

SOUTHERN POLICY CENTRE

**Collaboration and Devolution
in the central South: the view
from town, city and county halls**

June 2021

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Introduction

Since our launch in 2014 at a conference addressed by Rt Hon Greg Clark MP and Lord Andrew Adonis, the Southern Policy Centre has promoted both devolution to central southern England and the development of a strong regional narrative based on practical co-operation between local authorities and other organisations.

Our report ‘Is there strategy for the central South?’ was positively received by local authorities, business organisations, LEPs and further and higher education in 2019. Since then the SPC has continued to explore how collaboration and co-operation across the region can be developed, including a series of seminars on Recovery After Covid.

Our underlying assumption is that collaborative working should enable organisations to better achieve their own objectives rather than force them to change their aims.

Like many other organisations we had been anticipating a Government White Paper on Devolution and Local Recovery. This has now been replaced by a promised policy on Levelling Up. Although it is not clear whether new opportunities will be created for formal devolution, the scope for local areas to win resources and powers is likely to depend on their ability to make a powerful case to central government.

This seems a timely moment to renew our focus on regional collaboration. To inform our work, we held a series of

interviews with senior political leaders and officers in spring 2021.

We invited them to discuss the potential gains, and possible pitfalls, of regional collaboration in general and potential devolution in particular.

Given the government’s promise of further reforms to health and social care we included a focus on this central question of how best to organise the delivery of health and social care.

This report summarises the main insights we learned from our interviewees.

We thank everyone we spoke to for taking the time to participate and share their thoughts.

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Executive summary: developing our narrative in a changing world

Opportunities and challenges

The Southern Policy Centre spoke to eleven political leaders and senior local government officers to gauge their views on where we are now on collaboration and devolution in the central South. All shared their points of view freely and candidly and their responses have been anonymised for this report.

They provided first-hand insight on the extent to which local authorities in our region already collaborate with each other and partners, and the opportunities and pitfalls that could lie ahead with any form of devolution.

While Covid, Brexit and the environment featured strongly, interviewees also discussed how devolution could help answer one of the most pressing questions facing us as an ageing society: how best to fund and integrate health and social care.

We live in an age of huge global turmoil and challenge but it is clear from the responses that our regional leaders share an appetite for the central South to play its part in finding solutions.

There is a huge opportunity to grow skills, unleash talent, restore balance and prosperity in the economy, care for the most vulnerable in our communities and make our collective future sustainable.

Our local leaders are collaborating already and want to do even more, and they share a large measure of consensus about how this can best be achieved.

Later in this report we summarise ten headline messages from the leaders' responses indicating broad areas of agreement.

Background

As part of the 2015 Spending Review, the government invited places across the country to submit proposals for devolution. The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Local Government Association, representing all Hampshire councils including the Isle of Wight unitary authority, put forward a bid predicated on retaining all business rates' income in return for foregoing revenue support grants. The aim was to create a combined authority for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, badged as the Southern Powerhouse, with more powers regionally. The bid was supported by Hampshire Constabulary, Hampshire Fire & Rescue and NHS England Wessex but the process stalled after councils refused the government's recommendation of having a directly elected Mayor.

In 2016, proposals for a separate, combined Solent Authority were submitted by Portsmouth and Southampton city councils and Isle of Wight Council but were ultimately turned down by Westminster.

Five years on, the world has changed. The pandemic has wrecked lives, livelihoods and businesses and put immense strain on the NHS and other public services. The realities of Brexit have begun to kick in with profound implications for international trade and employment. And overshadowing it all, we have a climate emergency.

At the same time, in pursuit of a more equal share of wealth and opportunity nationally, the government has been pushing the concept of 'levelling up'

different areas to ensure nowhere is left behind.

There is an on-the-record manifesto pledge to devolve ‘power to people and places across the country’.

The path has hardly been direct though. A levelling up white paper, expected later this year, will supersede a much-delayed devolution and local recovery white paper first announced in October 2019 and originally due to be published in September 2020.

It is no surprise that momentum was lost as ministers focused their attentions on tackling the Covid crisis.

But now the aim of ‘levelling up’ has been confirmed in the Queen’s Speech: to achieve levelled-up opportunities across all parts of the United Kingdom, supporting jobs, businesses and economic growth and addressing the impact of the pandemic on public services. This will set the context for the central South in the coming years.

Our questions: seeking guidance on the substantive issues

The aim of the interviews, conducted in spring 2021 via Zoom calls, was to gain a more in-depth understanding of how senior political leaders and officers see the potential gains, and downsides, of regional collaboration and future devolution.

We wanted to tease out the substantive issues affecting our part of the country, chiefly Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, district council areas, the cities of Southampton and Portsmouth, and the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole conurbation (BCP).

On collaboration, we discussed the

areas of shared work with fellow local authorities that go well and those that are more challenging. We also looked at existing collaboration with LEPs, education providers and the NHS.

We invited our experts to tell us where they felt improved collaboration would bring about the greatest gains. And what these gains would be.

The group also spoke about obstacles to improved collaboration and how far these are driven by factors such as organisational culture, ways of working, politics and resource pressures.

On devolution specifically, we asked what powers and resources this might involve, and what difference it would make to people’s lives if there was more local responsibility and accountability. We looked at potential frameworks for authorities working together under devolution and whether these should be formal and legally binding, informal or something in between. And we discussed whether or not a directly elected Mayor would be right for the region.

On health and social care reform, interviewees shared their thoughts on the subject of ‘Integrated Care Systems’ and how well, or otherwise, the NHS and local authorities work together to care for us.

Ten headline points

1. PREVENTION BETTER THAN

CURE: There is broad agreement that there should be greater co-operation between the NHS and local authorities to strengthen public health and the preventative agenda. Interviewees said a renewed focus on upstream interventions could help to improve people’s mental and physical health, make for healthier communities and

take strain off the frontline NHS.

"The NHS is like a gushing pipe. You have someone standing at the end shovelling stuff that comes out over their shoulder, but more is coming out all the time. So, we just get bigger shovels. We should think more about what is going in, in the first place."

2. COVID RECOVERY: Collaboration among all kinds of organisations will be essential to help us navigate our way out of the Covid crisis and its aftermath.

"There is a hell of a challenge coming over the hill. Even if we get back to 'normal', there is a looming mental health epidemic, every prospect of greater criminality over the next ten to 15 years and an economy facing upheaval. The scale of the challenge, the societal problems, the health issues, is huge. Collaboration is the only sensible response."

3. QUALITY OF LIFE: Improving the quality of people's health, not just the longevity of their lives, was cited by many interviewees as a fundamental goal that would benefit from greater collaboration. Ten years of austerity budgets have left councils having to make difficult choices. Sometimes policy decisions are only made to work after officers have broken down organisational barriers to achieve results.

"We have council wards with five- or six-years' lower life expectancy compared with Westminster. We have

to go back to the fundamentals to improve people's lives. It's about opportunity, education and social mobility. More secure and better-quality housing. Give young people better role models, elevate aspirations, everyone accepting the region's challenges and owning them. Prevention is better than cure, but austerity certainly hasn't helped over the past decade. It's seen as the other organisation's problem. We've been pitched against each other."

4. DIVERSE ECONOMY: Interviewees were keen to stress that the central

South is home to a wide range of industries and business sectors. While the Solent and south Hampshire have been steeped in maritime history and trade over hundreds of years, no part of the region can afford to live in

the past. Together, we have an opportunity to strengthen the central South's contribution as an essential economic and cultural asset for the UK.

"While we are maritime focused, the economy is about more than metal bashing and building ships. Some still have an old-fashioned view. They don't get the cultural industries which play such an enormous role. The visitor economy is much more than cream teas on the Isle of Wight. It's vast and really growing quickly."

5. FOCUS ON DELIVERY: The Covid crisis forced all kinds of organisations to work more closely together to help the communities they serve. It was a galvanising influence and improved many working relationships within and

"Even if we get back to 'normal', there is a looming mental health epidemic, every prospect of greater criminality over the next ten to 15 years and an economy facing upheaval."

beyond local government. In any debate about devolution, we need to keep the focus on how best to deliver effective and efficient services to people rather than shoring up organisational structures or power broking.

“In the pandemic we shared stresses and tribulations together. We worked very well in breaking down barriers and making sensible pragmatic decisions.”

6. IDENTITY: Southampton, Portsmouth and BCP all have bold, ambitious plans as city authorities.

These include challenging goals to address climate change imperatives, chiefly targets to achieve net zero carbon emissions. For regional devolution to work well, it has to complement such ambitions, deepening their potential scope and impact, rather than reinventing the wheel.

“Our cities have very specific identities. We don’t want to dilute their focus. They are engines of growth.”

7. SENSITIVITY: Our leaders do not want to see some form of regional body imposed on us. The government must articulate a vision for devolution that works for communities that are distinct while sharing an ancient geography. The region cannot just be seen as another arm of Westminster.

“Any move to devolution needs an intelligent and sensitive approach from government, not the breaking up of Hampshire.”

8. AGENDA TO UNITE: Some interviewees felt the building blocks of

devolution for the central South are either not there or, if they do exist, are not clearly understood. They believe it will be a real challenge to have every local authority agree with a devolution proposal. At the same time, there is scepticism about ‘big government’ being set on a particular model and carrying on regardless of local opposition or concerns. It was suggested that the best way forward is to agree on a modest agenda around which as many authorities as possible can unite.

“Any move to devolution needs an intelligent and sensitive approach from government, not the breaking up of Hampshire.”

“Governments are centralising bodies. We need to guard against a power grab to centralise power dressed up as

devolution.”

9. OPPORTUNITY: Several interviewees see devolution as a shared opportunity to prove what the region can do. That includes a greater ability to invest in economic development, infrastructure and other priorities.

“We are too constrained in our powers. I would like to see us more in control of our own destiny. For example, deciding where and how many houses to build, not blaming top-down government targets.”

10. STAYING ACCOUNTABLE: We need to guard against any system where elected leaders and senior officers are remote from the impact of their decisions on people and communities. The more accountable authorities in the central South are, the greater the safeguards there will be for

local democracy.

“Covid proved there was a really strong social care system in place, but it was in the streets and neighbourhoods, the community and grass roots support. Local people, presented with a problem or a challenge, can come up with solutions and we can have a really positive experience of collaboration. If everything is driven by professionals, they have limited capacity to think outside their boxes. They have always been limited by their experience. All local authority staff and politicians should have experience of community development and planning. That’s far more important than command and control from a central office. It shouldn’t be about sustaining the organisation. It’s about helping the people. We need a change of mindset.”

Collaboration

Local authorities in the central South have a strong track record of collaboration. We found no shortage of examples of how they work successfully together and with other partners. High-level co-operation includes formal structures such as the Hampshire Local Resilience Forum, the Partnership for South Hampshire and the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Chief Executives’ group, linked to the Local Government Association. The chief executives’ group was cited as “a really good sounding board for sharing information”.

Covid

Top of mind right now is the pandemic response. Council-owned spaces such as halls and theatres were repurposed as testing and vaccination centres. Parish councils proved their worth as a vital community resource, mobilising teams of volunteers to ensure vulnerable neighbours were managing to look after themselves. Rough

sleepers were taken off the streets and given accommodation. Links with the University of Southampton helped deliver city-wide saliva testing.

One senior officer said: *“Covid is the best reference point for showing collaboration. Some of our response was serendipity, some was planned. The Hampshire Local Resilience Forum already had a good track record of working together, for example in tackling the flooding we experienced in 2014. Neither Covid nor flooding respect local authority boundaries, so you have to collaborate. On flooding, because of the time we have spent on planning, we know where vulnerable people are, and we have reserves of sandbags and so on. When it came to the Covid response, communities here caused less trouble to local authorities like mine because we had all worked together earlier through HLRF. We knew that those at local level were best placed to make things work. Yes there was deep collaboration at regional level on Covid but also at local level. HLRF respects local communities’ knowledge and capacity. It was a case of collaboration*

versus the imposition of ways of working.”

Also, on Covid, a councillor told us: *“Break down barriers and focus on outcomes and you will be amazed at what you can achieve. We can move quickly when we want to, I will never accept that things can’t be done, because I have seen it.”*

Freeport

Several interviewees praised the recent Solent Freeport bid as a hugely successful step forward. One said: *“There has been much intertwined collaboration on industrial strategies, and we have all engaged in conversations. There was recently immense co-operation on the Freeport bid. There is a lot to do, but it’s a real gamechanger whereby councils and the LEP can work together. It’s a great example of how to create a business case.”*

Brexit

In the early days of Brexit, councils in the region came together to lobby MPs successfully about the threat of freight traffic suddenly being diverted from Kent and impacting on roads into Portsmouth. *“We had to plan for the worst, and we provided an effective counterbalance to protect our area,”* one interviewee said.

Biodiversity

The response to climate change is another key area of collaboration. One

example highlighted is an innovative solution led by Fareham Borough Council, with funding from Solent LEP. It involves housing developers offsetting the nitrate levels in new homes by contributing to the costs of a nature reserve. The solution is good for the coastal environment, maintains scope for housing and regeneration, and provides a precious local amenity for residents and visitors.

Sustainable waste management

The region has a multi-authority partnership for waste management including recycling. How we recycle our waste is also crucial to solving the climate

emergency. It is difficult, and there are many issues involved. *“It is done well on lots of levels,”* said one leader. *“But it could be better. It needs more flexibility. If one district doesn’t like the collection frequency it has an impact on how it all runs. Everyone should adhere to harmonised collections and what you can recycle in one place shouldn’t be different from what can be recycled somewhere else.”*

Planning

Several interviewees praised the Partnership for South Hampshire, which involves the leaders of Solent area local authorities working together. We were told it has made ‘brave decisions’ on planning, housing and economic development, and played a key role in setting up Solent LEP. One comment was: *“It’s a good instance of subsidiarity - what can be done at the lowest level,*

“There has been much intertwined collaboration on industrial strategies, and we have all engaged in conversations.”

should be done there. "There are detractors though. *"It is partly successful,"* one councillor said. *"It worked well when there was money around, but it has a difficult relationship with the county council. It can be an unhappy forum for planning disputes."* A further commentator put it like this: *"The biggest impediment to moving south Hampshire forward is the officer-led culture of the county council. Too much command and control. They won't give up their boney grasp."*

Joining up

Shared services in parts of the region offer further evidence of collaboration, both within local government and with health and education partners and the voluntary sector.

Examples of the 'joining up' of activities given by interviewees include policing, fire and rescue, planning, legal services, a local care board, children's services, town centre regeneration, council housing waiting lists, transport policy, university research and the auditing of coastal defence resilience.

BCP

The recent local government reorganisation in Dorset, with the creation of BCP, was also cited as collaboration in action. *"It creates a punchier region, able to do more things and it has more clout when you are trying to get the ear of government,"* was one comment.

Potential gains: health planning, sustainable transport, green infrastructure

Improvements in the planning of health services, sustainable transport and green infrastructure were identified as examples of where stronger

collaboration would bring about the greatest potential gains.

Local decisions

A number of interviewees cited frustration with engaging the NHS on healthcare provision in plans for housing and area development.

"The NHS is the most difficult organisation to deal with," one speaker said. *"Its large centralised structure means not much decision making is devolved locally. We experience delays when we ask questions. We always have to await instructions from the top. One of the most frustrating things is infrastructure, putting land aside for GP surgeries and healthcare centres when you are developing areas. They say they don't need bricks and mortar but haven't looked ten years ahead. They could say to us, 'we need a section 102 contribution to fund services rather than buildings', but they don't."*

Another commentator said: *"We have to drag the NHS in to consider healthcare provision when we're looking at development."*

Faster travel

On rail transport, one interviewee said: *"Years ago our travel time from Waterloo used to be 100 minutes. There is now a less efficient service. It takes 114 minutes when really it should be under 90. This has an obvious knock-on impact for attracting investment and business to our area. We need to have far more say on our travel systems, both road and rail."*

Devolution

Key points at a glance:

- Individual leaders tend to have a clear idea of the powers they would like devolved
- Most favour a formal or statutory framework for co-operation
- They do not want imposed structures or leadership models
- Most agreed we should start from where we are now and build up collaboration

Our interviews confirmed there are a range of opinions about the potential for regional devolution, with some lingering sensitivity about the failure of earlier proposals to government.

In the words of one of our interviewees: *“Area-wide collaboration took a huge knock after the previous devolution bid fractured.”*

If ‘levelling up’ equals some form of devolution, what would the central South hope to gain in terms of powers and resources?

The economy

One answer was clear: *“The main employment sectors in our area are health and social care, tourism and hospitality, finance and insurance, advanced manufacturing and engineering, and arts and culture. We should have the resources to support all these key industries. We should be able*

to direct what happens.”

And a further speaker listed the following as areas where devolved powers and greater local authority control would have an especially positive impact: *“Transport and infrastructure, sector-led employment training, back-to-work training and unemployment support. All of these are too fragmented at the moment.*

Devolution can make a real difference to people if we can use it to be more focused, responding to economic needs and inequality. If we have more clout to speak to industry sectors and they tell us what they need, we can speak to the schools to get skills improved.”

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Environment

There was a view that greater collaboration locally could balance road development with safeguarding the green belt. One comment was: *“We need to build but it’s important to have green infrastructure with statutory protection. More local powers would help us achieve the most positive environmental impact.”*

The potential for devolution to deepen the scope and reach of net zero carbon neutrality ambitions was championed by at least one leader. *“We want to be transformative,”* they said, referring to a ‘green city charter’, designed to make their city cleaner, greener, healthier and more sustainable. *“We’re focused on green growth while achieving net zero.*

We want to overturn 60 years of car dominance by transforming our transport system and improving public transport links. Devolution could improve the potential scope and impact that our green charter and focus on green growth and net zero will have."

Housing

Another was equally firm on setting the context for housing targets: *"We should have the power to set housing numbers in our local plan. We should be able to define the local plan to reflect the wishes of local people. We should also be able to create a geography of health and social care co-operation that works for us. That could include the ability of local authorities at upper tier level to merge with CCGs. If need be, we push people to work together. In education as well, there should be a legal requirement for councils, academy chains and schools to cooperate two-way. Everyone supporting each other."*

"We should have the power to set housing numbers in our local plan. We should be able to define the local plan to reflect the wishes of local people."

Transport

Another said: *"Devolution would help us play in those areas where we don't currently play such as sustainable transport and linking to travel routes in and out of the region. We feel we are currently constrained in what we can do."*

Finance

One officer said their area was disadvantaged in funding terms but felt its financial settlement issue could be

resolved through the devolution process.

The public impact of devolution

Despite their general support for devolution, our respondents understood the difficulty of generating public support.

One said: *"It would be up to local politicians to sell it. You might argue that a rejuvenated town centre is an easy sell but that's not the case when you're talking about, say, moving to countywide bin collection. We need to recognise that it's the councils who are responsive and manage their areas best who succeed."*

Another offered this thought: *"In the public mind, local authority stock has never been higher, because of the collaboration and the actions we took in the pandemic. But people think about services, not structures or power bases. If it makes my life easier, or I can have lower council tax, then I'm interested. The single mum, struggling on benefits and worried about the future, isn't thinking about how to tweak the machinery of government or how regional devolution should be structured in ten years' time. There should be more of an acceptance by public sector players that they are not the place - it is the people who live in a place not the local authority."*

Potential framework ideas

There are a variety of potential frameworks for authorities working

together under devolution across England. We asked our leaders if they would prefer an informal arrangement about co-operation, a legally established combined authority under statute or something in between.

Responses included:

"Potential frameworks need to be legally established so they are not dependent on personal relationships that change when political leaders come in or there is a change of ruling party."

"Delicate, baby steps are needed. There should be a modest agenda around which we can all unite. It should involve areas when we know we can pull together such as infrastructure, police and fire. Other areas with devolution have that."

"We could develop two proposals: one, a large Hampshire-wide combined authority; and two, a smaller combined authority model based around sub-regional division. I have no problem with a combined authority in which the existing local authorities all play a constituent part - a combined deal without any local government reorganisation. There is not a great swathe of people having a debate about local government reorganisation. That's far away from the public narrative."

"Local government won't volunteer to be unitarised and we don't want powers to be taken away. The planning framework should continue to exist as it is."

"It would always be difficult to get buy-in from a county council if you proposed more than one combined authority in their council area. There would also be nerves among districts. One unitary for Hampshire would be ridiculous, too big, too remote."

Should we have a Mayor?

Whether the central South should have an elected Mayor is a sensitive question and our interviewees reflected this. Responses were varied and included the following:

"An elected mayor for Hampshire would be a challenge. The cities are very different from the rural areas. What goes on in Andover and Basingstoke is very different from the Solent."

"An elected mayor for Hampshire would be a challenge. The cities are very different from the rural areas. What goes on in Andover and Basingstoke is very different from the Solent. Southampton has greater links with Bournemouth than the north of the county."

"Where is the added value? Yes, it can be a single point of contact we can blame when things go wrong but how can it be devolution if it is set by national government. In Greater Manchester you have a dozen or so authorities who are more similar to each other than authorities are here. One of the beauties of our area is the diversity. Also, in Manchester they hate London and that's a very unifying force. We don't have that. In the West Midlands I believe the Mayor has a cleverly disempowered role. It's very dependent on the different local authorities and surely, it's better to simplify. Why

complicate it? People care about investment and effective, efficient public services, not bureaucracy.”

“I think they (the Government) will mandate a Mayor again and leave it to the local authorities to work out the best approach.”

“We should make the most of the existing arrangements we have. Local authority leaders already have a democratic mandate. If we don’t have to commit to a metro Mayor, I don’t see why we can’t start discussions about devolution.”

“Combine us by making us work across boundaries but don’t make us disappear.”

“A Mayor would work best in a larger area covering Hampshire, Dorset and Wiltshire, perhaps in strong collaboration with Sussex too. Big and powerful. Otherwise, you confuse the role with towns and cities where ceremonial Mayors have civic responsibilities only. We should go for a big regional powerhouse.”

“We’ve got to have a legal framework but not a Mayor. Whatever we do has to be sustainable and have a sense of ownership and collectivism. We need flexibility but also a stringent governance structure for accountability, so formalised but not overly bureaucratic.”

Health and social care reform

The government’s promise to reform the relationship between the NHS and social care reflects the challenge of organising and paying for social care and ensuring its integration with the NHS.

The need for reform of social care has been well articulated for decades, but it has proved an elusive challenge for successive governments. In such an advanced economy as the UK, it is quite simply a prolonged public policy failure that

continues to make individuals and their families suffer. It is exacerbated by chronic workforce issues in the NHS and social care services. In addition, expectations of any kind of ‘Brexit dividend’ for the NHS have so far had to be reined back.

Engaging with the NHS

Most of our interviewees believed that the health and social care system does not work and there is dire need for a fully funded, long-term plan with workforce support. Leaders spoke of their strong desire to work more closely with the NHS on these issues, but they also regarded the NHS as a difficult organisation to engage with.

“We’ve lived for ever with a health and social care system that doesn’t integrate,” said one interviewee. *“There is no surprise it doesn’t work now. It would be great if we could have more*

integration in a geography that works. The NHS operates on a one-size-fits-all basis. It's brilliant at providing care but disastrous at organising. There should be more freedom to have different solutions in different places based on outcomes that are validated and supported."

This difficult relationship had been illustrated by the initial handling of the pandemic by Westminster and the NHS and the pressure on councils to respond. One speaker said: *"In first wave of the pandemic, the decision the NHS took to remove people from hospitals to private nursing and care homes caused a huge transmission of the virus. They took Covid with them even if asymptomatic. It was a disaster, lives were lost. In the second wave, we set up isolation units run by the council for two weeks before they were demonstrably clear to go back to a nursing home. It was hugely successful. There were far fewer outbreaks."*

Despite the problems, the pandemic had also demonstrated the potential for improved collaboration. *"Covid strengthened the case for bringing health and social care together,"* said one leader. *"The pandemic showed we can take homeless people off the streets. It was hugely expensive, but the crisis taught us you can do it."*

Clear structures

Our interviewees wanted clear structures within which local government and NHS health co-operation can take place.

One said: *"Health is the centre of everything but the delivery structure is ridiculous. You have CCGs, the primary care network and a whole range of organisations with different budgets, responsibilities, structures, processes*

and budgets. We find we are constantly battling organisations and structures. It's an under-funded mess. Add to that the complexity of local government and you can see that often it's only made to work because people with a real desire to get somewhere have to break down the barriers first."

Strategic prevention

All the leaders placed strategic importance on preventative health, social care and planning for the future. They agreed that any efficiencies achieved through health and social care reform should be directed towards investment in the preventative agenda. One interviewee argued: *"There isn't a perfect solution in practice but prevention has to be the focus, whether that's better education to avoid teenage pregnancies or encouraging people to lose weight or stop smoking. There are good relationships in our region to achieve better outcomes. We need to keep helping each other and at the same time NHS organisations have to come together and speak to each other too."*

Several spoke of stepping back altogether from structures and processes and looking at the issue of health and social care in a wider context. One leader said: *"We should be about joining up more on prevention. That involves wellbeing, mental health, physical health, the built environment, building healthy communities, open spaces and parks, healthy eating. The longer we live healthily, the less call we will have on the primary care network and hospital."*

Another comment was: *"We need to look at healthcare from the bottom up and reduce patient numbers first. It's about healthy lifestyles. We should all*

be championing the concepts of living well, ageing well and dying well. But I don't believe dying well is funded properly through the health system. Hospices keep people out of hospital but they are not part of NHS trusts. They rely on grants and legacies such as Mountbatten and are constantly trying to get funding for services. We will not get integration right until we agree we are on the same agenda."

Retaining powers and funding

The government should not try to achieve closer cooperation by shifting power from local authorities to the NHS. Funding is a major issue for councils tasked with responsibility for social care and it needs to be maintained and enhanced.

"One single individual with complex needs can cost millions and that's the challenge," said one interviewee. Another said: "We are being asked to fund things we were never meant to. There needs to be much more of an equal partnership with shared funding responsibilities. And this isn't just about health or local authorities somehow being partners within the NHS."

Funding for future public health emergencies should best made on the basis it will be allocated jointly, said one respondent, arguing: *"We should have 'local outbreak boards' made up of democratically elected councillors and NHS representatives working together on management plans. They can say 'here is how we will deal with flare-ups and these are our governance structures'".*

"We don't want social care to be a second-class citizen. We all need to recognise the primacy of social care."

Place shaping

Interviewees argued that local authorities have a key role in supporting local communities that the NHS is ill-equipped to play.

One speaker said: *"It's really interesting from a local authority perspective because prevention at scale really only happens through place shaping. That's*

the way to stop problems before they happen. But the NHS doesn't know how to do place shaping. Local authorities are far better at

that. I think local authorities could do more to reduce pressure on the NHS, make lives better for people and help with rehabilitation but there has to be better integration if we are to take on more responsibilities and more involvement."

A further speaker was keen to differentiate between 'NHS bureaucracy' and what 'actually happens on the ground', saying: *"Councils and CCGs in our region have really good relationships. There is a really good sense of place that we don't want to dilute. We have to tailor what we do to accommodate people's different situations, from an elderly person beginning to suffer arthritis in a rural part of Hampshire to a teenager becoming pregnant in inner-city Southampton. At the same time, we can find that the NHS sometimes has an accountability problem. The voice of the patient, the local authority resident in the room, can be sorely lacking."*

Reflecting similar thoughts, another leader said: *"We are a very small council but we are passionate about doing the right thing by our communities. We are optimistic about having a stronger engagement with NHS. We are willing to listen to new voices and have frank, open conversations. It's complicated stuff. We don't want social care to be a second-class citizen. We all need to recognise the primacy of social care. At the same time, we need to remove the competitive pressures within the NHS. Having freestanding trusts competing with each other just doesn't make sense. We are a decade late in undoing the disaster of the Lansley reforms."*

Democracy and accountability

The same interviewee highlighted the gap between NHS and local government accountability: *"It would help to show more democratic accountability of the NHS at a local level. Ministers may not be happy to 'devolve' the NHS to local areas but I would welcome that 'democratic localist' approach. It would also help local authorities to be taken more seriously by the NHS. Currently local government in England doesn't have the range of public health powers you see in other countries."*

Workforce

On the workforce issues facing both the NHS and social care, interviewees were clear that more funding is needed. *"How do you make social care an attractive career?"* asked one speaker. *"When an ASDA opened in one of our towns five or six years ago, it drew local people away from working in social care because the supermarket paid better. On top of that you have disparity in wages between care assistants in*

social care and those don't have a workforce that swaps between the two. Until that problem is solved, we won't have integration. And integrating properly resourced teams is the best way to break down barriers."

Conclusion: we need to talk

We are a region with bold ambitions. One interviewee spoke of their vision of a *'well-connected, world-class powerhouse focused on people's wellbeing and with more ability to invest'*. They see devolution as a golden opportunity to achieve that.

Others are fearful because of the legacy of previous devolution bids. Those leaders with lingering unease sense devolution could be a potential distraction from existing collaboration and want to avoid any risk of an unnecessary shake-up of the local government landscape.

At the same time, and as shown in the huge amount of collaboration to help communities get through the pandemic, our local leaders already work with each other extremely well.

As the interviews indicate, there is a sense of shared ambition and responsibility around the integration of NHS health and local government social care, and there is broad consensus on the benefits of many aspects of devolution.

Whatever the point of view, more discussions need to happen. While its exact place in the government's 'levelling up' plans is as yet unclear, the issue of devolution for the central South is back on the agenda for debate.

If you would like to share any thoughts on the subjects of collaboration, devolution or health and social care

reform in the central South, contact our General Manager Ruth Eastwood at ruth.eastwood@southernpolicycentre.co.uk. For more information on the work of the Southern Policy Centre, visit www.southernpolicycentre.co.uk.

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About Southern Policy Centre

Southern Policy Centre was established in 2014 as the independent think-tank for the region of central southern England. We focus broadly on the area from Dorset to West Sussex and the Isle of Wight to Oxfordshire.

The region is often not recognised by central government and SPC exists to try and redress this by providing a politically neutral, constructively critical space for discussion on issues that affect the region.

SPC specialises in improving public policy making by conducting research into the social challenges facing society and we have established a strong reputation for leading public debate and setting the agenda across a wide range of regional issues.

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