

# “Disorganised Devolution”: Reshaping Metropolitan Governance in England in a Period of Austerity

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**Abstract** After 2010, the UK Government’s espousal of a Localist agenda reflected a rejection of the regional level as the most appropriate scale for sub-national governance. The development of a more explicitly city regional level of governance is illustrated in the creation of City Deals which have given some of England’s largest cities increased autonomy to allocate the dividend of local economic growth. More recently, Combined Authorities have been formed, within which larger city-regions such as Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool and the North-East of England have been tasked to undertake transport, economic development and other functions. In assessing this contemporary reshaping of metropolitan governance this article draws upon political economy, spatial and institutional approaches that highlight how austerity, competing spatial imaginaries and the historical evolution of central-local relationships within the UK state have combined to produce a particularly ‘disorganised’ approach to contemporary devolution in England. It contends that while the city region remains the dominant spatial narrative, the ongoing process of rescaling at the sub-national state level falls well short of being a coherent, clearly thought-out and

permanent transfer of powers and fiscal responsibilities to a uniformly defined scale of governance.

**Keywords** Devolution · Governance · Region · City · Economy

## „Desorganisierte Devolution“: die Umgestaltung metropolitaner Governance in England in einer Phase der Austerität

**Zusammenfassung** Die Förderung der lokalen Ebene durch die Regierung des Vereinigten Königreichs nach 2010 zeigt eine Ablehnung der Region als die angemessene Ebene für subnationale Governance. Die Entwicklung einer eindeutigeren stadtreionalen Governance-Ebene wird verdeutlicht in den sogenannten City Deals, die es einigen englischen Großstädten ermöglichen, die Dividende des lokalen Wirtschaftswachstums mit größerer Autonomie zu verteilen. In letzter Zeit wurden im Rahmen der Combined Authorities größere Stadtregionen wie Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool und Nordost-England mit Aufgabenstellungen wie Verkehr und Wirtschaftsentwicklung beauftragt. Bei der Auswertung dieser aktuellen Umgestaltung der metropolitanen Governance bezieht sich der Beitrag auf volkswirtschaftliche, räumliche und institutionelle Ansätze und zeigt, wie die Kombination von Austerität, konkurrierenden räumlichen Wahrnehmungen und der historischen Evolution der zentralen-lokalen Beziehungen in UK ein besonderes „desorganisiertes“ Vorgehen bei der gegenwärtigen Devolution in England hervorbringt. Die Ansicht wird vertreten, dass solange die Stadtregion das dominante räumliche Narrativ bleibt, der fortlaufende Prozess der Umskalierung auf der subnationalen Ebene bei weitem nicht einer klar konzipierten und dauerhaften

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Übertragung von Befugnissen und fiskalen Zuständigkeiten auf eine einheitlich definierte Governance-Ebene entspricht.

**Schlüsselwörter** Devolution · Governance · Region · Stadt · Wirtschaft

## 1 Introduction: The Demise of The Dual Polity

According to Bulpitt (1983) in his seminal work “Territory and Power”, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the UK political system could be viewed as a ‘dual polity’. While central government dealt with the ‘high’ politics of foreign policy, defence and the economy, local government was responsible for the ‘low’ politics of local service delivery in areas such as schools, roads and refuse collection. A key feature of these arrangements was that, for the most part, central elites kept out of local administration and let elected councils deal with local issues in their own way (Bulpitt 1983).

From the mid-1970s, however, the onset of UK economic decline and, more recently, global recession has heralded the incorporation of the local state into ‘high’ politics, as the attempts of a generation of Westminster governments to modernise public services, reform the welfare state and control local public spending have led to ever-tighter central control. Thus, in the contemporary context, this has led to charges that (despite the UK government’s claims to support devolving powers downwards) the acceptance of the austerity agenda has ensured – in practice – interventions that reshape and redirect local provision in order to meet the needs of the centre (Haughton/Deas/Hincks et al. 2016).

The demise of the dual polity, in which local administration in the UK was largely viewed as parochial and mundane when compared to the ‘high’ affairs of the central state, is also seen in the increasing importance of the ‘local’, not just as a target of centrally-imposed social and economic restructuring but also as a tier of governance open to the possibilities of rescaling of administrative and political boundaries. While structures of *local* governance at the metropolitan and county/shire level were fixed for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of structural changes at the *regional* level since the 1960s (including planning councils, government offices and development agencies) proved to be less permanent additions to UK sub-national governance (Shaw/Robinson 2012). The absence of an effective tier of governance between the centre and the local led to debates on the ‘missing middle’ in English governance, which increasingly identified the *city-region* as a more appropriate scale for policy integration and delivery than the region.

More recently, the policy debate on sub-national governance within England has been further developed through the focus of post-2010 Governments on devolving eco-

nomic and social responsibilities down to cities and their wider sub-regions through a raft of different mechanisms including city deals, devolution deals, combined authorities and directly-elected mayors (House of Commons 2015a; House of Commons 2015b). The post-2015 UK Government have also responded to concerns about the growing North-South divide by calling for the development of a pan-regional Northern Powerhouse, through which the three Northern Regions in England may work together to promote economic growth (Osborne 2014). Further momentum has been added by the need to ensure that other parts of England are able to enjoy a devolution ‘dividend’, given the granting of more powers to Scotland following the 2014 Independence Referendum.

The contemporary relevance of how sub-national governance should be reshaped has produced genuine political debates over the nature and intentions of the devolution process. This includes a focus on the scale of devolution, the powers on offer in different metropolitan areas, the link between cities and their suburban hinterlands, how any new structures should be governed, and the extent to which Central Government could – and should – impose its devolution model on local councils (RSA/City Growth Commission 2014; IPPR North 2014; Policy Network 2014; Wilcox/Nohrová/Williams 2014). There is also a particular concern that the attempt to empower local leaders in crafting locally-defined and coordinated approaches to economic growth and service delivery, “is being developed in the context of unclear rationales, complex geographies, centre-local deal-making, public sector restructuring and expenditure reductions” (Pike/MacKinnon/Coombes et al. 2016: 39).

In examining this particular phase in the reshaping of sub-national governance in England, this article draws upon the authors’ extensive previous research and wider policy engagement on issues of sub-national governance and urban planning (see for example Shaw/Robinson 2012; Tewdwr-Jones 2012). This includes ongoing research on the rescaling of economic governance in the North East of England, in the light of greater Scottish autonomy (Shaw/Robinson/Blackie 2014; Shaw 2015), and on enhancing the role of higher educational institutions in city-regional economic growth (Tewdwr-Jones/Goddard/Cowie 2015; Goddard/Tewdwr-Jones 2016). The aim in this article is to draw upon insights from this body of work to inform the ongoing debates on the rescaling of city-regional governance in England.

In particular, the article aims to offer a distinctive theoretical and conceptual framework through which to describe and explain the contemporary changes in sub-national governance in England. This approach firmly locates an understanding of the growing interest in city-regional sites of governance within a political economy approach that highlights how the neo-liberal ‘austerity’ agenda produces pres-

asures to enforce both fiscal retrenchment and the displacing of responsibility down to the local level. As Peck (2012: 647) argues: “Devolved governance and downloaded responsibility have long been hallmarks of neoliberal rule. Under conditions of systemic austerity, this phenomenon of ‘scalar dumping’ is taking on new dimensions, as cities are confronted with a succession of budgetary Hobson’s choices [...]” Some cities will be able to muddle through by cutting corners (and maybe the odd department), while keeping the streetlights burning; for many others, ongoing fiscal restraint, service retrenchment and public-private workarounds seem set to reshape the operating environment over the medium term.

However, despite this dominant structural imperative, it can be argued that even in highly centralised systems, national government faces challenges in ensuring the compliance of devolved administrations that have their own democratic legitimacy, local power bases, administrative resources, and local ‘know-how’ to draw upon. For Pike and Tomaney (2009: 29), “local and regional actors are not passive, nor do they merely respond to the initiatives of the centre. Such actors attempt to develop and pursue strategies shaped by history, and their national political economic context”. Thus, in England, the city-regional scale has not been simply imposed in a top-down manner. The promotion of city-regional governance has also been aided by the acceptance by metropolitan council leaders themselves of the international orthodoxy that such a scale is more effectively attuned to dynamic economic growth within functional/economic, as opposed to, spatial/administrative areas (World Bank 2009). In addition, this agenda also provided opportunities for some urban councils outside London to promote their economic interests and devolution opportunities under the auspices of the self-styled ‘unique and influential’ Core Cities network (Core Cities 2015). This is not a new phenomenon: Harvey’s (1989) discussion of ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ highlighted how urban governance had shifted from local service delivery to more creative uses of local resources to boost local economic growth through public-private partnerships. However, the increasingly dominant narrative on the appropriateness of the city-region scale for economic governance is a more recent policy driver.

Augmenting this political economy emphasis with a focus on the institutional features of the UK state also allows us to suggest that any process of rescaling economic sub-national governance remains highly contingent, as “states and state spaces are not natural pre-given formations, but are constructed, imagined and contested entities” (Haughton/Deas/Hincks et al. 2016: 359). Thus, in the UK, while the city region remains the dominant spatial narrative, the ongoing process of rescaling the sub-national state falls well short of being a coherent, clearly thought-out and perma-

nent transfer of powers and fiscal responsibilities to a uniformly defined scale of governance. At present, it amounts to a number of overlapping and even competing ‘spatial imaginaries’ being proposed for subnational governance in England including communities and localities, cities, city-regions, county sub-regions and even pan-regions (National Audit Office 2015; House of Commons 2016; National Audit Office 2016).

Indeed, in assessing the approach to devolution within England, this article highlights its predominantly ‘disorganised’ nature. Through this perspective, the approach can be viewed as less than a deliberate and considered rescaling strategy – motivated by the need for deficit reduction – than as an “ad hoc, incremental, piecemeal and rapid” process (Pike/Kempton/Marlow et al. 2016: 13). Thus, the politics of the contemporary devolution agenda in England is characterised by the emergence of different scalar alternatives reflecting a jumble of multiple and competing motives in a traditionally centralised polity that has recently had to respond to the political ramifications of a much more powerful Scotland, and even the potential break-up of the UK.

The structure of the article is organised around three sections. It commences with an examination of how the city-regional framework emerged as an important policy agenda – alongside the regional and pan-regional scales – for the post-1997 Labour Governments. The second section of the article then captures the mix of different spatial imaginaries associated with the post-2015 Government’s asymmetrical approach to devolution, focusing in detail on recent attempts to develop devolution deals and Combined Authorities. In doing so, it considers the continuing tensions between different scales, particularly focusing on the central state’s espousal of both ‘localism’ and ‘austerity’ as policy agendas, despite their inherent contradictions. It concludes by arguing that the eventual impact of this form of disorganised devolution is difficult to ascertain, given its incoherent and contradictory nature. However, the ‘messiness’ of the process may serve to expand central control over sub-national economic development while also offering some space for local initiative and, albeit constrained, autonomy.

## 2 A Scalar Shift: The Emergence of Metropolitan Governance Under New Labour 1997–2010

The re-emergence of a political concern with a wider focus on the governance of metropolitan areas is particularly associated with the devolution agenda of the New Labour Government after 1997. The devolution agenda was very wide-ranging, covering devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, introducing directly-elected governance in London and the creation of a regional tier in the other

parts of England. It also kick-started the debate on the need for governance of what contemporary policy-makers referred to as the ‘city-region’. The concept, which was first used in academic circles in the 1950s, refers to “a strategic and political level of administration and policy-making, extending beyond the administrative boundaries of single urban local government authorities to include urban and/or semi-urban hinterlands; this definition includes a range of institutions and agencies representing local and regional governance that possess an interest in urban and/or economic development matters that, together, form a strategic level of policy-making intended to formulate or implement policies on a broader metropolitan scale” (Tewdwr-Jones/McNeill 2000: 131). However, the initial phase of New Labour’s devolution agenda in England after 1997 concentrated on the regional level, and involved the creation of Regional Spatial Strategies (Swain/Baden 2012) and powerful appointed public bodies, Regional Development Agencies, (RDAs), which covered large areas such as the West Midlands, the North West, and the North East of England (Robson/Peck/Holden 2000).

While the creation of new regional structures in this period reflected emerging concerns about inter-regional economic disparities and the lack of a regional voice within the UK regions, wider European debates on regionalism and territorial cohesion were also of importance. One important ‘push’ factor, which gave momentum to the creation of English regional administrative structures, was the EU’s shift, after 1989, to a regional approach to structural funds. For one observer, the: “requirements of reform of the structural funds, particularly in relation to regional programming and regional partnerships, provided the major push for activity at the English regional level in this period. Despite the steering role of central government, EU cohesion policy reinforced the standard regions as the ‘official’ boundaries and created embryonic regional networks in England that provided something for the Labour government to build on from 1997” (Bache 2005: 10). In abolishing regional structures and their funding streams after 2010, the Conservative-dominated Coalition Government was both substantially reducing the financial and human resources that could be devoted to sub-national economic development and effectively demolishing the strategic planning role that had begun to integrate economic and spatial planning within an RDA-led integrated planning process at the regional level (Shaw/Robinson 2012).

The other strand of regional devolution was to encourage the creation of elected regional assemblies (regional parliaments) that would see elected regional politicians becoming responsible for such areas as economic development, spatial planning, EU funding, housing, culture and sport (Sandford/McQuail 2001). However, this latter initiative was effectively derailed in 2004 by the large ‘No’ vote in

the referendum on a directly-elected regional assembly for the North East region of England (the first of eight probable referenda in different parts of England), when many citizens in that region were less than impressed with the creation of – what many regarded as – an unnecessary tier of governance (Shaw/Robinson 2007). In general, it became increasingly clear that “regions don’t make a lot of economic sense, they often capture multiple economies. By comparison, city regions cover the functional economy of a place – the area in which people commute to, shop and move house, and where businesses connect with each other [...] City regions are more attuned to the preferences of their residents [...] and more democratically accountable. Their leadership is drawn from the council leaders of the local authorities involved, and – in the future – they may be led by a directly-elected executive” (Larkin 2010: 3).

The closing down of the regional assembly option served as a catalyst for the re-emergence of a city region agenda which both filled a policy vacuum, and seemed to offer more tangible economic, administrative and political advantages for policy-makers. In England, the contemporary case for city regions was first advocated in a report for the New Local Government Network in 2000. In considering whether there was a ‘missing middle’ in English Governance, the report argued that – despite the setting up of RDAs – the Government should consider whether city regions with new governance arrangements provide a more effective level for co-ordinating and delivering economic development (NLGN 2000).

Following the outcome of the North East regional referendum in 2004, such a view increasingly attracted support from within the UK Government. In 2006, the UK Treasury confirmed that, “there is significant empirical evidence to suggest that the co-ordination of economic policies across the city-region is conducive to economic performance” (HM Treasury 2006: 13). The council leaders of a number of key cities outside of London, such as Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Nottingham and Newcastle, were also emerging as strong advocates for greater devolution to metropolitan areas (Core Cities 2002). Indeed, over the last 15 years, this ‘Core Cities’ Group has become an increasingly influential network (Core Cities 2015). Evidence, perhaps, of the influence of a more pragmatic argument that the focus on devolution within England could also provide a useful counter-balance to the dominance of London and the South East.

The interest in city regions at this time also reflected the growing body of national and international academic research that highlighted their importance as “locomotives of the national economies within which they are situated” (Scott/Storper 2003: 581), and as the “ideal scale for policy interventions” (Rodríguez-Pose 2009: 50). While for Turok (2008: 153), city regions “fit closely with the focus on



indigenous economic development and innovation at the sub-national level, and offer the opportunity of capturing the economic benefits of agglomeration through coordinated planning transport and housing”.

Similarly, one account of the economic performance of European cities highlighted that the best performing urban centres were those where their political and administrative boundaries most closely matched the geography of the local economy (Cheshire/Magrini 2009). International support for developing city regions in England was also provided by the OECD’s territorial review of the metropolitan area of Newcastle, which argued that “the weak and fragmented governance structure in the North East suggests that consolidating governance functions of local authorities and strengthening governance capacity at the city region level may be a good option” (OECD 2006: 12).

The emerging governmental consensus in the UK – on rescaling at the level of the city region – was reflected in the passing of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act in 2009. The Act provided a legal framework within which metropolitan governance on a city region basis could commence. At this early stage, the new framework allowed the new city region bodies to draw upon the council leaders of their constituent local authorities, manage economic development, housing, and transport activities across the wider city region, and enjoy additional financial flexibility over capital funding. By the final year of the Labour Government in 2009–10, two city regions (West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester) were in the running to be the first such statutory city-regional body. Of the two, Greater Manchester was the most advanced having agreed, locally, to set up a voluntary body covering the wider metropolitan area – the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) – as long ago as 1986. The latter’s previous history of a long track record in joint working across the separate councils – despite political differences – proved crucial to the Government’s decision to agree city region status (Tomaney/McCarthy 2015).

This period can be viewed as one in which a bewildering variety of sub-national initiatives developed, and what one observer referred to as “scalar messiness” (Harrison 2012: 1255), but which did establish the intellectual and political rationale for a city region focus which was then taken up by the post-2010 Conservative-dominated governments. It also served to highlight some of the emerging challenges inherent in developing governance structures at this particular scale. But three emerging problems in particular can be associated with this stage of development.

First, while the Labour Government’s acceptance of a ‘variable geometry’ of locally-constituted and voluntary collaborative arrangements had the virtue of being flexible, and allowing for arrangements that reflect local economic circumstances, some areas unable to meet the demands

placed on them by government would miss out on the potential benefits of state-assisted city regional development. Indeed, the term ‘city region’ itself carries with it an assumption that it is the interests of the larger cities that are paramount, which tends to downplay the significance of the support for larger free-standing towns or mixed urban-rural areas that still face a number of economic challenges (NLGN 2009). For Houghton, Deas, Hinks et al. (2016: 356) this is merely one example of a wider set of highly debatable economic assumptions that “privilege large global cities as generators of economic growth” despite evidence that “economic growth rates are higher in many of the smaller cities of the UK and elsewhere in Europe”.

Secondly, the flexibility of the approach should not disguise the strength of the national imperative in England. If city regions did have some flexibility to respond to their particular sub-regional economic challenges, it was very much within the context of a national approach that enshrines the dominance of a “growth-orientated national economic policy over redistributive spatial policy” (Pike/Tomaney 2009: 17). From this perspective, the agenda can be viewed as a “top-down Treasury driven agenda, focussed predominantly on enhancing economic productivity” (Ayres/Stafford 2009: 619).

Thirdly, in the context of what some commentators saw as the growing ‘democratic deficit’ at the sub-national level, where key decisions were taken in secret either by unelected officials or by the not directly-elected councillors (Humphrey/Shaw 2004), Labour’s plans for city regions raised issues of accountability and openness. As things stood in 2010, there were no opportunities for voters to democratically directly-elect any key decision-makers at this scale of governance. This firmly suggests that there remained uncertainty over the preferred governance model to be introduced.

### 3 Post-2010 Developments: City Regions Under Localism

Following the May 2010 General Election, the Conservative-dominated Coalition Government’s approach to sub-national governance promised a greater ‘Localist’ emphasis on devolving power down to local authorities and local people. The rationale for the change was summed up in the 2011 Localism Act: “The Government is committed to passing new powers and freedoms to town halls. We think that power should be exercised at the lowest practical level – close to the people who are affected by decisions, rather than distant from them. Local authorities can do their job best when they have genuine freedom to respond to what local people want, not what they are told to do by central government” (DCLG 2011a: 4).

The focus on localism explicitly rejected the previous Labour Government's emphasis on the regional scale of governance. Indeed, the Conservatives were hostile to the regional tier on principle – considering it “unwieldy, interfering, and more concerned with fussy structures than actual job creation” (Kelly 2011: 4). Thus, the new administration removed an entire tier of regional organisations, notably the nine Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Government Offices for the Regions (GOs) and, effectively, sounded the death-knell for regionalism in England (Shaw/Robinson 2012). To inject a measure of accountability into sub-national governance, the Government also reinforced their belief in the new role of ‘strong and powerful’ directly-elected executive mayors at the local level who would lead councils, rather than the existing local leaders, who were – first and foremost – ward councillors internally selected from within the majority party caucus (DCLG 2011b).

Given the highly centralised culture of the British state and the perceived need to impose budget reductions on sub-national governments, it is not surprising that some critics interpreted the post-2010 approach to devolution as “centrally-orchestrated localism” (Pike/Kempton/Marlow et al. 2016: 10). With the post-2010 Government's neo-liberal focus on ‘rolling back the state’, the ideological significance of localism may also lie in its ability to shift responsibility for cuts in service provision away from the central, and towards the local level. In a similar way, the closely related emphasis on the Big Society, may have had a similar intention, this time with the additional emphasis on the so-called ‘empowering’ of the voluntary and community sectors masking how the adoption of a “market-based model for reforming public services, further concentrat[ed] power in the hands of new ‘quasi-monopoly’ private sector providers rather than in those of local people” (Civil Exchange 2015: 6).

In terms of proposals to rescale sub-national governance, the new Government continued with the strand of thinking that had characterised the last years of the previous government, namely the devolution of responsibilities to *larger cities* and their wider *sub-regions*. The three major policy developments that reflected this focus after 2010 are: Local Enterprise Partnerships, City Deals, and Combined Authorities.

### 3.1 Local Enterprise Partnerships

In place of the RDAs after 2010, the Government created 39 sub-regional Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) across England. These new bodies were independent of local government, non-statutory, lacked the legal powers open to RDAs, were much ‘leaner’ in terms of staffing, and had greatly reduced budgets (Pugalis/Bentley 2013). In

bringing together both local political and business leaders to enable a more private sector-led approach to economic growth, LEPs reflected the emphasis of the new Government on reducing public sector-led growth in favour of a more market-led approach (House of Commons 2013). It was also highlighted that the new partnerships should “better reflect the natural economic geography of the areas they serve and hence cover real functional economic and travel to work areas” (BIS/CLG 2010: 2).

From this perspective, they were potentially more aligned geographically with the non-implemented Redcliffe-Maud proposals of 1969, extending beyond individual urban local government boundaries. Resources for the individual LEPs came via a new Local Growth Fund worth £1 bn and were allocated on the basis of the quality of LEPs' economic plans. Areas that were deemed by government to have the strongest plans would get a greater share of the funding. This element – of differential reward – has also been underpinned by the Government's emphasis on the importance of creativity, innovation and taking risks when promoting city growth (HM Government 2011). However, such an approach also runs the risk of exacerbating already-ingrained processes of uneven development between English cities as it is likely to shift resources away from economically under-performing areas with high levels of social need (Martin/Gardiner/Tyler 2014).

In their relatively short life, the 39 LEPs in England have received, at best, a lukewarm response. The critical assessment has included concerns over their insufficient powers and resources to achieve their aims, variable arbitrary and transitory territorial boundaries that have at least as much to do with political ‘fixes’ as economic analysis and their lack of long-term vision and dynamism (Deas/Hincks/Headlam 2013; Pugalis/Bentley 2013). One recent critical account of LEP performance highlights how such concerns are the product of continuing internal tensions between centralism and localism, competition and collaboration, agility and “bureaucratisation and wider external challenges including state austerity, faltering growth and uncertain economic conditions in the short- and medium-term” (Pike/Marlow/McCarthy et al. 2015).

### 3.2 City Deals

The Localism Act 2011 gave ministers the power to transfer responsibilities to individual cities that came forward with innovative proposals to promote economic growth. This ‘City Deal’ process would see, in exchange for being granted greater powers, English cities and their wider areas assuming responsibility for delivering growth locally (National Audit Office 2015). This approach reinforced the principle of ‘asymmetrical devolution’, which sees different combinations of powers allocated to different cities or

areas. This marks a clear shift from traditional approaches to sub-national governance in England, which tended to impose similar devolved arrangements on to a variety of metropolitan areas in the time-honoured tradition of ‘one size fits all’. The Government were also flexible in how cities interpreted the *size* of the area within which devolution would occur: “The Government is committed to devolving powers and resources to the most appropriate level. In some cases this will be individual local authorities, but in others it will make sense for decisions to be made at a level which matches the economic geography of a city (broadly the area covered by the LEP). We will take a bespoke approach, agreeing on a case-by-case basis the spatial level at which decisions should be made, and the governance structures that need to be in place” (HM Government 2011: 8).

The first wave of City Deals covered the eight largest cities (including Manchester, Birmingham and Newcastle) that were in the Core Cities Group. A further, second, wave of 20 City Deal agreements then encompassed the next 14 largest cities, plus the six cities with the highest population growth between 2001 and 2010. These included smaller city regions such as Greater Cambridge, Oxford and Oxfordshire, Tees Valley, and Hull and the Humber (Cabinet Office 2013). The flexible nature of the process saw ministers offering a selection of different devolved responsibilities from which the cities could choose (see HM Government 2011: 8 f.):

- Giving cities one single capital pot (rather than multiple funding streams), allowing them the freedom to direct and prioritise economic investment.
- Access to an additional £1 bn Regional Growth Fund (RGF) to support innovative and ambitious economic programmes.
- Powers for cities to offer business rate discounts to local businesses, with the opportunity to match fund this through Growth Fund bids.
- Allowing cities to take strategic transport decisions by devolving local transport major funding.
- Increasing cities’ control over rail services, through devolving responsibility for commissioning local and/or regional rail services, including the management of franchise arrangements.
- Developing with cities specific proposals for developing greater accountability to local communities for local bus services, in the context of wider Bus Service Operators Grant reform.
- Putting greater regeneration funding and responsibilities in the hands of cities, by devolving Homes and Communities Agency spending and functions.

- Creating a City Skills Fund to enable cities and colleges to work together to tailor the provision of adult skills to the needs of employers in the city.
- Supporting the development of connected urban spaces through a £100 million capital fund for competitive bids for ambitious broadband infrastructure plans, including those enhancing superfast broadband to strategic business areas and high-speed mobile connectivity.
- Giving cities the opportunity to grow apprenticeship numbers in their area by establishing City Apprenticeship Hubs, accessing national funding to catalyse new apprenticeships in small businesses.

While there were similarities, in practice, relating to the devolved responsibilities prioritised by cities (including common areas such as skills, transport and freeing-up investment funding), other areas were less likely to be selected (such as housing), while bids also advocated using the new responsibilities to boost growth in different ways. Thus, Newcastle City Council wished to create a joint Accelerated Development Zone with Gateshead Council, Greater Manchester favoured the creation of a Graphene Global Research and Technology Hub, while Sunderland’s application asked for support for developing an International Advanced Manufacturing Park (Cabinet Office 2013). There has been recent confirmation that the English model of City Deals has been explicitly adopted within the centre-right Australian Government’s new cities programme (Dole 2016). This is evidence, perhaps, of how the wider neo-liberal focus on enabling private sector-led economic growth involves the central state re-regulating the nature of economic development at the local level (Peck 2012).

The permissiveness of the process did allow some cities to put forward applications based on different geographies. While the majority were firmly based on the wider city region, i.e. the urban core and its hinterland, included a number of different councils and were coterminous with LEP boundaries, others were more circumscribed and applied to a smaller number of local councils. For example, the Greater Manchester City Deal covered 10 local authorities in the wider metropolitan area, while the Newcastle bid only covered the city council and its near neighbour, Gateshead Council. Indeed, two other councils adjoining Newcastle and Gateshead – Sunderland and South Tyne-side – were to have their own City Deal accepted. Whereas in Nottingham, the original City Deal covered only one authority, the City Council (National Audit Office 2015), this was also the case with Southend Council’s application (Cabinet Office 2013).

### 3.3 Combined Authorities

A third strand of policy, which emphasised a focus on the wider metropolitan area or city region (and which is closely related to the two above), has been the development of Combined Authorities. As noted earlier, this approach was first mooted under the previous Labour Government (1997–2010), and it was left to the Coalition Government to create these bodies as legal structures, with approved functions in relation to economic development and transport, and with specified governance arrangements (House of Commons 2015a).

Combined Authorities can best be viewed as providing a city-region with a joint-working *legal* framework through which elements of devolution already agreed via City Deals and/or directed through LEPs, can be implemented, co-ordinated, and legitimated. They sit across the existing local government structures but only exist as the councils' own creations. However, the exact relationship between these three policy developments does, somewhat confusingly, vary across the different metropolitan areas – one practical implication of asymmetrical devolution. In Greater Manchester, the City Deal, LEP and Combined Authority all cover the same boundaries, while in the former North East region, there are three different City Deals, two LEPs and two Combined Authorities. The North East Combined Authority covers seven councils in the north of the area, while the Tees Valley Combined Authority covers five councils in the south of the region.

The Government's approach to Combined Authorities has also developed over time with a number of iterations. The first model (approved in 2011), and with its own economic development and transport duties, was that of the (ten council) Greater Manchester Combined Authority. This grouping was by far the most advanced metropolitan area

in its joint-working – having already gained strong local agreement before it was formally established by Government.

In 2014, Combined Authorities were also formally established in five other sub-regions (West Yorkshire, Sheffield, Liverpool, Tees Valley, and the North East), with Greater Manchester, at this stage, also being allowed to create a statutory spatial development plan, have a delegated and integrated transport budget, bus franchising powers and a substantial Housing Investment Fund (Colomb/Tomaney 2016).

Following the May 2015 General Election, the Conservative Government further revised the approach by announcing an additional 'Devolution Deal' which allowed the existing combined bodies to ask for additional responsibilities as long as they agreed to accept the introduction of a directly-elected mayor for their Combined Authority. In addition, the range of possible devolution opportunities was extended to encompass economic development, regeneration, housing, transport, skills, the integration of health and social care, aspects of children's services, land development and planning, taking over the work of Police and Crime Commissioners, control over the fire and rescue services, and retaining the surplus generated by business rate growth (House of Commons 2015b). For example, under the expanded deal in Greater Manchester (again, the first body to be approved under the additional 'deal'), the role of the elected mayor would be to lead the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, chair its meetings and allocate responsibilities to a cabinet made up of the leaders of each of the ten councils. Councils in Greater Manchester that currently control £5 bn of public money annually would also be expected to gain control over a further £2 bn and gain a greater range of responsibilities (Table 1).

**Table 1** Further devolution to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) – July 2015

Policy Sector	Responsibility
Land	GMCA will create a Greater Manchester Land Commission to co-ordinate how publically-owned land can be used to support the building of 10,000 new homes a year
Planning	GMCA will create a Mayoral Development Corporation which can help drive regeneration and advance complex development schemes
Fire	The directly-elected Mayor will oversee the work of Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service
Children's Services	The GMCA and the government will work together to review where children's services – both those delivered by councils and other providers – can be better integrated and be more efficient
Employment and Skills	Devolution arrangements had already given Greater Manchester influence over 40 per cent of skills training delivered in the area. In this new agreement the government has committed to exploring how the city region can have greater flexibility in commissioning employment and skills programmes
Health and social care	The government has pledged that Greater Manchester's Strategic Sustainability Plan will now be more closely aligned with the Spending Review process for health and social care, enabling greater certainty as funding levels will be known for a longer period than is currently the case

The GMCA covers the ten metropolitan boroughs which formerly made up the metropolitan county of Greater Manchester: Manchester, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan, Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, and Oldham. Source: based on GMCA (2015)



As eventually underpinned by powers within the 2016 Cities and Local Government Devolution Act, further devolution deals covering wider city or sub-regions were agreed in the autumn of 2015, including those with Combined Authorities covering the Sheffield City, the North East, Tees Valley, Liverpool, and the West Midlands. More recently (in Spring 2016), the coverage of the approach was widened to include more rural or mixed areas, including Greater Lincolnshire and East Anglia (Fig. 1).

There is also an additional spatial level to be considered. While seemingly encouraging a competitive ethos between rival authorities/areas each with their own mix of powers and resources, another spatial assemblage is emerging which highlights the potential for some form of co-operation across the pan-regional scale. This covers both the development of a Northern Powerhouse across the whole north of England (Osborne 2014) and the more recent espousal of a ‘Midlands Engine’ across 11 LEP areas in the West and East Midlands.

In the case of the Northern Powerhouse initiative, there had been an earlier attempt to encourage a pan-regional approach via the Northern Way initiative between 2004 and 2011. While lacking resources and strategic powers, the initiative did encourage a culture of collaborative working, created a robust database covering a wider spatial level and created a momentum that cities such as Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool could harness when promoting the city region approach. In the case of the former, “whilst the Northern Way as a spatial imaginary had emerged as a contiguous pan-regional growth corridor, its colonisation by Manchester allowed the city to further its city-regional ambitions” (Haughton/Deas/Hincks et al. 2016: 362). This approach may also fit within the direction of travel in Europe where the OECD has argued that the focus is moving away from competing with neighbouring areas for particular opportunities, to co-optation which involves collaborating across borders to highlight propositions for investment: “The real competition is global; therefore neighbouring regions may need to engage in ‘co-optation’ – co-operation for competition” (OECD 2013: 12 f.).

#### 4 ‘Disorganised Devolution’: an Assessment

In comparison to the tentative early attempts to forge a new approach to city regions prior to 2010, there is evidence in recent years of a more concerted approach to devolving powers and responsibilities downwards within England. It can be argued that UK Central Government has recognised (somewhat belatedly) that running everything from London is unsustainable, and is offering a flexible, permissive approach to devolution where councils bring forward their own plans. While such plans require the agreement of Cen-

tral Government (‘Treasury sign-off’) they are crafted and agreed by local councils to reflect *their* needs, and can encompass both economic and social interventions, the economy and society, economic growth and health and well-being. As one recent account of central-local relations argues, “unusually for public service reform, the government has eschewed a one-size-fits-all approach and developed a strategy that not just tolerates, but actually celebrates, local variation, and also allows for future iterations as contexts and priorities change” (Lowndes/Gardner 2016: 363).

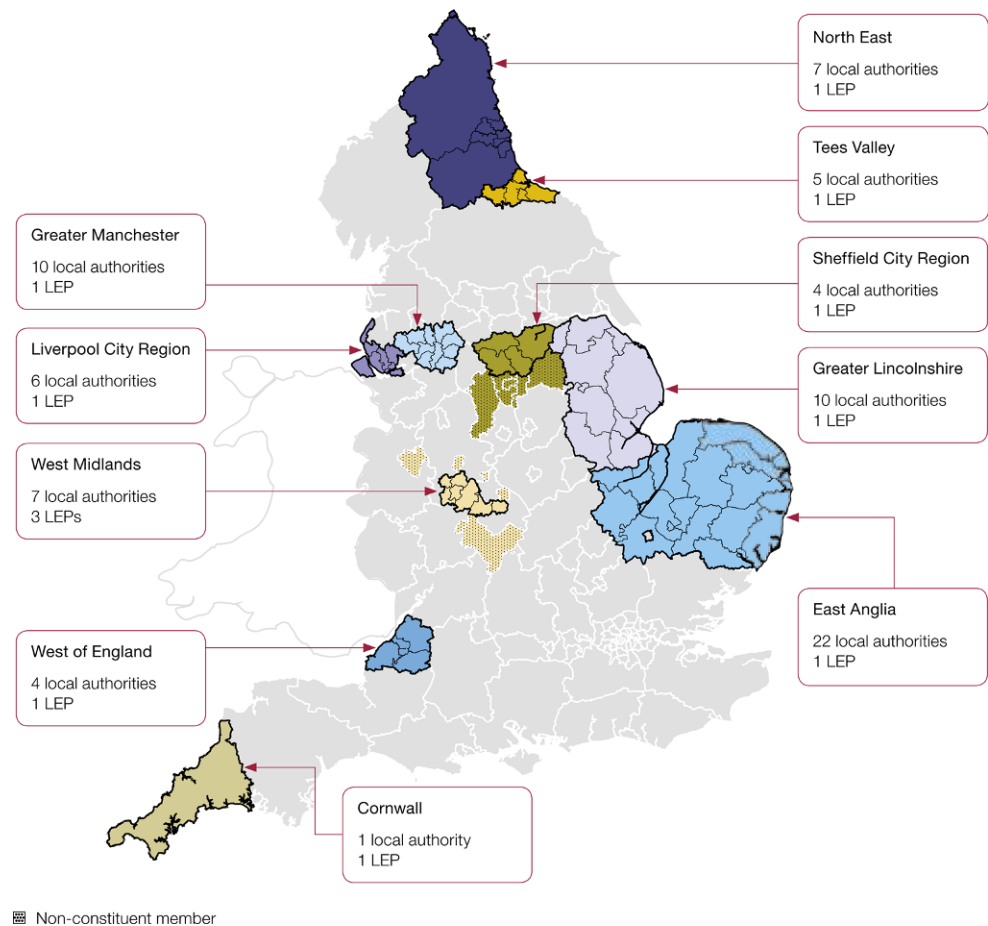
The Government’s approach both allows for the closer integration of administrative and functional economic boundaries and also encourages collaboration across a much wider metropolitan territory and, more recently, across rural or shire county areas. It also provides a boost for both democracy and transparency by insisting on a directly-elected mayor for the new Combined Authorities who is to be directly responsible to voters for the performance of the new authority.

There are also signs, within the Devolution Deals, of a deliberate shift in power away from the LEPs to the directly elected mayor and the Combined Authority. In turn, this would see the LEPs reporting more to the relevant city region body rather than centrally to the central government department for business. Finally, in the North of England in particular, the supporting argument that such changes begin to compensate English city regions for the granting of additional powers to Scotland, following the 2014 Independence Referendum, has also been made (Shaw 2015).

However, a number of concerns over the disorganised approach adopted since 2010 still remain. First, despite being critical of Labour’s overly bureaucratic, and increasingly complex approach to metropolitan governance prior to 2010, the increasingly piecemeal and inconsistent approach adopted since then has produced a ‘patchwork quilt’ of different spatial imaginaries in which the exact relationship and ‘fit’ between LEPs, City Deals, Growth Funds, Combined Authorities and Devolution Deals (and the ‘award’ process itself) is at best confusing and at worst chaotic, making accountability and transparency hard to achieve. Partly, this reflects how the rejection of the ‘one-size fits all’ approach works itself out on the ground and also the tensions (‘turf-wars’) within the different Central Government departments directly involved in sub-national issues. Indeed, for much of the period under review, four departments, the Treasury, Business, Communities and Local Government (CLG) and the Cabinet Office were all involved in aspects of the devolution process and, in the case of City Deals in particular, considerably complicated the decision-making process (Keeling 2013).

Secondly, adding to the complexity and ‘scalar messiness’ is the Government’s (or more specifically, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne’s) focus on the idea

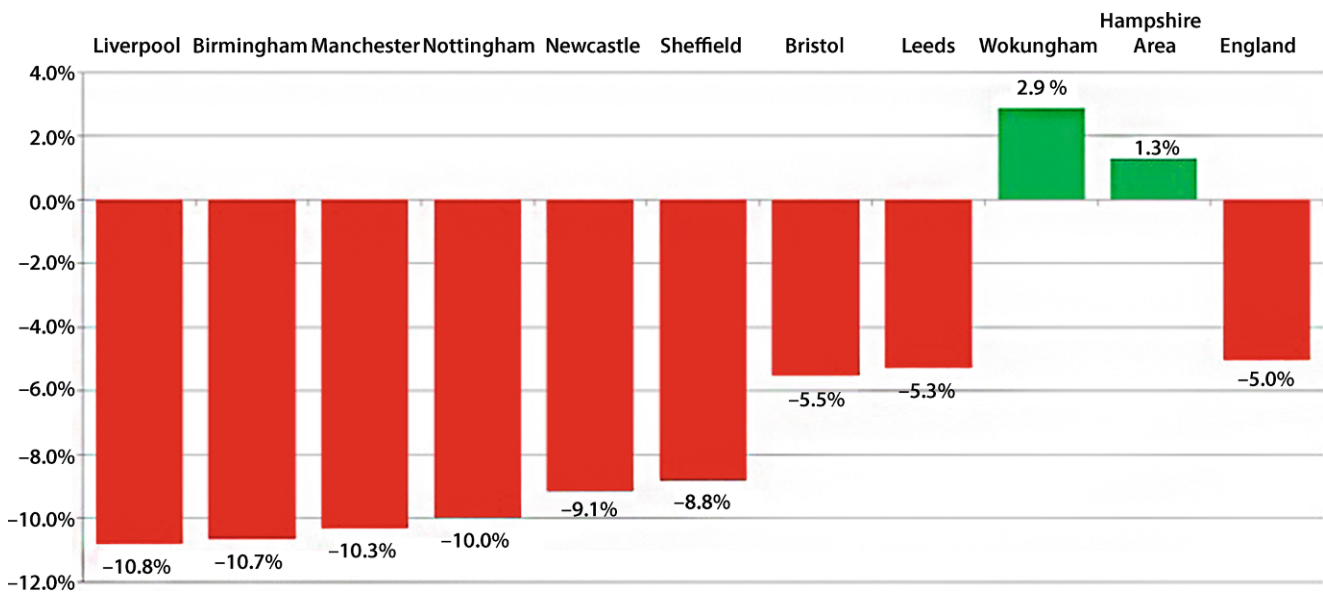
**Fig. 1** Devolution Deals  
2015–2016. Source: National  
Audit Office (2016: 18)



of a ‘Northern Powerhouse’, a pan-regional concept which aims to rejuvenate the economic fortunes of the North West, the North East, and Yorkshire. In a speech in Manchester in June 2014, Osborne argued that the lack of economic and physical connections between the cities and city regions of the North of England was holding back their growth. In order to challenge the dominance of London and the South East, a ‘Northern Powerhouse’ should be created. “Not one city, but a collection of northern cities – sufficiently close to each other that combined they can take on the world” (Osborne 2014: 1). Mainly focusing on connectivity issues, the Chancellor was able to include a number of transport initiatives within this agenda, including the establishment of a Transport for the North partnership, the £13 bn investment in high speed rail connections between the South and the North (‘HS2’) and the West and the East (‘HS3’), 40 major road schemes, and an electronic ticketing ‘oyster card’ system (similar to the one already operating in London) that would allow ticketless public transport between the ‘powerhouse’ cities. Despite Osborne’s rhetoric, however, many local and national politicians in the North viewed the Powerhouse as a barely concealed political attempt to strengthen the reputation of the Conservative Party in the North of England, a rebranding of what is already on

offer via the Combined Authority deals, and little more than government-backing for the growth of Greater Manchester (Fitzgerald 2015). Indeed, there are real concerns elsewhere in the North that the Manchester model (or ‘Devo Manc’ as it has been christened) has been anointed by the UK Treasury as *the* example to follow (Geoghegan 2014), and that for other areas such as the North East, there is a little on offer except kind words. The uncertainty over the Northern Powerhouse has been further intensified by the likely reduction in EU funding available to the North of England following the UK leaving the EU, and the disappearance – from the UK Government – of George Osborne, the creator and main advocate of the scheme (Hewitt 2016).

Thirdly, there are also concerns that the Conservative Government’s increasingly selective approach gives the UK Treasury the power to reward city regions that they feel possess the strategic vision and collaborative approach to governance required to transform city-regional economies, and refuse applications from other metropolitan areas deemed not to have the economic potential and governance structures necessary. While such an approach can be seen as establishing bespoke devolution deals with a small number of privileged city regions (Policy Network 2014), it clearly also creates a two-paced route to devolution, “a com-



**Fig. 2** Changes in Council Spending Power 2014–2016. Source: Liverpool Express (2014)

plex, multi-speed system [...] combined with processes of central government funding allocation [that] could reshape and accentuate patterns of uneven economic development” (Colomb/Tomaney 2016: 11). For one observer, business rates reform on this basis would exacerbate inequality: “It’s not a winner takes all system, but it’s a winner takes more” (Tony Travers, quoted in The Guardian 2015).

To take one example, Westminster Council’s 235,000 population in Central London is able to benefit from the council’s ability to collect £1.8 bn of business rates per year from its vibrant business community, while the five northern core cities (comprising 2.6 million residents) with a less substantial business base are only able to currently collect £1.3 bn in business rates (Marlow 2015). The previous Labour Government’s (albeit weak) focus on reducing inequalities between regions seems a long time ago. Instead it has been firmly abandoned, and replaced by a – predominantly neo-liberal – acceptance of the inevitability of wide variations in the competition for scarce resources. As a recent review of economic and social conditions in UK cities has argued, the present approach “risks the creation of a governance gap between cities that reinforces existing economic and social disparities. This gap will emerge because cities experiencing relative decline have more limited economic potential, weaker tax bases, higher levels of poverty and a greater need for public service provision” (Pike/MacKinnon/Coombes et al. 2016: 43).

Finally, while devolution deals with major cities in England chime with the Conservative Government’s espousal of localism, these are taking place against a backdrop of major cuts to the budgets of the individual local authorities involved in the deals. The significant cuts, defined as being essential in a period of austerity by the Government

(Lowndes/Pratchett 2012), have hit the core cities particularly hard, with a major reduction in the total amount of money (drawn from a range of sources) that these cities have to spend compared to many councils in the South East and to the English average. As noted in Fig. 2, between 2014 and 2016 the reductions ranged from 5.3 to 10.8%. The leader of Leeds City Council recently warned that the council’s financial situation was becoming ‘near impossible’ as he announced a further cut of £45 million in the 2015–16 budget. This latest round means that, by March 2016, Leeds City core funding from Central Government will have dropped more than 40 per cent in the last five years (Leeds City Council 2015). Even in the most developed of the devolution deals in Greater Manchester, it is estimated that the ten constituent local councils will have lost £1.5 bn and over 10,000 jobs since 2010 (Fitzpatrick 2014).

The simultaneous pursuit of the ‘localist’ and ‘austerity’ agendas by the Conservative Government has produced a political parallel world for council leaders. In one world, they are caught up in a crisis atmosphere having to make difficult decisions on major staffing levels and public service cuts in their own councils. While in another (at the city regional level) the focus is on devolved powers, access to new budgets and an atmosphere where there is talk of growth and development. The key fault line – and the dilemma facing council leaders in Greater Manchester – has been described as “accepting central government pressure to absorb expenditure cuts in return for the promise of additional powers and future funds that prove more modest than anticipated and come with strings attached” (Haughton/Deas/Hincks et al. 2016: 367). Indeed, the view that devolution deals have been used by ministers as smokescreens

to mask the scale of cuts to local councils was used by local politicians in the Gateshead local authority area to justify their refusal to join the North East Combined Authority (Seddon 2016). This concern is reinforced by recent figures from the Audit Commission that, on a per capita basis, the North East gets less funding than many of the other Combined Authority areas (National Audit Office 2016).

## 5 Conclusions

With the election of the Labour Government in 1997, questions on the form of sub-national government re-emerged and were instigated throughout the 2000s as commitments to regionalism. But English regionalism was never fully embraced publicly, neither by Labour's own voters nor by a Conservative Party who believed in more localist forms of governing. Despite attempting to embed the forms of regionalism into economic development and integrated planning strategies to address the specific needs of individual city regions, formal regionalism was increasingly overtaken by a renewed interest in city-regions. A new localism thus emerged, promoted by metropolitan councils eager not only to fill the post-regional vacuum, but also to demonstrate their ability to run services and think strategically. After 2010, and the election of a Conservative-dominated Coalition Government, regionalism was abandoned in favour of a new commitment to localism, albeit one which was promoted and instigated by central government. Localism, as promoted by this latest phase of devolution, is about the central state relinquishing duties to the local level, accompanied by a new commitment to an increasingly kaleidoscopic form of city-regionalism.

The approach adopted in this article has drawn upon political economy, spatial and institutional approaches that highlight, *inter-alia*, how austerity, competing spatial imaginaries and the historical evolution of central-local relationships within the UK state have produced a particularly 'disorganised' approach to contemporary devolution in England. Such disorganisation is reflected in the "piecemeal approach of incremental reform, limited fiscal localisation and bespoke arrangements" (Pike/MacKinnon/Coombes et al. 2016: 43). The disorganised nature of the approach, although heavily shaped by the desire of the UK national government to achieve a range of aims, including reducing public expenditure, reforming public services, promoting spatially-selective economic growth, and the promoting of party political interests, is also partly influenced by more localist, bottom-up pressures. However, while local political leaders, particularly (but not exclusively) at the city regional level have helped shape devolution policy and will have opportunities to shape resource allocation, it is still best viewed as a form of "centrally-prescribed localism with the

rewards going to those who can dance most credibly to the tune of central government" (Haughton/Deas/Hincks et al. 2016: 367). In addition, the process of deal-making itself (with both centre and local politicians each with their own agendas) "could lead to patchwork solutions, disadvantaging localities without natural local linkages, in a context where the principal of redistributing funding from prosperous to poorer areas is being steadily eroded" (Lowndes/Gardner 2016: 365).

Therefore recent changes in metropolitan governance in England have been shaped by intense political debates on both the appropriate scale and governmental structures required to deal with sub-national issues. The different preferences reveal internal UK debates on the ongoing relationships between different political tiers of the state but are also affected by trends in global governance. Thus, the governance frame itself is not a static construct, even though it comprises layers of institutions possessing differential roles and power. Without any formal written constitutional settlement setting out formal roles and responsibilities, the UK governance system comprises a political process that constantly re-layers governance, removes discretion from some governmental scales, adds to others, and changes the balance of relationships between the institutions. In the absence of 'one size fits all' models for sub-national government, more ad hoc, informal and flexible approaches emerge, ensuring different modes of governance in different parts of England, evidence perhaps of the continuing tension between decentralisation and territorial cohesion (Tomaney/McCarthy 2015). Jessop (2000) has also talked of these issues in relation to the shifting scales of power of the state, and Agnew (1999) has referred to the jostling of power between divergent forms of the state.

It is also contended that aspects of the ongoing, and emerging, relationships between pre-existing and new scalar politics of the state (MacKinnon 2011), form a contested and malleable framework of territorial governance and management (Haughton/Allmendinger/Counsell et al. 2010). Within this understanding of territorial governance, different levels of government and new forms of governance 'flex their muscles' and claim ownership and responsibility for policy and strategic coordination across – and within – government, or sometimes even temporarily abandon it. The overall determinants of how new forms of government and governance 'bed-down' relate to a desire *on the ground* to make sense and achieve some semblance of order out of chaos, to achieve integration, and strategic delivery. With the UK still reeling following the outcome of the June 2016 referendum on leaving the EU, and the resignations of Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor George Osborne, questions of what happens to sub-national governance and its relationship to both the centre and other nations is likely to occupy the minds of not only the new



Theresa May government but also city regional politicians and officials across England for some time to come.

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