HOUSE OF COMMONS

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Progress on devolution in England, HC 174

Monday 16 March 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 16 March 2020.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Ian Byrne; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Ben Everitt; Paul Holmes; Rachel Hopkins; Daniel Kawczynski; Abena Oppong-Asare; Mary Robinson.

Questions 1 - 51

Witnesses

I: Dr John Stanton, Senior Lecturer in Law, University of London; Professor Francesca Gains, Professor of Public Policy, University of Manchester; Professor Colin Copus, Emeritus Professor in Local Politics, De Montfort University.

Examination of witnesses

Dr John Stanton, Professor Francesca Gains and Professor Colin Copus.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to our witnesses and this inquiry into progress on devolution in England. Thank you very much. You are all very welcome this afternoon. Before I come over to you, I ask members of the Committee to put on record any interests they have that may be particularly relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Ian Byrne: I am a still local city councillor in Liverpool.

Rachel Hopkins: I am still a councillor in Luton.

Abena Oppong-Asare: I am the MP for Erith and Thamesmead.

Bob Blackman: I am a vice-president of the LGA and I employ a councillor in my office.

Brendan Clarke-Smith: I am the MP for Bassetlaw, and I am a Newark and Sherwood district councillor.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am MP for Shrewsbury.

Ben Everitt: I am currently an Aylesbury Vale district councillor but, on April Fools' Day this year, I will become a Buckinghamshire unitary councillor.

Chair: Could you say who you are and the organisation, if any, you are representing today?

Professor Copus: My name is Colin Copus. I am an emeritus professor of local politics at De Montfort University and a visiting professor at Ghent University, although I am not visiting there much at the moment, as you might imagine.

Dr Stanton: I am John Stanton, a senior lecturer specialising in constitutional law at City, University of London.

Professor Gains: I am Francesca Gains. I am a professor of public policy at the University of Manchester and co-director of Policy@Manchester, our policy engagement institute.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you for coming. If you find that you agree with a colleague on a particular subject, you can just say, "I agree with what has been said" rather than repeating it. That is helpful to the Committee.

Are the objectives of the devolution deals that have been done so far clear to the Government and everyone else?

Professor Copus: The objectives, as you would expect, vary across the country. When you look at devolution deals, you can see that there are various priorities in play. From the centre, the objectives seem to be based on an economic imperative. You would understand that, with the importance of economic development and growth, but it means the direction of travel on devolution, and devolution deals in particular, seems to be about economic issues that could exclude other issues. I do not think that the centre has had an overnight conversion to the principles of devolution and localism. There is an economic reason driving a lot of what we are seeing and, therefore, we are seeing combined authorities shaped in the way they are shaped and taking on the responsibilities they take on.

Dr Stanton: I agree with that. One of the key objectives of the devolution deal policy was this idea of bespoke deals. That has always been fairly clear and it should be protected in any further alterations or broadening of the policy.

Professor Gains: There is a narrow concept of the benefit of devolution that is about economic goals, but there is a broader conception that we see illustrated in Greater Manchester. The folding-in of fire, policing and crime, and health and social care integration, brings into play something broader about the social goal of tackling public health and integrating health and social care. If you have better transport systems, you are also contributing towards environmental goals and the carbon-neutral challenge. At its most expansive, the proponents of devolution in Greater

Manchester might see some democratic gains and some goals around a different way of doing politics.

Q3 **Chair:** Has it changed over time? At the beginning, it seemed to be very economically focused. City regions and drawing maps around the economic hinterland of cities seemed to be where it was at, and it seems to have moved on a bit. I have a parochial interest here in looking at the Sheffield City Region, which started off with not just the old, historic South Yorkshire authority but moved out into north Nottinghamshire and north Derbyshire, because that was the economic geography of the area. Then that seems to have rowed back and gone back to the historical local government administrative areas. Is that generally happening? Has that been a shift of approach by Government?

Professor Copus: It is not a general process, but it is a healthy one. We recognise that there are multiple levels and multiple ways in which we can achieve the same thing. If you have a combined authority that, by its very nature, is not going to have any community focus and is not an entity that local people recognise or have any affinity with, that places an emphasis on local government to start reconnecting to the communities within combined authorities. Over time, we are likely to see a rediscovering of the "local" in local government.

Q4 **Chair:** To what extent are the objectives or drivers of devolution determined by the attitude of Government Departments? HCLG has always been reasonably enthusiastic, for pretty obvious reasons. The Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions have not always been as happy to be involved and to see powers go down to the local level.

Dr Stanton: It depends on the policy area. The financial aspect of the deals is still at the core of what goes on. In terms of different policy areas, it depends not just on the Department but on the policy and the specific aspects as they pertain to localities. With education, there are academies on one side and schools on the other. Maintaining and addressing that relationship is quite key but also quite challenging.

Q5 **Bob Blackman:** As you have said in your initial answers, devolution has tended to be packaged around the bids and agreements that have been made. On the whole, has devolution been a success?

Professor Gains: I am more aware of what has happened in Greater Manchester, which is the oldest deal. It comes on the back of a set of circumstances that facilitated—

Q6 **Bob Blackman:** With respect, some people would say that London was the oldest deal. London is saying, "Hang on. Why has Manchester got this bit when London has not?"

Professor Gains: Yes, I am aware of the competitive nature of those deals. In talking about Greater Manchester, I am not trying to hog the conversation, but there has been the longest time and there are a broad

number of areas that point to some degree of success. I am sure that my colleagues will point out that we cannot look at outcomes yet because that process will take time, but there are indicators of success in the way funding is being directed specifically to investment in skills and transport infrastructure, with spurs to the airport and the Trafford Centre completed ahead of time. A local industrial strategy has been agreed with Government. There are the beginnings of some sense that bringing together health and social care may impact how integrated care is delivered. Greater Manchester has provided evidence for the Committee, so I am not going to try to list everything.

Q7 **Bob Blackman:** If I can press you further, if Manchester is so good, why has it not been replicated elsewhere in the country?

Professor Gains: The advantage that Greater Manchester had, which it is aware of, is a long history of the business community, politicians and the not-for-profit sector working together. It had the advantage of coterminous boundaries. It has a relative advantage to other areas and, in some ways, could provide an exemplar for possibilities of devolution.

Dr Stanton: Picking up on the point you raised of London being the first one, if London is the model, that has been a success. Looking more broadly elsewhere, Professor Gains is correct that there is plenty of indication of success stories so far, in terms of investments achieved and channelling money to certain areas of the combined authority strategies. It is too soon to say, in any grand sense, whether it is working but, in a recent publication, I talked about the distinction between procedural localism and substantive localism. Historically, Governments have been okay at passing the right powers, and empowering councils and what have you with, ostensibly, the appropriate powers and responsibilities. It is about providing the procedural framework in which that can take place. That is typically where Governments have struggled. With the combined authority model and the mayors, they are slowly putting in place the procedural framework for it to perhaps take place more effectively.

Q8 **Bob Blackman:** What about the effect on the areas immediately outside the area that has been devolved? Has that been seen as successful? There are mixed views, are there not?

Dr Stanton: There are mixed views. From day one, I was always quite sceptical about the gaps between the areas, as it were. I know that the inquiry is interested in non-metropolitan areas, and there is a risk that they will get left behind. A model relevant to non-metropolitan areas also needs to be established and found. Perhaps we will come to it, but it is distinct from urban areas and from the city regions. The areas outside of the current deal certainly run the risk of being left behind. If it is too early to comment on the success of devolution, it is perhaps too early to say how far behind the non-metropolitan areas would get.

Q9 **Bob Blackman:** Should other areas be allowed to join those areas of devolution?

Dr Stanton: Yes. It should not necessarily be just about existing areas around the fringes joining the nearby city region; it should also be a case of establishing a different form of deal for non-metropolitan areas.

Professor Gains: The non-metropolitan areas probably had the same concerns and issues about boosting growth, integrated transport and joining up health and social care. They probably have the same issues across those areas. As my colleague says, it is necessary to have a framework for what is on offer and what is required.

Professor Copus: The areas outside are not necessarily completely isolated. There is always going to be a spill-over effect, in terms of the economy and local economies, from the combined authority areas into the areas that are not part of those authorities. In one of its policy statements on devolution, the District Councils' Network has shown that it is also about how those areas outside of the combined authorities work together. They are not precluded from doing that. Working on the functional economic area principle, local authorities—districts in particular—are coming together to make sure they are in a position to garner the benefits that spill over from combined authorities and to benefit without a combined authority.

Q10 **Bob Blackman:** One area we have received a lot of evidence on is that, because of the way these deals are put together, they make the bidding process for extra funds and, therefore, extra capability rather complicated. Is that a risk in this form of devolution that has been adopted?

Professor Gains: I pick up a sense that there has been bidding fatigue, in a way, and that certainly the existing combined authorities would rather have a pot of money to make decisions about without—

Q11 **Bob Blackman:** Sorry, to clarify, are you saying that there is too much bidding to the centre and a top-down approach to the way money is given, with too many strings attached?

Professor Gains: Yes.

Q12 **Ben Everitt:** I was really interested in what you were saying about mayors. Dr Stanton, you mentioned that, essentially, all the ingredients were in place. We had a mayor and we had the procedural framework for devolution to work. We have spoken about London and Manchester so far. Are directly elected mayors fundamental to making devolution work?

Dr Stanton: I will start by saying that it is not the only model. They are not fundamental to making this model work. It probably is the best model in the sense that the benefits of directly elected mayors are well known. It is a single body of leadership, with accountability and answerability. We are seeing many benefits on the fringes of that. They are figureheads for local areas, which is a strong point. Whether they work in non-metropolitan areas is a different question but, fundamentally, while they are not required, they probably are the best model.

Q13 **Ben Everitt:** To follow up on that, you mentioned in an earlier answer that devolution needs to get a model that is relevant to non-metropolitan areas. In your eyes, could that include a mayor?

Dr Stanton: Yes, it could include mayors. Whether it includes combined authorities as they are currently conceived is a different question. I perhaps tend to favour more of a unitary model structure, but I cannot think of any reason why mayors should not be in charge of such areas.

Q14 **Ben Everitt:** To play devil's advocate, I am thinking of two specific English counties. The first is in the Midlands and has a city in the middle of it that could have explored a combined authority, but did not like the idea of a mayor because of the vast differences between the swathes of countryside around the outside and the large, unique nature of the metropolitan area in the middle. What would the answer be to that?

Dr Stanton: In that sense, I find myself so often drawn between two points. I am a big fan of mayors but we cannot ignore the fact that localities historically have not really liked them. Local people and councils are not massively in favour of them. I am a big fan of the bottom-up idea that localities should be able to choose their arrangements. In that example, hypothetically, a mayor could work. You run the risk in certain areas of the city being one locality, and everywhere not in the city being problematic if not included in the same way.

Q15 **Ben Everitt:** Congratulations, by the way, for not using the words "turkeys" or "Christmas" in that answer. The second English county I am thinking of is long and thin, and reaches from London up towards the Midlands. It is very diverse. It is quite London-ish at one end, quite countryside-ish in the middle, and has a city at the other end. Would the same sort of answer spring to mind? Would you see a unique deal involving some sort of directly elected figurehead but not necessarily around a combined authority?

Dr Stanton: That is a good example. Again, there is no reason necessarily why a mayor would not work there. A key point about a county such as that, with the different challenges and areas, is to have those differences reflected within the membership of a unitary authority or combined authority, and then the mayor is the figurehead for that. If you consider Greater Manchester or London, within a mile you can walk across London and go through such very different and diverse communities, yet there is one mayor for all of them. One leader is perfectly capable of dealing with a very different and diverse area. It is about how those are represented within a broader council.

Q16 **Ben Everitt:** Professor Gains, I was really interested in the benefits that you were elaborating on, certainly in Manchester, from your perspective, in terms of social goals, integration, service improvement, carbon neutrality and wider environmental goals. You mentioned democratic gains as well, which is the angle I would like to explore with you now. If we are looking to have an elected figurehead for areas that are socially,

economically, environmentally and aesthetically diverse, can we really get that democratic gain?

Professor Gains: The fact that mayors are directly elected makes an enormous difference in how they operate and see the world. From my experience, they are interested in every part of their area, because they need votes from every part. The research shows that they do different kinds of engagement. They can make use of social media. The Mayor of Greater Manchester travels around each of the 10 authorities to hold open question times. Meetings are webcast. His appointed champions—cycling tsars and champions of healthy living—are engaged extensively with community organisations. I have been drawn into helping provide the evidence base on equalities, working with a whole set of organisations. There is the possibility of democratic innovation there that mayors are very minded to do.

There also need to be very robust checks and balances, which can be helpful democratically. There are something like 600 local councillors in Greater Manchester. If you could harness their engagement with their own wards and bring that into scrutinising the work of the combined authority, that would be a tremendous way of using that talent and creativity.

Q17 **Ben Everitt:** Finally, Professor Copus, are you in the directly elected mayor fan club as well or do you see any alternative models?

Professor Copus: I am afraid I am, yes. When you think about it, the electorate of Greater Manchester is just under 2 million. What is the alternative to a mayor? If the alternative is 10 council leaders meeting in a room to decide who the leader of a combined authority would be, you can see that how excluding those 2 million voters from that choice leaves a gaping hole in our democratic framework and our fabric.

Somehow, a myth is beginning to develop that I often hear repeated: that mayors do not work in rural areas. They certainly do. If you look at the evidence from across the globe, many of the authorities in which elected mayors sit are far more rural than most of our authorities. Particularly for a large county authority, the same consideration comes into play: who should elect the leadership of that authority—the 90 councillors or all of the electorate?

A lot of local government in England is based on artificial boundaries. We have made-up council names. We have points of the compass in our councils. Somebody has to personify that and you get that personification through the office of a mayor far more effectively than you can through the office of a council leader. That is not to say that people like Richard Leese and other council leaders are not doing a fine job, because they certainly are.

Q18 **Ben Everitt:** Forgive me for giving you a rural response but, if I am leaning on the gate and you ask me directions, I would say that I would

not start from here. We have to convince, as you put it, districts that have just started working together that their best route to being democratically accountable is to cede power to somebody they do not know yet. How would we get there?

Professor Copus: If we are talking about that in the context of a devolution deal, for example, it is extremely difficult. Some of these deals have floundered on that fact: "You can have all the things you are asking for, and you have been asking various Governments for these things for 30 years, but you need an elected mayor". "No, thanks, we will not have it then". I do not underestimate the difficulty of overcoming that opposition, but the benefits that could come from the centre if authorities agreed to go down the route of an elected mayor would be far more beneficial than sticking to the model we already have.

Q19 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Should the Government be publishing a framework to aid negotiations? If so, what should it include?

Professor Gains: Yes, it should. It should include a clear statement in presumption of devolution and a recognition of the vitality of local government. It should be clear about what potential there is for devolution and what is required, therefore, in terms of capacity and evidence. It should also include information about roles and responsibilities, and what it can contribute to the deal in terms of supporting through transformation funds and ensuring there is capacity from Whitehall out in the regions.

Dr Stanton: I would agree with absolutely everything Professor Gains has said. I have two problems with the devolution framework. It cannot be too detailed. You need something important that espouses the fundamental founding principles but, at the same time, as we said at the very beginning, the defining feature of this devolution agenda is the bespoke aspect of the deals and the individual agreements with the various areas. If a framework is too detailed, you risk creating the same deals in all localities, so that is a problem.

If we create a framework, it should not be too top-down. Historically, concordats have never, ever worked at the local level but there is something attractive about the centre agreeing with some sort of representative of combined authorities generally and having consensus on what a framework should provide. A framework is a good thing but it should not be too detailed and it should have local input.

Professor Copus: The thing that worries me about a framework is that it will, inevitably, be top-down driven, and driven by the centre. There is a conflict in local government, which, on the one hand, says, "We want greater freedoms, more autonomy and the ability to make decisions locally", and then turns to the centre and says, "Now tell us how we can do it and give us the regulations, the structure and the framework". I do not blame local government for doing that because, historically, if it gets

it wrong, it is in trouble, so it will always be in a position of asking for frameworks.

Better than a framework, which would have the danger of being a centralising tool, when you think what devolution is about, is some form of basic silver, gold and platinum package of devolution. The silver package comes to the whole of local government: "This is what we are about to roll out". That would need to be negotiated between the LGA, local authorities themselves and Government. Above that are different tiers of devolution that you can buy into if you get the support from a collection of local authorities. If we drive down the route of a framework, there is the danger that what is already a centrally driven process becomes more so.

One thing that has concerned me, for example, is that the Lancashire authorities are trying to put together a devolution deal but the centre is saying to them, "We want you to slim-line your local government system, which effectively means we want you to abolish some local authorities". If that became part of a devolution framework—"You can have devolution but you have to go for unitary reorganisation at the same time"—we then just end up with English local government, already being the largest across Europe by a country mile, growing exponentially.

We were talking earlier about the importance of the "local" in local government, and there is a danger that, if the centre links devolution to structural change, we end up with huge combined authorities, huge tiers of local government and an electorate left feeling isolated and cut off from its local authorities.

Q20 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** On that point, you do not feel that you can bargain on equal terms with central Government if there is too rigid a framework.

Professor Copus: I would go along with that.

Q21 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Which part of Government should administer and update a framework? Is there any preference?

Professor Gains: It should be the product of a discussion with local government. I guess that that puts it into the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, although the Treasury is key, as are the Department for Education and BEIS. It has to be all of them.

Dr Stanton: It needs a bit of interdepartmental work, ultimately.

Professor Copus: It would be a challenge to the Civil Service to say, "Now you must negotiate with local government". There is not a central point here that will control this process. Let local government or the authorities that want to combine negotiate with the Departments separately, rather than again centralising that within Government. You would then open up a lot of evidence on which Departments are more enthusiastic about devolution and which ones less so.

Q22 **Chair:** Picking up a point that Colin raised, you talked about having devolved powers available generally to local councils. Have we got too obsessed with having to do bespoke deals for combinations of authorities and creating new organisations, when we should be looking at what powers could just be given to every council, if they wanted it?

Professor Copus: Absolutely, we have got hung up on thinking, "If we are going to devolve and do this sensibly, we really need new combinations of councils". It worries me slightly in that agenda—and this might sound fanciful—that I can see somebody somewhere, in 10 years' time, saying, "We have all these combined authorities. They seem to be working very well. Why do we need the 10 constituent boroughs? Why do we need the 12 here? Why do we not just move to these combined authorities?" You just see that direction of travel further and further away from local government. Interestingly enough, local government has been the forgotten part of the devolution agenda, as it exists at the moment. There is a need for central Government to look at what can be devolved to our existing councils, either in unitary areas or in two-tier areas, and to be less hung up on creating new institutions. That is absolutely right.

Q23 **Daniel Kawczynski:** As somebody who represents a very rural constituency—Shrewsbury in Shropshire—how can devolution benefit towns and rural areas?

Professor Copus: I go back to the policy statement that the District Councils' Network produced, which looks at the building blocks of using district and borough councils to operate in co-operation across fundamental economic areas. If the centre is looking at new combinations, but existing rural areas and rural authorities in places like Shropshire and Shrewsbury can put together a deal that does not necessarily involve the creation of a new entity but something that suits their own geography and their own needs in a rural area, they can present that to Government as the basis of a deal.

Q24 **Daniel Kawczynski:** In terms of the reorganisation that is inevitably taking place in the wider context, we feel very much subsumed into Birmingham and the huge power that exists in those big metropolitan areas, which are geographically very close to us but much larger than we are in terms of population. Could you perhaps expand a little on the dichotomy that we face in that regard?

Professor Copus: You have hit the nail on the head in a certain respect. Because the devolution agenda is so tied to economic growth and an economic imperative, it looks at large areas like the big cities that are seen to be economic drivers. We know county areas are underperforming economically compared to the rest of the country, through no fault of their own. Part of the answer to what you are asking is that we need to look at, in your particular area, for example, which towns link to which cities, which towns link economically to other towns, and what strengths those particular areas have, and then to build a package around that. In some respects, while it is the wrong word to use, if you do that, you can

isolate yourself from the draw of these larger areas. That may not be the objective but you are looking to, in some respects, maintain independence from a large urban area. That requires the towns and the smaller areas to work more smartly together.

Q25 **Daniel Kawczynski:** In our case, we have the English-Welsh border right next to us, so we cannot move that way because we cannot cross a national frontier. The closest thing to us is Birmingham and some of the inner-city conurbations that are on our side of the border and within our proximity. As a matter of interest, in the old days the Government took a lead in deciding how these local authorities were structured and who took the initiative in formulating any changes. Now, we are being told by this Government that, if there are to be any changes in rural shire counties like mine, they have to come from the councils themselves. Should it be a council-driven policy—and I refer back to turkeys not voting for Christmas—or should it still stay with national Government to holistically assess this, in conjunction with other parties that perhaps are not concerned about potentially losing their seats or their positions, if there is going to be that sort of structural change?

Professor Copus: Shropshire experienced structural change in 2007-09, with the creation of a new unitary there, and the loss of the district councils. Shropshire, as a council, is a huge area, and the other unitary, Telford, also has a strange position within the Shropshire economy. As a committed localist, which is based on evidence and not necessarily just a preference for the way I think the world should run, there is sufficient evidence to say that local authorities are able to create the sorts of deals and bids that they could go to Government with, which should be able to increase economic growth and economic development, if that is the key issue you are looking at.

If authorities are not, there are two responses to that: either leave them as they are, which is a possibility, or Government then steps in and says to an area, "We want to see you create some form of working relationship". Whether that comes through any structural change is where the real argument lies. In Buckinghamshire, we have seen the arguments over the creation of the new unitary, which are the sorts of arguments that occurred in Shropshire in 2007-09. Unless we are going to see those replicated right across the country, the smaller towns and cities have to be able to develop those sorts of approaches to Government.

Q26 **Daniel Kawczynski:** As a final question, any major change in the structure of power and rates, and the ability to raise money from ratepayers, is inevitably predicted on the ability to get money out of businesses and large commercial operations. When you represent an area like mine, which is so rural and where agriculture takes priority—and the structure of how agricultural practices pay rates is very different to those with normal commercial properties—could you give your thoughts on that? That concerns us a great deal.

Professor Copus: I will do it as quickly as possible. In the great devolution stakes, you mentioned the location on the border with Wales. England has been short-changed in terms of devolution compared to Scotland and Wales. Nothing that comes to English local government will replicate what has gone to Scotland and Wales in terms of devolution of legislative and financial powers. One of the glaring gaps and weaknesses in many of the devolution deals is fiscal devolution. There is a head of steam now beginning to build up around the idea of a tourist tax. One thing I know about Shropshire is that it has a reasonable tourist industry. If, as a council, that area, in some deal struck with Government, was able to have a tax on tourists, it would be perfect taxation without representation. Nobody moves to the area that they have been a tourist in simply to vote on how the people charge them a tourist tax.

Chair: We are going to come on to fiscal devolution.

Professor Copus: There are ways but I can see that Francesca is eager to say something.

Chair: Yes, she is itching away there.

Professor Gains: I do not have your expertise and knowledge in that area, but I wanted to make two general points. First, as I said before, rural areas still have the same issues of creating local growth, having better local transport and integrating health and social care. They reflect those issues in those areas. Different solutions will be needed. This is why, if a framework set out what kinds of deals would be available, it would help local elected politicians see the potential for what might be uncomfortable change.

This is the other thing that I hope is partly helpful. I did the evaluation of the 2000 Act that introduced leader cabinets and the first city mayors. One of the findings from that evaluation is that change was not comfortable but, looking back on it, people do not want to go back to how it was before. They did not want to return to a committee system. There are ways in which you could incentivise and help give people a picture of what could improve through further devolution, even in rural areas.

Q27 **Mary Robinson:** Bringing a few things together around the issue of a framework, one problem we have is that we are trying to compare like for like, which is not there, because devolution is different in different areas. For instance, we can say we do not have the same measure in our regions as they have in Scotland, but Scotland has its own elected representatives, which, in Greater Manchester, we do not. We have a different system, with 10 local authorities that were used to working together quite well before they had the devolution deal put in place with the mayor. I wonder whether we have to get a consensus as to what it looks like. Part of that might be that we re-examine whether we need to have mayors and to do things in an entirely different way, because every area, rural or urban, is going to be very different.

Professor Gains: There is a time for evaluation of what has happened so far. I am not aware of what research is happening there but this is now the time to evaluate the experience of those combined authorities that have had some time. It is important to do. History and leadership matter. You could have a framework that set out what conditions of transparency and accountability were needed to enter into a deal, even if that varied by the kind of adoption in each area.

Q28 **Ian Byrne:** I would like to say how fascinating it has been to hear views on directly elected mayors. This is quite a contentious issue in Liverpool at the moment. It has been fascinating listening to the three of you speaking on that issue, and I am sure it is being watched avidly back in Liverpool.

Daniel touched on fiscal devolution. I will ask you this first, John: does devolution require restructuring of local government finances?

Dr Stanton: Ultimately, yes. Right across local government, far too much money comes from the centre. At a local council level, 20% of money is raised locally. Compare that with somewhere like Sweden, where you can literally turn the number on its head: about 20% comes from the centre and everything else is local. It seems almost to state the obvious that, if councils have more money, they can do more. That is so important in the sense that many things connect with this. If we want to improve public engagement and increase turnout, having councils with more money would ultimately give them more opportunity to instil greater confidence among the local electorate, so that necessitates a change in the way in which councils and combined authorities raise money.

I think 100% business rates are a good thing. From the evidence that I have seen, the pilot a couple of years ago, with combined authorities taking 100% of business rates, seemed to be fairly successful. There was early uncertainty as to what the future held and whether it would continue, and that ultimately determined whether councils made full use of the money. I think 100% of business rates is a good thing. There could be even more opportunities for council tax and grants that are not tied to specific policies or objectives. Basically, councils need more autonomy in the use of their finances and more opportunity to raise their own revenue.

Professor Gains: I note in the Budget statement that there is due to be a review of the shared prosperity fund that will flow from the fair funding review, following the business rates, and of adult social care. That speaks to what Colin was saying earlier: there are measures that would assist all councils to devolve and have more power to raise finance, which could happen across the board, and they will be key in the future.

Professor Copus: The need for fiscal devolution is vital now. We have got to a stage where we cannot sustain the system we are developing based on handouts from the centre. English local government has the

narrowest basket of taxation powers available to it across Europe. When you look at other European nations and globally, you see a much more expansive basket of taxation powers. I mentioned the tourist tax earlier, which is one example, but there are things like local income tax and sales taxes that exist at local level. I am never quite sure whether we have exited the EU or whether we are going to do it at the end of this year, but we are in a much freer position to alter what we do with VAT, for example. That could partly be handed out to local councils.

We need to look really carefully at the nature of the taxation regime that we have locally, recognise how narrow it is and look at alternatives from overseas. There are alternatives that are working, and they are working well. It means, as John said, you see a much greater proportion of local spending raised locally across Europe than in this country. It has been a big gap in the devolution deal so far.

Q29 **Ian Byrne:** How would that work, though, given the disparities between the ability to raise income in different areas? In Liverpool and in Daniel's area, how would that work, compared to the south-east or the south, with their ability to raise through business rates? My worry would be, if it was devolved to those areas and we lost central Government funding, how we would replace that.

Professor Copus: I would argue that, rather than replicating one national system with another, we say to local government, "Here is this basket of taxations and you decide locally which suits your particular needs". We would not expect everywhere to levy a tourist tax if it did not have a tourist industry. If everywhere was able to generate more income locally, it would free up central Government resources. That is the point: if councils can raise money locally, they should, but that then allows the centre to say, "We are no longer funding X authority" or "We are not funding it to the level that we were, so these resources can be used for equalisation".

Q30 **Chair:** It is more challenging than in other countries. You mentioned Sweden. There is considerably lower inequality between the different parts of Sweden; therefore, each area has a greater ability to raise similar amounts of money from the same tax. It is still a big challenge, is it not?

Professor Copus: Yes, but there are ways around that. Certain areas can generate more income through tax. Indeed, we talk about taxation but there are other financial regulations that tie local government's ability to generate income. I am convinced that part of the raising of interest rates by the Public Works Loan Board was not so much a need to do that but a policy tool to ensure councils were not investing in things that the centre did not particularly want them to invest in. Once you free local government, we are not just talking about taxation; we are talking about commercial freedoms as well.

Dr Stanton: Ultimately, this is where the deals can come into their own. As Colin says, it is about being able to attract certain funding in an area that is relevant to that locality.

Q31 **Ben Everitt:** Following from that, it is almost the levelling-up version of the chicken and egg question. Does fiscal devolution work in other countries because, regionally, they are already more level, or can the answer to our levelling-up challenge be found in fiscal devolution?

Professor Copus: The answer to that is the same as to the question of which came first: the chicken or the egg. Nobody quite knows. When we look at local government overseas and we see, in many countries, greater financial freedom with local government, it normally came as a matter of principle. We look at some systems that did not develop quite in the way that ours did. When some countries' constitutions were written—Norway is a good example—the role of local government is clearly annotated there, and the freedoms that they have come from a matter of principle. We can say that there was an element of fiscal devolution before the growth in economies, and it may well be that those economies and those countries grew because there was that freedom at the local level. But I will be honest with you: we do not know.

Q32 **Bob Blackman:** I want to clarify one point you made, because fiscal devolution means different things to different people. You talked about a basket of taxes, which is absolutely right. Do you consider it to be a case of replacing national taxation with local taxation or are you looking at local taxation on top of national taxation? I just want to clarify your view on that.

Professor Copus: The centre is always going to need to tax, so that will always be a given. I would argue that, with fiscal devolution, there is the need to enhance the tax-raising powers and the sorts of issues, like tourist tax or sales tax, that could also rest at a local level.

The other thing that needs to be looked at, partly in answer to your question, is the issue of hypothecation and who collects. Much like districts will collect council tax, which is then transferred to the counties, there is a possibility of hypothecating income tax and a percentage of it going automatically to local government. Fuel duty is another example. There are different ways that exist across the globe in which taxation can be shared between the centre and the locality.

Q33 **Bob Blackman:** The argument we would potentially face on this is that central Government could well turn round and say, "That is why we give Government grant at the moment to local authorities". This would replace it. Then there is a burden on certain local authorities, and rural authorities in particular, that do not have the capacity to raise these taxes, yet still have to supply services.

Professor Copus: On the issue of grants, I can see that argument but those grants often come with strings attached and are often ring-fenced, so it is not enhancing the local authority's financial autonomy or enabling

it to make decisions about what it wants to spend and where in relation to local needs. It is the centre saying, "This is our assessment of your local needs and this is ring-fenced for that reason". The idea of being able to generate more income locally overcomes the attitude that the centre knows best.

Dr Stanton: I agree with that. In large part, it is not about creating new forms of taxation but about playing with what is already established, in a sense. For example, you can stop having ring-fenced grants. You can still have grants for local councils but give them greater freedom as to what they can do with that money. You can perhaps give greater council tax possibilities or more national tax to combined authorities. It is about moving portions of money around rather than creating fresh powers.

Professor Gains: This is, hopefully, what the fair funding review will look at in the light of the business rate piloting.

Q34 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** It seems that, for quite some time, the conversation around devolution has centred mainly on Whitehall and City Hall, and not the wider public. Do you feel there should be involvement and consultation with the public on devolution?

Dr Stanton: Absolutely, the public need an input into what the devolution deals are going to establish. The South Yorkshire deal, which is currently under consultation, has already been struck.

Chair: It finished yesterday.

Dr Stanton: The deal was struck and then the consultation happened. It is a fair question to ask: how much are politicians willing to unpick what has already been agreed in response to what the public are going to contribute? It almost a box-ticking exercise. You want the consultation almost earlier, so that it is genuine devolution, not just what the centre thinks should be devolved.

Professor Gains: Consultation is vital and there are different ways that you could go about that. You could have citizens' assemblies, for example. That would be one way of having a fairly focused conversation. As I understand from YouGov polling done for the BBC, the idea of combined authorities is very popular, especially when people know a little more about it. There are various ways that you could ensure that that consultation process is valued. We are very lucky to have some strong regional news and media organisations, and social media. There are various in which to engage people in a meaningful conversation.

Q35 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** I wanted to touch on that point. Do you have any recommendations? The YouGov poll touched on the point that a lot of people are open to devolution. Do you have any specific ways of doing it? It is sometimes really difficult to do that kind of engagement to make sure everyone is involved, not just a particular demographic of individuals. Do you have any ideas?

Professor Gains: Leadership is terribly important. Political leadership is critical in facilitating that conversation and providing a vision of what might be better. When people in Manchester say they voted against a mayor, it was because it was a city mayor. It was not really replacing anything or adding anything, whereas the idea of having a metro mayor does add something. People need a picture of what might change.

Professor Copus: Another missing part of the jigsaw has been the public. It is ironic that we are talking about devolution. Often, these deals are put together with minimal if any consultation with members of the public. If you are going to consult when you have a policy and an outline deal, that is the wrong time, because folk are already committed to the work and the effort that they have put into that. In those areas that are now looking to construct devolution deals, we need to engage the public more and to assess their priorities and the issues they think ought to be run closer to home. We know that local government is really good at public consultation; it just seems to have been missed. It is organisations that are too big—councils, collections of councils and Government—talking to each other, and the public have fallen through the gap.

Q36 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** Do you have any recommendations for what consultation could be done? As you know, local authorities in particular are massively financially restrained, so it is really difficult at the moment, but does anything spring to mind that people could be doing differently?

Professor Copus: This is where I would fall back to the role of the councillor. Councillors are rooted in their communities. It is the task of a politician rather than of an institution like a council. Councillors need to be absolutely engaged in talking to the public and assessing those priorities. Part of the response to your question is that councillors need to be talking—and I am not saying that they are not talking to their constituents—about devolution in particular and having conversations within wards and divisions about the sorts of things that folk would want. Then there is a greater use of social media. You talked earlier about the demographic of consultees. Social media can often help overcome that. Remembering that they are under legal requirements in many respects to consult on a whole number of things, local authorities have the framework and the mechanisms there. It is just thinking about using that around the issue of devolution.

Q37 **Abena Oppong-Asare:** I want to go back to you, John, on recommendations, but I want to ask a follow-up question as well. Do you think the public consultation process as it exists is adequate? It varies from council to council in how they do it, but do you think it is adequate in making sure people support the new deals that are being proposed?

Dr Stanton: It is adequate in the sense that, standing as far back as possible, it gives local people an opportunity to input and to have their say on what has been agreed. How successful it is and the means through which the public consult depends on the councils. As Colin said, ultimately councillors are going to know what works best for their local

areas, and they perhaps know best how to engage their local areas. The success of a consultation will largely depend on the success of those particular models. My main gripe, as it were, is that consultation comes too late and needs to come a lot earlier.

Abena Oppong-Asare: That is really helpful. Does anyone else want to add to that in terms of the current situation and whether consultations are adequate? I guess you covered it already with your recommendations.

Q38 **Paul Holmes:** I briefly want to touch on scrutiny of devolved bodies. You will note that, previously, the Committee has expressed concern particularly when it comes to scrutiny of combined authorities. What measures are necessary to ensure proper scrutiny of the executive within devolved bodies? Are the current scrutiny measures, if any, are up to scratch? Is it fair to say—and this is my opinion and I want to be proven wrong if possible—that the current scrutiny regime is fairly weak across the board?

Professor Copus: On your last question, unfortunately the answer is yes. Your Committee did an inquiry into scrutiny a while ago and that was one of the conclusions: there is work to do in strengthening the scrutiny function. We are very good at focusing on leadership and executive powers, but less so in getting scrutiny right and ensuring it has the parity of esteem and the parity of resources. Quite often, councils will say, "We do not have the money to adequately support the scrutiny function". I have never said anywhere say, "We do not have the finances to adequately support the executive". It never comes into it. It is never an issue.

I think we have a problem with the way in which scrutiny operates. There are some wonderful examples of scrutiny work, having said that. I expect a raft of reports on the recent flooding, for example, will come out and they will show not only to individual councils but to the centre evidence-based suggestions for improving that as a service. But it is very much the Cinderella part of the decision-making arrangements in local government.

That has just flowed over into combined authorities. Councils are doing what they can to provide a scrutiny function, but it is often joint scrutiny committees that are created between the constituent local authorities. No other combined authority has gone down the line of the London arrangement, for example, of having a directly elected scrutiny body there to challenge the mayor and the executive. It is yet more work falling on hardworking councillors, more meetings for them, more responsibilities for them. As our local government gets bigger and bigger, there are fewer councillors to do all that. London, in this instance, provides an alternative model. Whether you would need to go to the size of the GLA, that is doubtful given population sizes, but when you think about the budgets a directly elected scrutiny function for combined

authorities is yet another bit that is missing from the way we have approached it.

Professor Gains: I was quite concerned, when the 2016 Act came out, that scrutiny was not properly understood or recognised in how the Act set out the arrangements. In Greater Manchester, there was a need to do work to improve what had previously been scrutiny of the combined authority. The interim mayor did a lot of work to improve the infrastructure behind scrutiny and to map committees to the policy work of the leads in the different areas. That was an improvement and that is very necessary.

Scrutiny should enable the new bright, young councillors who are coming through to learn the ropes. That is what used to happen. If you could turn it round, support and celebrate scrutiny, you could really make that. Another thing that was important in Greater Manchester was to have shadowing arrangements for the executive, so it was not male-dominated and it reflected the diversity of the community better. There are ways that you can work with the arrangements to offer a training ground for councillors. If you celebrate that, you could make people want to do it and feel that they were learning the ropes.

Dr Stanton: Scrutiny is a difficult one to get right. Generally, in recent history, there has never been enough emphasis on, first, how it should happen and, secondly, what it is there to do. That conversation needs to be had, perhaps at the central level, but particularly at the local level within individual councils.

With regard to the combined authorities, Colin is absolutely right. Some measure of scrutiny needs to come from individuals from the local area. The London model is quite attractive. There might be scope—who knows?—for four or five region-wide representatives on the combined authority with primarily a scrutiny function, perhaps.

Q39 **Paul Holmes:** Could that be local council leaders? What form, if any at the moment, would you consider to be a possibility?

Dr Stanton: Off the top of my head, I would see that not as being individuals from the consistent councils, but directly elected scrutiny individuals, who sit on the council and, in the council sense, are at the same level as the individual council leaders on the combined authority. Rather than coming from and representing a particular area, they are there as representatives of the whole area to provide a degree of scrutiny, as with the London-wide assembly members.

Q40 **Paul Holmes:** Thank you for those answers. I want to get into a bit more detail about the London Assembly. Do you think we should look to the London Assembly as a model for effectively scrutinising directly elected mayors, or does it need reform? You have all said you are fans of the London model, if I am interpreting it the right way, but because of the political composition of, for example, the current London Assembly, is

scrutiny really up to scratch when a majority of AMs take the Labour whip and we have a Labour mayor? Is that the right way of doing it?

Dr Stanton: It is problematic when you put it like that, because as you said, at the moment, the majority of the assembly members are Labour and we have a Labour mayor. That does prove an issue. Obviously, we go back a few years and we have Boris Johnson with a predominantly Labour assembly, which almost tips the point on its head. It is not purely a problem of its own making. It stems from the individual members of the assembly. In principle, the London model of scrutiny is effective. In that regard, it is perhaps locally specific. The Mayor of London is, more than anywhere else in the country, a local figurehead. It is almost identified as a Prime Minister for London. It is a figurehead to that extent. Scrutiny in that model is effective in principle, because it puts the individual on the spot and it fits within the existing structure. Whether that would work elsewhere is problematic, not purely from the political point of view, but whether combined authorities are capable of holding mayors to account in the same way.

Professor Gains: I would echo what Colin was saying: scrutiny should not be a poor relation; it should be funded and supported. That is necessary when there are devolved budgets from Whitehall. It is critical that people understand how that deal is meant to work, if they are to hold it to account.

Professor Copus: I only ever met one councillor who said he was offered the opportunity to go on the council cabinet and turned it down because he would rather stay as a scrutiny chair. Most scrutiny chairs, when offered the opportunity to go into the cabinet, take it. But scrutiny has to be a career choice for members and that is part of the problem with the 2000 Act: it failed to recognise how party politics operate within local government and the drafters thought often that it operates very much like these sort of committees. It does not. You are asking, more often than not, a committee with a majority of members from one party to criticise, to critique, to hold to account an Executive of their own party, and to do that in public. That causes problems in local government and that is the reality of it, unless local government happens to be inquiring outside of the authority. These flood reports that I know will come will mean that the authority is looking externally. Councillors often report that, when they are engaged in external scrutiny, the party dynamics tend to melt into the background. That is an issue.

If you have a mayor elected from one party and you have a scrutiny body directly elected from another, that is what the electorate wants. Often you might see, if those elections are on the same day, an interesting dynamic among the voters, saying, "We want this individual to be our mayor, but we want a brake on what they may or may not do. Therefore, we are voting for a different type of assembly".

I have to say that I am a great fan of elections. I do not have to fight them, which is why. I think they are great things. If you operate a

system of scrutiny based on the idea of direct election of a scrutiny body to a combined authority and you resource that, not only do you provide a leader with the ability to lead through direct election, but you enhance the accountability mechanism. There is always a role, of course, for the public. There are public question times, citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries and all sorts of other mechanisms that can be used, so that the public can directly hold their mayors to account as well.

Q41 **Paul Holmes:** This is actually the first election I have won, after standing in many, so I do not really want another one so soon. I agree that we love elections too, as the last few years have shown.

If I could briefly touch specifically on the London Assembly again, as I think you can tell, I am someone who has to be convinced on the current model of the London Assembly. It is not arguable that there is a potential democratic deficit in the way in which the Mayor of London is scrutinised when London boroughs have budgets and responsibilities, and obviously have local ward councillors within those boroughs, but they are completely written out of the scrutinising process for the Mayor of London? Is there scope for something like a borough leaders' senate that would have scrutiny powers legislated for against the Mayor of London, or is it pointless?

Dr Stanton: I would see the value in that. Another possible option might be aligning the GLA electoral map with the boroughs and the wards within those boroughs, so you have a GLA member who comes from the same locality, perhaps even the same ward, certainly the same borough. You have different individuals, but the same constituencies, so it is aligned in that respect: there is a relationship between the borough councillor and the GLA member. That strikes me as one quite streamlined way of doing it.

Professor Gains: The designers of the Greater Manchester arrangement thought that having the 10 leaders as the mayor's cabinet—they are executive members, so they cannot criticise themselves—would provide a behind-the-scenes check and balance through geography, in that they are each protective of their areas. That was the logic behind it, but that left a gap in that there needed to be further scrutiny, because they could not scrutinise themselves. I take the point that people might need to see scrutiny as a career option, but I suppose the other model operating in Greater Manchester is to have scrutineers from the individual authorities. That has the advantage of strengthening that geographical accountability, so they go back to their authorities and need to share with their fellow non-executive councillors what they have been looking at, what the logic is and what the gaps are. It is just another model, slightly less separate than separate elections

Q42 **Paul Holmes:** So scrutiny could be better. I know that the solution would be different for the London mayoralty vis-à-vis the Greater Manchester authority, but arguably scrutiny still is not where it needs to be in both.

Professor Gains: I would agree that scrutiny is a weaker part of the infrastructure, but it should be an important part. It can involve further engagement with the public. It must be there, because there are big sums of public money.

Paul Holmes: Thank you for your time.

Q43 **Bob Blackman:** I declare an interest as an ex-member of the London Assembly. Would you not agree, though, because 14 of the members are elected on a district base, a borough base, and 11 via a top-up list, that it enables representatives of different, smaller parties, for example the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, who otherwise would not get representation, to be on the assembly and then critique the mayor? The weakness of the Manchester model, in my view, would be that minority parties have no chance whatsoever of critiquing the mayor. Is that the way forward for scrutiny: to allow smaller parties to get a foothold and then hold the mayor to account, whoever he or she may be?

Professor Copus: I agree absolutely. If you look at the figures, something like 90% of all councillors across England come from one of the three main parties. That is a stunning penetration of national politics into local politics. There is very little space for other parties and for community groups that might want to stand for election for non-party politics. Having a mechanism that allows those voices to be heard sharpens accountability. Let us be quite honest; sometimes the interplay of party politics is less about accountability and more about party point scoring. That is a reality of the system. If you have others involved in that process who are not schooled in the same way, you may well find that you get enhanced accountability. I would go along with a system that enables more voices and more opinions to challenge what, after all, is a very powerful executive office.

Q44 **Bob Blackman:** Another problem occurs in local government now, where people choose the route of scrutiny. Especially where one party dominates a local authority, it is a very brave individual who then takes on their own party. Therefore, the public scrutiny of the work being done is very difficult. Have you come up with any ways that that could be followed through and people could be protected? This is a key part of scrutiny.

Professor Copus: There are not supposed to be whips on scrutiny, but an implied whip can operate. As you say, even if there is not a whip, somebody who openly challenges their own leadership or their own party may well find themselves having selection problems next time round. It is very difficult to protect individuals from that. That is less about the system and more about the culture of politics as the way it is played out at a local level. The whipping system in local government is stronger than the whipping system in Parliament. Very few councils have one, two and three-line whips. It is either a three-line whip or you are out. It is difficult to protect people from a cultural issue. The solution is to do what can be done to change that culture. It is down to the parties to do that.

Q45 **Chair:** It is down to parties. Colin, I know you are a great enthusiast for elections, but do the public really want another load of elections for scrutiny members to look at the mayor? Then, logically, do you not elect the scrutiny committees on local councils as well?

Professor Copus: It is an interesting thought. I do not think you would need to elect scrutiny committees on councils. Of course, if you have a directly elected mayor of local government, that is more or less what you are doing. You have a council with an elected mayor and then you have council elections.

Q46 **Rachel Hopkins:** What is your assessment of the Government's recent announcements relating to devolution in England?

Professor Gains: I am picking up a sense that there is a long-awaited devolution framework setting out some of the prerequisites, roles and responsibilities. I am not aware they have made that yet. We are still waiting.

Q47 **Rachel Hopkins:** What would you like to see in the forthcoming White Paper?

Dr Stanton: We have more or less established that the combined authorities and the mayors have many benefits. I, for one, am quite a fan of theirs. One big problem that I have always had is with the structure of local government, especially beneath the combined authority level. There are parts of Cambridgeshire that have four local authorities: parish council, district, county, combined authority. Where I live, I just have the one unitary council. There is a massive problem in terms of the number of tiers of local government, the ways in which they relate to each other and the ways in which their responsibilities are announced to the public.

I know this has been rumoured as part of the White Paper, but a restructuring, perhaps even on a grand scale, is needed. I am doing an empirical study at the moment, which has involved talking to various councillors. One of the most prominent issues they talked about with regards to the structure of local government was the confusion that can come out of having too many tiers. Who is responsible for what? Where is my money going? Who is accountable for what?

That is a massive problem. If combined authorities are working—and I think they are—they need to be the future of local government, in the sense that we need to change everything else underneath them and effectively make them the new upper tier of local government. You can have a unitary authority at the bottom and a combined authority further up; maybe that could be the whole country, almost. The main thing that needs to be sorted out is the structure of local government further down. From what we have seen so far, combined authorities and mayors could be the future of local government.

Professor Copus: I am going to take a slightly different tack. I hope that one thing that is not in the white paper is any more structural reform

to local government. Tiers are not unusual in local government across the globe. Some countries have five or six, depending on whether they have a regional level, how many tiers of local government they have. They could have two; they could have three. It is not the tiers themselves that are the problem; it is often the people who inhabit them. I have to say that the fact there is a tiered system does not mean to say it is doomed to failure.

I have had county council leaders say—and I will not mention names— "It would be much easier if we did not have all these pesky districts and I did not have to get everything agreed. I could do what I want to do". Is that not a form of accountability? Is that not a form of a brake, in that case? I have already made the point that, in England, we have the largest units of local government across Europe and we are at the bottom of the league table on electoral turnout across Europe. I do not think it is any coincidence that we have those two factors in play.

I heard a little while ago that Michael Heseltine was calling for a revamping of the Maude report, with 60 unitary authorities across England, which would give you a population of roughly 900,000. I do not know what that is, but that is not local government. That is a huge, sub-regional entity. Almost 50 years of independent academic research, again across Europe, has shown that the benefits we are often told would come from bigger local government—it would be more efficient, more effective, cheaper—are not a guaranteed outcome of amalgamations or bigger units of local government. We can have effective small local government and effective big local government. Size is not the only factor.

You do find that, as local government gets bigger, democratic quality starts to corrode. Things like trust in councillors, trust in council officers and turnout in local elections all start to degrade, as local government becomes bigger. Rather than unitary local government, I would keep the tiers we have and move down the route of double devolution, which is that things come to combined authorities or come to local government and we should not forget the parish angle. These are the institutions that root our local government system in very small, identifiable communities in a way that districts and counties often do not. Double devolution is an important ingredient, so we do not create local centralism, local government does not hold on to everything and it is passed down where possible.

As a final point on the issue of confusion, a lot of these confusions can be cleared up by a simple phone call. A member of the public rings the council; "Sorry, you need to ring the district"—end of confusion.

Professor Gains: As I said before, I would like to see a statement of positive intent around devolution; some taking stock of where we are up to; an evaluation put in place on the benefits of the devolution deals; a statement about how Government will look at providing fiscal freedoms;

a clear statement about what is on offer, what is in scope and how you can access it, to facilitate the decisions people have to make; and funding to support the transformations, and the checks and balances, which needs to come from central Government as well as from local government.

Q48 **Rachel Hopkins:** That is building on another question: what measures should central Government take now to prepare Departments for greater devolution of power? I do not know if you want to add anything.

Professor Gains: It was very heartening to hear about the move of civil servants in the Budget speech. That seems marvellous. I do not know anything about it, but I would be wholeheartedly in favour of it. More than that, I remember asking the chair of the LEP in Greater Manchester, at some event, "What would you like to see happen to help with devolution?" He said, "Having some civil servants locally". That is a key part of the equation.

Dr Stanton: One problem with recent attempts at pushing power down and getting genuine devolution has been a different form of the chicken and egg question. If local people are not engaged, participating and interested in local politics, why are we devolving it? Why are we giving them so much power? A lot of it comes from the willingness of the centre, not just the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government but all the Departments, to engage and have the attitude that local government is valuable. Colin spoke at the beginning about putting the "local" back in local government and seeing this institution ultimately for what it is: the very front line of democracy across the whole of the country. If the attitude can change, the devolution and the money can follow, and local people would be much more interested and take it much more seriously.

Professor Copus: I would go along with all that. The role of devolving the Civil Service is crucial to the success of devolution of any sort. Government and the Civil Service have to be committed to hand down power and responsibilities, and then step back. There will always be a monitoring role; there will always be a role for inspectorates, but largely we have lost, in this country, our trust of local government. Devolution is a way in which you can start to rebuild that trust.

Q49 **Rachel Hopkins:** You talked about other countries before. Which countries are a model of devolution to work towards? Should devolution elsewhere in the UK be a model?

Professor Copus: Often, if you look at unitary states, you see a different flow of devolution to federal states, as you would expect. In a lot of federal countries the responsibility for local government rests with the state, the region, whatever it might be called. Often, they can also have a controlling role over local government. You could almost cherry pick any country across Europe. Have a look at the way in which municipalities operate in Germany or Spain, and you will find a different dynamic and a

different set of powers and autonomies that we could learn from here. That is not to say that, because it works in Germany or Sweden, it will work here, but there are lessons we can start to learn to tweak things and get our system right.

We have lost the sense of the "local" in local government. As I said earlier, we have lost the idea that our councils have anything to do with necessarily meaningful communities. We have certainly lost the "government" in local government. The centre often does not trust enough, does not give enough powers, for it to prove itself. We may still be living in the hangover of the 1980s and the mandate wars; "My mandate is bigger than yours". We need to get back to the idea that we have an elected institution, which therefore has legitimacy, and we need to ensure it can carry out the role we want it to. You could look at almost any other country, Belgium or the Netherlands, to see different ways in which that relationship works. It is very difficult to say, "Have a look at that one country and it will be perfect".

Dr Stanton: The problems with the central/local relationship go to a much deeper issue. Any other country you look at across Europe has that codified constitutional document. Many of them enshrine within that document a role for local government. Germany is one example. Ireland is another. As a result of that, straight away, the constitutional and democratic value of local government is immediately increased. By the same token, the role of central Government is decreased, because the constitution is higher in that sense. The relationship is different; it is a different dynamic. Perhaps it is more equal. It is probably not equal completely, but it is closer to equality. That is an underlying issue with English local government. Ultimately they are for ever at the mercy of the centre. That is the route of so many of the problems.

Professor Gains: I completely agree with my colleagues.

Q50 **Ben Everitt:** You will probably see this coming, Professor Copus. It is to do with the point you made about the geographical size of an area and then the distance that the electorates feel, which is sometimes witnessed through their apathy at the ballot box. To what extent does that square with the idea that you can have a directly elected mayor for a larger area?

Professor Copus: It is interesting, when you look at the research on electoral turnout, that, as units of local government get bigger, there is a falloff. Then you tend to reach a point at which it plateaus and may even increase again, because we do not have the problem with people voting in parliamentary elections, in terms of turnout. With the first round of police and crime commissioner elections, I think it was 15%. It does not mean to say that electing that body is a bad idea; it simply means that people did not understand what it was for. Also, the constituencies were huge. They were very convenient for administrative purposes. One thing you always spot whenever you are on holiday is a municipal police force. You walk around the resort with the municipal police force there. There

are tiered levels of policing, yet we elect people to a huge constituency. Anybody would struggle to make any sense of what it meant in terms of community and geography.

We have other problems with local government, in this country in particular. We are at the bottom of the turnout league, not only because of the size but because of the fewer powers and autonomies. The more power local government has, the more autonomies it has, the more likely you are to see a greater turnout.

For something like an elected mayor across a rural area, it would depend on what that mayor was able to do. It would depend on the powers as to what the turnout was. We have to also be honest. Even though I am a great fan of elections, maybe a lot of the public are not and do not share my enthusiasm for them. That is just something we have to tolerate in a democracy.

Ben Everitt: I feel we are helping.

Professor Gains: The turnout for the Mayor of London increased year on year and then fell back a bit, but it is 45%, is it not? That is quite good. In the election of the first metro mayors, the turnout varied across the country but was on a par with county councils. The police and crime commissioners is an area I have done quite a lot of work on and the first election was radically affected by being held in November. Those turnouts increased to be on par. That is a very interesting model, because they are also directly elected. My research, which is with Vivien Lowndes at the University of Birmingham, shows some of the ways in which those directly elected officials have engaged very differently with communities, taken on new roles and acted in a different way as leaders.

Q51 **Chair:** Do the Government have all the data to effectively analyse and identify the success of devolution, in terms of both individual services and wider performance of the new bodies?

Professor Gains: Notwithstanding the need for evaluation of the current deals, it will take a while before it is possible to see. We can see outputs, decisions and initiatives, but it will be a while before we see outcomes. In terms of a gap, with colleagues at the University of Manchester, I have put data together on equalities and assessing the potential of devolution deals. That is just to flag that taking equalities duties seriously in devolution deals is really important, because it helps direct attention to achieve the economic and social goals that the deals are meant to deliver, for example looking at how women can be supported to remain in the workforce, which leads to productivity potential and addresses the fact that older women end up being poorer and living longer in poorer ill-health. There is a gendered and equalities aspect to how the devolution deals are assessed, which is quite important not to lose sight of, alongside geography and other considerations.

Dr Stanton: I have nothing to add.

Professor Copus: I think that sums it up nicely.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming in and giving your evidence this afternoon. That is very much appreciated.