

# Devolution Deal Support Survey

Research Report

January 2022



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# Summary

## Background

Between January and February 2022, the Local Government Association (LGA) conducted an online survey of members of its six Combined Authority Networks. The purpose of this survey was to evaluate the LGA's support in running these networks on the capacity and capability of members' organisations to deliver their devolution deal objectives. A total of 43 members responded – a response rate of 36 per cent.

As the survey aimed to evaluate the impact of the LGA's support both on individual members and their areas, the results for this survey are presented both at the level of individual respondents and aggregated to their areas.

## Key findings

- A total of 77 per cent of respondents reported that the support provided by the LGA had improved the capacity and capability of their authority to deliver its devolution deal objectives to at least a small extent
- The average of this percentage for each of the devolved areas as 79 per cent, thus showing a slight increase when each area was weighted equally
- Open text comments reveal that the networks are valued venues for the sharing of information and best practice and the building up of relationships that continue beyond formal network processes and meetings
- Open text comments also indicated a desire among respondents that the networks gain greater prominence, clarity, formality and structure, a preference for an increase in network activity, and a concern about the turnover in network membership making it harder for them to discuss confidential issues during official network events

## Introduction

The LGA's six combined authority networks are places where lead officers from each of the combined authorities can come together to share best practice, discuss issues, seek advice and receive updates on relevant policy issues. This survey was intended to evaluate the experience of the members of these networks, and particularly to gauge whether their membership has helped them to improve their authority's capacity and capability to deliver its devolution deal objectives.

This survey was also originally intended to reach officers from areas currently negotiating a devolution deal, to measure the extent to which the LGA's support had placed them in an improved decision to negotiate these deals. However, at the time the survey was run it was not possible to identify a confirmed and official list of areas negotiating a devolution deal, so this survey was instead confined to officers from areas with existing devolution deals via the combined authority networks.

As the survey aimed to evaluate the impact of the LGA's support both on individual members and their areas, the results for this survey are presented both at the level of individual respondents and aggregated to their areas.

## Methodology

In January 2022 the LGA sent an online survey invitation via email to members of the combined authority networks across England, excluding a small number of members who were not from a local authority. Members from the London region were also excluded, owing to the unique devolution situation faced by authorities in the Greater London area. The survey was in the field until mid-February 2022. It was circulated to 121 combined authority network members and a total of 43 responded to the survey: a response rate of 36 per cent.

This level of response rate means that these results should not be taken to be more widely representative of the views of all councils. Rather, they are a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents.

Table 1 shows the difference in response rates between the areas with members in the networks – this includes the ten current combined authorities<sup>1</sup> and Cornwall. This demonstrates that participation in the survey was relatively well-distributed across the areas involved, with all but one combined authority represented by at least one member's response.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/devolution-online-hub/devolution-explained/combined-authorities>

**Table 1: Response rate by area with members in the combined authority networks**

Type of authority	Number of network members	Number of responses	Response rate %
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority	14	5	35.7%
Greater Manchester Combined Authority	13	3	23.1%
Liverpool City Region Combined Authority	11	7	63.6%
North East Combined Authority	3	0	0.0%
North of Tyne Combined Authority	14	6	42.9%
South Yorkshire Combined Authority	11	4	36.4%
Tees Valley Combined Authority	8	3	37.5%
West Midlands Combined Authority	17	6	35.3%
West of England Combined Authority	11	3	27.3%
West Yorkshire Combined Authority	17	5	29.4%
Cornwall	2	1	50.0%

In addition, the following points about the methodology used in this report should also be noted:

- Where tables and figures report the base, the description refers to the group of people who were asked the question. The number provided refers to the number of respondents who answered each question.
- Throughout the report percentages in figures and tables may add to more than 100 per cent due to rounding.

## Devolution Deal Support Survey

This section contains analysis of the full results from the survey.

### Impact of LGA support on capacity and capability

Respondents were asked the extent to which they thought that the support provided by the LGA had improved the capacity and capability of their authority to deliver its devolution deal objectives.

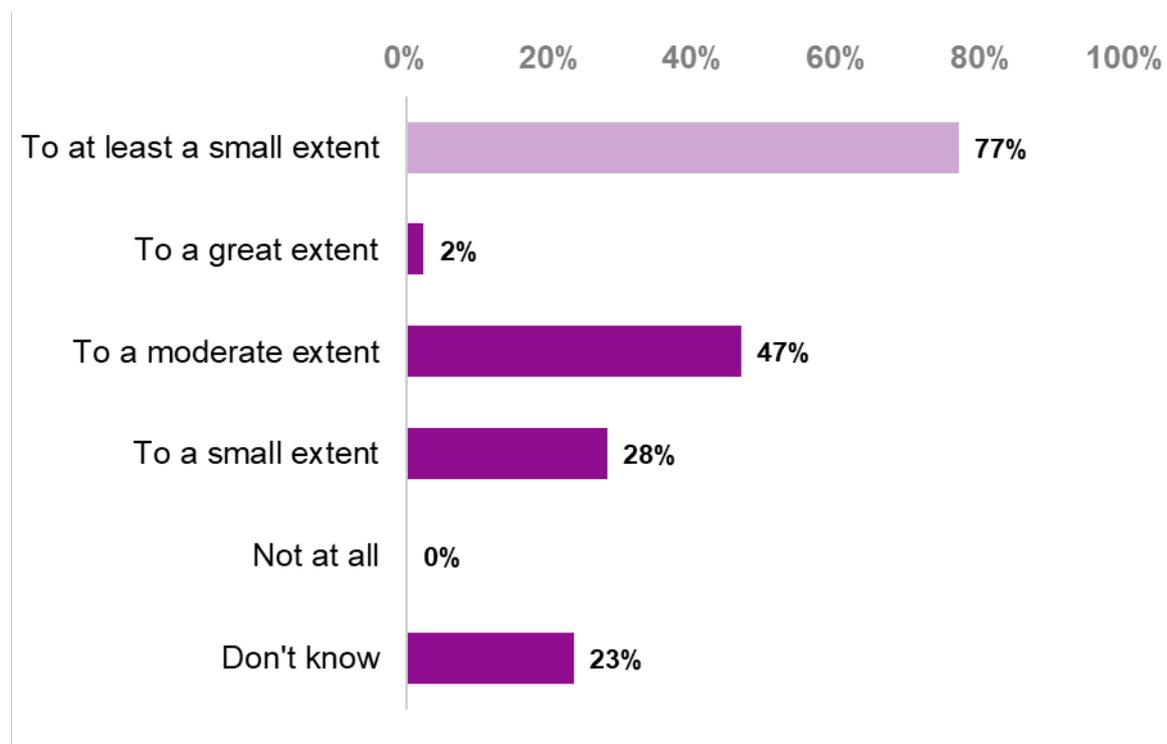
Table 2 and Figure 1 show the results for this question among the individual respondents to the survey. These results show that, considered at the level of individual respondents, a total of 77 per cent (33 respondents), reported an improvement in their authority's capacity and capability to at least a small extent, consisting of two per cent (one respondent) answering "to a great extent", 47 per cent (20 respondents) answering "to a moderate extent", and 28 per cent (12 respondents) answering "to a small extent". The remainder of respondents selected "don't know" (23 per cent, 10 respondents), with no respondents indicating that the LGA's support had not improved their authority's capacity and capability at all.

**Table 2: To what extent, if at all, do you think that the support provided by the LGA has improved the capacity and capability of your council to deliver its devolution deal objectives? Individual-level results**

	Number	Per cent
<b>To at least a small extent</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>77%</b>
To a great extent	1	2%
To a moderate extent	20	47%
To a small extent	12	28%
Not at all	0	0%
Don't know	10	23%

Base: all respondents (43 respondents).

**Figure 1. To what extent, if at all, do you think that the support provided by the LGA has improved the capacity and capability of your council to deliver its devolution deal objectives? Individual-level results**



To calculate levels of perceived improvement aggregated to the area level, the above percentage breakdown was calculated for each area individually and the average of these percentages was taken. The above results do not control for the fact that differing numbers of respondents completed the survey on behalf of each area, so areas with more respondents made a greater contribution to the overall results. The aggregated area-level results, by contrast, give each area an equal weight in contributing to the overall results, thus providing a fuller indication of how devolved areas view the LGA’s support.

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the aggregated area-level results for the question. These results show that, at an area level, the percentage responding “to at least a small extent” was slightly higher, at 79 per cent, and just over half on average (52 per cent) responded “to a moderate extent”.

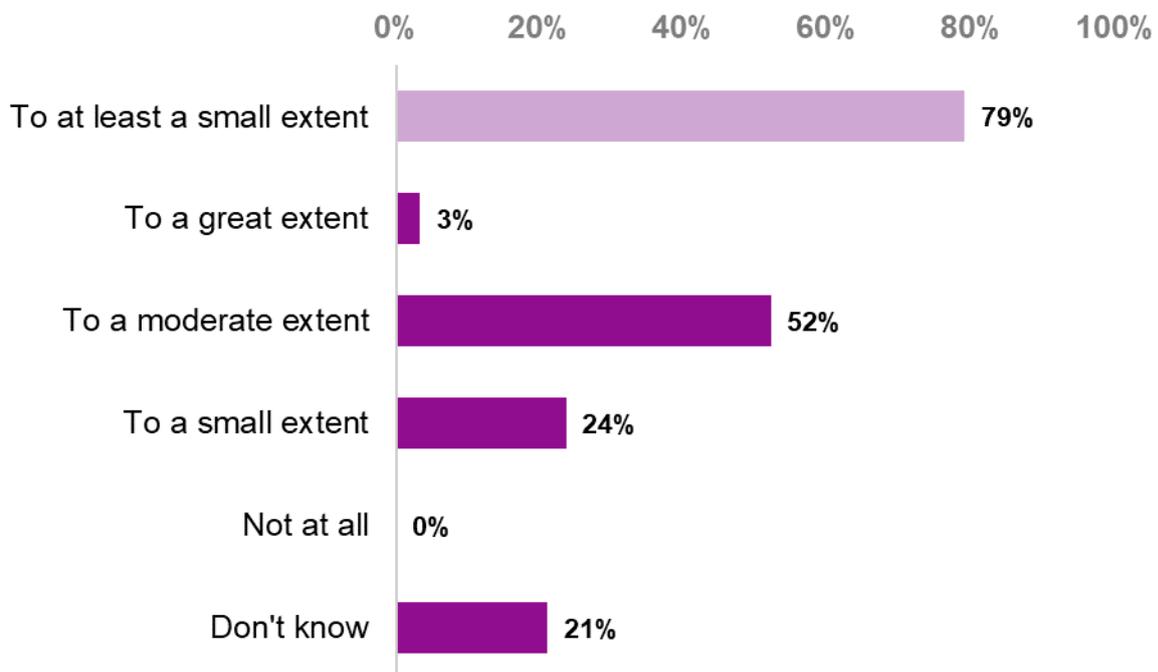
Of the ten individual areas represented in the survey, four had a rate of 100 per cent of respondents answering “to at least a small extent.” The other six had rates of between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of their respondents answering “to at least a small extent”. As the individual-level results show, no respondents from any area answered “not at all.”

**Table 3: To what extent, if at all, do you think that the support provided by the LGA has improved the capacity and capability of your council to deliver its devolution deal objectives? Area-level average results**

Per cent	
<b>To at least a small extent</b>	<b>79%</b>
To a great extent	3%
To a moderate extent	52%
To a small extent	24%
Not at all	0%
Don't know	21%

Note: these figures are an average of the percentages calculated individually for each area. For each area, the base was the total number of respondents from that area as shown in Table 1.

**Figure 2. To what extent, if at all, do you think that the support provided by the LGA has improved the capacity and capability of your council to deliver its devolution deal objectives? Area-level average results**



## Any Further Comments

Respondents were asked to provide any further comments on their experience of being a member of a combined authority network and the support provided by the LGA. These comments can be grouped into the following emerging themes, with selected quotes used for representative purposes.

Positive feedback:

- The networks are **valued for the sharing of experiences, information and suggestions**, and for acting as a sounding board for emerging issues and future plans. “I think the network has provided valuable sharing of experiences, information and approaches.”
- The **attitude and responsiveness of other members of the network was particularly praised**: “The members of the network are responsive and helpful.”
- Respondents valued the **overall, wider picture which the LGA and other areas’ perspectives open up** for them: “Having LGA involvement has also been useful to help us understand the context and bigger picture.”
- Several respondents noted that the networks had **catalysed relationships and partnerships between members reaching beyond the network meetings** themselves: “The network provides a useful opportunity to share and hear good practice, hear about latest government policy development and recent publications that will impact our roles and build a network from which we can seek advice and information outside of the meeting.”
- The networks have been particularly **valued by the newer combined authorities and for dealing with rapidly emerging issues**: “many combined authorities are reasonably new and some of the challenges are therefore unprecedented, so having a peer group to work things through with has been invaluable.”
- Some respondents **valued the flexibility afforded by virtual rather than face-to-face meetings**: “virtual working has been a real advantage here. I'm much more likely to make time to attend now.”
- Respondents felt that the **LGA helps provide insight and context for formulating policy responses**: “LGA provide additional insight as to what is helping in other areas not just in devolved areas. LGA is also helpful in formulating policy responses with local insight.”
- Some respondents **reported that the networks had helped them to deliver specific strategies and policies**: “The Network experience has helped develop a strategic comms strategy and a soon to be implemented comms and mayoral office restructure based on conversations and experiences of what works.”

Constructive criticism and suggestions for improvements:

- Several respondents **felt that the networks are not sufficiently visible and clearly signposted**, and some respondents were in doubt as to what activities constituted their network membership: “It would be helpful if the LGA

provided material to enable a greater understanding of the support offer available and also provide updates where there have been changes and/or additions to this support.”

- Some respondents **felt that the networks should operate on a more formal basis**: “It has allowed us as a group to share experiences on an informal basis. A more formal basis would be better.”
- There were some **concerns about considerable recent changes to the membership of the networks, due to the confidentiality of some of the issues discussed**: “2 years of lockdown and change in personnel in the group has not helped as our discussions quite often are confidential therefore trust is the big concern.”
- Some respondents **expressed a preference for more targeted discussions** over open conversations: “Might be an idea to have a discussion on a topic led by a CA which is really leading the way on how to tackle a thorny issue. That way, we could learn from each other. Might be more effective than an open conversation on matters where we all have some experience but aren't necessarily leading the way.”
- Some respondents felt that the **unique circumstances of their area made discussions less applicable** to them in some cases: “Network is useful for exchanging ideas with other CA colleagues and to share experiences. However, we have very differing housing devolution requirements.”
- Some respondents **perceived a reduction in the activity of the networks** since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: “The LGA network was pretty active prior to March 2020 lockdown.”
- Respondents expressed a **desire for more frequent meetings**: “If anything these meetings would be good to have monthly for a catch up and short/quick queries in my opinion, with each third or second meeting being a substantive discussion item - instead of too many discussion items (e.g. on a white paper or something) on each agenda.”
- Respondents expressed that there are **occasionally too many common questions and answers** taking up network meeting time: “Sometimes there are too many common questions and answers - it would be good if there was a record, a FAQ somewhere, where common questions and answers can be stored and accessed by everyone to act as a historical institutional memory for everyone and in particular newer officers who may start in future.”
- Some respondents **perceived that discussion topics and other input originate largely from other combined authorities** rather than the LGA: “Discussion topics though are largely driven and initiated from combined authorities themselves, and the LGA's wider oversight and support has not always been particularly evident.”
- Although some respondents valued virtual rather than face-to-face meetings, some observed a **decline in engagement resulting from the shift to virtual meetings**: “We used to meet face to face with the Housing and Planning Group and that was quite regular. COVID-19 has made the network an online one and has met less frequently.”

## Annex A: Questionnaire

**Please amend the details we have on record if necessary.**

Name (1) \_\_\_\_\_

Authority (or combined authority) (2)  
\_\_\_\_\_

Job title (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Email address (4)  
\_\_\_\_\_

**To what extent, if at all, do you think that the support provided by the LGA has improved the capacity and capability of your council to deliver its devolution deal objectives?**

- To a great extent (1)
- To a moderate extent (2)
- To a small extent (3)
- Not at all (4)
- Don't know (5)

**Please provide any further comments on your experience of being a member of a combined authority network and the support provided by the LGA below.**

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