

Delivering the Government's Devolution Revolution

In December 2024, the UK Government unveiled its plans to decentralise power, publishing the English Devolution White Paper, to support select areas in accelerating their move towards devolution. The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) has produced this policy briefing, offering fresh insights into public attitudes towards devolution.





Executive Summary

Sussex has been called a ‘devolution desert’.¹ While parts of England, like Manchester and the West Midlands, have in recent years reached agreements with central Government to take on new powers – bringing multiple local authorities together under larger ‘combined’ authorities – other areas still lack devolved institutions.² In Sussex, for example, there are thirteen district and borough councils, grouped into three local authorities, but no overarching body that can speak and work for the people of Sussex as a whole. The power of these smaller authorities over transport, housing, employment support, and other important areas, is limited. They have minimal capacity to distribute spending or coordinate decision making across the whole of Sussex. By contrast, in Manchester, Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, took local buses into public control to fix what he felt was a fragmented, inefficient and expensive service.

The Government has plans to change this. The English Devolution

White Paper, published in December 2024, sets out a goal for all of England to be covered by combined county-level ‘Strategic Authorities’, with elected Mayors, like in Manchester and the West Midlands.³ These authorities will receive consolidated budgets and

Government wants to shift power closer to local communities

expanded powers across eight areas.⁴ The stated aims of the White Paper are both political – decisions should be “made with communities, not done to them” – and economic – devolution is seen as a core part of the growth agenda.⁵

But there is a challenge at the heart of the push for devolution. While Government wants to shift power closer to local communities, there has been relatively little consultation with communities on how this shift should occur, where

those powers should be used, and who will hold these new authorities to account. There is more than one way of doing devolution and local support should not be taken for granted. In 2012 the public rejected the introduction of Mayors in nine cities, and Cornwall rejected a devolution deal more recently in 2023.⁶

At NatCen, we believe the best way to engage the public on complex topics like devolution is through deliberation. By providing people with time and relevant information, and by allowing them to engage carefully with their peers and experts, the public can arrive at considered viewpoints.

As part of NatCen’s Society Watch series, our Centre for Deliberation convened a workshop with 31 Sussex residents to explore how they wanted their new combined authority to function, and to test a model for how further devolution deliberations could be carried out.⁷ Residents deliberated on the White Paper and its implications for local authority powers and accountability.

1 Completing the map: How the government can extend devolution to the whole of England, Institute for Government (2024)

2 Ibid. P.46.

3 English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK

4 Specifically: transport and local infrastructure, skills and employment support, housing and strategic planning, economic development and regeneration, environment and climate change, health, wellbeing, and public service reform, and public safety.

5 English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK

6 Putting people at the heart of English devolution, Involve (2024)

7 NatCen would like to thank Ross Mudie from the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods and Matthew Fright and Rebecca McKee from the Institute for Government, for early conversations that helped refine the focus of this research.

Key findings

Given time, information, and the opportunity to interact with experts and people with different perspectives, residents were able to articulate how they wanted their new combined authority to function, providing a model for how devolution deliberations could be carried out in the future.

- Residents supported devolution but were concerned a future Mayor would put personal and political ambitions ahead of local needs.
- Residents wanted the public to play a role in holding the combined authority to account. Beyond local elections, they said this could be achieved through mechanisms such as citizen engagement workshops or regular public surveys. Public engagement should be fostered by the availability of accessible information explaining the combined authority's decision making.
- Residents felt that the combined authority's ability to plan and coordinate local services was its most consequential power, offering a route to better service delivery. Participants wanted the authority to focus its powers on: addressing water pollution (essential to public health and tourism); ensuring housing investment is accompanied by improved public transport links (also important on environmental grounds); and ensuring health and care services are better integrated across the county.

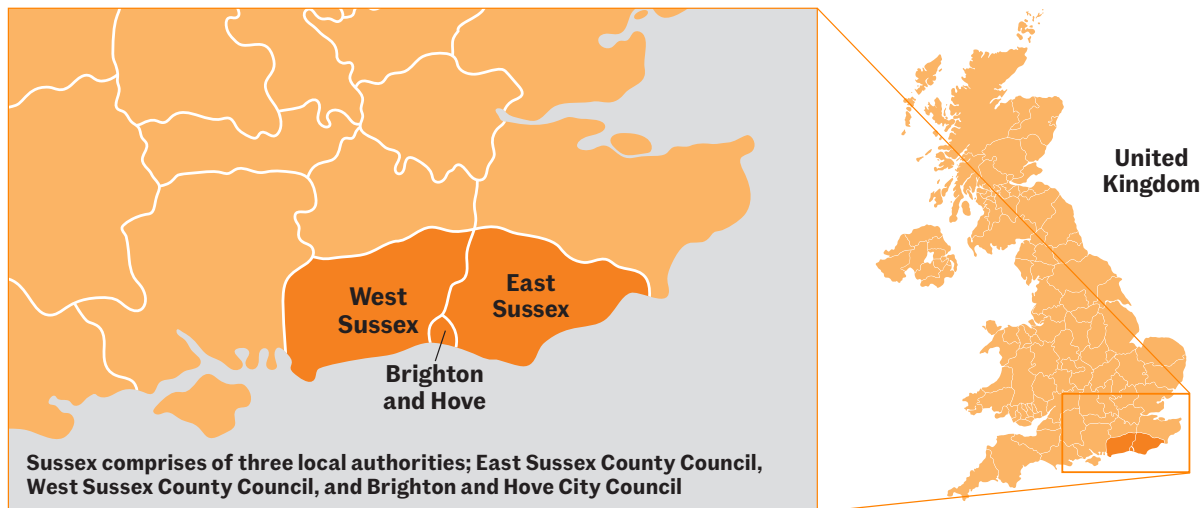
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- Residents supported the Government's mandate to generate economic growth through devolution. They identified the same policy areas – the environment, housing, transport, and health and care services – as central to the growth agenda.
- Participants agreed that upskilling and attracting investment are key factors in the drive for local growth. On upskilling, they said the emphasis should be on local, not national industries, and focus on poorer coastal areas. On business investment, participants said the priority should be small local areas, rather than established business hubs, like Gatwick. In doing so, it was hoped that inequalities within the county – regarding access to work and services – could be minimised.

Recommendations

- Residents called for more coordinated policy on the areas mentioned, as well as homelessness.
- Participants want public policy that is responsive to specific local needs, not dictated by pre-set assumptions about particular areas or nationwide requirements or interests.
- As a guiding policy principle, participants supported the reduction of inequality across the county.
- To compare our workshop findings with the views of the wider Sussex public, further small workshops and/or large population surveys could be used. Residents also recommended further public engagement as a means of holding combined authorities to account.



Introduction

Following the publication of its White Paper, the Government set up a Priority Programme to support selected areas ‘to move towards devolution at pace’.⁸ However, for many people living in these areas, the Government’s proposed changes to local government are likely to feel unfamiliar, complex, and potentially contentious.

NatCen’s 2024 edition of its British Social Attitudes survey found that ‘people’s trust and confidence in how they are governed is as low now as it has ever been throughout the survey’s [forty-one year]

...insights reveal a public that is eager to be heard, but reluctant to participate if engagement feels shallow

history.⁹ However, as a survey by Demos in the same year found, the British public still want to be involved in decision-making and 63% stated they would ‘be likely to accept an invitation to take part in a public participation exercise by the government.’¹⁰ Despite this, the

biggest obstacle to participating is the belief that government will not listen to their perspectives.¹¹ Together, these insights reveal a public that is eager to be heard, but reluctant to participate if engagement feels shallow.

From February to April 2025, the Government hosted online surveys for each of the six devolution priority regions, open to the general public.¹² This form of consultation is necessary, but it also has limitations. Namely, consultations do not give people the opportunity to explore or refine their perspectives or engage with the views of others. It is also hard to know if the responders were representative of the relevant areas.

At NatCen, we think deliberation is a suitable method to deepen our understanding of public attitudes to English devolution. Deliberative inquiry gives people the time, information, and conditions required to fully engage with complex policy areas, like devolution, and come to a considered view. The public are experts in their own lives, and their insights can usefully be brought to bear on policy areas that affect the places they live. Policymakers will need these insights if they are to

devolve power in a way that taps into local needs, while being attentive to public priorities on key policy trade-offs.

Our research focuses on Sussex because, as well as being one of the areas chosen for the Government’s priority programme,

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its devolutionary settlement is due to be delivered with limited input from, or understanding of, the views and preferences of local people.¹³ Similar circumstances obtain in Cumbria and Essex (and the Institute for Government estimate that almost 30 million people live in places with no devolved settlement).¹⁴ As such, our Sussex research acts as a case study for the value of conducting devolution deliberations in other areas of the country.

8 Devolution revolution: six areas to elect Mayors for first time - GOV.UK

9 British Social Attitudes 41: Five years of unprecedented challenges, National Centre for Social Research (2024)

10 Citizens White Paper, Demos (2024)

11 Ibid.

12 See, for example: Sussex and Brighton devolution consultation - GOV.UK

13 As the Institute for Government noted in 2024, there has been ‘limited public discussion of a Sussex-wide devolution settlement in recent years’. See: Completing the map: How the government can extend devolution to the whole of England

14 Ibid. P.4.

NatCen carried out a 6-hour online deliberative workshop with 31 Sussex residents, reflective of the county's population in terms gender, age, ethnicity, disability, education, social grades, geography, and political party support, as well as existing levels of support for devolution.¹⁵ Presentations from NatCen and two subject specialists supported participants to learn about the Government's policy agenda as set out in the White Paper, and its implications for local authority powers and accountability.¹⁶ Participants had opportunities to ask questions of the subject experts, and engaged in extended, facilitated small-group discussions to reflect on what they heard. This report is based on an analysis of those discussions and our observations of the workshops.

Our work with residents in Sussex shows how combined authorities that engage the public on how devolved institutions should function, and what they should prioritise, could have greater legitimacy – establishing relationships of trust and equality with local people.

Findings

Structure and Purpose of Devolution

In the first half of the workshop, participants reflected on the structure and purpose of devolution in Sussex. The combined authority will receive a range of new powers including: spending, long-term planning, and coordination (between areas and services). Participants discussed which policy areas should be prioritised when using these powers, as well as the form the powers should take. Participants also discussed how the new authority should be held to account by local citizens.

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Support for devolution hinged on effective local governance

Participants were generally supportive of devolving greater powers to local areas, as local authorities are closer to their citizens and have useful on-the-ground knowledge. However, there were concerns that elected Mayors of newly combined authorities would pursue their own political and ideological agendas and fail to address local needs. This distrust of government at local levels was prevalent – with participants referencing the recent spate of local authorities going bankrupt in England. For some participants, this distrust was seated in a perceived lack of governance expertise – for example, in managing the local economy. As such, participants' support for devolution was conditional on the elected mayor serving the area effectively, remaining attentive and responsive to local needs throughout their tenure. They expected these functions to be executed with competence and guaranteed by accountability mechanisms.

Sussex's combined authority should be held accountable by the public

Participants wanted to increase the ways the public could hold local representatives to account – beyond existing processes, like local elections. Discussions focused on methods for ensuring local needs and sentiments were effectively relayed to policymakers. Participants endorsed the use of citizen engagement workshops to give citizens an opportunity to discuss important policy questions and better understand the policymaking process. Some people raised concerns about



¹⁵ Large deliberative processes usually aim to bring together a 'mini-public' through a stratified random sample of a broader population. This is because, in addition to information shared by specialists, it is through exposure to different views and experiences of other discussants that participants develop their views. Due to sample size, it is not statistically representative of the Sussex population, which means we do not draw broader conclusions about the views of particular populations here. However, our qualitative findings provide a basis for further research into public preferences on the future of devolution in Sussex and illustrate the case for wider engagement.

¹⁶ NatCen would like to thank our speakers: Professor Jonathan Davies, Professor of Critical Policy Studies at De Montfort University in Leicester, and Shona Duncan.

the representativeness of such exercises. Others responded by proposing alternative forms of engagement, such as regular and representative surveys.

At the same time, participants stressed that policy decisions and their rationales must be made clear to the public. An informed public was viewed as a prerequisite for effective scrutiny. One way to inform citizens would be to provide simple, jargon-free information materials detailing what local government is doing and why. Participants wanted these materials to be widely accessible, including for disabled people who may have cognitive or visual impairments, and provided in both physical and digital formats.

Broad powers over planning and coordinating services and infrastructure was seen as the combined authority's key advantage

During the workshop, subject specialists explained to participants which policy areas the new authority would have power over. They also explained the *forms* of power the authority would have: decision-making power (such as deciding to build houses rather than invest in road maintenance); control over spending (such as allocating money to spend on bus services); and control over planning and coordination (such as planning how Sussex will support local business or provide an effective and efficient health service). Participants discussed how they wanted these different forms of power to be used across each of the policy areas.

Participants felt that the main upshot of the new combined authority was its capacity to bring *better planning and coordination* to policymaking in Sussex. By having control over a larger area, participants hoped the authority would create more joined up services and make better use of capacity across the county. Nevertheless, the authority's



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other powers – to take decisions and control spending – were also understood as integral to local government's ability to plan and coordinate successfully. For example, the authority might *decide* to invest in the county's health services rather than road maintenance, exercise *control over the eventual health budget*, and then plan the *period of investment* such that it best meets objectives.

In this section, we provide a series of examples to illustrate how residents wanted these new powers to be used.



Housing: Existing housing planning and delivery was viewed as disjointed, and the cause of avoidable

knock-on problems in the area. For example, participants felt new housing was being developed without consideration of wider local infrastructure. Participants were particularly concerned about the need for increased public transport, or, in some

cases, policing, in the newly developed area. The combined authority, with its broad jurisdiction – over geography and various infrastructure – was viewed as better placed to identify and respond to these issues, relative to local authorities or national government.

Similarly, participants saw potential for a more joined-up strategy to tackle homelessness in the county. On the one hand, local authorities' current efforts to support homeless people were viewed as siloed, failing to take advantage of region-wide capacity. On the other, participants did not feel the national Government sufficiently understood local circumstances to combat homelessness in Sussex. The combined authority was viewed as better placed than both to manage the region's response.



Health and social care: By being closer to citizens, participants felt the new authority

would be better than central government at identifying and addressing local health and social care needs. At the same time, owing to its large geographical jurisdiction, the combined authority would be better than existing local institutions at ensuring that services – from GP surgeries to specialist referral units – were strategically located

and coordinated to meet demand. When discussing their hopes for improvements under the new devolutionary arrangements, one participant described needing to travel for two hours from their home to access a health service under current provisions.



Environment:

Participants felt that the newly formed combined authority would

be more alert to local concerns about the county's natural environment – in particular, the level of pollution entering the waterways and the sea on Sussex's coast. Participants said pollution poses health risks for people who swim in the rivers and the sea, putting unnecessary pressure on the health system. Pollution was seen as detrimental to the (often highly seasonal) economy of seaside areas. It was hoped that the combined authority, with its greater economic and policymaking powers, could develop stronger working relationships with regulators like Ofwat to mitigate the polluting behaviours of the region's water provider.



Transport: Similarly, participants were hopeful that the combined authority could provide

more joined up public transport services. Participants discussed the difficulty of travelling through areas of the county which are not serviced by the Brighton Mainline or the East and West Coastway lines. Improving public transport in isolated areas was not only seen as encouraging economic growth, but also important for improving the county's air quality (through minimising the need for cars) and the accessibility of services for residents. County-wide oversight of the transport network was viewed as a good way to identify and resolve gaps in the existing transport network across Sussex.



The Economic Mandate

In the second half of the workshop, participants reflected on the economic mandate of Sussex's new devolved institutions. They discussed whether it was sensible or necessary for a local authority to have such a mandate, and then, more specifically, how Sussex's economic mandate might be implemented through regional upskilling and business investment.

...reducing water pollution would maintain the coast's tourist appeal, protecting seasonal economies

Sussex residents support the drive for economic growth through devolution, but also see this as an opportunity to address other priorities in the region

Participants supported the national Government's overarching objective of stimulating economic growth through devolving powers to local areas. They identified three policy areas as central

to that economic mandate: the pollution of Sussex's rivers and sea, the availability of health and care services, and housing affordability. Participants argued that reducing water pollution would maintain the coast's tourist appeal, protecting seasonal economies; improving public health would ensure the availability of a productive workforce; and affordable housing was viewed as foundational for good public health and employment.

Initiatives for economic growth should work to minimise inequalities within the county

During the workshop, participants discussed two approaches for how the new combined authority could stimulate economic growth: upskilling Sussex's population and attracting investment to the county. They discussed each approach separately and considered different policy options within each.

...improving public health would ensure the availability of a productive workforce



businesses to areas *outside* of the Gatwick Diamond. These areas were regarded as being in greater need of employment opportunities and services. And it was hoped that investment would encourage the creation of small, local businesses which preserve the identity of the area. Finally, participants expected investment in these areas to have a multiplier effect, attracting additional businesses to service the other recent arrivals.

Participants supported prioritising areas with higher levels of deprivation, but not to the extent that services are completely withdrawn from other areas.

By contrast, the Gatwick Diamond was thought to have existing and well-established appeal to businesses and investors. As such, it already offered the sort of employment opportunities and services that other less developed areas lacked. Participants further argued that, despite its advantageous transport links to London and the coast, the Gatwick Diamond was hard to access for much of the rest of the county. Further development would therefore do little to increase employment opportunities and services for residents who live in areas with the greatest need.



Across both approaches – upskilling and business investment – participants generally wanted to focus resources on wherever, or whomever, had the greatest need. They wanted the combined authority to promote greater equality between places and people. However, views on this were nuanced. Participants cautioned against painting areas or groups with a broad brush (assuming all young people need upskilling, for example). They also worried that solely focusing on one area or group might mean overlooking others. If resource allocation is too crude, some people in need of upskilling support (to gain employment), or areas in need of greater business activity (to provide local services and employment), might get lost.

Skills

While participants recognised the benefits of upskilling initiatives that focused on broader skills (for which there is national demand), they generally favoured a more focused agenda – catering to industry demand in Sussex – which they felt would improve the employability and life chances of the county’s population while increasing the potential labour force for local industry.

Participants were asked whether upskilling initiatives should focus on Sussex’s young people or be more widely available. While the

unique needs of young people were recognised, focusing squarely on one age group was seen as a risk, causing other groups – particularly older residents in need of employment – to be overlooked.

Similarly, participants felt that small coastal towns faced higher levels of deprivation than, for example, Brighton and Hove and wealthier inland areas. As such, they said upskilling initiatives should be focused on poorer coastal regions, thus improving equality of opportunity across the region. However, they also noted that specific areas of Brighton and Hove, as well as certain inland areas, had similar needs despite being generally wealthier. Consequently, *solely* focusing on small coastal towns was seen to be too narrow. Participants supported prioritising areas with higher levels of deprivation, but not to the extent that services are completely withdrawn from other areas.

Business

When talking about business investment, participants considered whether the combined authority should prioritise attracting businesses to the ‘Gatwick Diamond’ – a large area that includes wide range of industries, including aviation, advanced manufacturing and financial services – or to areas of the county with fewer businesses. Participants favoured the latter – attracting



The value of deliberation to devolution

Our deliberative exercise sought to complement and enhance the Government's current approach to understanding what the public thinks about its proposed devolution plans. We recruited a diverse group of people, broadly reflective of Sussex's demographic and attitudinal diversity.

Our deliberations revealed the trade-offs acceptable to the public, but also how best to resolve disagreements

And we designed the workshop so that participants heard from subject experts, as well as one another, and supported them to develop their understanding of devolution, and engage in productive discussions. Our deliberations revealed the trade-offs acceptable to the public, but also how best to resolve disagreements.

For example, when it came to upskilling, participants suggested that, where possible, support should be directed at specific populations, and not simply or exclusively allocated on the basis of geography (which might lead to coastal areas taking all the attention from inland areas). While we did not try to engineer consensus, our deliberations remained

alert to what people understood by the public interest. This contrasts with other forms of research that focus on understanding and aggregating people's personal preferences, leaving policymakers with the task of piecing these together.

Policy debates on subjects like devolution take time. While this means deliberation requires a greater upfront investment, the payoff is deeper insight into people's considered views on a challenging topic, rather than the more changeable, 'top of mind' opinions that less time-intensive research methods provide. Time was relatively short for this deliberation – just a single day-long workshop. Thus, additional deliberative exercises could usefully be run to confirm and deepen the findings outlined in this report. Other areas of England thinking about pursuing similar forms of engagement might consider larger deliberations (more people, convened over longer periods), increasing the breadth and depth of available insights. Whatever the approach, combining existing methods of public engagement with deliberative inquiry is liable to generate greater public buy-in for future devolutionary settlements.

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