cohesive community may not be a pluralistic one. Newton argues that the 'dissent, diversity and conflict' associated with large urban authorities may contribute more favourably to the achievement of

democratic goals than the pressures to social conformity that characterise smaller (generally rural) units.³⁰ When conflict does break out in smaller units, it can be particularly acrimonious. As noted in 3.2, there is a tendency for fellow citizens to be branded as friends or enemies; the emotional nature of politics within very small units can run counter to the principles of rational political debate based upon principles of popular control and political equality. Defensiveness and insularity may result: such units may be good at cultivating cohesion *internally* but very poor at establishing links across community boundaries. This makes it hard for small units to manage perceived external threats to their way of life (such as new housing development or the arrival of migrants), let alone to turn such 'threats' into opportunities for the locality to adapt to changing environments.

In addition, it is important to note that no community is ever *entirely* homogenous. Those who identify themselves as 'different' (or are identified as such by others) are especially isolated in such settings. As the size of governance units decreases, so too does the population of community associations and interest groups, contributing to a lack of diversity within political debate. Larger units provide more opportunities for minorities to express and protect their interests and identities, and politicians have greater incentives to understand and respond to these. Experiments with neighbourhood decentralisation in multi-cultural areas have provided evidence of the marginalisation of minorities, most notably in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in the late 1980s³¹.

The disturbances in some Northern towns in 2001 revealed the dangers for community cohesion of the 'parallel lives' lived by different ethnic groups within the same local authority areas, where ignorance led to fear and even demonisation of the 'other', resulting ultimately in violence. If our concern is with cohesion *across* diverse citizen groups, further devolution – or the search for more homogenous communities – is unlikely to be the answer. Indeed, community cohesion policies since 2001 emphasise the value of breaking down tight community boundaries through activities based in workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods. Integration rather than separation is the focus, with an emphasis upon elaborating common values beyond the level of individual communities.³² Small, relatively homogenous communities tend to be sites in which 'bonding social capital' flourishes (linking people in similar sociological niches). The type of community cohesion promoted by current policies requires the development of 'bridging social capital', which may be easier in rather larger units of governance. In this context, devolved units of governance are charged not simply with reflecting existing community values, but also with *creating and nurturing new values and identities* (albeit drawing upon diverse local resources).

As the Community Cohesion Panel report puts it: 'The leadership role at a local level should be taken by local authorities to bring all agencies together and to promote integration and tolerance. Local authorities should create a sense of belonging and ensure that all communities share common values'.³³ This ambitious agenda requires institutional solutions that maximise the *benefits* of diversity for democracy and governance, and develop a conception

of cohesion that does not depend upon any simple homogeneity of identity or belief (or, indeed, of social class – given the social and economic benefits of diversity of this sort also).³⁴ Reducing the size of governance units is not the answer; it is about developing relationships between different forms of participation and representation, drawing upon the resources of civil society as well as the state. While neighbourhood units will have a role to play, it is important that they do not become institutional expressions of different communities' 'separate lives'.

4.3 Competence

Citizens in a devolved unit can seek control over a relatively narrow range of matters and are less likely to develop specialised skills. Is there a trade-off between citizen access and citizen competence?

Leaders in a devolved unit are more vulnerable to pressure from dominant groups. There may also be problems of calibre given the small pool from which leaders (and representatives more generally) can be drawn. Leaders are more likely to adopt parochial viewpoints. Is there a trade-off between responsiveness and populism?

The smaller a unit of governance the smaller the pool of citizens from which to recruit representatives and leaders. The range of skills and experience will also be less, particularly in relatively homogenous communities (see 4.2). This may impact upon the capacity of citizens to mobilise campaigns and to hold representatives to account. Citizens who are active may become frustrated when they discover the limitations of the responsibilities and powers of local government. There are fewer opportunities for citizens to develop political skills and to build political careers. The recruitment of representatives is made harder in smaller units because party systems are less well developed, there are fewer and less diverse community organisations, and there is little media coverage of local politics. These problems are of particular relevance to current policy debates about empowering neighbourhood or parish-based units of governance. Research has found that larger devolved units have a more 'representative' councillor body (to the extent that it reflects the make-up of the population), with councillors also more likely to have been born and still live in the locality.³⁵

Concerns about councillor calibre go back three decades in British local government.³⁶ Currently they are being addressed through programmes of leadership training and mentoring: lay knowledge and 'a feel for local issues' can no longer be considered a sufficient basis for governing competence.³⁷ The Local Government 2000 Act distinguished between different councillor roles, establishing new forms of executive leadership and new roles for ward councillors in scrutiny and neighbourhood-based activities. The potential for local leaders to be responsive needs to be nurtured and given appropriate institutional expression: it cannot be assumed. The greater visibility and transparency of the leadership function within devolved units can only help to reduce the possibility of a trade-off between responsiveness and populism (or paternalism).

Similarly, the role of 'backbench' councillor will only become attractive to a new type of citizen-representative if it is more closely linked to the principle of expressing local voice and choice. Increasing citizen interest and competence in relation to 'self-determination' or community control requires the development of a mix of opportunities for participation at the neighbourhood level: these may or may not involve election (and may be increasingly de-linked from parties) and they may be based upon a single service or issue, or broader strategic concerns. Capacity building among community organisations and the education of community leaders needs to be at the heart of any attempt to minimise the trade-off between accessibility and competence.³⁸

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the potential advantages of devolution for the democratic goals of self-determination and community cohesion. It has argued that devolution provides benefits associated with opportunities for direct participation; common values and identities; and accessibility and responsiveness. Devolution can also have drawbacks from the point of view of self-determination and community cohesion. Devolved units of governance face potential problems of capacity and competence (in terms of resources, functions, leadership and citizen activity), while also tending to be less diverse in demographic and political terms. The paper has explored the trade-offs associated with devolution and offered suggestions for ways in which institutional design can minimise, if not overcome, these limitations. But the impact of devolution on self-determination and community cohesion will depend upon key intervening variables: how much power is delegated, of what type, on what basis, and at what scale. The outcomes of devolution are shaped by the character of the wider governance system, including relationships between different tiers of government and the role of non-state actors. These are relationships expressed and enabled through financial systems, among other devices.

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