**Creating the North from the Sum of its Parts? Research questions to assess the Northern Powerhouse**

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**Abstract**

In late 2014, Chancellor George Osborne announced ambitious plans for the creation of a ‘Northern Powerhouse’ which would see cities taking control over a greater number of functions including planning, transport and public health, in exchange for installing mechanisms for greater democratic accountability. This paper explores those plans and in doing so outlines a number of questions that will be of interest to researchers. This focuses of a number of issues including the ability to develop coherent regional success by fostering city region level development, the governance model of a directly elected executive mayor (DEEM) and how this will work on a practical basis, and the city-level democratisation of key services including health provision.

**Introduction**

In what is frequently regarded as one of the most highly centralised systems of government in the Western world, the idea of shifting power away from Westminster – the UK’s political centre – has been a feature of the legislative agenda of incoming governments for decades. As part of this, devolution and localism, which argue in broad terms that people should have more say over the decisions which affect them albeit at varying scales, frequently take centre stage. Yet across this period these two facets have been largely distinct, with devolution principally relating to the four nations that comprise the UK and localism dealing, arguably more prosaically, with the functions and reform of local government. Now, these two closely interrelated but oft-distinct fields find themselves discussed in tandem as part of the Government’s proposals for the city-scale devolution of powers away from Westminster and the creation of what has been dubbed ‘The Northern Powerhouse’ – an initiative that will see city’s take control over a greater number of functions including planning, transport and public health, in exchange for installing mechanisms for greater democratic accountability (HM Treasury, 2014). This, as will be discussed later in this paper, can be argued as being influenced by, and even part of the ongoing narrative surrounding Scottish Devolution/Independence which has been described eloquently elsewhere (McEwen and Petersohn, 2015, Tierney, 2015, Henderson et al., 2015), and which has now come to influence the English cities and their relationship with Westminster (Shaw et al., 2014, Paun and Munroe, 2014) Yet while the developmental threads of localism can be clearly traced, from Conservative schemes such as City Challenge (Ying Ho, 2003), through New Labour’s local government modernisation agenda (Downe and Martin, 2006) to the Coalition’s Local Enterprise Partnerships (Pugalis, 2010, 2011) the introduction of the North as a policy construct, although much vaunted, is more nebulous. That is not to say it is without precedent. Indeed, New Labour have trialled schemes which have had a similar flavour: from the 2004 referendums in Northern England on regional devolution, which were halted in the face of an overwhelming no vote from the North East (Shaw and Robinson, 2007), to the ‘Northern Way’ which also began in 2004 championing more joined up policy working, including through increased business activity and a more integrated transport network (The Northern Way, 2004).

Acknowledging, and briefly outlining the background from which it emerged, this paper seeks to discuss the policy landscape surrounding this Northern Powerhouse in more detail. In doing so it will seek to draw out the research questions which will be of relevance to those seeking to explore this initiative as it develops, focusing on questions of governance, accountability and the various elements of policy the Northern Powerhouse encompasses. The aim is not to outline an exhaustive research agenda, but rather provide an indication of the broader issues and questions which may arise, the answers to which will be of interest not only to those with an interest in UK governance, but for those seeking to draw lessons within an international context.

**Towards the Northern Powerhouse: Understanding the recent Policy Background**.

Since its election in 2010, the Conservative-led Coalition Government in the UK advanced a localism agenda that marked out a middle ground between the city-region-state model that had prevailed under the previous New Labour Government. After the 2010 general election the structures of regional governance, including Government Offices for the Region (GOR) and Regional Development Agencies (RDA) were swept away and replaced with, amongst other initiatives, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) that where focused at a smaller city-region scale. The rationale behind this shift in focus was to acknowledge the Government view that functional economic areas centred around a city-core would serve as a more meaningful platform at which to conduct local policy (CLG, 2010). This, Pugalis (2010), argued was simply the latest iteration of ‘an ongoing pursuit of more effective and efficient devices for the implementation of sub-national economic policy’ (Pugalis, 2010 p402), whilst others (Bentley et al., 2010) suggested that the proposals might be a veil for deeper centralisation.

The Coalition added to their new city-focused agenda in 2011, when the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg announced a series of ‘City Deals’ (CLG, 2011) – each comprising a bespoke agreement that granted greater powers to foster transport, labour market and economic development initiatives, and attained through a period of negotiation with central government (Marlow, 2013, Deas, 2014, Harrison and Heley, 2015). The trade off for the receipt of this new funding was that each city would hold a referendum to determine whether it would shift its mode of governance from the existing Leader and Cabinet model, to one of a directly elected mayor. Referenda on the proposals were held in May 2012 in eleven cities, including the seven core cities – Liverpool, as the eighth core city opted to bypass the referendum and held elections for the position of mayor on the same day. In echoes of the North East referendum on regional assemblies, the proposals were rejected in all but two places: Bristol, and Doncaster (which opted to retain its system). Despite this rejection, the City Deals pressed ahead, honouring the results with the cities having fulfilled the requirement to hold a referendum. This inevitably led to questions over the purpose of the referendum itself, especially in Liverpool which had opted to bypass the referendum and the wishes of the electorate.

The next significant step in the Government’s agenda for cities came in 2014 with the acceleration of Combined Authorities (CA) (Morphet and Pemberton, 2013). With origins under New Labour in 2009 (HM Government, 2009), and with Greater Manchester in place as a combined authority since 2011 the scheme, which allowed the local authority leaders within a city region to combine strategically on a number of issues including transport and economic planning, was expanded to cover the city regions relating to Leeds, Liverpool, Newcastle and Sheffield. This meant that the LEPs now had a (at least partly) democratically installed counterpart which could foster and drive through strategic thinking at the city region scale. Yet the new CA were not smoothly installed, and instead proved ridden by political infighting over who would lead each CA, as well as membership (Nurse, 2015). As will be shown later, it could be strongly argued that this internal disarray was the reason behind a key tranche of the government’s latter reforms around electoral accountability within the Northern Powerhouse.

Building upon this city region focused agenda in late 2014 Chancellor George Osborne used a series of speeches culminating in his Autumn Statement (HM Treasury, 2014) to launch his plans to create a ‘Northern Powerhouse’: a city-scale devolution of powers away from Westminster which will see city’s take control over a greater number of functions including economic planning, transport and public health, in exchange for greater democratic accountability – essentially a significant deepening of the City Deal. Following the installation of a Directly Elected Executive Mayor (DEEM) returned by the districts comprising the CA, each city region has the potential to take significant control over the way it is run. Alongside the previously mentioned greater powers to direct transport and economic planning, the regional Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) will be subsumed within the purview of the new DEEM alongside substantial control over NHS budgeting and policy direction. Simultaneously the Northern Powerhouse has been identified as a significant platform to boost science and innovation research and development, centred on the North’s universities (HM Treasury, 2014), and beginning with an announcement of the establishment of a National Institute for Material Research as a keystone project[[1]](#footnote-1). The thematic ‘glue’ that would link the Northern Cities together would be ‘HS3’ – the third addition to the nation’s high speed rain network, as proposed by the Higgins Report (Higgins, 2014), and running across an East-West corridor between Newcastle and Liverpool. This, it is argued, would significantly expand the travel-to-work area of the Northern cities and thus their economic potential, although it must be noted that at present the plans remain just that, with no action expected before completion of the initial North-South HS2 line.

The announcement of the Northern Powerhouse should be viewed within the context of the September 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence which, although rejected, nonetheless resulted in a fresh devolution of powers including the ability to control tax rates, as recommended by the Smith Commission (Smith Commission, 2014). As a result, the referendum continues to have profound political and policy implications for Scotland and the wider UK (Shaw et al., 2014, Henderson et al., 2015, McEwen and Petersohn, 2015, Tierney, 2015) exacerbated by evidence suggesting that, despite years of policy interventions, the North-South divide continues to expand (Centre for Cities, 2015). Thus, as Scotland receives a fresh raft of devolution measures, the Northern Powerhouse can be viewed as a method of assuaging the concerns of those Northern cities who feel they might be falling through the cracks as Whitehall devolves power away to other regions of the UK.

As this agenda continues to develop a number of questions emerge which will be of interest to researchers seeking to explore the Northern Powerhouse in more depth. They range from establishing the parameters of this Northern Powerhouse – exploring what is meant by the North, and what it looks like – to exploring the mechanics of the proposals. This includes what the proposed DEEM model will mean for towns and cities. The following section therefore outlines some of these issues in more depth, before outlining research questions across four main areas that may be of interest, and warrant further exploration.

**Understanding the Northern Powerhouse**

*What IS the North?*

In order to be able to make any meaningful assessment of this Northern Powerhouse, it is vital to establish the terms upon which it is premised: In other words: What is the North? It is clear that even a cursory examination of the Government’s plans turns up a clear conflict of scales, with cities, city-regions, and the broader North all being invoked to some degree and, although cities and city-regions have a long history, it is the North that presents a problematic concept to policy makers as, although much vaunted and the subject of longstanding cultural debates (Dorling, 2010), it is without significant precedent in policy terms. At the same time, and in developing such an idea, it is important to avoid suggestions that the ‘North’ is a homogenous mass to which policy can be applied with a broad brush. Its towns and cities face different economic and social challenges, and have different needs. There are places where economic success is systemic, and others where it has been piecemeal, sporadic and often elusive (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993, Jones and Wilks-Heeg, 2004, Biddulph, 2011, Nurse, 2015). Similarly, the North is characterised by urban regions that are historic economic competitors which have long been engaged in a zero-sum game of urban ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, and remain committed to the entrepreneurial thesis which demands they carve out a unique stance in a globally competitive market (Harvey, 1989, 2001). For those cities there are questions over whether they are capable of abandoning such a narrative, or indeed if by emphasising their individual strengths they can collaborate whilst still maintaining the core principles of the entrepreneurial thesis,. Thus, we are faced with the uncertain question of who will be involved in this initiative, the nature of that involvement, and the extent to which they will add coherence to this new North. Will the cities perceive the idea of the Northern Powerhouse as the best vehicle to develop their own economic potential, leading to collaboration and setting aside old rivalries for the greater good? If not, what might they perceive as the barriers to working at this scale, and how might they be overcome?

Greater Manchester will be the forebear: this much we know, and this serves as testament to the long history of coherent political working within the city and wider city region (Deas, 2014). But who will follow, and join Greater Manchester is unclear. Sheffield and Leeds are touted as the likely candidates and Liverpool has expressed a strong desire to be involved although this is complicated by prolonged political infighting (Nurse, 2015). Yet other city regions such as Newcastle have remained cool on the plans and questions as to what the realisation of the Northern Powerhouse will mean for the North’s smaller towns and cities, many of which signed similar City Deals of their own, as well as the predominately rural authorities which sit between remains unresolved (Harrison and Heley, 2015). This seemingly piecemeal roadmap for the rollout of the Northern Powerhouse could see the emergence of a new period of governance, embodied not by juddering but broadly consistent change that has traditionally characterised UK governance, but rather the development of a two-speed system in which urban areas are governed according to the deal they are capable of making with Whitehall.

As the plans develop further, the concept of the Northern Powerhouse is likely to become muddier. Although Greater Manchester will be first, in his speech formalising the plans after the election[[2]](#footnote-2) the Chancellor signified that all cities who met his criteria and were prepared to commit to the DEEM model would be welcomed on equal terms. This paved the way for other cities in England, particularly Birmingham, Bristol and Nottingham, as the only Core Cities outside of the old Northern regions to sign up. This was given further credence through comments by the Prime Minister affirming that the powers devolved to the Northern Powerhouse would not be exclusive, but open to others including London (HC Debate, 2015). Yet London notwithstanding, which has had a DEEM for over a decade, the rate at which this will occur is open to debate given that at present, none of the previously mentioned cities have a Combined Authority in place, which could be argued as providing the structural governance for a DEEM to be in place. Thus, although the reality of this issue arising may not be necessarily imminent, the question of whether a policy initiative focused exclusively on the North could be swiftly undermined and opened up to the South remains in play.

*Democratically Elected Executive Mayors*

The reintroduction of directly elected executive mayors (DEEM) - popularly known as ‘Metro-Mayors’ can be seen as the primary quid-pro-quo for the receipt of this greater devolution of powers. Following their election, the DEEM will represent the entire CA area to which the powers are being devolved – i.e. in Greater Manchester the DEEM will represent the 10 districts comprising the Greater Manchester CA. It is noticeable that unlike the city-deals, which had similar caveats of directly elected mayors attached, this time there is no referenda - to access the devolved powers, a DEEM must be installed. This is seemingly to avoid the situation seen in 2012 where several cities (including Manchester) rejected the idea of a directly elected mayor, instead favouring the existing leader and cabinet system (Deas, 2014), while others including Liverpool bypassed the referenda altogether. We can therefore consider what the implications are for the democratic legitimacy of any newly installed DEEM, particularly when installed in an area that has previously, and recently, voted against such measures. Is the price of more localism a system of local governance that runs counter to the wishes of the electorate? What are the alternatives? It also remains unclear how any party political element will be resolved ahead of any DEEM election – particularly an issue in the predominately Labour dominated North of England (for instance, only 2 of the 10 leaders of Greater Manchester’s district councils are currently represented by non-Labour parties). Will the existing Combined Authority committee agree upon a candidate who will be elected virtually unopposed, or might there be a number of Labour district leaders standing on an individual basis, appealing to the broader region. Is there a need for mayoral primaries – a fixture of US elections, and trialled for Parliamentary constituencies in the UK by the Conservatives ahead of the 2010 general election?

There also remain questions as to how the different facets of democratic accountability within a particular devolved city region will be reconciled. If the newly installed DEEM will take primacy over the newly devolved powers of transport, planning etc, will a concomitant reduction in powers and scope be observed in the smaller districts that comprise the city region? Whilst this might be reasonable, and expected, it remains to be seen how any new resources will be spread across the districts of the city region in an equitable way. Similarly, how will existing structures – most notably the LEPs – be absorbed into this process? With experience of working at the city region level, and with the authorities that comprise the CA, will the LEPs serve as another arm of the DEEM’s toolbox, or continue to act independently, albeit in concert?

*PCCs and Health*

Two of the more notable additional powers offered to the devolved city region are those of health, and policing – providing a platform for the DEEM to direct budgets and priorities. The decentralisation, and even the democratisation, of health and policing is something that was explored under the Coalition, with Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG) placing local doctors in control of health budgets, and policing priorities taken over by democratically elected Police and Crime Commissioners (Lister, 2013). The Northern Powerhouse plans will see this decentralisation taken further with the office and powers of PCC being subsumed into that of the DEEM upon their election, and the area given direct control over its health budget in consultation with the CCGs. This will mean that two of the most politically sensitive areas of public policy will now be in the hands of the city region.

This decentralisation of such significant powers represents one of the most significant balancing acts that the devolved city region must undertake, and is laden with high degrees of risk and reward. The Northern cities have some of the highest rates of deprivation in the UK (Nurse and Pemberton, 2010), facing significant problems of social and economic deprivation – including health and crime. The challenges that they are now taking control over, therefore, are more entrenched and severe than other cities might perhaps face. Yet cities are attempting to deal with these challenges during a period of austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012, Meegan et al., 2014) which has seen public sector funding in particular fall dramatically in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Given that the Northern Powerhouse proposals contain no significant measures for local revenue raising, as proposed in Scotland by the Smith Commission (Smith Commission, 2014), the extent to which local areas which accept this model will be able to deliver a better service whilst still relying on Whitehall for budget allocations remains to be seen. At the same time, this comes with a risk of political cost, whereby DEEMs could carry the political cost of failure (or continued entrenchment) despite their hands being tied by the amount of overall funding available. Therefore, it is appropriate to warrant further questioning over how cities might raise the funds to cover shortfalls – particularly in emergencies or crises stemming from that entrenched deprivation.

**Analysis**

Far from being a coherent policy that stands ready to solve all the perceived ills of the Northern post-industrial cities and launch them into a golden era of governance that will serve as an example to others, the Northern Powerhouse raises more questions than it does answers. For those seeking to research the policy there are a host of questions to be posed. From those of identity to resolving the multi-level politics, or simply for those eager to see what the Northern Powerhouse will truly mean for transport or health planning.

Many of those avenues of enquiry can be assimilated into a several research questions which, through their use, can help to shed light on how this agenda is working.

1. *What does the successful Northern Powerhouse look like?*

The Northern Powerhouse is a multi-level, multi-faceted policy area that spans a multitude of sectors. Therefore, to understand what success looks like it is essential to clearly understand who the key actors are and subsequently define their role. In doing so, it may be that different organisations or urban areas take a differing view to their counterparts, leaving space to ask how such differences might be reconciled. How will the different tiers of governance cooperate, and at what scale? Is the Northern Powerhouse a joined-up economic region working in collaboration, or a collection of booming city states whose wider strategic interests happen to align? If it is the former, we can ask if England is returning to a de facto regionalism once more. In exploring the proposals, we can also ask what is missing from these debates. Might the addition of further policies allow the Northern cities to boost their socio-economic output further?

The recent indication that these devolution plans are not to be the exclusive domain of the Northern cities over the longer term adds further confusion to the issue of defining the North. Will plans to foster economic growth in the North be critically undermined if Southern economic competitors have access to the same mechanisms and policy instruments?

1. *Against those terms, how will existing and proposed governance arrangements either support, or hinder plans to achieve this successful Northern Powerhouse?*

Simply put, what works, and what changes would be needed to attain success? At the heart of any success will be the DEEM model – but we can ask how it works, and how those lessons can be transplanted to other areas. The way in which new DEEMs are capable of working across the tiers of governance will be central to their success. In particular, how will the DEEM reconcile the needs of all the constituent authorities for which they preside over and, in particular, the needs of the democratically elected leaders of those authorities who still retain some power. At the same time the relationship that the DEEMs will be able to cultivate with central government could prove to be central – this could be in terms of demonstrating the competence that forms the basis of further devolution, or in order to negotiate greater funding for example during a health crisis. Therefore, we can explore what the characteristics of an effective DEEM are, which can be used as and when the powers are rolled out further.

Similarly the role of other key institutions will play a key part in the Northern Powerhouse’s success – and the success of any city with devolved powers. How will agencies such as the Police and NHS fare under such reforms? Will DEEMs be capable of managing those institutions, particularly in terms of allocating funding or during instances where central and local policy priorities may clash? How will the DEEMs include (or exclude) other agencies from this process?

1. Will the rising tide lift all boats?

At present the only urban area to experience this greater devolution of powers is Greater Manchester. One of the first indicators of success, and building upon the work of others such as (Jones and Wilks-Heeg, 2004, Boland, 2010), will be to draw upon the experiences of Greater Manchester to explore whether the benefits of the Northern Powerhouse extend beyond its urban core. Then, as the scheme expands, and as other cities sign up, it will become possible to see if there is uniform spread of benefit, both across the North as a unified entity, as well as within their own respective cores. To what extent will the various cities buy in to the Northern Powerhouse and more specifically, the concept of the North as an idea? Will the traditional notions of urban development as a zero-sum game (Peck and Tickell, 1994) be broken down, or remain in place? Are cities likely to view the devolution of greater powers as a vehicle to foster their own development, or will they see the success of other places as intrinsically linked to their own and begin to act in concert?

Also of interest will be whether there is a net benefit to this unified North – particularly for those in rural areas, or in urban areas unable to strike such a deal with central government. Will those places experience any economic boost as and when their neighbours begin to grow, or find that they slip through the gaps of a policy hinterland?

1. *What are the ramifications for failure?*

Whilst much of an emerging research agenda relating to the Northern Powerhouse will focus on the extent to which it is a success, or otherwise, the nature of the plans present a situation where there are very real ramifications for failure. Notwithstanding any findings related to the ability of the rising tide of the Northern Powerhouse to lift all boats, there are clear risks to the individual cities which opt to take on these powers. The devolution of health powers in particular represents a major potential stumbling block. For instance, should a city find itself in a health crisis, or a funding crisis caused by mismanagement, will central government have any provision to assist? Similarly what will the centre-local relationship be if there is a funding shortfall if there is no ability to raise revenue locally?

As a subset of this there is also scope to explore what the political ramifications might be. Given that the metropolitan areas are predominately Labour controlled it is not unreasonable to question why a Conservative government might give such a gift to their political rivals. Should devolved cities experience funding challenges over politically sensitive areas such as health will they pay the price for that electorally? Much has been made over the Northern Powerhouse being a political sop to the Northern cities in the aftermath of the Referendum on Scottish Independence that has seen Scotland promised even greater powers, but might this be part of an ulterior motive further seeking to distance poorer socio-economic performance from Whitehall responsibility?

1. *How is the Northern Powerhouse drawing down international lessons?*

Although it can be argued that the Northern Powerhouse represents a dramatic shift in how the English cities are governed, the idea of cities enjoying independence from their central government is now a new idea elsewhere. In Europe especially, many cities enjoy a significant degree of autonomy, often at a greater scale than that currently on offer in England. Therefore it is of continued relevance as to what lessons can be drawn from those European examples such as Hamburg or Barcelona, and the extent to which those lessons are being drawn. How does European best practice compare to that on offer to the Northern English cities? What are the pitfalls for when such powers have been given to cities, particularly over policing and health, and how might they be avoided? Conversely, are there areas where the Northern Powerhouse exceeds current international best practice?

Importantly, and given the argument that the Northern Powerhouse is centrally informed by the continuing debate over Scottish Independence (Shaw et al., 2014), this debate must continue to maintain a watching brief on events in Scotland. In particular, it is vital to understand the successes and failures of further Scottish devolution, and how those lessons can be transplanted into an English context. For instance is a greater control over tax revenues a useful tool? What are the shortcomings of such proposals?

**Conclusions**

The Government’s vision for the Northern Powerhouse – premised upon significant spending on transport infrastructure, alongside strengthening the existing city-region focused Combined Authorities (CA) through an increase in the ability to control health budgets, retain some tax revenue, and the election of ‘metro-mayors’ to replace existing committees of authority leaders - can be viewed as perhaps the biggest fundamental shift in how our cities are governed for decades. Consequently, as the agenda develops it is accompanied by a raft of research questions which will seek to explore how the Northern Powerhouse will work, how it will succeed, the ramifications for failure, and above all how it will foster this (in practical policy terms) comparatively new policy construct of the North.

In large part, the success of the Northern Powerhouse will be heavily premised on the extent to which cities are able to abandon the zero-sum game of winners and losers in which they have long been engaged (Peck and Tickell, 1994). If they are not able to move beyond the view that their neighbours are fierce economic competitors who, in urban entrepreneurial terms, remain in a continuous battle for footloose economic capital (Jessop, 1997, 1998) then what we will see is a piecemeal development that broadly reflects a city’s political coherence. There remains a significant danger that this might become a reality if the Government’s caveat of installing DEEMs as part of the plans remains in place. Given the rejection of elected mayors in previous referenda (Shaw and Robinson, 2007), as well as the inability of some city regions to agree on a programme that will see them meet the Government’s criteria (Nurse, 2015), it is a real risk that metropolitan governance in England will become a two-speed affair. At the level of the individual city region this political coherence and the capacity to self-manage will also likely be a key indicator of success. The ability to marshal resources effectively and to balance the various facts of service provision, particularly against a backdrop of profound deprivation (Nurse and Pemberton, 2010) will avoid placing the new DEEMs in a position where they must either return to Whitehall for extra funds, or face their electorate with a failing system. It remains unclear as to the extent to which DEEMs will be left to carry the weight of failure/shortfall, particularly given the fact that no ability to generate tax revenue locally appears forthcoming.

So, while every city wants to be held up as a success it is not unrealistic to expect that, unless DEEMs can be convinced to abandon the entrepreneurial thesis that has long informed the development of their city, development here will be similarly piecemeal and sporadic. How this new North will emerge from these plans remains ill-defined, not least in terms of what the Northern Powerhouse means for the urban hinterlands, or rural communities who will remain at the fringes of these proposals. Therefore question at the heart of this agenda for those places is – will the rising tide of the Northern Powerhouse lift all boats, if it is a rising tide at all?

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1. # Northern Powerhouse science plans set out by Chancellor

   <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northern-powerhouse-science-plans-set-out-by-chancellor> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-on-building-a-northern-powerhouse> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)