

Greening devolution

How the devolution of power to local areas can enable
low carbon and environmental progress

Based on workshops held in Cornwall and Manchester with Sarah Newton MP and Ivan
Lewis MP

Introduction

What might devolution mean for the environment and low carbon progress? As the government presses ahead with plans to devolve power to local areas, there will be new opportunities for energy, transport and the environment to be managed at local and regional levels. Green Alliance is working with local MPs and stakeholders, from business, academia, civil society and local government, to explore how devolution can empower and enable low carbon progress, environmental growth and protection.

We selected two contrasting local areas for workshops to explore the issues: Cornwall, the first county to sign a devolution deal, where our workshop was hosted by Sarah Newton, Conservative MP for Truro and Falmouth; and the more urban Greater Manchester, where our workshop was hosted by Ivan Lewis, Labour MP for Bury South.

Workshops and findings

At each workshop, participants discussed what progress had already been made in developing a local low carbon economy, and how new powers might help to increase ambition. The workshop in Cornwall focused on local solutions, creating participation and ownership of the issues across Cornish communities, and linking clean energy, transport and the protection of natural capital.

In Manchester, the devolution agenda has been tied to the Northern Powerhouse narrative, placing opportunities for economic growth and regeneration at the centre. However, sustainability and green growth have yet to feature as prominently as economic prosperity, education or health and social care.

Despite significant differences between the two constituencies, three common themes with wider relevance to other areas emerged:

1. Better co-ordination and strategic planning is possible at local level

Throughout the discussions the lack of a comprehensive strategic vision throughout the devolutionary process was evident. Policy areas such land use, transport, energy, health and environment are often addressed through separate strategies.

Whilst it can be difficult to co-ordinate strategies at a national level, at the local level the links can be made much more easily. For example, city and local level devolution can create better co-ordinated approaches to planning and infrastructure, to enhance and protect waterways, green spaces and air quality alongside city development, with benefits to health as well.

Such a vision can support strategic planning to build resilience, for instance against extreme weather events and flooding, and enable the incorporation of natural capital thinking in planning strategies. Examples of such thinking are co-operation between the Canal and River Trust with Transport for Greater Manchester to introduce sustainable cycle routes along towpaths and Exeter University's mapping of natural capital in the south west.

Growth is a driving concept behind devolution, and is a simple strong and appealing message. But there is no reason why this message should not incorporate 'green growth', offering opportunities to link the devolution, growth and environmental agendas and focus on making better use of urban and rural spaces. Strategic planning at the city and county level can help develop urban spaces with citizens' needs in mind and enhance a sense of ownership and belonging.

2. The local benefits of a low carbon vision

Devolution offers significant opportunities for the development of low carbon energy and the transition to a more decentralised energy system; however, greater flexibility from national frameworks is required.

Whilst Cornwall has a vast renewable energy potential, there are limits to how much the area can benefit from it, due to the constraints of the national electricity grid and a lack of mechanisms allowing local control over how energy is produced and distributed. Though devolution has sparked interest and efforts to invest in and support opportunities for low carbon businesses and social enterprises in the area, it still is not clear how much Cornwall itself might benefit and be able to make itself less susceptible to national policy risks.

Another area in which devolved powers could provide significant benefit to local areas is energy efficiency. Devolving regulatory powers to set ambitious energy efficiency standards locally could improve existing housing stocks, reduce fuel poverty and cut emissions from buildings, particularly in rapidly growing cities like Manchester.

City regions are also thinking about how to enable local people to develop the skills needed to take advantage of employment opportunities arising from the growing low carbon goods and services sector.

3. Engaging communities

So far, the devolution agenda has been promising on paper, but has lacked the support of communities and civil society, largely due to a lack of transparency around the deals that have been made. If devolution is to be meaningful, the way powers are used and increasingly stretched public funds are spent needs to take into consideration the needs and views of local citizens.

This is particularly so in the case of infrastructure, which is more often than not felt as something that is done to people rather than for them. Personal engagement and involvement can increase a sense of participation for people and, crucially, a sense of responsibility over their cities and natural landscapes, that can foster support for the changes needed to transition to greener local economies.

Conclusions:

What could be done to achieve more?

- Foster collaboration between city regions and London to challenge the Treasury on funding.
- Establish a strong, coherent environmental and low carbon narrative to link policy areas such as health, transport, energy and infrastructure.
- Develop an evidence base to determine what places like Manchester and Cornwall need in terms of resource and regulatory powers from the centre.
- Encourage more openness in discussions around devolution to take account of the views of stakeholders and enhance their sense of ownership and participation in local issues.
- See devolution as a process rather than a single event, and learn from ongoing experience to inform future decisions.

Thanks to the workshop participants

Truro: Alastair Mumford, Regen SW; Alex Huke, University of Exeter; Cllr Bert Biscoe, Cornwall Council; Cheryl Marrriott, Cornwall Wildlife Trust; Claire Gibson, Wave Hub Cornwall AONB Colette Beckham, Partnership; David Cox, Good Energy; Joanie Willet, University of Exeter; Gage Williams, Spinetic Energy Ltd, Graeme Buck, Natural Generation; Ian Jones, Volunteer Cornwall; James Standley, The Kensa Group; Johnny Gowdy, RegenSW; Liam Dennis, Community Power Cornwall; Mark Holmes, Energy Share; Peter Child, Waves 4 Power; Rachael Bice, Cornwall Local Nature Partnership; Rob Andrew, Cornwall Council; Ruth Smith, Wattstor; Sarah Newton, MP for Truro and Falmouth; Simon Murray, Sustrans; Stephen Warman, Eupraxis; Tony Bennet, EGS energy.

Manchester: Ali Abbas, Friends of the Earth; Mark Atherton, Greater Manchester Low Carbon Hub; Michael Bakewell, 350 Investment Partners LLP; Polly Billington, Here Now; Cllr Kate Chappell, Manchester City Council; Steve Connor, Creative Concern; Jackie Copley, Lancashire CPRE; Dom Goggins, British Cycling; Todd Holden, Greater Manchester Low Carbon Hub; Richard Jenkins, Viridor; Ivan Lewis, MP for Bury South; Jon Lovell, Hillbreak; Walter Menzies, Canal and River Trust; Neil McInroy, Centre for Local Economic Strategies; Nick Sandford, Woodland Trust ; Anne Selby, Lancashire Wildlife Trust; Cllr Neil Swannick, Manchester City Council.

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