

South East England Councils (SEEC) response

APPG Devolution inquiry: *the role that central government has in making a success of devolution in England*



“The Conservative Party 2019 General Election manifesto outlined a commitment to “devolving power to people and places across the UK”.

The manifesto said its ambition was for full devolution across England, with proposals set to be outlined in an English Devolution White Paper. It is disappointing that paper has not transpired.

While we appreciate that the government’s bandwidth has and will continue to be consumed with the coronavirus pandemic, local authorities the length and breadth of the England, and not least in the south east are concerned the proposals are not reduced to local government re-organisation rather than a genuine devolution of powers from the centre to the regions.

Local councils have risen to the challenges brought about by Covid-19, and years of austerity, by continuing to provide essential services to residents and leading on local recovery efforts. Councils have demonstrated that if you put faith in local leaderships they will deliver.

England remains one of the most centralised nations so there is a need to bring real powers and responsibilities closer to local areas, and devolution certainly must not happen and would not be meaningful without fiscal devolution.

Cllr Roy Perry, Chair, South East England Councils

1. Introduction

1.1 This response is from South East England Councils (SEEC) a cross-party, voluntary membership association recognised as a regional group by the Local Government Association (LGA). SEEC brings together District, Unitary and County councils to promote the views and interests of all tiers of local government across the South East. The majority of the 70 local authorities across the region are members of SEEC.

1.2 SEEC welcomes the opportunity to respond this inquiry into devolution. During the coronavirus pandemic, councils the length and breadth of the UK have adapted, and risen to, the challenges brought about by Covid-19, by continuing to provide essential services to residents and leading on local recovery efforts. Councils have demonstrated that if you put faith in local leaderships they will deliver.

1.3 It should be noted that this response is a compendium of feedback received from our member councils. If any clarification or further detail is required on any point raised, the SEEC secretariat would be delighted to help facilitate this. Our response summarises the views of our members and of SEEC as an organisation more broadly.

1.4 This response will also reflect some comments of member council representatives that participated in an online event with the chair of APPG Devolution, Andrew Lewer MP on 24 November 2020.

SEEC correspondence address

South East England Councils
First Floor, Council Offices, Argyle Road, Sevenoaks, TN13 1HG



2.0 Existing barriers to devolution

2.1. What barriers currently exist in central government that limit the scope and scale of local devolution and place-based leadership?

2.1.1 It has been suggested that a lack of coordination within Government departments acts as a barrier to form a coherent strategy for genuine devolution¹. Devolution is much more than the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, other departments must also play a vital role too, for example, Department for Transport (sub-national transport bodies), Department for Education (skills and apprenticeships), Treasury (fiscal devolution) and the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (local industrial strategies).

2.1.2 Despite the Government having the bandwidth to publish revised housing and planning proposals, the Government is yet to publish its long-awaited Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper. Arguably this is a more important document that will enable councils the length and breadth of the England to continue to provide essential services – as they have done throughout the pandemic – while also providing them with the resources to they need to plan for future.

2.1.3 SEEC was therefore concerned that buried towards the end of the recently published National Infrastructure Strategy document, the Devolution White Paper is now not expected to be published for up to twelve months².

2.1.4 However, given the delay to the publication of the White Paper, we would strongly urge the Government to undertake thorough listening exercise with local authorities, by embarking on an extensive period of engagement with councillors. This would help ensure that when the White Paper is finally unveiled it will genuinely reflect the views of those it will impact.

2.2. Has a focus on establishing new governance arrangements as a precursor to devolution unnecessarily slowed the pace of devolution?

2.2.1 A simple reorganisation of local government must not be sole driver of the Government's devolution agenda. In our view, local councils will be more effective and better able to serve their residents if Government devolves additional powers and responsibilities to them. However, and perhaps most critically, any future arrangements must come with fiscal devolution, providing individual council with tax and spend powers.

2.2.2 While we recognise that South East is relatively prosperous area, in comparison to its Northern counterparts, the South East does have areas of deprivation too. The Government would do well to factor this into their thinking when devising their proposals for recovery from Covid-19 – levelling up must not be carried out at the expense of the South East. Every region of England has its own distinctive assets, all of which bolster the nation's economy – the South East for instance has its strategic ports which act as gateways to world, for people and goods.

2.3. Understanding the Whitehall perspective – are there areas where devolving power and responsibility would make delivering national policy harder?

2.3.1 One local authority suggested that in times of national crisis, such as the pandemic, a centralised approach to decision-making may be preferable to combat a crisis. Andy Burnham's dispute with central Government over lockdown across Greater Manchester was cited.

¹ Discussion among member councils during on online event with Andrew Lewer MP, chair of the APPG on Devolution on 24 November 2020.

² HM Treasury: National Infrastructure Strategy pp. 94:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/938539/NIS_Report_Web_Accessible.pdf

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2.3.2 In addition, one of the main criticisms levelled at devolution is that you get postcode lottery, with some areas getting more than others, which is an inevitable by-product of devolution. Though, democratic accountability must be placed at the heart of devolution, while enabling one region to learn from another's mistakes or successes.

2.4. Are there areas Whitehall believes it should be devolving more promptly?

2.4.1 Given the bid has already been submitted to the Department for Transport, a quick win here would be granting Transport for the South East (TfSE) statutory status³ (like that of TfL). This would provide an ideal vehicle to develop coherent and effective transport policies that reflect the needs of the South East regional as whole. Currently, there is concern that the transport secretary Grant Shapps has signalled his intentions to block this bid⁴. It is critical that the government grant TfSE statutory status, as it will give the transport body "direct influence over government decision-making on transport issues and the powers needed to deliver major improvements to the South East's transport network". **Granting TfSE statutory status would go some way to reassuring members here in the South East of the Government's commitment to devolve powers and responsibilities to the South East.**

2.4.2 If Government did decide to pursue a network of statutorily designated sub-national transport boards, this would further underline the need for a codified and structured approach to future Local Government relationships with the centre.

2.5. What changes would enable better working between local and central government in their approach to devolution?

2.5.1 Any approach to devolution must be locally led, as opposed to top down, with the views of residents, councillors' businesses taken into consideration. It is for this reason, SEEC have commenced a survey – which will be published biannually – seeking views on several pertinent issues, from transport and skills to devolution and housing, of members of the public, business decision-makers and councillors across the region⁵.

2.5.2 In order to develop better link between MPs and Whitehall, SEEC is establishing an APPG for the South East, similar to the APPG for London, to provide a forum for MPs and Peers to work together on a cross-party basis to strengthen voice of the South East in Parliament. The purpose of this group would be to promote the South East in the interests of all residents, councillors, and businesses throughout the South East.

2.5.3 However, fundamentally, any changes local and central government approach to devolution, must be locally led from the communities up, as opposed to imposed from the top down – residents buy-in on future changes are critical. Recent polling conducted for SEEC by SavantaComRes⁶ found that while 69 per cent of the public felt they belonged to the place they lived, only 37 per cent said that felt they had a say over important decisions affected their area. Furthermore – referencing the same poll⁷ – 59 per cent said changes were needed to their area – emphasising the need residents to have a greater say over potential future changes that impact their respective area.

2.5.4 A proposals which could be explored in further detail and would have to coincided with

³ <https://transportforthesoutheast.org.uk/tfse-news/south-east-submits-bid-for-transport-devolution-to-boost-economic-recovery-and-accelerate-green-transport-revolution/>

⁴ <http://transport-network.co.uk/Shapps-blocks-TfSE-application-for-statutory-status/16923>

⁵ South East 1,000 Biannual Monitor, Autumn 2020: <https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/2020/10/south-east-england-councils-1000-biannual-regional-monitor-autumn-2020/>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid



any potential reform of the House of Lords, is to for the second chamber to include elected local council representatives – an idea like that of the French Senate. In theory this would provide the basis for elected councillors to reformed upper house to have direct access to Westminster while enabling them to scrutinise government legislation.

2.6. What could be improved in government departments' approach to devolution?

2.6.1 A member council said that the MHCLG have been good engaging through pandemic, though there is a feeling that this has been one-way street, with MHCLG telling councils what to do, instead of a productive two-way dialogue. The same member council said that they needed reassurance that the MHCLG had influence on Government decision-making.

2.6.2 One local authority member said that the Treasury really needs to understand local government finance and its real impact on every resident. It is viewed that the Local Government Association (LGA) have done great job of raising this but still does not feel it hits home as not as obvious as things like Education and NHS – as they rely on local government partnership – councils are the glue in communities and all government departments need to recognise this.

2.7. Are there changes that would enable government departments to take a more consolidated approach to devolution?

2.7.1 The Government Offices of the Regions were an effective way of bringing together government departments away from Whitehall and created, at their best, opportunities to be a voice of the region in government, not just a voice of government in the region. Ultimately, all Government departments need to relate more closely to local democratic councils, with a good starting being the NHS, with Health and Wellbeing Boards given more power.

2.8. What barriers exist at national government level to the delivery of housing?

2.8.1 Recent polling of business decision-makers, members of the public and councillors in the South East revealed that overall, 42 per cent found lack of available land in the in their area as a barrier to building more homes⁸. Meanwhile – as part of the same poll – overall, 32 per cent of all respondents regarded the planning system as the main barrier. However, only 1 in 5 councillors (18%) felt the planning system was the main barrier.

2.8.2 With the Government recently consulting on reforms⁹ to planning there is an important point for Ministers to take from this – if less than one in five councillors do not see a problem with the current planning system, then why expend so much political capital to change it?

2.8.3 In our response to the MHCLG's *Changes to the Current Planning System* consultation we raised several concerns, notably the proposed reforms distracted attention from the need for more affordable housing, with most councils, irrespective of party, across the South-East want to see government focus and energy prioritised on increasing investment in housing for rent and sale, not on dismantling the existing planning system¹⁰.

⁸ SavantaComRes polling for South East England Councils (SEEC of 1,043 people (261 councillors, 278 business decision-makers and 504 members of the public) between the 4 and 17 September 2020 for SEEC Regional Biannual Monitor (August) <https://www.seecouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/South-East-1000-Doc.pdf>

⁹ Through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's *Planning for the Future White Paper* and the *Changes to the Current Planning System*.

¹⁰ <https://www.seecouncils.gov.uk/2020/10/seec-criticises-government-over-planning-system-proposals/>



2.8.5 SEEC is a signatory to the Local Government Associations “Keep Planning Local¹¹” campaign, which argued against taking further planning powers away from communities, while advocating that local communities must be heart of Covid-19 recovery efforts. Keeping planning local will help ensure that high quality affordable homes are built in the right places, supported by the right infrastructure, providing enough schools, promoting a greener and more active travel, while helping to tackle climate change.

2.9. What lessons can be learned about devolution from abroad?

2.9.1 If the term Devolution is not to be debased to become mere local government re-organisation it is crucial that reserved powers are adopted conferring powers, for example like the German Länder. **Member authorities have suggested going forward local government should be guaranteed be a constitutional settlement – along similar lines to that of Germany – to bring more stability and long-term solutions once change is made and greater clarity to councils¹².** Meaning: there is need for a constitutional framework for local government.

2.10. How can government ensure local and combined authorities have the capacity and skills to take on new responsibilities?

2.10.1 As SEEC have argued in this response, just devolving powers and responsibilities to local councils is not enough, the Government must also provide councils with additional tax and spend powers too, notably through fiscal devolution. Fiscal devolution would go some way to alleviating the uncertainty created by Government through their one-year finance settlements, which creates uncertainty, and prevents councils planning for the long-term.

2.10.2 Better financing of local government will be critical in enabling them to build back better from the pandemic while removing the cliff edge, brought about by the one-year finance settlements. This could be achieved through providing councils with additional fiscal levers, for example control over vehicle excise duty, the apprenticeship levy and air passenger duty. With the South East being a magnet for tourism, the region could capitalise on this by introducing a tourist tax. However, with the recent backlash following the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, proposing this, especially at this time as UK economy begins its recovery from Covid, this would very much be a proposal for the long-term.

2.10.3 Local autonomy is critical important and the need for buoyant sources of income and its lack thereof at present is a major flaw with present funding systems.

3.0 Lessons learned from English devolution

3.1. What lessons can be learnt from the negotiation of previous devolution deals and how they have worked in practice?

3.1.1 It is presumed that the current “devolution” deals are seemingly designed to help economic development and the “levelling up” agenda which is a worthy aim and to give some more direction in local areas, but it is open to question whether this is being achieved. The South East is not a metropolitan area and has no large city nucleus other than London.

¹¹ Local Government Association, Keep Planning Local: <https://www.local.gov.uk/keep-planning-local>

¹² Discussion among member councils during on online event with Andrew Lewer MP, chair of the APPG on Devolution on 24 November 2020.



The establishment of LEPs, Police and Crime Commissioners, STP and ICS for NHS, School Commissioners have led to an increasingly complex structure, fragmentation and in some respect's diminution of local democracy.

3.2. What case studies of central government best practice, and of bad practice, exist?

3.2.1 Up to now, successive government approaches to devolution have been rather piecemeal, therefore, consideration should be given to an English constitutional framework for local government – like that adopted in Germany (see paragraph 2.9).

3.2.2 One area where local government has drastically outperformed is on localised test and tracing, with local health protection teams reached 98.9 per cent of contacts of cases managed by them, compared to the national NHS test and trace system which only picks up an average of 6 in 10 contact of people that have tested positive¹³.

3.2.3 Throughout this pandemic, councils have demonstrated on numerous occasions that they know their communities best, and have an excellent record of delivery, the Government must reward this success by granting additional powers to local councils.

3.3. To what extent is there effective accountability in England's devolved areas?

3.3.1 Where there is an elected body, such as the London Mayor and Assembly, there is direct accountability for decision making. This is less effective, if it is at all, with Mayoral models outside of the London where the Mayor's only real accountability is at the ballot box after four years. Councillors therefore should be granted the power to remove a leader, ensuring more and real accountability.

3.3.2 We would argue – especially given scepticism of the Mayoral model here the South East¹⁴ - that a Royal Commission needs to be established to conduct a careful and independent objective review before the Mayoral model is extended.

3.3.3 In order to ensure that residents know who is responsible for their respective areas, great care must be taken to avoid boundary changes.

3.4. To what extent do combined authorities need greater control over devolved policy areas, such as skills or housing, to ensure they have enough responsibility to be held accountable for the economic performance of their areas?

3.4.1 Moving the powers and responsibility of the LEPs into Combined Authorities and reconstituting the LEP as the "Economic Development Board" of the Combined Authority, would give a route back to the ballot box that is at present lacking.

3.5. What lessons can be learnt from previous initiatives on adult education and skills budgets, and community budgets?

3.5.1 Further Education also needs to play a role more closely aligned to local councils and

¹³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/lga-responds-latest-weekly-test-and-trace-figures-0>

¹⁴ ComRes polling of South East Councillors for SEEC (July 2020): 69% of 275 councillors in the South East opposed the introduction of Metro Mayors in their area <https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SEEC-Survey-Sheet-5.pdf>

assessment of economic needs.



3.6. Has government struck the right balance between bespoke deals and a standardised devolution baseline, do things need to change for future deals?

3.6.1 Devolution should not be imposed in a uniform way, and the Government must recognise that all areas of England are different, therefore, devolution should not be imposed – rather it should be carried out in consideration of the differences of each area of England.

3.6.2 For example, while eight city regions currently have ‘metro’ mayors¹⁵, it should not be assumed that ‘metro’ mayors are suitable to all areas of England. As a survey of 275 councillors in the South East revealed: 69 per cent were opposed to introduction of ‘metro’ mayors in the South East¹⁶. There needs to be a careful and independent assessment of the role, value, and implications of directly elected mayors before there is any extension of that model.

3.6.3 Therefore, it is critical that the government in developing its proposals for English devolution, ministers reflect on the importance of local identities, communities, and links.

3.7. Is the focus on devolving powers related to growth and infrastructure, rather than, social services such as welfare and health still appropriate?

3.7.1 Ultimately, devolving powers must be about providing the wherewithal for local councils to deliver the best possible social services for residents while ensuring adequate infrastructure is in place to enable economic growth.

3.8. Which department is best placed to lead the process of greater devolution?

3.8.1 As mentioned previously: devolution must be about effective collaboration across multiple Government departments. While, naturally, the onus falls on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for delivery on the ground, other departments must also play a vital role too, for example, Department for Transport (sub-national transport bodies), Department for Education (skills and apprenticeships), Treasury (fiscal devolution) and the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (local industrial strategies). Though, the Cabinet Office will likely be best placed to fulfil the process of delivering greater devolution, so that it is all encompassing, and not just responsibility of MHCLG.

4.0 Looking forward – central government reform

4.1. What reforms are necessary to increase the scope and scale of devolution in England?

4.1.1 The Government urgently need to publish its delayed Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper, while councils across the South East will be eagerly anticipating the local government finance settlement for 2021-2022. Though, as previously mentioned, councils must be provided with greater long-term funding.

¹⁵ <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/everything-need-know-metro-mayors/#whatis>

¹⁶ Savanta ComRes online polling conducted on behalf of the South East England Councils between 13th-23 July 2020: <https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/2020/07/news-release-elected-metro-mayors-opposed-in-the-south-east/>

SEEC correspondence address

South East England Councils
First Floor, Council Offices, Argyle Road, Sevenoaks, TN13 1HG



4.2. Should the powers of the existing mayoral combined authorities be enhanced? What would this look like?

4.2.1 Devolution should not be imposed in a uniform way, and the Government must recognise that all areas of England are different, therefore, devolution should not be imposed – rather it should be carried out in consideration of the differences of each area in England. As mentioned in section 3.6, metro mayors are not necessarily appropriate for all of the England.

4.3. How can we ensure that devolution delivers better outcomes for all communities?

4.3.1 Based on recent polling of business decision-makers, councillors, and members of the public, it is clear that all three cohorts have a strong sense of connection with their existing local area (see figure 1), with councillors in particular expressing strong links to their respective communities.

Fig. 1¹⁷

I FEEL A STRONG CONNECTION TO MY LOCAL AREA	AGREE 64%	DISAGREE 15%
Public	51%	20%
Businesses	59%	17%
Councillors	93%	4%

4.3.2 While councillors have indicated that they have a say over important decisions in their area, it is clear (see fig. 2) that public seem to be excluded from the decision-making process in their respective communities across the South East – something which would need to be addressed by government when developing their proposals for the Devolution White Paper.

Fig. 2¹⁸

I FEEL LIKE I HAVE A SAY OVER IMPORTANT DECISIONS THAT AFFECT MY AREA	AGREE 37%	DISAGREE 41%
Public	24%	48%
Businesses	32%	45%
Councillors	67%	25%

4.3.4 With close to two thirds (64%) of those polled feeling a strong connection with their existing area, it is clear that any future devolution settlement must make “place” at its heart.

4.4. How can arrangements be enhanced so that combined authorities can take responsibility for economic outcomes in their region?

4.4.1 One proposal recently suggested by Tony Travers, professor at the London School of

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid



Economics during a discussion among SEEC member councils is **to create voluntary combined authorities throughout the region**, as the South East could not be easily defined in the same way as city regions there was a need for councils to find a single voice.”¹⁹

4.5. To what extent is improved control over funding and fiscal decentralisation key to the success of devolution?

4.5.1 A recent Localis/Local Government Association report on Fiscal Devolution²⁰ revealed that England remains one of the most centralised nations in the world, despite consecutive governments pledging to devolve power and responsibilities down to local councils.

4.5.2 English Devolution has been piecemeal up to present, therefore, with the Government set to unveil its much delayed English Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper in the next twelve months, it's time for a genuine devolution with autonomy that empowers local people to have a real say.

4.5.3 That means much more than ministers simply handing out pots of money – as that would leave any so-called devolved area even more dependent on Whitehall. Each English region is different – not all are metropolitan conurbations.

4.5.4 The Conservative Party's manifesto commitment to deliver full devolution must see more Town Hall and less Whitehall, meaning: **devolution which devolves powers and responsibilities to local areas, must come complete with fiscal powers too.**

4.5.5 This is evidence by recent polling which found that overall business decision-makers, councillors and the public wanted to see taxes and levies managed or raised in their local area²¹ - for example:

- Almost a half (48%) believe Vehicle Excise Duty (car tax) should be within their area
- 43% overall, want the Apprenticeship Levy kept locally
- 44% overall, believe that Business Rates take should stay within their area

4.5.7 It must be recognised – as with devolution – business rates reform has been piecemeal up till now, therefore, we would urge the Government to accelerate business rates reform to ensure it is both fit for the 21st Century.

4.5.8 Councils play a huge role in the lives of residents and communities. Managing a diverse range of responsibilities places a significant burden on representatives and officers engaged in local authority financial planning.

4.5.9 Throughout Covid-19, Councils have been paramount; leading delivery of essential services and guidance. However, this has brought substantial additional cost; adding pressure to local authorities facing Covid impacted local incomes.

¹⁹ <https://www.themj.co.uk/South-east-urged-to-find-its-voice/218956>

²⁰ <http://localis.org.uk/research/fiscal-devolution-an-international-approach/>

²¹ SavantaComRes polling for South East England Councils (SEEC of 1,043 people (261 councillors, 278 business decision-makers and 504 members of the public) between the 4 and 17 September 2020 for SEEC Regional Biannual Monitor (August) <https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/South-East-1000-Doc.pdf>

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4.5.10 The annual determination of funding to local government from central government is a process often leaving Councils lacking certainty, until the last moment, on how local services will be funded in the coming year.

4.5.11 As Government contemplates a national recovery from Coronavirus a new approach to local government financing must be a core component. Ideas abound with some citing other countries systems as models. However, each English region has different needs and requirements. In the South East consideration could be given to a Finance Commission, similar to that chaired by Professor Tony Travers to explore what fiscal responsibilities the capital region needed to deliver public services and invest in infrastructure

4.6. How can devolution be secured for those parts of England that have so far been left out of this agenda?

4.6.1 In order to help ensure that a future potential devolution deal reflects the needs and wishes of the wider South East, South East England Councils (SEEC) proposed establishing a APPG for South East. This APPG would aim to work together on a cross-party basis to strengthen the voice for the wider South East. As the only formally recognised regional grouping of the Local Government Association, SEEC would propose fulfilling the secretariat role for this APPG.

4.7. Should local authorities be given more powers to support infrastructure delivery?

4.7.1 SEEC believes that investment in transport is vital to unlocking housing development, creating jobs and boost economic growth. As such, we welcomed and supported our regions local transport body, Transport for the South East's (TfSE) bid to the Department for Transport to become a statutory sub-national transport body²². However, we are therefore concerned by recent comments in the press by both the secretary of state, Grant Shapps²³ and minister, Baroness Vere that have potentially moved to block this bid.

4.7.2 As we highlighted in our South East 1,000 Biannual Regional Monitor²⁴, regional sub-national transport bodies need recognition and support [from Government] to address pressing road and rail network priorities alongside developing resilient link to and from the region's multiple air and seaports of entry. We would, therefore, urge the Government to reconsider, and move at grant TfSE statutory status as soon as possible.

4.7.3 In addition, with Climate Change rightly given increased prominence across Government, it is critical that local authorities are not left out of the discussion, as policy changes in this area will inevitably impact on councils and their residents.

4.7.4 Finally, there must be an acceleration in digital infrastructure²⁵ investment, especially given the rapid rise of remote working brought about by the pandemic – a trend that is likely to persist for foreseeable future.

4.8. As part of the Project Speed initiative, how can Whitehall enable local government

²² <https://transportforthesoutheast.org.uk/2020/07/22/transport-for-the-south-east-submits-bid-for-statutory-status/>

²³ <http://www.transport-network.co.uk/Shapps-blocks-TfSE-application-for-statutory-status/16923>

²⁴ South East 1,000 Biannual Monitor (Autumn 2020): <https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/South-East-1000-Doc.pdf>

²⁵ 80% of 275 councillors polling in the South East ranked investment in digital infrastructure a high priority for post-Covid19 Savanta ComRes online polling conducted on behalf of the South East England Councils between 13th-23 July 2020:

<https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/2020/07/news-release-elected-metro-mayors-opposed-in-the-south-east/>

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to deliver infrastructure projects such as schools, housing, and hospitals at pace?

4.8.1 It is important for the government to recognise that shovel ready schemes and projects that were previously suited to the UK's needs, may not now be needed or relevant in a post-Covid-19 economy. As the country embarks on its road to recovery, an assessment of these shovel ready project should be made, to ensure that each scheme that goes ahead reflects the current needs of the UK, as it enters a post-Covid-19 era.

4.8.2 Consequently, Project Speed must align to the Government's stated priorities for an inclusive, 'green' recovery, and should reflect the new realities and patterns of demand which have sustained beyond the lockdown.

4.9. What could be done to improve the way central government departments co-ordinate and develop place-specific policy interventions?

4.9.1 In conjunction with the above-mentioned APPG for the South East, the region should also seek to establish a South East Research Group of MPs – which would operate alongside similar lines to that of the Northern Research Group of MPs²⁶ – acting as advocate group for the South East.

4.9.2 Working in collaboration both could be used a vehicle to promote the regions agenda to ministers and across various Government department across Whitehall.

4.10. Should local government have a more formal role in the development of national policy?

4.10.1 In most countries with a Second Chamber of their Parliament (albeit not USA) there is a formal presence of local government – e.g., the French Senate. Therefore, an argument could be made for the House of Lords to be reformed, so that it contains a representative group of the members drawn from local councils.

4.10.2 Accountability for national policies must rest with Parliament, however, more effective consultation in policy development based on evidence, rather rubber stamp consultation on Green and White Papers where the Government clearly has a stated position, would be welcome.

4.11. What has the response to COVID-19 from Whitehall taught us about devolution?

4.11.1 Councils the length and breadth of the UK have adapted, and risen to, the challenges brought about by Covid-19, by continuing to provide essential services to residents and leading on local recovery efforts.

4.11.2 This is clearly evidenced by Covid-19 test and trace records, which have shown that local health protection teams have outperformed England's national test and trace system consistently throughout the pandemic²⁷, specifically regarding contacting those people that have tested positive for Covid-19 to ask them to self-isolate.

²⁶ <https://www.conservativehome.com/thetorydiary/2020/10/as-tory-mps-in-the-north-lobby-for-their-constituents-amidst-lockdowns-and-restrictions-the-northern-research-group-is-born.html>

²⁷ <https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4027>

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4.11.3 Councils have demonstrated that if you put faith in local leaderships they can deliver. This should be a reminder to Government that devolving further powers and responsibilities to local authorities can deliver better results for their respective residents.

4.11.4 Our members were also bolstered by comments made by Dame Carolyn Fairburn (then director-general of the Confederation of British Industry) when Dame Carolyn said: “businesses have ‘hugely valued the power of local government’, while adding: “we have seen the power of local delivery on PPE, on dispersal of funding. Before concluding that this was moment to “turbo charge” devolution²⁸.

4.11.5 Finally, following local authorities resolve and resilience in dealing with the pandemic, we would echo comments made by Sir Bob Kerslake that called on the Government to put “devolution at the heart of its Covid-19 recovery plans” while adding: “a failure to start the process of change now would be missing an enormous opportunity²⁹.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Secretariat

South East England Councils

e: communications@secouncils.gov.uk

²⁸ The MJ: “CBI back “turbo charged” devolution <https://www.themj.co.uk/CBI-backs-turbo-charged-devolution/218068>

²⁹ Building Design: Put devolution at centre of Covid-19 recovery plans, says Kerslake <https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/put-devolution-at-centre-of-covid-19-recovery-plans-says-kerslake/5107003.article>

SEEC correspondence address

South East England Councils

First Floor, Council Offices, Argyle Road, Sevenoaks, TN13 1HG