

Knowledge: Devolution and place

Devolution and place-shaping have much in common. The former gives more power from upper tiers of government to local councils, so they can improve services to fit the specific local context and needs. The latter is about the council understanding the identity and personality of the community, so it can better reflect and represent them.

People in this country on the whole have significantly more trust for local government than they do for national government (the closer power is, the less suspicious people seem to be of it). So, devolution and place leadership link together as the virtuous circle by which power is brought closer to people. Communities in turn are able to have a greater say in how it is exercised, meaning a more engaged resident base.

At the moment, this social angle of devolution is often underplayed at the expense of the economic one. Research by the New Economics Foundation has found that 42 per cent of government documents speak about devolution in terms of its economic benefits. By contrast, only 13 per cent of arguments refer to it as an opportunity to shift power and bolster citizen participation.¹ A big challenge is to address this imbalance, to emphasise the benefits of building power from the bottom-up. To do that a proper appreciation is needed that those who interact with services on a daily basis are best placed to see when things work, when they don't, and how they can be improved.

Below are three steps you can take to engage local communities around the devolution issue:

- 1. Be clear to people what devolution actually means and what material changes it might bring:** It's easy to fall into the abstract language of 'empowerment' and 'transformation'. Instead set out for residents, in plain English, the things that newly devolved powers can and can't control. Explain to them in simple terms how changes in the structure of local government will impact on them' with tangible examples of how this will give them more power as citizens. (The [resource pack](#) developed as part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority pilot.)

¹ 'Democracy: the missing link in the devolution debate', New Economics Foundation, 2015

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- 2. Engage with communities so that they can help shape how devolution may look in ways that are relevant to their needs:** One example of this is the Citizens Assembly Project, piloted in Sheffield and Southampton. In Sheffield, 32 citizens were brought together over two weekends to discuss whether a new regional body should be formed. Experts were invited to give their views and different models were set out. The sessions helped shape how devolution might look in Yorkshire, with an elected assembly proposed that included tax-raising and law-making powers.
- 3. Increase involvement with very localised forms of ‘micro-government’:** An example of this is the ‘pop-up parish’ or the neighbourhood planning project – eg Queen’s Park Community Council, London’s first parish council. These entities operate at a super-local level. They may have a limited lifespan and be designed to address an immediate problem at hand like planting trees or having graffiti removed but can evolve to address other important local issues. Projects like this devolve power to the most local level possible, laying the groundwork for the devolution big picture.

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