

CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND DEVOLUTION

Before coronavirus, the government promised a renewed focus on devolution of power to the English regions. *Joe Lepper* explores its impact on children's services to date and looks at what the future holds



Devolution of power to the English regions has increased in recent years through the creation of combined authorities, which offer councils the chance to set up formal regional collaborations.

But with combined authorities in differing stages of development their powers to support children's services remain piecemeal.

The vanguard of devolved support for

children and young people is the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). Set up in 2011, this was the first such super authority and young people are already benefitting from a range of collaborative systems across transport, health and social care (see case study box).

However, for the majority of combined authorities "devolution over children's services is a long way off", according to one government insider.

It is early days, explains Judith Blake, leader of Leeds City Council and chair of combined

authorities representative group Core Cities UK.

"UK cities and city regions are currently in the early stages of devolution and do not yet have the powers they need to really make a difference, particularly in complex areas like children's social care," she says.

Investment from central government is needed "alongside devolution" if it is to be effective in improving services, including those for children, adds Blake, who also chairs the Local Government Association's children and young people board.

MANCHESTER JOINT WORKING AND COMMISSIONING IMPROVES CHILDREN'S WELFARE

As England's first combined authority Greater Manchester has the luxury of almost a decade's worth of development.

This makes the combined authority well-placed to offer region-wide support for children and young people.

Formalising priorities through the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) children and young people's plan is central to its work, says Salford director of children's services (DCS) Charlotte Ramsden.

"The combined authority has galvanised the pace of supporting young people among statutory partners," she says.

"Having a really visible shared priority on supporting children and young people has certainly helped me as a DCS in my area with added opportunities and resources."

Ramsden has been particularly impressed by the GMCA's focus on improving child development in the early years.

Regular GMCA "school readiness summits" enable the area's councils, health and care bodies, and charities, to work together to improve child development and better target those children who are falling behind.

Latest evaluation shows the proportion of pupils who achieved a good level of development at reception age rocketed from 47.3 per cent to 68.2 per cent in the six years since 2013. The rate is still below, but far closer to, the national average of 71.8 per cent.

"In Greater Manchester, levels of good development at the end of reception for children eligible for free school meals have improved by four percentage points since 2015/16, a rate of improvement faster than for England as a whole," adds Ramsden.

The devolution of the region's NHS budget, which amounts to around £6bn a year, has made a big difference when it comes to services for children and young people.

This sees 12 NHS clinical commissioning

groups, 15 NHS providers and the area's 10 councils work together within a joint decision making agreement on children's wellbeing, in areas such as mental health.

It is estimated that 45 per cent of children in need of mental health support in Greater Manchester will be able to access services this year. This is already well above the government's nationwide target of 35 per cent next year.

Regional support for young people to access education and training is another area where GMCA involvement has proved useful.

This includes the introduction last year of the Our Pass travelcard, for 16- to 18-year-olds. For a one-off £10 fee young people can travel for free on all local buses across Greater Manchester as well as access cheaper tram travel.

The scheme launched in September 2019 and by January this year there had been 5.5 million journeys using the pass region-wide.

Creating opportunities for care leavers is another GMCA priority.

A Greater Manchester care leavers covenant and care leavers trust have been set up with commitments across the 10 council areas. This includes offering free public transport, which was piloted in December 2019 and started to be rolled out region-wide from January this year.

"We have corporate parenting responsibility in our local authorities, but we also have a corporate parenting approach at regional level, looking at what can be done as a combined authority to meet the needs of looked-after children and care leavers," says Ramsden.

"We also have a commitment to care leavers around employment, ensuring every care leaver has access to employment experience and the development of internships depending on what they are ready for."

For example, in an area with a large rural population, such as the West of England, challenges like poor digital connectivity and transport links, plus the "brain drain" caused by skilled people going to work elsewhere, may well be more of a priority.

Nevertheless, the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) has looked for ways to support young people as part of efforts to address transport and skills issues, explains West of England mayor Tim Bowles.

This has included setting up "careers hubs"



GMCA has a focus on improving child development

Further work is planned to establish commitments around housing for care leavers across the region.

The GMCA has also helped bring extra funding to the region to help children.

This includes Reform Investment Fund money to help ensure the Troubled Families programme, which targets disadvantaged families, is delivered across the region and links up with councils' early help services.

According to latest figures, 62 per cent of those supported through the programme are below the threshold for children in need or child protection interventions.

"Greater Manchester is the only area in the country that is delivering the Troubled Families programme at a city regional level," explains Ramsden.

Other additional children's services funding coming into the area through the combined authority includes £100,000 Local Digital Fund money last year, to improve data and evidence gathering on children in care.

across the region, which "link up schools and colleges with local business so that young people have better work experience opportunities and careers advice".

A Creative Workforce for the Future Programme has also been launched by WECA, to help small companies give more opportunities to young people.

Meanwhile, the WECA's Enterprise Adviser Network focuses on careers advice for school leavers.

"We are committed to giving young people »

Councils also have an integral part to play in ensuring support for children and young people is a priority during the development of their regional combined authority.

Councils are able to "set their own priorities, agendas and strategies" within devolution agreements, explains New Local Government Network (NLGN) senior policy researcher Pawda T'joa.

"Each area has its own challenges which would to an extent shape the devolution deal of the region," she says.



Liverpool launched its journey to become a Unicef Child-Friendly City in 2019, aiming to champion children's rights

“Power devolved is power shared with people and communities”

Pawda Tjoa, senior policy researcher, New Local Government Network



Children at Liverpool's Hackathon led by iamtheCODE

every opportunity to secure employment, and our enterprise advisers are an important part of making this happen,” says Bowles.

The Local Government Association (LGA) is in favour of combined authorities' prioritising careers support for young people. Latest figures show there are more than 750,000 young people classified as Neet (not in education, employment or training).

“Councils want to ensure every young person realises their full potential and supporting our young people to make an effective transition from education to employment must be a top priority,” says LGA city regions board chair Richard Leese.

“This means providing the right careers advice and guidance, and holistic support needed for every young person. Devolving careers advice, post-16 and skills budgets and powers to local areas would allow councils, schools, colleges and employers to work together to improve provision for young people so that they can get on in life.”

Meanwhile, in Greater Manchester's largely urban area, boosting children's access to health and early years services is a key priority.

According to Tjoa this creates “a safety net providing support to children and families that are on the edge of care, thus diverting them from the need to access acute care services”.

The devolved and integrated healthcare system in Greater Manchester has helped improve links between the NHS, youth services, early years and social care.

London has a similar approach, with a health devolution agreement in place for the Greater London Authority and the capital's boroughs and NHS organisations. This

includes prioritising London's childhood obesity rate, which is the highest of any similar global city.

Among challenges combined authorities and devolved organisations face is ensuring there is a clear strategy, agreed by all councils in the area, so that it offers genuine support rather than another layer of red tape.

Joint reviews to improve services

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) achieves this through ensuring the region's directors of children's services (DCSs) lead joint reviews to improve specific areas of children's services, such as educational welfare and fostering placements.

“The combined authority's constituent local authorities have worked together to review a wide range of areas in order to improve opportunities for, and the safeguarding of, children and young people in the city region,” said a LCRCA spokesman.

“Within the context of increasing demand for children and young people's social care and safeguarding, combined with reducing budgets, the areas reviewed were: adoption and fostering; children in care placements, looking at availability and cost; contextual safeguarding; educational attainment, especially maths and English; and looking at school attendance and children educated at home.”

He stresses that “work has been led by the six local authorities' directors of children's services, supported by the combined authority”.

GMCA also has a similarly clear strategy and is co-ordinating a needs assessment of children across the region.

This uses “all the local information and

working with the residential care market and independent fostering around the types of places we need”, says Salford DCS Charlotte Ramsden.

In addition “there is a whole governance system in relation to children” that has been set up to avoid duplication and red tape, adds Ramsden.

Through a Greater Manchester Children Board, the area's 10 DCSs and lead members for children's services meet monthly for half a day and each are given a specialist area to report back on to the GMCA.

“One leads on care leavers, one on early years, for example. They do the intense co-ordination and link in. That makes it easier,” says Ramsden.

Barriers to further devolution of children's services include concerns about information sharing and confidentiality.

“A risk-averse culture still lingers in many areas when it comes to data use and sharing,” says Tjoa. “There is a lack of understanding and confidence in how data can be used and shared to improve outcomes.”

Lack of clarity on funding from central government to help combined authorities' long-term planning is also an issue.

However, in January's Queen's Speech the government set out its intention to give regions more powers.

A white paper on devolution is planned, which promises to increase the number of devolution deals and mayors as well as “levelling up” the powers between mayoral combined authorities.

“We'd like to see a clear commitment to handing over power and resources to the local areas, reflected through unconditional devolution – a genuine understanding that

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS COULD SPUR DEVOLUTION

By Andrew Walker, head of research, Local Government Information Unit



The future of devolution within England was already uncertain, but since the coronavirus crisis, all bets are off. In assessing what future devolution within England could have in store we need to bear this in mind and also

remember the overarching aim from the perspective of central government. In as much as there has been a strategy around devolution it was to boost regional economic performance, save money from the public services budget and balance out productivity levels.

Evidence suggests, however, that pooling budgets and resources across the geographical area has been beneficial beyond the economy in crucial areas of social policy, improving outcomes for children and young people. First, the new governance arrangements and scale have enabled leaders in Greater Manchester to encourage investment from central government through the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care partnership. This included spending an extra £80m on mental health services targeted at children, young people and mothers.

Working in a more formal place-based model, such as the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, also enables innovative programmes to be delivered in a joined-up manner. This means spending is co-ordinated and multiple outcomes can be achieved simultaneously. The Greater Manchester Children and Young People Health and Wellbeing Framework was agreed with key commitments on better mental health, improved support for those with long-term conditions, more integrated early years services and better support to schools and colleges to support good health.

Meanwhile, the Transformation Programme seeks to collectively improve outcomes in seven core areas: looked-after children; complex safeguarding; integrated healthcare; early help; early years and education; youth offending; and quality assurance.

A great deal of the success in Greater Manchester up to this point has derived from collaboration and an enthusiasm for creativity and ambition with limited tools. But leaders in Greater Manchester have always argued that they need to have more powers to intervene earlier in the education process, co-ordinating the pathway through early years and schools, rather than just in post-16 education. There have also been consistent calls for the government to go further and include children's services in future devolution deals with other cities and regions.

The new government under Boris Johnson has committed to "levelling up" the regions of the UK, but whether there is a strategy for this, what form it might take and who might be the agents to implement it in local areas remains to be seen. A devolution white paper was due to be published later this year, but the ongoing crisis and uncertainty surrounding coronavirus is sure to have scuppered any plans in that regard.

It has also been suggested that councils could be in for a more wide-ranging programme of change. Sources inside government have been quoted as saying the white paper will feature "lots of local government reorganisation", hinting at wholesale structural and governance changes. This would be sought in order to smooth potential devolution deals in two-tier areas, but would have significant knock-on effects for areas of social policy like children's services.

Based on current trends, future devolution is likely to involve extending a similar set of spending powers around skills, transport and spatial planning, including a range of



Leaders argue for more powers to intervene earlier

spending responsibilities to more areas. This would certainly help more authorities to support young people in employment and training. However, we know these new deals will probably stop short of extending Greater Manchester's health and social care devolution model to combined authorities in other areas, and with it the capacity to integrate and scale up children's services. They are also unlikely to further extend powers into schools and early years.

English governance could be very different after the coronavirus crisis and there is a big question mark over the future role of local authorities and key service areas. The strength and value of properly funded local leadership may have been demonstrated beyond argument. This could bolster arguments for further and more strategic devolution over social policy if and when the white paper emerges. We in local government should make that case loud and clear.

power devolved is power shared with people and communities," says Tjoa.

"This means the handover of budgets, decision-making and revenue raising powers to the local level, giving people the direct influence in making decisions to suit the local needs of children and families."

The County Councils Network (CCN) says any further devolution must respect local authorities' existing powers and ensure children's issues are a priority.

"The County Councils Network has long argued that any devolution deal must enhance the powers of local authorities, and retain democratic control over key areas such as children's social care," said a CCN spokesman.

"At a broader level where devolved powers are passed to combined authorities we would urge government to ensure they put children's needs at the heart of their policies – such as ensuring that transport is designed with young people's needs in mind."

Leeds City Council leader Judith Blake hopes there is "proper fiscal devolution" in the future and believes decentralisation offers an opportunity to "improve services for everyone" and would also boost productivity.

This economic argument could prove decisive in any forthcoming devolution reform as the government looks to boost the economy when the UK emerges from the coronavirus pandemic. ■