

The North-East Combined Authority represents another step in the uncertain progress of English devolution

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The North East Combined Authority has had a quiet start to its life, in stark contrast to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority which was launched last year to great fanfare. The North East differs from Greater Manchester is the comparative lack of unity between the constituent councils and council regions, and as **John Fenwick** argues, progress towards a powerful and cohesive sub-governmental unit will depend on overcoming several barriers.*



The new North-East Combined Authority (NECA) came into being in 2014. Launched with a minimum of public fanfare, the Authority promises to be more than a resurrected Tyne and Wear County Council (abolished in 1986) in several senses: it incorporates the counties of Northumberland and Durham, giving it a geographical reach well beyond the conurbations of the Wear and the Tyne; it is explicitly about the development of economic growth and infrastructure (especially transport) rather than the whole range of local government services; and it will, at the behest of central government, involve an elected mayor as its political (and business) leader. It does not otherwise involve direct elections.

Working with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), and having the same boundaries, it offers the prospect of a growth-oriented basis for devolution and for regeneration, making a reality of some of the recommendations of reports across the political spectrum including those [from Lords Heseltine](#) and [Adonis](#). Yet there are several contentious aspects of all this, and these combine to make the future of the Combined Authority challenging for those charged with ensuring its success.

First, there is the party political dimension, a problem made worse rather than better by one-party domination in Labour's remaining heartland. There are powerful Intra-regional issues and strong historical distrust between, for instance, Newcastle and Gateshead. To some extent the latter was overcome by council co-operation around arts-

based cultural regeneration on the shared quayside, although tension is never far below the surface.

Other tribal differences within Labour in different towns and cities of the region remain strong, and indeed almost prevented creation of the Combined Authority. Sunderland would find it impossible to accept perceived dominance from Newcastle, and it is no accident that the first chair of the NECA is the respected leader of Durham County Council. Politically, the dominance of Labour is crucial, not only in framing the often acrimonious debates but also in its sheer scale. Like Manchester, Newcastle was led by the Conservatives in the early 1970s but there has not been a single Tory councillor in Newcastle (or Manchester) for many years now. Also relevant, of course, is the North-East's political memory of being the only part of England to hold a referendum ([in 2004](#)) on whether to establish an elected regional assembly which, of course, it decisively rejected.

Secondly, there is the proximity to Scotland, which has a long border with the NECA. With enhanced Scottish devolution, including greater delegated control over budgets and taxation north of the border, the relationship with North-East England will be competitive and, under current and proposed arrangements, the NECA will be the weaker partner in attracting the investment and growth which is its *raison d'être*. There is considerably greater political pressure on UK central government to resolve governance issues in Scotland than there is in North-East England.

Thirdly, there is a weakness in both road and rail links from (and to some degree within) the NECA area to the rest of England. While road and rail connections from North-West England to Scotland are well-developed in the shape of the West Coast mainline and the M6 motorway, connections from the North-East are much less consistent. The East-West rail line from Newcastle to Carlisle is modest, and the country lane running beside it is the principal East-West road route. The East Coast rail line to Scotland and London is very well used but all other rail links North are long gone. The new Borders Railway, scheduled to open in September 2015, lies wholly within Scotland. As for road connections, the A1 south to Yorkshire is currently being upgraded to motorway standard for much of the 100 miles to West Yorkshire, but road links from the North-East to Scotland, and the North-East to Cumbria, remain basic.

Fourthly, the requirement to create a directly-elected mayor to lead the NECA is by no means a detail. It is a major problem. Within the boundaries of the NECA there have been several referendums – Sunderland, Newcastle, Berwick, Sedgefield, Darlington and Durham – in which the public has voted not to have an elected mayor. In Hartlepool (geographically within the NECA area, but, like Darlington, a unitary authority not subject to Durham County Council) the post of elected mayor was abolished by referendum in 2012. Middlesbrough's elected mayoralty (retained by public vote at referendum in 2013) sits beyond the boundaries of the NECA. There is thus only one directly elected mayor within the NECA area, and that is in North Tyneside. Curiously, despite Labour controlling the mayoralty in North Tyneside, having a large majority on the council itself and holding the relevant Parliamentary seats, the future of this elected mayor is uncertain: the current Labour mayor plans a referendum for 2016 on whether to abolish the office. All this suggests that any elected mayor of the NECA will have a very tough job creating any sense of public legitimacy or support, a point [previously made in relation to the Combined Authority for Greater Manchester](#).

Finally, there is the question of how the NECA links to the politically high-profile '[Northern Powerhouse](#)'. The 'powerhouse' is a major political and economic project for the cities and regions of the north of England, with specific plans for roads, rail, airports and other infrastructure throughout the broadly defined 'North'. It is much wider geographically than the NECA, and there is already evidence of suspicion within the North-East of the [model of devolution pioneered](#) in Manchester. The ambiguity of geographical boundaries – whether of the NECA area, or of the 'North' more generally – are also more significant than they appear at first sight.

Factionalism within the NECA is magnified when placed within a wider 'North', the definition of which is not very clear in [Government thinking to begin with](#). Although the NECA comprises seven local council areas of North-East England, including Newcastle/Tyneside and Sunderland/Wearside, it does not include Middlesbrough/Teesside which historically has been more closely associated with North Yorkshire: another 'North'. These are highly salient

matters around which identity, place, belonging and aspirations of individuals and communities are based. Perhaps ultimately the North, and the North-East, is defined simply by not being in the South. But that alone is a very shaky basis for effective and robust governance.

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