CAN INSTITUTIONS ADAPT TO NEW MODELS OF ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE?

Case studies in North East England and Tees Valley.

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Abstract

This thesis draws lessons for economic governance from two case studies of a model of local development introduced by the UK government in 2010. Its temporal context is the decision of the coalition government to abolish the regionalism introduced by the Labour government in 1997/98 and replace it with a model of localism based on functional economic areas (FEAs). Its spatial context is North East England, where the two case studies have been conducted to illustrate how localism is working in practice as a governance system. The thesis studies the governance of devolution in the North East Combined Authority (NECA) and in Tees Valley as a political, economic and institutional issue, analysing the responses of local leaderships to the new model and its formal institutional arrangements. It finds that informal institutions in the shape of identity, socio-cultural values and political traditions and practices can exert a powerful influence on local leadership groups and hence the establishment and operations of new formal institutions. The thesis discusses the different approaches taken by the new formal institutions to development, and the resulting economic outcomes. It concludes that governments intending to devolve powers for economic purposes must take full account of regional and/or local circumstances, including the political. Trying to impose an economic governance model on an unwilling locality does not work, and a bottom-up approach should be adopted. Economically, it finds that at this stage, and with so many spatially blind factors affecting the regional economy, it is impossible to say whether the transition from regionalism to localism is having any economic effect, though early signs are largely disappointing. The thesis also examines the accountability and inclusiveness of the new governance and finds problematic issues in relation to both. It concludes with recommendations for institutional reform. In what is the quite recent and continuously evolving institutional landscape of localism in England, the thesis makes a significant addition to a still under-researched field.

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This work could not have been carried out at all without the co-operation of the 43 people who agreed to be interviewed. All are busy people, and I am grateful for their time, but also what I believe was their frankness, without which the value of the work would have been very much diminished. They must remain anonymous, but they know who they are.

Finally, I thank my family and friends, who had to put up with long periods when I was sitting in front of my computer or had my head buried in a book instead of participating in sociable activities. I also thank my great niece, Jemima Woodhouse, for using her digital skills to replicate the diagram of Hambleton's framework for civic leadership, which is reproduced in Chapter 2.

This has been a work of close personal interest to me. I spent my entire career observing my native North East England struggling in vain to lift its economic performance from the lower reaches of the UK league tables where it has languished for decades. I have worked in a variety of positions in all the region's conurbations and want to see them and their hinterlands prosper. I would like to be able to offer a solution to their economic predicament but I can't, and this thesis does not propose a panacea, though it does suggest ways of building a sense of common purpose, which is a necessary first step.

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Acronyms

ASC	Audit and standards committee
BME	Black and minority ethnic
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and *Industrial Strategy*
CA	Combined authority
CARD	Campaign for Real Devolution
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CURDS	Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
DTVA	Durham Tees Valley Airport
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EDRAB	Economic Development and Regeneration Advisory Board
EEF	The Manufacturers' Organisation
EEG	Evolutionary economic geography
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FEA	Functional economic area
FSB	Federation of Small Businesses
GOR	Government office for the region
GDP	Gross domestic product
GVA	Gross value added
IAMP	International Advanced Manufacturing Park
IPPR	Institute of Public Policy Research
IoD	Institute of Directors
LEP	Local enterprise partnership
LGF	Local Growth Fund
LibDem	Liberal Democrat
MCA	Mayoral combined authority
MDC	Mayoral development corporation
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

NAO	National Audit Office
NECA	North East Combined Authority
NEECC	North East England Chamber of Commerce
NEG	New economic geography
NELEP	North East Local Enterprise Partnership
NEP	North East Party
NEPC	Northern Economic Planning Council
Nomis	Official labour market statistics
NP	*Northern Powerhouse*
NRST	Northern Region Strategy Team
NTCA	North of Tyne Combined Authority
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ONE	One North East (regional development agency)
ONS	Office for National Statistics
O&S	Overview and scrutiny
OSC	Overview and scrutiny committee
PDO	Protected designation of origin
PESA	Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses
PSA	Political Studies Association
PUA	Primary urban area
R&D	Research and development
RDA	Regional development agency
RES	Regional economic strategy
RGF	Regional Growth Fund
SEP	Strategic economic plan
SME	Small-to-medium-sized enterprise
STDC	South Tees Development Corporation
TEC	Training and enterprise council
TfN	Transport for the North
TTWA	Travel-to-work area
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TVCA	Tees Valley Combined Authority

TVU	Tees Valley Unlimited
UE	Urban economics
UK	United Kingdom
VONNE	Voluntary Organisations Network North East

Chapter 1. Introduction and methodology

1.1 The aims of the thesis

> *[T]oday I am putting on the table and starting the conversation about serious devolution of powers and budgets for any city that wants to move to a new model of city government - and have an elected mayor (Osborne, 2014).*

> *[T]he current process is not real devolution – real power has remained with central government, while other important areas of policy have actually become centralised and local government capacity has been cut severely (Raikes, 2020).*

These two statements, six years apart, crystallise the very different views of English devolution as conceptualized in the mind of a Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer and perceived in that of a Labour councillor in a northern city.[1] This thesis describes how devolution has actually turned out in two areas of North East England in comparison with these two views, and explains how and why the outcomes in these two areas differ so radically from each other.

Since Chancellor George Osborne's *Northern Powerhouse* speech in 2014, proposing to devolve powers and resources to cities in the north of England in a bid to boost the region's economy, the UK government has been struggling with varying degrees of commitment to find willing partners among the local authorities. While councils have sometimes reacted with initial enthusiasm, they have also sometimes failed to follow through and sign the devolution deals on offer (Osborne, 2014; Sandford, 2016a; MacKinnon, forthcoming: 18). One such case was that of the North East Combined Authority (NECA).

To assess if institutions can adapt to meet the prerequisites for local and regional development, the aim of the thesis is, firstly, to explore in depth the reasons why NECA failed to reach a devolution deal with the government while neighbouring Tees Valley

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[1] Raikes is a Labour member of Manchester City Council (https://www.linkedin.com/in/luke-raikes-a7666023/).

succeeded when the two areas have so much in common, including Labour Party control of all their local authorities at the time. It also investigates what difference devolution has made to the approaches of the two areas to economic development and to the resulting outcomes, and what the consequences of the new economic governance have been for accountability and inclusion.

Building on its findings, the thesis further aims to contribute to an understanding of how central government and local governance can co-operate most successfully to bring effective devolution to England, with particular reference to the building of local partnerships and the reform of local institutions. Drawing on what is learned, the thesis concludes with recommendations designed to improve local economic governance in England by making it more accountable, inclusive, transparent and legitimate, engaging the public, strengthening scrutiny, motivating political leaders and facilitating a sense of common purpose among all leadership groups in society (8.3).

In exploring these questions, the thesis aims to make an original contribution to an understanding of the operation in practice of the local, as opposed to the previous regional, form of economic governance introduced to England by the UK government in 2010. It offers new insights into the factors that motivate local politicians and other elites, factors that have their roots deep in the history and socio-cultural environment of their individual geographies. It provides further research into the private meetings of the party political groups of councillors where these motivating factors exert their influence. These insights are based on a study not just of documentary evidence but a wide range of in-depth interviews with high-level regional leaders in the fields of politics, public administration, business, trade unions and the voluntary sector that can rarely have been matched in the current era of localism in England.

There are three research questions:

1. Why did the local authorities in Tees Valley accept, and in the North East reject, UK government offers of devolution deals in 2016?
2. What is the effect of the resulting formal institutional arrangements in these areas on their approaches to economic development?
3. To what extent can the system of local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) and combined authorities (CAs) be described as accountable and inclusive?

Devolution is a continuing process already dating back several years, whereas much study of institutional change has traditionally considered abrupt, transformational change. The research therefore aims additionally to make a valuable addition to the body of literature which suggests important changes often take place incrementally, and analyses how and why that happens (Martin, 2010; Mahoney and Thelen, 2012: xi)

This chapter first sets out the global and UK national background to devolution and debates over the appropriate geography; defines the spatial and temporal scope of the study; expands on the research questions; and describes key concepts. Secondly, it states the methodology, including the philosophical approach and analytic framework; justifies the selection of case studies; describes the methods used; reflects on the situation of the researcher; and sets out the structure of the remaining chapters.

1.2 The wider devolution context: globalisation, regionalisation, localisation

The globalisation of recent decades has been accompanied by a movement towards the decentralization of governance and economic development to the sub-national level as governments have devolved powers and responsibilities to regional and local authorities (Rhodes, 1996; Jones, 2001; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Rodríguez-Pose and Sandall, 2008). Rodríguez-Pose and Gill (2003) note that sub-national units have been increasing their demands for power, but warn that the devolutionary process raises important issues concerning equity and welfare, public finance and territorial competition. They advise a cautious approach taking account of both the benefits and drawbacks: political support may be low, affecting legitimacy; responsibilities and funding may not match; and the ability of the centre to redistribute may be reduced, resulting in a less progressive system of transfers. Prud'homme (1995: 18) similarly argues that 'any reduction in the importance of national budgets relative to sub-national budgets – a definition of decentralization - will increase inter-jurisdictional disparities'.

Nevertheless, the advocates of decentralization ranging from a strong form of federalism to local, community-based governance are numerous. In the context of wide regional economic disparities in the UK, Martin *et al.* (2016) argue for radical changes to the national political economy to decentralize many of its functions and

structures. Greater Manchester, England's devolution pioneer, has won independent support for more powers (Coyle *et al.*, 2019; Bounds, 2019b), and the independent UK2070 Commission, still at work when this thesis was being written, was moving towards recommending 'systematic and comprehensive devolution', backed by a £250bn budget over ten years (UK2070, 2019b: 10). Lord Heseltine called for more devolution in a report in 2019 (Walker, 2019g)., and the Prime Minister promised the Convention of the North that he would 'do devolution properly' (Pickard *et al.*, 2019).

Meanwhile, in the context of global capitalism and ecological concerns, Hambleton (2015b) makes the case for place-based leadership, focusing on cities, while in the context of small and medium-sized towns, the case is made for development at a still smaller geographic level by Kelly (2016a), in research building on the World Towns Leadership Summit in 2016.

Devolution in England in the 21st century has followed two distinct paths, regionalism followed by localism, with a radical shift between the two resulting from a change of government in 2010. Both have been accompanied by constant tinkering with both geography and governance.

Regionalism was introduced when the Labour Government established regional development agencies (RDAs) in England's nine regions, including London, in 1998. Legislation the following year gave London a mayor and assembly, with the first elections in 2000. Meanwhile, the regions outside London set up regional assemblies, also known and regional chambers, which were unelected voluntary bodies but had significant responsibilities including the production of regional spatial strategies (Sandford, 2013).

By 2004 new geographies were taking their place in Labour's policies. The government launched the *Northern Way*, a pan-northern, multi-level initiative to promote growth across three regions, including eight city-regions. Two years later the arrival of city-regional thinking was marked in a Local Government White Paper (Rees and Lord, 2013: 680).

Also in 2004 a referendum in North East England rejected by 78%-22% a government proposal to bring a form of democracy into regional governance in the shape of an

elected regional assembly (BBC, 2004). This failure was followed by the introduction of alternative forms of elective oversight. In 2007 nine regional ministers were appointed to scrutinise policy in their regions; in 2008 the House of Commons established eight regional select committees to examine regional policy; and in 2009 the Commons set up regional grand committees, open to all regional MPs. In another innovation in 2009, regional assemblies were replaced by Local Authority Leaders' Boards (Sandford, 2013)

None of these institutions survived the general election of May 2010. The change from regionalism to localism following the formation of a coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was rapid and comprehensive. The abolition of RDAs was announced on 29 June, and accomplished in March 2012, and the revocation of all regional spatial strategies on 6 July (Sandford, 2013). Local authorities were invited to submit proposals for business-led LEPs, based on functional economic areas, and the first 24, including Tees Valley, were approved by the end of the year; the remaining 15 followed in 2011 (Ward, 2019b).

City-regionalism as a concept and pan-northern ambitions were, however, carried over from the Labour era. In 2011 Greater Manchester formed England's first combined authority, to be followed by four more areas, including NECA, in 2014 and another five by 2018, including Tees Valley and North of Tyne. Meanwhile the pan-northern concept of the *Northern Way* was replicated in another form in George Osborne's hopes of a *Northern Powerhouse* with its suggestion of more powers for cities willing to accept elected mayors (so-called metro mayors) *(Osborne, 2014; Sandford, 2016b; LGA, undated-d).* In two further pan-northern moves, Transport for the North was established in 2018 as England's first sub-national transport body and NP11 was launched as a government advisory body consisting of the chairs of the 11 northern LEPs (TfN, 2018; Sandford, 2019c).

From 2012 the government offered bespoke 'city deals', with funding and powers, to councils, LEPs and other local bodies, with the largest cities in the first wave and wider areas following. In all 38 deals have so far been confirmed, including Sunderland/South Tyneside and Tees Valley. Then in March 2014 all LEPs submitted strategic economic plans as the basis for funding growth deals. The first devolution deal was signed by Greater Manchester in 2014, followed by 11 more by 2016, of which three collapsed,

including that with NECA, but two were partially revived, including with North of Tyne (Ward, 2017d; Ward, 2019a; Sandford, 2019c).

As part of the national industrial strategy, LEPs and mayoral combined authorities are now preparing local industrial strategies to run alongside their strategic economic plans (BEIS, 2017: 216). Still more governance changes are in prospect following the Queen's Speech of December 2019 which promised to 'give communities more control over how investment is spent so that they can decide what is best for them' (Queen, 2019b).

This study commenced in autumn 2016 just as North East England's two CAs were making their devolution decisions – Tees Valley (TVCA) to accept a deal and the North East (NECA) to reject. Two years later NECA formally divided, with three councils breaking away to form their own CA, North of Tyne (NTCA), and sign their own devolution deal while four, all south of the Tyne, remained in a rump NECA without a deal. The North East LEP (NELEP) continues to work with all seven.

England's devolution agenda has been widely criticised as inadequate and problematic (Pike *et al.*, 2015; Martin *et al.*, 2016; Tomaney, 2016; Berry and Giovannini, 2018). It is not the purpose of this thesis to add a further assessment of the adequacies of devolution as currently being implemented in England. Rather, the thesis argues that the new localism, as a form of democratic governance, can only work for economies if the local politics, influenced by the socio-cultural environment, is amenable. Selecting areas for governance on economic grounds alone – functional economic areas (FEAs) - without taking account of the politics, does not always work, though economics may, anyway, sometimes only be an ostensible reason for the selection of geographies for devolution. Government may also have an eye to political advantage which, as we will see in Chapter 5, was the case in Tees Valley. The fact that one party sees possible advantage for itself does not however mean that local politics as a whole will necessarily be amenable - though in Tees Valley it was.

Through its case studies, this thesis firstly recounts the responses of local leadership groups to offers of devolution deals. It explains how and why the selection of FEAs as localities for political governance and hence for devolution deals can either succeed, with reservations, or fail. The evidence of this thesis shows that the coalition

government had introduced a policy of localism without always understanding - or, if it did, without taking due account of - the politics of the localities where it was to be implemented. It worked as a governance scheme in Tees Valley because the top-down policy was sufficiently consistent with the bottom-up wishes of local political and business leaderships. But that was not so in the North East, and the government's plans were confounded.

The explanation for the different decisions of the two areas and the response to research question 1, the study therefore finds, lies in the presence or absence of willingness and ability on the part of local politics to co-operate with the formal institutional arrangements demanded by central government if it is to support local governance with enhanced powers and resources. This willingness and ability depend, in turn, on a complex of informal institutions deeply embedded in local geography and history.

Secondly, in response to research question 2, the thesis asks what difference these decisions made to approaches to development in the areas concerned. It finds a sharp divergence between a North East business-led technocracy and the highly political approach which developed in Tees Valley after its election of a mayor.

Devolution has brought extra resources and a raised profile to Tees Valley, as well as a focus on the mayor personally as the centre of power and publicity. The process has become highly politicised and personalised. North of Tyne (NTCA), following its breakaway from NECA, is starting to implement the same institutional model, if not necessarily to follow the same political path or style, two years behind. Meanwhile the rump NECA faces an uncertain future, and economic development remains a largely technocratic exercise in the hands of the business-led LEP.

What effect, if any, the different approaches are having on economic outcomes is a separate question. Early indications are mixed-to-disappointing so far (6.5)[2]. This question, however, does turn attention to debate over the related issues of the respective merits of place-based and spatially blind development. Belief in the efficacy

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[2] Throughout this thesis numbers in parentheses are internal cross-references.

of place-based development is a *sine qua non* of both regionalism and localism, but contested, and the theoretical arguments are examined in section 2.1.1.

In response to research question 3, the thesis examines the extent to which the formal institutional arrangements of devolution, the CAs and LEPs, are accountable and inclusive. It finds a complex of problematic issues in both areas. Metro mayors are directly elected but were arguably never wanted by local people and certainly not by many of their councillors. CAs are elected, but indirectly, and the private sector majorities on LEPs not at all. Inclusion is regarded in different ways by different groups of people. To those inside the governance system it means access for all to the labour market; for those outside it means having a voice in decisions, which they feel they lack.

1.3 Key concepts

This chapter now develops in more detail the above outline of the formal institutional context for devolved economic development in England, and explains what is meant by informal institutions. It describes other key concepts that will be discussed throughout the thesis.

1.3.1 Institutions

Institutions have been defined as 'humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction'. They can be both formal, such as constitutions, laws and property rights, or informal, such as sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions and codes of conduct. They evolve, and 'in consequence history is largely a story of institutional evolution in which the historical performance of economies can only be understood as part of a sequential story' (North, 1991: 97). A notable feature of this definition is that institutions are referred to as constraints, but this disguises the fact that in constraining behaviour they can simultaneously be enablers by creating the conditions in which economies can grow. As North says, political and economic institutions are essential parts of an effective institutional matrix. They may create an economic environment that induces increasing productivity (1991: 98). The extent to which institutions act as constraining and/or enabling factors in North East England is an important part of this study.

The formal institutions examined here are what Hodgson (2006: 18) calls organisations, which he defines as special institutions that involve criteria to establish their boundaries and to distinguish their members from non-members, principles of sovereignty concerning who is in charge, and chains of command delineating responsibilities. In this study – to be specific - CAs, local authorities, LEPs, governments and government departments, political parties and groups, business and voluntary sector organisations are all formal institutions. They need not be legally established.

Addressing the question of informal institutions 22 years after North (1991), Rodriguez-Pose (2013: 1037-1038) pronounces them 'notoriously difficult' to define. He lists them as norms, traditions, social conventions, values, interpersonal contacts, relationships and informal networks. Informal institutions, he says, facilitate economic benefits such as generating trust, promoting entrepreneurship, greasing labour markets and adapting to shocks. In North East England, this study finds, informal institutions, socially inherited and deeply embedded in the history and geography of the region and its localities, help determine the nature of its formal institutions.

Based on these findings, the significant informal institutions relevant to North East England's devolution story are sense of local identity, which trumps regional identity and gives rise to local rivalries and mistrust; political traditions and voting habits which have historically ensured power lies most of the time and in most of the region in the hands of a single party, Labour; and the widespread practice, not confined to North East England, of making important decisions in the privacy of party groups.

These informal institutions are common to the whole region, but there are differences between Tees Valley and the NECA area which moderate their effects in the former. Most significantly, rivalry has in the past been directed by Tees Valley's leaders outwards against their northern neighbours rather than inwards against each other, thus fostering internal trust and collaboration. This internal harmony may not survive the electoral upheaval which occurred in 2019 when, amid Brexit turmoil nationally, Labour lost overall majorities on all five Tees Valley councils and three parliamentary seats (3.1.1). But it had lasted long enough to bring devolution and a metro mayor.

The operations of these informal institutions are revealed through the case studies as they examine how politicians, their professional advisers, the business community,

trade unions, the voluntary sector and the general public responded to the governance structures, proposed and actualized, resulting from the transition from regionalism to localism and the government's offer of devolution deals.

The regional structure of formal institutions of economic governance inherited and immediately dismantled by the coalition had been established by the Labour government in 1998, as described above (1.2). The abolition of North East England's RDA, One North East, was more than an economic blow to the region, eradicating its principal driver of public development policy. It also meant the loss of the one organisation that held the region's 12 local authorities together in unstable cooperation. In a brief preview of the picture that will emerge during this thesis, a regional business leader said:

> *It's almost Balkanization. One thing One North East did was it totally united all 12 local authorities, but they were fighting against this other power that seemed to have all the money. As soon as that other power vanished, like Tito disappearing in Yugoslavia, they all fell at each other's throats (Business leader. August 2018).*

The coalition's reasons for abolishing regions were spelled out in 2010. They were, it said, arbitrary and not efficient, effective or popular, and an artificial representation of functional economies. The regional approach missed the opportunities that came from local economic development activity and largely ignored the knowledge and expertise of the private sector, local authorities and local communities. The LEPs on which the new governance regime is based would, the government believed, give a clear vision and strategic leadership for sustainable private sector-led growth and job creation. The aim was to move power from Whitehall to localities, create partnerships between business communities and local authority leaders, focus on growing the private sector and increase local accountability, including, but not necessarily, by the creation of directly elected mayors. The government's reasons for abolishing regionalism were explained more simply by Elcock (2016: 11): 'The Conservative Party had generally regarded all forms of regional government as a waste of money' (BIS, 2010: 3, 7, 13; DCLG, 2010).

The coalition partners, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, were not wholly united on this issue. A regional business leader, two national politicians of different parties and a political activist all told this study, independently, that the momentum to abolish RDAs came from the Tories, who were ideologically opposed to regionalism. LibDems on the other hand, according to two of these interviewees, argued unsuccessfully for at least the retention of One North East even if RDAs in other regions were abolished (Interviews November 2017, December 2017, January 2018, August 2018).

A first wave of 24 LEPs was approved in 2010 and the remainder the following year. As part of this process the North East region was divided between Tees Valley, part of the first wave, and the remainder of the region, which confusingly retained the name North East[3]. All LEPs submitted SEPs in 2014 as a basis for funding growth deals (Ward, 2019a). LEPs and CAs continued to operate under the Conservative governments of 2015, 2017 and 2019.

This new localism was said to recognise that places have specific geographic, historic, environmental and economic circumstances. Shifting power to the 'right' levels would increase democratic accountability and transparency, including through directly elected mayors (BIS, 2010: 3, 11). The local circumstances that were thus so important to the new governance regime, it is the argument of this thesis, were favourable to the devolution agenda in Tees Valley but not in the North East, where they were not 'right' but proved insuperably divisive when required to adapt to the new governance. It is an irony of the devolution process that a government which thus recognised the importance of local circumstances failed to understand, or perhaps simply ignored, what those circumstances actually were in the North East.

In June 2014, when Osborne set out his vision of a *Northern Powerhouse* which, using improved transport links, would create an agglomeration in the north of England to match the economic might of London, he made clear new formal institutions would be required. Osborne envisioned powerful city governments with enhanced powers and budgets devolved from the centre but, crucially, on condition that they accepted

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[3] Throughout this thesis 'North East England' refers to the region encompassing both the North East and Tees Valley LEP areas; 'North East' refers to the area of the North East LEP (NELEP). Further geographic detail, including maps, is in section 3.2.

elected mayors (Osborne, 2014). This led to the establishment later that year of four CAs, including NECA – but not yet with mayors - following the lead of Greater Manchester in 2011. TVCA was established in 2016.

CAs are combinations of two or more local authorities that may take on any functions their constituent authorities agree to share and statutory functions transferred to them by the government. The next step in the process saw the government negotiate devolution deals with a number of CAs to devolve additional powers, supported by annual grants for 30 years (subject to five-year reviews) and on condition of the election of a metro mayor (Sandford, 2016a; Sandford, 2016b).

1.3.2 Place and identity, agglomeration and dominance

A place, according to Hambleton (2015a: 82-84) is somewhere somebody cares about. In the past, in his view, city politicians have often failed to appreciate the importance of the feelings people have for their home area and the social significance of neighbourhood life, based on personal experiences such as community celebrations and street festivals. Successful leaders work with the grain of these feelings, as Hambleton (2015a: xiv) illustrates through 17 case studies from around the world.

In England, councillors are elected to serve their municipality, which is what they do on a daily basis and what they are held accountable for by voters. These are their communities. Yet around once a month leaders attend CA or LEP meetings at which they are expected to put wider interests first and, it is argued here, they are not always able to do so. In North East England there are 12 municipalities but only two (now three) CAs and two LEPs which in theory correspond to FEAs. But FEA boundaries can be drawn and changed arbitrarily when politics demands, as demonstrated in the North East when one FEA became two after its politicians failed to agree on devolution. These two or three FEAs are themselves not the only economically possible geographies, as discussed in section 6.1.

Persuading councillors and voters to accept new political entities for the purpose of democratic local government which also coincide with economic areas suitable for place-based development can be difficult anywhere. Plans for CAs fell through in Great Lincolnshire and East Anglia, for example. In Yorkshire, the Sheffield mayor said he would not touch devolution 'with a barge pole' if it meant a Leeds takeover (Torr,

2018). Even in areas which have accepted devolution deals there have been difficulties associated with identity. A study of the Liverpool and West Midlands CAs found that local identity is a challenging concept for the public to pinpoint, and when defined tends to relate to a citizen's immediate locality rather than a wider sense of regional identity (PwC, 2016: full report, pp. 3, 11-13). The public's lack of propensity to identify with a wider region is matched by the inability of their leaderships to collaborate. According to Giovannini (2015), one of the most striking aspects in the current debate on devolution in the north of England is that the main actors seem to work in isolation, and a climate of mutual suspicion hinders decentralization from within.

It has been local authority elected representatives worldwide who have most strongly expressed reluctance to support mergers, according to the OECD, but local residents have also often declined to do so, including in the United States 'because they feared losing a certain quality of life which they ascribed to local identity'. Municipal mergers to form metropolitan governments have been rejected in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and a merger that took place in Montreal was soon reversed. In fact: 'When the merger of municipalities is put to the popular vote it has to be said that the result is almost always a refusal' (OECD, 2006: 201). Metropolitan government was established in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2010 by amalgamating eight existing councils, but this was achieved by an act of parliament, not by a popular vote (Hambleton, 2015a: 189-192). McCann (2016: 492) reports that of 263 OECD metropolitan areas of over 500,000 population, 31% have no metropolitan governance body at all and 50% have a body without any regulatory powers.

In North East England a 2004 referendum vote to reject a regional assembly (1.2) ended the Labour government's attempt to introduce democratic accountability into the regional dimension on which it had based its economic development apparatus in the form of One North East, just as NECA's 2016 decision against devolution ended the coalition and Conservative governments' plans for mayoral democracy. While neither the regional assembly nor the devolution deal would have involved a merger of local authorities of the form described by the OECD, they did involve new arrangements for sharing political power over areas selected for economic reasons, and both were rejected.

The attachment that voters and their elected representatives feel to their local area may be further strengthened if they feel that a neighbouring municipality, typically a regional capital, is receiving preferential treatment due to its dominance. The role of cities or city-regions has been emphasized in England because they have often been the locations of CAs and devolution deals. The metro mayors of Manchester and Birmingham have become national figures. But the claim that cities act as growth hubs, creating jobs that benefit their hinterlands, is a controversial one which placed the role of Newcastle, North East England's regional capital, at the forefront of the devolution debate.

When the OECD reported on North East England it referred to the 'Newcastle city region' – in which it included all five Tyne & Wear metropolitan districts - as the growth centre (OECD, 2006: 40, 172). One North East also recognised the importance of urban cores as drivers of economic growth and identified the region as having two, centred on Tyne & Wear and Tees Valley (ONE, 2006: 14-16). These differences of view may have had a political rather than an economic rationale: One North East had to bear in mind the sensitivities of local politics; the OECD did not.

As will become clear in this study, Newcastle's perceived dominance is resented by some in the region, and the idea that it receives more than its fair share of development in a process of regional-level agglomeration is deeply felt in neighbouring municipalities. Some feel that development in Newcastle is at their expense. And it is not only the resources perceived to be going to Newcastle that is the problem, but the city's (represented by the city council's) assumption that they should, which is seen as arrogance: 'There is an acceptance that Newcastle is the regional capital; I don't think there is any question about that. But it's the way it behaves as the regional capital that is the problem' (Retired public official, April 2018). This suspicion was exploited during the North East devolution debate, as will be seen in the case study chapters.

1.3.3 Leadership and accountability

The government's insistence on elected mayors to be accountable for the extra powers and resources provided as part of devolution deals has been one of the most contentious aspects of the process and was possibly a deal breaker in the North East. Leadership in English local government may be exercised in a variety of styles

depending on the formal system in place and the personalities of those involved, but councillors have traditionally favoured collective rather than individual leadership (2.2.4). Since local government reform in 2000 they have stuck as closely as possible to the collective model by having most council leaders elected by their fellow councillors, which in practice means by their party colleagues unless there is no overall political control. Only 16 councils in England, including one in the North East and one in Tees Valley, are led by directly-elected borough mayors, who are elected for four years (Sandford, 2017a). All are subject to political pressure within their party groups: one North East council leader who disagreed with his party group over devolution resigned (Milligan and O'Donoghue, 2016) and another is believed by some observers interviewed for this research to have voted against devolution because of group pressure (4.5.1, 4.6).

Council leaders and members of their cabinets, which fulfil the executive role, are thus still subject to party discipline. Some, however, are able to establish sufficient dominance over compliant party groups to be able to exercise considerable freedom over important decisions, as was the case over NECA's devolution deal (4.5.3). As to accountability to voters in council elections, it is dampened by voter loyalty and the link between local and national politics which often sees near-uniform swings across the country. The effects of this trend in North East England are discussed in section 3.1.1.

The election of metro mayors to lead CAs has raised the question of what style of leadership they should exercise. According to Hambleton (2015a: 11), what is required is a re-think of the role of the local leader, summed up in what he calls a caricature, but a helpful one, in the words: 'Out goes the notion of the "city boss"…in comes the "facilitative leader" orchestrating the efforts of multiple actors', not just collective but inclusive, creating a process of citizen empowerment. The extent to which this has happened in Tees Valley, where a metro mayor was elected in 2017, is examined in sections 5.5, 5.6 and 6.2.2.

Leadership is exercised by other groups in society too, alongside politicians, including through LEPs. According to Hambleton (2015b: 14, 17), local governance needs to respect and reflect that dispersal of leadership if decisions taken in the public interest

are to enjoy legitimacy. He looks for leaders who are empathetic, collaborative, imaginative and willing to take risks. The relative power of leadership groups varies by locality, as is examined in the case studies. With its discussion of place leadership at the sub-national level, the thesis thereby makes a contribution to what Horlings *et al.* (2018: 247) describe as the 'missing link' in our understanding of place-based development and local economies (Horlings *et al.*, 2018: 247). According to Quinn (2013: 749) leadership had been relatively under-researched in regional studies until recently and needed to be explored in greater detail. It is a subject of which the OECD (2015a: 57) said:

> *Leadership of local economies is a largely unexplored topic in academic literature even though leadership is widely referred to by employers and investors as one of the reasons they seek new opportunities in certain locations...[T]he critical work of local leaders in their local economies is worthy of further investigation... Avoiding leadership failure is a critical task in an arena of public policy where there are few clear scientific methods.*

The establishment of CAs and LEPs raises new questions over accountability in local governance. In English local authorities, all councillors and the small number of borough mayors are directly elected by voters. Responsibilities are then shared between the executive, in the form of the leader (elected by the council) or mayor and cabinet, and backbench councillors, whose role is to hold the executive to account through their overview and scrutiny committees (OSCs) and to approve the policy framework and perform the key task of agreeing the annual budget (Hambleton, 2015a: 181-188). The scrutiny system can be problematic, as discussed in section 2.2.4, and the potential difficulties are compounded in the CAs, which have no councils of their own but are scrutinised by backbenchers of their constituent councils, who may feel somewhat remote from the work of the CA. These same backbenchers also scrutinise the LEPs, from which they may feel even more distanced.

There is a precedent for scrutiny and accountability in somewhat similar circumstances which, while not exact, is close enough to offer useful lessons. Under the Labour government's regional development system, scrutiny of RDAs was performed by regional chambers, made up of councillors and other civic leaders. The lessons of that

experience in North East England were studied at the time and are discussed in section 2.2.4. How accountability under the current governance of CAs and LEPs is working in the region is described in section 7.1.

1.3.4 Path dependence

Path dependence is the idea that 'the current state of affairs cannot be derived from current conditions only, since the current state of affairs has emerged from and been constrained by previous states of affairs. Evolutionary geography deals with path dependent processes in which previous events affect the probability of future events to occur' (Boschma and Frenken, 2006: 280-281). Economically, path dependence is a consequence of the clustering of industries, with their sunk capital and skilled workforce. Once a region is on a particular path as the location of particular industries with their technologies and skills, it may become locked in.

The key defining characteristic of path dependence is an inability to shake free of history and create new paths, and this problem can be wide in scope, referring equally to material development and social dynamics, including the political, for path dependence is a concept that has come to be applied equally to institutions, which can also get locked in. However, both industries and institutions can avoid this situation by adapting in ways described in section 2.1.3 (Martin and Sunley, 2006: 399; Martin, 2010; Mahoney and Thelen, 2012).

The informal institutions of North East England form a socio-cultural environment which affects the ability of councillors to adapt to a new political situation and adopt new governance arrangements to facilitate devolution and its development opportunities. The evidence emerging from this study is that in the political sphere informal institutions are an important, sometimes decisive factor, facilitating change in Tees Valley but supporting the *status quo* in the North East.

In the economic sphere, informal institutional pressures might in similar fashion have affected the willingness of councillors to support business in taking new paths, but the evidence of this study is that this is not the case. Even in the North East, where councillors were resistant to institutional change, there is no evidence they opposed economic path creation.

As a purely economic factor the power of path dependence is gradually weakening as old industries are adapted to meet new demands, but as a political factor it remains important in the North East. This study uncovers powerful political and socio-cultural influences which, it argues, played an important role in the events examined, bringing deeply rooted pressures to bear on actors.

The extent to which the industries of North East England have avoided path dependence is discussed in Chapter 6 and the success of the region's governance institutions in shaking free in sections 4.7 and 5.8.

1.4 Methodology

This thesis is structured in such a way that the concepts to be discussed, set out in the literature review (Chapter 2), lead naturally into the North East England context in which they are played out, but without reference to specific institutions or events (Chapter 3). This regional context leads in turn into the empirical findings of the case studies, which are specific to institutions and events (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) and to the further empirical findings in relation to economic issues (Chapter 6) and accountability and inclusion (Chapter 7). This ordering allows the conceptual and contextual background to the research questions to be explored as preparation for the search for empirical answers, and it is in order not to break this progression from the conceptual to the contextual and thence to the empirical that the methodology is placed here rather than after the literature review, which is perhaps more usual.

The methodology is a comparative analysis of case studies designed to throw light on the responses of local actors to the institutional regime of localism introduced in England since 2010 and the extent to which they affect local approaches to economic development. A further objective is to assess the extent to which this regime is locally accountable and inclusive.

The mixed methods used are to a large extent qualitative, based on the researcher's perception and interpretation of official documents, interviews with key actors, and attendance at 29 relevant conferences and meetings (Appendix A). The devolution processes which are the focus of the study were public events, reported and commented on in mainstream media, and these media were in turn monitored and

interpreted by the researcher. Social media used by some actors was monitored, and contributed to the research findings. These qualitative methods were supported by quantitative methods using statistics relating to North East England's economic performance, and to public and private finances; and by electoral statistics to aid an understanding of the region's political situation.

Devolution forces its way to the forefront because of its prominence as a public controversy during the relevant period, because it forms a point around which issues of interest are crystallised, and because it provides a salient symbol of difference between the case study areas, which otherwise share many apparent similarities. Devolution helps throw light on both formal and informal institutions through the intensity of the regional debate around it. A specific and crucial objective is to determine what role informal institutions played in the decisions of five local authorities in Tees Valley, all controlled by the Labour Party at the time, to accept a UK government offer of devolution in 2016 and of seven local authorities in the North East, also all then controlled by Labour, simultaneously to reject a deal.

As a first step to answering the research questions, the results of the mixed methods used were combined to build a picture of the regional context against which the events concerned unfolded and thus to help explain the decisions and actions being studied. This contextual step was an essential prerequisite to answering all three questions. Within this overall methodology each of the three research questions required somewhat different approaches.

The first question, asking why the local authorities in Tees Valley and the North East took different decisions on devolution in 2016, is a question of the motivations of the 12 individuals who alone had the final deciding vote on those decisions - the seven council leaders constituting the North East Combined Authority (NECA) and their five Tees Valley counterparts. The two primary methods for ascertaining these motives were the official records of the CAs (agendas, reports and minutes) and interviews with the individuals, their colleagues and counterparts among other stakeholder groups. These primary sources were supported by data enabling an understanding to be formed of the political and socio-cultural background which exerts a powerful, if not always recognised, sway over regional governance. Explaining this background is the

main purpose of the context chapter (Chapter 3), and its consequences are seen in the case studies (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5), where they are presented in narrative form as the civic leadership groups identified in the analytic framework for the thesis (2.2.4) play out their roles in the devolution drama.

The answer to the second research question, addressing the effect of the resulting formal institutional arrangements in the case study areas on their approaches to economic development, is again addressed primarily through the official documents of the LEPs and CAs, in this case including their strategic economic plans, and the interviews. The context, particularly the socio-cultural and political background, is an important secondary factor. It suggests that the closer political balance in Tees Valley than in the NECA area, and the higher Tory hopes, encouraged a more high-profile, politically motivated approach. The Conservatives were encouraged to build proactively on their success.

The third research question, concerning the accountability and inclusiveness of the LEP/CA governance system, required a considerable methodological mix. The effective accountability of local government in general in the region to their voters is examined statistically in terms of entrenched voting patterns and low election turnouts, forming part of the North East context (Chapter 3). It is against this background that the discussion concerning the indirectly-elected nature of CAs and the unelected status of the private sector majority on LEPs (7.1) is to be seen; low voter engagement and lack of direct representation reinforce each other.

Accountability to the general public through the consultations carried out on devolution is considered qualitatively on the basis of the official reports of those consultations and of the researcher's attendance at three consultation meetings.

Internal accountability of LEPs is addressed through their official documents, supported by interviews, which examine the extent to which council leaders fulfil their role as the democratically, if indirectly, elected members of LEP boards and the nature of their engagement; this is to a significant extent a quantitative as well as qualitative investigation dealing with the frequency of inquorate meetings. A similar procedure is followed to examine the work of the overview and scrutiny committees (OSCs) of backbench councillors tasked with examining the work of their leaders and cabinets,

and the LEPs; this is again partly quantitative research, dealing with numbers of inquorate meetings, and partly qualitative, discussing the nature of scrutiny.

Inclusiveness is considered in its economic and political aspects. Economic inclusiveness is examined qualitatively in terms of the work being done to enable marginalised groups to access the labour market, and quantitatively to report the success of these efforts as measured in official statistics. Political inclusiveness is treated as a LEP issue, as LEPs have considerable control over their own membership whereas CAs consist of the leaders chosen by their constituent local authorities and, indirectly, the voting public. LEP membership is examined quantitatively in terms of gender, ethnicity and the representation of the five civic leadership groups identified in the analytic framework (2.2.4) and different sectors of the economy. These primary data are supplemented qualitatively by interviews with representatives of those outside the LEP/CA system, such as the voluntary sector and those working in business development, to gauge their perceptions of the system's inclusiveness.

1.4.1 Philosophical approach

This section outlines the philosophical approach of the thesis, which is critical realism supported by Aristotelian practical rationality, and justifies the accompanying narrative analytic method; discusses the comparative case study method and justifies the choice of the North East and Tees Valley as the two cases; and considers the question of the validity of studying a small number of cases.

The critical realist philosophical approach incorporates an ontology which claims that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it, and that social phenomena, such as the informal institutions of this study, by and large exist regardless of researchers' interpretations of them. Our knowledge of these phenomena is fallible, and epistemologically relativist, but not immune to empirical check, and not judgementally relativist (Sayer, 1992: 5-6; Jessop, 2005: 42-43).

Critical realism sees reality as stratified. At one level is the actual world of events as they occur (meetings take place, decisions are recorded etc.). At another is the empirical world of those events as they are experienced and interpreted by participants and observers. At the third level is a real world where are to be found the

causal mechanisms that underlie events. In this study, for example, exploration of the 'real' may lead to the informal institutions, political traditions and practices that cause local authority members to make the actual decisions they do, influenced by their own empirical perceptions and in turn empirically perceived and interpreted by observers.

In the world of local governance, actual events often take place in public while the real is confined to the private meetings of decision makers – what Ayres *et al.* (2017b: 861) call 'front' and 'back' stage. Front stage governance describes 'activities of visible and accountable office holders in elected bodies, constrained by bureaucratic rules', while back stage governance is 'the world of unseen decision-making where public officials are less constrained by formal rules and public scrutiny'. Critical realism requires the researcher to explore both these worlds.

This approach, applied to this thesis, enables the multiple factors leading to the different decisions in the North East and Tees Valley in relation to devolution to be explored in terms of the complex relationships between them and the ways they created the conditions, or causal mechanisms, which explain what happened. It calls for what Archer *et al.* (2004: cited in Easton (2010): 124) call 'judgemental rationality', meaning that the researcher's case can be publicly defended, with reasoned judgements about what reality is objectively like. Therefore, though critical realism leads to an interpretation of events, it is more than just one possible interpretation among many with no criteria for choosing between them; it is supported by defensible reasons established through research.

These strata of reality, the relationships that form and the causal mechanisms that are forged, lend themselves most readily to narrative analysis. While the North East England context is analysed thematically in Chapter 3, looking in turn at the four sides of the analytic framework (2.2.4), the events leading NECA and Tees Valley to their diverging decisions on devolution are subjected to a narrative analysis. It is the developing relationships between groups of actors, played out over time, that explain the devolution decisions, and the account of this drama is most clearly laid out in the narrative form utilised in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

These narratives recount events as they actually occurred, mainly on the basis of official documents. The empirical interpretations of these events by key actors are

ascertained during the course of the interviews. Documents and interviews, supplemented by the researcher's own empirical perceptions of the events he attended, are then triangulated to construct the narratives, which present the events at the critical realist level of the real. The rationale for the narrative method is summarised by Sayer (1992: 259):

> *By narrative I mean an account of some process or development in terms of a story, in which a series of events are depicted chronologically…Its power derives from the way in which putting things in chronological order, in a story, gives the appearance of a causal chain or logic in which each event leads to the conclusion.*

Alongside its critical realist approach, this thesis is a work of what Flyvbjerg (2001) calls '*phronetic* social science' after the type of knowledge known to Aristotle as *phronesis,* or practical rationality. *Phronesis* is 'a rational faculty exercised for the attainment of truth in things that are humanly good and bad' (Aristotle, c350BC (1953)) and is akin to the judgemental rationality referred to above. It is, Flyvbjerg (2006: 221) argues, practical, concrete, context-dependent and non-predictive; it deals with real human situations such as those described in the case studies.

Aristotle's reference to 'things that are humanly good and bad' is a clear indication that *phronesis* takes account of values as well as epistemic, or scientific, facts. *Phronetic* judgements are ethical. As Flyvbjerg (2001: 57) says, *phronesis* is 'practical value-rationality'.

1.4.2 The case studies

In comparative case studies, the cases are *what* is studied; comparison is *how* they are studied (Lijphart, 1971: 682). Case studies, according to Yin (2003: 1), are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon with some real-life context. They are thus appropriate here.

The suitability of the North East and Tees Valley as the choices for comparative case studies is enhanced by the fact that they share many characteristics, economically, socially and politically, which can be used as controls, allowing key differences to be

identified. The two LEP areas fall into Flyvbjerg's category of cases with a significant variation which, in this study, is the acceptance in one case and rejection in the other of a devolution deal (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230). Their shared economic situation, social conditions and politics offer the opportunity to observe and explain their divergence over devolution by understanding causal factors with their roots in informal institutions that are too complex for other research strategies (Yin, 2003: 15). **Table 1-1** shows how the North East and Tees Valley share some significant economic differences from the national situation.

Table 1-2 shows how they share relatively high levels of multiple deprivation in some, though not all, domains. Of the 326 local authorities in England, Middlesbrough is the one with the largest proportion of highly deprived neighbourhoods, 48.8%, and Hartlepool follows in tenth place with 32.8%. Though North East England has no other local authority among the 20 most deprived, South Tyneside ranks as having the greatest increase in its proportion of deprived neighbourhoods between 2010 and 2015 (DCLG, 2015b: 10-12). Overall, Tees Valley is the second most deprived of the LEP areas and the North East is tenth (2015b: 19).

The extent to which the two LEP areas share a common party political balance is tabulated in section 3.1.1.

An advantage of the comparative case study, particularly at the sub-national level, is that it enables the researcher to dig deep into the detail. Snyder notes that focusing comparative method on sub-national units helps deal with the issue of having a small number of cases by making it possible to increase the number of observations. In this study, for example, it is possible to get down to a level of detail that might be impractical at national level or over a large number of cases in relation, for example, to economic strategies, professional advice, political decision-making and the motivations for it, political campaigning, and the opinions of business, the voluntary sector and the public. Snyder argues that sub-national units within one country can be matched on cultural, historical and socio-economic dimensions, making it easier to identify a small number of significant dissimilarities (Snyder, 2001: 95-96).

Table 1-1: Selected statistics for North East and Tees Valley LEP areas (2016).
Source: Nomis

	North East	Tees Valley	Great Britain
Economically inactive	23.8%	26.3%	22.2%
Unemployed	6.7%	6.4%	4.8%
Workless households	19.7%	21.3%	15.1%
Top classification occupations[4]	38.7%	38.6%	45.4%
NVQ 4 and above	31.6%	30.8%	38.2%
Gross weekly pay – all full-time workers	£491.80	£495.70	£540.90
Jobs density[5]	0.71	0.69	0.85
Gross Value Added per head (indexed)[6]	73.1	72.6	100

Table 1-2: Deprivation rankings (out of 39) for North East England LEP areas (2015).
Source: DCLG

Nature of deprivation (domain)	North East	Tees Valley
Overall relative measure of deprivation	10th	2nd
Income	6th	21st
Employment	3rd	2nd
Education, training and skills	18th	2nd
Health and disability	4th	2nd
Crime	29th	5th
Barriers to housing and services	29th	37th
Living environment	33rd	37th

Though the two cases in this study were chosen largely on grounds of interest to the researcher, and convenience, any disadvantages of this method of selection are outweighed by important advantages. As Etikan (2016: 4) point out, the main disadvantage of convenience sampling is that participation is restricted to certain members of the target population and the results are therefore not necessarily generalizable. However, not only does this study enjoy the offsetting advantages already discussed of shared characteristics coupled with a significant variation, opportunity for context-dependent learning, and sub-national susceptibility to in-depth study yielding richness of information; it also lends itself to the counsel of

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[4] Standard Occupational Classification 2010, Major Groups 1-3: managers, directors, senior officials, professionals, associate professionals, technical.
[5] Ratio of total jobs to population aged 16-64.
[6] 2016 figures are provisional.

Flyvbjerg (2006: 229) that it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms and how frequently they occur, as would be the aim of a random sample. 'Random samples emphasising representativeness will seldom be able to produce this kind of insight; it is more appropriate to select some few cases chosen for their validity'.

Lidstrom (1999: 98) argues that in local government studies it is the broad overviews that are problematic. Losing in depth what they gain in breadth, overviews can be superficial and unable to provide genuine understanding of the reality behind the formal structures; for example, how power is distributed and decisions are reached. Second, they tend to be mainly descriptive and only in exceptional cases do they explain why differences and similarities occur. Superficiality and lack of explanation are problems which this research aims to overcome, utilising what Stake (2000: 439) calls 'thick description'.

1.5 Methods of data collection and analysis

This section explains the temporal boundaries of the thesis; enumerates the official documents examined; and details the interviews conducted and the issues arising from them of credibility and interpretation, power relations and confidentiality. It describes the use made of statistics; and deals with ethical considerations. The researcher reflects on his own background and how it relates to the research.

The period covered by the case study research is the five years 2014-19. The 2014 starting point is chosen because both LEPs published the first versions of their SEPs that March, stating the economic targets they aimed to achieve in the coming decade. This was also the time that NECA, one of the main institutions studied, was established; its first meeting was in April 2014. TVCA followed two years later. The end of the study is March 2019 because that is the half-way point of the SEPs and an opportune moment to assess progress. It was also the (then) scheduled date of Brexit and thus of the anticipated start of a new economic era for the UK.

The research itself started in 2016 and, although systematic research stopped in March 2019, later significant relevant events occurring while the thesis was in preparation are noted. These include the 2019 council elections, scrutiny issues arising in Tees Valley,

the publication of Lord Heseltine's 2019 report on devolution (Heseltine, 2019), the first report of the UK2070 Commission on Rebalancing the UK Economy (UK2070, 2019b), the EU Commission for Economic Policy's report on place-based *Industrial Strategy* (Commission for Economic Policy, 2019), the Convention of the North in September 2019, a CBI report on devolution (CBI, 2019) and, at a very late stage, the 2019 general election.

1.5.1 Documentary evidence

Answers to the research questions required first of all a detailed background knowledge of the North East England economy. The first research step was therefore to study economic reports and plans produced for and in the region in recent years. These include the LEPs' strategic economic plans (including updated versions in 2016, 2017 and 2019) and other reports from the recent past: One North East's regional economic strategies (ONE, 1999; ONE, 2006), an OECD territorial review (OECD, 2006), the 'North East Independent Economic Review' (Adonis, 2013) and 'Tees Valley: Opportunity Unlimited' (Heseltine, 2016). This selection made it possible to compare policies and priorities recommended by earlier and independent sources with those actually pursued by the LEPs and CAs and identify areas of agreement as to priorities, and any differences and the explanations for them, including the extent to which path dependence was a factor.

The research into devolution began at the critical realist level of the actual with reading and analysing the agendas, reports and minutes of the two LEPs and CAs. All agendas, reports and minutes of the main governance bodies were read - or at least noted if they appeared routine or irrelevant to the research questions - at an early stage and then periodically as new monthly papers appeared. The bodies covered in this way were the NECA leadership board, NELEP board, Tees Valley Unlimited (predecessor to Tees Valley LEP) and the TVCA cabinet. A similar same process was followed for the CAs' overview and scrutiny committees (OSCs), though at a later stage when it became clear that scrutiny was an issue for the research.

The meetings and documents taken into account are tabulated at **Table 1-3**. The numbers given take account of some subjective judgements: for example, appendixes

to reports, and reports not in the public domain, are not counted separately; inquorate meetings are included.

Analysis of these document started with the creation of a summary timeline of events and issues covered in the NELEP/NECA papers from March 2014 to January 2017. By this point the researcher had become sufficiently familiar with the issues to dispense with this procedure, and could readily tell the significant from the routine and feed the former directly into the analysis. In the case of Tees Valley it was possible to move directly to the second stage and focus largely on the principal controversy, which was over the mayor's plan to purchase Durham Tees Valley Airport, and on the mayor's leadership style. This familiarity with the main issues in both areas was achieved in time to inform the interviews, and the documents additionally provided a written record against which the memories and perceptions of interviewees could be independently checked.

Table 1-3: Meetings and reports taken into account

Meeting and documents			
Body	Dates (inclusive)	Meetings	Reports
NELEP	11/09/2014 to 21/03/2019	41	80
NECA Leadership Board	15/04/2014 to 05/02/2019	41	258
NECA OSC	14/06/2014 to 14/03/2019	30	105
TVU	22/01/2014 to 27/01/2016	9	n/a
TVCA Board	04/04/2016 to 22/03/2017	11	41
TVCA Cabinet	31/05/2017 to 15/03/2019	18	118
TVCA OSC	09/09/2016 to 01/03/2019	9	n/a
NTCA Cabinet	04/11/2018 to 12 /03/2019	4	16
NTCA OSC	17/12/2018 to 21/03/2019	3	9
Totals		**166**	**627**

These readings sometimes resulted in supporting or clarifying documents being sought from other sources such as government departments and individual councils. Government documents from several departments and agencies provided data, the most important being the Department for Business, Energy and *Industrial Strategy*, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and their predecessors, and the Cabinet Office. House of Commons Library briefings were also helpful.

Regional mainstream media were monitored on a daily basis for reports of relevant events and opinions. Social media was discovered during the course of the study to have been in use for campaigning against NECA's devolution deal and the relevant site was thenceforward monitored. The Tees Valley mayor's highly active social media sites provided useful information.

The achievements of the CAs and LEPs in economic outcomes by March 2019 – the half-way point in the 10-year SEPs and the concluding date for this study - were compared quantitatively with the targets set out in the SEPs published in 2014, using UK official statistics and the LEPs own documents (6.5).

1.5.2 The interviews

Interviews were the primary means for penetrating beneath the actual events recorded in official document to the underlying levels of the empirical and the real. While examination of the documents discussed above is an effective method of researching actual events, the interviews were essential for exploring the socio-cultural environment that must be understood to answer the research questions. To get as wide a range of interpretations as possible, interviews were carried out with representatives of all five leadership groups identified in the analytic framework (2.2.4) Forty-two-interviews were conducted; in one case two colleagues chose to be interviewed together, making a total of 43 interviewees (**Table 1-4**).

Table 1-4: Interviewees

Local politicians	13
National politicians	4
LEP members	4
Business leaders	5
Other private sector	2
Voluntary and community sector	6
Trade unions	2
Political campaigner	1
Public servants	3
Miscellaneous (health, culture, ex-RDA)	3

The most important task was to secure interviews with those close to the devolution decision-making process. Interviews were secured with leading political figures from all seven NECA councils which collectively rejected devolution. Senior political

representatives of two of the five Tees Valley councils were interviewed, but as there was no evidence of disagreement between the councils it was considered superfluous to interview others. It was however essential to interview leading players in the devolution drama from the four other leadership groups identified in the analytic framework – public officials, business, trade unions and the voluntary sector. Account was taken of the fact that officials also had a voice through the documents studied.

An interview plan was prepared in October 2017 listing the position held by each interviewee justifying his/her selection, the relevant issues the interviewee was in a position to deal with and the research question/s to which s/he could be expected to help provide an answer. Interview request letters were sent by email in November 2017 specifying that the subject would be the role and impact of LEPs and CAs in the North East and Tees Valley. Within that broad framing, the semi-structured interviews enabled interviewees to raise any matters they considered relevant; some, for example, raised comparisons with the earlier regional development agencies. The researcher did, however, always steer discussion back to the issues of the research questions.

Some interviewees held region-wide responsibilities, some in one case study area or another. Many held leading positions in the region and some nationally, though all had backgrounds in the region. The national politicians and a civil servant interviewed were chosen for their combination of national and regional perspectives. Some interviewees filled dual roles (e.g. politician and LEP board member). Voluntary sector interviewees were selected on the basis of their involvement in economic development activities, such as business support, enterprise development, education and training, and employability. Some held senior positions, others closer to the grass roots. Eight interviewees were women; one was from an ethnic minority. More interviews were necessary in the North East than Tees Valley because the more turbulent events in the former called for a wider range of interpretations. At least one interview was conducted in each of the region's 12 municipalities. The researcher was fortunate in that very few of those asked to give interviews declined.

Interviews, conducted between November 2017 and December 2018, were carried out face-to-face and lasted 40 minutes on average. They were recorded, transcribed by the

author, digitally stored and coded in NVivo to aid analysis. Fifty-seven codes were used, with 1,932 references distributed among them (Appendix B). Quotations used were selected as those best suited to summarise views expressed by interviewees collectively and/or support points being made in the thesis.

Many of the interviews were with members of local elites, and scholars have identified a wide range of problems associated with this practice. How does one identify elites, asks Cochrane (1998) – a point discussed in relation to this research immediately above and in connection with the analytic framework (2.2.4). What is the relationship between researcher and interviewee? How can the researcher avoid being sucked into the interviewee's world and becoming its mouthpiece? Alternatively, is it legitimate to assume elites have something to hide which should be exposed? Cochrane (1998: 2030-2031) advocates responding to these questions with 'committed scepticism' – not simply believing elites, but still taking them seriously in their own right. He also advises that 'the key is not to be found in the elites themselves, but in the broader systems, processes, and structures of which they are a part' – in other words, the causal mechanisms of critical realism (1.4.1).

(Raco, 1999) argues that representations of the world arising from research, including interviews, are a fundamental part of political struggle and something which is the virtual monopoly of what he calls 'intellectuals'. This is a point addressed in relation to this research in the author's reflexive remarks in section 1.5.4. Raco says of the researcher's monopoly position:

> *This 'privilege' is one which can, therefore, be used in the pursuit of political agendas. On the one hand, critical research may challenge existing power relations through exposing and uncovering new forms of knowledge and helping to make organizations more accountable for their actions. On the other hand, intellectuals may help to reinforce existing power relations through exclusive processes of knowledge construction and distribution, which concentrate power further in the hands of the already powerful' (Raco, 1999) .*

Critical realism raises two practical issues for research based on interviews: how do we know interviewees are telling the truth, and how can we have confidence in our own explanation of what they say? On the first question, as Clark (1998: 82) says: 'I do not

believe that respondents tell us the truth if truth is defined as neutral, uncommitted observations about the given world'. Interviewees may have their own agendas. Clark's recommended response involves continuous checking against known facts, and fortunately checking was often possible in this case, not only against the views of other interviewees but also official documents. According to Stake (2000: 443-444), the solution involves using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. It is a process that brings different methods – principally interviews and documents in this case – to bear on the same issues. In relation to one important area for this research, party political meetings in private, the task is particularly difficult, as it must rely on the memory and interpretations of individuals. But as Grix says: 'Research should be judged on how its constituent parts logically link together and not by the methods used' (Grix, 2002: 181).

Schoenberger recognises that interviewees themselves interpret the events they describe, and the researcher then has to interpret the interpretation. The best strategy, Schoenberger believes, starts with being well informed. The interviewee will be reassured by an informed researcher and is therefore likely to be more open, while the researcher will have an independent basis from which to assess what he or she is told. The researcher should constantly check validity by looking out for inconsistencies and asking for the same events or decisions to be described in different contexts (Schoenberger, 1992: 186-187).

Confidentiality is an issue experienced by Neal and McLaughlin (2009) in a way relevant to this research. They report that in their research anonymity was insufficient to avoid particular voices being recognised in a setting in which all the respondents were known to each other (2009: 694). In the research for this thesis interviewees were in some cases political colleagues or business associates of each other. The North East and Tees Valley political and business communities are relatively small and closely integrated and care had to be taken in the text to minimise the possibility that individuals would be recognisable.

Cochrane (1998) and Smith (2005) both call for reflexivity on the part of the researcher as a way of dealing with these issues arising from elite interviews. Personal reflexivity relating to this research is provided in section 1.5.4.

1.5.3 Use of statistics

This is, for the most part, a qualitative study. When statistics are used, they are drawn from the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS), official labour market statistics (Nomis), HM Treasury, North East England's two LEPs, Eurostat and the OECD regional demography dataset. Where statistics for 2016 are used instead of more recent figures now available, it is because these are the statistics for the time councillors made their devolution decisions. While recognizing that statistics are open to interpretation and never beyond question, official statistics are accepted as valid for the purposes of this study.

Numbers relating to council elections, party political balance and trade union representation on local authorities are sourced from the council websites concerned; compilations are by the researcher.

Statistics are actual, but wield powerful empirical force. They influence perceptions which feed back to the level of the real and therefore drive actions. They contribute to the causal mechanisms that lead to decisions. How one views statistics depends on where one is coming from and in turn helps determine where one is going. We will see this process at work most clearly in the case studies in the attitudes of politicians and their officials to funding issues.

1.5.4 Ethical and reflexive considerations

Practical steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality of interviews, anonymity of interviewees and security of data. Interviews were agreed and arranged by e-mail. Each interviewee was assured that his/her participation would remain confidential and any use of material from the interview would be anonymous. Interviewees were informed of the nature and aims of the research at the time the interview request was submitted. Interviews and all associated documents, including back-up copies, were stored anonymously on the researcher's laptop and an external hard drive. Identities were kept separately from the interviews. All this information is encrypted, in addition

to the researcher's routine password protection. The research posed and continues to pose no known risk to anyone.

Speaking reflexively, the researcher should clarify his own situation for the reader, expanding on the information in the *Acknowledgements.* A native of the North East and after a career in newspapers and then government, he feels committed to the region's prosperity and wellbeing. For professional reasons he has always attempted to maintain political impartiality and the only occasion he joined a party, when already in retirement, was on the day the 2017 general election was called. He joined the Liberal Democrats for the sole reason they were the only party with a Brexit policy he could support. He resigned again in under a year because he did not feel professionally comfortable placing his political impartiality in question. Brexit features in this thesis, but only incidentally.

His career experience placed the researcher in what is certainly an unusual relationship with his interviewees, and what he considers an advantageous one. It made him familiar with the regional political and economic context and comfortable dealing with local elites. However, his contextual knowledge, though still relevant, was somewhat out of date in detail at the time of the research, which he considers an added advantage as it meant he was not on such close personal terms with any interviewees as to be influenced by his relationship. He was previously professionally acquainted with two political interviewees of different parties, but had seldom or never been in touch with them for some years. He had worked with another interviewee more than a decade earlier and not seen him since. He was currently friendly with one other interviewee.

Finally, the researcher's experience reinforced, he believes, his ability to deal with the 'situated knowledge' issue – both his interviewees' and his own. Situated knowledge has been described as 'the idea that all forms of knowledge reflect the particular conditions in which they are produced, and at some level reflect the social identities and social locations of knowledge producers' (Rogers *et al.*, 2013). While the researcher believed that all his interviewees spoke sincerely, he recognised that they all reflected their own situated perspectives, as he does his own, and he was able, he

believes, to take that into account, applying the 'committed scepticism' recommended by Cochrane (1998) (1.5.2).

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has stated the aims of the thesis and the research questions. It has introduced the reader to the key concepts being explored, to the critical realist and *phronetic* philosophical approach and to the analytic framework. The reader will now understand the basis on which the two case study areas were selected and the mixed methods used to study them, and why the interviewees were selected. The chapter has explained how the account of the region's contextual background given in Chapter 3 will contribute to the different approaches and methods required to address each of the three research questions. Ethical issues have been considered and the researcher has explained reflexively his own relationship to the research.

The strengths of the thesis are that the case studies facilitate an in-depth examination of the real-level causal factors that result in informal institutions influencing formal institutions. They provide early examples of the governance regime of LEPs and CAs, with particular reference to social values, political traditions and practices, including the private workings of party groups, and of democratic accountability, inclusiveness, leadership and the elected mayors issue. The researcher has had interview access to leading actors from all leadership groups involved. The aim is to come to a reasoned, plausible judgement on these issues which supports the recommendations with which the thesis concludes, aware however that alternative interpretations are possible. These issues are of wider interest than in North East England, not least to policy makers in the field of economic development, and the country's other LEP areas.

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2, the literature review, covers theories of economic geography, including debates over agglomeration and place-based *versus* spatially blind development; and governance, including leadership and the mayoral question. Chapter 3 applies the analytic framework thematically to the context of North East England, placing the region within its socio-cultural and political, governmental, economic and environmental framings. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 present the case studies covering the North East and Tees Valley respectively, in narrative form, taking a critical realist approach. They explain why the North East and

Tees Valley took different decisions on devolution (providing an answer to research question 1). Chapter 6, following the narration of events leading to the different decisions in the previous two chapters, outlines their consequences for the approaches of the case study areas to economic development (providing an answer to research question 2) and considers whether the different approaches are making any difference to economic outcomes. Chapter 7 addresses research question 3 by discussing what the case studies of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 tell us about accountability and inclusion. Chapter 8 draws together the answers to the three research questions. It discusses what has been learned empirically, conceptually and methodologically. It makes recommendations for reform of the institutions of devolutionary governance. Finally, it sets out a further research agenda to support its suggestions.

Chapter 2. Literature Review: economic theories and political governance

English devolution having been situated in its global, historical and political context (1.2), this chapter introduces the issues raised throughout the thesis through the medium of academic and some official, literature. Sub-national development faces issues in both economics and politics. Those discussed here include the key concepts introduced in section 1.3 and all have a significant place in the debates over devolution that emerge through the case studies described in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. This chapter first discusses economic theories: new economic geography, focusing on agglomeration the debate over place-based or spatially blind policy; institutional economic geography, dealing with institutions formal and informal; and evolutionary economic geography, featuring place and identity, and path dependence.

Though these theories and concepts were almost certainly not in the minds of most North East England actors, in terms, during the events to be discussed in the case studies, and certainly did not feature explicitly in their debates, they form an essential background against which the events must be seen to be fully understood. In the context of new economic geography, a preference for place-based policies – though rarely if ever mentioned as such – is taken for granted by all concerned in the region; yet the literature makes it clear that there is an alternative, spatially blind policy, which governments must consider. Theories of institutional and evolutionary economic geography will be seen, as the argument of this thesis progresses through the following chapters, to underlie explanations of how the region's institutions, formal and informal, influenced the decisions on devolution being researched here.

Political issues examined in this chapter will also be found as the research progresses to play an important role in North East England: trust, legitimacy, the historical meaning of events, the continuing power and influence of government over governance, hopes and fears over fiscal devolution, leadership including the mayoral issue, accountability, inclusion, and the role of party groups and business leaders

All of these issues, economic and political, form essential background for understanding the events to be narrated in the case studies and for providing answers to the research questions.

2.1 Theories of economic geography

This section discusses the controversy between new economic geography, with its emphasis on spatially blind policies and agglomeration, and place-based strategies aimed at achieving even levels of development across all geographies. It then examines institutional and evolutionary economic geography, both of which are concerned with how the features of particular places, such as their politics and cultures, and their ability to adapt, affect their development.

2.1.1 New economic geography

The claim that cities act as growth hubs, creating jobs and benefiting their hinterlands, has long been controversial. Molotch (1976: 140) saw cities as growth machines driven by property interests keen to drive up land values and rents. He did not think they created jobs, merely distributed them as cities competed for their share of economic activity largely determined by spatially blind decisions outside their control - investment returns and the money supply (1976: 320).

The idea of the city as growth hub survives, if in different forms, and remains controversial. Moore-Cherry and Tomaney (2019: 1-2) note that 'metropolitan regions are now regarded as the drivers of economic growth' while using the term 'metro-phobia' to describe a simultaneous reluctance to consider new metropolitan governance structures. Waite and Morgan (2019: 1-2) use the counter-term 'metrophilia' and note that while cities are seen by some policy-makers as 'engines of growth', empirical evidence casts doubt on this claim.

The role of cities is inextricably linked with the debate over place-based *versus* spatially blind development. Should cities be left free to agglomerate, with the resulting benefits spreading – it is hoped - to all, or should policy intervene to support growth in peripheral areas? New economic geography (NEG), made prominent by Krugman in the 1990s (Krugman, 2011: 2; Martin, 2011: 53), seeks to 'explain the riddle of uneven

spatial development' and why agglomerations form in a few places, leading to inequalities and tensions (Fujita and Thisse, 2009: 109).

NEG is controversial partly because it uses mathematical models to theorize the economic landscape, such generally valid abstract models paying attention to economies of scale, mobility of capital and labour, and transport costs, but not to contextual geographical differences, and thus producing, in the view of some, one-size-fits-all approaches to regional policy (Hassink and Gong, 2016: 3-4). The controversy was highlighted in an exchange between Krugman and the geographer Martin (1999: 80, 83), when the latter wrote that what he calls 'economic geography proper' involves not abstract models but 'a firm commitment to studying real places (a recognition that local specificity matters) and the role of historico-institutional factors in the development of those places'.

Economic geography proper, wrote Martin (2011: 54-56), is 'mainly narrative-based and discursive…typically emphasizing a range of institutional and cultural processes as well as – or instead of – economic mechanisms, where the interest is on "actual existing" spatial economic landscapes, not on hypothetical and idealized ones'. It is realist, pragmatic, empirically grounded and often case study orientated. In the terms of this thesis, Martin's approach is *phronetic.*

The controversy around NEG was heightened further when its influence was given expression in the World Bank's *World Development Report 2009* (Hassink and Gong, 2016: 4, 5). The Bank was opposed to the way the debate on development had become 'fixated on economic growth in lagging areas' (World Bank, 2009: 23). It argued that the drivers of economic transformation were agglomeration, bringing the benefits of the concentration of economic production; migration as people and businesses move closer to agglomerations; and specialisation (2009: xx-xxi, 34, 39). The bedrock of this process of integration was spatially blind institutions, such as laws, regulations and basic services, supported by connective infrastructure, and – but only as a last resort – targeted, place-based interventions (2009: 1, 22-23, 231). Economic growth would as a result, it agreed, be imbalanced. However:

> *To try to spread out economic activity is to discourage it. But development can*
> *still be inclusive, in that even people who start their lives far away from*

economic opportunity can benefit from the growing concentration of wealth in
a few places. The way to get both the benefits of uneven growth and inclusive
development is through economic integration (2009: xxi).

The Bank claimed not to be anti-equity, and argued progressive policies could ensure that living standards converge (2009: 2, 39). However, McCann (2016: 430) argues that often what are ostensibly space-blind policies in reality tend to be top-down, centrally driven policies which favour the interests of elites in capital or commercially dominant cities, and this is one reason for lack of trust leading some local actors to refuse to engage. Martin (2008: 3) argues that the claim associated with NEG that policies to reduce regional inequalities may be nationally inefficient is neither theoretically convincing nor empirically supported.

Urban Economics (UE), like NEG, focuses on cities, or city-regions, and their benefits of scale, population and density. UE incorporates assumptions of classical economics, such as that capital and labour are rational and mobile, but places more emphasis than NEG on human capital. Education, skills and entrepreneurship are seen as critical, and people move to cities for quality of life as well as jobs (Pike *et al.*, 2017: 129-131).

NEG and UE notwithstanding, advocates of decentralization and place-based interventions at various levels are numerous (1.2), and they found support in the *Barca Report 2009*, which argued for place-based development. The Barca Report was produced for the European Commission and was highly influential in the redesign of European cohesion policy for 2014-2020 (Hildreth and Bailey, 2013: 240), under which the North East LEP was awarded 540m euros and Tees Valley 202m (BIS, 2013b).

Yet the advocates of place-based policy can sometimes struggle to make the economic case. Empirical research by Pike *et al.* (2012) in the UK found limited evidence of any economic dividend of devolution, though this was hard to discern because its likely effects were overridden by national economic growth (2012: 25). According to Martin *et al.* (2016: 342), imbalance in the UK economy is a problem that has not been resolved by 90 years of regional policy.

The debate about the role of cities in the UK specifically is skewed by the fact that London is so much bigger than all other cities. McCann (2016) makes the case that the

strong economic performance of London has not benefited the rest of the UK outside its southern hinterland. He therefore sees the UK's economic geography problem as between the London-based core and the peripheral regions, with varying urban performance elsewhere simply as a manifestation. According to Los *et al.* (2017: 790) the assumption that London would catalyse growth across the UK has simply not happened. Their analysis shows that for all other UK NUTS-2 regions[7] demand from London only accounts for between 0.7% and 4% of local GDP[8].

Whether the same is true at a smaller scale of other UK cities in relation to their hinterlands has an important bearing on this study. Between 2000 and 2010 most cities (defined to include their wider urban areas) in the midlands and north of England grew more slowly than the national average, placing in question the suggestion that they should be allowed or encouraged to expand. Outside London, productivity barely increases with city size (OECD, 2015b: 48; McCann, 2016: 137, 140, 146-148, 150-151, 490). Lloyd (2015: 14-15) argues that the city growth model is inadequate because it rests on the notion of agglomeration economies and besides is not aimed at equity between regions, redistribution or social justice.

NEG thus poses a dilemma for the UK with its dominant capital city, raising the contested question of a trade-off between national growth and regional equality. Overman (2012) suggests building on success by prioritising investment in London and a few other cities – he names Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds – even if this means uneven spatial development. Leunig and Swaffield (2007: 5-6) agree, proposing expansion for the London economic powerhouse while accepting that not every town and city that has fallen behind can be regenerated. Some medium-sized cities – Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle are mentioned – can build on their strengths but, unlike London, are not successful enough to deliver prosperity to surrounding towns. Newcastle's place in this debate is an important feature of this study.

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[7]NUTS: Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics. NUTS level 2 regions are counties and/or groups of counties (Eurostat: https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/eurostat). North East England, including Tees Valley, is a NUTS2 region.
[8]Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measures if and how much the economy is growing (https://www.gov.uk/government/news/gross-domestic-product-gdp-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters)

Pike *et al.* (2012: 11, 19-22, 25) find that when the economy is thriving London and the South East benefit most and regional disparities grow, but when boom turns to bust the economies of regions like the North East are less exposed to the market and disparities reduce. The implication, that reducing regional inequalities is linked to reducing national economic performance, is unlikely to please many. This outcome is linked, however, to the pursuit of growth-oriented national and regional economic policy, and other, more redistributive approaches may have different outcomes. An alternative view is that raising regional performance is an essential component of raising national performance. According to the government's *Industrial Strategy*, every region has a role to play in boosting the national economy, while the independent, though northern-based, Industrial Strategy Commission is still more explicit: 'The performance of the UK economy is held back by our high degree of regional imbalance' (BEIS, 2017: 216; Industrial Strategy Commission, 2017: 9).

This debate raises other important questions; how many agglomerations can a country have? Does the UK have only one, around London, or can there be mini-agglomerations centred on second-tier cities – what Hildreth and Bailey (2013: 240) call 'mini spikes'? If so, what are the implications for the distribution of investment within as well as between regions? Should regional capitals be encouraged to grow to benefit their hinterlands (if that consequence would indeed follow) or should regional investment be evenly distributed, as pork-barrel politics demands? Besides, different definitions of a city may give different answers – is it the municipality, or a wider metropolitan area?[9] Former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne's plan for a *Northern Powerhouse* suggests that England could have two agglomerations – London and the north, integrated by improved transport (Osborne, 2014). According to the independent UK2070 Commission, agglomeration works well in southern England and Scotland but plays a limited role in northern England, the midlands and Wales (UK2070, 2019b: 36). According to Iammarino *et al.* (2019: 284), the jury is out on whether the benefits of agglomeration can be achieved through a more even distribution of medium-sized agglomerations.

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[9]See section 6.1 for a discussion of this question.

Present government policy is a nuanced mix of place-based policies aimed at boosting the national economy while working through LEPs and mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) to build on city, growth and devolution deals and introduce local industrial strategies with policies tailored to local circumstances (BEIS, 2017: 214-239).

Doubt is thus cast on both approaches: agglomeration around London has not produced much spillover benefit for other parts of the UK, but decades of regional policy have not worked either. This debate, however, reflects a relative view: agglomeration and regional policy have failed, true, if failure is seen as development which is not evenly spread across the country, or even more rapidly in lagging regions so they can catch up. But, as will be seen in section 3.1.2, the lagging North East of England has continued to get wealthier in absolute terms and, when lower housing costs are taken into account, people in the region are actually getting more prosperous more quickly than elsewhere, though they are still behind, and the fact that there remain neighbourhoods suffering multiple deprivation (1.4.2) draws attention to the fact that economics is only part of the argument for regional policy. There are issues of social justice too, and the question whether spatial disparities are necessary and, if so, politically tolerable as part of a trade-off to secure higher national growth.

Martin (2008) discusses justice as an issue alongside efficiency, asking: 'Are there equilibrium levels of spatial agglomeration and regional inequality that maximise national growth, and are these socially acceptable? Such questions remain largely unanswered yet are central to the trade-off issue'. Martin believes that even if there was a trade-off between national efficiency and regional equality, which he questions, 'policy surely should be concerned with…devising policies that both increase national growth and reduce regional inequality: that is, policies that increase both efficiency and equality' (2008: 3, 11).

The controversial implication of this debate is that maximising national growth is good for all in absolute terms but may actually increase disparities, while regional, place-based policy may be the only one acceptable to its beneficiaries on grounds of fairness but comes at the price of slower growth all round. Add the fact that regional policy under all governments this century has been spread across all regions, and it is hard to see who benefits, either absolutely (because growth is slower than would otherwise be

the case) or relatively (because leading regions are given the same assistance as lagging ones). When all parts of an unequal country are offered help equally, the result will be neither an economic dividend nor territorial justice (Morgan, 2006: 189, 201-203).

The Industrial Strategy Commission recognises both that there is a trade-off between efficiency and justice and that not everywhere can receive equal support. While there should be nowhere where the *Industrial Strategy* makes no impact at all, it says, the need to focus does mean some places will receive more attention than others: 'Policymakers must acknowledge a trade-off between economic efficiency and equitable treatment of communities. Sometimes, in these cases, it is right that decisions are made where the fairness objective predominates' (Industrial Strategy Commission, 2017: 9)

Martin *et al.* (2016) believe a radical, place-based approach is required. They diagnose the problem as caused by the concentration of economic, political and financial power in and around London and argue that northern areas have the potential to reverse their decline if the key institutional structures of the national political economy are devolved. They envisage devolution of large sections of public finance to a new federal system; regions or city-regions as the key units of economic governance, and locally accountable; a national investment bank; reform of the tax system; and a commission or similar body to oversee all this.

The UK2070 Commission, drawing on work by the IPPR think tank, is also moving towards a radical solution, provisionally calling in a first report in 2019 for a 'systematic and comprehensive' framework of political devolution and organisational decentralisation, and a budget for the regions of £250bn over 25 years. It has suggested a constitutional convention 'to achieve a stable devolution settlement' (IPPR, 2018; UK2070, 2019b: 10, 62, 64). Lloyd (2015: 23) is another calling for a constitutional convention to start the process of UK fiscal federalism. The case for 'fundamental reform', with the suggestion of a shift towards a federal system to rebalance the economy and reduce its concentration on London, is made as well by Martin and Gardiner (2018).

2.1.2 Institutional economic geography

New approaches emerged in the 1990s, under the influence of postmodernism, emphasising the cultural, institutional and evolutionary foundations of economic processes. Postmodernism attracted the interest of geographers because of its embrace of difference and variety as characteristics of the world, including regionally (MacKinnon and Cumbers, 2011: 34). Institutional and evolutionary geography and new regionalism are of special relevance to this study and closely linked. Together they raise important questions about the significance of institutions, formal and informal, for regional and/or local growth and about the issue of path dependence. They support the *phronetic* element of the philosophical approach (1.4.1).

New regionalism examines the effects of social and cultural conditions within regions on economic growth and the way inherited institutional frameworks and routines influence how regions respond to economic challenges (2011: 37-38). Economic behaviour is embedded in regional cultures, according to Gertler (2003: 134): some 'hard luck cases' were once successful areas but fostered ties so strong, structures so rigid and attitudes so unbending that newcomers and new ways of doing things encountered insurmountable barriers. Gertler mentions parts of Germany, Switzerland and the US; MacKinnon and Cumbers (2011: 38) add North East England to the list.

Rodriguez-Pose (2013: 1037-1038) argues there is reason to believe that it is formal institutions, like the rule of law, that have most effect on economic development, while most analyses of the impact of informal institutions in advanced countries find their effects to be negligible. Storper *et al.* (2015: 111), in their comparative case studies of San Francisco and Los Angeles, found their interviewees and a large scholarly literature to be quite sceptical about the notion that even deliberate formal policies, if they were local, had significantly shaped divergence in development.

Economic geography distinguishes between the institutional environment of a territory and its institutional arrangements. The environment, explains Martin (2000: 79-80), encompasses both the informal institutions described in section 1.3.1, such as traditions, and formal ones like constitutions, while the arrangements are the organisations, like CAs and LEPs, referred to by Hodgson (2006) as special institutions. The environment and arrangements affect each other, and '[H]ow this interaction

varies across space, and how it shapes economic outcomes, are central issues of concern in institutionalist approaches to economic geography' (Martin, 2000: 80). Rodriguez-Pose (2013: 1043-1044) believes it would be futile and counter-productive to try to change the institutional environment, which forms the embedded culture of a place, but efforts should be made to overcome barriers to development created by the arrangements.

What Amin and Thrift (1994: 14-15, 258-259) call 'institutional thickness' can assist growth, such thickness consisting of the number of institutions, the degree of inter-institutional interaction, the formation of coalitions and the development of a common agenda. This provides a clue to the puzzle why some regions are institutionally thick and yet unsuccessful. Thickness alone is not enough; institutions need co-operation towards a common goal. This is in keeping with the critical realist view adopted in this study (1.4.1) that it is relations, not entities, which matter.

Tomaney (2014a: 134) notes that regional institutions tend to be viewed through separate lenses, one emphasising their contribution to economic performance and the other their expression of politically constructed spatial identity. The result is that economic governance is exercised by individuals who bring their embedded cultural norms to the task, blurring the distinction between formal and informal institutions – a point reinforced by this study. What those norms are in North East England and how they affect local economic governance will come to light as the narratives unfold.

2.1.3 Evolutionary economic geography

Institutions are embedded in society not only spatially but temporally, in the history of their place. They are characterised by path dependence (1.3.4) and evolve incrementally, acting as 'carriers of history' and transmitting attitudes and values down the generations (Martin, 2000: 80). Though path dependence is often discussed as a feature of economies, for the purpose of this study its greater interest is its applicability to governance institutions.

Martin (2010: 13-15) is critical of equilibrium-based approaches to path dependence and draws attention to the idea that institutions, like economies, may change over time; he identifies three mechanisms to enable this to happen. Firstly, layering may

occur, in which new rules, procedures or structures are added to an existing institution; secondly, an institution may take on a new form or function, or both, or be reoriented to serve a new purpose, in a process of conversion; or thirdly, existing social-political-economic structures may recombine with new resources and properties to produce new structures. The abolition of RDAs and their replacement by CAs and LEPs, followed by the offers of devolution deals with their additional powers and resources as well as the creation of elected mayoralties, provide an opportunity to study - and an additional heuristic framework for analysing - how these processes of layering, conversion and recombination have been applied in actual cases of devolution in North East England.

This is the approach recommended by Mahoney and Thelen (2012: 31-32) in their study of gradual institutional change. Rather than promote abstract debate about metatheory or definitions, they say, their framework is intended to aid substantive analysis of change in individual cases. Ultimately, the arguments can be evaluated only through concrete cases and actual episodes – it is a *phronetic* process applied to the case studies of this thesis (4.7, 5.8).

Pike *et al.* (2010), whose purpose is to investigate the uneven resilience of different places, are also critical of equilibrium-based approaches, and concerned with renewal. They follow Grabher and Stark (1997) in distinguishing between adaptation and adaptability and arguing that while measures to implement adaptation in the face of exogenous shocks as quickly as possible – i.e. to return to the previous equilibrium – may be beneficial in the short run, they may hamper adaptability in the long term. For places where the previous equilibrium was at a low level, getting back to normal might be to the exclusion of seeking a better future. Adaptation and adaptability are thus in tension (Pike *et al.*, 2010: 62).

Sunley *et al.* (2017: 385) argue that we cannot assume the trade-off between adaptation and adaptability to be universal. In some instances incremental adaptation within a path allows learning and adaptation of dynamic capabilities that facilitate the creation of a new trajectory so that it generates adaptability. This is a process seen in North East England as, for example, shipbuilding has transformed itself to serve

various offshore industries, and the Tees Valley chemicals industry is adapting to meet the need for low-carbon energy (Chapter 6).

Keating remarks that failure to appreciate the value framework of a territory underlies many of the failures of regional development policies, such as the assumptions that peasant economies could painlessly move into tourism or that mining and steelmaking communities could become nurseries of entrepreneurs (1998: 5-6). It is an important issue for, as Garcia-Rodriguez *et al.* (2016: 2039-2043) report, empirical studies have demonstrated how the cultural aspects of a region can affect entrepreneurial intention even more than economic variables because they tend to present a more permanent character associated with fundamental values. According to Angula-Guerrero *et al.* (2017: 682-683) there is wide consensus that individual entrepreneurial activity and attitude cannot be explained without considering contextual factors, so that personal attributes and local conditions, including cultural and social norms, should be considered jointly. This has actually been done by Huggins *et al.* (2018) among others and the results relevant to North East England are reported in section 3.1.2.

A counterpart informal institution to lack of entrepreneurialism in old industrial areas is found by Robinson (2002: 326-333) in North East England in the form of community spirit. Robinson had doubts about policy direction, with its emphasis on trying to catch up with the south of England, wondering if this was possible and in any case whether it was what the people of the region wanted; might they not prefer to keep some aspects of regional life that risked being undermined by economic growth, such as affordable housing, reasonable public transport, a generally good environment and the ability of public services to attract and retain staff? Above all, perhaps, there were still elements of collectivism and community, born of generations of struggle in the tough industries of the past, not yet destroyed by individualism and consumerism. Community he saw as the region's main strength and foundation for the construction of a better, socially inclusive future. Robinson's concerns have been echoed more recently in the question discussed by Pike *et al.* (2017: 55): 'What kind of local and regional development and for whom?' and their conclusion that: 'Definitions…are broadening to include economic and social, environmental, political and cultural concerns'. These issues as they apply to North East England are discussed in section 3.1.2.

Taken together, the economic theories outlined above encompass a range of issues that extend beyond the purely economic to the political and moral, some of which may be addressed at regional and/or local level while others are matters of national policy. The fundamental questions are those associated with the debate about place-based and spatially blind policy: should place-based policy be pursued at all; if so, does it have trade-off implications, positive or negative, for national growth; if negative, is this morally justified on grounds of justice for lagging areas; should the aim be a relative one, to close gaps, or an absolute one, to increase prosperity for all but not necessarily to the same extent? The debate about the trade-off, if it exists, between maximising growth and reducing disparities, arises at every level – over London agglomeration and regional imbalance, over regional capitals as growth hubs, and between clusters and deprived communities as discussed below (2.2.4). If the answers to these questions result in place-based policy, as they have in one form or another for more than two decades, what form of decentralised governance is most appropriate?

Governance issues are discussed in the following sections of this chapter and their application in North East England in the case study chapters. Institutional adaptation in the socio-cultural-political field, its connection with community values and the consequences for entrepreneurialism are discussed in sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2.

2.2 Governance, the state and devolution

This section traces the emergence of governance in England and the continuing role of government in overseeing governance. It describes the history of devolution and questions whether either Labour's RDA-based model or the current system have legitimacy. It discusses issues of leadership, including the debate over elected mayors and accountability; and inclusion. It discusses issues raised in the literature that will be found to trouble North East England leaders in their devolution debates – their relationship with government, particularly over finance; the conflict between regional and local, municipal interests; and leadership and the mayoral controversy. Scrutiny, inclusion, and the role of party groups and business leaders, all discussed here, will also be found to be problem areas in North East England.

2.2.1 The emerging role of governance

If development policy is determined in the UK at national level, it is implemented partly through regional and/or local institutions, which are subject to frequent reorganisation. Since about 1980 scholars have been paying attention to the fact that states are no longer subject simply to government but to 'governance', which is a popular but imprecise term but can nevertheless safely be said to apply to the local and regional development studied here. The interest in governance came to prominence because a shift occurred in state-market-society relations brought about in part by the internationalisation of the economy, reinforced by a complex of reasons including, in the UK, public sector reforms during the 1980s rise of neoliberalism which moved the emphasis from a hierarchic bureaucracy towards greater use of markets, quasi-markets and networks, especially for the delivery of public services. These reforms intensified the effects of globalisation and the rise of transnational institutions such as the EU. This complexity and fragmentation meant the state increasingly depended on other organisations to deliver its policies (Rhodes, 1996: 652; Jessop, 1998: 29; Bevir, 2011: 459).

New economic and social conditions and attendant problems emerged which could not be resolved readily, if at all, through either top-down state planning or the market (Jessop, 1998: 32). This was a challenge to what Gamble (1990) calls the Westminster model based on parliamentary sovereignty, strong cabinet government, ministerial accountability through elections and the hierarchical bureaucracy of Whitehall. Supplementing this form of government came new networks of organisations involved in managing the economy and delivering public services: Jessop (1998: 31) mentions public-private partnerships, industrial districts and trade associations, among others, while Stoker (1998: 19) lists agencies, direct service organisations, opted-out hospitals and schools, and the voluntary sector. Rhodes (1996: 653-660) eventually settles on a definition of governance as self-organising, inter-organisational networks with characteristics including interdependence, continuing interaction, a basis of mutually agreed rules and a significant degree of autonomy from the state.

Governance has the same objectives as government – described by Stoker (1998: 17) as 'creating the conditions for ordered rule and collective action' – but by different means. The institutions of governance have no recourse to the authority and sanctions

of government (Stoker, 1998: 17), so they rely on trust (Rhodes, 1996: 652). According to Jessop (1998: 35-37), as well as trust, the key to success is continued commitment to dialogue, exchange of information, reduction of opportunism, interdependent decisions and solidarity. 'Shared values and norms are the glue which holds the complex set of relationships together' (Rhodes, 2007: 1245-1246). The extent to which these qualities are prevalent or absent in the institutions of North East England will become evident as the case studies in this thesis are developed. While CAs, as local government bodies, have authority in some areas, they and the LEPs still depend on trust and the other desirable qualities mentioned, such as in their dealings with each other and the business community.

The institutions of governance are, in one view, characterised by autonomy, both from each other and – with qualifications discussed below (2.2.2) – from central government. Those involved, according to Rhodes (1996: 658), have to exchange resources like money, information and expertise to achieve their objectives, maximise their influence and avoid becoming dependent on others. Stoker (1998: 18) likewise states that 'governance is about autonomous self-governing networks of actors'. Torfing (2007) finds on the basis of 12 case studies that governance networks have significant advantages; they are conducive to knowledge and understanding, flexible, good at mobilising private actors, reduce resistance, help to build consensus and cope with political conflicts, and close the gap between decision-makers and citizens. On the downside, good networks are hard to form due to political apathy and low expectations of the joint benefits, a lack of capable actors, reliance on precarious social and political processes, lack of leadership and frustration caused by absence of clear results (2007: 12-13).

Clarke and Cochrane (2013: 15) worry that governance can be technocratic and anti-political in the sense of favouring apparently effective solutions and freezing out alternative approaches. They argue that participation has been partial and unequal, favouring the wealthy, the educated and the 'responsible' and excluding the inarticulate, the poor and 'extremists'. Elites, often unelected, set the agendas and position themselves as experts, with others as amateurs. Alternatively, consensus is achieved between stakeholders, glossing over issues and narrowing political debate. As Tomaney (2014a: 134) says: '[T]he sense in which economic development is a technical

exercise which is disturbed by an excess of politics is a theme of the literature on regional institutions', such an exercise being an attempt to avoid failures like corruption and inefficiency by offering 'hygienic' or technical solutions to what are essentially contentious political questions. This issue is discussed in a North East England context in section 6.2.1.

Where the literature of governance focuses on institutions and policies, that on governmentality – a term discussed by Bevir (2011) - concentrates on meanings and discourses. Policy actors are not treated straightforwardly as rational pursuers of power or cogs in institutional wheels but as drawing on historically contingent webs of meaning (2011: 457). This is an extremely promising approach for exploring the informal institutions featuring in this study, with many actors aware of the historical meanings of the events in which they were involved, as the interviews make clear. According to Bevir: 'In this view, people act for reasons that they form against the backcloth of inherited traditions that influence them' (2011: 463).

2.2.2 The continuing role of government

Government forms one aspect of the state, an aspect seen by Jessop (2016: 72-73) as politically organised, coercive and administrative, with general and specific powers. It sits alongside the other elements of the state, which are clearly demarcated territory, a stable population and the 'idea of the state' giving it legitimacy.

The autonomous nature of governance institutions does not mean that central government is without influence, or even power. For one thing, it controls funding, which it uses to steer governance the way it wants. As Rhodes (1996: 662) says: 'So far, British government has compensated for its loss of hands-on controls by reinforcing its control over resources. Decentralising service delivery has gone along with centralising financial control'. The government also has a role in what Jessop (1998: 42) calls 'meta-governance': while remaining hands-off as far as strategies and initiatives are concerned, the government still has a major role in shaping the context, organising the dialogue, ensuring coherence and acting as a source of regulatory order and a last resort in case of failure. Rhodes (1996: 660) agrees that, although the state does not occupy a privileged, sovereign position, 'it can indirectly and imperfectly steer networks'.

Jones (2001) sees regional policy as a way for the government to shift problems from itself to another level. Labour's RDAs, he thinks, formed part of a political strategy aimed at rescaling, instead of resolving, an economic and democratic deficit, and 'ended up enacting a less-than-glamorous role as subcontractor to central government'. The same might be said of today's LEPs, at a different spatial level, as they technocratically administer growth funds handed down from the centre. CAs, however, being led by elected politicians, are liable to be less compliant and not always willing to accept responsibility for what they see as the government's problems, at least without what they consider the requisite funding. This was the view taken by the four south of Tyne NECA councils when they rejected a devolution deal (Chapter 4).

More fundamentally, Jones (2001) casts doubt on the economic necessity for regionalism by drawing attention to research which he says has done much to highlight that many successful regions are located within dynamic national political economies and innovation systems - a finding already noted in the discussion of NEG (2.1.1), and subversive of the economic (though not necessarily the political) case for regionalism (2001; 1185, 1198, 1202).

2.2.3 Economic governance and devolution in England

'There has not been a long history of regionalism in England' according to a House of Commons briefing paper, which traced the story back no further than campaigns for devolution in some regions during the 1990s, leading to the establishment of RDAs in 1998 (Leeke *et al.*, 2003: 30). Keating (1998: 10) agrees, noting that: 'In England, the regions are mere administrative divisions with no institutions of their own'. Jones (2001: 1191) says that English regionalism has been 'somewhat inert'. By many measures, the UK is one of the most centralised countries in the developed world (Slack and Cote, 2014: 30).

This absence of robust regionalism in England may seem odd in the context of the simultaneous drive to decentralisation globally noted in section 1.2. It is explained by the fact that of the discourses that drove global devolution, in England identity (in this context) was not a strong factor while the case for regionalism as a route to democracy and/or economic improvement was unenthusiastically and weakly developed by

government, as evidenced by its failure to persuade the voters of North East England to support an elected regional assembly in 2004 (Rodríguez-Pose and Sandall, 2008: 62).

The weakness of the public debate over English devolution is a factor underlying the differences that will be revealed in this thesis's empirical research over the right geography for devolution, exemplified by the splitting of the North East Combined Authority (NECA) in 2018 (4.1) and continuing speculation in some quarters of the possible reintegration of Tees Valley with the rest of the region (5.7). Radical federalism is one suggested form of devolution, as we have seen (2.1.1), but there are others. An alternative approach is to build from the bottom, offering the advantage, or at least the hope, of creating a governance unit of whatever size can gain local political and popular support - what Rodríguez-Pose and Gill (2003) call legitimacy - accompanied by commensurate responsibilities and resources. Government policy offers two of these requirements for devolution – responsibilities and resources - up to a point. Legitimacy, however, is something top-down government cannot confer. This is an important consideration: what will win the support of the public, stakeholdes and those who have to make it work. According to McCann (2016: 497-498), one of the challenges involved in identifying the most appropriate governance is to be perceived as legitimate and to develop trust and credibility with citizens, the private sector, civil society and other levels of government. Legitimacy, judged in this way, will be found in this thesis to have been achieved in Tees Valley, but not in the North East.

Economically, the bottom-up approach may not result in what Hildreth and Bailey (2013: 245) call the 'right geography' – at least initially. But it would, as Martin (2015: 261-262) suggests, enable people with local understanding to take account of the economic, social and, most importantly, political and institutional circumstances. Kinossian (2018: 372) agrees:

> [I]n order to explain development patterns and to address uneven development more effectively, research and policy should pay more attention to the politico-institutional, social and cultural evolution of regions and localities in broader geographical and political contexts rather than generalising from the experiences of the few most successful.

This would likely mean, at least to start with, different-sized areas and populations and different policy solutions in different places. Support for this type of approach emerged from discussions between five of the fastest-growing urban areas in England – all in the south: 'When it comes to urban development, one size rarely fits all, and policy makers must recognize this' (Ramuni, 2019).

The point that regional devolution needs to be at the most appropriate democratic, not just economic, level is argued by Giovannini (2015). For the most part, she says, the underlying message in the current regional and city-regional agenda seems to be that devolution will lead to economic renewal for the regions lagging behind. Yet this is only one side of the coin, because to really flourish regional economies need to be nurtured from the bottom, through a system of governance which is ultimately accountable to the people, and not only to Westminster. McCann (2019: 11) argues the need for bottom-up institution-building to support place-based economic development involving all sectors of the community: '[M]odern place-based approaches are fundamentally about building the local institutional capacity necessary to ensure that genuinely locally-tailored policies are designed with the explicit involvement of local communities'.

Research by the Association for Public Service Excellence reached a similar conclusion 'The success of devolution, as with public services, will be measured not by the purity of the boundary or the structure but by the desire of those within them to make it work' (Rogers, 2018).

Besides, small-scale geographies need not necessarily mean lack of economic development. Towns can be the foci, as noted in Kelly (2016a) (1.2). Pike *et al.* (2017: 132-133) have reported that geographical units such as medium and smaller-sized cities/city regions and larger and medium-sized towns have been strong growth performers over the longer term. Research by Leach (2013) can also provide a model. She found

> *significant evidence that local economies with higher levels of small businesses*
> *and local ownership perform better in terms of economic success, job creation*
> *(especially in disadvantaged and peripheral areas) local multiplier effect, social*

inclusion, income redistribution, health, wellbeing and civic engagement, than economies more dependent on centralised economic actors.

This could be an alternative route for those local authorities that choose not to go down the combined authority/devolution deal route. However, while Leach argues that much good could be done locally with relatively small changes using mechanisms already in place, this approach has its limits. Scaling up, she says, would still require decentralization of policy, support services, subsidies, tax, competition, banking, infrastructure and measures of success (Leach, 2013: 929-931). This is as radical a proposal in its way as the new policy models recommended by Martin *et al.* (2016) and others (2.1.1) and potentially as difficult to win government support for.

Evidence for the success of a more local approach of the type advocated by Hambleton (2015a), based on cohesive communities with inclusive leadership, is accumulating, both internationally and in the UK, and a common feature of case studies is that successful communities share interests that extend beyond the economic functionality that dominates the current English model (Kelly, 2016a: 29-33). It is an understanding of this community spirit, supporters argue, that is needed if successful development locations are to be shaped. One American community leader said expecting solutions to come from the government was rarely successful: 'What I tell communities is, if something gets done it is going to be because you do it. No one cares that much about the community except those people who live there or used to live there' (Grisham, V. quoted in Gilette, 2004).

Some disagree, though. According to Shutt and Liddle (2019: 196-197), commentators argue there are grave dangers in bottom-up approaches that seek to achieve consensus only at the local level, and the limits of localism are exposed when agreement cannot be reached.

The absence of meaningful devolution in England should not be taken as meaning there have been no regional policies. Quite the contrary; there has been a succession of regional policies since the 1930s (Tomaney, 2006: 3), culminating in Labour's RDAs, established in 1998. They were non-departmental public bodies, appointed by and accountable to ministers, though there were 'some arrangements in place to ensure

that the RDAs are responsive to regional views' including four local councillors on every RDA board (Allen, 2002: 13).

The Labour government also encouraged the development of non-elected regional chambers (1.3.3), also known as regional assemblies. These were voluntary bodies with no legal powers which scrutinised the work of the RDAs. They were made up mainly of local authority councillors, alongside 'social and economic partners' from civil society (Leeke *et al.*, 2003: 30). These institutional arrangements for England came at the same time as more significant powers were being devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. RDAs' accountability to regional chambers is further discussed in section 2.2.4.

RDAs and regional chambers, alongside the government offices for the regions (GORs) inherited from the Conservatives, formed a troika which worked with a fragmented array of predominantly single-purpose, quasi-autonomous bodies with overlapping responsibilities and strategies (Pearce, 2008: 109). The Audit Commission, quoted in Pearce (2008: 109), reported that although 'working relationships between the troika tend to be good, and there is evidence of them working together to set priorities and develop a shared agenda for the region, few working at the local or regional level feel that this equates to regional leadership in an overarching sense'. One strength of the chambers was their 'social and economic partner' members, who were praised by senior RDA and GOR officials as less parochial and more visionary than their local authority counterparts (2008: 108).

The chambers were eventually phased out between 2007 and 2010 (Sandford, 2013: 4) in favour of local authority leaders' boards, which formed part of what Tomaney (2014b: 32) calls a twin-pole structure with regional ministers and House of Commons regional committees at the national pole alongside leaders' boards at the local pole.

Though the coalition government that came to power in 2010 immediately abolished the RDAs and GORs and introduced business-led LEPs, followed by CAs alongside them, the establishment of local authority leaders' boards, however short-lived, had activated 'dormant or latent institutional resources, with local government leaders discovering their potential central role in regional governance' (2014b: 32).

CAs, consisting of two or more local government areas, with or without a directly-elected mayor, enable councils to take decisions across boundaries on issues which extend beyond the interests of any one council (Morse, 2017: 5). Whether the introduction of CAs, which are indirectly elected, has dealt satisfactorily with concerns about the democratic accountability of local and regional governance is a question for debate, and is discussed in section 7.1. According to Tomaney (2014b: 30) the establishment of NECA was at least an attempt to introduce some form of regional democratic structure to countervail the business-led LEP. Sandford (2017b) believes devolution has little to do with territorial governance at all but rather resembles a contract under which the government determines the terms on which it will outsource specific responsibilities. Accountability, governance and even geography take second place. Sandford (2019a) also argues that the system incentivises CAs to trade policy priorities in exchange for discretionary central funding.

Martin *et al.* (2016) believe regional authorities need greater powers and resources to stimulate growth, as noted above (2.1.1). So do Filipetti and Sacchi (2016: 1793), who found from a study of 21 OECD countries that the growth effects of fiscal decentralization depended critically on the authority of sub-national governments: tax decentralization led to higher or lower rates of economic growth when coupled with high or low administrative and political decentralization. Tax decentralization was more conducive to growth if sub-national taxes accrued mostly from autonomous revenues such as property taxes, they found. This is step that the UK government is planning to take through the business rates retention scheme (MHCLG, 2018a; Sandford, 2019b).

However, fiscal devolution is not without its concerns for local government because of fears that poorer areas with smaller tax bases will lose out ((Prud'homme, 1995; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2003) (1.2), and this is a concern in the North East as we will see (4.5). Fiscal devolution would still leave relatively poor areas dependent on some form of redistribution from the centre unless uneven development was to be allowed to be accompanied by uneven wellbeing.

Ayres *et al.* (2017a) take a critical look at the devolution process yet hold out hope that deals, and particularly mayors may, in accordance with a 'wedge and crack' theory

developed by Wright (2004), enable minor initial concessions to be expanded into more significant changes. However, English devolution, so far, conclude Ayres *et al.* (2017a), has been a revolution that has not occurred, and has been marked by a 'rhetoric-reality gap'. England has seen little of the bottom-up public pressure associated with identity and democratic representation that characterised devolution in Scotland. Instead, the process has been driven by economic motives while paradoxically having to face the *realpolitik* of finding politically workable governance arrangements.

The result is a new form of top-down control, backed by financial incentives, assimilating local elites but with weak citizen mobilisation. Why, ask the authors, would local authorities risk becoming a lightning rod for centrally imposed cuts in return for only modest financial and policy incentives. The answer: 'Local authority leaders have consistently suggested that the importance of the deals lies not in their initial content but in their potential to evolve into a quite different relationship in the future' (2017a: 1). This was a hope expressed with confidence by the Newcastle Council leader during consultation on the establishment of North of Tyne CA[10].

Could it happen? The government does not hold all the cards, and some council leaders have described it as 'desperate' to do deals. So: '[L]ooking to the future, there is clearly a strong chance that if the economic, social and democratic benefits of "devolution" deals begin to be realised then the centre-periphery model will shift, implying that the government has ceded some control' (2017a: 1, 2, 7-10). According to Magrini (2018), mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) are already better placed than their counterparts without deals to manage the challenges of an increasingly automated labour market. They can make their local economies more attractive by improving transport and addressing housing needs, and use their control of adult education to support people in an evolving labour market, as well as being better placed to secure more devolved powers in future.

A question worth asking here in the political context, as it was in effect in the economic by Martin *et al.* (2016) (2.1.1), is whether what the regions of England have been granted over the past two decades – whether Labour's troika or the current LEPs

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[10] Personal observation

and CAs - is actually devolution at all. Just what devolution is, is a 'complex and heterogeneous process' according to Rodríguez-Pose and Gill (2003: 334). They specify three factors – legitimacy, the decentralisation of resources and the decentralisation of authority (or responsibilities). While details of the last two of these are specified in the devolution deals agreed between government and CAs, legitimacy is a more subtle concept. Rodríguez-Pose and Gill (2003: 335) argue that the legitimacy of sub-national and national governments is determined for the most part by processes of history and political support, taking account of factors such as culture, language, religion, ethnicity and economic development which combine to create regional identity and legitimise regional government. Much of this, it might be thought, is not applicable in England which, though more diverse than in the past, is not differentiated by language, religion or ethnicity on a regional basis and only superficially on a cultural basis. But as we will see in Chapters 3-5, very localised identities and historic rivalries can pose continuing problems even in what appears a homogenous region like North East England.

Legitimacy in England traditionally comes through the ballot box, which is where regionalism was rejected in North East England in 2004. Under Labour, coalition and Conservative governments, regionalism and localism have focused on economic development, with political support and legitimacy as an afterthought. Labour's attempt at a North East elected regional assembly came six years after the establishment of RDAs, and the coalition's and Conservatives' CAs followed at various periods after their respective LEPs. The result has been fraught with difficulties.

2.2.4 Leadership, accountability and inclusion in local government

Labour's English regionalism coincided with a reform of local government introduced in 2000. Reform and attempts to strengthen local leadership have been driven in several European countries by two concerns, according to Wollmann (2008: 279-280) – a democratic deficit reflecting a lack of transparency and accountability, and a performance deficit as local government appears less able to cope with social, economic and environmental challenges. Wollmann identifies varying degrees of movement towards individualist solutions such as mayors, and collectivist ones like committee systems. In England, he argues, self-government came historically to be seen as the collective action of local citizens according to an essentially voluntary

formula covering both decision-making and the execution of tasks. From this premise, local government by executive committee followed (2008: 292).

Not surprisingly, then, when Labour's Local Government Act 2000 obliged councils to choose between three constitutional models, 81 per cent rejected the two options involving mayors and preferred the alternative cabinet-and-leader system, which came closest to the collectivist tradition (2008: 284). The leader may approximate to a local 'prime minister', but he or she is at least elected by his/her peers and can be removed by a majority of the council, unlike directly elected mayors, whose position is thus more presidential.

Nevertheless, some believe the choice between the English tradition of collective responsibility and the mayoral model of strong and accountable individual leadership, need not be a dichotomy. The skill to bring actors from diverse areas of public life together in a common cause is recognised as especially important when governance is fragmented. Borraz and John (2004: 112-114) see leadership in these conditions as 'crucial to the functioning and success of local governance' and believe that 'leaders can make the shifting framework of individuals and organisations work together'. The OECD (2015a: 11) sees local leaders are being adept at influencing and persuading other stakeholders: 'They need to become expert in sharing, listening and networking'.

Hambleton (2015a: 187) lists the arguments for and against directly elected mayors. Their potential advantages are visibility, legitimacy and accountability, strategic focus and authority to decide, stable leadership, the attraction of new people into politics, partnership working and the building of coalitions. Disadvantages are celebrity posturing, the wrong geographic area, scope for corruption, weak power of recall, cost, and the continuing over-centralisation of the state. However, he backs away from prescribing a particular model of governance, saying merely that in democratic societies the citizens should decide.

The overview and scrutiny (O&S) system, through which backbench councillors hold a council's executive to account and can call in decisions for review, was found by Stoker *et al.* (2004: 9-10) to be 'problematic'. In some cases call-in was hardly used at all and in others frequently. The determining factor was political relations on the council. If competition was fierce and the parties closely matched, call-in was used to create

publicity and score points. Where there was a safe majority, party loyalties seemed to make challenges to the executive problematic and difficult to sustain. Wollmann (2008: 285) argues that the influence of backbench councillors has been diminished as their role has been confined to scrutiny, and a mayor would potentially distance backbenchers still further from power. Leach (2010: 336-337) argues that the executive-scrutiny division has demotivated backbenchers, perhaps explaining the resistance of dominant party groups to strong council leadership. O&S was carried forward from councils into CAs, and its operations in NECA and Tees Valley are discussed in section 7.1.

Scrutiny of CAs and LEPs bears some resemblance to that of RDAs by regional chambers, made up of councillors and other civic leaders, as noted in section 1.3.3. Blackman and Ormston (2005), who noted that accountability is very open to interpretation and the focus of much analysis, conducted a study of scrutiny of One North East by its regional chamber, which consisted of 72 members of whom 47 were council representatives and 21 'economic and social partners', alongside four MPs and MEPs.

The researchers found a tension between the RDA's focus on measurable economic targets, characterised as objective facts , which it was held responsible for achieving by the government which appointed and funded it, and the assembly's view that it was there to reflect the subjective views and experiences of stakeholders, which were regarded as just as valid. An example of this difference of approach was the RDA's strategy of clustering certain industries, as required by the government in the belief that all areas would benefit as a result of 'trickle down', and the assembly's scepticism that this would benefit deprived communities (Blackman and Ormston, 2005: 383-384).

Economic inclusion is a task falling largely to LEPs, which work hard to help more people access jobs, as we will see (7.3). Their approach has been questioned, however, for prioritising growth over social issues (Sissons *et al.*, 2018). The debate resembles that over place-based and spatially blind development, and regionally over clusters, as we have just seen, in the sense that once again there is concern over an implied and supposed trade-off between efficiency and justice. The authors find from a study of

devolution in six areas, including Tees Valley, that the focus is on creating more good jobs rather than improving low-pay sectors and challenging the existing development model and the inequalities it produces: 'Inclusive growth concerns appear to be largely side-lined in the devolution processes as a narrative of growth (and assumption of trickle-down) prevails' (2018: 10).

Inclusion also means participating in political decision-making. Young (2000: 6-14) draws a clear distinction between economic and political exclusion and argues that problems such as economic exploitation or a refusal to help needy people should be so named, and not confused with political exclusion. Nevertheless, she adds, social and economic inequalities such as deprivation do help to account for political exclusion. The membership of LEP boards is an important factor in connection with inclusive decision-making and is discussed in section 7.3.

Concerns over political inclusion are closely connected with a lack of public engagement. In the case of devolution, the Political Studies Association (PSA) found that decision-making had involved a small number of people at a high level in central and local government who had believed that a streamlined and closed process offered the best opportunity to broker a good deal for their area. The PSA believes there is potential to reinvigorate civic participation in communities in England, though it does not explain how this is to be done (PSA, 2016: 10). One possibility is participatory or deliberative democracy like the citizens assemblies that have been held in relation to devolution in some areas, in which a representative group of citizens are selected at random to learn about, deliberate upon, and make recommendations in relation to a particular issue or set of issue (Giovannini, 2017). Public consultation is another form of engagement and is discussed in connection with devolution in North East England in section 7.2.

Copus and Erlingsson (2012: 238, 242-243) found in a study of England and the Nordic countries that in spite of declining membership political parties continued to dominate local government. The party group and its private meetings were a forum for councillors to question, challenge, criticise and influence the party leadership, but in public, the system privileged unity, loyalty and discipline over debate, responsiveness and the articulation of citizen views, with councillors expected to defend group

decisions even in the face of public opposition. Ordinary party members and citizens were excluded from effective input into local politics. The operation of party groups in the North East is described in Chapter 4.

Councillors often regard themselves as having been elected because voters identify with their party, from which they believe it follows their duty to the electorate is to implement party policy rather than defer to whatever the wishes of local people may happen to be on any particular topic (Copus, 2004: 198). This view is deeply embedded within Labour in particular. Jones (1969: 163-164), in his study of borough politics in Wolverhampton, records that at the turn of the 20th century, while Conservative and Liberal councillors formed fluctuating coalitions on different issues, Labour from its earliest days tried to act as a bloc.

Even if strong, individual leadership of the facilitative, networking type (Hambleton, 2015a; OECD, 2015a) is able to overcome all the obstacles in its path to becoming established, party politics is still likely to prove a continuing complicating factor. Borraz and John (2004: 116, 117) argue: 'Much depends on the leaders' ability to wield influence above party politics and to have a direct relationship to the citizens', and leaders must 'free themselves from their party's grasp and find new political resources to sustain them in office'; they have to build networks. One explanation for the difficulty in doing this is provided by Stoker and Mossberger (1995: 820) who argue in relation to Europe generally that partisan politics is more important in local politics [than in the US] and sometimes leads to ideological conflict between central and local government. Copus (2004: 1) and Newton (1976: 13-30) see municipal and parliamentary battles as part of the same political war.

Just where power lies today between mayors or leaders and their cabinets, backbench councillors in their scrutiny committees, and party groups is understandably an under-researched question in relation to the recently-established CAs. Analysis of the party group is one area where this study makes a valuable new contribution. As Copus says:

> *The party group has not been granted the attention it deserves in reviews of the organisation and management of local government. Part of the reason for overlooking the group system is that the group is not part of the formal political*

decision-making process of local government, but it is widely recognised by
members and officers as the place where council policy is set. (Copus, 2004: 92).

Mossberger and Stoker (2001: 812) argue that both local government and business possess resources needed to govern, and this is a reminder that leadership is needed in business as well as politics. In a study focusing on a business context at times of economic change, featuring the English West Midlands and the Italian region of Tuscany, Bailey *et al.* (2010: 462) define place-renewing leadership as 'a form of public-private strategic leadership that empowers institutional or social forms of decision-making to absorb and adjust…to path-breaking economic change'. But Tomaney (2016: 4-6) takes a more circumspect view of links between political leaders and business – at least, if the formal institutional framework is not right, which he believes is the case in England. He worries that contacts could come to resemble a typical American model, lacking transparency and scrutiny and favouring urban property interests. He regards vehicles for distributing resources from central to regional and/or local government, such as devolution deals and city deals, as 'secret deals' between business and political elites, and the whole system as regressive.

Business and political elites, and other groups , are brought together in a framework of 'new civic leadership' developed by Hambleton (2015a: 109-137) that will be used in this thesis to aid analysis of both the context and actors of regional/local governance. Hambleton sees local leadership as not confined to elected politicians but as involving four other groups as well – business, public administration professionals, trade unions and the voluntary sector.

These five leadership groups operate within the fourfold constraints of government, economics, socio-cultural influences and the environment. In this model **(Figure 2-1)**, government provides the national context and determines the degree of autonomy, including fiscal powers, available to regional/local leadership and the legal and policy framework in which they must operate. Economic logic dictates that areas must compete in the market to promote growth. Socio-cultural influences comprise the mix of people in the area and the values they hold. Hambleton identifies a tension between the economic and political objectives of governance resulting from these

influences, and also argues that environmental factors, the fourth side of the framework, have been neglected.
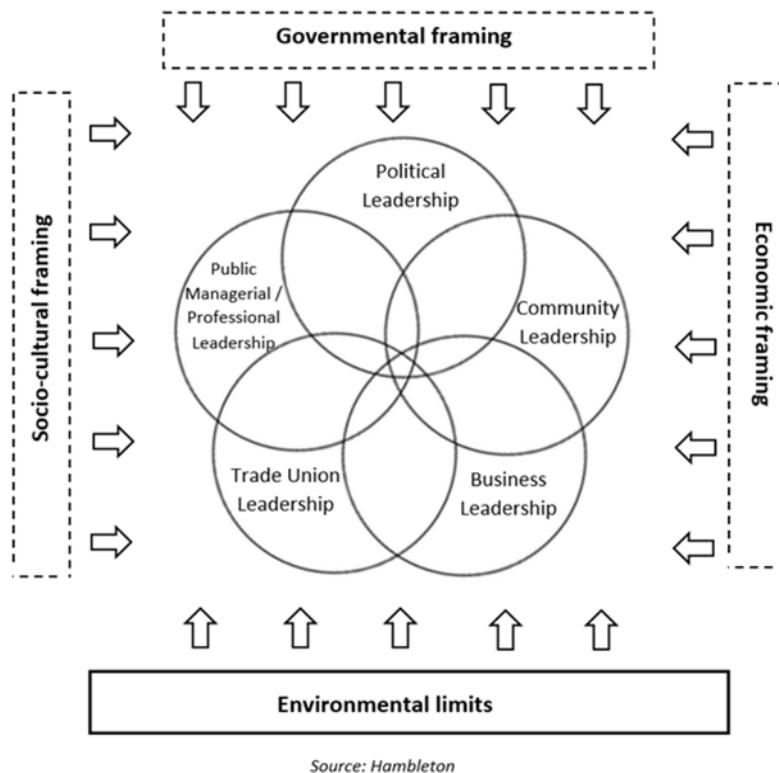
Figure 2-1: Hambleton's model of place-based civic leadership

These forces do not disable local leadership but they do combine to limit it, and it is within these constraints that new civic leadership must operate. How it does so depends on personal qualities, institutional design, the task at hand and the context. Hambleton argues for transformational leadership in which leaders have the self-confidence to empower others – to exercise facilitative leadership, which he defines as 'shaping emotions and behaviours to achieve common goals' (2015a: 124). Such emotional engagement is aligned to place and identity which, like the environment, Hambleton believes has been seriously neglected. It is within this place-based context that the five groups of the new civic leadership operate.

Hambleton's model of new civic leadership is used in this study to aid thematic analysis of the context of North East England in Chapter 3 and narrative analysis of the roles played by each leadership group in the region's devolution story in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Additionally, the study examines the role played in the devolution debate

by public opinion which, though not a leadership group or a feature of Hambleton's model, has a part in the story. Public consultation has a statutory role in the establishment of combined authorities, mayoral and non-mayoral (7.2). Public opinion will be seen in Chapter 5 as intrinsic to the Tees Valley mayor's leadership style as he shapes it, appeals to it, responds to it and uses it in support and justification of his policies and actions and as a political weapon against his opponents.

Hambleton's model is not a perfect fit for analysing North East England. Firstly, while Hambleton regards the environment as a non-negotiable 'good', the governance institutions of North East England treat it as an economic opportunity for the region's energy-related industries and as a challenge in making the region an attractive place to live and invest. Secondly, economics is not only one side of the framework within which activity takes place but also, in the shape of growth, the objective of that activity. Thirdly, Hambleton's discussion is in the context of local authorities rather than CAs and LEPs. Finally, while Hambleton's focus is public service innovation, this study deals with economic development, which involves just one aspect of such innovation. With these *caveats*, the model's focus on collaboration between civic leadership groups within a relevant framework of constraints makes it appropriate and helpful for this study.

The governance issues outlined above constitute a formidable list of issues to be dealt with by local authorities seeking devolution: the need for trust to be built and networks to be created; historical awareness and sense of community to be taken into account; technocracy to be avoided; suspicion of central government's continuing involvement, of directly elected mayors and of the risks of fiscal devolution to be overcome; the opaqueness of party group decision-making; and the 'problematic' nature of the scrutiny system. All these obstacles have to be tackled, and the ways this was done in the North East and Tees Valley are described in the case studies.

2.3 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter discusses and explains a wide range of issues, economic and political, which will be found in the course of this study to raise questions and play roles, often disruptive, in the governance of North East England. It provides the conceptual background an awareness of which is the first step towards

fully understanding events to be narrated in the case studies (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) and the issues of economic development, accountability and inclusion discussed in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, and thus towards answering the research questions.

The concept of the city as growth hub, or city-regional agglomeration, will be found to be a divisive issue, linked to concerns over fair shares of development for all and tension between place-based and spatially blind development within the region as well as between regions. This in turn will be discovered to lead to underlying strains between the regional and municipal responsibilities of council leaders with their roots in local socio-cultural identities and finding expression through formal institutions of governance. Identity will be found to be a feature of the region's public life which can either unite, as in Tees Valley, or divide, as in the North East. Problems will be found with accountability, scrutiny, inclusion, and the roles of party groups and business leaders, all discussed in the literature.

The next chapter will take the issues raised here one step further by describing the North East regional context in which these questions form and essential, if often unarticulated and perhaps even unrecognised, background.

Chapter 3. The context of North East England: identity, culture and politics

Following the exposition of theoretical issues underlying England's devolution policies of the past decade in Chapter 2, this chapter takes the investigation of this thesis to its next stage by describing the regional context against which the events of the case studies were played out. It forms a bridge between the world of theories and ideas in Chapter 2 and their realisation in the actual events of North East England to be discussed in the following chapters.

North East England is analysed here thematically in terms of Hambleton's four-sided framework for civic leadership – its socio-cultural and political, economic, governmental and environmental framing. In doing so, the chapter places key concepts introduced in section 1.3 in their regional context – socio-cultural and political factors which form North East England's informal, and help shape its formal, institutions; and identity, which helps unite Tees Valley but divides the rest of the North East. It contextualises, too, issues raised in the literature, including entrepreneurialism and community values (section 2.1.3); and relations between regional/local governance and central government (2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3).

In the socio-political context, this chapter discusses the meaning of identity in the region and finds a contrast between local rivalries at the municipal level and solidarity in the community. Economically, it discusses regional attitudes towards entrepreneurialism, aspiration, wealth and wellbeing, education and enterprise, and whether the region's economic performance is affected by the importance local people place on values other than economic development, like community and public services. In its examination of governmental framing, the chapter describes how the powers devolved to North East England's local government, as well as other regions, have changed over time and discusses what will emerge in Chapter 4 as the vexed question of funding. Environmentally, the chapter finds that in contrast to the approach of Hambleton (2015a) to the environment as a non-negotiable good (2.2.4), North East governance regards it as an opportunity to adapt traditional industries to new 'green' purposes.

This chapter finally places the region in its geographical and administrative context, with a description and history of its two LEPs and two (now three) combined authorities (CAs). This geography with its LEPs was created by the coalition government in 2010-2011, some five-to-six years before the devolution decisions which are a central focus of this thesis, and should therefore be seen as part of the established regional context by that time, albeit not one with which all regional actors were content (5.7).

3.1 North East England's framework for place-based leadership

This section, placing North East England in Hambleton's four-sided framework for civic leadership, deals first with the region's socio-cultural and political character, which together constitute one side, followed by its economic, governmental and environmental framing.

3.1.1 Socio-cultural and political framing

It is an easy mistake to think of North East England as homogenous. This was an underlying assumption of the Labour Government when it held a referendum in 2004 on the establishment of a regional assembly. How wrong they were. The region rejected the proposal by 78%-22% (Rallings and Thrasher, 2006: 928-930). The fact that even Labour, so closely identified with the voters of North East England, could be wrong about such a matter indicates how easy it can be to misjudge. According to the OECD, there is lack of common purpose in the region; a belief persists there is a strong regional identity representing a vital asset for the region as a whole, but: 'While there is a strong element of truth in this, the sense of identity is not mobilised for political objectives...Nor does the sense of common culture and history prevent serious rivalry between localities and between organisations' (OECD, 2006: 204).

So in North East England, what is identity, and what are its implications? Governments over the past 60 years have constantly amended the region's boundaries and even its name – sometimes the North East, sometimes the North (Board of Trade, 1963; NEPC, 1966; NRST, 1977). The separation of Tees Valley from the wider region in 2010 was just the latest change. A survey of North East voters after the 2004 referendum found regional and local layers of identity, with the latter undermining the case for a regional body:

There can be no doubting the degree to which respondents identified with their region – 87% said they felt 'very' or 'fairly closely' attached to the North East - but for many this was an overlap on top of their continuing, equally fierce loyalty to their own city, town or village. This was often articulated in concern that a regional tier of government would weaken rather than strengthen the influence of their own area. (Rallings and Thrasher, 2006: 934)

Interview evidence for this study confirms that however strongly attached people in North East England may feel to their region, local identity remains important too. A NELEP board member, talking of identity in the North East, said:

Traditional family structures and traditional communities have…everybody wedded to their town and having pride in their town and having a born hatred of the town three miles down the road, and if there's a job there you are still not going to move. (NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018)

In 2019, as the Prime Minister was promising the Convention of the North to 'do devolution properly' (1.2) a parliamentary petition calling for English devolution was amassing only 275 signatures nationally, including ten in North East England (Unboxed, 2019).

Sense of local identity can be an asset, supporting strong communities and effective civic leadership, as Hambleton (2015a) argues. But it can also present difficulties if it hinders the establishment of democratic governance over geographic areas that are simultaneously appropriate for place-based economic development. In North East England, it is argued here, there is a mismatch in one case (the North East), but not the other (Tees Valley), between the functional economic areas (FEAs) upon which the LEPs are based and the areas which form people's sense of local identity and which are therefore appropriate for political governance.

Following case studies that included NECA and Tees Valley, the National Audit Office (NAO) concluded that key factors for progress were a common sense of purpose, a history of joint working leading to sound working relationships, and clear and aligned geographical areas. TVCA, it found, built on established joint working arrangements. In contrast the NECA council leaders, in addition to funding issues, disagreed over the

requirement to have an elected mayor, and following the failed devolution process of 2016 relations between them deteriorated (Morse, 2017: 23-25).

In the North East, in contrast to Tees Valley, the pragmatism needed to share power on a consistent basis is lacking. Cooperation is intermittent and prone to break down, as when NECA split. True, rivalry does not always prevent co-operation when it is to mutual advantage, as the Newcastle Gateshead Initiative for place marketing exemplifies (NewcastleGateshead Initiative, undated). Nevertheless, that there are still contrasting identities between two such closely connected municipalities as Newcastle and Gateshead, their centres facing each other over the Tyne and linked by seven bridges, seems odd to outsiders. A former Newcastle Council leader told the House of Lords of incidents of non-co-operation by Gateshead and other local councils dating back to the 1960s. Actually, they can be traced to the middle ages (Page, 1891; Fraser, 1966: 257; Beecham, 2018: cols. 110-112GC).

So in spite of a shared regional identity, it is competing local identities that are stronger in the North East's town halls. Tales of rivalry are rife, and though they may appear petty to outsiders, the resulting divisions have serious consequences. The rivalry is most commonly seen in terms of Newcastle *versus* the rest, though with varying degrees of animosity, felt most strongly south of the Tyne due to the perception that Newcastle is the main beneficiary of development, with little spillover benefit for others. According to one interview account, the Newcastle leader spent one NECA meeting being shouted at for most of the two hours by a majority of his fellow leaders 'about how Newcastle always got everything and how their boroughs were being left behind and therefore they weren't prepared to countenance any money going to Newcastle through these arrangements' (North East councillor. March 2018).

Whether this resentment is justified is contested, and both views were expressed by interviewees. A study of one measure of investment, foreign direct investment (FDI), found that between 1997 and 2017 in the UK the benefits flowed overwhelmingly to core cities[11], with Newcastle among those more than doubling their number of

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[11] Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield.

projects, and large towns[12], which include all the other boroughs in Tyne & Wear and Tees Valley, also being successful. But there was almost no growth for smaller places. North East England did, though, see FDI shared more equally between its core city and large towns than the UK average, with 113 projects to Newcastle and 256 shared between the large towns, a phenomenon accounted for by the region's relative strength in manufacturing (EY and Centre for Towns, 2018: 1-3, 16, 23, 24). An independent report on the North East's inward investment effort found that while it 'may be the case' that a city-region branding would help compared with a regional brand, it played down the significance. Anyway, it remarked without further explanation but implying the local rivalry issue, a city-region brand was 'undeliverable in the region' (NELEP, 2018e: item 6, p. 43).

Newcastle has so far received the largest share of the £120m North East Fund, which provides finance for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Figures in January 2019 showed that of 80 investments made, 39.5% by value and 47.7% by number were Newcastle-based 'but there are increasing numbers of investments in most local authority areas indicating uptake across the region' (NELEP, 2019b: item 4).

Rivalries between the North East's authorities were denied by hardly a single interviewee for this thesis, though a minority played them down, arguing that the region should not be seen as unique in this respect, or that some political horse-trading was to be expected. A NELEP official suggested that rivalry was sometimes played up by politicians in public, as they wanted to be seen to be fighting for their area, while in private they were supportive (Interview. January 2018). This is a point relevant to the debate about path dependence at the socio-political level. It suggests councillors are willing to support the economic measures necessary for renewal but wary of being seen to sacrifice local political interests.

The business community is well aware of the political rivalry and impatient with it, accepting pragmatically that Newcastle as regional capital is the brand to attract investment. One business leader said: 'There's no doubt that Newcastle's the regional

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[12] Population over 75,000 but not a core city.

capital. I think the quicker the region gets over that the better, to be honest, and not all parts of the region are equal' (Regional business leader. August 2018).

Media are aware of the tensions too. A North East newspaper, featuring the development of a tech hub in Gateshead, quoted an executive as saying they branded themselves as Newcastle, but as it expanded 'it is our responsibility to start saying Gateshead'. The paper commented: 'Newcastle may be well known for its tech scene but if everything goes to plan, Gateshead will surpass it as an international hub for emerging technology' (Manning, 2018) - as if the global tech world knew or cared on which side of the river a project was located.

Behind the pettiness are serious issues; the distribution of resources is an important matter, and there is a feeling in some quarters that their areas get less benefit from regional or sub-regional institutions than others. This is why it was so important to Sunderland when it got its new *Northern Spire* bridge, a highly visible £117m structure. The bridge exemplifies many of the issues which prove so troublesome in the North East: local identity, rivalry, jealousy, the 'fair-shares-for-all' question, prestige and perception. It brought civic pride and a royal visit (Sunderland Council, 2018a), but a former NELEP board member (interview. January 2018) doubted its justification on economic grounds and a regional business leader agreed:

> *Sunderland got the bridge to nowhere… because it was their turn, in inverted commas. Now what difference does that really make to the economy? (Regional business leader. August 2018)*

Two politicians of different parties who both had a hand in approving the bridge when in government justified it because it opened up land alongside the A19 corridor, where an international advanced manufacturing park (IAMP) is now being developed (interviews. December 2017 and January 2018). It also contributes to a link between the A19 and Sunderland docks. But in the mistrustful atmosphere of North East politics, the industrial park too, with its position straddling the border between Sunderland and South Tyneside, raised suspicion; it was there so both councils could lay claim to it, commented a close observer (interview. April 2018). The industrial park and the bridge seem, intuitively, to make sense, located as they are close to the A19 and the Nissan car factory. But in the North East such suspicions are no surprise.

The Tyne & Wear Metro light railway is another grievance for Sunderland, where they still remember paying towards its construction in the 1970s and 1980s even though it did not initially run there. The Metro was extended to Sunderland in 2002, but the memory remains and makes Sunderland wary of any joint governance scheme that does not give it a veto. A neighbouring councillor said:

> *The thing that was said in Sunderland for years and years and years and years was we pay more for the Metro than anyone else...and it doesn't even come here. You could sit down and you could argue the massive economic benefits of the Metro system and the benefits that Sunderland derives from that...but the prevailing view was 'We pay for it but we don't get it'. (NECA councillor).*

This is not denied in Sunderland, as confirmed in interview (Sunderland councillor. March 2018).

Such dissatisfactions can stem from perception. A concert hall and a footbridge across the Tyne were given by an interviewee as examples of investment in Newcastle, as well as sometimes in Gateshead, which supports impressive public buildings while equal sums invested in industrial sites in Sunderland or Tees Valley, while just as economically important, do not result in equally edifying, visible projects (Former RDA member. December 2017). Still today, more prestige developments for shopping, entertainment, conferences and science continue to come to the regional capital and its near neighbour (Whitfield, 2019; Wayman, 2019b).

This reflects another aspect of local rivalry: its ubiquity. Newcastle may be the main target of envy, but some in the region see Newcastle and Gateshead as joint chief beneficiaries of development, while in Tees Valley it is Tyne and Wear, which includes Sunderland, that is seen as dominating attention. Complaints arise in other geographic areas as well. One interviewee spoke out for rural areas on the region's western fringes which suspect they are losing out to the eastern coastal strip (Labour councillor. March 2018). Local jealousies are everywhere.

Rivalry and jealousy over resources are not confined to the North East. In Yorkshire, Gray *et al.* (2018: 152-153) found 'jam spreading' to appease all local authorities and, in the *Northern Powerhouse*, concern that other cities and non-metropolitan areas

would lose out to Manchester. Amid such competition it is not surprising there is unease over any new institution that will have power over investment decisions, and even where it will be based, with an assumption during the devolution debate that the proposed metro mayor would be located in Newcastle, as the RDA had been.

In Tees Valley, Newcastle is regarded by some as a domineering member of the family, by others as a stranger who has little to do with them at all. Some south of the Tees identify with Yorkshire. Resentment against Newcastle is not universal in Tees Valley but it is widespread, and its roots lie in the fact that the former RDA was headquartered there. The rivalry surfaces at popular level, with Teessiders keen to distinguish themselves from 'Geordies' (Robson, 2018; Price, 2018a). Now that Tees Valley has its own institutions, and with its neighbours to the north divided, it sees itself as a flagship for the region. Its internal cohesion is a reflection of that quality which Rhodes (1996) identified as essential to good governance, built up over two decades: trust (2.2.1).

However, the division manifest within the region's town halls is only one aspect of political identity. Solidarity has its place too. On 8 July 2017, more than a decade after the closure of North East England's last deep colliery, an estimated 200,000 people crowded into the medieval centre of Durham City to greet Jeremy Corbyn, Labour Party leader, at the Miners' Gala. The annual gala, first held in 1871, has been dubbed 'the biggest demonstration of working class culture in Europe' and is emblematic of the trade union solidarity and community spirit which people in the region exhibited most conspicuously during the miners' strike of 1984-85 (Chronicle, 2013; Halliday, 2017; Welford, 2017). Their strength came from unity. 'Unity is strength' is a famous union slogan, and it is the tradition of union-based solidarity that was the foundation of the politics that has given the Labour Party unbroken or virtually unbroken control of most of the region for around a century. In March 2017, towards the end of the municipal year in which NECA and TVCA decided to accept or reject devolution deals, the political composition of the councils in North East England was as set out in **Table 3-1.**

Council elections that May saw the Conservatives take control of Northumberland County Council for the first time since 1974, with 33 seats (one short of an absolute

majority), while Labour fell from 31 seats to 24. Labour lost 20 seats on Durham County Council but retained control with 74. A Conservative won the mayoralty of Tees Valley by a narrow majority.

These Labour setbacks came on a day when the party lost 382 council seats nationally and the Conservatives gained 563 (BBC, 2017; Northumberland County Council, 2017; Seddon, 2017; TVCA, undated-a), suggesting a contemporary reflection of the conflated parliamentary and municipal battles long a feature of English politics (Newton, 1976; Copus, 2004) (2.2.4). Elections for six councils in the region in 2018 saw virtually no change and the devolution issue had no evident electoral effect; Labour won 306 seats, suffering a net loss of two (BBC, 2018). Its dominance was reflected in parliamentary elections too; Labour won 26 of the region's 29 constituencies in the 2017 general election, with Conservatives confined to the rural and semi-rural fringes.

Table 3-1: Council membership by party. March 2017.
Source: council websites

Council	Con	Lab	LibDem	Other	Vac.	Total
NORTH EAST						
Durham	4	94	9	17	2	126
Gateshead		54	12			66
Newcastle		55	20	3		78
N.Tyneside	7	51		2		60
North'land	20	31	10	5	1	67
S.Tyneside		53		1		54
Sunderland	6	66	2	1		75
Total	**37**	**404**	**53**	**29**	**3**	**526**
TEES VALLEY						
Darlington	17	29	3	1		50
Hartlepool	3	19		11		33
M'brough	4	31		10		45
Redcar & Cleveland	9	28	11	11		59
Stockton	13	30	1	12		56
Total	**46**	**137**	**14**	**45**		**243**

In 2019 however, with Brexit controversy at its height, there was a significant shift away from Labour. First, in council elections in May, the party's overall strength in Tees Valley was cut from 137 councillors in 2017 to 92 and it was left without an overall majority on any of the five councils. In the NECA area, however, in spite of losing 20

seats overall, it retained control of all five contested councils by majorities of between 27 and 42[13].

Then, in the 2019 general election, significant Labour losses spread throughout the region. Of seven parliamentary seats in Tees Valley, the Conservatives added three to the one already held, in Northumberland they gained one in a former mining area, and in semi-rural parts of County Durham took three. But Labour retained all 12 seats in its Tyne and Wear metropolitan heartland, just as it continued to control all five councils there (Kelly, 2019; BBC, 2019d).

Low turnout may be a factor reinforcing Labour's hold. In the 2017 elections Northumberland had the highest turnout nationally, at 40.7%, and it was in Northumberland, alone in the NECA area, that voters enforced change, bringing the Conservatives to office. Turnout in County Durham by contrast was the third lowest of 36 local elections nationally, at just 31.3% compared with a national average of 35.1% (Electoral Commission, 2017a; Electoral Commission, 2017c: 5-6).

Dominance by a single party could, warned a specialist in regional culture interviewed for this study - a man with roots in the region and behind him a professional career in cultural administration which brought him into regular, close contact with councillors - lead to complacency and perpetuate in-fighting: 'I think it certainly breeds a lack of challenge. It forces factionalism within the Labour Party, because that is where your fights are' (Retired public official. April 2018).

An alternative interpretation could be that voters' apparent lack of desire for political change in most parts of the North East is partly a reflection of a belief that their local government is well run. North East England performs well on the European Quality of Government Index, which ranks 202 EU regions according to public perceptions of institutional quality at regional level measured by quality of public services, impartiality of delivery and low corruption. North East England ranks second in the UK, one place behind the West Midlands, and 28th overall (European Commission, 2018).

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[13] Source: council websites

A business interviewee saw mayors as a solution to the turnout problem by offering the prospect of change (Former NELEP board member. January 2018). Unfortunately for this argument, elections for six metro mayors nationwide in 2017 brought turnouts even lower than for local councils, averaging just 27.8%. The Tees Valley mayoral turnout was lowest of all at just 21.3% (Electoral Commission, 2017b: 5). Nor was this simply due to the novelty of the metro mayoral office; the election for the well-established position of borough mayor of North Tyneside attracted a turnout of 34.3% - no higher than usual for council elections (Electoral Commission, 2017c: 6).

The outcome of political, economic and social attitudes in the North East has been that regional governance has in some respects stood still since the millennium. Robinson *et al.* (2017),following up a study of 2000, found that 67% of North East council seats were held by Labour compared with 66% in 2000, and councillors were even older than in 2000, with an average age of 60.3; over half were retired. Where there have been changes are in education, with over half now having university degrees, and the representation of women, who account for 43% of councillors, though still only two out of 12 council leaders/mayors. But black and ethnic minority (BME) communities and the disabled are under-represented and as a result 'the region's councillors still do not properly reflect the range and diversity of their communities'.

This socially, if not politically, unrepresentative group retains further influence via membership of a range of organisations that make up the 'extended world of local governance'. The authors conclude that 'local democracy continues to be at a low ebb, with disappointing turnouts at elections, a dominant political party subject to little challenge, and widespread public indifference'. A follow-up paper refers to a 'substantial democratic deficit' in the region (Robinson *et al.*, 2017: 6-7, 39, 142; Shaw and Robinson, 2018: 849).

The age of councillors is not irrelevant, for many of them remember the de-industrialisation of the 1980s, and – in powerful examples of the informal institutions at work in the North East and discussed in terms of institutional and evolutionary geography (2.1.2, 2.1.3) - this can make them reluctant still to do business with a Conservative government. Emotions aroused by those memories and expressed in interviews range from anger at police actions during the miners' strike to nostalgia for

the values and trade union solidarity of working communities. The regional cultural specialist quoted above reflected on the events of the 1980s and their lasting legacy, and warned against underestimating, still, 30 years later

> *the absolute loyalty to your marras [workmates] in the mine and on the shipbuilding site and in heavy industry…There is the sense that to do anything other than vote for the party that we created in the 20th century, that we created, I mean we the class, created... And then you get Thatcher. The thought that you would actually vote for them bastards who did this to us and our people, who never cared, who stripped the money from the land and took it to the south, the thought that you would vote for them is viscerally unthinkable still to a large number of people (Retired public official. April 2018).*

A Labour MP has memories of shipyard communities of the same era. Reflecting on what comes across almost as a golden age, he remembers trade union leaders who not only looked after the material welfare of their members at work but set standards of behaviour. Mrs Thatcher had destroyed that sense of community and undermined the Labour vote by dismantling the large unionised workplaces and selling off the council houses (Labour MP. January 2018).

Nothing similar was said by any interviewee in Tees Valley. In fact they barely looked backwards at all beyond the SSI steelworks closure at Redcar in 2015 (5.1) and the era of RDA domination, as they saw it, from Newcastle.

In the North East, until the 2019 general election, opportunities to improve relations with Conservatives, at least to the pragmatic level seen in Tees Valley (Chapter 5), were severely limited by the Tories' electoral failure in most of the area. The two Conservative MPs were far away on the rural fringes, out of sight and mind of Labour councillors in their heartlands. Conservative control of Northumberland did not occur until after NECA had rejected devolution. Unmoderated by meaningful intercourse with their opponents, NECA had no friends looking after their interests in high places. Labour campaigners against the NECA devolution deal could see nothing at all in its favour and regarded the process as a cynical Tory plot to undermine real devolution. A campaigner said:

The Conservative government's policy, right across the UK where these mayoral combined authorities have been created and these metro mayors have been established - what you can see is an attempt to prevent genuine regional devolution from taking place by breaking up the identity of the region. (Labour activist. November 2017)

The view of the Labour MP quoted above was that the government had two political motives for devolution. One was to muddy the waters over local government funding by offering small amounts for devolution while taking much greater sums away from core services. The other in the mind of Conservative strategists was:

Let's offer them something they can shape themselves and let them quarrel over what the boundaries should be, how the money should be applied, what the functions should be. Leave the quarrelling to them and let's see what happens (Labour MP. January 2018).

The informal institutions discussed in this chapter take their place, tacitly but potently, in the consciousness or perhaps sub-consciousness of decision-makers, alongside formal agendas and reports, whenever important decisions are to be taken. But where the informal institutions are most influential of all is another institution, in this case formal, if not official. Decisions about important matters of public policy within the competence of local government are debated and determined not at council or cabinet meetings, where the naïve might assume power is exercised, but in the privacy of the party political groups on local authorities. Only afterwards are they exhibited with unanimous acquiescence, if not necessarily whole-hearted support, to the public gaze. So it was in the case of North East devolution, as we will see in 0. The process was different in Tees Valley where, true, the decision was taken in the Labour groups of four of the five councils - though in Redcar & Cleveland, where there was a minority administration, others had to be persuaded too – but the issue was not as contentious. The Tees Valley process is narrated in Chapter 5.

3.1.2 Economic framing: the economic consequences of social values

This section describes North East England's economic situation, which forms a second side of Hambleton's framework, and discusses entrepreneurialism and the role of

education. The emphasis here is on social factors affecting the economy rather than the economy itself, which is dealt with in Chapter 6.

Popular attitudes in North East England towards economics, and especially to the important question of entrepreneurialism, are difficult to gauge. Low levels of entrepreneurialism and accompanying, potentially countervailing respect for community values were noted by Hudson (2000b) and Robinson (2002) and remain relevant to the debate.

Huggins and Thompson (2017) and Huggins *et al.* (2018) have created 'psychocultural' profiles of regions, which combine community values with individual personality traits. They then compare the results with economic performance. Of 11 regions and nations in Great Britain, North East England comes top for social cohesion, and psychoculturally is the third most 'inclusively amenable', but ranks tenth for economic competitiveness. Being socially 'nicer' is thus likely to come at the cost of economic rewards, the researchers conclude (2017: 68, 69). Their work supports the finding of Angula-Guerrero *et al.* (2017) that individual entrepreneurial activity and attitude should be seen in the context of cultural and social norms (2.1.3).

Interviews for this study suggest the lifestyle aspirations of people in the region are often modest, once a satisfactory standard of living is achieved – defined by one interviewee as 'getting by' (Professional man, private sector, Newcastle. November 2017) or more precisely by the specialist in regional culture quoted above as 'as long as we can have our two weeks wherever, in Torremolinos, as long as we can have a car, as long as we can manage, that's fine' (Retired public official. April 2018). Young to middle-aged professionals told stories of coming from families where the height of ambition was to have a secure low-to-mid-level job with a large employer, and they believed such attitudes were still common (Professional man, private sector, Newcastle. November 2017; business support executive, County Durham. October 2018).

While the region has some of the greatest concentrations of deprivation in England, as we have seen in section 1.4.2, other statistics suggest a mixed picture for the region's prosperity. Overall, households in the region are continuing to get wealthier, albeit not as fast as the national average. While households in the region have less total wealth

than any other region of England, with a median figure of £165,200 in 2014/2016 compared with £268,100 for England, this was still an increase of £17,000 over 2012/14 - a rise of 11.4% compared with 18.5% for England - and reflects the fact that people have less of their money in property than elsewhere (26% compared with 37% in England) (ONS, 2018a: figs 11, 13, 22, 23).

North East regional households have proportionately more of their wealth in private pensions – the largest and fastest-growing component in national aggregate household wealth, following the introduction of automatic enrolment in workplace pension schemes in 2012 - than anywhere else in England (52% compared with 40%). And they suffer less under the burden of debt: the proportion of households in the region with problem debt fell from 7% to 4%, equal lowest in England with the South East (ONS, 2018a: figs 1, 11, 39).

Young workers are actually catching up with their counterparts elsewhere. Research published in 2019 by the Resolution Foundation found that millennials born in the North East region in 1986-1990 are progressing faster in the labour market than their counterparts in other regions when compared with their elders born in 1971-1975. The intergenerational comparison found that while the 1986-1990 cohort in the North East still has earnings, employment rates and degree attainment levels below national average, it is catching up. Pay is up 13% over the earlier generation compared with 3% nationally, employment rate up 4% compared with 1% and degree attainment up 99% compared with 62%. What is more, the region is benefiting from among the highest growth rates in both earnings and employment for all age groups since the early 2000s. And at the same time housing costs are up only 2% compared with 20% nationally (Gustafsson, 2019).

This picture of the region's growing wealth and prosperity is mirrored in its spending habits (ONS, 2018c). Though annual spending by people in the region is the second lowest at £15,727 per head, or £3,347 below average, this is substantially offset by the lowest housing costs, £2,077 below average. The region saw a larger than average increase in total spending (28% compared with England average 22%) between 2009 and 2016; in 2015-16 total spending per head in the region increased by 8.1%, the highest in the UK. Measured by spending rather than income, these figures suggest the

region's relatively subdued housing costs have enabled people to devote more to items like household goods and services, clothing and footwear, recreation and culture, and restaurants and hotels **(Figure 3-1).**
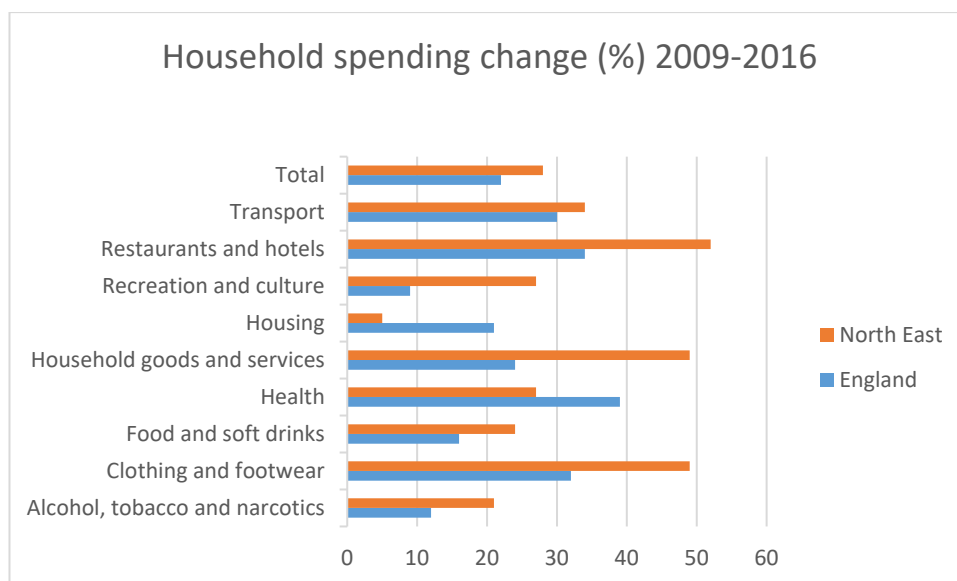
Figure 3-1: Change in national household final consumption per head by selected COICOP[14] commodities, England and North East Region, 2009-2016.
Source: ONS

If lack of aspiration above a certain level may be a problem at the bottom-to-middle of the jobs ladder, modesty of ambition can be inhibiting higher up too, with entrepreneurs starting businesses then easing off when they achieve what they regard as a good standard of living, perhaps again reflecting the value attached to other aspects of life and a satisfaction with 'getting by', albeit at a higher level:

> *You can get to a level of business and have a really, really good lifestyle in the*
> *North East and not have to continue to grow your business; there isn't the same*
> *drive. We have a lot of what I would style as lifestyle businesses...Therefore*
> *even the businesses that do get started and do manage to scale to a level then*
> *tend to cap out...Is that lack of entrepreneurial spirit? I don't know. There's*
> *certainly a feel that there's a lack of drive to take some of these businesses to*
> *where they can be. (NELEP board member. January 2018)*

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[14] Classification of individual consumption by purpose.

Another business leader agreed:

> *More and more people are wanting to start up their own. It's the level of growth; it's whether we have enough businesses that really want to take on the world... There are a lot of people who just want to have a lifestyle, and who is anybody to disagree with the intentions of whoever wants to run a business? (Regional business leader. August 2018).*

North East England (including Tees Valley) does have the lowest number of businesses in England per head of population, but new business creation as a proportion of existing businesses is running consistently very close to or even above the national average. In 2017 the region's business birth rate as a proportion of existing businesses was fifth out of 12 UK nations and regions, at 12.6% compared with a national average of 13.1%. In the seven years 2011-17 it was above the UK average twice, equal to it twice and below three times, and of the eight English regions outside London (which is a top-end outlier), the region was in top place twice, top equal twice, third once and fifth twice (ONS, 2018d).

The problem for North East England is that these figures build on a low baseline. The number of businesses in the region rose during 2011-17 by 18%, equal second highest in England outside London, but its total number of enterprises was still considerably the lowest, with just 287 businesses per 10,000 population compared with an England average of 406 (excluding London) (ONS, 2018b; ONS, 2018d).[15] The region was running a little faster than comparable regions but was still a long way from catching up.

NELEP reports that in its area in 2018 there were 318 private sector enterprises per 10,000 population compared with 474 in England excluding London. If North East performance matched England's excluding London the area would have 25,500 more businesses. In 2017 there were 44 business births and 40 business deaths per 10,000 adult population in the North East compared with 65 births and 62 deaths in England excluding London. NELEP comments: 'Whilst the North East underperforms on each of

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[15] Author's calculation.

these measures, it has made progress on them since 2014 – suggesting that the business base is growing and becoming more dynamic' (NELEP, 2019e: 10).

This discussion suggest that the region's problem may indeed be a legacy of its history of large employers, reflected partly in a low baseline of private enterprises and partly in a comparative weakness in entrepreneurship. However, perplexity over the source of the problem is reflected in NELEP's answers to its own question: 'What next?' Its list of replies is headed by; '[I]mproving our understanding of the factors underpinning our low business birth rate' (NELEP, 2019e: 11).

There may still be a link to the number of people in North East England with large employers, but often now in the public sector. More people in North East England than nationally do work in the public sector – 29.2% compared with 25.1% in the UK in the public administration and defence; education; and human health and social work sectors. More also still work in manufacturing - 10.4% compared to 7.7% **(Figure 3-2).**
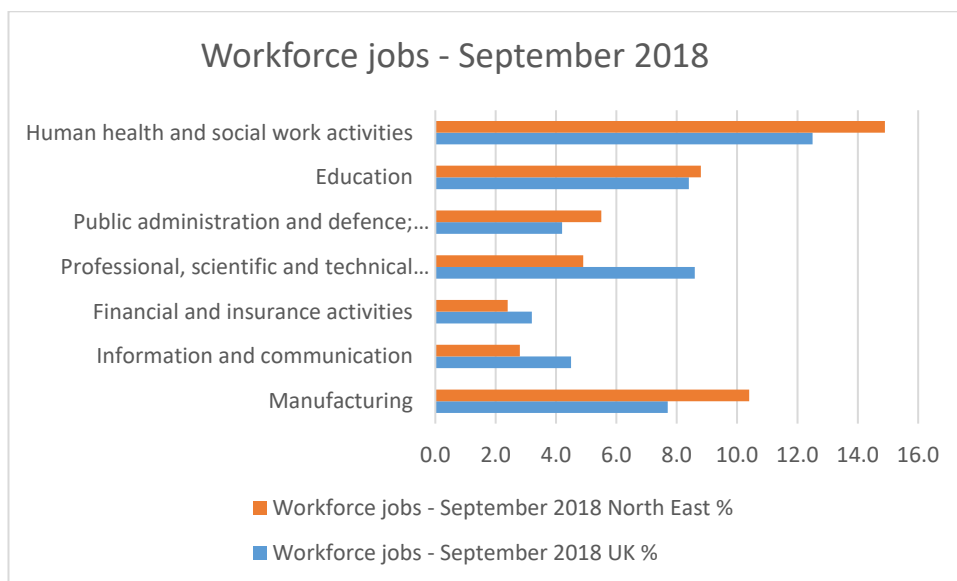
Figure 3-2: Workforce jobs by industry (selection) (SIC 2007).
Source: Nomis

Perceptions of North East England's spirit of enterprise differ widely. Of 19 interviewees for this study who discussed entrepreneurialism, six stated that problems associated with the region's industrial heritage were history: 'Our industrial past is just a cheap excuse that's used to demonstrate why we haven't got more businesses' (Regional business leader. August 2018); 'a bit of an out-of-date caricature' (Public official, Tees Valley. January 2018). Another business leader was insistent that

entrepreneurial spirit and community values were anyway far from mutually exclusive; many of his members running regionally-based businesses were intent on contributing to their communities by providing good-quality, well-paid jobs (Regional business leader. September 2018). Others – though fewer, on the evidence of these interviews – think the problem lingers, partly now centred on the public sector rather than industry. A digital entrepreneur said well paid jobs in government and academia were dampening entrepreneurial spirit (Professional man, Newcastle. November 2017).

Some look at the schools when seeking responsibility for the region's economic problems. Few interviewees blamed them directly, though a politician with national experience said: 'The North East needs to look at itself more closely than it does. Why are our secondary schools performing so much worse than London secondary schools?' (Liberal Democrat. December 2017). Others were more nuanced, concerned principally about lack of contact between schools and the world of work, with a consequent lack of preparation, expectation and aspiration among school leavers. While several saw the universities as a source of enterprise, no matching ambition was seen coming direct from secondary education.

Higher educational attainment is explicitly targeted in the Tees Valley SEP (TVU, 2014g: 6), and NELEP prioritises it too: its Skills Board is chaired by the NELEP chair personally. According to a NELEP interviewee, the best thing anyone could do for the North East economy would be to improve his or her skill level (NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018). A council leader said it was just not good enough that skills locally were a grade or two lower than in the South East (NECA council leader. May 2018).

These perceptions must be seen in the context of actuality. North East England schools rank only just below average for England, measured by the proportion of schools judged outstanding or good; it has 85% in these categories, ranking fifth equal of nine regions including London. The England average is 86% (Ofsted, 2018) (**Table 3-2).** There are some notable inspection results at local level: Gateshead has 38% outstanding schools, second highest anywhere in England outside London. A year earlier, however, before the introduction of a new methodology, the North East had had the lowest proportion of outstanding or good schools, at 67% (BEIS, 2017: 98, 230).

In spite of school performance, however, many parts of the region are dogged by poor levels of educational attainment. Pupil attainment measured by average grade per GCSE subject in secondary school is in the bottom 25% in England in all 12 local education authorities in the region except Gateshead and North Tyneside, and of those only North Tyneside is above the national average. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) notes that levels of educational disadvantage have become 'firmly entrenched' in some regions, of which it highlights the North East. Low performance, the EPI finds, is sometimes correlated with levels of persistent disadvantage, but not always. In London, for example, Tower Hamlets has many disadvantaged pupils in secondary schools but a relatively low attainment gap (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2018).

Table 3-2: Overall effectiveness of schools inspected by region. As at March 2018 (new methodology). Source: Ofsted

%	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate
England	21	65	10	4
London	32	60	6	2
South East	21	68	9	2
East	18	68	10	4
West Midlands	19	66	11	5
South West	18	66	12	4
East Midlands	17	67	12	5
North West	23	65	10	3
Yorks & Humber	17	63	14	5
North East	23	62	12	3

Nor is the issue simply one of funding. When the Prime Minister announced in August 2019 that cash would be provided to raise funding per pupil to a minimum of £4,000 a year in primary schools and £5,000 in secondary schools, only three councils in North East England (Darlington, North Tyneside and Stockton) were not already above that floor for primaries and none were below for secondary schools though, as the EPI pointed out, these were averages for each local authority, so individual schools may have fallen below the baselines (Department for Education, 2018; Education Policy Institute, 2019).

According to NELEP, performance in its area's secondary schools is mixed, with poor outcomes in many and no clear pattern about what underpins this under-performance (NELEP, 2019a: 42). Research in 2019 provides a possible answer to the puzzle why pupil attainment in North East England should be relatively low when school performance is more or less up to standard. A report for the Northern Powerhouse

Partnership shows that differences in average school performance scores between regions change dramatically once adjustments are made for pupil background, with North East England showing the biggest improvement. Schools in the North East are doubly disadvantaged under current performance measures by teaching not just relatively poor intakes [eligible for free school meals] but also disproportionately white British pupils, both of which characteristics are associated with below average progress (Leckie *et al.*, 2019: 1, 8).

This suggests, as the report says, that responsibility for improving performance should be rebalanced towards society and government rather than schools (2019: 2). As education and skills are such an important part of economic development, this supports the case for a broad, multi-agency approach to the economy, with a focus on motivating disadvantaged pupils to learn through support in their communities as well as their schools.

3.1.3 Government framing

This section discusses North East England's governmental framing, including the hotly contested issue of funding, which forms a third side of Hambleton's framework.

> *It is central government that decides the size, shape, responsibilities, powers and functions of councils; it is central government which can, and does, abolish individual councils, or entire layers of local government, or create new types of councils when it deems that circumstances, or politics, or policy requires such change (Copus et al., 2017: 17).*

These authors see local government in England as a 'constant tussle' between the pressures of centralisation and localism in the context of globalisation, urbanisation, Europeanisation, austerity, increased public demand and economic downturn. In spite of localism and devolution, they say, the direction of travel has been clearly top-down (2017: 2, 5-6). The constancy of this tussle is reflected by Ayres *et al.* (2017a: 2), who note that 'England has been a landscape of permanent administrative reconfiguration during the second half of the 20th century'.

North East England has experienced the effects of this central power on several significant occasions in the past half century. The Local Government Act 1972

established Tyne and Wear Metropolitan County Council, bringing together all or parts of 24 existing councils in five new metropolitan districts (National Archives, undated: Schedule 1). The Local Government Act 1985 abolished the metropolitan county council, though the five districts remain as unitary authorities (Copus *et al.*, 2017: 89). Teesside County Borough, bringing together areas of Middlesbrough, Stockton and Redcar & Cleveland, was in existence in 1968-74, and Cleveland County Council, covering the same area plus Hartlepool, from 1974 to 1996. Thirteen district councils in Northumberland and Durham were abolished in 2009.

Which powers are under local control is also largely in the hands of the centre, as remains the case with devolution to CAs. As Ayres *et al.* (2017a: 3) remark: 'Research has indicated that the scope of devolution was firmly limited in practice by government priorities' (2017a: 9): largely, but not wholly, for they also note, as we have seen (2.2.3) that some council representatives report the government was 'desperate' to do deals and did not hold all the cards. This is borne out by a government offer of more powers made to a NECA leader (4.5.1). Devolution deals have generally consisted of what Sandford (2016a) calls a 'menu with specials', with the core powers being further education, business support, the Work and Health Programme, EU structural funds, Transforming Cities funding, fiscal powers and planning and land use.

As well as determining their very existence and their powers/responsibilities, the government controls the funding of local authorities. As already discussed (2.2.2), it has retained control of resources even as it has decentralised responsibilities. The consequences of this in the North East will become clear when we see that 'unfair funding' was an important factor in NECA's decision to reject its devolution offer (4.1).

When the government established the Local Growth Fund (LGF) in 2013, it pledged to maintain it at £2bn a year to the end of the next parliament (Treasury, 2013: 57). The White Paper *Investing in Britain's Future* in 2013 put 'resources under the strategic influence of LEPs' at as much as £20bn in the years to 2021, including £5.3bn EU funding (Treasury, 2013: 57). The £20bn overall figure was described by Martin *et al.* (2016: 353) as 'a significant move towards fiscal devolution' but still 'far short of the scale required'.

LGF resulted from a report commissioned by the government from Lord Heseltine. Money was to be allocated to LEPs on the basis of local growth deals and covering the six years 2015-2021. The North East region fared relatively well; NELEP received £379.6m and Tees Valley £126m in tranches. On a per capita basis both were in the second highest tier of LEPs (Ward, 2019a). However, these sums included some previously-committed projects, and NELEP had £270m actually available while Tees Valley's £90m first tranche included £18m previously committed (Cabinet Office *et al.*, 2014; NELEP, undated-f).

For North East England, EU funding was another important element of the package. The North East was allocated £539.6m for 2014-2020 and Tees Valley £202.6m (BIS, 2013b). The awarding of EU money to programmes and projects is controlled by the government, with advice from local committees in each LEP area (TVU, 2016b: Annex A).

It is a common perception that LEPs and CAs are poorly funded compared with RDAs. Not one interviewee for this study said otherwise, and RDA finances are discussed briefly here because a tendency to compare LEP funding unfavourably with RDA funding contributed to the background of dissatisfaction with funding generally against which NECA decided to reject its devolution offer.

One North East invested £3bn over 13 years (ONE, 2012: 6), an annual average of £230m a year, and in addition managed the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which brought £318m to North East England in 2007-13 (ONE, 2011: 27), an average of £45m a year, bringing the average annual total under the RDA's management in that period to £275m. However, following the global financial crisis of 2008 RDA finances were already being reduced under the Labour Government, collectively down from £2,263m in 2009/2010 to £1,178m in 2010/11 (Ward, 2019b: 19).

If the ambitions of the North East and Tees Valley strategic economic plans (SEPs), published in 2014, had been met, the region as a whole would have exceeded investment by the RDA. NELEP's SEP alone envisaged total spending of up to £1,592m over six years to 2020/21 (NELEP, 2014a: 87), an average of £265m annually. But the figures were only best estimates and dependent on the LEP's partners' budgets, as the

SEP acknowledged (2014a: 86). Actual spending turned out much less, and future plans are commensurately modest.

The North East invested £127m in 2015/16, £116m in 2016/17 and £111m in 2017/18. However, over the three years these sums included £39m, £37m and £26m for renewing the Tyne and Wear Metro, a responsibility which did not fall to the RDA (NECA, 2016c; NECA, 2017a; NECA, 2018l). Tees Valley Invested £44m in 2016/17 and £51m in 2017/18 (TVCA, 2017f; TVCA, 2018a). Total investment in the region therefore peaked at £162m in 2017/18, though without Metro renewal this was £135m – almost exactly half the annual average under the RDA.

Going forward, in early 2019 the rump NECA was anticipating capital spending of £134m in 2019/20, £114m in 1920/21 and £255m in 1921/22. However, these comparatively large sums are heavily weighted towards transport, and particularly the Metro, reflecting the fact that following its split from North of Tyne, NECA was tasked as the accountable body for transport covering both CAs. Furthermore, to add to the ongoing Metro asset renewal programme, a new fleet of trains was due to start being paid for from 2019/20, rising to a peak of £184m two years later. Excluding these Metro-related sums, and with LGF funding due to end in 2020/21, NECA's capital budget was set to fall to £70m in 2019/20, £46m in 2020/21 and £36m in 2021/22 (NECA, 2019b: 3) unless new funding was announced.

Meanwhile, in North of Tyne it was possible by early 2019 to begin to see the funding effects of its devolution deal. NTCA would have its £20m annual devolution grant coming in but as yet few projects ready to spend it on, with planned investment of £4m in 2019/20, £9m in 2020/21 and £15m in 2021/22. The result, even without anticipated funding from other sources, was expected to be an investment reserve of £50m by 2021/22 (NTCA, 2019a: 11).

In Tees Valley, its £15m annual devolution grant was being supplemented by a series of other government grants, most significantly by £71.5m over five years from the Transforming Cities Fund (TVCA, 2018i: 4-6). Its ten-year investment plan for 2019-29 envisaged spending of £588m, but this was heavily front-loaded and reduced sharply as LGF and EU funding ended and some grants tailed off. Investment in the three years 2019-22 was planned at £107m, £69m and £84m, though by 2025/26 – with new

funding sources including the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund (EU funding replacement) still undetailed - investment of only around £31m a year could be confidently anticipated (TVCA, 2019a: 29).

In spite of the uncertainties and the effects of factors such as front loading in Tees Valley, the lack of ready-to-go projects in North of Tyne and its resulting £50m accumulating reserve, lack of information about future funding including the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and the Metro effect, it is clear that in 2019-22 Tees Valley, the smallest of the now three parts of North East England, is investing more in its economy than NECA and NTCA combined - £260m compared with £180m (Metro excluded). The *Northern Powerhouse* Minister was correct when he said that: 'It's clear that mayoral combined authorities, with that single, accountable, electable individual, are drawing more money and more power down from government than other areas' (Walker, 2018ak).

The sums discussed above are not definitive. While based on official documents, and thus not mere estimates, they are not always the only documents available. As noted above, for example, there are different versions of the amounts of LGF allocated to the North East and Tees Valley LEPs. NELEP's AGM in September 2019 was told growth deal investment for its area, including public and private match funding, was £672m and enterprise zone investment was £167m (Woods, 2019). Several scholars have reported that certainty on funding for regional development is elusive and subject to interpretation (Pike *et al.*, 2015: 12, 15; Pike *et al.*, 2017: 267; Sandford, 2019a: 113-115). Similar problems have been found in the US by Storper *et al.* (2015: 114-116). Some documents, such as RDA reports, have been archived and those with direct knowledge of them have dispersed.

The sums allocated to LEPs for regional development form only a small proportion of total public spending in the regions[16]. Total public expenditure on services in North East England was over £24bn in 2014-15[17]. Total public spending in the region has been consistently above the national average for many years, though there has been a

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[16] All public spending figures in the remainder of this section are taken from HM Treasury's Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses, Chapter 9, published annually and available at https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/public-expenditure-statistical-analyses-pesa
[17] Where 2014/15 statistics are used it is because they were the most recent available when councillors were debating their decisions on devolution.

slight relative decline. When One North East was producing its final regional economic strategy (RES) in 2005/06 indexed expenditure per head (i.e. UK=100) was 108 in the North East region. This declined to 107 in 2010/11, when the Labour Government gave way to the coalition and austerity took hold, and to 105 in 2014/15, though in 2016/17, after the devolution decisions, it rose again to 106. **Table 3-3** shows areas where spending in the North East region was above the level for England during at least part of the decade preceding devolution[18].

Table 3-3: Identifiable expenditure on selected services per head, indexed (UK=100). Source: Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses (PESA)

	SPENDING INDEX					
	2005/06		2010/11		2014/15	
	N.E.	England	N.E.	England	N.E.	England
Total economic affairs	106	93	90	90	84	90
Public order and safety	102	99	103	98	105	97
Housing etc.	105	87	123	91	128	85
Health	108	98	107	99	107	99
Recreation etc.	120	89	110	87	89	86
Education	108	98	103	100	98	99
Social protection	111	97	112	98	112	98
All spending	108	97	107	97	105	97

The region's slowly declining share of spending was in the context of a declining total under austerity. Spending per head in real terms[19] in England as a whole rose to £9,116 in 2010/11 but then fell steadily to £8,645 in 2014/15, a reduction of 5.1%. For the North East region, affected by the double decline of total and share, the fall was from £9,979 to £9,355, a 6.2% cut (Treasury, 2011: table 9.4). The region thus suffered a bigger-than-average cut but was still receiving a larger-than-average total by almost £1.2bn[20].

However, the extra money was not going to activities to boost economic performance but rather, largely, to mitigate the effects of under-performance. In 2014/15 North East England's indexed figure was 112 for social protection, including pensions,

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[18] International services and defence are omitted.
[19] Real terms figures are the nominal figures adjusted to then current price levels.
[20] Author's calculation.

benefits and personal social services, the highest proportion in England, and by 2016/17 it had risen to 114.

Figure 3-3 shows how even the economic affairs budget was being used to offset failure rather than promote success. The overall economic affairs budget declined from £1.544bn in 2005/06 to £1.529bn in 2010/11 and more sharply to £1.356bn in 2014/15. Within that total, spending on employment policies was consistently high compared with the UK average, reflecting not so much a welcome relatively high level of activity as an unwelcome need for it due to relatively high unemployment; indexed *per capita* spending on employment policies was comfortably the highest in England every year between 2005/06 and 2014/15. Meanwhile spending on enterprise and economic development, needed to boost the economy, plummeted following the 2008 financial crash; capital investment fell by more than half between 2006/07 and 2010/11. Other spending that would have helped the region, on science & technology and transport, remained consistently below average. Education, another budget essential to the economy, also suffered a decline, down from 108% of UK average in 2005/06 to 105% in 2010/11 and 98% in 2014/15. In 2016/17 it was down to 96%.

For council leaders whose main job is to lead their individual councils, local government spending is especially important, as will become clear when the question of 'fair funding' emerges as a fatal stumbling block for NECA on the road to devolution (Chapter 4). As with some other budgets, noted above, North East England consistently received more than its equal, if not its fair, share for local government, on a fluctuating but generally downward trend from 108% to 105% of UK average over the decade to 2014/15. It remained at 105% it 2016/17. An above-average starting point, however, does not make the pain of above-average cuts seem less. Northern primary urban areas[21] in general, including in the North East, suffered cuts up to almost twice the Great Britain average between 2009/10 and 2017/18 – down 26.6% in Newcastle, 21.1% in Sunderland and 17.8% in Middlesbrough, compared with 14.3% for Great Britain (Centre for Cities, 2019a: fig. 5). Gray and Barford (2018: 553-554) find that the biggest spending cuts have been in cities most dependent on government grants including Newcastle and Middlesbrough.

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[21] For a discussion of economic geography see section 6.1.
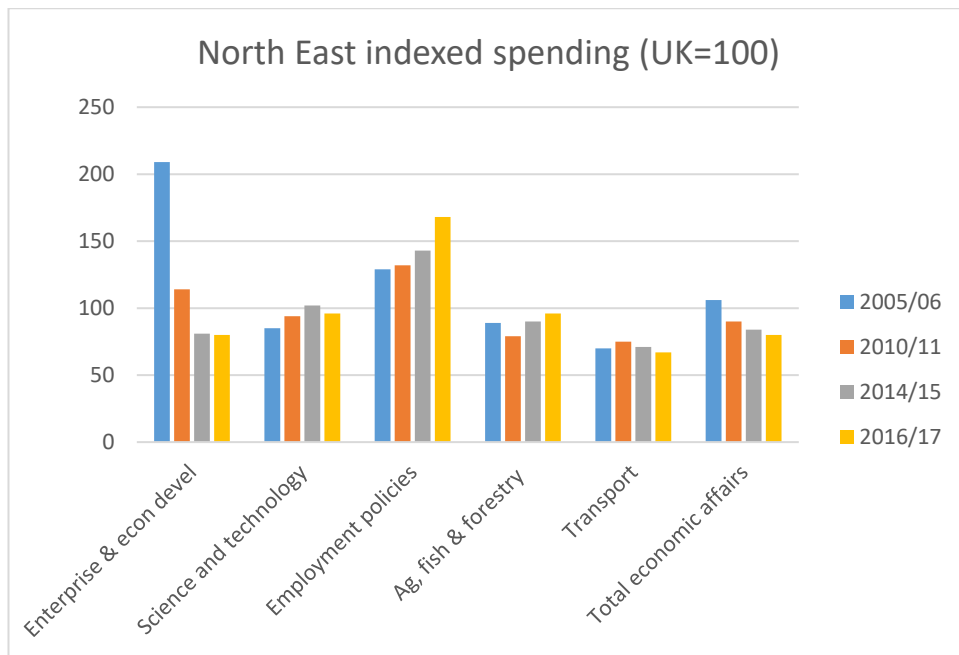
North East indexed spending (UK=100)

Figure 3-3: Identifiable expenditure on economic affairs, per head, indexed.
Source: Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses (PESA)

The way local politicians think about figures like these is illustrated in election literature. A Labour Party newssheet delivered to homes in Newcastle referred to reductions in grants to the city council like this: 'The Tories and Lib Dems have stolen £2,481 from every household in Newcastle since 2010' (Labour Party, 2019a).

The statistics enable some trends to be discerned. Overall, the North East region receives a larger than equal share of public spending, mainly due to its need for social protection. Investment in success as opposed to ameliorating failure took a hit after the financial crisis. Local government funding, starting from a relatively high level, has been cut more than average but remains above average. The region has fared relatively well in winning slices of UK growth funding and EU funds but the cake is only about half what was available to One North East. Finally, following its devolution deal, Tees Valley has proved more able to win government support than the North East, but even there future funding is uncertain following the ending of LGF and EU funding.

3.1.4 Environmental framing

This section discusses how North East England deals with environmental issues constituting the fourth side of Hambleton's framework. This is the only side which Hambleton regards as non-negotiable because to ignore it would be irresponsible (Hambleton, 2015a: 113). North East England's approach to environmental protection

is different, however, reflecting its industrial base. Sustainability and the environment have their places in the North East and Tees Valley SEPs, but are regarded as opportunities rather than limitations, in the form of developing renewable energy technologies, the offshore, sub-sea and low carbon sectors, and the circular economy (TVCA, 2016a: 16-17; NELEP, 2017c: 20). NECA is engaged in work on sustainability in both transport and urban development (NECA, 2016q: 1-8; NECA, 2017c: 131-136). For NELEP, sustainability is a means of supporting the economy; its vision is stated as 'to rebalance the economy and create Europe's premier location for low carbon, sustainable, knowledge-based private sector-led growth and jobs' (NELEP, undated-a: 1). It sees potential to gain advantage from new investments in offshore wind, electric vehicles, micro generation and research and innovation on low carbon technologies (NELEP, 2014a: 29). According to the 2014 version of the North East SEP, the investment focus was on 'creating a distinctive area that supports sustainable growth, environmental sustainability and resilience'.

NELEP also recognised the need to strengthen the cultural and visitor offer with projects such as a convention centre, museum improvements and investment in coastal towns and rural 'assets', but again the purpose was not so much environmental as economic: 'There is real potential through projects like these to increase the number of visitors to the area, specifically international and businesses (sic) visitors, and to increase significantly the levels of visit spend'. Good housing was 'essential for creating sustainable communities which will attract and retain economic investment and skilled workers' (NELEP, 2014a: 12, 13).

North East England contains a national park, nine areas of outstanding natural beauty and two world heritage sites. One North East made significant use of these environmental assets to promote the region, featuring a full-page map in its first regional economic strategy, which was littered with photographs of regional attractions (ONE, 1999: 15). The North East SEP 2014, focused on its economic task, in contrast, made barely any mention of the natural environment, and when it did so it was in terms of the rural economy (NELEP, 2014a: 28). Tables and figures took the place of the RDA's photographs. When photos made an appearance in later documents, they showed the workplace (NELEP, 2018b).

The revised SEP published in 2019 gives greater prominence to the area's environmental assets, and without always linking them so closely to economic objectives. Environmental assets take the lead position in the SEP's section on 'Our offer', pointing to the 'high quality living environment with historic towns and cities, a varied landscape and coastal environment and strong cultural and leisure offer', accompanied by references to attractions including the world heritage sites and national park. The SEP features photographs of local attractions, both natural and cultural. Nevertheless, the economic message is still present: 'The North East is a great place to live, learn, work and do business' (NELEP, 2019a: 4, 12-13).

North of Tyne (NTCA), home to the region's national park, makes somewhat more of its environment, referring to its 'stunning natural landscapes' (NTCA, 2017e). It is possible that green issues will receive more focus as a result of the NTCA devolution deal, which assigns it the role of 'national rural exemplar', though the emphasis is on rural business growth and productivity (MHCLG, 2018c). A rural business growth investment fund was one of the first items on NCTA's agenda (NTCA, 2019b: 2). Meanwhile, more ambitiously, a proposal was submitted to the government for a Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal to build on connections between Northumberland, Cumbria, Carlisle and southern Scotland, which won a £260m UK government grant in March 2019 towards total funding of £394.5m (Borderlands Partnership, 2018; NELEP, 2019a: 11; Walker, 2019e). A councillor told this study: 'It's up to us from Northumberland to come up with those rural programmes that will make a real difference to our county and our rural areas' (Northumberland councillor. May 2018).

Tees Valley is conscious of its environment, and focused on its quality. 'Place' is one of its six strategic priorities. But again there is an economic purpose, and it is the man-made environment that is the main concern of its SEP. Place is said to be 'central to the creation of a diversified and inclusive economy', with vibrant town centres, housing offering affordable and aspirational choices and a commercial property market to support new investment. Culture too is to contribute to diversifying the economy. The aim is an environment that offers a comfortable work-life balance, where health and wellbeing flourish and businesses want to invest. Clean technology at work, better housing and dealing with deprivation and social exclusion are the objectives (TVCA, 2016a: 31).

TVCA's 2019 Ten-Year Investment Plan includes both place and culture & tourism among six priority growth-generating themes. Of £588m to be spent by 2029, place is allocated £50m and culture & tourism £60m. The area is bidding to be City of Culture 2025. Up to £20m is allocated for Hartlepool waterfront and the same for Darlington and Stockton railway heritage (TVCA, 2019a).

3.2 North East England's administrative geography

North East England is the smallest of the nine English regions which formed the basis for economic development until the Labour government gave way to the coalition in 2010. It has a population of 2,644,000 (Nomis). Localism saw the region replaced by two functional economic areas (FEAs), the North East and Tees Valley, each with a LEP and later a CA. In 2018 the North East split again as a result of local political disagreement into two areas – North of Tyne, and the south of Tyne authorities which retained the name North East. Each has its own CA but both continue to be served by a single LEP (NELEP).

3.2.1 North East and North of Tyne

The North East **(Figure 3-4)** was the larger of the original two CA areas, with a population of 1,972,000 (Nomis). Until it divided in 2018, it covered 3,200 sq. miles and encompassed in Newcastle one of Great Britain's ten core cities, the mid-sized city of Sunderland (though actually almost the size of Newcastle in population) and the smaller city of Durham, plus a network of towns and smaller settlements including post-industrial, coastal and remote rural communities in the counties of Durham and Northumberland. There are large and international university populations in the main cities. The economy is underpinned by natural, cultural, sporting and heritage assets (Bolton and Hildreth, 2013; NELEP, 2014a; Core Cities UK, 2017). Administratively it consisted of seven local authorities – the five metropolitan councils in Tyne & Wear (Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Sunderland) and the counties of Durham and Northumberland.

Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Areas

KEY
01 Black Country
02 Buckinghamshire Thames Valley
03 Cheshire and Warrington
04 Coast to Capital
05 Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly
06 Coventry and Warwickshire
07 Cumbria
08 Derby Derbyshire Nottingham and Nottinghamshire
09 Dorset
10 Enterprise M3
11 Gloucestershire
12 Greater Birmingham and Solihull
13 Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough
14 Greater Lincolnshire
15 Greater Manchester
16 Heart of the South West
17 Hertfordshire
18 Humber
19 Lancashire
20 Leeds City Region
21 Leicester and Leicestershire
22 Liverpool City Region
23 London
24 New Anglia
25 North Eastern
26 Northamptonshire
27 Oxfordshire
28 Sheffield City Region
29 Solent
30 South East
31 South East Midlands
32 Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire
33 Swindon and Wiltshire
34 Tees Valley
35 Thames Valley Berkshire
36 The Marches
37 West of England
38 Worcestershire
39 York and North Yorkshire
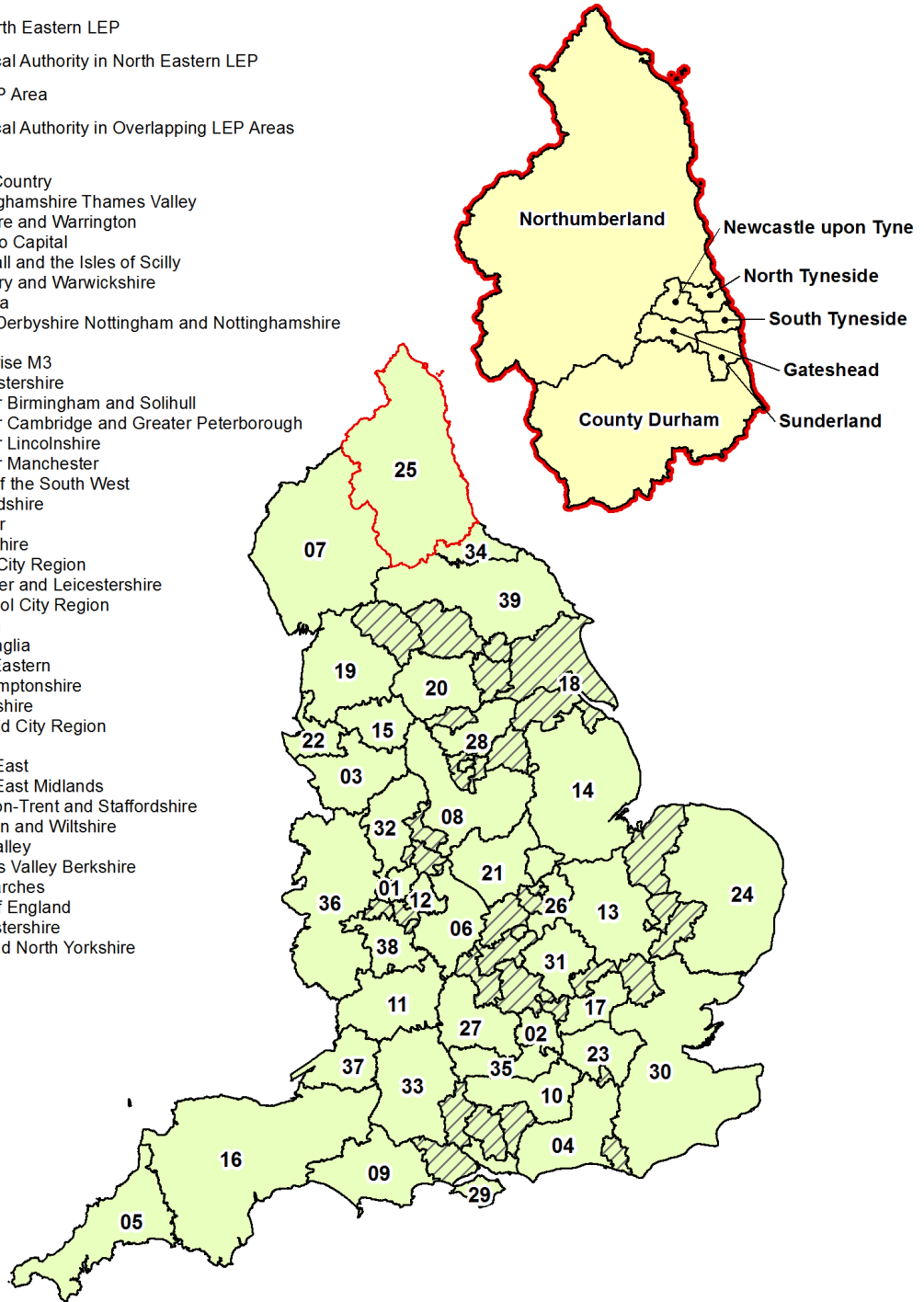
Figure 3-4: England's LEP areas, with the North East featured.
Source: Northumberland County Council

The North East Combined Authority (NECA) was established in April 2014 as a legal

body, headed by a leadership board consisting of the leaders (including one elected

borough mayor) of the seven councils who also sat on the board of the North East

Local Enterprise Partnership (NELEP). All were Labour Party representatives until 2017, when Conservatives took control of Northumberland County Council. One, the borough mayor, is a woman. The chair of NELEP sits on the NECA leadership board, without a vote. NECA holds leadership responsibility for three of the six themes in the area's strategic economic plan (SEP) – economic development and regeneration; employability and inclusion; and transport. Partnership working was affirmed as an integral part of NECA's formal arrangements, and representatives from NELEP, North East England Chamber of Commerce (NEECC), CBI, Federation of Small Business and TUC, alongside councillors, form the membership of NECA's economic development and regeneration advisory board (EDRAB) (NECA, undated-c).

In 2016 NECA voted 4-3 in effect to reject a devolution deal offered by the government, a decision that is a central focus of this study (Chapter 4). This led during 2017-18 to a process which resulted in the three councils which had supported the deal, all located north of the Tyne – Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland – going through a process of secession from NECA in order to establish the separate North of Tyne CA (NTCA) and sign their own devolution deal. NTCA came formally into existence on 2 November 2018.

The rump NECA, consisting of the four south of Tyne councils of Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland, remains the largest of the region's three CAs in population with 1,152,000 residents (Nomis). It has similar internal governance arrangements to its predecessor, including a leadership board consisting of its four council leaders, all Labour, with the NELEP chair as a non-voting member. All are men. It retains an economic development board (EDRAB) with the same external representatives as previously (NECA, 2019a).

When North of Tyne split from the North East it took 819,000 of the population with it (Nomis). Containing the large rural county of Northumberland, it covers 2,014 of NECA's original 3,200 sq. miles. NTCA is governed by a cabinet headed since May 2019 by a metro mayor and consisting of the leaders and deputy leaders of Newcastle and Northumberland and the borough mayor and deputy mayor of North Tyneside, plus a non-voting representative of NELEP. Five of the politicians, including the metro mayor, are Labour and two Conservative. Two are women. The members' portfolios reflect the CA's responsibilities: business competitiveness, employability and inclusion, housing

and land, economic growth, place and productivity, and education improvement (NTCA, 2018c). NTCA has an inclusive economy board and a housing and land board (NTCA, 2018b).

NELEP dates from 2011. By its constitution it is led by a board of 18 of whom nine, including the chair, are from the private sector, seven from the local authorities and one each from higher and further education. The local authority representatives are the leaders of the seven councils. In 2019, five of the board were women (three from the private sector, one from further education and the borough mayor) and two, both private sector, were from ethnic minorities. NELEP's private sector members are recruited to reflect the geography of the NELEP area, key sectors and different sizes of business operation; they may serve two three-year terms and are unpaid. Unlike the RDA before it, NELEP has no guaranteed place for the trade union movement and had until early 2020 none for the voluntary sector (NELEP, 2018e: item 9, p. 1; NELEP, undated-a: 1-2; NELEP, undated-d).

3.2.2 Tees Valley

Tees Valley **(Figure 3-5)** is the smaller of the LEP areas, with a population of 671,000 and covering 307 square miles (Demographia, undated; Nomis). It is polycentric, with small towns in Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Stockton, while Redcar & Cleveland is semi-rural. The area lies between County Durham and North Yorkshire and bears the visible signs of industrialisation in the 19th and 20th centuries by the steel and bulk chemicals industries; but it benefits from the North Yorks Moors National Park on its doorstep.

Tees Valley's institutional arrangements are significantly different from those of the North East and North of Tyne. Tees Valley's LEP, originally known as Tees Valley Unlimited (TVU), was among the first wave of 24 LEPs announced in 2010 , and had pre-existing institutional roots in collaboration between the area's local authorities and business community dating to 1996 (TVCA, undated-c). It was, a member told this study, 'a LEP before LEPs were ever invented' (TVLEP board member, private sector. March 2018). It was an example of a business-based, cross-sector collaborative

institution of the type identified by Burcher and Mayer (2017) as contributing to social capital and regional economic dynamism.

The Tees Valley
Combined Authority Area

HARTLEPOOL
Population: 92,500
Jobs: 33,100
Businesses: 2,215

STOCKTON-ON-TEES
Population: 194,800
Jobs: 90,400
Businesses: 5,260

REDCAR & CLEVELAND
Population: 135,300
Jobs: 48,200
Businesses: 3,055

TEESPORT GATEWAY

DARLINGTON
STATION

DURHAM TEES
VALLEY AIRPORT

DARLINGTON
Population: 105,400
Jobs: 55,600
Businesses: 3,020

MIDDLESBROUGH
Population: 139,500
Jobs: 66,100
Businesses: 2,955

Urban Centres

Enterprise Zone Sites:

1 Belasis Business Park
2 Kirkleatham Business Park
3 Teesside Advanced Manufacturing Park (TAMP)
4 Queen's Meadow Business Park
5 Hartlepool Port Estates
6 New and Renewable Energy Park
7 South Bank Wharf
8 Wilton International
9 Central Park
10 Northshore
11 Oakesway Industrial Estate
12 Middlesbrough Historic Quarter

Universities and Colleges:

A Teesside University
B Durham University, Queen's Campus
C Middlesbrough College
D Cleveland College of Art & Design
E Cleveland College of Art & Design, Hartlepool
F Redcar & Cleveland College
G Darlington College
H Stockton Riverside College

Figure 3-5: Tees Valley identifying its five boroughs
Source: Tees Valley Combined Authority

TVU held its last separate meeting on 27 January 2016, before effectively merging with Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA). The intention, members agreed, was that the two bodies would work together, providing a strong voice for the area. TVCA would include the five local authority leaders (including one borough mayor) plus the LEP chair. Other LEP members would be in attendance. The TVCA Board and LEP would be one meeting, with TVCA-specific and LEP-specific responsibilities – one meeting but divided into two. Later that year TVCA accepted a devolution deal, and its first metro mayor was elected on 4 May 2017 (TVU, 2016a: 4) – a Conservative to head a cabinet consisting of five Labour council leaders. The metro mayor and four of the cabinet were men. In autumn 2018 three women from the private sector were appointed to the LEP board to increase diversity, following which the board had nine men and five women; none of the TVCA or LEP members was from an ethnic minority (TVCA, 2018h; TVCA, undated-d). Since elections in 2019 the cabinet has consisted (in addition to the

mayor) of one Conservative, one Labour member and three Independents. Two are women (TVCA, 2019e).

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has taken an essential step towards explaining why NECA and Tees Valley took the contrasting decisions they did on devolution, in answer to research question 1, by placing key concepts such as formal institutions and the informal socio-cultural and political institutions which shape them, and issues from the literature such as governmental relations and entrepreneurialism, in their regional context, where they exert profound influence on decisions-makers.

Placing North East England within Hambleton's four-sided analytic framework for place-based leadership, the chapter has found that socio-culturally, while the region shares community values based on its legacy of heavy industry and trade unionism, at the political level local identity trumps regional identity, leading to rivalry and mistrust. Tees Valley, however, is internally cohesive, though political tensions are mounting following the election of a Conservative mayor and Labour losses in the 2019 council elections.

Economically, the region presents a confusing picture in relation to its spirit of enterprise. Some worry that it lacks entrepreneurial spirit and there is a willingness to settle for 'getting by', based on secure employment or a lifestyle business. Others, however, think the region is as enterprising as elsewhere. These findings suggest that more research is needed into factors affecting entrepreneurialism in the region, as NELEP recognises (3.1.2).

Governmental control over most public funding available to the region has resulted in its receiving more than its equal share of the national cake, but only because it needs it to soften the effects of its economically lagging position. Under austerity, the region's declining share of a declining total has resulted in less being available for development. Environmentally, the region's SEPs see the demand for sustainable technologies as opportunities for local industry, while the purpose of maintaining and improving the natural and built environment is to contribute to growing the economy.

The following two chapters will bring this contextual investigation to its fulfilment by analysing in narrative form why, against this background, the two areas took the decisions they did, assessed at the critical realist levels of the actual and the real. In Chapter 4 we will see how socio-cultural-political factors, resistance to the concept of an elected mayor and discontent over funding combined to bring about NECA's rejection of the government's devolution offer and the CA's consequent split into two.

Chapter 4. NECA: a failure of institutional adaptation

This case study develops the key concepts of section 1.3 and builds on the economic theories and political issues raised in Chapter 2 and contextualised regionally in Chapter 3 to provide a narrative answer to the first research question as it relates to the North East (as opposed to Tees Valley), asking why the area rejected a devolution deal. It describes the roles of four of the five groups identified in Hambleton's analytic model of civic leadership – political, business, public service and trade union leaderships – in NECA's decision first to seek, then to reject, a devolution deal with the government. The fifth leadership group in Hambleton's model, the voluntary sector, had a marginal role. The outcome was that the NECA area, already separated by government decision from Tees Valley, was split again along the Tyne.

The chapter's narrative accords with critical realism's levels of the actual, recorded largely in official documents; the empirical, as those events were interpreted through interviews; and the real, which analyses how actors, perceptions and circumstances interacted to determine events.

The events are first described at the critical realist level of the actual, as they were enacted largely at what Ayres *et al.* (2017b) call 'front stage' and recorded in official documents, though supplemented by interviews describing 'back stage' events. The following two sections describe the roles of the business and public service leaderships. There follows a section on a campaign against the devolution deal, carried on predominantly, perhaps even wholly, within the Labour and trade union movement. The focus then turns to the political leadership, now at the 'back stage' level of the real, enacted mainly in the privacy of party groups where the pressures exerted by the other leadership groups and campaigners were resolved into decisions.

The narrative sees the formal institutions introduced in section 1.3.1, NECA and NELEP, fulfilling their roles as decision-makers and would-be influencers respectively. Informal institutions, the region's socio-cultural and political traditions, also introduced conceptually in section 1.3.1 and further discussed in the regional context in section 3.1.1, are seen playing their full part in the real-world decision to reject devolution.

Political party groups, discussed theoretically in the literature (2.2.4) are found to have a crucial role.

4.1 From deal to no deal in 11 months

Ostensibly, NECA valued unity above all else: 'United in purpose, boldness of vision and determination' headlined NECA's first constitution. NECA, it said, builds on a strong track record of joint working, and provides an accountable and stable platform to take on more powers, responsibility and funding from the government (NECA, 2017d). Yet when faced with its most important institutional decision, it split in two in an extended crisis played out in low-key public leadership board meetings and heated private arguments over much of 2016. Now that NECA has split, the constitutional vision statement of its early days has been dropped (NECA, 2017d; NECA, 2018c).

NECA's early existence was marked by optimism, notably expressed by its thematic lead for transport. He and leading officials told NECA in July 2014 that the new body offered 'the opportunity to influence our connectivity to the rest of the UK and the world, to attract new investment, and to ensure that transport makes a strong contribution to sustainable and inclusive economic growth – helping us to realise our aspirations for communities, the environment and the economy'. In a reference to Chancellor George Osborne's *Northern Powerhouse* speech, they remarked that 'the inception of NECA, combined with the government's acknowledgement of the limitations of our current transport network, offers a unique opportunity to make the case for a step change in our transport connectivity'. NECA would have a 'substantial' budget for public transport, with the prospect of further devolved funding. A government announcement of Local Growth Fund (LGF) allocations added to the enthusiasm: it was 'gratifying' that the North East had been one of the big winners, and in terms of transport had received almost everything it had bid for (NECA, 2014c: 2). NECA's overview and scrutiny committee (OSC) congratulated officials on securing the third highest LGF award (NECA, 2015f: item 3, p.3). A NECA council leader told this study:

> *Looking back for the first year or so there was quite a lot of optimism about what we might achieve. But then, as always with these things, it came down to relationships (Council leader. March 2018).*

In June 2014 NECA wrote to the government 'to encourage further and greater devolution'. That October it responded positively to '*Northern Futures*', a government initiative to devolve more decisions and 'create an economic core in the heart of the region [northern England] that can compete with the biggest cities and regions in the world' (NECA, 2014a: 13-24; NECA, 2014b: 45; NECA, 2015b: 6).

In December, as debates were stoked over devolution in the rest of the UK following Scotland's decision in a referendum to reject independence (Cameron, 2014; Colomb and Tomaney, 2016: 1), and in response to a challenge by Osborne to city regions to come forward with proposals, NECA's chair wrote to the Chancellor requesting an urgent meeting. NECA wanted 'a substantial devolution of power, funding and responsibilities' including an investment fund, enhanced responsibility for around £500m EU funding, a guarantee that the government would deliver commitments under existing city deals, investment in housing and transport, employability support, devolution of skills funding and business support, creation of Transport North East and an integrated approach to public service delivery (NECA, 2015c: 23-28).

The following months saw consultation on devolution by NECA with its stakeholders, including a meeting with MPs and members of the House of Lords, and in June 2015 NECA's leadership board heard that feedback had shown clear support from the public and the business sector (7.2.1). In reference to elected mayors, the board, rather cryptically, noted 'the importance of being mindful about concentrating heavily on the elected mayor issue, including by the media' (NECA, 2015a: 2-3; NECA, 2015d: 8).

Following 'positive' discussions with the Communities Secretary, NECA wrote to the government on 17 July 2015 seeking to open detailed negotiations. Less than two months later it submitted a statement of devolution intent, in which it expressed 'the ambition for the North East to be at the forefront of an ambitious programme of real devolution of powers, funding and responsibilities from Whitehall to combined authorities'; there was 'a once-in-a-generation opportunity to achieve a real devolution deal for the people of the North East. We are determined to seize that

opportunity as an ambitious region with strong public support for a significant shift of power and responsibility from Whitehall to the North East… accompanied by a strengthening of local and community leadership'. It pledged to consider 'with an open mind' the most appropriate governance structures, including an elected mayor, and expected the same from government. Finally, with a message often to be repeated, it reminded the government that 'devolution does not sit in isolation from the wider impact of cuts to public services, and to local government in particular', and called for 'fairer funding' (NECA, 2015d: item 4).

By the time NECA met again in November its devolution deal, offering 'significant powers for employment and skills, transport, housing, planning, business support and investment', and £30m a year for 30 years (subject to five-year reviews) (Treasury, 2015), had been signed and, superficially, all was well. And yet, with the ink hardly dry, there was a reminder that hurdles remained. Final agreement was conditional on factors including the legislative process, the government spending review, further public consultation, agreement by the constituent councils, and formal endorsement by the leadership board and ministers (NECA, 2015e: 1-3). Nevertheless, there was no indication at that stage that elected members dissented from the deal, though they did see many elements which still required attention and stressed the importance of consultation and fiscal devolution (NECA, 2016a: 2-3). It is clear with hindsight, however, that the process through which the agreement would eventually be rejected was already beginning.

When NECA discussed the deal in January 2016, the mood had already become cautious; members expressed concerns about 'risks', listed as the fact that some crucial detail had not yet been discussed; the timescales; and that the current status of the deal was not final (NECA, 2016f: 5-6). Two months later the list of issues had grown to 11, and some had negative implications for the deal, including reduced and reducing local authority budgets, the importance of fair funding and the need for further negotiations with the government to achieve clarification, assurances and better conditions (NECA, 2016f: 12-13).

The deepening negativity was crystallised at NECA's March 2016 meeting with news (already revealed in the media) that Gateshead's cabinet had rejected the deal. Whilst supporting the principle of devolution, Gateshead did not endorse the deal and did not consent to becoming part of a mayoral CA (MCA). Meanwhile, Newcastle had agreed the deal and the other five councils wanted clarifications on a range of mainly financial issues. They were emphatic that the government 'must fully deliver on the commitments made in the proposed agreement', indicating that a vital ingredient, trust, was lacking (NECA, 2016e: 2). Outstanding financial issues related to LGF, the promised £30m annual investment fund, 'rural proofing', transport funds, fair funding, and the devolution of air passenger duty to Scotland (NECA, 2016d: 17-18; NECA, 2016e: 2).

In May 2016, NECA heard from its officials that substantial progress had been made in discussions with government. Ministers had made clear throughout, however, that devolution was conditional on having a mayor. NECA had kept an open position on this and had sought to include appropriate checks and balances on mayoral power. NECA members recognised good progress but thought work was still needed. Apart from money for highways, their concerns at this stage were no longer financial but related less specifically to getting a deal that was best for the region, with the right powers and responsibilities. In spite of these doubts, six leadership board members voted to go ahead. But Gateshead voted against, making itself liable to be expelled from NECA. One of the implications was that Gateshead would become a local transport authority, separate from the integrated transport authority covering all areas surrounding it geographically (NECA, 2016g: 2; NECA, 2016h: 4, 12; NECA, 2016k: 9).

If May seemed to mark a step forward (albeit without Gateshead), July saw devolution stopped in its tracks. A legal requirement at this stage was for NECA to publish for consultation a governance scheme covering its new responsibilities. But it did not do so. Instead, in the wake of the Brexit referendum, at a meeting on 4 July 2016, members 'expressed concern about the current position and emphasised the need for long-term assurances over the terms of the devolution deal, particularly in relation to funding'. Nine days later Sajid Javid, Communities Secretary in the post-Brexit government, replied. Devolution, he said, was more important than ever. He committed to allowing councils to retain 100% of taxes raised locally to support

economic growth, referred to a fair funding review, said work was ongoing on the question of EU funds and that an update on future funding would be published shortly. Six more days later NECA met again and considered whether Javid's letter should be considered as the firm assurances they had sought. 'A number of views were expressed', the minutes record (NECA, 2016k: 1; NECA, 2016l: 1-2; NECA, 2016m: 2; NECA, 2016n: 2).

In spite of the opaque nature of this record, it is clear from the minutes that those who wished to proceed argued their case. Points raised during discussion are recorded as having included the importance of progressing devolution, access to funding and having a strong voice at the negotiating table, the risks of delay, strong business support for devolution and the promises made during the Brexit campaign about honouring funding commitments. On the other hand, there was mention of the importance of full assurances from the new government on the terms of the agreement signed the previous October, and the position of Gateshead. NECA was split, and in spite of adjourning for private discussions was unable to resolve its differences. All voted to move to the next stage of devolution – publication of and consultation on the governance scheme – but a majority of 5-2 added the proviso 'subject to receipt and acceptance…of assurances from the government' (NECA, 2016n: 3). Although the minutes refer simply to a short adjournment, there was according to one account confusion and a shouting match lasting over two hours split between the pre-meeting and the adjournment:

> *We got to a position which I didn't like where I thought I'd lost; in fact I definitely had lost, four votes to three. Went into the meeting, and [name of council leader] got up to moved what I thought had been agreed at the meeting beforehand, and we were an hour later. He started to move it, and [name of another leader] jumps up and says 'That's not what we agreed'. There was then a commotion and a shouting match, so [chair] says 'We're going to have to adjourn, we'll go back to a private discussion'. So we went back for a discussion and had another hour's argument and eventually had another vote and this time I won 4-3. That's exactly what happened. (Council leader. February 2018).*

It was not unusual for the leaders' private meetings to be difficult. One said they were always difficult and understandably so because everyone was passionate about getting the best for the region as they saw it (Council leader. March 2018)

NECA received another letter from Javid on 15 August in which he confirmed full funding for EU projects signed off before the forthcoming autumn budget statement and that there would be new funding arrangements for later projects while the UK remained in the EU. He confirmed the requirement for an elected mayor. Eight days later NECA members met Javid for talks, when he confirmed the funding arrangements in his letter, and said the government supported devolution to NECA and that it was a stepping stone to further devolution. He remained unequivocal that an elected mayor was required (NECA, 2016o: 3). A civil servant involved in the negotiations told this study:

> *They [NECA] asked for some reasonable things which he [Javid] gave them and then they asked for some unreasonable things. But what they kept doing was delaying and delaying and delaying. Their tactic was not to do anything, not force anything, I don't know if they were trying to call anyone's bluff. Eventually we said unless you make this progress then the deal will lapse. (Civil servant. January 2018)*

The NECA requests that the civil servant criticised as unreasonable related particularly to European funding. The councillors wanted guarantees that after Brexit they would still receive the EU funds they were expecting, guarantees which the government felt unable to give at that early stage of the Brexit process. Council chief executives knew that the demands of their political masters were unreasonable, the civil servant claimed, though in the end, he said, most of what they wanted was secured by negotiation (Civil servant. January 2018).

Control over EU funding was a critical issue and a symbol of the distrust between NECA and the government. One of those who voted against the deal complained they had been led to believe that after devolution the funds, amounting to nearly half a billion pounds, would be controlled by the elected mayor, but later this pledge was weakened so that the mayor would only have influence over the funds (NECA council leader. March 2018).

By late summer there were signs that Gateshead Council might be getting cold feet about being isolated. Its cabinet met at 9.00am on 6 September 2016 – the day NECA was to meet at 2.00pm to decide whether to proceed with the deal. Councillors received a report from officials detailing the implications of being left out but also warning of the danger of opting back in only to find others opting out. Gateshead officials recommended the cabinet give its consent after all but with the proviso that it could withdraw again if one or more of the other councils pulled out. In the event the cabinet made no decision at all, deferring the matter to take account of the outcome of NECA that afternoon (Gateshead Council, 2016a; Gateshead Council, 2016d: 10).

The final act was played out at a special leadership board that afternoon, delayed for about 15 minutes while the leaders held a private pre-meeting[22]. Members expressed again their concerns about funding issues and also the view that the deal was not a good one; on the other hand, some noted the importance of going to the next stage and being at the negotiating table, the risks of not going ahead including to transport projects, and the unlikelihood of a better deal. Members commented on the importance of devolution to the North East and their full commitment to 'real' devolution, but in the end the board voted 4-3 not to proceed to the next stage (NECA, 2016p: 7-8). Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland backed the deal; Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland did not. One person who was present laid bare the hidden tensions when the final vote was taken:

> *[Name of leader] went from abstaining to - God, this is really awful! [His] group would not have accepted him being the determining vote...[He] would have been happy to abstain...and for it to happen, but not for it to be the determining vote, because he had difficulty inside his group (Council leader. February 2018).*

The deal's rejection was followed by more than a year of apparent stagnation. But behind the scenes the three north of Tyne authorities were involved in intense negotiations to set up their own MCA. Their efforts, never secret but never transparent either, broke into the light of day when the government's backing for the new North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) was announced in the November 2017 Budget. Local

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[22] Personal observation.

media were enthusiastic, strap-lining stories: 'North of Tyne devolution: why you should be excited' (Hill *et al.*, 2018). In an 'Invest in the North East' campaign in a regional paper, devolution figured in fifth place in its list of 50 reasons for businesses to do so (Whitfield, 2018). Speculation started about who might be the first metro mayor.

In early 2018 an assurance came from the government that the North East would be compensated for EU funding lost as a result of Brexit. The news came in a letter to Northumberland County Council's new leader, enabling a Conservative politician to announce the resolution of one of the issues that had proved a deal breaker when NECA rejected its agreement 16 months earlier (Kelly, 2018). It was a reflection of the party political game which we will see in Chapter 5 being played much more extensively in Tees Valley. Meanwhile, pressure from Labour opponents continued with a newspaper report, based on quotes from a Newcastle MP, that a North of Tyne mayor could mean higher council tax bills (Walker, 2018a).

When Newcastle and North Tyneside Councils approved the NTCA plans through their cabinets in December 2017, they made a point of not breaking completely with their south of Tyne counterparts. They would continue to collaborate with the rump NECA through a proposed transport committee (inevitably, in view of the integrated nature of local public transport) and with NELEP (again, as they had to), their cabinets were told, and 25% of the 10,000 new jobs expected to be created by the deal would, it was estimated, be taken by south of Tyne residents (Graham, 2017).

NECA gave its consent to the departure of the North of Tyne councils in April 2018 by 6-0 votes. Gateshead abstained, with its leader commenting: 'At some stage some future government...will have to do something to pull this governance together. It's dysfunctional to say the least' (Muncaster, 2018; NECA, 2018a: 13-15). Theresa May brought her cabinet to Gateshead and confirmed the deal (Graham and Eden, 2018; Seddon, 2018c; Walker, 2018c; Walker, 2018d). The legislation passed that October, leaving just enough time for a mayoral election in May 2019 (Walker, 2018e). Three Labour and two Conservative MPs were content to be photographed with the *Northern Powerhouse* Minister at the signing ceremony (Holland, 2018a). Even while the legislation was in Parliament came an example of the harmful effects of splitting

the Tyne and Wear conurbation, with its Metro running on both sides of the river. The decision on whether the first Metro extension should be north or south had been 'parked', the House of Lords was told (Shipley, 2018). A business leader said:

> It's been the most frustrating process in the North East. We have had four years now of talk...and it just felt as though the civic leadership wasn't ready for a devolution deal and they would find any reason to reject it...There was a whole range of different excuses as to why they didn't want to sign up to a deal. To their credit the North of Tyne authorities have not buckled under that...It just means that we are one step behind other areas like the Manchesters, like the Liverpools (Business leader. August 2018).

Within days the new NTCA held its first meeting and the political parties started their searches for a mayoral candidate. Labour's process was at one stage reported to be 'in disarray' over the lack of women candidates. Its choice eventually came down to a straight fight between two men from Newcastle, the city council leader and a Momentum activist first elected to the council the previous May. The Momentum candidate won selection by 2,514-1,913 votes (Seddon, 2018a; Seddon, 2018b; Seddon, 2019b; Tighe, 2019b; Seddon, 2019c) and went on to win the election with 56% of the vote, including second preferences, on a 32% turnout against Conservative, LibDem, UKIP and Independent opponents, all men (Holland, 2018b; BBC, 2019a; Seddon, 2019d; NTCA, 2019f).

4.2 The role of the business leadership

NELEP first received a presentation on devolution in March 2015 and was kept updated regularly. The minutes of its meetings record little or nothing more than that reports were noted (NELEP, 2015a: 2; NELEP, 2015b: 5-6; NELEP, 2015c: 3; NELEP, 2016b: 7). Then, in April 2016, when it was already public knowledge that controversy within NECA was threatening the deal (Graham, 2016b), NELEP's chair reacted with a statement that the LEP was publicly on board with devolution and would be happy to assist in any way (NELEP, 2016c: 6). This offer was repeated a month later, with NELEP noting that it had a responsibility for the economic wellbeing of the North East (NELEP, 2016d: 6). Nevertheless, devolution still appeared likely enough for one NELEP board member to resign from the Conservative Party with a view to standing for the

mayoralty as an independent (such was the poverty of Tory expectation in the North East) the following year (Hill, 2016a).

Business as usual ended in summer 2016 with the dual shocks of the Brexit referendum and NECA's rejection of its devolution deal. Following the Brexit vote NELEP played an active role alongside other business organisations in pressing for their voice to be heard in the debates over both devolution and Brexit. Business leaders met informally on 8 July 2016 to formulate a response to Brexit, co-ordinated by a working group representing NELEP, the CBI, EEF, FSB, North East England Chamber of Commerce (NEECC), Entrepreneurs Forum and NECA represented by the economic directors of the local authorities (NELEP, 2017e: item 5 (iii)).

In July NELEP was still working on the assumption that devolution would proceed (NELEP, 2016e: 5), and NECA's decision on 6 September not to go ahead came as a shock. Three weeks later NELEP's chair wrote to the government to reaffirm its commitment to leading strategic economic growth and to place NELEP at the head of the process. It had been an unsettling time for many North East businesses, he said, and it was now even more important, post-Brexit and with uncertainty around devolution, that business leadership through NELEP was 'front and centre' of the agenda (Hodgson, 2016). The business leader who had earlier declared his intention to stand for the mayoralty resigned from NELEP and set up the North East Devolution Commission 'to explore ideas for the region's future', backed by 100 local business people (O'Donoghue, 2016; Rowell, 2016; NELEP, 2016a: 3). It launched a youth employment policy the following month (Ord, 2016), though has since had a profile low to the point of invisibility.

Just before Christmas the Chamber of Commerce wrote to NECA criticising its rejection of the devolution agreement in strong terms (NECA, 2017b: 5-6):

> *While business across the UK are faced with the uncertainty of Brexit, our members also remain frustrated by unfulfilled devolution and are calling on NECA to set out very clearly how it intends to contribute to the realisation of the ambitions originally set out in the SEP... Ongoing uncertainty on both fronts puts the North East at a disadvantageous position compared with other regions of the UK.*

On 5 January 2017 the NELEP chair and vice-chair, accompanied by representatives of the other business organisations, met the seven NECA council leaders for a discussion that was 'open, honest and conducted in a positive manner'. Afterwards the business leaders agreed key principles on which to seek government support and move the devolution agenda forward, including action in time for a mayoral election in May 2018 and involving as many of the local authorities as were willing and did not frustrate the process. The business community wanted to be acknowledged as a senior partner, the new devolution deal to be at least as good as the previous one and to have more business-focused outcomes, the SEP to continue as the principal economic policy document, and NELEP and business leaders to be part of any negotiating team (NELEP, 2017b: item 8).

Following news that the three north of Tyne councils were in talks with the government about their own deal, the NELEP chair spoke out in a newspaper column. It was clear that despite a huge effort by NELEP and the business community, he wrote, the seven councils were not in a position to progress devolution. It was important for the North East not to be left behind, so they would work with the three councils and any others wishing to move to a deal with business-focused outcomes (Hodgson, 2017).

In April, when NELEP (with NECA) responded to the green paper *Building our Industrial Strategy,* it took the opportunity to air its views on governance issues and, though diplomatic, hinted at frustration. After outlining its work to implement the SEP, it noted that underlying it 'should be [implying 'is not yet'] a framework of economic governance offering long term and stable institutional support for the economy through properly empowered local institutions'. Regular changes in institutional structure and capacity had not served regions like the North East well, it added; partners across the region were said to support significant devolution to strengthen the local institutions to make an economic impact (2017d: 19).

Then, in July 2017, as NECA appeared still paralysed, NELEP stepped forward again, in an apparent attempt to fill a gap in local leadership (NELEP, 2017e: item 5). It approved a series of measures to communicate and promote the SEP, strengthen the economic evidence base, shape the economic policy environment and take control of the

region's response to Brexit. The informal group of business leaders that had formulated the North East's response to Brexit the previous summer was put on a firmer footing, reporting to the NELEP board and with its membership extended to include the TUC and universities. Over the following 18 months the Brexit group published reports on migration, the impact of Brexit on the area's economy and key messages, and prepared a Brexit toolkit for businesses. In December 2018, as MPs debated the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement, the group issued a special bulletin to its stakeholders detailing its work (NELEP, 2018d; NELEP, 2018e: item 7).

Members of NELEP's team were trained and tasked with spreading its message at dozens of presentations. NELEP planned a programme of research, an 'evidence forum' of key partners, regular public commentary on economic data and an annual 'state of the region' report. It planned to fulfil its role of boosting the regional economy by operating as 'a collaborative organisation working across sectors', influencing, convening and supporting. It contemplated, too, controversially, stepping beyond the bounds of economic and industrial policy to address linked social issues like inequality, suggesting it might use SEP funding to tackle them. A NELEP report stated:

> The [2017 general] election campaign and the result itself exposed key issues of inequality. All the main parties expressed concern in the run up to the vote, but the outcome has been catalytic. A particular focus is on the issue of intergenerational division and inequality which found particular expression in both the referendum and the June election. Narratives around 'equitable' and 'inclusive' growth are now at the heart of the national debate, with debate around tax, the quality of employment, and access to housing for young people and families. These are aligned to key programmes in the SEP and provide opportunities to elaborate proposals through policy and investment programmes (NELEP, 2017e: item 5 (ii) p.3).

In Hambleton's model of civic leadership, co-ordinating the response to such issues is a role an elected mayor would have played. A regional business leader told this study: 'I think there is a definite feeling around the whole patch that some proper leadership is required' (Interview. August 2018). In the absence of a mayor, the task was thus potentially being taken on by a body of unelected business leaders (though with a

minority of councillors on their board). This caused unease in both political and business circles, and NELEP backed off. A NELEP board member from the private sector said later that one of the NECA leaders warned that social policy had to be either done or not, but not half done (NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018).

In spite of the Brexit and devolution traumas, NELEP asserted in its 2016/17 annual review that 'we are in an extremely strong position to continue driving the SEP forward'. One advance NELEP had made during 2016/17 was to 'significantly improve collaboration with the North East business community, our membership organisations and key sector groups'. Though it attributed these closer links to work on refreshing the SEP, the joint reaction of business organisations to Brexit and NECA's rejection of the devolution deal must also have helped bring them together (NELEP, 2017f: 1, 8).

Relationships between the NELEP business sector and the NECA politicians remain sensitive. There is jealousy, for example, over access to ministers. A civil servant involved in devolution negotiations said: 'The LEP in particular felt excluded from a lot of those [devolution] discussions, led by a small group of elites within the local authorities within NECA' (Interview. January 2018). From the other side, a council leader complained: 'I can't pick up a 'phone to Sajid Javid. I don't speak to ministers and secretaries of state. But [LEP chair] does. Daily' (NECA council leader. February 2018).

Through all the political machinations, business generally takes the pragmatic view that it must work with whatever is in place: 'It is what it is', sighed one regional business leader (Interview. September 2018). 'There is a sense that the LEP will do what the LEP will do' said another (Interview. September 2018). NELEP too has to take as it finds. A NELEP board member who deals with the NECA leaders regularly, reflecting on relationships, said:

> *I think the frustration is between the political leaders locally. It's a very complex situation. You learn a lot doing roles like I do and one of the things that I think I have learned is that the politics within a party are much more complex than the politics between parties, and a lot of the leaders here have power bases built upon very, very localised politics. And it took me some time to get to grips with*

that, and some of the sub-optimal decisions that become apparent through

that. (NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018)

4.3 The role of public professionals

While the North East's political and business leaders struggled to build a working partnership, another of the five civic leadership groups in Hambleton's framework, the professional public servants were getting on with their jobs, but in the view of some were failing to maintain the impartiality which was intrinsic to their role. A Labour Party activist told this study:

> *Don't forget that behind the scenes the chief executives and other senior*
> *officers in the councils were working closely with the DCLG [Department for*
> *Communities and Local Government] to press the government line, and there*
> *was a lot of pressure, really a great deal of pressure, political pressure, on*
> *council leaders not just by Osborne but also by Lord O'Neill, who came to the*
> *region numerous times and tried to lean on those who were not happy to try to*
> *persuade them it was a good idea. So in a way I think the local authorities were*
> *brave, actually, and in my view were outstanding in terms of the democratic*
> *decision making they took (Anti-devolution deal campaigner. November 2017).*

The officials who advised NECA were certainly upbeat about the deal from the start, consistently recommended moving forward, and maintained that position for as long as possible without seeming to interfere in what had clearly become a controversy capable of resolution only by their political masters. The official tone was set in a report to NECA at its first meeting after signing the provisional deal. It detailed the 'significant' powers to be devolved, and said the deal paved the way for further devolution and would 'bring considerable additional resources' (NECA, 2015e: 2). As late as 4 July 2016 officials were recommending the leadership board to move to the next stage (NECA, 2016k) and even on 19 July, although the official recommendation was simply to consider the next steps, there was advice that devolution 'will have a positive impact on the objectives of NECA' (NECA, 2016m).

Gateshead's cabinet was recommended by its chief executive at a crucial meeting on 22 March 2016 to approve the deal subject to clarification on outstanding issues. Though risks were noted, the overall message was positive:

> *In its totality the agreement will support increasing the region's ability to support all in society, through new responsibilities for skills training for young people, support for those struggling to find employment, improving transport services and infrastructure and helping the region build more homes (Robinson, 2016a: 13-15).*

But it was too late: Gateshead's Labour group had met privately and overwhelmingly rejected the deal (Seddon, 2016). The vote was 43-7, according to one informed source[23]. On 12 July the chief executive tried again, recommending that the cabinet reconsider, 'having regard to the interests of unity across the NECA area' (Robinson, 2016b). As late as 6 September, the day NECA finally rejected the deal, Gateshead's acting chief executive was recommending the cabinet to agree unless at least one other council backed out. He warned of the costs of being the only council to hold out against the deal (Barker, 2016: 6, 8). A Gateshead councillor recalled being warned that the consequences would be dire:

> *We would have to set up our own transport authority, we would have to have our own concessionary fares scheme, we'd have to employ 50, 60, 100 staff to monitor and administer that. When they broke up the debts we would be disadvantaged by it. All the pension liabilities would tie up our financial departments and our legal department. So they were beating us over the head to get back in line. (Councillor. February 2018)*

Newcastle officials, with top-level political support, backed the deal, while the approach of officials in the other councils was generally cautious, pointing out the risks and potential disadvantages but either avoiding a specific recommendation or recommending taking the next step forward while continuing to talk to the government about outstanding issues (Forbes and Lewis, 2016; Mason and Davey,

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[23] Personal information

2016; Melia, 2016; O'Donnell and Henig, 2016; Swales, 2016; Sunderland Council, 2016b).

4.4 The Campaign for Real Devolution

A campaign against NECA's provisional deal emerged almost as soon as it had been signed in October 2015. It shows trade unionists, one of five civic leadership groups in Hambleton's framework, playing a dual role. Many councillors, sometimes in leading positions, were union members. They sat in the Labour groups which had the ultimate say over the devolution deal while simultaneously being members of unions campaigning against the deal.

Within a month of the provisional deal being signed the Labour MP for Newcastle East, Nick Brown, made his opposition known through his webpage (Brown, 2015). Brown is one of the region's most influential figures, though most of his time is now spent on the national stage. A former Newcastle councillor, he served in the Blair and Brown governments, was Minister for the Region, and survived into the Corbyn era as Chief Whip. His posting marked (though did not cause) the start of a 10-month struggle, and by the following month a campaign had formed.

Though the Campaign for Real Devolution (CARD) was not branded a Labour campaign, it was conducted almost wholly within the Labour and trade union movement. It was in effect the work of one long-standing, well-connected Labour Party member, not holding elective office, who organised the support of its political and union wings to target the Labour groups of councillors. One Labour MP who supported CARD's campaign said of him: 'The prime mover is [name]..a very senior figure, academic man, highly respected...I think he did very well. He is well thought of and that gained support', though he added: 'The opinions of the rank and file councillors were shaped to some extent by [name's] campaign, but also by exposure to the arguments'.

This campaign organiser understood the vital fact that in the local government of North East England, power is exercised through the Labour groups who determine policy in the privacy of their meetings and control most of the area's councils most of the time. Party political groups wield a dual power, organisational and normative, as

discussed by Elder-Vass (2010: 7): they control votes in council and exert moral pressure.

By early December 2015 CARD[24] had written to every Labour councillor in the area spelling out its reasons for opposing the deal, which it described as simply a form of 'enhanced localism'. This letter set the tone for the entire campaign. It went into considerable detail but the basic messages remained the same: the net financial benefits were marginal; council services would remain starved of funds; the deal was undemocratic because of the imposition of a mayor; it cemented the division of the region; regional control of EU funding was likely to prove illusory; it was not a starting point for further genuine devolution; and voters should be given a say. The letter also introduced a phrase which, with some variations in wording, would become familiar: 'It is based on a flawed city-region economic growth model which is analytically and empirically unsound'.

On 18 March 2016 ten Labour MPs and three trade union leaders wrote an open letter to NECA drawing attention to 'increasing strength of feeling' among MPs and unions against the deal. Four days later CARD was celebrating news that Gateshead's cabinet had rejected the deal. The decision was reported in local media as having stunned many. A LibDem councillor said devolution had been 'sacrificed by those in the Labour party who view elected mayors as a threat to their own establishment and control of the region' (Kelly, 2016b; Seddon, 2016). Two months later the Gateshead Council leader resigned, described by the same opponent as 'collateral damage in the battle against the regional elected mayor' (Milligan and O'Donoghue, 2016).

Trade unions played a big part in the CARD campaign. Regional leaders of the GMB, Unison and Unite wrote jointly to all Labour councillors on 8 April 2016 to ensure they were aware of union policy on devolution:

> *With this decision being one for Labour groups, we urge you to ensure that the proposals are brought under full scrutiny within your Labour group in the course of the next few weeks. We feel it is vitally important that all Labour groups give full consideration to the latest information before making an informed decision*

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[24] CARD's campaign is documented on its Facebook page at
https://www.facebook.com/Campaign-for-Real-Devolution-CARD-944653188965455/

on whether to commit their council to the MCA in its current form. We ask you to support the policy of your trade union by rejecting the current deal, and would be pleased to offer you any support you feel would be helpful to get this debate raised in your Labour group.

The use of the phrase 'your trade union' is a reminder that in many cases the union leaders were writing to their own members, and in some cases these members constituted a majority within their Labour group. Research in January/February 2018 revealed how many councillors were members of the three unions active in the campaign[25] **(Table 4-1).**

The GMB, Unison and Unite between them accounted for a majority of the Labour group in Gateshead, which was the first to reject the deal, with Unison as the largest union. This is consistent with the opinion of a civil servant close to the devolution negotiations, who told this study that the unions were particularly strong movers in the CARD campaign and that: 'Unison were leading the charge' (January 2018).

Table 4-1: Trade union representation in Labour groups (January/February 2018). Source: Council registers of interests

Council	Labour group total	GMB	Unison	Unite	Three unions total
Durham	74	19	7	10	36
Gateshead	54	7	16	14	37
Newcastle	53	10	12	6	28
N. Tyneside	52	12	12	7	31
North'land	24	4	9	2	15

Any argument, however, that councillors automatically follow the line of their trade union faces the problem that the three unions also had majorities in the Labour groups in Newcastle and North Tyneside, and perhaps Northumberland, which backed the devolution deal, and the two council leaders known to have been members of one of

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[25] The Gateshead, Newcastle and North Tyneside council memberships at that time were the same as in 2016, when the devolution deal was rejected, apart from by-elections. The Northumberland and Durham memberships were significantly different following all-out elections in 2017. The 2018 figures give only an indication of union strengths in these local authorities. Union membership for South Tyneside and Sunderland could not be established.

the three campaigning unions (Gateshead and Northumberland) took opposite sides when the final NECA vote came. A CARD campaigner made the controversial claim that in Labour groups which failed to support the CARD line, the decision was due to a failure of group democracy:

> *Unfortunately not all the Labour groups were enabled to have a proper discussion and debate about the issues, and that for me was very sad and very undemocratic. The three in particular who did not have full debates were North Tyneside, Northumberland and Newcastle. The other authorities, Durham and Gateshead in particular, had quite detailed discussions within the Labour groups, and the Labour groups took the decision...It is interesting that the three authorities where there was no proper democratic full discussion are the ones who actually supported the idea of a mayoral combined authority (CARD campaigner. November 2017).*

This campaigner, echoing Wollmann (2008) (2.2.4), ascribed failure to debate devolution critically within some Labour groups to the cabinet system introduced in 2000, giving leaders, as he saw it, considerable patronage in appointing the cabinet.

This version is vigorously contested, however. One leader of a deal-supporting council said devolution had been discussed at virtually every Labour group meeting for three years, and anyone saying otherwise was either inadvertently or deliberately trying to mislead people. Devolution had won widespread group support and on several occasions the group had voted unanimously to press ahead (NECA council leader. March 2018).

Political group meetings are private and only those present know for sure what happened. The CARD campaigner quoted here is not a councillor and did not attend the meetings concerned. According to his interpretation of events, the Labour groups that supported his position had proper democratic debates while none of those which opposed his position did so. This view carries a tinge of self-justification. The interview evidence, however, suggests he is correct to say that debates were particularly vigorous in Gateshead and Durham.

By 15 February 2016 three mailings had been made by CARD to all Labour councillors in all seven NECA authorities urging them to oppose the deal. A public meeting was held on 5 March addressed by councillors, trade unionists, Labour activists and at least one shadow cabinet member, to discuss how rejection of the deal could be justified and implemented in a democratic manner. A second public meeting was held on 7 May. Perhaps the only voice at these meetings to remind campaigners that not everyone in Labour was opposed to devolution deals came from the party's mayoral candidate for Tees Valley, who explained why colleagues there had decided to accept a deal. Another mailing followed ten days later arguing that a powerful executive mayor without an elected assembly was undemocratic and saying the money on offer amounted to only 4% extra for investment. The campaign thereafter petered out, but it had done enough.

The CARD campaign was not secret; it was on social media, and public meetings were held and reported in mainstream media. Nevertheless, in a process with so little public engagement and a region with such marginalised and ineffectual political opposition, it was in effect a Labour Party and trade union in-house affair, and all that was required for victory was to persuade around 400 Labour councillors, meeting in private in their party groups. A civil servant involved in the negotiations speculated later about the motives behind the campaign, and referring to the self-declared independent candidate for mayor referred to above (4.2) - businessman, former Conservative and NELEP board member - added:

> *There was certainly a rhetoric of 'you're passing on Tory cuts'. I think people were scared about a particular candidate who had made a powerful bid [name]; they were scared he would be successful. I think there was also a little bit of protectionism among council leaders that having a mayor would force them not to have their own priorities first in their cosy little cabal (Civil servant. January 2018).*

Exactly how influential CARD was in swinging the vote in the Labour groups is hard to say for sure. A leading councillor in Sunderland said he had never heard of CARD (March 2018). Another in South Tyneside said: 'I think I had one conversation with [campaign organiser] and that was pretty much it. So it had no effect down here. I

wasn't in any way politically pressured' (March 2018). One Gateshead councillor remembered receiving CARD's correspondence but claimed not to have been influenced by CARD at all (backbench Labour councillor. March 2018). Another said he was aware of very few councillors who had attended CARD events. A retired member of one of the three campaigning unions, he added: 'I do not feel under any pressure whatsoever from [the union] to vote in a particular way on any given issue...You are under the impression that the trade unions have sufficient influence to direct councillors' vote. That is not the way it operates' (Gateshead backbench Labour councillor. February 2018). A Durham councillor had heard of a CARD meeting but not attended. He was aware though of the trade union letters it issued: 'They were also taken into consideration. A lot of councillors are members of those trade unions ...and as part of the Labour movement trade unions are fundamental to that. That all comes into the mix in terms of how this plays out' (Durham backbench councillor. April 2018).

The CARD campaign displays both the influence of the trade union movement in local government and its limitations. Union leaders are well connected, have members sitting on councils in significant numbers and holding important leadership and cabinet roles, and are able to ensure their voice is heard. On the other hand they cannot rely on those members to automatically follow the union line, as demonstrated by the decisions of at least two and perhaps three councils with union majorities in their Labour groups to back devolution. They lose other battles too, such as over redundancies (4.5.1). Close connections between the Labour Party and the trade unions date back more than a century and are an established part of the UK political system. In most, though not all, councils checked for this research councillors' membership of trade unions is public knowledge through their register of interests.

4.5 Political leadership – councils and cabinets

This section focuses on why and how four councils responded to the pressures described above and rejected NECA's devolution offer. The interest centres on these four because, after NECA agreed a provisional deal with the government in October 2015, acceptance was the default position. Why, this thesis asks, did four councils turn down an offer of extra powers and funding less than a year after accepting it?

A NECA council leader told this study:

I ended up from March to September [2016] sitting in meetings...sitting talking, sandwiches and crisps, and I cannot believe this is how democracy works. I cannot believe the future of this region actually revolves round me having some sandwiches over lunch with [another council leader]; it cannot be right. It didn't involve trade unions, stakeholders, academic institutions, constituencies, members of parliament - and members of parliament were furious: 'What the [expletive deleted]'s going on here?' This is having massive political consequences but it was being determined by half a dozen people in private rooms (Council leader. February 2018).

That is one version, from the inside, of how it happened. The reality was not always quite like that, for decisions are sometimes taken by rather more than half a dozen people in private rooms; they are taken by a few dozen people in private rooms when party groups hold their meetings – though in some councils, as we will see (4.5.3), leaders are given a very free hand.

Another version, looking in from the outside – but in close contact with the process – came from a business leader:

At the core of it was some quite left-wing politics [in Gateshead] that fundamentally was going to fight anything that was a Tory dogma, that was going to fight anything about mayors because they don't believe in that particular form of governance, and that they also, a number of the individual leaders, feel threatened by joining something that was bigger, and seeing it - although it was very much a matter of trying to bring devolved powers from Westminster back to the North East - actually lessening the authority of their own little fiefdoms. So there were a number of both personal objectives and political objectives coming together (Business leader. August 2018).

Full councils and their cabinets did actually debate devolution in public, and the minutes and reports which contributed to decisions can be viewed online. Members of the public may, however, be unaware of the private decisions already taken that constrained their elected representatives in public. Cabinets made the decisions, though full councils usually met first to make their views known. Six of the seven

councils discussed the devolution deal between 24 February and 21 March 2016 (the exception being South Tyneside), followed by decisions by their cabinets. NECA was told on 24 March that the decisions were: Newcastle to support the deal, Gateshead to endorse the principle of devolution but not the deal or an MCA, and the remainder to support subject to clarifications (NECA, 2016e) (4.1).

4.5.1 Gateshead leads the opposition

Gateshead has a history when it comes to resisting government initiatives, and is proud of its ability to stand on its own feet. Its attitude might be characterized as bravado: 'We are confident about our own capacities', said a councillor (February 2018). Another recalled with pride that Gateshead refused to join the Tyne and Wear Urban Development Corporation (UDC) of the 1980s but still managed to achieve some regeneration (February 2018). An official referred cockily to Newcastle, the regional capital across the Tyne, as 'Gateshead North'[26].

Gateshead is key because it led the way in rejecting the deal, and understanding why is challenging. 'Momentum Gateshead and Blaydon' is linked as a related page on the CARD Facebook page (Momentum, undated). Nevertheless, a backbench councillor discounted any suggestion that Momentum had dictated the decision; some councillors were supporters and others not (Gateshead councillor. April 218). Another Gateshead backbencher was actually unsure altogether why Labour councillors voted against the deal:

> *It's hard to say to what extent something actually influenced different people...We debated as Labour councillors this issue at length and came to a decision (Gateshead councillor. February 2018).*

The limitations of union influence on councils in general, discussed above in relation to the CARD campaign (4.4), were made clear by a union leader. The union's strongest representation, he said, was in Durham and Sunderland, but that did not stop those councils making the union's members redundant (Union official. October 2018).

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[26] Personal observation.

Nevertheless, the CARD campaign message did get through to some. When Gateshead Council debated the deal on 25 February 2016 one member, a Unison official, referred to it as 'an enhanced form of localism' and 'based on a city region economic growth model that does not suit our region' – both forms of words reminiscent of CARD literature (Gateshead Council, 2016b) (4.4). When the cabinet rejected the deal on 22 March, of nine councillors round the table seven were members of one (in one case two) of the campaigning unions, and one has since become a Unison-sponsored MP (Gateshead Council, 2016c; Parliament, 2018a). The council leader was one of the two not in these unions, and two months later was replaced by a GMB member. A suggestion that some councillors are under union influence without necessarily understanding the reasons came from a leading member of another council: 'Sometimes I think it was as basic as "we've got a message from the union and we're against it". They might not have put it in those terms – don't get me wrong' (Labour council member, NECA. March 2018).

Links with Momentum notwithstanding, Gateshead cannot be said with confidence to be dominated by the Labour left. It is not even clear how 'left' would be defined. However, given its consistent resistance to Tory initiatives, a different adjective is suggested by a trade union banner that hangs in a Civic Centre interview room[27]. Displaying a portrait of Lenin, the word for Gateshead Council it brings to mind is 'bolshie'.

For all the internal politics, Gateshead had serious concerns about being asked to take on devolved responsibilities with inadequate pre-determined budgets to fulfil them. One councillor recalls being told by a minister: 'You can have any function you want, except education. You can have DWP if you want (laughs). There's power for you. There's a function for you'. He added:

> Even if we got some kind of fiscal - and we are miles and generations away from
> fiscal devolution - the North East of England needs to be very, very, very careful
> about fiscal devolution because on which tax would we benefit? Business rate?
> Put up a local tourist tax? There isn't a single form of taxation where we don't

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[27] Personal observation.

heavily depend on redistribution from central government. So that was our

objection to devolution (Gateshead councillor. February 2018).

Durham is also aware of this danger (4.5.2), as was made clear in interview (April 2018). Bailey (2018) has argued that tax reforms ostensibly intended to incentivize councils to boost economic growth, including business rates retention, will concentrate capital for investment in areas already affluent and growing and probably further disadvantage northern regions. A mismatch between responsibilities and funding and a weakening of the ability of the centre to redistribute were among the reasons for caution over devolution given by Rodríguez-Pose and Gill (2003) and Prud'homme (1995) noted in section 1.2.

4.5.2 Durham shrugs its shoulders

Durham's decision to vote against the deal came as a surprise to some. A business leader from outside Durham, asked why he thought the four south of Tyne councils had rejected the deal, simply replied: 'If anyone could explain to me why Durham did I'd be grateful' (Business leader, North Tyneside. December 2018). Outside observers believe the decision within Durham Labour group must have been close, and difficult for the Durham leader. A fellow NECA council leader said:

It was very finely hung. Leaders have a huge amount of influence inside of
group and council; you would expect to support a leader; you look for
leadership; you expect them to have spent the time and effort to research issues
and to persuade people and take people with them. So when it starts to get
towards 50:50 votes in a group meeting leaders' positions are becoming very
strained; you are stretching every ounce of loyalty out of people (Council leader.
February 2018).

Durham was the only council to poll all residents on the deal. Almost 82,000 responded and there was general support for the concept of devolution (Henig, 2016)[28]. After receiving the results the cabinet deferred a decision on 23 March, the day after Gateshead had rejected the deal. By 24 April all Labour group members had

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[28] For further discussion of public consultation see section 7.2.

received a letter from six county Labour MPs urging them to do likewise: 'It is economically dysfunctional, unequal in its application and reduces democratic control at local level', they wrote, repeating the wording of a CARD union letter of 8 April (Hill, 2016b). On 11 May the cabinet met again and was torn. On the one hand, said the leader, 'moving forward was reflective of the results of the poll'. On the other, 'fair funding was integral to making devolution work and without it there were no prospects to proceed'. Faced with a dilemma, the cabinet agreed to move to the next stage, but only on four conditions – no mayoral veto; no disadvantage to NECA councils as a result of mayoral voting; no disadvantage to Durham in relation to transport and highways funding; and fair funding (Durham County Council, 2016a: 17, 21; Durham County Council, 2016b).

These concerns expressed publicly at the cabinet reflected those voiced privately in the Labour group. There were undoubtedly concerns about a mayor, a fear that was exploited by CARD. In a social media post a week after Durham County Council decided to poll its residents, CARD conflated the threats of a Conservative imposition and rule from Newcastle with the misleading claim that local councillors would be side-lined and the mayor would be responsible for local government services across the area, as well as reminders of cuts and the paucity of the financial offer.

In spite of concerns about the mayor, however, it was funding which was the deciding factor. The Durham leadership, like Gateshead's, had thought carefully about the fiscal implications of more devolved responsibilities and was worried it would leave the North East worse off, leading to another round of cuts for which they would be blamed. According to one leading member, they would have been prepared, reluctantly, to accept a mayor if funding guarantees had been sufficient (Durham councillor. April 2018)

Alongside these articulated fears, however, other deep-seated factors were at work in the minds of Durham councillors, semi-conscious examples of the evolutionary economic geography discussed in 2.1.3. One was a historic unwillingness to deal with a Conservative government. According to one councillor:

> *There are people on this council who were arrested during the miners' strike, let alone anything else. So there's a lot of that folk memory, and it makes it – it*

always made it all the way through – difficult to do anything (Durham councillor. April 2018).

Such people are the 'carriers of history', embodying the value framework of their territory (Keating, 1998; Martin, 2000) (2.1.3). The memory of the miners' strike and its continuing influence on politics continues to surface elsewhere in the region. Sunderland Council called in 2019 for a public inquiry into police actions at the 'Battle of Orgreave' during the strike 35 years previously (Binding, 2019). A North of Tyne politician said unsympathetically of his south of Tyne counterparts: 'They're political dinosaurs who can't see past what happened in the 1980s' (May 2018).

A second factor for Durham was the Gateshead effect. Gateshead's rejection of the deal changed the dynamic and unnerved Durham as the arguments spread across the border. The Durham leader witnessed strong opposition when he debated the deal at Blaydon (Gateshead) Constituency Labour Party. Word was passed on through links in the party and trade unions, informal networks and close family ties among elected representatives at the highest levels.

The third informal factor to influence Durham was an indifference in some parts of the county born of a belief that the deal was Newcastle's business and rural Durham could expect nothing from it. Durham shares few major public services with the conurbation to its north and many residents see no reason to go there; some in the south of the county look to Tees Valley rather than Tyne and Wear. A leading councillor described what he found as he travelled around to discuss devolution:

I wouldn't say it was a hostility, it was more a shrugging of the shoulders and 'What's that got to do with us?' and the further I got south and west, away from the metropolitan area and into rural areas the stronger that became. So it isn't political; actually it is stronger in some of the more Conservative areas. Some of the farming areas particularly say 'What have I got to do with Newcastle? Town for us is Barnard Castle; we don't even like Durham City very much' (Durham councillor. April 2018).

Others in County Durham, not politicians but with a direct interest, shared some of these views. A business support executive thought Durham was fearful of ending up

second cousin to Tyne and Wear: 'I think there was a fair bit of concern that that is what we would have ended up as if there had been a mayor appointed. I would certainly have been worried about that'. He, like councillors, was torn between concern about Newcastle predominance and the potential benefits of devolution. Ultimately, though, he came down for devolution, which he regarded as 'a lesser evil': 'I look at what's happening in Tees Valley and I think actually that's a good model' (October 2018).

4.5.3 Sunderland and South Tyneside – following the leader

Sunderland Council met on 21 March to consider its advice to the cabinet. Views were generally favourable. The (ceremonial) mayor, summed up: 'Council appeared minded to support the devolution proposals and the creation of an elected mayor'. The deputy leader warned of the financial consequences of rejection and said 'the mayoral model proposed would ensure significant control for local leaders' (Sunderland Council, 2016b). Sunderland's cabinet met two days later, supported the deal, noted the outstanding issues and agreed to discuss the subject again in May (Sunderland Council, 2016a). Cabinet members remained supportive when they met on 16 May, but still cautiously retained the possibility of rejection if not satisfied with the final details (Sunderland Council, 2016c). As late as 31 August the cabinet still felt unable to commit itself unreservedly, so it authorised its leader to agree to the next steps if satisfied with further clarifications (Sunderland Council, 2016d). A councillor said later:

> *[Council leader] was very open with the group, and rather than having to delay anything that was happening he got the group's agreement that he was in a good place, he was clever enough, he knew what was going on, he lived and breathed it, and any decisions that were needed quite quickly that he could actually do that, make that decision (Sunderland councillor. March 2018).*

In the event, the Sunderland leader, who also chaired NECA at the time, voted against the deal. Sunderland's records of its 31 August cabinet suggest why he did so: 'Since cabinet's deliberations in May, there have been the significant events of the European Union referendum result, and the change of Prime Minister and cabinet membership' (2016d). Whether anything else motivated the Sunderland leader to vote against the deal, with EU and national events just a rationalisation, is unknown; he died in 2017. A

campaigner against the deal told this study: 'His late conversion was strong and critical' (November 2017).

The Sunderland councillor quoted above believed it was funding, not the mayoral issue, that was the deal breaker. Given the changes of government that might occur, he did not believe 30-year funding promises could be guaranteed. Besides, the money did not compensate for the £400m of cuts that the council had already suffered (Sunderland councillor. March 2018).

In neighbouring South Tyneside they thought, and still think, NECA could have got a better deal in 2016, and still could if only the North of Tyne three had not broken away. A leading councillor said:

> *There was a perception from some people that once you don't agree this deal…that's it, the door is shut. I don't believe that. The North East is too important a part of the national economy not to be at the table discussing the agenda with government. So I think they would have come back to us in future to say: 'What is it about the previous deal you didn't like, what is it we can do to get you over that finish line?' So I was hopeful and I still think they would have done that (South Tyneside councillor. March 2018).*

Given a good enough deal, a mayor might have been acceptable to South Tyneside, but it shared Sunderland's worries about the reliability of future funding. A business leader, however, argued pragmatically that local government had to work with central, even if it disagreed with it, to get the best it could for its area (Former NELEP board member. January 2018). A politician agreed: the south of Tyne councils made a major strategic mistake by not doing so (Conservative councillor. May 2018). A Labour supporter of the deal said, in response to fears that the money might be cut off, that keeping it flowing would depend on how successful one was in using it, and argued in frustration for a quite different approach:

> *One has to take opportunities to make things happen. Sometimes there's a bit risk. But it's about your passion and your enthusiasm and your strategy going forward and the vision you have; that's the way things happen. It's not about saying 'Oh well, this isn't any good, we're not going to do that'. We would never*

do anything. No one would ever do anything if they weren't prepared and didn't have the enthusiasm to make things happen. So you find a way. And people have said to us 'Oh you're going in with the Tories'. What other way could I go to make things change in the area? That's the only thing that's on the table (Labour council member. March 2018).

South Tyneside's Labour group received regular updates from the leader. According to one account: 'Their view was this was a fast-moving agenda, it was changing daily, and that the leader needed to be given scope to use his judgement as to whether or not at the end to sign up on behalf of South Tyneside' (Interview, March 2018). The cabinet discussed the deal three times between March and August and left it in the hands of the leader. The last occasion saw a hint that members hoped the deal would proceed: subject to clarifications, and the approval of all the NECA authorities, they endorsed the requisite conclusion that the new arrangements 'would be likely to improve the exercise of statutory functions in the NECA area'. But in the end the South Tyneside leader voted with the majority against the deal (South Tyneside Council, 2016a; South Tyneside Council, 2016b; South Tyneside Council, 2016c). The Sunderland and South Tyneside votes are consistent with the view of a NELEP board member close to the talks who told this study:

If I was the Sunderland leader, why would I run the political risk, just for the greater North East? Sunderland has always been a problem like that. South Tyneside - the leadership in South Tyneside - just follow where Sunderland go to. It's connected (NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018).

This was rejected in South Tyneside, and the suggestion that South Tyneside, though considerably smaller, always follows Sunderland's lead is too crude a characterisation. The two areas are adjacent geographically and close socio-culturally. At the popular level, Sunderland Football Cub has three supporters branches in South Tyneside (Sunderland Assocation Football Club, undated). They share a post-industrial heritage with Newcastle but without the same level of commercial, cultural and architectural assets, and a common perception that economic growth in the regional capital does not ripple outwards to their areas. The two do a lot of cross-boundary working, said a

leading councillor, but on the basis of equality (South Tyneside councillor. March 2018). In as far as it is possible to judge, that seems a fair assessment.

4.6 Postscript

There was surprise in Whitehall when news came through from Sunderland by text on 6 September 2016 that NECA had rejected the deal. Civil servants had been watching seven individual agents struggling with the historic, social, cultural and political structures of the North East and been expecting they would emerge from the battle to sign a deal. But the forces of the *status quo* were too strong, and they did not understand why. One civil servant said:

> *We knew what Gateshead's position was. We knew that Sunderland and South Tyneside had leeway, that their leaders had personal decision-making to go either way. We thought Durham were safe. In the end it was Durham we misread, because what we didn't have visibility of was discussion within Durham Labour Party; we only had official-level discussions so we missed that Labour Party policy. It is always difficult for an official to understand what goes on within Durham Labour Party, and with [Durham council leader] unable to back the deal it fell. We still could have got a majority but I don't think either [Sunderland leader] or [South Tyneside leader] were willing to take the risk...[Gateshead leader] was clear about what he was going to do although he also, if it looked like the vote was going to go, our understanding was that he would probably throw his hand in with the majority (Civil servant. January 2018).*

This failure by the civil service to understand what was going on within NECA was matched by lack of insight on the part of the NECA leaders into the thinking of government, epitomised by a revealing incident in the middle of the 2016 summer holidays, recounted by a leading councillor (NECA leader. March 2018). On 6 August a report appeared in *The Times* that the Prime Minister was planning to ditch the *Northern Powerhouse* brand, switching the focus from Manchester and other northern cities in favour of a wider industrial strategy including areas further south. It threw the NECA leaders into confusion, and they and their chief executives held a two-hour conference call, one from the balcony of his holiday hotel, to discuss the implications.

Lacking Whitehall contacts – unlike their Tees Valley colleagues, as we will see in Chapter 5 - they were in the dark.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has narrated the roles of four of the North East's civic leadership groups identified by Hambleton in its devolution decision. This was the point at which the concepts discussed in the preceding chapters – formal and formal institutions, relations with government, political practices such as the private meetings of party groups, and the political tradition of collective in preference to mayoral leadership - moved from the conceptual to the actual, empirical and real levels of critical realism and made their mark on the political governance and hence economic development of the NECA area.

The chapter has provided a narrative answer to research question 1 as it applies to the North East area: why did NECA reject a devolution offer from the government. That answer may be summed up as dissatisfaction with the £30m annual funding offer and resistance to an elected mayor. These grounds for rejection were facilitated by a socio-cultural-political context in which rivalry was pervasive, trust and common purpose were absent and the power to decide was in the hands of a few hundred Labour councillors meeting in private. They were pressured to accept the deal by their professional advisers and business leaders, but pressure against the deal from within the Labour and trade union movement proved stronger.

NECA's institutional evolution lends itself to analysis in terms of the processes of layering, conversion and recombination discussed in connection with the work of Martin (2010) and Mahoney and Thelen (2012) (2.1.3). The North East's local authorities were initially able in 2014 to form a CA because it involved a recombination of existing authorities to take responsibilities which those authorities granted it and left each of their leaders with strong influence, if not an absolute veto. As part of the CA's procedures and in a layering process, they added co-operation with another structure, NELEP. Having established NECA, however, a majority were then resistant to seeing it displaced by or converted into an MCA for reasons explained by Mahoney and Thelen (2012: 19):

Instead of displacement or conversion, drift or layering [the addition of new
rules, procedures or structures to existing institutions] are more promising as
strategies of change in political environments with strong veto players. This is
true because drift and layering do not require making any direct changes to the
old institutions and do not rely on altering the rules themselves or actively
shifting their enactment.

A veto player has been defined by Tsebelis (1999: 593) as an individual or collective actor whose agreement is necessary for a change of the *status quo*. While powerful veto players can protect old institutions, according to Mahoney and Thelen (2012: 20), they cannot necessarily prevent the addition of new elements. Thus, while four NECA councils were able to stop it becoming an MCA, they could not stop three other councils breaking away and establishing a new MCA alongside which the four would have to work. Only the three North of Tyne councils were able to recombine, in conjunction with new resources and properties, to form a new structure, a devolved CA with an elected mayor. The NECA majority had shown themselves to be 'opportunists' who, rather than trying to change a *status quo*, exploit it to achieve their ends and can be a source of institutional inertia:

Their preference of making use of existing possibilities over the riskier strategy
of mobilizing for change makes opportunists – through their inaction – 'natural'
(de facto) allies of an institution's supporters. Thus...opportunists help explain
why changing an institutional status quo is often far more difficult than
defending it (2012: 26-27).

In Chapter 5 we will see the very different institutional processes and outcome that resulted from the devolution process in Tees Valley, where trust and common purpose were present between key actors.

Chapter 5. Turning Tees Valley blue

This case study, like that of the North East (Chapter 4) develops key concepts of section 1.3 and builds on the economic theories and political issues raised in Chapter 2 and contextualised regionally in Chapter 3 to provide a narrative answer to research question 1 as it relates to Tees Valley, asking why it accepted a devolution deal. The narrative of this chapter finds the informal institutions of Tees Valley, its socio-cultural background and political attitudes, to be subtly but significantly different to those of the North East, and they led to very different results from those to the north.

Trust, recognised conceptually as a vital governance ingredient in the literature review (2.2.1), is confirmed as having played exactly that role in the concrete reality of Tees Valley. The key concept of dominance (1.3.2) had an important reactive role in giving rise to resistance to the perceived leading regional position of Newcastle. It was supplemented by a positive concept of local place and identity, also introduced in section 1.3.2., contextualised in section 3.1.1 and now consummated in Tees Valley's devolution deal.

As well as being an institutional case study of Tees Valley this is also a study of the concept of leadership (1.3.3) and mayoral governance (2.2.4) in the person of the metro mayor elected in May 2017.

In Tees Valley, this case study finds, though the devolution decision lay with politicians, unlike in the North East they were not engaged in a struggle with business or in disagreement with officials. It was after the devolution deal had been done and a Conservative mayor elected that controversy arose.

It is notable that Tees Valley's civic leadership was and remains essentially a duopoly of politicians and business leaders rather than the partnership of five civic leadership groups envisaged by Hambleton. While public officials played their full role as professional advisers, there is no evidence that they steered policy, probably because they were in any case in agreement with the direction their political bosses were taking and so did not need to. Nor have either the documents examined for this thesis or the interviews conducted yielded any indication that either the trade unions or the

voluntary sector played significant roles in the devolution debate. Indeed, compared with the NECA area, there wasn't much debate at all at that stage. There was no equivalent to the CARD campaign against their deal.

The chapter describes how Tees Valley became separated from the wider North East in 2010, an essential precursor to the formation of a CA, and then signed a devolution deal and elected a Conservative mayor to lead a Labour dominated area, and the transformational effect that result had for Tees Valley politics. It describes the way the mayor has used popular politics and proactive public relations to impose himself on the area and implement his most high-profile manifesto pledge against the opposition of his cabinet. It describes how he has raised his own profile and that of Tees Valley at the national level. Finally, it discusses the possibility that Tees Valley may be reunited with the wider North East region.

5.1 Tees Valley Unlimited: a basis for collaboration

Tees Valley Unlimited (TVU) was a public-private development organisation with roots in collaboration going back to 1996. It brought together council leaders and their officials, civil servants, higher and further education and private sector representatives including the chair. Five TVU groups dealt with economic development; place; transport and infrastructure; employment and skills; and innovation (TVU, 2014d: 1; TVU, 2016a). From 2010, as a formal and stand-alone LEP, TVU had a short life which, if not uneventful, was undramatic.

Its archived papers, covering 2014 to 2016, demonstrate a pragmatic strategy aimed at getting the most it could from the government for Tees Valley by doing whatever was required. TVU's minutes show a recognition from the start of the need for change and to tell the government what it wanted to hear. TVU's chair said that, following the securing of a city deal, TVU must look at how it could further improve its performance; times were changing and TVU would have to change with them, including more involvement of the private sector in developing the strategy and regeneration agenda (TVU, 2014a: 5). Ahead of a meeting with Communities Secretary Greg Clark, TVU noted that the government wanted evidence of solutions:

We are not asking for extra money but a policy change or a way of spending existing money in a better way… [We] can demonstrate to Greg Clark we are taking responsibility for managing rather than asking for money (TVU, 2014b: 3. 5).

TVU was effectively anticipating advice published the following year to those seeking devolution to 'give the confidence to devolve' by demonstrating ability to deliver within the framework of the government's approach (Grant Thornton and Localis, 2015). TVU certainly wanted all the help it could get but its approach, unlike the North East's, was based on a philosophy of 'ask not what the government can do for you, ask what you can do for the government'.

For Tees Valley, within the limits of what was available, it worked in the sense that it was able to carry on, and face the forthcoming changes brought by devolution, without institutional disruption – though its politics was transformed. That is not to say there were not setbacks, and unfortunately for TVU its accommodating approach did not bear immediate fruit. In an 'unsatisfactory' meeting, Clark 'attempted to dampen down expectations on what to expect regarding money'. TVU did not, however, dwell on its disappointment but continued to look for ways forward. Members noted the previous [Labour] government had focused on supply-side solutions to economic problems while the present [coalition] administration focused on the demand side. TVU should go forward with 'a couple' of transformational projects rather than a raft of supply-side projects. There was also a recognition that with an election due in 2015, the government was keen on projects that could visibly be delivered quickly, a message that was repeated following a meeting with the government, when there was mention of the importance of 'shovel-ready' projects which could demonstrate an early impact (TVU, 2014c: 2-3; TVU, 2014d: 4).

TVU's work throughout its lifetime was routine until, three months before it entered into a new relationship with TVCA, the closure was announced of the SSI steelworks in Redcar, a shock to the Tees Valley economy that cost 2,800 direct and supply chain jobs. TVU's involvement however was secondary, working with affected companies in the supply chain, with Redcar & Cleveland Council taking the lead (TVU, 2015b: 3-4; TVU, 2016a: 3; Redcar & Cleveland Council, 2017b: 4).

Devolution and possible changes in its own status first appeared on TVU's radar, as it did in the North East, in October 2014, following the Scottish referendum. With devolution, members were told by their officials, the private sector would sit at the heart of the strategic development of functions such as economic development, transport and skills. Thought needed to be given to the powers, functions and resources that the area may wish to see devolved, and in January 2015 TVU agreed to review its make-up, membership, support groups and relationship with the prospective new combined authority. Otherwise, Tees Valley's devolution deal and its implications for TVU and its relationship with TVCA caused few ripples as the process went through its formal stages over the following year.

In October 2015 the proposed devolution deal, which included the transfer of 'significant powers' over employment and skills, transport, planning and investment, the power to establish mayoral development corporations – which saw South Tees get the first such development corporation outside London - and a £15m annual grant for 30 years, was described by one of the council leaders at a TVU meeting as 'good for Tees Valley and would make it less reliant on others' (TVU, 2014f: 4-5; TVU, 2015a: 4; TVU, 2015b: 4). Unlike their NECA colleagues, the Tees Valley leaders did not change their minds.

5.2 Tees Valley Combined Authority – normal politics

TVCA started life in 2016 with enthusiasm, as had NECA two years earlier. The opportunity for the CA was enormous and the plans that were in place or taking shape were an extremely exciting prospect, said the chair. This enthusiasm was given added impetus almost immediately by a report in June 2016 from Lord Heseltine following his appointment by the government to advise on the Tees Valley economy in the light of the SSI closure. Heseltine's report (6.4.2) was said to set out a bright future for the area, and an analysis demonstrated that it was largely complementary to the existing SEP, as had been hoped (TVCA, 2016b: 2; TVCA, 2016c: 13-14).

Enthusiasm for devolution did not, however, dispel all doubts, particularly in the wake of the Brexit referendum and subsequent changes in government. TVCA members, like their NECA neighbours, felt in August 2016 that given all that had happened reassurance was needed about devolution and the commitments that had been made.

They were worried about the effects of Brexit on funding, regulation, exporting, FDI, the attraction and retention of talent and international knowledge transfer. But, unlike in the North East, doubts did not halt the process, and all the while plans were being laid for the establishment of a Tees Valley land commission to maximise the use of brownfield sites held by government departments and agencies to support economic development and housing supply (TVCA, 2016c: 3-13).

By early 2017, even before the metro mayor was elected, TVCA was starting to see the fruits of its deal. Proposals had been developed for a Tees Valley Housing Agreement under which the government would make available over £100 million for an accelerated home building programme enabling more than 2,500 good quality affordable homes to be built by 2021. However, said officials, the proposals went much further by providing a platform for working with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and key local partners to regenerate communities, create jobs, support the SME sector (small and medium-sized enterprises), diversify market capacity, promote innovation in home building and attract new sources of investment (Waters, 2017h). The provision of housing funds was later to prove a bone of particularly bitter contention for one NECA leader because of the preference given to MCAs while the south of Tyne authorities had received nothing (NECA council leader. February 2018).

On 4 May 2017 a Conservative councillor from Stockton was elected as Tees Valley's first mayor. The narrowness of the Tory victory is evident from the statistics: the Conservative won by 48,548 votes to 46,400, counting second preferences, on a turnout of 21.3% on a day when the Conservatives gained 563 seats and Labour lost 382 across Britain (BBC, 2017; Stockton Council, 2017). It was the start of a new era, the novelty for much of North East England of a Conservative in power, and a new style of popular politics. That a change of control should have been a shock says much about the politics of North East England. A civil servant, watching Tees Valley devolution unfold at close quarters, regarded the election of a Tory mayor as having brought 'normal politics' to the area:

> *Political conversations in Tees Valley have tended to be within the Labour Party*
> *or between Labour and Independent. I think what it has done is say 'well*
> *actually there is a different political dynamic here that is more normal around*

the country'. There are tensions obviously between a mayor and the leaders in terms of political outlook and way of doing things but actually it is normal politics. It is nothing untoward. It is probably something a little different from what you would expect in Tees Valley. It will probably chafen things up a bit. (Civil servant. January 2018).

5.3 Political pragmatism: no mayor, no deal; no deal, no money.

A Tees Valley MP, asked why TVCA had accepted a devolution deal while NECA had not, blurted out instinctively: 'It was the money. It was the money'. Then he added more thoughtfully:

> *It's a relatively small amount of money, but facing an era when the local authorities have lost half their income and simply don't have the resource to invest in economic development promotional work, it was an opportunity for some money and of course it would be able to drive additional match funding over time. So that's why they did it (Labour MP. February 2018).*

There is widespread agreement with this interpretation in Tees Valley, and the blow to the area's economy caused by the SSI steelworks closure only served to confirm local politicians in their pragmatic view that they needed every penny they could get, even if it meant a accepting a mayor. One council leader explained: 'We absolutely did not want a mayor. But the choice was "no mayor, no deal; no deal, no money"' (TVCA council leader. March 2018)

The SSI closure was a blow which affected prospects for a devolution deal in Tees Valley and the area's ability to regenerate the economy in contrary ways. On one hand, said a local official, local politicians didn't want the deal to be seen as a response to the steel works closure. They wanted the government to be on the hook for the consequences of the steel works closure over and above the deal. In that sense it could have been a disruptive factor (Public official, Tees Valley. January 2018). On the other hand – and in the end this weighed more heavily – the closure made councillors realise how badly they needed all the economic tools they could get.

A private sector representative close to the issue argued that the mayoral development corporation resulting from devolution was an important factor in dealing with the SSI closure because the compulsory purchase and planning powers that went with it enabled projects to be fast-tracked. Compulsory purchase was a Sword of Damocles which one hoped never to have to use, he said (LEP board member, private sector. March 2018) – though it was used in 2019 in relation to the SSI site.

While funding was the up-front reason for Tees Valley's pragmatic decision to accept a deal, it was made possible by the very underlying factors whose absence in the North East made a deal impossible there – the trust seen as so necessary for governance by Rhodes (1996) and Jessop (1998) (2.2.1) and the collaboration between at least two of the civic leadership groups of Hambleton's framework – politics and business (2.2.4). A private sector representative on Tees Valley LEP said business would not have been co-operating with the five local authorities for the previous 20 years if they had spent that time fighting each other (LEP board member, private sector. March 2018). An official said:

> There's certainly good strong personal relationships between the leaders of the five councils; no one should underestimate that; I think they trust each other (TVCA official. January 2018).

If there was trust and collaboration between the Labour leaders and with the private sector, in an area with a significant number of Conservative politicians, as well as a Tory government in place, at least a modicum of trust across party lines was important as well, and its presence in Tees Valley meant the area had friends in high places when it needed them. Tees Valley actually has a significant number of Conservative councillors (3.1.1), and a Tory MP – at the time James Wharton, *Northern Powerhouse* Minister. It also experienced the involvement of Lord Heseltine, and Greg Clark, Communities Secretary and a Middlesbrough native. Though none of these was decisive in negotiating the devolution deal, they did help smooth the way. A Labour council leader said the involvement of Wharton and Clark was 'quite instrumental in enabling us to deliver the devolution deal here, because as a small area we probably would not have had one had it not been for those two people' (March 2018). A Labour MP said of Wharton: 'Despite all our political differences there are things that we have

worked on very closely together. The fact that he was a DCLG minister did actually help' (February 2018). According to a civil servant, Tees Valley 'had the right national politicians who were backing their case, who were willing to put in a bit of hard miles – Greg Clark and James Wharton – both prepared to put their political capital on the line to get something for Tees Valley' (January 2018). A business representative on the LEP said Wharton helped smooth the way when difficulties arose (LEP board member, private sector. March 2018)

The Labour leaders were suspicious when Heseltine was appointed to advise on regeneration in 2015, but his personality and their pragmatism created a working relationship. A civil servant who witnessed the process said: 'They made a friend in Lord Heseltine, who deployed his considerable personal charm' (Civil servant. January 2018).

As a result of all these factors – Tees Valley's history of collaboration between councils and with the private sector, political support across party lines and the spur to action provided by the SSI closure – the five council leaders confirmed their deal with the government just as their NECA neighbours were rejecting theirs.

The Tees Valley council leaders had, in theory, as much veto power as their NECA colleagues and could have prevented devolution. The fact that they did not do so is due to the fact that they were pragmatists and were prepared to make the most of a governance system not of their devising or choice. They were, to use the phraseology of Mahoney and Thelen (2012: 24), 'mutualistic symbionts'. This type of change agent 'thrive on and derive benefit from rules they did not write or design, using these rules in novel ways to advance their interests'. They are not linked to any specific mode of change (van der Heijden and Kuhlmann, 2016: 551).

5.4 Devolution: business builds on the past

If Conservatives played a role in Tees Valley's devolution deal, it was a natural extension of the part they had fulfilled five years earlier in establishing the area as one of the coalition government's FEAs, separate from the NECA area and, importantly for them, from Newcastle. A Tory strategist and businessman recalls that even before the

2010 general election, in anticipation of a Conservative government, the local business community started pressing for the area to be in the forefront of any changes:

> *The Tees Valley business people said 'We always lose out. The North East is divided. Newcastle gets all the goodies' and so on. And [Eric] Pickles [Shadow Communities Secretary] said 'Look, we are going to have these LEPs'...[T]his group of businessmen... got themselves active, because in Teesside, it's such a small area, we all know each other, whether it's Labour leaders of the local authorities, Tory business people like me, we know each other, we are friendly, socially friendly, and we get on well (Conservative businessman. June 2018).*

Tees Valley's history, with its well-established TVU, gave it an advantage. TVU was a ready-made vehicle to serve as a LEP and therefore, according to the account of the businessman quoted above:

> *Bang, we're in! And that's where the division [from the North East] happened. Speed, agility and a certain determination from a cohort of people in business and politics in Teesside – Tees Valley, I should say… And that's the forerunner of the subsequent devolution. (Conservative businessman. June 2018).*

Tees Valley's momentum was maintained after the 2015 general election. Within days the Prime Minister flew in and named Wharton as the *Northern Powerhouse* Minister, opening the door for the area to choose devolution.

This version is a story of collaboration transcending party, crossing the boundary between politics and business, of urgency and enthusiasm. Nothing like it was evident in the NECA area. The same Conservative strategist said: 'I feel very passionate about it. I really, really want it to work'. There is approval too from the politically uninvolved. A local business support executive active under both the RDA and TVCA, said Tees Valley was the 'forgotten element' under the former whereas now, he suspected, Newcastle and the North East LEP were looking on with envy (Business development executive, Tees Valley. October 2018)

Events are seen very differently by some others. A regional business leader who was personally involved described his memory of events when Tees Valley was first separated from the North East:

> *[Cabinet minister] told me personally to my face that Eric Pickles was just philosophically determined to break up regions and believed – I'll never forget the word he used – regions are evil, which is an incredibly strong word, and of course had as a henchman Greg Clark, who was a Middlesbrough lad, who very much, they worked tirelessly to get Teesside to break away because they wanted to break up the region. So although they said this is about local determination, and we had come together totally of our own free will over the previous six months and agreed that we were better off staying, they worked tirelessly behind the scenes to break us apart, and it was quite a difficult time actually. (Regional business leader. August 2018)*

That is a similar view to that, already noted, coming from a Labour activist opposed to NECA's devolution deal (3.1.1). But whatever the party political motives of the government may have been, Tees Valley's localism rather than regionalism is in line with the findings of Hambleton (2015a) and Kelly (2016a) (2.2.3) as well as the findings of local identity in the North East outlined in section 3.1.1 that people are attached to very local places.

If Labour councillors in Tees Valley took advantage of government policy for their own ends, to get what money they could for development, they equally had no illusions about the Conservative Party's political motives in offering Tees Valley a devolution deal. The Tories, one leader said, see Tees Valley as a starting point for their ambition to turn northern England blue (TVCA council leader. March 2018).

These contrasting interests – Labour's desire to win some extra funding and the Conservatives' electoral ambitions – both pulled Tees Valley in the same direction, towards a deal, for it meant both sides had something to gain. Pay-back for the Conservatives began on 4 May 2017, when Ben Houchen was elected as Conservative metro mayor.

5.5 Serious economics meets popular politics

It's a local delicacy, probably about 3,000 calories of pork escallop covered in cheese, deep-fried...best served up after people have had several gallons of beer at 2 o'clock in the morning (Labour MP. February 2018).

That mocking description of the Teesside parmo by a Labour MP symbolises the tensions between Tees Valley's Conservative mayor and the area's Labour establishment which provided the five council leaders who served in his first cabinet. For the parmo featured in the Tory candidate's mayoral campaign. He campaigned for the delicacy to be given Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status, and it gained him headlines: 'We should be proud of the things we produce, including the world famous parmo', he told a local paper (Smiles, 2017). For an ally of the mayor, mockery of the parmo is replaced by admiration of the way that the mayor continued to exploit it in office:

The parmo is populist and fun, and he made the Chief Secretary to the Treasury [Liz Truss] eat a parmo in public (laughs) on video...The day he gets Theresa May to eat a parmo I think he'll have completely succeeded[29]. (Conservative businessman. June 2018).

He qualified his description of Houchen's campaign as populist by adding:

It certainly caught the mood of politics. It wasn't extreme; it wasn't populist on things like immigration and race and things like that. It was populist in economic terms though...Ben [Houchen] definitely ran a populist campaign, but populist should not be used as some kind of pejorative statement. Just because it's populist doesn't mean it's wrong (Conservative businessman. June 2018).

The parmo was not the only Conservative election issue which Labour politicians portrayed as far removed from the strategic economic plan (SEP) which it is the main

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[29] The word 'populist' during this interview was not and is not intended to imply association with radical right attitudes that have come to be connected with it, as is clarified in the quotation immediately below. 'Popular' is the word used elsewhere in the thesis in this context.

responsibility of the CA which the mayor heads to deliver. The mayor's manifesto priorities included buying back and revitalising the struggling Durham Tees Valley Airport (DTVA), in which the five local councils and Durham County Council had a minority share; and setting up an independent commission to review the structure of Cleveland Police, which the candidate regarded as a failing force (Lloyd, 2017). The police, like the parmo, continued to occupy the mayor's attention as he repeatedly criticised the [Labour] police and crime commissioner, holding him responsible when, in September 2019, the force was graded inadequate by HM Inspectorate in all three areas assessed – effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (Metcalfe, 2018a; HMICFRS, 2019; Brown, 2019a; Houchen, 2019b).

The parmo, the airport and the police were all, in the eyes of the mayor's political opponents, causes adopted purely to win a position to which they were irrelevant. But it was these touchstone issues, coupled with the Conservative Government's relative popularity at the time - after the Brexit referendum and the triggering of Article 50 but before the 2017 general election – that the mayor's ally quoted above believes resulted in the Tory victory. Of these, it was the plan for the airport that was most significant, and was to result in a striking political triumph for the mayor two years later.

The airport controversy draws attention to wider issues around elected mayors: their budgetary control, their power relations with their cabinets, and the extent to which they can dominate their area and transform its politics through force of personality and PR skills. It is therefore an episode that merits detailed attention and invites analysis in terms of the arguments for and against elected mayors listed by Hambleton (2015a) and noted in the literature review on leadership (2.2.4).

While the parmo issue does lend itself to ridicule, and the police do not fall within the mayor's remit, the airport is a legitimate concern of TVCA and its mayor. An official report in 2018 noted that the airport had a role in the SEP and forthcoming transport plan, and a continuation of its decline would be a significant risk to local economic growth. A significant ownership stake by TVCA could in principle provide substantial benefits (Lewis, 2018a: 2, 4). Disagreement over the mayor's plans can be seen simply as healthy politics, debated between parties, in public (as far as commercial

confidentiality allowed). It turned into a test case of the relative powers and, as decisively, political and PR skills, of the mayor and cabinet and as such is of more than local interest.

Post-election tensions over the airport first came to a head in early 2018 when the Labour leaders wanted to see £500,000 of airport-related spending included in the MCA budget go on support for developing new routes and retail investment in line with an agreement they had proposed, but not finalised, before the mayoral election. When cabinet members realised the money was to be spent on furthering the mayor's pledge to buy the airport, they blocked it and then voted through an amended budget under which the money would be used as they had originally intended (Lewis, 2018a: 3; TVCA, 2018b).

It was an important test of mayoral and cabinet powers because, as officials explained, as an amendment to the budget the spending could be agreed by a majority of the five council leaders excluding the mayor. However, this would achieve no more than set money aside in the budget; specific project approval would be required subsequently, and this would be subject to the TVCA's normal decision-making procedure requiring approval by both a majority of the leaders and the mayor, who thus had a veto (Wayman, 2018; TVCA, 2018b; Lewis, 2018d: 1-3). A council leader expressed confidence that the money would be spent as Labour intended, and regarded the budget as a battle won (TVCA council leader. March 2018).

Another leader anticipated a more nuanced outcome, however, with enough money both to support new routes and progress the mayor's purchase plan (TVCA council leader. April 2018) and this was reflected in a TVCA report that work was continuing on both purchasing a stake and supporting new routes (Lewis, 2018b: 2). In May 2018 TVCA agreed to spend £1m over three years on an 'air connectivity facility' to support routes to Europe (TVCA, 2018d).

If the cabinet thought after their budget success that they had curbed the mayor's ambitions, they under-estimated him. Late in 2018 talks to buy the airport were revealed to be heading to fruition, and the mayor used every PR lever to rally the public in support of the purchase and put pressure on his cabinet. With seven weeks still to go before the cabinet was to debate the purchase, the mayor tweeted a smiling

photo of himself at the airport over-stamped: 'Deal done; public ownership as promised'. In another characteristic move, he launched a poll to ask the public whether the airport's name should revert to its original 'Teesside International': 'Whatever you decide, I will deliver', he said. 'The people have spoken' the mayor commented when 93% of 14,000 participants voted for 'Teesside International'. Meanwhile, a local newspaper poll showed 'overwhelming' support for the mayor's purchase plan, with 76% backing among 1,966 participants (Wayman, 2018; Brown, 2018c; Houchen, 2018c; Lewis, 2018c; Brown, 2018d; TVCA, 2018d).

The PR blitz continued in 2019. In January, in quick succession, the *Northern Powerhouse* Minister visited Tees Valley and urged the public to get behind the mayor's plan; the airport's private owners said it faced an extremely uncertain future if the purchase did not go ahead; consultants reported that the area would take an immediate £57m hit if the airport closed, with 1,100 jobs at risk, but 1,800 new jobs in prospect if the purchase went ahead; and a local company employing 180 warned it might have to re-locate if the airport closed.

Forty businesspeople added to the pressure by writing to the Labour leaders urging them to support the purchase, which 'defines us as a first-class city region not the poor relation of Newcastle and Manchester'. Three days before the cabinet was to vote the mayor announced that the airport was in line for a heliport to serve a big new North Sea wind farm - if his deal was approved. A Labour leader complained that a gun was being held to their heads. But according to the mayor: 'History will not be kind to those who let emotions and personal politics get in the way of what the people voted for and rightly demand' (Metcalfe, 2019a; Price, 2019a; Tighe, 2019a; Metcalfe, 2019b).

The mayor was astute enough to know, however, that a major investment could not win approval solely on the back of a popular campaign. A commercial lawyer and businessman by background, he backed it up with a detailed business case, business plan and valuation report and introduced it personally, with visual aids, in a 35-minute presentation[30]. It convinced the overview and scrutiny committee (OSC), and it

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[30] Personal observation.

seemed the cabinet was splitting, with the Hartlepool leader announcing he was backing the plan (TVCA and Mayor, 2019; Metcalfe, 2019d).

Two crucial procedural decisions were issued before the cabinet finally voted on the acquisition: the cabinet won a ruling that its unanimous backing was needed - reinforcing its budgetary control – but were presented with the deal as part of a wider ten-year £588m investment package, all subject to a single take-it-or-leave-it vote.

With three days to the decisive cabinet meeting, Conservative, LibDem and Independent councillors representing a majority on Redcar & Cleveland Council, where Labour was running a minority administration and where the Labour leader was perhaps the most prominent of the TVCA cabinet to question the plan, wrote an open letter urging her to back the investment package. Simultaneously, with a threat to further mobilise public opinion, a campaign group, Save Teesside Airport, said it would stand in council elections across Tees Valley if the purchase was blocked.

The scene was set for a showdown, and a conference room in a local hotel was booked for the cabinet meeting in anticipation of a rare display of public interest in local government. Then, one by one, the remaining cabinet members announced they would back the plan; one of the last, two days before the vote, was the Redcar & Cleveland leader, who said she would do so 'despite real concerns'. The potential showdown turned into a triumph for the mayor as hundreds of members of the public applauded his plans in front of a bank of TV cameras[31]. He had combined political, professional and PR skills to find a way of spending £40m on a project which required the unanimous support of his cabinet and which they had all earlier opposed. He was publicly gracious in victory, defending his cabinet against criticism and saying the deal had been improved by their robust scrutiny. He had made the most of the opportunity to display leadership before the largest possible audience.

Tees Valley's local newspaper endorsed the deal, said the Labour leaders had performed their duty in properly examining the plan 'in the face of a clever PR campaign by the mayor's office' and congratulated all concerned. Within days the mayor was meeting potential commercial customers to promote the airport (Brown,

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[31] Personal observation.

2018b; Metcalfe, 2018b; McNeal *et al.*, 2019; TeessideLive, 2019; Cain, 2019a; Wayman, 2019a; Metcalfe, 2019c; Metcalfe, 2019e; Metcalfe, 2019f; Metcalfe, 2019g).

The mayor exploited the publicity value of his airport triumph to the full for months afterwards, achieving headlines in mainstream media and posting on social media, personally or through TVCA, at every opportunity, such as the announcement of new holiday flights. A video was posted on 'the story behind our new airport brand' explaining how the design was developed (BBC, 2019b; Houchen, 2019g; TVCA, 2019h; TVCA, 2019i).

It was not long before the full political significance of the mayor's victory was felt. Council elections in May 2019 saw Labour suffer heavy losses (3.1.1) and retain only one cabinet seat. Though these results were part of the Brexit-induced turmoil affecting councils throughout England, a local newspaper described the mayor plausibly as the biggest local winner of the day, even though he didn't stand: 'His unlikely success in buying back Teesside airport enthused the regional party during the campaign, and now his cabinet, which is made up of the five council leaders, has a very different political complexion' (Lloyd, 2019). Mayor Houchen may not have turned Tees Valley blue in one go, as Independents were also winners at Labour's expense, but he made a big start by diluting the red, and in the general election seven months later, again dominated by Brexit, Tees Valley contributed three new seats to the Conservative victory, giving them four to Labour's three in the area (3.1.1).

In relation to the advantages of a mayor listed by Hambleton (2015a) (2.2.4) Houchen has certainly achieved visibility, not least through his airport purchase and as is further demonstrated below (5.6); and can claim legitimacy, having been elected, and accountability on the same grounds, though with *caveats* discussed in section 7.1.1. His airport purchase displayed strategic focus, though not on an objective that all agreed with. His authority to decide has been greatly strengthened by his airport victory, for which he had to fight hard. The stability of his own leadership will be tested at the mayoral election in May 2021, while the Labour Party's collective leadership of Tees Valley has been overturned by its election losses of 2019. New people have been brought into cabinet roles, if not into politics, for the first time. Views on the mayor's propensity for coalition building and partnership working will be contested. Some will

see his garnering of popular support in that light; others, as we will see in sections 7.1.1 and 7.3, see him as open only to those who can serve his own interests.

As to the disadvantages of mayors listed by Hambleton, most are inapplicable or not evident in this case – the wrong geography (except to advocates of regionalism), scope for corruption, weak power of recall, cost and over-centralisation of the state. The mayor is, perhaps, open to criticism for celebrity posturing, though opinions will differ on this subjective question.

A senior Tees Valley official believes the mayor does have a legitimate role in providing leadership on a range of issues outside his direct responsibility, as Andy Burnham has done in Greater Manchester on the issue of homelessness and Houchen has done in relation to policing:

> *I think a legitimate role for a mayor is to have a position on something that they don't have direct responsibility for but because they want to lead a particular policy position within the area...So mayors are not going to be constrained by the core functions of a combined authority; they are going to range more widely than that. And they should do, because that's a legitimate part of their role. They have a sort of thought leadership and convening power as mayors that is an important part of the role (TVCA official. January 2018).*

The tensions caused by these issues came to be one of the defining characteristics of the political life of Tees Valley after the mayoral election, just as collaboration and pragmatism had been the watchwords in the run-up to devolution. Those tensions found expression in the irritation of some at least of the mayor's opponents at the high profile which he attained in the media. But this profile for the individual was accompanied by a raised profile for the area as well, as Tees Valley rose from being a neglected part of England's most lagging region to a flagship for government policy and Conservative electoral hopes in the north.

5.6 Raised profiles – geographical and mayoral

Having a mayor has raised the external profile of Tees Valley as well as of the mayor personally; the two effects go together. For Tees Valley, they are most obviously visible in a constant string of ministerial visits, including by the Prime Minister, who visited in

August 2017 to launch the South Tees Development Corporation (STDC), where TVCA hopes to create 20,000 higher skilled jobs in manufacturing innovation and advanced technologies (TVCA, 2018e: 3). Visits can have substance as well as show. A business representative on the LEP said he had spent a lot of time talking to a visiting minister who was 'personally supporting and will support a number of projects that I can't talk about in the Tees Valley' (March 2018). A special economic area was declared on the STDC site, allowing the local retention of business rates (TVCA, 2018g). By early 2019 the government had announced £137m for the site and the transfer of 1,420 acres to the Development Corporation (Bell, 2019). 'It has taken 18 months of blood, sweat and tears but I am delighted to announce that a deal has been done' the mayor tweeted (Houchen, 2019a).

A Labour MP said Tees Valley had hosted more ministerial visits since the mayor was elected than in the previous seven years. Their aim was to exploit the situation politically, but that was a price he was willing to pay if it brought investment (Labour MP, Tees Valley. February 2018). A local official said Tees Valley was not an area of the country that people knew much about, but it was starting to get a reputation with national government and the private sector which was going to pay dividends (TVCA official. January 2018). A Labour council leader, while recognising the political gain accruing to the Conservatives, could see the opportunity a Tory mayor offered to exploit his profile on behalf of the area:

> This is the only place in the north where they [Conservatives] have made any
> significant inroads and on that basis they need to make that mayor a success,
> and that means we are seeing reams and reams of government ministers
> coming here ...It doesn't matter whether they [ministerial visits] are window
> dressing and PR or not. What it means is there is a focus on this area that there
> wouldn't be otherwise (TVCA council leader. March 2018).

Access to ministers and a seat at some tables is a result of having a mayor that quickly became evident. TVCA's cabinet minutes for June 2017, a month after the mayoral election, record tantalisingly: 'The mayor left the meeting for a short period to receive a 'phone call from the Secretary of State' (TVCA, 2017d). High-level contacts are frequent. An early opportunity came in September 2017 when the Chancellor visited

the *Northern Powerhouse* to discuss job creation, transport and housing. He met the north's three elected mayors, including Tees Valley's, but the North East was unrepresented, angering politicians who had campaigned against NECA's devolution deal (Walker, 2017). Weeks later the mayor was given the opportunity to introduce the Chancellor's keynote speech at the Conservative Party conference and seized the chance to promote Tees Valley's development opportunities (Price, 2017; TVCA, 2017b: item 4, p. 2). Days later it was again the northern mayors who met the Brexit Secretary to lobby over replacement grants for EU funding (Bounds, 2017). A year later the mayors were still lobbying over the issue, with a joint statement from Labour's mayors in Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield and the Tees Valley Conservative. The government confirmed it was engaging with 'mayors and mayoral combined authorities' (Hughes, 2018). Soon afterwards the Tees Valley mayor joined his peers from London, Manchester and the other MCAs at a meeting to call on the government for more devolved powers (McNeal, 2017b), giving what Teesside's local paper called 'bragging rights' over Newcastle (McNeal, 2017c). The mayor joined his Labour counterparts in Manchester and Liverpool in urging his own government against a 'Whitehall power grab' for EU funding (McNeal, 2017d). Within weeks concerns were placated and November 2017 saw TVCA awarded special powers under its devolution deal to take extra control over its share of EU funds and the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund (TVCA, 2017c; TVCA, 2017e: 5). A North East Conservative believes the ability of mayors to have their voice heard is at the expense of MPs:

> *Increasingly government ministers are starting to talk to the mayors first, before the local MPs, because they are covering a wider area and more significant population... The elected mayor is now the go-to person for any sort of consultation (Conservative politician. May 2018).*

The media, too, he said, regarded the mayor as the first person to talk to, even on issues not necessarily under his/her control.

If a high profile has benefited Tees Valley, the Conservatives were hoping it would do the same for them and help with their aim of turning the north blue. A Tory strategist said: 'A Tory mayor in Teesside! This is a man with a serious incentive to do well for Teesside people' (Conservative business leader. June 2018). A civil servant agreed,

saying that having a Conservative mayor in a relatively weak Conservative government was helpful both to Tees Valley and the government. It gave the mayor a bit of personal power that he probably would not have as a Labour elected mayor (Civil servant. January 2018)

But one irritated local MP felt the mayor was being given credit for initiatives long pre-dating his election (Labour MP. February 2018). Another said it was not just local authorities, but other organisations, that were affected by the mayor 'riding in at the top to cream off the publicity'. But he warned pragmatically against allowing annoyance to prevent the area taking advantage of opportunities presented by devolution (Labour MP. February 2018)

The reason Tees Valley's Labour leaders had not wanted a mayor, said one, was that it would disrupt the collective approach traditional in English local government described by Wollmann (2008) (2.2.4). The relevance of collectivism to Tees Valley is not so much to that within individual local authorities, for Middlesbrough has a borough mayor and Hartlepool had one between 2002 and 2012, but that between the five councils.

When the Prime Minister brought the cabinet to Gateshead in 2018 (4.1), ministers gave the Tees Valley mayor a high-profile meeting and he was praised by the Prime Minister in an article for regional media (Bell, 2018; Price, 2018b; Walker, 2018d).

The picture of a Tees Valley mayor who combines advocacy for his area with promotion of the interests of his party is confirmed, if not impartially, by an ally, who described the mayor as 'a very high-calibre individual, very passionate, very active and very dynamic, and he has made that job his own'. He was seen by the government as 'a totem of the northern outreach of Conservative devolved power' (Conservative business leader. June 2018)

A regional business leader said having a devolution deal made a huge difference:

> You only have to look at Tees Valley. It might not be that you get all the powers
> and responsibilities that you want, but it's that figurehead. I think Ben Houchen
> is doing a far greater job in the past year than I think most people would have
> given him credit for. He is one of a select few of mayors across the country, and

there's a lot of focus and...you can really influence people to make decisions
(Regional business leader. August 2018)'

Another regional business leader, taking a still more positive view of the mayor, and playing down the party politics, emphasized the importance of personality over geography in ensuring devolution was a success. Asked about Houchen, the somewhat star-struck response was: 'He is great – a fine upstanding young man and he has got his heart in his community (Regional business leader. September 2018).

The view is similar from just across the Tees Valley border in south Durham, with a tinge of envy. A business support leader wondered who had the ear of ministers on behalf of Durham. While the county council was doing a good job, he said, it would have been better to have a mayor, pushing issues of local concern like ensuring rural areas of the county had access to the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund (EU funding replacement):

He's managing to shout about the issues that matter for the people of Teesside.
Some of them might be white elephants, airports included, but he's doing it, and
it's got a line in and he's starting to make a noise. Who's doing that for our
county here?' (Business development executive, Durham. October 2018).

Not everyone agrees with these assessments of the Tees Valley mayor. He has his critics, as we will see in Chapter 7.

5.7 The return of regionalism: a latent threat

Today Tees Valley feels secure in its separation from the remainder of the North East, with its own formal institutions. The possibility of a re-unified region is absent under a Conservative government, newly re-elected in 2019, but that is not to say it may not one day re-emerge as part of a move back to regionalism. Hildreth and Bailey (2013: 244) believe that some LEPs are too small and 'at some point an intermediate scale of geography will have to be back on the agenda', and 'there remains the question of what happens to the LEPs that are not connected to a core city'.

What might happen under a future Labour government remains far from reassuring for Tees Valley leaders wishing to remain independent of the wider region. While Labour's

2019 general election manifesto did not mention abolishing existing combined authorities, mayoral or not, or LEPs, its commitment to establishing government offices in nine regions, regional development banks and a local transformation fund in each region would bring a significant regional element back into the governance mix (Labour Party, 2019b: 14).

The very idea causes anguished mixed feelings in Tees Valley, where the latent possibility of regional re-unification has long been present in the mind. In July 2014 TVU discussed two reports published by Labour on its thinking on the future of LEPs. One contentious issue was said to be the scale/geography of LEPs, with potentially fewer. TVU agreed it had to 'align' its case for retaining a Tees Valley LEP. Its chair said Tees Valley was a functioning entity and in a recent telephone conversation with Lord Adonis (chair of the North East Independent Economic Review) had made this position clear. Local Labour MPs were said to be supportive of the LEP. Nevertheless, one Labour council leader and TVU member 'felt the Labour Party would reincarnate the regional work' (TVU, 2014e: 2).

A Labour economist and campaigner, interviewed for this study, explained the case for regional rather than sub-regional governance. Only regions would be large enough to handle the level of devolution, particularly fiscal devolution, that he envisaged: 'I don't know how long it is going to take but that has to be the approach if we do genuinely want to avoid a situation of central control in England' (Labour campaigner. November 2017).

A regional business leader took a similar view, more ominously for Tees Valley because not obviously politically motivated. Tees Valley was too small to punch its weight on the national and international scenes. 'But they feel like a threatened minority, and threatened minorities always fight harder (Business leader. August 2018). This view was reflected by another business leader: Tees Valley had felt bullied by the RDA (Former NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018).

A Labour frontbench MP interviewed for this study was ambivalent about Tees Valley under a Labour government. He recognised the strength of feeling in Tees Valley against Newcastle but spoke in general terms of dealing with that issue 'within

something that enables us to work together rather than quarrelling over how many subsets there should be' (Labour MP. January 2018).

There are trade unionists, too, who would welcome the return of regionalism and even another attempt to establish a regional assembly. One union leader said, however, that to gain acceptance by business and voters any assembly would have to be elected by proportional representation to stop it becoming another fiefdom; even though his union was affiliated to the Labour Party, he thought people, and certainly business, would not buy into another layer of Labour bureaucrats (Trade union leader. October 2018). Another union leader said:

> *In a kind of romantic world that would be so much easier for us, to have the region working together as a collective, as we did with the RDA. But in terms of devolution, we have been there in 2004 when we had a proposal for a regional assembly. I don't think there's any appetite to revisit that (Trade union leader. October 2018).*

Some regard those proposing reuniting the North East with scorn; a Tees Valley business support executive suspected those advocating reunification were based in Newcastle, where they had been unable to get their act together [as NECA] and form their own mayoral CA (Business development executive. October 2018).

There is another latent threat to the established order, though it is barely discernible at present. Crossing the River Tees outside the TVCA headquarters one passes road signs announcing one's arrival – depending on direction of travel – in the 'historic' county of Durham or the North Riding of Yorkshire. Two tests of public opinion in Tees Valley have taken place in recent years which, though not directly related to the devolution process, touch on issues of place and identity and could hold the seeds of a new division. Referendums were held in Yarm and Thornaby in 2014 and 2015 respectively on the question of seceding from the borough of Stockton, which was formerly in County Durham, with a view to re-uniting in an undefined way with Yorkshire, of which both historically formed a part, lying as they do on the south bank of the Tees. The people of Yarm voted by 90% and of Thornaby by 72% in favour of leaving Stockton, though the ballots were not binding and have not been implemented. The two areas are very different and the results do not appear to have

had economic motives: Thornaby has three wards among the 20% most deprived in England while Yarm is among the 20% least deprived (Stockton Council, 2014: 120; Keane, 2017).

These popular votes may have led to nothing, but ties between Tees Valley and Yorkshire remain strong. One of the biggest economic developments in the area, reportedly involving investment of £3.2bn, links the two through the mining of natural fertilizer near Whitby, North Yorkshire, and its processing at Wilton on Teesside. It is creating more than 1,000 jobs and is expected to add 17% to the economic output of North Yorkshire and 18% to that of Tees Valley (Brown, 2018a). Teessiders look south to the North Yorks Moors National Park and Whitby for recreation[32]. A regional business leader said:

> *Tees Valley now have a view that they wouldn't want to join that rabble to the north. And also they are led by a mayor who is fundamentally a Yorkshireman, and his views are looking south rather than north (Business leader. August 2018).*

A politician with the North East Party (NEP) believes the South Tees area might one day choose to return to its Yorkshire roots, splitting Tees Valley and making it unviable (NEP member. 2017). Alternatively, the Tees Valley mayor, who has publicly described himself as 'a proud Yorkshireman' has speculated about welcoming neighbouring Yorkshire towns into Tees Valley (Cain, 2018a). Nevertheless, any threat comes at present from the north, and most of those interviewed for this study believe that Tees Valley is secure. Still, a Tees Valley MP reflected in a nuanced way that:

> *[T]hat doesn't mean we shouldn't lift our heads a little bit when the opportunity presents, and hopefully once the north of the region can work out what it wants to do and becomes established, then there's going to be an opportunity (Labour MP. February 2018).*

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[32] Personal knowledge

5.8 Conclusion

The narrative of this chapter has facilitated an understanding of how the subtly but significantly different socio-cultural-political environment in Tees Valley enabled it to accept a devolution while NEA rejected its similar offer. Though Tees Valley, like its northern neighbour, was completely controlled by the Labour Party at the time, its leaders benefited from an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, while their pragmatic approach enabled them to accept a mayor in order to access the funding and powers of devolution.

Separation from the North East has enabled Tees Valley to establish its own place-based identity, given it recognition on the national stage and revealed how distinct it has now become, socio-culturally and politically, from the rest of the region. Tees Valley's politics has been transformed both in style, with the election of a high-profile mayor, and substance as Labour has been swept from power in four of the five councils and lost three parliamentary seats (3.1.1). It feels secure in its new institutional arrangements, and it is hard to see a return to reunification with the rest of the North East even though latent pressure for regionalism remains in some quarters.

Tees Valley's institutional evolution, seen in terms of the analyses developed by Martin (2010) and Mahoney and Thelen (2012) (2.1.3) is very different from that of NECA (4.7). Tees Valley went through an initial process of layering in which TVU become an official LEP, quite a small institutional change but laying the ground for a much greater cumulative transformation. The local authorities, which had previously co-operated with each other and with the private sector through TVU, then recombined to form the new TVCA which, in turn, recombined in a close new relationship with the LEP. TVCA then underwent a process of layering by accepting a devolution deal, thus adding new powers and resources and an elected mayor to its existing structure.

In the following chapter we will see how the different decisions made by NECA and Tees Valley affected their approaches to economic development and the consequences for economic outcomes.

Chapter 6. Contrasting approaches to governing economic geography

This chapter describes and explains the different approaches of the two functional economic areas (FEAs) of this study to pursuing economic development: technocratic in the North East - an approach questioned in the literature as undemocratic and elitist (2.2.1) - and highly political in Tees Valley following the election of its mayor. It thus provides an answer to research question 2. It finds that the explanation for the different approaches lies not in the economic problems or plans of the two areas, which are quite similar, but in the different institutional arrangements following the decisions on devolution described in the previous two chapters, and in the politics and personality of the Tees Valley mayor elected in 2017.

The chapter explores the consequences of the economic geography of North East England that emerged from the introduction of localism in 2010 (1.2) and the devolution processes described in the previous two chapters. It describes how one FEA can become two if politically expedient. These FEAs may still, however, not coincide with other possible definitions of economic geography used widely by international bodies. What is more, none of these alternatives matches the geography through which politicians administer their municipalities.

The chapter goes on to discuss the economic background against which the two LEPs prepared their strategic economic plans (SEPs) in 2014, including the key concepts of path dependence and path creation (1.3.4), and the controversy over Newcastle's dominant role as a growth hub and potential centre of agglomeration (1.3.2, 2.1.1). It then turns to the SEPs themselves and discusses issues arising, including the targets they set themselves. Finally, it discusses the economic outcomes at the half-way points of the ten-year SEPs.

6.1 The mismatch of political and economic geography

Though LEP geographies were selected ostensibly because they were FEAs, we have seen in the previous chapter that the establishment of Tees Valley LEP was heavily influenced by socio-cultural and political factors. Local politicians and business leaders were keen to break away from what they perceived as Newcastle's dominance, and

Conservative ministers were keen to break up the region for ideological reasons and in the hope of party advantage. Once Tees Valley had broken away, there inevitably followed implications for the remainder of the North East.

Geographically the North East is a large area, even without Tees Valley – 106 miles by road from Berwick-on-Tweed to Barnard Castle – and diverse, with urbanised, post-industrial Tyne and Wear located between the largely rural counties of Northumberland and Durham. Yet dividing it between two LEPs would have been problematic. Had County Durham, for example, sought to form its own LEP – a possibility in view of the detachment from NECA expressed by some in the county (4.5.2) - it would have been the second smallest, behind Cumbria, with a population of 523,000 (Durham County Council, undated; Nomis, undated).

NELEP considers that its geography covering Northumberland, Durham and the five councils in Tyne and Wear is an FEA, basing its view on the facts that it is the sixth largest LEP in area, 96% of jobs in the area are taken by people living there, 79% of those living in the area work there, its industrial sectors rely on supply chains and assets located in the area, the housing market is strongly related to the labour market, and it has integrated transport governance. As NELEP does not overlap with any neighbouring LEP it did not see any need to amend its geography to comply with a government requirement that it reflect a 'real' FEA (NELEP, 2018c: item 9, pp. 4, 5).

Yet, when the political governance of the NELEP area broke down and NECA split, as recounted in 0, it was found expedient and possible to divide the area into two along the line of the Tyne and claim both were FEAs, creating the North of Tyne CA (NTCA) from the three councils supporting a devolution deal while the remaining four continued to administer the rump NECA. NTCA succeeded not just in gaining the required consent of a majority of the NECA seven to the requisite boundary change, but in meeting the legal requirement to show both that the creation of NTCA would be likely to improve the exercise of statutory functions in its area and that the change would do the same for what remained of NECA.

The rationale to support this position was provided by officials in an argument of two parts – economic and political (Melia, 2017: 5, 23, 50). Economically, officials argued that 'whilst working at a wider geography has the advantage of capturing more

community and supply chain interactions, this comes at the expense of economic linkages between some parts of the area being weak, making it difficult to have shared priorities'. North of Tyne it was argued, was an economic area in its own right, a 'functional economic market area' within the seven-council NECA FEA, while the rump NECA also, on its own, 'would remain a coherent and functional economic geography, and could therefore operate effectively'.

The political advantage was that splitting would liberate both areas from the disagreements that had held them back and allow them more scope to pursue their respective policy objectives – economic development and transport in NECA and human capital, housing and rural growth in NTCA. Without explicitly mentioning the factional disputes described in Chapter 4, officials stated that having two CAs would ensure more closely aligned policy objectives in each authority than existed within NECA at that time, enabling each to pursue a more diverse policy agenda and make and implement decisions more efficiently and effectively (Melia, 2017: 50).

This rationalisation came at a time when the government was itself uncertain about the basis for FEA boundaries and in its review of LEPs in 2018 said the time was right to revisit them:

> *There is no universally accepted approach to measuring or defining functional economic areas and boundaries vary depending on the method used. However, we acknowledge that economic geographies often cross administrative boundaries and we want to see continued collaboration between local enterprise partnerships and local authorities where this is the case (MHCLG, 2018b: 22-23).*

The CBI has called for a clear definition of FEAs taking account of political, geographical and decision-making boundaries (CBI, 2019: 24). When Heseltine reported on devolution in 2019 he looked at the problem from another angle, recommending that the Boundary Commission should review local authority boundaries, starting with CAs (Heseltine, 2019: 60). A North East economist took the pragmatic view that the most important requirement was stability, whatever the geography (NELEP economist. January 2018).

FEAs, however flexible they may be to meet the requirements of politics, are not the only possible or even actual economic geographies. The EU and OECD both divide North East England into seven units[33], selected on economic grounds, taking account of contiguous built-up areas and commuting. They recognise a single economic territory of Tyneside, taking in the four neighbouring metropolitan municipalities of Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside and South Tyneside and with a population of 854,000. County Durham, Northumberland and Sunderland, under this classification, remain as three separate units. Tees Valley is divided into three – Darlington; South Teesside (Middlesbrough and Redcar & Cleveland); and Hartlepool and Stockton (European Parliament and European Council, 2003: 53; Eurostat, 2019).

The OECD and some literature also recognize a 'Newcastle' economy which had a population of 1,166,000 in 2016 making it the fifth biggest city in the UK, and arguably a regional mini-agglomeration (McCann, 2016: 124-125; OECD, 2018). The Centre for Cities recognises a Newcastle primary urban area including Gateshead and North and South Tyneside; Sunderland as self-contained; and Middlesbrough as including Redcar & Cleveland and Stockton (Centre for Cities, 2019b). Looked at yet another way, North East England has five functional urban areas – Newcastle, Sunderland, Darlington, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough (OECD, 2016).

Whichever of these economic geographies is considered, it does not match the local government boundaries of North East England, which is divided into 12 municipalities. As Ward and Hardy (2013: 4) put it: 'The trouble…with the messy world of work, business and enterprise is that it obstinately refuses to acknowledge municipal boundaries'.

Councillors are elected primarily to serve their municipality and, it is argued in this thesis, are in some cases so constrained by their sense of local identity and perceived accountability to municipal voters that they are unable to take the wider view needed

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[33] EU: NUTS3 (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics); OECD: TL3 (small regions).

for dealing with economic issues that cross boundaries. One consequence of this, as we have seen in the North East (Chapter 4), was that insuperable political difficulties were caused. LEP geography, when CAs were added, embedded municipal-political thinking into what was intended to be a means of solving economic problems, and led to the NECA split.

The political difficulties that made a NECA devolution deal impossible have much in common with the problem revealed a few years earlier by Rees and Lord (2013) in their work on the Labour Government's *Northern Way* initiative, with its eight city-regions, including Tyne and Wear: a clash between abstract ideas of what city-region geography should look like, based on economic rationale, and the realities of fractious local politics. There is little doubt, they say:

> *that explaining the actual city regions that have emerged in the north of England and accounting for their operation can only be accomplished by reference to qualitative variables including culture, power and politics…Experience is so variegated and the geographies that have emerged are so fundamentally determined by context-specific characteristics...that there is very little in the way of a coherent logic that can be sensibly applied to understand all eight (Rees and Lord, 2013: 692).*

It is a widespread problem which the business leader quoted in section 1.3.1 called balkanization, a feature found by Scott (2019) to be global:

> *[The challenge of governance] is exacerbated by the persistent tendency to balkanization of municipal government in probably the vast majority of city regions... The political geography of city regions...is composed out of multiple municipal governments that have strong incentives to focus on their own localized interests at the expense of the wider regional community, and this leads in turn to dysfunctional forms of municipal competition (Scott, 2019: 16).*

The fact that North East England encompasses 12 local authorities is reflected in the constitution of its LEPs and CAs, where all are represented. It is possible, and doubtless common, for municipal politicians to look at economic statistics in terms of how they are reflected in their local council area. This is where their constituents reside and

vote, but not necessarily where they lead their economic lives. Recognition of this fact, if given greater weight by local politicians, as in Tees Valley (6.2.2), might help overcome barriers to cross-boundary trust and cooperation. As the World Bank points out:

> *Which spatial scale to use, or how best to define a spatial area, depends on the issue and the information available. But the choice can dramatically affect the conclusion drawn from studying social and economic conditions across different parts of a country (World Bank, 2009: 78).*

Economic statistics are very different depending which geography is used. Unemployment levels, a popular measure of economic performance, are a good example. Taking the figures at the time of the region's devolution decisions, none of the geographies confirms a simple picture in which Newcastle had gained the lion's share of the benefits of development. **Figure 6-1** shows that unemployment in Newcastle as a local authority was above the regional average.
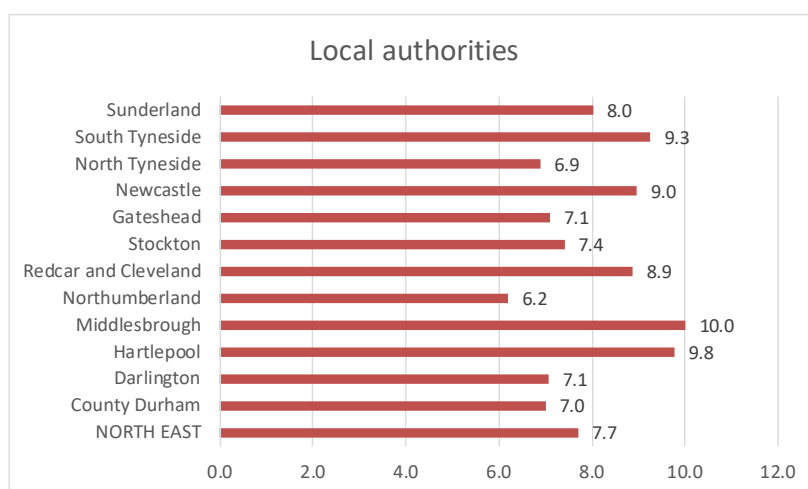
Figure 6-1: Unemployment (%) July 2015-June 2016 by local authority**.**
Source: Nomis

The NUTS3 classification gives a picture in which unemployment on Tyneside, including Newcastle, at the time of the devolution decision was also above the regional average, though below that of South Teesside, while Durham and Sunderland were average (ONS, 2017a) **(Figure 6-2).** Measuring by travel-to-work area (TTWA) presents a similar picture, with Tyneside again with above average unemployment, along with Hartlepool and Sunderland **(Figure 6-3)**.
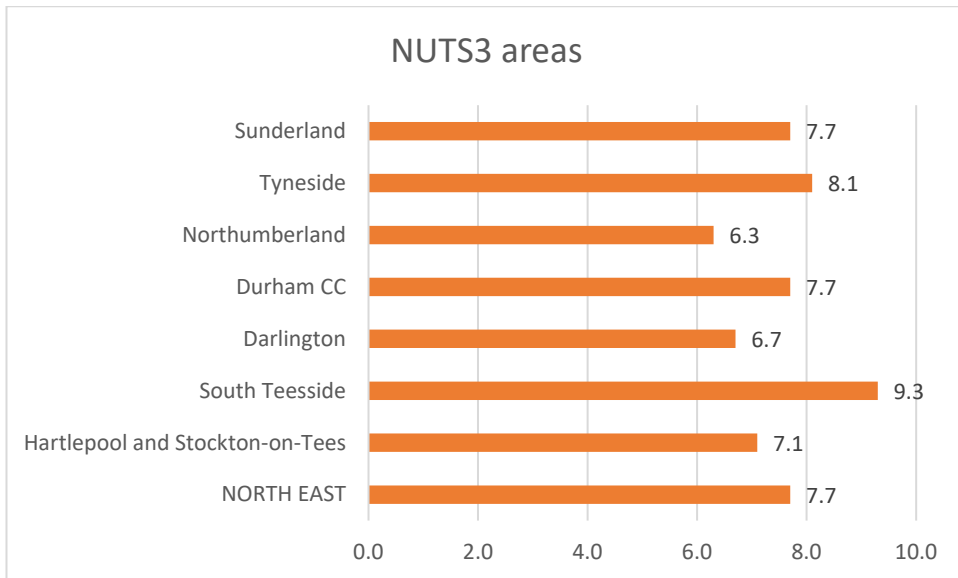
Figure 6-2: Unemployment (%) July 2015-June 2016 by NUTS3 area.
Source: Nomis

Figure 6-3: Unemployment (%) July 2015-June 2016 by travel-to-work area.
Source: Nomis

Taking a different economic measure, Newcastle was the local authority with the highest gross value added (GVA)[34] in North East England, but again the picture is not that simple, for the city did not see the fastest GVA growth between 1998, when Labour established RDAs, and 2016, suggesting it did not disproportionately benefit. That distinction goes to North Tyneside (ONS, 2017b) **(Table 6-1)**.

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[34]GVA is a measure of the increase in the value of the economy due to the production of goods and services.

Table 6-1: Gross value added (balanced)[35] per head by local authority.
Source: ONS

	1998 (£)	2016 (£)	% change[36]
Hartlepool	10152	16246	60.0
Stockton-on-Tees	13132	20638	57.1
Middlesbrough	10581	18575	75.5
Redcar and Cleveland	9865	15311	55.2
Darlington	13471	24381	80.9
County Durham	9423	16295	72.9
Northumberland	10512	16140	53.5
Gateshead	12960	21690	67.3
Newcastle upon Tyne	15008	26317	75.3
North Tyneside	10931	20786	90.1
South Tyneside	7936	14236	79.3
Sunderland	11556	20632	78.5

Nevertheless, there is some, mixed evidence of small-scale agglomeration of the Tyneside economy this century, with Newcastle leading the way. North East England lost population during and after the de-industrialisation of the 1980s and bottomed out around the turn of the century before starting to gain residents again, and by 2018 the region's population was 0.8% more than in 1981. Meanwhile, the number of people in employment has been climbing in the 21st century and is up regionally by 7.6% since 2004 (Nomis, undated).

Table 6-2 shows Newcastle with one of the largest increases in population and significantly the biggest in the number in work. The other Tyneside municipalities have also seen employment growth, but Gateshead and South Tyneside have not recovered their population losses of the 1980s and 1990s. The picture elsewhere in the region is mixed in both population and employment.

These figures overall, including unemployment and GVA, suggest that looking at wider geographies would aid economic planning; economic planners know this, and it was the ostensible point of FEAs, CAs and LEPs. NELEP's constitution commits it to working across local administrative boundaries, and this is therefore what its board members, including council leaders, are formally obliged to do (NELEP, undated-a: 1).

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[35] GVA(B) is measured at current basic prices, which include the effect of inflation.
[36] Author's calculation

Table 6-2: Population and employment change by local authority

Area	Resident population	Change 1981-2018(%)	In employment	Change 2004-2018 (%)
Newcastle	300,200	5.6	140,500	19.7
Gateshead	202,500	-5.1	97,300	12.7
North Tyneside	206,000	3.7	95,000	5.4
South Tyneside	150,300	-7.1	64,400	7.0
Sunderland	277,400	-6.9	125,600	2.6
Northumberland	320,300	7.1	140,400	-0.6
County Durham	527,000	2.9	252,100	16.9
Middlesbrough	140,500	-6.7	57,000	0.2
Stockton	197,200	13.3	86,200	2.4
Hartlepool	93,200	1.8	37,600	5.9
Darlington	106,600	8.1	49,700	6.2
Redcar & Cleveland	136,700	-9.4	57,100	-7.0
Tees Valley	674,300	0.8	287,600	1.1
NELEP	1,983,600	0.8	915,400	9.8
North East Region	2,657,900	0.8	1,202,900	7.6

A NELEP official told this study different geographies made sense for different purposes: the NELEP area was suitable for labour market issues like access to training, and transport to get people into Newcastle for service sector jobs and from Newcastle to Sunderland for manufacturing jobs, while the North East region was appropriate for sector development in industries like chemicals and pharmaceuticals and the wider north of England for sectoral co-operation in, for example, motor manufacturing (Interview, January 2018). A researcher engaged in raising labour market participation agreed that working on the basis of a city-region TTWA made sense, but added: 'Inevitably as in all policy making there is a whole lot of compromises that take place' (Researcher. January 2018).

While the detail of these geographies may be confusing, the overall message is clear: economies do not fit neatly into local authority boundaries. Some particularly disadvantaged municipalities do suffer widespread problems, but there are challenges elsewhere too, including in Newcastle. What all the region's local authorities have in common, with one partial exception, is that they form parts of wider economic areas, suggesting cross-boundary co-operation would help. More than a third of Gateshead residents and almost a fifth of South Tynesiders cross the Tyne to work, for example (Swinney, 2017).

The partial exception is Sunderland, which forms its own NUTS3 area and TTWA; for Sunderland, trying to win as much investment for itself as possible has a rationale. But even here there are *caveats*: for higher qualified workers, Sunderland is part of a larger TTWA encompassing most of the region (ONS, 2016). Its international advanced manufacturing park (IAMP), shared with South Tyneside, sits alongside the A19 corridor, and the 5,200 jobs it is expected to provide (Sunderland Council, 2018b) will, like the adjacent Nissan car plant, be within commuting distance of much of the region's population. Overall, for all councils, competing for investment with neighbouring authorities that share a common economic territory makes no economic sense. Nor *a fortiori* does splitting the Tyneside NUTS3 area and Newcastle TTWA along the Tyne, as has happened with the establishment of NTCA.

This is well understood in the region, even by politicians committed to their local municipalities, and it is hard to find anyone who thinks the NTCA geography is ideal. A Labour MP who opposed devolution at both NECA and NTCA levels told this study: 'In structural terms, it does not make any sense at all' (Labour MP. January 2018). A devolution supporter on the other side of the political fence said dividing the north of the Tyne from the south was 'absolute nonsense. I can't believe anybody believes it makes any sense at all apart from it's the only thing they can get through' (Former NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018).

6.2 Diverging approaches to economic development

This section describes how their different political arrangements after rejecting and accepting devolution deals respectively led the North East and Tees Valley to adopt different approaches to economic development: technocratic in the first case and democratic in the second.

6.2.1 North East – politics and business: uneasy partners

Economic development under NELEP fits what Tomaney (2014a: 134), calls 'a technical exercise which is disturbed by an excess of politics' and what Clarke and Cochrane (2013) worry can be anti-political in the sense of favouring apparently effective solutions and freezing out alternative approaches (2.2.1). In the North East, the work is shared between NELEP and the CAs, but business and politicians do not always work

well together even at the technical level, as is made clear in the minutes of one of the forums where they meet regularly. The minutes of NECA's economic development and regeneration advisory board (EDRAB) for March 2016 record the frustration of the private sector over the apparent disconnect with local government; it had to be explained to the private sector by the chair, a councillor, that it was not realistic to expect local authorities to relocate their economic function into one regional pot (NECA, 2016b: 3). This minute indicates not only tensions between local government and business, but that the individual councils guard their resources from each other.

NELEP 's responsibilities are carried out mainly by three boards which oversee the three SEP themes for which NELEP has lead responsibility – the Innovation Board, the Business Growth and Access to Finance Board and the Skills Board. It administers the North East's enterprise zones and Invest North East England. There is an investment panel to advise on loan funding and a technical steering group to assess grant applications for new projects and monitor performance (NELEP, undated-b). Among its activities, it is engaged with the business community through several initiatives, such as its Growth Hub, which helps micro, small and medium-sized businesses find support and finance. It links schools with businesses to help prepare young people for work. NELEP receives updates from the CAs on the SEP themes for which the latter take lead responsibility: transport and digital connectivity; employability and inclusion; and economic development and regeneration. When appropriate, NELEP contributes to debates about economic policy, as when it responded with NECA to the government's 2017 green paper *Building our Industrial Strategy,* and co-ordinated the regional response to Brexit.

This is technical work. The political disturbance is provided by the council leaders, both in their relations with each other and collectively with NELEP. This is not new. In the early days of NELEP, according to one council leader, there were a lot of concerns about the accountability of the LEP, conflicts of interest and a lack of awareness by some business representatives of the standards of behaviour expected (Council leader, NECA. March 2018). Another shared this view:

> *One of the frustrations from the new partners who were appointed in 2010-*
> *2011 was 'why does it take so bloody long in the public sector; we want to*

*appoint staff, appoint them tomorrow' and this type of thing, and we were
having to say 'look you can't do that with public money; there has to be
transparency, there has to be openness, there has to be adverts, there has to be
proper interview techniques and so forth, because this is public money', and
some of them that were on that board initially had a real genuine difficulty
understanding how the public sector worked (Council leader, NECA. March
2018).*

A former NELEP board member confirmed that NELEP and its council leaders got off to
a bad start:

*The local authorities around here first of all didn't want the LEP. They applied
for it; they were forced to apply for it. It was not what they wanted. They
consistently refused to provide anything more than the minimum funding...so
we had no basic resources to do what was required. Over time I think the local
authorities warmed to it more, but they found it very frustrating in the early
years when business representatives would consistently try and do things that
the local authorities didn't really like... The chairman would take soundings
from everybody and then say, 'Well on the basis that there is a majority here we
will do this'. And that was consistently unpopular with the local authorities
(Former NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018).*

The low opinion in which the council leaders were held by the NELEP business
representatives is made crystal clear by a story told by one of the latter concerning
what happened when a council leader was given a copy of the SEP. The contempt is
unmistakeable:

*He said he had an objection. What was that? He had been through and counted
up the number of times [his council] was referred to and it was less than the
number of times that the other local authorities were referred to. So we thought
'Great, OK, we'll change that. That's fine. Anything else? Strategic commitments
to add? No?' (Former NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018).*

NELEP's board papers are available online, but NELEP's meetings are not open to the public, and this can lead to issues being kept from the public which, in the view of at least one former board member (the same one as quoted immediately above), ought not to be. On one occasion, he said, NELEP was asked by the government to redraw the boundaries of areas eligible for certain economic assistance, including – to save money - one option that would cover only 80% of existing areas, eliminating, perhaps, areas never likely to be used but including others that offered more potential. Council leaders, he said, refused, either because they were unwilling to implement Tory cuts or they feared their own area might lose out. When NELEP decided to go ahead anyway, believing it made sense otherwise the government would perform the exercise itself, the council leaders would not provide the staff, who were on their payroll. So NELEP hired consultants:

> *There's an example which would not have been in the public domain, which it should have been, where business people showed leadership. It was pretty aggressive stuff and never mind if it was a waste of public money (Former NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018).*

That story did not come from a neutral observer but an insider who arguably had an interest in embarrassing Labour councillors. Nevertheless, it paints a picture of poor relations between the political and business members of NELEP, certainly in its early days, with accountability over public money one of the central issues.

The formation of NTCA quickly engendered the prospect of new intra-regional conflicts to come. Rump NECA now has its own representative on Transport for the North (TfN), the statutory body established in 2018 with responsibilities across the north of England, whereas the old NECA had been represented by the Newcastle leader, who now sits on the TfN board representing NTCA (TfN, undated). A County Durham official highlighted the local rivalries of North East politics when he said of the Newcastle leader: 'I know he is a County Durham boy, but is he really interested in rail stops in Chester-le-Street? Hopefully one of the benefits [of the rump NECA] is we have a new representative, so hopefully it won't be all about Newcastle'. A new representative, however, he acknowledged, would not eliminate competition for resources, for NTCA, which has a devolution grant, and NECA, which does not, sit alongside each other on a

joint transport committee: 'Whether we can agree on priorities when bidding for that pot will be interesting' (Harrison, 2018).

The prospect of increasing divergence between NTCA and NECA emerged when Heseltine published a report in 2019 calling for more powers for metro mayors. The North of Tyne mayor, like his Tees Valley comrades before him (5.3), became another North East Labour politician to unexpectedly find himself in agreement with Heseltine: 'Life takes you on some interesting journeys' the Momentum supporter told a local paper. But, as the same paper remarked, Heseltine's report may not be welcomed by rump NECA 'as the clear implication is that powers and funding should go to areas with mayors' (Walker, 2019g).

One result of NECA's collectivist yet fractious approach to development is that it lacks an identifiable figurehead either to be accountable to local people or as a point of contact for outsiders, whether ministers consulting on policy or overseas investors wanting a contact person. NECA has a chair who has normally served for two years and whose main job is elsewhere, leading his/her local council. NELEP's chair, meanwhile, is an unelected business leader. It is a situation that led an economic planner to adapt the question asked by former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger about Europe: 'Who do I ring if I want to ring the North East?' It was important to be able to answer that question, he said, because if the nation's biggest conurbations ended up with mayors as their public face, as he thought likely, the North East could not afford to miss out (North East economist. January 2018)

6.2.2 Tees Valley – size isn't everything

Tees Valley has an answer to the Kissinger question, and the result has been a dramatic change in its approach to development since its mayoral election in 2017. Its SEPs, like the North East's, started as technical exercises, but the election of an assertive mayor in 2017 caused political disturbance of a different type to that experienced by its northern neighbour as the mayor imposed his highly political presence on the CA and the area.

There were early difficulties, before the mayoral election, when TVCA and TVU integrated, and they bore some similarities to those in the North East as public and

private sector cultures clashed. They were not as intense, but some staff who transferred from TVU to the CA had to adjust to moving from the private sector into local government (Council leader, TVCA. April 2018).

Such problems aside, the trust and collaboration built up over 20 years succeeded, at least to start with, in embracing the mayor, despite the shock of a Tory victory. A council leader said: 'Politics aside, I get on really well with Ben' (Labour council leader. Tees Valley. April 2018). Tees Valley's internal collaboration and new independence were validated from outside by a former NELEP board member who said they seemed to have got their act together after previously appearing to come second to the north of the region (Former NELEP board member, private sector. January 2018).

With devolution, a wider range of responsibilities, from transport to culture, combined with multi-year funding, has made it easier to take a strategic rather than municipal view while still keeping everyone happy they are getting their share. An official explained that individual authorities knew that while they might not get something they could call their fair share out of each area of activity and not necessarily win every year, they could have confidence that their priorities were being supported over a long period (Public official, Tees Valley. January 2018).

Overcoming potential local rivalries has been assisted by the compact geography of the area following its separation from the North East. A disadvantage for some because it means less status and resources than competing areas, its small size has the advantage that economic opportunities in any one place are potentially accessible to residents everywhere – though commuter transport needs improvements - helping to overcome the municipal outlook endemic in the North East. TVCA leaders, said one, did not think about five individual local authorities but about delivering the SEP with the transport infrastructure to make sure people could access the jobs wherever they were in Tees Valley (Council leader, TVCA. April 2018). An official agreed that Tees Valley was seen as a cohesive unit with a common economic geography (Public official, Tees Valley. January 2018).

Some have reservations. According to one business leader, Tees Valley has not always been immune to the North East temptation to put fair shares above strategic vision. He thought trust was superficial, motivated by fear of the consequences of disunity

(Regional business leader. August 2018). An official thought the collaboration could, on occasions in the past, have resulted in difficult decisions being ducked, while the partnership was about securing government resources (Tees Valley official. January 2018). The majority view in Tees Valley, however, is that collaboration is genuine.

Contacts with the Prime Minister, exemplified by a visit to launch the South Tees Development Corporation (5.6), and other ministers are more than flattering. They are an essential part of Tees Valley's and the mayor's high-profile approach to development. An executive with a background in industry and a role in Tees Valley governance said the external profile of the region has changed and access to government, including secretaries of state, had improved: 'You should never ever underestimate the power of being able to pick up the 'phone and do that' (Tees Valley LEP board member, private sector. March 2018). An ally of the mayor confirmed this picture: 'It's the ability to be taken seriously. Ministers realise that these individuals have big electorates. They do take the calls' (Conservative business leader, Tees Valley. June 2018).

The mayor's high-profile purchase of Teesside Airport (5.5), driven by him personally on the basis of his election manifesto, was just the most prominent example of the way economic development after devolution has become a political project, as opposed to the technocracy of the North East. From large-scale projects like the development corporation to routine visits to small companies, tweeted frequently by the mayor, Tees Valley's economic development has become a personal and politicised matter.

The mayor raised Tees Valley's profile another notch, to the international level, when he led a trade mission to the Far East to meet potential investors in the SSI site (McNeal, 2018). The high profile continued at COP24, the world climate talks in Poland, when the government announced £170m for the world's first carbon 'net zero' cluster for clean energy, with Tees Valley named as an area that could benefit (TVCA, 2018f). The plans to adapt the traditional industries of the past for the clean technologies of the future – a route out of path dependence – brought Tees Valley and its mayor favourable headlines, and not just locally (Tighe and Sheppard, 2018).

In a striking and characteristic initiative, the mayor invited President Trump to Tees Valley during his UK state visit of June 2019, speaking at the same time of attracting an unnamed major US investor to the area: 'This is not about Trump or his policies', he said. 'This is about Teesside jobs. It's a long shot, but if you don't ask you don't get'. The invitation was declined, but within weeks the mayor was welcoming the US ambassador (Robson, 2019; Brown, 2019b; Metcalfe, 2019j). Some are enthusiastic about the new approach:

> *Actually I think they are doing an incredible job. In Tees Valley we seem to be in the middle of a sort of halcyon period in terms of our profile being raised, and that's only down to I think what they have done at TVCA, but also having an elected mayor as well; it's made a hell of a difference (Business support executive, Tees Valley. October 2018).*

The mayor's response to a challenge was tested with the threatened closure of two small steel plants in the area – though still employing 700 – when British Steel entered administration in May 2019. He reacted with characteristic vigour and outspokenness, chairing a cross-party emergency meeting including MPs and attending a public meeting at a local working men's club (Huntley, 2019; Manning, 2019; Houchen, 2019d). He also attacked British Steel's private equity owners with a detailed critique of their record on social media:

> *It's time local people know about the sharks behind British Steel's collapse. Greybull Capital is a private equity fund based in Knightsbridge. They are notorious for buying up firms, extracting money and then presiding over company failures. This is predatory capitalism at its absolute worst (Houchen, 2019c).*

The mayor's outspoken attack on the British Steel 'sharks' displays another aspect of his political style. He is combative when challenged, and presents his pugnacity as championing the people of Tees Valley. His opponents in commercial dealings on behalf of his office were more than once accused to holding him or the people to ransom, and one named individual was called a profiteering opportunist. He did not shrink from branding the Chief Constable of Cleveland a liar or from accusing the

private owners of Durham Tees Valley Airport of attempted bullying, to which - of course - he would not yield (Metcalfe, 2018a; Cain, 2018b; Price, 2019b; Metcalfe, 2019h).

6.3 Economic strategy: the background

The SEPs published by the North East and Tees Valley LEPs in 2014 did not emerge from a vacuum. Regional economic planning, as Tomaney (2006) has recounted, pre-dates the Second World War and has been continuous, though not undisrupted, since the advent of RDAs in 1998. Some issues raised in earlier reports remain relevant, and 2006 is an appropriate starting date, as it marks both the final regional economic strategy (RES) of One North East and an international perspective on the regional economy by the OECD. While advocating support for investment in the staples of economic development, such as innovation, business support, education and skills, inclusion and infrastructure, these reports also raise less straightforward questions. Issues include the realism of expecting the region to catch up with the rest of the UK; the extent to which it should aim to make a radical break with its industrial heritage and embark on a new path to a knowledge-based economy, the problem of balancing the supply of and demand for skills, the wisdom of selecting identified sectors for priority support and the focus on urban cores as drivers of growth.

The RDA in 2006 had a delicate line to tread between realism in acknowledging the region's poor record and ambition in promoting a new pathway to competitiveness and prosperity. Existing forecasts for growth were negative compared with other UK regions, it conceded, but this was because they were based on historic trends; the aim of the RES was to capture a sense of future ambition and buck the trend through a combination of raising productivity and the creation of 61,000 to 73,000 new jobs and 18,500-22,000 new businesses (ONE, 2006: 22-30).

The RDA aimed to achieve a restructuring of North East industry and its movement up the value chain by creating world class knowledge sectors where the region was already globally strong – chemicals and pharmaceuticals, health and social care, and energy. Other vital sectors were identified as automotive, defence and marine, food and drink, knowledge-intensive business services, tourism and hospitality, and commercial creative. Coupled with this focus on existing strengths and manufacturing,

the RDA also sought to make the region part of the knowledge-based economic world of the future. It was seeking, in short, to continue along some existing paths while simultaneously creating a new one (2006: 19-20).

In the OECD's view, this positioning of the region within the knowledge economy was suggestive of a radical rather than incremental path, necessary to raise GVA and reduce regional disparities but presenting a high risk of failure. The OECD was worried the region was trying to move too fast from an FDI strategy towards a knowledge economy. While an aspirational tone was to be applauded, it said, if it was not grounded in reality the likelihood of disillusionment was high and the region could lurch from strategy to strategy without advancing (OECD, 2006: 124).

In the OECD's alternative strategy, a mixed economy incorporating both a low-wage low-skill economy and a high-wage high-skill economy was considered achievable through the protection of the existing manufacturing base combined with growth in a range of sectors and the fostering of innovation and SME entrepreneurship over the entire economy. The OECD thus displayed a cautious approach towards the questions of path dependence and creation, and reluctance to attempt a radical change of direction (2006: 126).

When the *Adonis Report* (North East Independent Economic Review) appeared in 2013 it adopted the objective of 'more and better jobs', aiming at an extra 60,000, all in the private sector. It sought a balance between protecting existing manufacturing jobs and increasing the number of higher value service sector jobs linked to business services and the new economy. While building on the region's industrial strengths, it advocated moving away from sector-based initiatives to support that took account of new developments in the economy. At the same time, growth in lower skilled and lower paid jobs was said to be inevitable. The report's recommendations were based around the key elements of exporting, innovation, FDI, investment finance and investment in young people, as well as improvements in transport and the living environment (2013: 13). There were specific mentions for digital, media, telecoms and software; for tourism, heritage and culture; and for biomedicals, sub-sea and offshore engineering, automotive and science - a mix of continuing along existing paths and creating new ones (Adonis, 2013: 6, 13, 16, 21, 23).

The *Adonis Report*, which was commissioned by NELEP, did not, unlike the OECD, stress the significance of Newcastle as a growth hub, though it did identify it as an employment centre for corporate, financial and professional services and, with Gateshead, as an accelerated development zone for high value-added services (2013: 9, 29).

There was thus general agreement about the main priorities. The OECD, *Adonis* and One North East, as well as the later *Heseltine Report* on Tees Valley (6.4.2), were united in focusing on the need to build the region's business base, concentrating on the private sector, including FDI and exporting; on innovation; on the importance of education and skills and bringing the economically inactive into the labour market; and on infrastructure improvements. They highlighted, with varying degrees of emphasis, quality of life issues including housing, the natural environment, cultural and heritage assets. The later reports added digital connectivity to the list (OECD, 2006: 16-20, 175; ONE, 2006: 100-113, 126; Adonis, 2013: 6; Heseltine, 2016: 5-8).

The involvement of Adonis and Heseltine added prestige and authority to the North East and Tees Valley SEPs respectively. The North East SEP made the point explicitly that it had strong business and political endorsement and built on the workshop programme undertaken by the Adonis team, which had been supported by international experts bringing significant expertise and knowledge and a wider perspective in their role as critical friend (NELEP, 2014a: 2, 5). Heseltine launched Tees Valley's refreshed SEP in 2016 at Darlington (Walker, 2016).

When the LEPs produced their SEPs their choice of target measures was commensurate with the advice received – GVA, private sector enterprises and jobs, the employment rate, economic activity, and education and skills. Some interim and subsidiary targets, such as increased business density, innovation, and improvements in education, skills and employability, offered the advantage of increasing the areas' adaptability and resilience.

One notable outlier in the advice was the OECD's emphasis on Newcastle as the regional growth hub (OECD, 2006: 46, 172), which was not reflected elsewhere. The 'city as growth hub' debate (2.1.1) remains a live and divisive one in North East England, as we have seen in the case studies. It is a reflection at a smaller geographical

scale of the global and UK national debates about the benefits of agglomeration in relatively few places, expecting the benefits to trickle down. The OECD's lone position on Newcastle's central role may be explained by the fact that it was under no pressure to be tactful towards the region's rival interest groups.

A regional business leader said the rational approach was to do whatever was for the greater good, but that North East England needed help in some specific geographic areas – another regional example of the policy debates seen in the literature, this time over the controversy between place-based and spatially blind development (2.1.1). There was a similar debate to be had over scale-up and start-up, said this business leader – investing to help existing business to grow or helping to start new activity in areas of desperate need:

> *It's a tough call...In the North East there are areas of utter deprivation which will remain areas of utter deprivation to the detriment of the North East community, business and social, if they don't get some sort of help (North East business leader. September 2018).*

OECD fears that the region was being too radical in switching from manufacturing, including FDI, to a knowledge-based economy, have turned out unfounded. NELEP and Tees Valley both see manufacturing and FDI as remaining important. NELEP plans 30% of new jobs to be outside the higher skilled, higher paid category and Tees Valley, similarly, sees only 49% of new jobs being at the higher level, with 17.9% at intermediate and 33.2% at lower levels. The region continues to pursue FDI, though the success rate is erratic (DIT, 2016; TVCA, 2016a: 25; DIT, 2017; DIT, 2018; DIT, 2019; NELEP, 2019a: 3; TVCA, undated-e; TVCA, undated-f).

In view of the weight of the accumulated inherited advice, it is not surprising that both the North East and Tees Valley LEPs went along with it in identifying the priority themes, key sectors and strategic objectives for their SEPs (NELEP, 2014a: 7; TVU, 2014g: 3, 12). Both the North East and Tees Valley display path dependence to the extent that they seek to maintain and adapt traditional industries like chemicals, marine and manufacturing, but also a willingness to create new paths into sectors such as the digital, the creative and professional services. The one piece of advice that is too

politically sensitive to be openly adopted anywhere in the region is to treat Newcastle, however defined, as a growth hub.

6.4 The Strategic Economic Plans

Having surveyed the economic plans providing the background to the SEPs produced by the North East and Tees Valley LEPs in 2014 and their subsequent revisions, this section turns to the SEPs themselves. It reveals a combination of approaches involving both the adaptation of existing paths, such as through advanced manufacturing and the development of low-carbon energy, and the creation of new paths in sectors such as digital, culture and business services.

6.4.1 North East – closing the gap

NELEP's SEP, *More and Better Jobs,* first published in 2014, built on the *Adonis Report*. Within a ten-year timescale, it aimed to add 60,000 private sector jobs to the 40,000 expected to be created in any case, with 60% being 'better', defined as high skilled and higher paid in the private sector (NELEP, 2014a: 6). The major growth sectors would be business and professional services, new economy (cultural, creative, technology, media and telecoms), low carbon (renewable technologies), tourism, and logistics (building on internet shopping and international trade) (2014a: 6-7, 29). Low carbon technology and sustainability were a new feature in the plan. Manufacturing remained important, including in export markets, and was said to be enjoying a renaissance. Growth was to be achieved by pursuing the six strategic themes of innovation; business support and access to finance; skills; employability and inclusion; economic assets and infrastructure; and transport and digital connectivity. Maintaining good levels of FDI was seen as key to future growth (NELEP, 2014a: 5-7, 28, 29, 43).

Skills was seen as essentially a supply-side problem, with an increase of 120,000 by 2020 in the number of jobs requiring educational level 4[37] and above, though on the demand side the plan did refer to creating a landscape where companies realised the benefits of training and saw returns on their investment; and it recognised low levels of graduate utilisation. The social inclusion agenda was aimed at removing or overcoming practical barriers to work such as skills, deprivation, ill health and poverty.

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[37] What qualification levels mean. See: https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels

There was no special place for the Newcastle urban core as a growth centre (NELEP, 2014a: 9, 11, 24, 43, 51,52, 58, 60, 90).

NELEP set itself four targets for 2024 in addition to 100,000 new jobs. It would, it pledged, halve the gap between the North East and the national average (excluding London) on three measures: productivity (measured by GVA), private sector employment density and economic activity rate; and fully close the gap on employment rate. So encouraged was NELEP by progress on the jobs measures in 2017, with already 53,000 new jobs of which 63% were 'better', that it committed itself to a new target of 70% in this category (NELEP, 2014a: 5; NELEP, 2017h).

However, in the 2016 version of its plan, NELEP did acknowledge that closing the gap by 2024 between the North East's employment rate and the national rate as it had stood in 2014 was not a particularly valuable measure of performance. It changed the target to one of closing the gap with the rolling national figure, achieving which it said would be significantly more stretching (NELEP, 2017c: 6). This is an implicit acknowledgement that progress on jobs is to some extent a reflection of the national trend and not of NELEP's own activities. A North East England business representative said (at a time unemployment was falling):

> *The North East [region] has reduced unemployment significantly year on year on year. Now is that a direct result primarily of what the LEP has done? To some extent it will be; there will be programmes in there that have helped, but is there anything that you can tangibly directly point to? I don't think there is... How much is the business community just getting on and taking on more staff. Now you could arguably say that the LEPs and the combined authorities create those conditions for business to be able to flourish and to be able to expand, but again there's a shift in the labour market as well as that (Business leader. August 2018).*

Much had changed politically when NELEP published a new SEP in 2019. Britain had voted to leave the EU and appeared on the verge of doing so; NECA had voted to reject a devolution deal and split; the new North of Tyne CA had been established, signed a devolution deal and was about to elect its first mayor; and the *Industrial Strategy* Green and White Papers had been published. The new SEP committed NELEP to

working with the government to develop a *Local Industrial Strategy* and noted that a number of sector deals under the *Strategy* were focused on key North East sectors: automotive, life sciences and offshore renewables. Global grand challenges listed in the national *Strategy* and offering business opportunities also included some sectors where the North East was active, including clean growth and the ageing society (NELEP, 2019a: 6, 17).

The 2019 plan identified four areas with strong opportunities for growth: digital, advanced manufacturing, health and life sciences, and energy. NELEP would work with four service sectors that supported the wider economy and offered significant opportunities for more and better jobs: education; financial, professional and business services; transport and logistics; and construction. There would be five programmes of delivery (equivalent to the six strategic themes of the 2014 plan): business growth; innovation; skills, employment, inclusion and progression; transport connectivity; and investment and infrastructure (2019a: 2). Priorities are sometimes expressed in varying, though not necessarily inconsistent, terms: NELEP's assurance framework published in December 2018 listed 'key priority areas' as innovation and business support; working with schools, colleges and universities to improve education outcomes; skills and economic inclusion; economic assets and infrastructure; and transport and digital connectivity (NELEP, 2018f: 8).

The extent to which the North East economy has been successful in path creation, not just under the SEP but in is recent decades, is made clear in NELEP's 2019 annual economic report. Manufacturing, while remaining important, is increasingly in high-value, advanced sectors, and the regional economy has diversified into areas including energy, health and life sciences, digital, finance and professional services, and culture (NELEP, 2019e: 2).

This is encouraging in itself, but not without its problems. As the North East economy moves up the value chain the need for more highly qualified workers increases. In a region where we have seen (3.1.2) that educational attainment in secondary schools is comparatively low, this creates the danger that some young people will lack the qualifications needed for the jobs of the future, perpetuating perhaps the problems of the region's deprived neighbourhoods. This was one reason the OECD advocated a

mixed economy of both high and low skills (OECD, 2006: 126, 158). The skills equilibrium is a long-term issue that worried the RDA throughout its existence and featured in its regional economic strategies. 'Some believe that the region's low aspirations are rooted in the culture', it said in 1999 (ONE, 1999: 48; ONE, 2006).

6.4.2 Tees Valley – the UK's 'greatest single development opportunity'

The Tees Valley SEP established six priorities when published in 2014 by Tees Valley Unlimited (TVU) – innovation and business growth; low carbon, high value; skills; increased capacity on the East Coast Main Line (rail); infrastructure; and making Tees Valley a preferred location to live, work and visit. It recognised that the area was over-reliant on public sector jobs (TVU, 2014g: 3-4).

Like NELEP, TVU saw skills shortages as mainly a supply-side problem, with much of the predicted jobs growth being in higher skilled occupations. It identified specific local problems as including market failure in business accommodation, with achievable rents unable to cover development costs. Some key housing development was also unviable without public sector intervention due to infrastructure costs. Because of the nature of Tees Valley's heavy industry, power and water supplies and waste disposal infrastructure were issues, as was flood defence because of the natural geography. There was a suggestion of a cultural problem in the form of a lack of contact between schools and business. TVU reported inconsistency in careers information, advice and guidance for young people; schools did not have co-ordinated access to businesses (TVU, 2014g: 8, 41-43, 55-58, 66, 109).

The Tees Valley SEP 2014 set itself four measurable targets: £1bn extra GVA (10% increase); 25,000 new jobs, to match the national employment rate; 3,200 additional enterprises (25% increase); and 4,400 more residents achieving education levels NVQ3 and NVQ4 (TVU, 2014g: 6).

Just as NELEP had received the advice of an independent economic plan in the shape of the *Adonis Report*, so Tees Valley was given outside advice, in its case by Heseltine following his appointment to report on the SSI steel site closure (Redcar & Cleveland Council, 2017b: 4) (5.2). Heseltine's report, published in June 2016, came two years after the area's first SEP and was to lead to a revised SEP six months later.

When the second SEP appeared following the *Heseltine Report,* the familiar task of reducing the jobs deficit, with only 292,500 jobs in an area with a working age population of 417,000, was at the top of TVCA's new agenda (2016: 12), but Heseltine also highlighted education and skills issues and made a series of detailed recommendations in the fields of industrial and urban regeneration, growth opportunities, energy, housing, transport, leisure, environment and tourism. He identified key problems as low productivity linked to low rates of enterprise, high public sector employment, skills deficits and low levels of commercialisation. Eighty per cent of employers in Tees Valley had a skills shortage or struggled to recruit in the ICT sector. Heseltine was especially outspoken in his criticism of the performance of secondary education, with 25% of schools requiring improvement. Heseltine saw the formation of TVCA and its devolution deal as a significant opportunity to refocus the local economy. He thought TVCA would accelerate the growth in jobs and the election of a mayor would enhance this trend (Heseltine, 2016: 4-9, 19-20, 22, 42, 44-9).

The new SEP, which Heseltine launched in December 2016, combined ambition and realism. It reduced the number of targets to two. Its 25,000 jobs target was realistically in line with recent employment growth of over 2,500 a year, but if the area were to match the anticipated national rate over the next ten years the extra jobs would total only 11,000; so it needed to out-perform, which was ambitious; this challenge was noticed by TVCA's overview and scrutiny committee (TVCA, 2016e: item 7, p. 3). The other target, GVA, was increased from £1bn extra in 2014 to £2.8bn. extra, a seemingly very ambitious rise, though the figure was updated to 2016 prices and the timescale extended to 2026 (TVCA, 2016a: 4, 18).

In addition to these two targets, the new plan listed six measurable 'impacts' for 2026, including 2,000 new enterprises (reduced from the 2014 target of 3,200), jobs density growth (+55%), GVA per hour worked (+30%), population (+6%) and residents with NVQ4 (+20%) (2016a: 39).

TVCA based its ambitions on 'growth enablers' resulting from devolution, the *Heseltine Report* and the *Northern Powerhouse.* These enablers were itemised as new powers over adult education, housing, regeneration and transport, a proposed mayoral development corporation (MDC), increased influence over national policy, the Single

Funding Pot, integrated business advice and support, increased sectoral and supply chain linkages and a skilled workforce (2016a: 6-8).

Tees Valley also updated its key themes in the light of the SSI closure, receipt of the *Heseltine Report* and signing of its devolution deal, though in substance they were little changed. They were now business growth; research, development, innovation and energy; education, employment and skills; place (to attract businesses and people); culture; and transport and infrastructure. Key sectors were identified as chemicals, health innovation, energy, advanced manufacturing, logistics, digital and creative, culture and leisure, and business and professional services. Logistics was a new key sector in both North East and Tees Valley plans (TVCA, 2016a: 4-9).

The MDC created under the devolution deal and the first outside London, enabled Tees Valley to begin the regeneration of 4,300 acres of industrial land including the former SSI steel site (TVCA, 2017a: item 7). Its formal launch in summer 2017 was marked by a visit by the Prime Minister (Duncan, 2017), followed in October 2017 by the launch of a masterplan for the site, with plans to create 20,000 jobs over 25 years in sectors such as steelmaking, metals recycling, bulk materials processing/manufacture, offshore energy manufacturing, energy storage, major power generation, submarine cable manufacture, rail related industries and waste management (McNeal, 2017a). The plan was described by the *Northern Powerhouse* Minister as 'a crucial step to stimulate economic growth and regeneration across Tees Valley' and by the mayor as 'the single greatest development opportunity in the UK right now' (Hill, 2017).

6.5 The economic outcomes – still struggling, still lagging

The quarterly labour market statistics for February-April 2019, as the study period for this thesis was ending, were disappointing. Though not broken down between the North East and Tees Valley, they cannot have promoted optimism in either. Regional unemployment was up 0.6% on the previous quarter and – a more reliable indicator – by 1.1% on the year at a time when the UK figures were down (Nomis, undated). It left the region in its accustomed position with the UK's highest unemployment rate, and going in the wrong direction.

6.5.1 North East

At the half-way point in NELEP's ten-year SEP progress was mixed and the outlook remained challenging. In December 2018 progress towards the headline target of 'more and better jobs' was on track, with 71,600 new jobs towards the 100,000 target and 49,800 of these (70%) in the 'better' jobs category. But employment had been rising nationally too, so the gap was only 34% of the way towards the target of being totally closed. The economic activity rate showed disappointing progress of only 15% towards halving the gap (NELEP, 2019e: 6-7).

Progress towards halving the gap in private sector employment density was particularly disappointing, though somewhat uncertain because of a dataset change, and the most recent statistics were for 2017. The 2014 SEP drew attention to the area's shortage of private sector jobs needed for a balanced and sustainable economy (NELEP, 2014a) and by 2015 the gap had closed by 16%. Then the dataset changed, broadening the range of businesses included, and by 2017 the gap had actually widened by 5%, reflecting a 1.5% increase in the North East compared with a 3.2% increase in England excluding London. The productivity measure was encouraging however, though it too had undergone a change in the dataset and was now measured in terms of GVA per hour rather than per full-time equivalent worker. By 2017 the gap was down by 29% towards its 50% target (NELEP, 2019a: 59; NELEP, 2019e: 7; NELEP, undated-e).

For North East performance to match England excluding London it still, in 2019, according to NELEP, needed to add 93,000 jobs, 25,500 businesses and 40,000 individuals qualified to degree level or above. NELEP's brief overall conclusion on its performance so far was that there was more to do to close the gaps: 'We have made progress in each of these areas but the rate of improvement will need to increase if we are to achieve our 2024 targets' (NELEP, 2019a: 3, 15, 59).

Overall, across a wide range of indicators, almost two-thirds are showing improvements since 2014 and roughly one-third have seen the gap closing with England excluding London. Nevertheless, NELEP reported to NECA's overview and scrutiny committee in March 2019 that the North East continued to underperform on many indicators that still required action, including growing the jobs base and

increasing the quality of available jobs; ensuring individuals have the skills to take up available jobs; continuing to grow the business base and ensure the right support is available for businesses to grow; and investing and innovating to drive improvements (NECA, 2019d: 44-45; NELEP, 2019e: 1).

6.5.2 Tees Valley

When TVCA reported on its own progress in 2019 its assessment was generally downbeat, though mitigated by recalling the damage done by the SSI closure of 2015. GVA per head increased from 2014 to 2015, fell back in 2016 and increased again in 2017, reflecting, said TVCA, a significant loss of high paid jobs from the SSI closure and subsequent supply chain effects. GVA per head fell from 79.9% of UK average in 2009 to 71.5% in 2017 (TVCA, 2019a: 3).

Towards its target of 25,000 new jobs, Tees Valley was broadly in the same place after five years of the SEP as it had been before the Plan started, though with some variations on the way. In the year before the SEP was introduced (April 2013-March 2014) the number of people in employment was 287,600. Figures thereafter fluctuated between a low of 284,500 in January-December 2014 and a high of 293,500 in January-December 2016. In the 12 months to March 2019, the half-way point of the SEP and the conclusion of the study period for this thesis, the number in employment was 287,300 – down by 300 on five years previously (Nomis, undated).

It is notable that employment was at its highest in January-December 2016, the year immediately following the SSI closure, and this was in fact the employment high point for Tees Valley since 2004, the period for which statistics are available. National employment was on a rising trend at the same time, indicating that the performance of the national economy may have had a greater effect on local job numbers, though not necessarily quality, than even a significant economic shock at local level (Nomis, undated). The figures, though, say nothing about what the Tee Valley employment number would have been had the steelworks not closed.

Towards its targets of 3,200 new businesses set in 2014 (or 2,000 set in 2016), Tees Valley gained enterprises annually from 2014 to 2017, up from a total of 14,580 to 17,500 in 2017. But it then suffered a loss to 17,230 before recovering to 17,765 in

2019. Overall, therefore, there were 3,185 more businesses in 2019 than five years earlier, already ahead of even the more ambitious, earlier target. But the bulk of the increase had come in the early years, with only 665 more enterprises since 2016. The CA was told in early January 2019 that Tees Valley's business density was the lowest of all LEP areas (TVCA, 2019a: 4; Nomis).

Population rose 1.1% from 667,000 to 674,000 between 2014 and 2018 towards a hoped-for impact of 6%. Against the new target for educational attainment set in 2016 of a 20% increase in residents with NVQ4, the number actually fell from 126,600 in 2016 to 125,700 in 2018, though it had risen earlier from 116,600 in 2014 (Nomis).

As Tees Valley's mayor focused public attention on his successful airport venture, the SEP was thus struggling. Nevertheless, in spite of the generally disappointing statistics, Tees Valley's leaders remained optimistic about devolution and the election of a mayor. A regional business leader said there was more purpose and direction that previously (Business leader, August 2018). An official, asked if having a mayor would make a difference to economic outturns, replied:

> *Absolutely, and I think we can point to that now already, bringing more resources in, getting bigger scale projects, more interest from international investors, a more strategic approach to our infrastructure requirements, more ready access to government money, a greater reputation with the business community, indigenous and potential investors – all of these things are very clear benefits already from having gone down the road we have gone down. Is it enough? No probably not; absolutely not. It's a bit of a journey, but we are more likely to succeed in the long term if we head off in that direction, I think, than resisting on the basis that it's not adequate at the moment (Public official, Tees Valley. January 2018).*

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a clear answer to research question 2, asking what effect the different institutional arrangements in the North East and Tees Valley have made to their approaches to development. It shows that the two areas' economic problems and plans are quite similar and do not account for the technocratic approach in the former

and the high-profile, political style in the latter. It is the political and institutional situation, coupled with the highly proactive personality and style of the Tees Valley mayor, which make the difference. While the everyday duties of development are performed by professional officials in both areas, in Tees Valley the mayoral combined authority as a formal institution has placed control firmly in the hands of elected politicians, while the mayor has imposed his personality on Tees Valley in a high-profile manner which is unknown in the North East.

This chapter and the two case studies preceding it (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) therefore together provide an additional case study of the key concept of leadership introduced in section 1.3.3, contrasting the collective and individual approaches discussed in the literature (2.2.4).

In relation to other questions of special interest to this study, this chapter reveals that path dependence remains evident but its grip is weakening as the capital and human assets of past industries are either adapted to new related industries like energy and offshore or replaced by new industries, technologies and skills in sectors like digital and creative which the CAs and LEPs are keen to support in an attempt to create new paths. The developments in energy and offshore industries are examples of the incremental adaptations within a path theorised by Sunley *et al.* (2017) (2.1.3).

The chapter has also discussed the key concept of agglomeration (1.3.2) and the linked controversy over place-based *versus* spatially blind development raised in the literature in connection with new economic geography (2.1.1) and has found some evidence of limited agglomeration around Newcastle, though the city still shares the unemployment of other parts of the region (6.1).

Whether the different approaches will result in different economic outcomes is another matter. After five years implementing their ten-year SEPs, two-and-a-half years after their devolution decisions and, in Tees Valley, two years after the election of a mayor, the economies of the two LEP areas continued to struggle. That in itself is not a sign of failure. It takes a long time to turn round an economy. North East England was lagging in 2010, after 12 years of the RDA. It had lagged for decades before that, in spite of a succession of plans (Board of Trade, 1963; NEPC, 1966; NRST, 1977). Tees Valley's major projects in particular are for the long term: the South Tees Regeneration

Master Plan is a 25-year vision (STDC, 2019). Nevertheless, both LEPs set themselves aggregate targets for their ten year plans and can expect questions to be asked about progress at the half-way stage.

The LEPs and their SEPs have other significance for the local economies too, by way of steering the strategy for their areas and supporting the ways in which they are adapting old paths and creating new ones. While private sector businesses may be the main drivers of this evolution, the SEP plays an important role by identifying sectors for support and promoting big projects like the International Advanced Manufacturing Park (IAMP) and the South Tees Master Plan (STDC, 2019).

Disappointing short-term outcomes do not, therefore, invalidate the devolution decisions that were taken in either area. Tees Valley's decision to accept devolution was pragmatic, and some philosophical pragmatists see the efficacy of ideas consisting in their mere adoption by the community rather than any success the community may or may not gain from them (Rescher, 2005). Either accepting or rejecting devolution could therefore be the right thing to do, depending on the circumstances, irrespective of the economic outcomes. Tees Valley has made a choice that has given it a raised profile, a feeling of liberation from its northern neighbour and an enhanced sense of identity. Whether North of Tyne and the rump NECA, if their economies continue to lag, will find similar pragmatic consolation in their respective decisions seems doubtful. Neither of them is where it is by choice, but to make the best it can of an unsatisfactory situation.

The next chapter discusses accountability, public consultation and inclusion and addresses research question 3. It supplements the study of the Tees Valley mayor's leadership already conducted by considering it in the context of Hambleton's distinction between facilitative leadership and the 'city boss' (1.3.3).

Chapter 7. Holding power to account

This chapter addresses research question 3: to what extent can the system of LEPs and CAs be described as accountable and inclusive and finds significant problems in both areas. It does so by examining in the specific circumstances of the North East and Tees Valley and their formal governance institutions the concepts of accountability and inclusion discussed in section 2.2.4. Accountability is discussed in terms of electoral accountability to voters and internal accountability by leading councillors to their backbenchers through overview and scrutiny (O&S) as discussed by Stoker *et al.* (2004), Wollmann (2008) and Leach (2010). The chapter situates the leadership provided by the Tees Valley mayor in the context of the distinction drawn by Hambleton (2015a) between facilitative leadership and the 'city boss' (1.3.3). It examines the public consultation carried out in relation to devolution and the extent to which its results were taken into account when decisions were made, complementing concerns expressed by the PSA (2016) about the reluctance of elites to broaden participation in the devolution process.

Inclusion is considered as an economic concept concerned with ensuring that everyone can benefit from participation in the labour market, and as a political concept concerned with enabling all to be involved in decision-making procedures. These two aspects are seen to be distinct, but with a causal connection, as argued by Young (2000).

7.1 Accountability

The following sections deal in turn with accountability as it applies to Tees Valley, NELEP, and NECA and North of Tyne. In Tees Valley and, since 2019 in North of Tyne, accountability is focused on a directly-elected mayor, whereas rump NECA's rejection of a devolution deal means its CA's electoral accountability is indirect, *via* the leaders of the four councils who sit on its leadership board. Section 7.1.1 includes a discussion of the Tees Valley mayor's leadership style in the context of the distinction drawn by Hambleton (2015a) between facilitative leadership and the 'city boss' (1.3.3). The North of Tyne mayor's leadership is not considered as his election occurred after the period on which this thesis is focused. There is a discussion of internal accountability through the O&S system, which is found to be problematic in both Tees Valley and the

North East. The performance of NECA council leaders in contributing to NELEP's democratic accountability is also problematic, to the point of having come to the government's attention.

7.1.1 Tees Valley

On 7 May 2021 (postponed from May 2020 due to the coronavirus emergency) the mayor of Tees Valley is due to stand for re-election after three years in post. It will be a crucial test of the claim – intrinsic to the government's devolution agenda - that metro mayors are a way of bolstering the accountability of local governance in England (Osborne, 2014). Mayor Houchen is one of only two people in North East England to have been elected specifically to lead a CA with devolved powers and increased funding, and the first to face re-election.

Tees Valley's mayor has a public profile probably as high as possible in local media and among voters. He won the position in 2017 in favourable electoral circumstances by a tiny margin. If he can hold it in 2021, particularly if there is a national swing against the Conservatives, some support will be provided for the claim for mayoral accountability. If local voting follows the national trend, and particularly if the turnout is again low, the claim will be thrown into doubt. It is an election meriting close attention, and by 2019 Mayor Houchen was already preparing, with the support of Boris Johnson at a fundraising dinner. The mayor, a Brexit supporter, went on to back Johnson for the Conservative Party leadership (Houchen, 2019e; Walker, 2019f; Houchen, 2019j).

Mayor Houchen's popular style, with a high profile and personal identification with big projects like the airport purchase and the regeneration of the SSI site, means he relies on a continuing series of visible successes, and is in permanent campaigning mode, with frequent use of social media. In 2019 he adopted another high-profile cause, advocating free ports for post-Brexit Britain. In a characteristically ambitious move, he produced a 'white paper' for the two Conservative Party leadership candidates setting out plans for six ports (including the Tees) creating 70,000 jobs and adding £4bn to the economy. He tweeted it on a day he campaigned with Boris Johnson on the Conservative Party leadership trail (Giles *et al.*, 2019; Houchen, 2019f). When Johnson was appointed Prime Minister and mentioned free ports in his first public statement, Houchen was able to boast 'Boris Johnson...is backing my policy to roll out free ports'

(Houghton, 2019; Houchen, 2019i). Days later he was celebrating again when the International Trade Secretary, Liz Truss, undeterred by her earlier encounter with a parmo (5.5), visited Tees Valley again to confirm the free port policy (Walker, 2019a).

The Tees Valley mayor is evidence that Hambleton's distinction between a facilitative leader and a city boss is not a binary choice (Hambleton, 2015a: 11). Houchen combines characteristics of both. His facilitative, political and professional skills were never better displayed than in the controversy over the airport purchase as he won over his cabinet yet, on the day of his triumph in front of the TV cameras and hundreds of enthusiastic voters, defended the cabinet members, his political rivals, from criticism (5.5).

Nevertheless, the 'city boss' aspects of the mayor's political persona are there for all to see in his dominance of Tees Valley's public and political discourse, its media reporting, his discussions with ministers, his occupation of the chair of the MDC, his airport victory, his self-identification and combative style as defender of the rights of local people against private equity 'sharks', 'profiteering opportunists' and others (6.2.2), and in the answer he provides to the Kissinger question (6.2.1, 6.2.2). All this does mean that he has some critics:

> *It's becoming more about the Ben Houchen Show and what is he trying to build for, for himself, long term rather than genuinely looking to help the wider economy. I hear a number of people saying he won't meet with people unless he feels that it's in his [personal] interests. (Business leader. August 2018)*

Members of the TVCA cabinet are also democratically elected, but indirectly. They are there because of their positions as leaders of their councils. They are not personally identified with TVCA as the mayor is.

CAs, like councils, have internal mechanisms to hold their executive arms to account. TVCA, its cabinet and mayor are overseen by two committees. The overview and scrutiny committee (OSC) reviews the most important strategic decisions and the direction of the CA to ensure any decisions are in line with agreed policies. It meets once every six weeks (TVCA, undated-h). It has 15 members, of whom (until the 2019 council elections) 11 were Labour, three Conservative and one LibDem. The role of the

audit and governance committee (AGC) is to assure sound governance, effective internal control and financial management, and it meets at least three times a year (TVCA, undated-i). It had four Labour members and a Conservative. Until 2019, meetings of both committees usually took place as scheduled, though between the mayoral election in May 2017 and March 2019, of 16 meetings of the OSC one was cancelled and two were inquorate, and of 11 meetings of the AGC one was cancelled due to bad weather and three were inquorate. Some councils' representatives were less diligent in attendance than others', and the CA found it necessary to feed this back to leaders and chief executives in the hope of improvement (TVCA, 2017g; TVCA, 2017h; TVCA, 2018j; Tees Valley OSC, 2019; TVCA, 2019f; TVCA, undated-g).

The OSC paid close attention to the mayor's most controversial plan - to buy Durham Tees Valley Airport. In January 2018, when it heard £46,000 had been spent on financial and legal advice with more set aside, the OSC wanted to be fully informed of financial and legal issues. There was a 'full discussion' on whether £500,000 set aside was reasonable. In March 2018 the OSC held a special, closed meeting devoted to the airport and held a 'wide-ranging discussion', followed by requests for confidential information, and for regular updates. Another special, closed meeting was held on 20 December 2018 at which questions were put to the mayor and proposed airport operators. The mayor made a presentation and answered the committee's questions again, in public, in January 2019, before cabinet finally approved the purchase – again in public (5.5) (TVCA, 2018k; TVCA, 2018l; TVCA, 2018m; TVCA, 2019b).

But that was not the end of the story. The OSC was soon asking critical questions of its own role in the airport affair. It should have used its call-in powers, said one Labour member; including the airport deal within the much wider investment plan at a late stage (5.5) had been 'gerrymandering' and a ploy to make call-in more difficult: 'I don't think we did enough'. It must also have been difficult if not impossible for backbench councillors, without independent expert advice, to evaluate the more than 200 pages of business case, business plan and valuation report with which they were presented (TVCA and Mayor, 2019). The OSC was not denied the information it needed; it was overwhelmed by it. No further action was taken, but the OSC chair, referring to mayor and cabinet, noted: 'It's not our job to work for them, it's our job to scrutinise and make sure they're doing their jobs' (Metcalfe, 2019i).

The OSC continued to be uneasy about the airport. At an inquorate meeting in April 2019 the chair said the committee must play a significant role in future overview and scrutiny of the airport. It was stressed that serious debate was needed about the role of O&S and that an arrangement needed to be in place to allow effective and timely scrutiny (TVCA, 2019g).

This episode marked a troubling and unexplained development in the work of scrutiny at TVCA. The OSC's meetings of March and April 2019 and an extraordinary meeting in July were all inquorate. The OSC chair acknowledged the recent poor attendance when presenting the committee's annual report to the cabinet in June, and noted one result was that a report on diversity (7.3) had not yet been approved. The mayor, in a remark without further explanation, said 'it was his personal belief that some committee members had been told not to attend, particularly in relation to the diversity report'. Poor attendance was reported by Hartlepool members in particular (TVCA, 2019j). The diversity report was on the OSC's agenda at a quorate meeting on 12 July but members voted not to progress it at that stage; they were concerned how TVCA could make changes if its five constituent councils did not do so (TVCA, 2019k). A year later, in June 2020, the report was still in limbo (TVCA, 2020d).

When the researcher asked to see notes that were taken of the inquorate OSC meetings (in place of minutes) he had to submit a request under the Freedom of Information Act, even though in at least one case a media report of the meeting appeared the following day (Metcalfe, 2019i). One item to emerge was that the inquorate meeting of 1 March 2019 agreed to hold a special meeting four days later (if possible) to discuss the diversity report. There is no record of such a meeting having been held (TVCA, 2019o).

This was not the only development affecting the OSC's work at the time. TVCA's cabinet was told by the chief executive in June 2019 that amendments were being made to the TVCA constitution, including to the way the OSC worked. Among these, the requirement to send all decisions to the OSC within two days was being replaced by a requirement to send only key decisions within that period (Gilhespie, 2019). This prompted the OSC to use its call-in power, and on 12 July – its first quorate meeting

since discussing the airport in January – some members expressed concern that they had not been consulted, and about other constitutional changes as well (TVCA, 2019k).

Among them, the OSC was told that the rules had been amended to make it clear that it was the chair (i.e. the mayor) who agrees items for the cabinet agenda, prompting the response that O&S should retain its independence to put reports to the Cabinet: 'There may be instances in the future where the mayor may not want a specific report to be considered and could refuse to submit; this goes against the purpose of overview and scrutiny' (2019k).

It is apparent from the OSC's minutes that these worries caused some division among members. The call-in is recorded as having been supported by five committee members, and the committee's decision following its discussion of the issues - to defer the matter so all members could digest the information - is recorded as having been agreed with a majority vote of six (out of 13 recorded as in attendance). The authority's monitoring officer advised that deferral was possible, but only once, and members were told another meeting must be held within 14 days. Yet a week later, when an extraordinary meeting was held to decide what to do about these issues considered important enough to have prompted a call-in, it was inquorate (TVCA, 2019k). The call-in subsequently expired and the constitutional changes were adopted by default (TVCA, 2019l: 2).

When this researcher asked a question about a discrepancy in the new constitution between the mayor's right to determine the cabinet agenda and the OSC's right to present reports, it was confirmed that OSCs' rights are established in law (TVCA, 2019p).

Members of the public concerned about accountability and reliant on the CA's published documents were left to wonder what was going on. The OSC appeared to have been transformed from vigilant watchdog to sleepy lapdog in six months. The events of 2019 over the airport and its scrutiny, the spate of inquorate meetings, the constitutional changes and their unconsummated call-in, and the delay to the diversity report suggest Tees Valley's cherished trust and collaboration might be breaking down. The OSC was inquorate again in January 2020, and in the committee's annual report for 2019-20 its chair reported that she had obtained consent from the Communities

Secretary to allow substitute members in the hope of overcoming the problem (TVCA, 2020d; TVCA, 2020e).

Tees Valley's LEP, as with other LEPs, is much less accountable to the public than the CAs. It is not elected at all. LEPs represent the local business community, not the general population. As an integrated part of the TVCA, the LEP takes part in its public meetings, normally held every two months. But it also meets monthly in private to enable 'commercially confidential items to be discussed and for open and frank exchanges of information and views to be expressed that might not otherwise be expressed in an open forum'. The minutes of these meetings are published (TVCA, 2019c: 22). A LEP board member interviewed for this study made no claim to be publicly accountable; quite the contrary. He and the other members, he said, were collectively accountable as representatives of the business community; it was the job of the politicians to represent voters. LEP members were an expert sounding board for the CA but did not need to be accountable to the public because they did not vote (Business member of Tees Valley LEP. June 2018).

7.1.2 North East Local Enterprise Partnership

NELEP, like its Tees Valley counterpart, argues that as an unelected, business-led, single-purpose organisation it is not in a position to answer to wider society, which should be represented through elected councillors. The only time it seriously considered widening its remit to encompass social issues, in 2017, it eventually backed off (4.2). A statement on NELEP's website makes clear that it regards its democratic accountability as being exercised through NECA, including its OSC (NELEP, 2018a: item 6, pp. 2-3).

Accountability went up NELEP's agenda following a report for the government into LEP governance and transparency, the Ney Report, in 2017. Although NELEP had been given a clean bill of health, it responded to Ney with some procedural changes to keep up with best practice, including a new policy on whistle blowers and a revised form for declarations of interest. But the board still meets in private, believing that the amount of commercially confidential business it deals with makes public proceedings impractical (NELEP, 2017g: 4,19).

Nevertheless, one of NELEPs roles, according to its constitution, is to provide local accountability and its attempts to square this circle include the online publication of its official papers (subject to confidentiality). Among these are regular, detailed and informative programme delivery updates against the SEP. NELEP operates according to the Nolan Principles of Public Life and the Langlands Principles of Good Governance, under which it is committed to giving partners, funders and local people information that meets their needs, being open about what it does and publishing information about its activities wherever possible. It holds stakeholder events to launch new initiatives and an annual state-of-the-region event, issues an e-bulletin, sends an e-newsletter to 2,000 subscribers and has more than 9,000 followers on Twitter, the second highest of any LEP. Openness and accountability are written into the members' code of conduct. As with all LEPs, it is required by the government to publish an assurance framework to demonstrate standards of governance, transparency and accountability consistent with its role. It is subject to the Freedom of Information Act via NECA (NELEP, 2018f: 19, 21-22; MHCLG, 2019d: 18; NELEP, 2019d: item 4; NELEP, undated-a).

Whether these arrangements make the system accountable is a matter of opinion, and interviews revealed a wide range, with no pattern. Views included: there is accountability for specific funding but not strategic decision-making (Researcher, voluntary sector. January 2018); and, the government says it is devolving power but will not devolve the governance and accountability structures (Backbench Labour councillor, Gateshead. February 2018). A business leader, referring to NELEP, said: 'There is a sense that whatever the LEP will do the LEP will do' (Regional business leader. September 2018). A business support leader in County Durham said he had good informal relationships with NELEP staff but no official contact. He expressed high regard for NELEP's professionalism but did not think accountability was high on their agenda (Business support executive, County Durham. October 2018).

A survey of stakeholders, delivery partners and board members commissioned by NELEP from an independent research agency resulted in positive feedback. Fifty people took part in an online survey (out of 200 asked) and 18 gave in-depth interviews (out of 50 asked). The results showed that NELEP's role was well understood and most respondents thought it made a significant contribution to

economic growth. The leadership and wider team received recognition and there was an awareness of the challenges they faced. A question was raised (but no answer provided) about whether the LEP should be more vocal on political issues (NELEP, 2019d: item 8; DRG, undated).

One major cloud hangs over the NELEP board's performance in overseeing its own responsibilities, and it relates to a matter under the complete control of its own members – attendance in sufficient numbers to ensure a quorum, which consists of ten members including at least five from the private sector and four council leaders (NELEP, undated-a). It was the council leaders who were mainly responsible for inquorate meetings.

Between 2014, when NECA was established in an atmosphere of optimism, and May 2016, when it was going through the drawn-out process of rejecting its devolution deal and splitting in two, all but one NELEP meetings were quorate. But at that point inquorate meetings became a problem, with an inquorate meeting in July 2016. It was at its most serious over a period of 20 months, from 25 May 2017 to 31 January 2019. Between those two quorate meetings the NELEP board held nine consecutive inquorate meetings. In seven of those it was the absence of council leaders that caused the meetings to be inquorate. In the period covered by this study, from September 2016 to March 2019, of 16 board meetings ten were inquorate, and it was the council leaders who were inquorate on eight of these occasions (**Table 7-1**). This is a serious failing of democratic oversight if the government's view is accepted:

> *As autonomous local partnerships, local enterprise partnerships are primarily accountable to the communities within their area. In practice, the full and active role of senior local authority representatives on these boards provides a strong and direct link back to local people and are one part of the local enterprise partnership's democratic accountability (MHCLG, 2018b: 19)*

All seven councils share responsibility for inquorate meetings. Of a total of 28 board meetings, quorate and inquorate, over the life of NELEP between NECA's establishment in 2014 and March 2019, Durham missed 11 meetings, Gateshead 7, Newcastle 17, North Tyneside 16, Northumberland 11, South Tyneside 10 and Sunderland 12.

Table 7-1: Attendance at NELEP board meetings, September 2016-March 2019.
Source: NELEP website

Date	Quorate or inquorate	Private sector attendance	Local Authority attendance	Local Authority absentees
29/09/2016	Quorate	8	4	Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside
24/11/2016	Quorate	7	4	Gateshead, Newcastle North Tyneside
26/01/2017	Inquorate	10	3	Gateshead, Newcastle Northumberland, Sunderland
23/03/2017	Quorate	9	5	Gateshead, North Tyneside
25/05/2017	Quorate	8	6	North Tyneside
27/07/2017	Inquorate	6	3	Durham, Newcastle South Tyneside, Sunderland
28/09/2017	Inquorate	7	3	Durham, Northumberland North Tyneside, Sunderland
30/11/2017	Inquorate	4	4	Newcastle, North Tyneside
25/01/2018	Inquorate	7	2	Durham, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside
22/03/2018	Inquorate	7	2	Durham, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside
07/06/2018	Inquorate	5	4	Durham, Newcastle, Northumberland
26/07/2018	Inquorate	6	2	Durham, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside
27/09/2018	Inquorate	7	2	Durham, Gateshead, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Sunderland
29/11/2018	Inquorate	8	3	Northumberland, Newcastle, South Tyneside, Sunderland
31/01/2019	Quorate	7	5	Newcastle, Sunderland
21/03/2019	Quorate	8	5	Newcastle, North Tyneside

Inquorate meetings were the main governance issue raised by the government when

NELEP underwent its annual appraisal on 14 January 2019 at a meeting attended by a

senior civil servant and NELEP leaders. They assured the MHCLG [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government] that the matter was being raised with board members and constituent local authorities and would also be raised at the next board away day (NELEP, 2019b).

Subsequent board minutes record that 'the chair noted that it had been made clear that there was a very good written representation process in place which ensured that decisions were made in a timely fashion' (NELEP, 2019c: 5). Written representations may result in timely decisions, but whether they facilitate 'a full and active role' for local authority representatives and provide 'a strong and direct link back to local people' is at the very least open to question.

Nor has the problem been solved, in spite of government intervention. Board meetings were inquorate again in May and September 2019, as this thesis was being written, though in September it was the private sector that did not muster the required numbers. NELEP was still looking for a solution to the problem of inquorate meetings when it held its AGM in September 2019 (Hodgson, 2019). In November only one councillor was present.

The failure of the NECA leaders to attend regularly at NELEP board meetings may be interpreted in terms of their lack of veto power (4.7) compared with their positions of strength in their own local authorities and, to a lesser degree, on NECA. Actors with strong veto capabilities on one institution may lack them on another. The NECA leaders, in a minority on NELEP, thus face difficulties in trying to displace or convert it, and drift (along with layering) are theoretically more promising strategies, not requiring any direct changes, as Mahoney and Thelen (2012: 19) point out.

7.1.3 North East and North of Tyne Combined Authorities

As the North of Tyne councils prepared to follow Tees Valley down the devolution route, one of their leading figures expressed faith in the system of local democracy it would entail, combining a directly elected mayor and indirectly elected council leaders:

The mayor would be elected. We are elected - the leaders...People can get rid of you very, very quickly. They don't have to stay with you for a lifetime if you are

*not successful. I think that's the accountability, isn't it? (Council leader. March
2018).*

But another NECA leader, alluding to the Tees Valley mayoral election, was more
sceptical:

*Twenty-one per cent of the electorate electing you; does that make you
accountable to anybody in particular? I don't think so. (Council leader. February
2018)*

While this leader made a valid point in referring to low turnout, he also had a vested
interest in undermining the credibility of the mayoral model, for he represents one of
the south of Tyne councils which rejected devolution in part because of opposition to a
mayor.

As in Tees Valley, one of the bodies in a position to question NECA's leadership board,
and with a duty to do so, is the overview and scrutiny committee (OSC). Effective
scrutiny arrangements are said to be an essential component of local democracy,
enhancing accountability and transparency of decision making and enabling councillors
to represent the views of constituents. They are in place 'to enable local councillors, on
behalf of their communities, to scrutinise and challenge all matters within the remit of
the combined authority' (NECA, undated-a). NECA's OSC consists of two members of
each constituent authority, reflecting political balance – 12 Labour, a Conservative and
a LibDem in 2016 as NECA was making its devolution decision (NECA, 2016t: 28)

NECA's OSC also has co-opted non-voting members as chair and vice-chair, who are
described as independent and impartial. OSC members were told by officials in 2017
that these roles would be advertised, the appointment process open and transparent.
There were set criteria to determine whether or not an applicant could be considered
non-political. Non-political did not necessarily mean non-party, provided the applicant
was not a councillor of the majority party. The chair appointed in 2017 (after the
devolution debate featured in this thesis) is a Labour Party member but not a
councillor (NECA, 2017e: 28; NECA, 2017f: 6; NECA, 2017g; NECA, 2017p: item 6;
Gooby, undated).

The relationship between the OSC and the body it scrutinises can sometimes appear cosy, as noted by Wollmann (2008: 285). On one occasion (before the appointment of the independent chair) NECA's OSC noted that 'there should be more publicity generally of the positive things that were happening within NECA' (NECA, 2017f: 3).

Devolution came to the attention of NECA's OSC in March 2015, when the presence of the BBC at its meeting was an indication of rising public interest. This was at a time when NECA was pursuing devolution with enthusiasm, and the committee shared its approach; members thought this was 'a really exciting time'. But one OSC concern, surprisingly in the light of subsequent events, was that an official report made no mention of a mayor: 'In Manchester the agenda being worked towards was predicated on an elected mayor. The North East could potentially have seven leaders and there was a danger that it lacked a figurehead'. By July however the OSC was on message alongside the leadership, to the point of offering support rather than critique over the issue. It noted among members' comments that 'the support of this committee in expressing reservations at the possibility of an elected mayor may be welcomed by the leadership board' (NECA, 2015g: item 4, pp. 5, 8; NECA, 2015h: 5).

The committee returned to devolution in December 2015 and met again at 2.00pm on 22 March 2016, the day Gateshead's cabinet had come out against the deal at its 10.00am meeting. The OSC expressed worries mirroring those of the NECA leadership board: the role of the mayor, the importance of democratic decision-making, and general uncertainties including over funding. On the other hand were the benefits of joint working and the successful example of Manchester. Comment was also made on 'unfair criticism of the proposals by the media'. It was noted that the government was keen to transfer a lot of responsibility to NECA, but this was discussed in the context of risk, presumably because it was felt resources would be inadequate. The committee decided nothing, but to keep devolution as a standing agenda item (NECA, 2016u: item 4, pp. 10-11).

By the time of its September 2016 meeting, when the leadership board had already decided not to proceed, the OSC was fully on side with the deal's opponents. It 'considered the correct approach had been adopted and informally endorsed the decision of the leadership board as the government had failed to provide the assurances sought for a properly funded devolution deal'. In March 2017 the OSC

recognised the prospect of NECA splitting into two was a worry; if that happened, it was suggested, there would be a problem of the authorities competing against each other rather than co-operating (NECA, 2016r: item 3, pp. 5-6; NECA, 2016s: item 3, p. 2; NECA, 2017h: item 3, p. 3).

This record raises questions. Four of the nine councillors present in September 2016 when the OSC informally endorsed the decision not to proceed represented councils which had supported the deal, including a Northumberland Conservative and a Newcastle Liberal Democrat; if any of them did not agree that the correct approach had been adopted, the minutes do not say so (NECA, 2016r: 6; NECA, 2016s: item 3).

And why was the committee's endorsement informal? The answer is that its meeting was not quorate and its decision had to wait until the next meeting to be formalised (NECA, 2016s: item 3). The previous meeting, in July, was also inquorate (NECA, 2016i). In fact, as the devolution controversy raged, the OSC did not hold a single quorate meeting between 22 March and 1 November 2016, and was without a chair from NECA's annual meeting on 21 June until 1 November. At a critical moment in NECA's history the body supposed to scrutinise its actions was not fully functioning.

The leadership board was aware of this situation, and at its 2016 annual meeting 'considered the challenges in holding a quorate meeting' and decided to allow substitute members. That did not solve the problem though; the OSC was inquorate again at two meetings out of five in 2017, and four out of five in 2018, meaning there was only one quorate meeting between September 2017 and March 2019 including none for a year between 15 March 2018 and 14 March 2019 as NECA decided to consent to its own division into two and in its new four-council form adopted a new constitution and approved its first budget – though informal discussions were always held. There was then no meeting at all for six months (NECA, 2016j: 1tem 3; NECA, 2017f: item 3; NECA, 2018b: item 3b; NECA, 2018d; NECA, 2018h; NECA, 2018i; NECA, 2018j; NECA, 2018k; NECA, 2018m; NECA, 2019c; NECA, 2019d). As we have seen (7.1.2), at the time the NECA leaders tried to deal with this problem at the OSC they were themselves about to embark on a period when they failed to muster a quorum at most meetings of the NELEP board.

The other body with a role in the oversight of NECA is its audit and standards committee (ASC) (previously governance committee). It is said to be 'a key component' of NECA's corporate governance arrangements and 'an important source of assurance about the organisation's arrangements for managing risk, maintaining an effective control environment and reporting on financial and other performance, and for the promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct by its elected and co-opted members'. It has an independent chair and vice chair and an independent person as observer as well as, under the rump NECA, eight councillors of whom six are Labour and two LibDems (NECA, undated-b). This committee too has an incomplete record of quorate meetings: of ten scheduled between September 2016 and March 2019, one was cancelled, three inquorate and one part inquorate (NECA, 2017i; NECA, 2018e; NECA, 2018f; NECA, 2018g).

Lack of public knowledge of, or interest in, governance was indicated when NTCA sought to recruit two independent persons for the purpose of its standards regime, with website and press adverts, and there was only one applicant, who was successful. There were however two applicants to be independent chair of the ASC (NTCA, 2019c: 8; NTCA, 2019e: 5).

For many of the intended beneficiaries of economic development, discussion about CA and LEP governance may appear remote. One politician, referring to a deprived town, said LEP-funded activity was taking place there which people liked, but without being aware of the LEP. Did that make the LEP accountable to ordinary people in a meaningful sense? 'Absolutely not' (North East Party member. December 2017)

7.2 Public consultation

Devolution is circumscribed by statutory public consultation at every stage. In the North East and Tees Valley it involved a very small proportion of the population (apart from in Durham (7.2.1). It could be, and was, effectively ignored. One backbench councillor interviewed for this study spoke of talking to local people informally about the issues, and there is no reason to doubt councillors do consult in this way, but such conversations are unsystematic and, in this particular case, resulted in established views being confirmed rather than challenged:

I asked people in my community, in my ward, what do you think to this [devolution], and people were very suspicious. They like what works now, on the whole (Labour councillor, North East. March 2018).

The following sections deal in turn with public consultation as conducted in NECA, North of Tyne and Tees Valley.

7.2.1 North East Combined Authority

NECA's creation in 2014 followed a consultation by the Communities Secretary, who wanted to be sure that the opposition of voters to governance changes when they rejected a regional assembly in 2004 did not extend to the NECA proposal. There were 73 responses, of which 21 were from local organisations and their representative bodies (including ten from local government), 11 from local businesses and their representative bodies, nine from elected representatives, two from the voluntary sector and one each from a community newspaper and a trade union; 28 were from individual residents. Of total responses, 64% supported establishing a CA, 30% opposed and four commented without coming down on one side. The seven councils all supported the idea, which is hardly surprising as they had proposed it, though perhaps not with enthusiasm, as suggested by a former NELEP board member (6.2.1) (Gateshead Council, 2013: item 3, 2; DCLG, 2014: 4-8)[38].

The breakdown of responses does not make clear whether the opposition came from institutions, elected representatives or residents. However, further light on public attitudes resulted from consultations carried out by each of the councils individually, covering 650 interested parties including around 450 residents. An online survey received 444 responses including 324 from residents, with 75% supportive of the proposal; there were 16 focus groups, meetings with interested parties, and local press articles. Consultation by the local authorities, according to an official report, showed 'overwhelming support from stakeholders'. MPs and members of the House of Lords

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[38] The Tees Valley councils, consulted about the NECA proposal, did not want the name 'North East' to be used for fear of causing confusion. They were right, as readers of this thesis will recognise.

were 'very supportive' (Gateshead Council, 2013: item 3, appendix 1; appendix 3, 49-50; DCLG, 2014: 4-8).

NECA's decision in 2015 to seek a devolution deal sparked another round of consultation, with 'inclusive' events in all seven council areas which showed 'clear support' from the public and business. MPs and peers were supportive of the broad principle and keen to champion the NECA proposals. The consultation feedback was used in framing the proposals which NECA put to the government. The government's requirement that devolution be accompanied by a mayor was recognised, so in going ahead councillors must have thought it was not a deal breaker, presumably because either the government would drop its insistence or they would drop their opposition, or perhaps a compromise would result in a mayor with few powers (NECA, 2015a: item 3, 2-3; NECA, 2015d: 8-10; NECA, 2016d: 41, 54-55).

The signing of NECA's devolution deal was the trigger for another round of consultation, including six public events involving 374 people and sessions with the voluntary sector, business and trade unions. Altogether there were 750 responses and they were 'positive overall'. There was said to be strong support among a wide range of stakeholders from communities, businesses and partners for the principle of devolution and broad positive support for the proposals in NECA's agreement with the government (NECA, 2016d: 4-5, 28, 42-47).

The only test of public opinion to involve a large number of members of the public was a poll of all residents by Durham County Council. There were 81,964 responses representing 21.7% of the electorate, coincidentally almost exactly the same as the turnout in the Tees Valley mayoral election (3.1.1). This was described by the council as 'evidence of a significant amount of interest in what is essentially a policy issue'. A majority of 59.5% thought that devolving some power and resources to the North East would be a step in the right direction; 14.9% thought it would not; the remainder thought it would make little difference or didn't know. On mayoral powers, 47.8% thought that the mayor should have limited power and influence, 40.3% that the mayor should have quite a lot of power and influence, and 11.9% were unsure. On the possibility of more devolution in future, the most popular response was 'let's wait and see' (42.9%); 28.3% would want to see more devolution and 22.4% would not. As to

whether the agreement would bring more prosperity and jobs, 40.5% thought it would, 9.1% thought it would not, and 36.2% thought it would make little or no impact; 14.2% did not know (Henig, 2016: paragraphs 25-27).

These results are open to interpretation. Followed as they were by the Durham County Council leader's vote at NECA on 6 September 2016 not to proceed to the next stage of the deal, effectively killing it, they prompted one fellow leader to comment to this study:

> *Durham had a referendum and the majority of people wanted to go ahead with it. Yet he voted against it. So that £250,000 or whatever it was that he spent on a referendum was meaningless. Because the Labour group or whoever they were put the pressure on him (NECA board member. March 2018).*

A Durham backbench councillor, though, interpreted the referendum result as support for devolution in principle but not for the proposed governance structure, including a mayor (Labour councillor. April 2018).

In other consultation by the seven councils, 85 businesses attended an event in Durham, and the overall tone was in support of the deal. Gateshead Council undertook a website survey which elicited 81 responses, with 62% agreeing with the focus of the proposed agreement. Gateshead also hosted an event, the official report of which gives no clear indication of support or opposition. Newcastle Council's consultation elicited feedback which 'demonstrated very significant support for the principle of devolution and for using the current agreement as a platform for further opportunities'. Events in North Tyneside indicated 'broad support'. Northumberland County Council sent an online questionnaire to its 1,654-strong People's Panel, with 350 responses; the results showed majorities of between 70% and 78% thought it was important for the North East to take control of a range of issues. The council held meetings with a variety of organisations and 'on balance the view given was that devolution should broadly be supported, albeit *caveated* by the fact that the government's approach was rather unstructured and in danger of leaving places in England behind'. South Tyneside Council had a devolution consultation page on its website and held a number of events, but no feedback was supplied at the time NECA received reports from the other councils. Sunderland Council received 582 responses

to a website survey and newssheet delivered to every home, with 61% agreeing that some strategic decisions should be made at a more regional level. The disadvantages noted were the elected mayor, the feeling that the government was ignoring the 2004 referendum, the additional tier of bureaucracy and inadequate funding (NECA, 2016d: 47-50).

NECA's decision not to proceed with its deal was therefore taken in spite of the 'positive overall' support referred to above. The public consultation results were reported to the NECA leadership board on 24 March 2016, two days after Gateshead Council had come out against the deal. A council leader explained his view of public consultation, expressed in relation to the North of Tyne deal but applicable generally:

> *In North of Tyne they've carried out a public consultation and 1,086 people have responded on line. By my calculation I think it's 0.04% of the population of the affected area, and it's a permanent governance change. I think that's inherently undemocratic (NECA council leader. February 2018).*

7.2.2 North of Tyne Combined Authority

Public consultation on the North of Tyne deal ran from 14 December 2017 to 5 February 2018, with public meetings in all seven NECA areas, and official literature struck an upbeat note. With references to the £600m investment fund being offered over 30 years, the consultation document described the moment as 'a once in a lifetime opportunity to help to grow the economy, retain the region's talent and support residents to access new and better jobs'. As well as the powers and resources in the deal, the public was told there was a commitment to explore new opportunities in future (NTCA, 2017a).

Perhaps the most robust debate to occur in public took place during a consultation event in Gateshead, where the council had been the first to reject the NECA deal. Newcastle's leader, in presenting the NTCA case, faced a series of critical questions, including from two Gateshead Labour councillors, around the divisiveness of the devolution process, the issue of mayoral powers and democracy, and the alleged

paucity of the financial offer, as well as the suggestion that the consultation was meaningless as the decision had already been made[39].

According to a report on the consultation, of about 1,400 people and organisations that took part, a majority supported the overall plans. Actually, the report's accompanying chart shows that of 1,082 people who answered the question on governance – 'Do you agree or disagree with our proposals to change the way councils in the North East work together in order for devolution in the North of Tyne to be implemented?' - 50% precisely (541) agreed while 412 disagreed and 129 neither agreed nor disagreed (NTCA, 2018a: 5, 10).

Feedback from stakeholders was supportive in almost all cases, though with a variety of reservations. Among them, the business community saw North of Tyne devolution as a first step towards its preferred option covering the whole of NECA. The TUC wanted to be involved in consultation on the deal as it developed. Unison supported devolution in principle but not the North of Tyne deal because of the proposed level of funding, and Unite was also concerned about funding and the impact on the rump NECA. Newcastle University backed the deal, including an elected mayor, enthusiastically and wanted to work alongside the new combined authority and NELEP (2018a: 22-27).

While stakeholders were generally supportive, and 50% of respondents backed the new way of working together, the results from those who provided more detailed feedback revealed more people worried about the deal than were content, though the numbers were smaller. Of those agreeing, 25 thought the deal made sense, 20 that it would give greater access to government funding, 11 that the area should not be left behind and 11 that an elected mayor would raise the region's profile and be key to unlocking government funding. Of those disagreeing, 58 wanted to retain NECA as it was, 48 thought the funding was not enough and the proposals would not have the desired impact and 40 were against an elected mayor. Thirty-two respondents

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[39] Personal observation.

'thought the proposals were designed to meet the personal interests and ambitions of local decision makers or political parties' (2018a: 37-38).

Three of the four south of Tyne authorities responded. Durham was most concerned to ensure continuation of effective joint working on transport. South Tyneside's overarching concern was that the North of Tyne deal 'must be on the explicit basis that it does not lead to any detriment to the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the residents and businesses of South Tyneside', with special mention of education and training. Sunderland was also insistent on 'no detriment' and wanted the same assurance as South Tyneside over education and training. It was worried too that accelerated house-building north of the Tyne might result in a slow-down to the south. Overall, it welcomed the North of Tyne deal and was disappointed something similar could not have been achieved for NECA. Gateshead did not respond. (2018a: 49-59).

Individuals accounted for almost 1,100 of the responses, and 902 of those were residents of the NECA area, ranging from 316 from Northumberland to 18 from Sunderland. Of those prepared to say, 698 were aged over 45; there were 629 males and 377 females; 940 gave their ethnicity as white British, with 13 white Irish as the next biggest group (2018a: 42-43).

The consultation leads to several plausible conclusions. The North East establishment in the form of the organisations taking part in various aspects of governance, including business, supported the proposed deal. Most local people either did not know about the consultation or did not care enough to participate. Of those who did, most were middle-aged to elderly white men, of whom half were in support and the other half either disagreed or neither agreed or disagreed. Those who disagreed were more active in giving feedback, suggesting they felt more strongly.

7.2.3 Tees Valley Combined Authority

The first test of public opinion in Tees Valley came when consultation was carried out between 10 December 2014 and 31 January 2015 on the proposal to create the original (non-mayoral) TVCA. Of 1,911 responses, 1,638 were from residents. Of the responses, 74.4% agreed with the idea of partnership working between councils and business and 64.8% supported the idea of a CA. The mayoral issue was not part of the

consultation, though it could and arguably should have been, for it was known by then in the light of Osborne's *Northern Powerhouse* speech that a mayor was likely to be an element in any future devolution package (DCLG, 2015a: 12).

The Communities Secretary carried out statutory consultation between 28 October and 9 December 2015, after the Tees Valley councils and LEP had signed their provisional deal providing for a CA with an elected mayor. Of 28 responses, four were irrelevant to the issues; 11 were from residents and one from a councillor, and the remainder from local authorities and organisations. While there was institutional support, most individuals were opposed. Three of the 11 were from Hartlepool and said they did not associate themselves with Tees Valley. Faced with this negligible response, the Communities Secretary in approving the proposal took into account the consultation carried out by the local authorities a year earlier, even though the devolution deal, with its mayoral element, had not been included (DCLG, 2016: 5-8).

A third consultation between 11 July and 22 August 2016 on new governance arrangements to accompany devolution raises other serious concerns. The consultation elicited 1,160 responses, of which 1,067 were from residents. Once again, people were not asked a question about the principle of having a mayor. That did not stop them providing an answer. As TVCA's report on the consultation notes, 'many respondents used this consultation to express opposition to the principle of an elected mayor, notwithstanding that this was not something on which we were seeking views'. Principal objections to having a mayor concerned centralization of power, cost and disregard for the previously expressed views of people in referendums and consultations. Of 547 who answered a question about specific powers and responsibilities, 67 took the opportunity to give their view on having an elected mayor, with over 90% opposed. Of 535 who responded to the question about how the mayor should work, 133 focused on whether there should be a mayor at all and the 'vast majority' were negative (TVCA, 2016d: paragraphs 3, 4, 30, 33).

Hartlepool was disproportionately represented in this consultation. It is the smallest of the five boroughs with a population of 92,500, or 13.8% of the Tees Valley total (TVCA, undated-b), yet produced 501 (46.9%) of the 1,067 resident responses. Hartlepool had a mayor between 2002 and 2012, when it voted in a referendum for abolition, and

opposition to a Tees Valley mayor during this consultation was particularly strong in Hartlepool; views about the geographical unsuitability of the Tees Valley area were also predominant in Hartlepool (TVCA, 2016d: 21, 31, 33).

The TVCA report following the consultation argued that the nature of the exercise and the diversity of the views expressed meant it was not possible to draw a simple statistical conclusion. Where clear views expressed did not directly refer to the consultation - for example the views opposing a mayor - they had been noted. However, of those people who gave views on the consultation questions, a majority overall supported the proposals; many mentioned the need for checks and balances on the mayor's powers and this emphasised the importance of the measures in the governance scheme. In an apparent reference to Hartlepool, the summary noted that individual communities emerged with clear views, but these individual interests did not negate the overall conclusions drawn from Tees Valley as a whole. The same was true of certain business sectors: it was not possible to draw conclusions suggesting the responses were statistically representative of the population. The official response claimed that the consultation had taken place at the formative stage of the devolution proposal, prior to any final decision and at a time when the decision could still be influenced by the outcome. However, given that the powers being consulted on were devolved from central government rather than being centralised from local authorities, it said, the proposals did not harm and should enhance local community powers and identity (TVCA, 2016d: paragraphs 10, 15, 17, 35-37).

A possibility of influencing the outcome through the consultation may have existed theoretically, but in fact the MCA went ahead, and on the geographical basis always envisaged. Tees Valley thus got its mayor after three consultations, the first of which did not raise the issue of an elected mayor at all; the second elicited only 28 responses; and the third attempted to side-step the principle of a mayoralty but was ambushed by a few score voters from the smallest of the five boroughs. It was a far-from-ideal way to end an unsatisfactory process. A Labour campaigner against the current devolution deals, observing events in Tees Valley from the North East, commented:

As far as the population as a whole is concerned they haven't got a clue what is happening. They have had a metro mayor foisted on them without having a referendum (Labour anti-devolution deal campaigner. November 2017).

The consultations described in this section illustrate the problems experienced more widely in such exercises, notably the challenge identified by the NAO in getting responses to governance issues (Morse, 2017) as well as the need expressed by the PSA (2016) to reinvigorate public participation (2.2.4). The devolution consultations also had a drawback of their own: because the government was making mayors an essential condition, the public were not asked about the contentious principle of having a mayor but only about the powers s/he should have. Previous questions on this point had produced largely but not wholly negative responses. Middlesbrough and North Tyneside have borough mayors and Hartlepool had a mayor between 2002 and 2012, when it voted to abolish the post (Mulholland, 2012). Referendums were held in 2012 in ten English cities, including Newcastle in the North East, on whether to introduce mayors and all but Bristol rejected the idea (BBC, 2012).

It is noteworthy that those opposing devolution shared two of their councillors' reasons for doing so, and one of those was opposition to a mayor. The other reason for rejecting devolution common to councillors and the public was the inadequacy of funding. Consultation participants also expressed opposition on two grounds not prominent among councillors - bureaucracy and a belief that the project was designed to serve personal ambitions.

In spite of these opponents, however, the balance among the public was in support of devolution in NECA, where it was rejected, while in Tees Valley there was initial support for a non-mayoral CA followed by inconclusive results when the mayoral element was added. While the numbers taking part (apart from Durham's poll of all residents) often numbered in the hundreds and sometimes over 1,000, they were still a very small proportion of the total electorate. Equally concerning is that stakeholders (apart from the unions) were also overruled in the NECA area. Stakeholders work with and are familiar with local government and are the partners it needs if the joint civic leadership envisaged by Hambleton (2015a) (2.2.4) and the common purpose found by the OECD (2006) (3.1.1) to be lacking are to be realised.

7.3 Inclusion

Inclusion in one sense is concerned with whose voice is included in the decision-making process. Inclusion is 'a core of the democratic ideal' (Young, 2000: 13). But this is not the sense in which most people engaged in economic development understand it. They mean inclusive growth – giving everyone the opportunity to participate in the labour market. This distinction between political and economic inclusion (or exclusion) is one drawn by Young (2000), though she also recognises that economic exclusion helps to account for political exclusion (2.2.4).

LEPs and CAs take economic inclusion seriously. Inclusion stands alongside employability as a joint objective aimed at ensuring all have both the skills and the opportunities to access the labour market. Inclusion will be achieved, according to NELEP

> *by addressing high levels of youth unemployment, reducing inequalities, improving economic wellbeing and by ensuring that growth is inclusive and assists those most distant or disadvantaged in the labour market and living in areas of persistent and entrenched deprivation (NELEP, 2014a: 58).*

Inclusion was one of six strategic themes in NELEP's 2014 SEP, allocated £196m to be spent by 2020/21. By 2019 NELEP had spent £18.4m with a further £28.5m from other public and private sources on skills and inclusion, including careers guidance and support for 170 schools and colleges (NELEP, 2014a: 7, 87; NECA, 2019d: 50). Programmes include initiatives to provide more joined-up support for individuals with moderate mental health issues return to work; work with employers to improve take-up of the Better Health at Work Award Scheme; building capacity in the voluntary and social enterprise sectors to support people who are excluded from work; and adopting a community-led local development approach in communities suffering significant deprivation (NELEP, 2019b: item 4).

Inclusion in the labour market has improved markedly since 2014 for young people. Unemployment in the NELEP area for those aged 16-24 was 20% and has fallen to 11.5% and, moreover, has come into line with the England (excluding London) average. But it is still higher than any other age group. Another priority now is the 50-64 age

group, where unemployment remains above average, though it too has fallen since 2014, down from 5.6% to 4.1% compared with the 2.8% national average. The problem is exacerbated by the area's older age profile (NELEP, 2019e: 15).

However, some of NELEP's programmes to promote employability and inclusion are facing obstacles. A scheme to support primary care professionals help people access help to get back to work has, according to NELEP, been struggling to get referrals from Jobcentres and faces closure following a decision by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) not to extend the contract. Monitoring and evaluation of the Work and Health Programme faces 'significant challenges'. Proposed projects intended to focus on up-skilling and reskilling to aid job progression for those in work face possible delays. A successful project to support third sector organisations work with unemployed learners has a waiting list but needs more funding for which no decision date has been given at national level. Lack of support or delay pose risks to a project to support people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act who are furthest from the labour market. And a substantial amount of EU funding to support disadvantaged groups in the workplace was not yet allocated, with time running out[40] (NELEP, 2019b: item 4).

Tees Valley's SEP speaks similarly of 'increasing the lifetime opportunities for young people and older workers which will help ensure a more inclusive economy'. TVCA is working with its constituent councils to run a DWP Routes to Work pilot project for people over 30 facing barriers to employment, and is developing programmes to tackle long-term unemployment and create a careers and enterprise initiative (TVCA, 2016a; TVCA, undated-j; TVCA, undated-k; TVCA, undated-l).

Tackling exclusion from the labour market is difficult, as NELEP has found. By September 2018, four-and-a-half years into its SEP, it had reduced the gap with England excluding London in the economic activity rate by only 15% compared with a target of 50% by 2024 (6.5.1).

Most interviewees for this study saw inclusion in terms of the labour market. A policy institute researcher said:

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[40] January 2019.

We think of it as growth that benefits everybody, so that is about people's ability to be able to participate in the labour market, to be able to work in a job where they are actually able to see their standard of living improve; it is about having the skills and capabilities to enable you to do that. (Researcher. January 2018)

But those on the receiving end of services see inclusion differently. Those who feel they have no voice inevitably want one. Grassroots development workers in a deprived town spoke of being ignored by those at the strategic level. Even if they were consulted, it had no effect. One said:

Inclusive to them means consultation, the fact that they can say 'there's some information, there's consultation, we are being inclusive because we are asking people's opinion'. Inclusivity to me means about having direct contact and a voice that's heard (Business development worker, Northumberland. January 2018).

Perceptions differ. Those involved in business support at a rather higher level were more positive. One, operating in County Durham, felt he had access to NECA through the county council: 'I know if I'm unhappy about something that's taken place within the combined or any other authority I know who I can go to; I know I can email [council leader's first name]' (Business support executive, County Durham. October 2018). A counterpart in Tees Valley said: 'As a business I feel like we are listened to more. I also feel that they [TVCA] canvass for opinion quite a lot as well, which is something that didn't happen before.' The same interviewee saw inclusion as meaning having one's voice heard, but pointed to a problem with the process as a small, self-selecting group could come to dominate, with the same people appearing repeatedly in social and mainstream media, usually with their own agenda (Business development executive, Tees Valley. October 2018)

About three-quarters of people in all parts of North East England feel unable to have much say over local decisions, according to a 2018 survey for the BBC – though it was not concerned with CAs and LEPs specifically, and respondents may have had their

local council in mind when saying how much influence they felt they could have (**Table 7-2**).

Table 7-2: Influence over local decisions.
Source: YouGov for BBC

Area	Can influence local decisions fair amount or a lot/not very much or not at all (%)
England average	21/73
North East regional average[41]	20/74
North East (NECA) average	20/73
Tees Valley average	19/74
County Durham	20/74
Darlington	21/73
Gateshead	20/74
Hartlepool	18/75
Middlesbrough	18/74
Newcastle	23/71
North Tyneside	21/73
Northumberland	21/74
Redcar & Cleveland	19/75
South Tyneside	19/74
Stockton	20/74
Sunderland	19/74

LEPs and CAs are arguably constitutionally unsuited for inclusive decision-making. They have formal roles for three of the five leadership groups identified in the analytic framework for this study: elected politicians constitute the CAs, where they are advised by professional public servants, and business representatives lead the LEPs. But there is no guaranteed place for the trade union movement, as there was on the board of One North East. Higher and further education have seats at the LEP table (and one such representative on NELEP is a Labour Party and trade union member (NELEP, 2018g)), and the NHS has a representative on Tees Valley LEP, but otherwise community organisations are unrepresented at the top level, though there are places for them on various committees and subordinate bodies of both LEPs and CAs. Faith

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[41] Regional, NECA and Tees Valley averages are rounded

leaders and other voluntary sector representative are outside the system, at least at the highest levels.

NELEP in its early days was up-front about the fact that it is 'a public, private and education sector partnership'; for NELEP it is this 'triple helix' leadership of public and private sectors and higher education that is important (NELEP, 2017d: 10; NELEP, undated-c). Below board level, it has a business growth board with 14 members including two from education and one from social enterprise; an employment and skills board with 15 members including the TUC and two from the charity sector; and an innovation board with 10 members from the private sector, education and local government.[42] NECA's economic development and regeneration advisory board (EDRAB) has places for the chamber of commerce (NEECC), TUC, CBI and Federation of Small Businesses[43] .

The inclusiveness of LEP governance is, however, evolving. The government is encouraging LEPs to recruit a voluntary sector champion to their boards. NELEP was told at its annual appraisal with the government that it was 'required' to have voluntary and community sector representation on the board as a matter of good practice, and to nominate a diversity champion. It says it has 'a strong partnership with… the third sector, who are represented on its advisory boards as appropriate', and in early 2020 a voluntary sector representative was appointed to the main board (NELEP, 2018e: item 9, p. 2; NELEP, 2020a). However, some groups still feel ignored. One interviewee told this study:

> *Despite the fact that we are the only black-led women's organisation that's around, that's survived for 25 years, and our focus has been very much on economic independence until recently...there's never been even the slightest bit of attempt, whether it's by the authorities or the others, to really identify organisations that they needed to include to make sure that that voice was part of decision making (Voluntary sector leader, Tyneside. December 2018).*

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[42] Source: NELEP website, March 2019.
[43] Source: NECA website, March 2019.

LEPs must have 33% of women on the board by 2020 and 50% by 2023 (NELEP, 2018e: item 9; NELEP, 2019c: 5). The NELEP board has five women out of 18, but the 50% target will be a problem unless more councils elect women leaders.[44]Councillors take seven seats on the board and six are men, and if that does not change by 2023 eight of the other 11 will have to be women, though the numbers will be affected if total membership of the board changes. The government has said it will support boards of up to 20 members and wants two-thirds to be from the private sector (MHCLG, 2018b: 5).

Tees Valley had a 21-member LEP board in March 2019 – 14 private sector including higher and further education representatives, and seven public sector comprising the mayor, five council leaders and an NHS representative[45]. It planned to reduce the number to 20 that May when the terms of office of several members expired. Six board members were women, including three appointed in 2018, and the aim was to increase this to 50% by 2020. This, said TVCA, 'reflects the combined authority's commitment to diversity which is not just about the gender balance but ensuring that the combined authority is reflective of the local community' (TVCA, 2019c: 12; TVCA, 2019n)

TVCA commissioned an O&S review of equality and diversity within the CA, its constituent local authorities and the LEP in 2018. It found a 'universal desire' to more closely represent local communities and a recognition that this was not being achieved. Among findings, although women made up an above average percentage of councillors, they appeared not to be progressing into leadership roles (TVCA, 2019d). The diversity report was affected by delays caused by problems in the O&S system, as we have seen (7.1.1).

The trade unions are well represented and influential in the North East's local government (4.4), but have no designated place in the CA/LEP system. Opportunities to make their voices heard are patchy and depend on local arrangements and even personalities. A union movement representative compared access to power in Tees Valley unfavourably with that in NECA and North of Tyne. In NECA, trade unions and

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[44] Source: NELEP website, March 2019.
[45] Source: TVCA website, March 2019.

others are represented on sub-groups and can use them as channels to access decision-making boards. According to the union leader, this works quite well and enables them to have input on important issues like Brexit and employment and skills. In North of Tyne, even before its statutory establishment, talks were taking place on issues of concern to the unions. But the situation is different in Tees Valley, according to this union leader:

> *We don't have a seat on anything on Tees Valley. I have tried to engage with the mayor by investing a significant amount of money into some research around carbon capture and storage and trying to complement their strategic economic plan for that area. I have worked with industry; I have worked with politicians, with business, the unions, leaders from the local authorities to develop that piece of work[46]...But to get round the table with the mayor...has never happened, despite asking twice for a meeting. It does very much depend on the personality of the mayor, and their particular goals and ambitions... It's very much about who you know, and leverage to get in, rather than: 'Actually this is the make-up of our region, these are the voices, these are actually the diverse voices we want in our governance structures'. Relations at officer level, they're all OK, but is it the be-all and end-all if you haven't got the ear of the mayor? No (Trade union leader. October 2018).*

TVCA has a selection of around 70 representatives of various stakeholder groups, including business, education and government agencies, on partnership boards dealing with issues like education, employment and skills; culture and tourism; innovation; and transport (TVCA, 2018c). A senior Tees Valley official commented cautiously that while this reflected an embedded Team Tees Valley approach among many local organisations, absent in the North East, it did not necessarily mean inclusive decision-making (TVCA official. January 2018). This approach may, however, it is hoped, at least exert influence. Tees Valley has set up a Business Engagement Forum - with 91 members in March 2019 - to help it keep in touch with the wider community. TVCA and the LEP

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[46] For transparency: a reference to research carried out at the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, Newcastle University.

recognise that the private sector members [of the LEP] cannot represent the
views of 17,230 businesses in Tees Valley. Therefore a variety of engagement
mechanisms are utilized to ensure that the broader business community has the
ability to influence strategy and policy development, our investment priorities
and to be actively engaged in the delivery of some of our activities, particularly
around supporting careers development with schools (TVCA, 2019c: 14).

As we have seen in section 2.2.4, a critique of the inclusiveness of regional approaches to economic development is that the focus on growth and the creation of 'better' jobs comes at the expense of improving existing jobs (Sissons *et al.*, 2018). A policy institute interviewee for this study worried that mass-employing, low-paying sectors like retail and hospitality were poorly represented on LEP boards, which were skewed toward sectors like legal and manufacturing (Researcher. January 2018). The care sector is another that came to prominence during the coronavirus emergency.

Neither retail nor hospitality is represented on North East England's two LEP boards, and MPs have found that these industries have also been overlooked by the government for sector deals under the *Industrial Strategy* (BEIS Select Committee, 2019). The NELEP board includes representatives of the engineering, utilities, legal, automotive, ports, architecture and business development and transformation sectors. Tees Valley LEP has representatives of chemicals, brewing, telecoms, ports, manufacturing, PR and digital entertainment[47]. The researcher quoted above believes that increasing emphasis on inclusive growth is bringing more pressure for voluntary sector participation in inclusive decision-making through involvement in LEPs:

I suppose you could argue that that is what a big part of what the local
authorities' role is, because they are also there as well as representatives of the
people. But...now that inclusive growth as an idea has started to gain a bit of
traction...it becomes more difficult for them to maintain there is no role for
third sector organisations. As you start to think about things like how do we
engage marginalised people in the labour market then actually that is the kind

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[47] Source: LEP websites, September 2018.

of area where organisations potentially can bring a lot of expertise to the table
(Researcher. January 2018).

Beel *et al.* (2018) argue on the basis of research in Manchester and Sheffield that there is a clear divide between those who have a voice in the devolution, city-region agenda and those who have been marginalized. Civil society groups have been placed outside the decision-making process while being expected to deal with the fallout from uneven development, inequality and austerity.

Beel *et al.* (2017: 572) see the devolution of health and social care in Greater Manchester as an opportunity for greater voluntary sector involvement, and something similar might have happened in the North East. In an early initiative under its proposed devolution deal, which could have seen it getting involved in multi-agency work in dealing with social issues wider than the purely economic, NECA co-operated with local NHS organisations to set up the North East Commission for Health and Social Care Integration. The commission investigated the health and wellbeing gap between the North East and the rest of the UK and health inequalities within the area. Though eventually devolution did not proceed, the commission completed its work in 2016 and, according to its chair, its recommendations could be implemented through existing structures (Selbie *et al.*, 2016: 1). But an interviewee who took a close interest told this study it was a wasted opportunity:

> *Because of the failure to sign off as a properly devolved authority that's all gone; it's just not there. Nothing is happening...There has been no support for this from any of the authorities in the combined authority. (NHS governance volunteer. April 2018)*

Lessons from Greater Manchester include the need to include the voluntary sector as actors in the devolution process (Beel *et al.*, 2017: 566) – a view supported by the experience of the leader, quoted above, of a voluntary organization which helps ethnic minority women into employment in the North East. Their situation, she said, had not improved in spite of all efforts:

For 30 years unemployment for African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women had stagnated and that reflects our experience, and despite a lot of public policy and development (Voluntary sector leader, Tyneside. December 2018).

In November 2018 around 150 of North East England's voluntary organisations met at a Collaboration Conference to discuss how they could better work together. 'We are people who feel that collaboration is a great way to drive social change and who are motivated to do something to help this to happen', said an organiser[48]. A conference report found from seven case studies that shared goals, trust and established relationships were central to motivating people to work together. 'Sadly', it said 'collaboration is not yet the norm across the North East' (Cole, 2018; Webb *et al.*, 2018)

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an answer to research question 3, asking to what extent the system of LEPs and CAs can be described as accountable and inclusive, by showing that North East England's two CAs are both democratically accountable but not equally so. Democracy, as Young (2000: 5) says, is not an all-or-nothing affair but a matter of degree; societies can vary in both the extent and the intensity of their commitment to democratic practice.

So it is with CAs and LEPs. Tees Valley is headed by a directly-elected mayor and NECA by indirectly-elected council leaders. LEPs are much less democratic, unelected but subject to the input of democratically-elected politicians. This is an effective process in Tees Valley, where the mayor and cabinet are firmly in control, but much less so in the North East, where councillors are in a minority and less than assiduous in attending meetings, demotivated probably by their lack of control, as suggested in section 7.1.2, and distracted by their municipal duties.

Inclusion is also problematic in North East England. The normative legitimacy of a democratic decision, says Young (2000), depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making process and had the opportunity to influence the outcomes. Representation is most inclusive when it

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[48] Personal observation.

embraces relatively marginalised or disadvantaged groups (2000: 6, 8). Yet it is just such groups, such as the black women's group referred to above (7.3), which do feel excluded.

Political inclusion is evolving, with the voluntary sector gaining some involvement. But there is still no formal place for the trade unions in the governance system. They are strong in the North East's councils, as we have seen (4.4) but that is because of Labour's electoral strength; a change in the political balance could see them excluded, as a union leader feels has happened in Tees Valley. Business is included through its leadership of the LEPs, where it has significant influence over technocratic decisions in the North East, but NECA's rejection of its devolution deal shows the limits of business's power – its proper limits, some will say. In Tees Valley business is subservient to the mayoral CA, embraced by it but not empowered. So in both areas locally elected politicians remain in final charge, subject to the important *caveats* about continuing government control discussed in section 2.2.2.

One big step towards addressing issues of both accountability and inclusion could be taken by broadening the democratic debate. While councillors, being elected, can justly claim the right to decide, others in society can fairly claim the right to participate meaningfully, on an informed basis, and to influence. This is the model of collective civic leadership envisaged by Hambleton (2015a) and referred to throughout this thesis, and it is also advocated by Young (2000: 8):

> *I look to the vast range of activity often brought under the label 'civic society'*
> *for important forms of participation, of expression from a situated perspective,*
> *and forms of holding power accountable that a strong communicative*
> *democracy needs.*

One step is being taken in this direction with the inclusion of a representative of the voluntary sector on LEP boards. But it is a small one. Recommendations for further reform will be made in the final chapter of this thesis.

We have thus seen that there are problems in both accountability and inclusion. Judging by yardsticks used by Young (2000), democracy is limited in both extent, particularly in the North East where no one is directly elected to sit on NECA, and in

the intensity of commitment to democratic practice, as evidenced by ineffective scrutiny and, in NELEP, persistent inability to muster quorate numbers.

Inclusion has been seen until recently almost exclusively as an aspect of the labour market, and LEPs are working hard to overcome the obstacles to achieving it. Inclusion in the decision-making process is evolving, but some groups continue to feel marginalized.

Chapter 8 will draw together the difficult issues that have been discussed throughout this thesis in both the economic and political spheres and present, by no means a solution to the problems, but a suggested approach to fulfilling the necessary precondition of working together to tackle them, and some detailed recommendations for incremental reform.

Chapter 8. Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter draws together answers to the three research questions set out in section 1.1. It then details the contribution the thesis makes to its field, dealing in turn with the empirical, conceptual and methodological contributions.

Empirically, it concludes that the lesson of the research is that for devolution to work local politics, shaped by the socio-cultural environment, must be amenable. Conceptually and, it argues that the best way to achieve this viable devolution governance is a bottom-up approach. Methodologically, the chapter commends detailed research of the type evident throughout the thesis, which digs deep into case study reality to supplement, though not replace, theorising about how to achieve the most appropriate formal institutions for local economic governance.

The thesis provides a valuable addition to the case study literature of the era of localism in England, thus providing empirical evidence to support or critique the theory. It is one of only a few studies in its field and of its era to have interviewed significant numbers of key players from the political, official, business, trade union and voluntary sectors. Using a critical realist approach, it has dug deep into the underlying reality of the devolution process in North East England. In doing so, it contributes a detailed study of how the informal institutional environment of a place in the form of socio-cultural values and political traditions and practices can shape its formal institutional arrangements and its response to the political and economic challenges of development.

A further contribution throws light on the workings of the formal institutions of economic governance, including the power relations between five groups of civic leaders – politicians, officials, business, trade unions and the voluntary sector - which are analysed using the framework developed by Hambleton (2015a) (2.2.4). His model of civic leadership as a collaboration between these five groups is found to be still a distant ideal in North East England.

The thesis gives a rare insight into the 'back stage' machinations of local governance (Ayres *et al.*, 2017b) where these power relations are played out, and the internal

workings of the party group system discussed by Copus (2004), affording it the attention which he says it deserves and complains it has not been given. It examines the shortcomings of accountability in the system, both externally by voters due to low turnouts and the tendency for local voting to follow national trends, as noted by Copus (2004) and Newton (1976), and internally through the overview and scrutiny (O&S) system, confirming the doubts of Stoker *et al.* (2004), Wollmann (2008) and Leach (2010) about its effectiveness. Additionally, it reveals problems in achieving diversity in governance.

A further contribution is that the thesis provides a case study of leadership, contrasting the mayoral model that has developed in Tees Valley since 2017 with the traditional, collectivist approach still operating in the North East.

Economically, the thesis finds that after five years of their SEPs, the North East and Tees Valley provide only limited and inconclusive evidence at aggregate level of an economic dividend, in line with findings by Pike *et al.* (2012). It therefore does not provide clarification of the contentious question of place-based *versus* spatially blind development discussed in the literature (2.1.1).

What the thesis can offer in the area of economic governance, however, is a suggested way forward which could encourage collaboration between municipalities and civic leadership groups and potentially facilitate the combination of economic efficiency and social justice hoped for by Martin (2008) and others (2.1.1). This suggested approach, based on building economic governance from the bottom, is outlined in section 8.2.3, with detailed recommendations in section 8.3. These recommendations are designed to make local governance more fit for the purpose of economic development by improving the legitimacy, transparency, accountability and inclusion of the formal institutions of devolution.

8.1 Answers to the research questions

The following section summarises the answers to the three research questions and how they were arrived at.

8.1.1 Research question 1

Research question 1 asks why the combined authorities in the North East (NECA) and Tees Valley, so similar in many ways, took opposite decisions over devolution. Finding an answer involved consideration of the region's socio-cultural environment including the key concepts of place and identity, agglomeration and dominance. In Tees Valley and some parts of the North East these issues were reflected in resentment and resistance to Newcastle's perceived receipt of favoured treatment because of its position as regional capital. This factor operated with opposite effects in the two areas. In the North East it tended to pull the seven NECA councils apart, divided between those willing to accept devolution and those fearing a continuation of Newcastle's perceived preferential treatment. In Tees Valley it encouraged the five councils to remain united, create a devolved authority and consolidate their collective separate identity as distinct from the territory to their north.

Other factors, the research found, all springing from the socio-cultural history of the region and its political traditions, contributed to the different devolution decisions. In NECA there was disdain for the proffered devolution grant, especially in the midst of a period of austerity, and resistance to the concept of an elected mayor in place of the traditional collective leadership, as noted in the literature (2.2.4), as well as lack of trust in a Conservative government. Leaders in Tees Valley, in contrast, were pragmatically prepared to accept a mayor and do a deal in order to access whatever money they could.

Two very different informal institutional environments thus pulled the North East and Tees Valley in opposite directions. North East unity was fatally undermined by historic local rivalries, while the area's lack of effective political opposition meant there was no countervailing pressure except from council officials and business leaders. Private decision-making in party groups and a virtual absence of public debate allowed complacency and factionalism to flourish. Above all, and permeating these factors, was a lack of the mutual trust identified by Rhodes (1996) (2.2.1) as so essential to governance.

In Tees Valley, in contrast, the institutional environment was very different. Trust between council leaders and with the private sector was built on the strong

foundations of collaboration dating back 20 years, while familiarity with Conservative politicians enabled business to be done with a Tory government.

The North East and Tees Valley have much in common, yet reacted very differently to devolution offers because their informal institutions and hence their politics are different in important respects. The North East's devolution story has been of a struggle between political forces based on history, geography and the local identities they create on one hand, and economic interest on the other. The politics was against a deal and the counterbalancing economic rationale was not strong enough to prevail. The result has been a technocracy that no one likes but everyone can live with. In Tees Valley, where politics and economics were pulling in the same direction, devolution was accepted comparatively easily.

8.1.2 Research question 2

Where the answer given to research question 1 focused on the influence of the informal institutions which shape the formal, it is the nature of the formal institutions and the personality of the Tees Valley mayor which explain the different approaches to economic development. It is not, it should be noted, the economies of the two areas or their strategic economic plans (SEPs), which are quite similar, which caused the divergence of approach.

Following its acceptance of devolution, Tees Valley's formal institutions include a directly elected mayoralty to which significant economic powers are attached. The mayor, a proactive personality with an ambitious political as well as an economic agenda, dominates Tees Valley's governance and media scene, maintaining a regular presence in social and mainstream media on a virtually daily basis and on a range of issues, and he has succeeded in achieving the political transformation of the area. He is making the most of his democratic mandate, however narrowly achieved in 2017, to pursue high-profile projects like the purchase of Teesside Airport and the development of the SSI steelworks site. He wins headlines in part by presenting himself as the champion of local people and stoking public grievance against others perceived to be frustrating their interests – Thai banks, the private equity owners of British Steel and the owner of the 'Teesside Airport' name (6.2.2). Meanwhile, the routine tasks of implementing the SEP, while not neglected, are left largely to officials with the advice

of the LEP – but all subject to the democratic oversight of the mayor and his cabinet, where he is the dominant figure.

In the North East, in contrast, there is no single dominant figure (apart perhaps, since 2019, the North of Tyne mayor, who is outside the temporal scope of this study). No politician has taken ownership of economic development, and the front man for the SEP has been the NELEP chair, conscious of his position as an unelected business leader and reluctant to stray beyond economics. NECA has retained the collective leadership discussed in section 2.2.4, but it is riven by the divisions that led to its rejection of devolution in 2016 and subsequent formal split into two parts. The historic, place-based rivalries discussed in section 3.1.1. remain strong. The result is a technocratic approach to economic development led by the business sector on NELEP and with weak and demotivated input by political leaders whose prime focus is on their municipalities.

The North East and Tees Valley share many economic problems but have thus adopted different political approaches to tackling them. In the North East, economic development under localism has been an example of what Tomaney (2014a: 134) has called a technical exercise disturbed by an excess of politics and which Clarke and Cochrane (2013) worry can be anti-political in the sense of favouring apparently effective solutions and freezing out alternative approaches, favouring the wealthy and educated and excluding the inarticulate and poor (2.2.1).

Economic governance in the North East fits this picture. It has been led by the business community and disturbed by politics. Politicians have accepted business leadership because they had to. They have worked with the SEP and played their part in implementation by taking lead roles in transport, economic regeneration and inclusion and employability. But no politician has created a high public profile as the SEP's champion or the voice of the North East. The semi-detached relationship of the council leaders is exemplified by their irregular attendance at NELEP board meetings (7.1.2).

The similarities of the two SEPs, considered alongside the contrasting approaches to their implementation, indicate that while the leaderships of both the North East and Tees Valley are open to path creation in the economic field and the development of new industries, whether in energy, technology or services (Chapter 6), the politics of

the North East (but not Tees Valley) retains a path dependence rooted in the industrial history of the 20th century.

This answer, finally, with its focus on the contrasting mayoral and technocratic approaches to development of the North East and Tees Valley, contributes to the comparative case studies in place leadership which have emerged from the research – business-led and technocratic in the former case, political, democratic and popular in the latter - as well as of the places themselves, their socio-cultural environment, their politics and their economies.

8.1.3 Research question 3

The subject of this question and its answer are the key concept of the accountability of the formal institutions of economic governance in North East England - the CAs and LEPs of the North East and Tees Valley as well as the mayoral leadership of the latter (1.3.3). The inclusiveness of the institutions is also examined, and the related issues raised in the literature of legitimacy, scrutiny and the role of party groups in local government (2.2.3, 2.2.4) are discussed.

Democratic accountability of the formal institutions exists in both the North East and Tees Valley, but not to the same extent and in both cases is imperfect. The Tees Valley mayor has a direct democratic mandate and will account personally to his voters again in 2021 (delayed from 2020 due to the coronavirus emergency). But he was elected on a turnout of only 21.3%. His cabinet and all the members of NECA's leadership board are elected only indirectly. The legitimacy of elected members is undermined by low turnouts generally throughout local government, while in much of the North East the vigour of the democratic process is sapped by entrenched voting habits.

This public lack of engagement reflects the low level of engagement of the NECA leaders, though it is not directly caused by it, for leaders like all councillors are elected for their work on their local authority, not on their CA or LEP. Demotivated and distracted by the factors discussed in this thesis, including their responsibilities in their own councils, discontented over funding and frustrated by their inability to control NELEP, the NECA leaders simply display no enthusiasm for CA/LEP governance. They suffer from some of the downsides of governance networks identified by Torfing

(2007) (2.2.1), including low expectation of joint benefits and frustration at the absence of clear results, as well as (at the CA/LEP level) lack of leadership. How different it is in Tees Valley, where the mayor, driven by motives including party political and probably personal ambition, has thrown himself into his role, keeping the Ben Houchen Show permanently on the road.

The lack of any direct election in the NECA area and the low turnout in Tees Valley in 2017 are symptomatic of the fact that CAs and LEPs have not caught the public imagination. As the Political Studies Association concluded, CAs need to move quickly to drive public engagement and wider stakeholder collaboration (PSA, 2016: 3). Uninvolved voters do not hold office holders to account. But there is a vicious circle which will not be easy to break. Low levels of engagement and election turnouts will not encourage governments to devolve more, while low levels of devolved power and funding will not encourage public engagement.

With the above *caveats,* in Tees Valley the directly elected mayor and indirectly elected cabinet are in democratic control of their brief – economic development. Democratic control is less in the North East, where the indirectly-elected NECA leaders make up only a minority of the NELEP board. What is more, they fulfil their democratic duties on the board by attending so irregularly that inquorate meetings have become a significant problem (7.1.2).

Scrutiny of the leaders by their own backbench councillors is flawed in both the North East and Tees Valley by a cosy relationship in the former and emerging but opaque signs of discontent in Tees Valley (7.1.1), where inquorate meetings of the overview and scrutiny committee have become a problem.

Inclusion has two aspects, economic and political. As to the former, work is being done to bring disadvantaged groups into the labour market which needs to be continued and stepped up. It is not just a matter of resources, but bureaucratic obstacles, which make the task a struggle, as described in section 7.3. Ideas for developing this work are proposed in section 8.3, as are recommendations for increasing political inclusion.

Inclusion in the decision-making process is already on the way to being broadened to some extent with the inclusion of the voluntary sector, but there is more to be done.

The absence of trade unions and, until early 2020, the voluntary sector on the NELEP board has deprived these civic leadership groups of a voice except through the indirectly-elected and sometimes absent council leaders. Some voluntary organisations, like the black women's group referred to (7.3) feel marginalised. Not all, clearly, can have seats at the table and there will be a heavy responsibility on the single voluntary sector representative to channel their concerns and provide feedback. Diversity remains a problem in both areas, with NELEP struggling to meet gender targets and Tees Valley's diversity report delayed (7.3).

8.2 The contribution of the thesis

The following sections describe the contribution made by this thesis empirically, methodologically and conceptually. Empirically, we consider what has been learned about economic governance in North East England. Methodologically, we consider how the way this study has been conducted might inform similar research into the same or similar topics in other areas. Conceptually, we think about a range of issues that arise throughout the thesis, from the key concepts and the literature review to the regional context, the case studies, the approaches to development, accountability and inclusion.

8.2.1 Empirical contribution

The overarching empirical lesson of the case studies is that selecting areas for development for purely economic reasons (functional economic areas) without taking account of the politics will not necessarily work. In a democratic country the collaboration of locally elected politicians is required, and it cannot be taken for granted just because some extra powers and funding are on offer. In Tees Valley collaboration was forthcoming but in the North East not. The local politics, in turn, depends on the socio-cultural environment, rooted in history, place and identity. If two such superficially similar areas as the North East and Tees Valley cannot be relied upon to take similar approaches, where can such an expectation by confidently held? This lesson is therefore of wider interest - potentially in every part of England and perhaps even more widely.

The institutional environment of the North East meant that the local councils' (NECA's) debate with themselves over whether to accept the devolution deal on offer was set

against a backdrop of lack of trust. Trust and solidarity, noted in the literature as essential to governance (Rhodes, 1996; Rhodes, 2007) (2.2.1), are historically absent from the North East's local government community, expressed most markedly in resentment at the perceived preferential treatment of Newcastle as regional capital. This fact laid the stony ground on which efforts to encourage devolution withered, throttled by the weeds of rivalry, resentment, jealousy, unwillingness to take a risk and the absence of effective challenge that comes with one-party rule and ineffective scrutiny.

Lack of trust of the NECA members among themselves was compounded by their shared distrust of a Conservative government as a result of the still-remembered and deeply resented injustices of de-industrialisation of the coalfields and shipyards, coupled with current austerity. These feelings remain strong in influential political circles within the region and were forcefully expressed by interviewees. They deprive the area of ministerial allies unless there is a Labour government. No similar feelings over the de-industrialisation of the late 20th century were expressed by interviewees in Tees Valley, where these particular manifestations of the influence of informal institutions and evolutionary economic theory, of actors as 'carriers of history' (2.1.3), are weaker. In fact, Tees Valley interviewees barely looked backwards at all beyond the SSI closure in 2015 and the era of RDA domination, as they saw it, from Newcastle.

The fact the devolution debate in NECA was held virtually entirely within the Labour and trade union movement meant the opposing political case went almost unheard, while the public's voice was muted and could be safely ignored. The only robust argument in favour of the deal came from council officials, whose advice ultimately could be, and was, overruled, and from the business community, which was not influential enough in the committee rooms. Both these groups were entirely unrepresented in the forums where the final decisions were made – the Labour groups.

What influenced the Labour groups has been subject to inevitable speculation, but the interviews carried out for this study suggest very strongly that two factors were crucial: money and the mayoralty. And these are indeed the two issues which emerged publicly as matters of concern between October 2015 and September 2016, and by the

time the deal came to be rejected were openly cited as being the deal breakers (NECA, 2016p).

The money problem for NECA was the persistence of councillors in viewing the £30m annual devolution grant in the context of the much greater austerity cuts of recent years, as though the former were intended to compensate for the latter, and they were encouraged by CARD to treat it with disdain (4.4). Endemic distrust of government on money matters was then vindicated in the eyes of NECA at a crucial moment when it failed to get the guarantees it wanted over EU funding (4.1). Coming as it did in the summer of 2016, this rebuff was fresh in councillors' minds when they voted on the deal. Brexit may thus be seen as having played an indirect role in the death of the deal.

The funding issue leaves an intriguing question unanswered: if the money had been deemed sufficient, would the mayoralty alone have been enough to kill the deal? The attitudes of the four councils which voted against are crucial in answering this question, and collectively they suggest probably not. A Durham councillor said: 'For us the key was funding, not the mayor' (Interview: April 2018); a South Tyneside colleague: 'If the deal is good enough and is worthy of the North East region then it is worthy to consider new governance arrangements as part of that' (Interview: March 2018). In Sunderland the view was that they would put up with a mayor provided there were sufficient checks on his/her powers (Sunderland Council, 2016b).

So the key was in the hands of Gateshead, where there were three fears. One was that a mayor would over-ride collective democracy and another that the job might be hi-jacked for personal ambition – an example of the distrust that permeates regional politics. The third fear was that the mayoral election might be won by a Conservative. In spite of these fears, there are those who believe that had the other six councils stood firm for devolution, Gateshead would have conceded in the end (4.6). This mix of factors was astutely exploited and persuasively presented by CARD, the campaign for real devolution. Opponents of the deal could read CARD's literature and feel their case was intellectually justified.

Of the five civic leadership groups in Hambleton's model, public servants were restricted to their proper role of advising but not deciding, business leaders were

guests in the corridors but without the power, and the voluntary sector was virtually invisible. In an area dominated by one party, the result was an in-house debate within the Labour and trade union movement, and the decision was left in the hands of a few hundred, often elderly, Labour councillors with long memories, meeting in private. These are not the institutional arrangements to facilitate devolution.

Tees Valley's devolution deal did not stir the controversy of that in NECA, and it was at later stages of the process – the mayoral election and subsequent governance – that tensions arose. The factors operating at the critical realist level of the real which facilitated Tees Valley's deal took the form of an underpinning layer of trust and collaboration built over 20 years and a shared, pragmatic desire to access whatever funding was available, reinforced at a critical stage by the SSI closure. Trust was shared between the five councils and with the private sector, and extended when necessary to include the Conservative government represented by ministers with local connections and symbolised in the active presence of Lord Heseltine. A further unifying factor was a desire to consolidate Tees Valley's independence from Newcastle.

A further consideration, perhaps one essential to any deal, is that potentially there was something in it for everybody; both sides felt they had something to gain. Labour council leaders saw an opportunity for additional funding, and to get it were prepared to tolerate a mayor, while the Conservatives saw an opportunity – if they could after all win the mayoralty – to establish a foothold in Tees Valley as a step towards turning more of northern England blue. When they succeeded in winning the mayoralty local politics was swiftly transformed.

While Tees Valley and North of Tyne historically are majority Labour-voting areas, the social and political structures in place did not hold them in such an iron grip that politicians were unable to relate pragmatically to a Conservative government. South of the Tyne, though, while pragmatism and adaptability are present in the economic arena, enabling new paths to be created, as discussed in Chapter 6, adaptability has its limits. Politicians faced with decisions with consequences that were principally political and only secondarily or incidentally economic, were locked in by their values and traditions, structurally trapped in institutional rigidity.

That is not to say that structure was the only factor channelling these politicians towards rejection of their devolution offer. Some had rational concerns about being handed further responsibilities without the necessary resources – concerns noted in section 1.2 (Prud'homme, 1995; Rodríguez-Pose and Gill, 2003) as well as locally in sections 4.5.1 and 4.5.2. But structure channelled councillors south of the Tyne towards rejection more forcibly than in North of Tyne and Tees Valley. Following the shocks of de-industrialisation, the North East economy has been gradually transforming for four decades, but a large part of its politics remains firmly rooted in the 20th century.

Agency was arguably strongest of all in North of Tyne, where councillors had to defy pressure to conform to anti-Tory, anti-deal norms, marshalled by CARD, as well as the arguments – sometimes very forcefully expressed – of their NECA colleagues south of the river. Tees Valley's leaders, in contrast, were supported in making the change they did by a history of collaboration and a balancing pressure in support of devolution from their long-standing private sector partners, as well as their own pragmatic inclination to take whatever money was available. The structural constraints binding them were not as tight.

Attitudes among the North East's elected politicians are aligned with and reinforced by the views of their voters and have deep historical roots. For some, voting against a Conservative proposal is so deeply ingrained as to be habit. A leading member of one NECA council, asked why some councillors had voted against devolution, replied:

> I haven't got a clue really. I think some people are like sheep. I shouldn't say that. They're feeling as though 'it's the case I have to do this'. I find that quite worrying (Labour council member, NECA. March 2018).

While the specific factors discussed above determined why the North East and Tees Valley took the decisions they did, one further factor may have been lying even more deeply embedded in the minds of those in the four south of Tyne councils that rejected devolution. After generations as a lagging region and decades of failure to fully recover from 1980s de-industrialisation, after repeated economic plans (Board of Trade, 1963; NEPC, 1966; NRST, 1977; ONE, 1999; ONE, 2006) – and with a local industrial strategy on the way (NELEP, 2019b: 5b) – all so far followed by repeatedly

disappointed hopes - some may have lost faith in any prospect of catching up. What difference would another reorganization in the town halls make? Anyway, most people were getting by, weren't they, and had other, community values as well? It was a doubt that had been expressed in the past by Robinson (2002: 326) and was repeated to this study by a young Newcastle graduate:

> *Sadly, do I think the North East will be a great prosperous region for my grandchildren? I don't think so. It's a kind of eternal war that we know we are not going to win. I don't think we can ever be the best area of the UK unless there was some kind of seismic change, and I don't think most people even think about this. It just seems that it's an ever-long situation where the North East…will probably always be the least prosperous area. But it does not mean that it is doomed or it doesn't mean that we should give up on it. It kind of means the antithesis of that in the sense that we have got to make the best of things however which we can (Private sector professional. Newcastle. November 2017).*

8.2.2 Methodological contribution

This thesis has followed a step-by-step process to reach answers to its research questions. The first step, after some reading for the purpose of familiarisation with the subject, was to identify key concepts (1.3) and then discuss them, together with issues they raised, in the light of relevant literature (Chapter 2). Following this conceptual framing, the next step was to bring these concepts and issues closer to home (so to speak) by considering them in the context of North East England but still without relation to specific cases or institutions (Chapter 3). The final step was to examine the specific institutions and actors of the case studies, their natures, procedures and actions, in the light of the conceptual framing and contextualisation that had gone before, and draw conclusions leading to answers to the research questions.

These steps were carried out by means of a methodology comparing two cases in North East England using mixed methods involving official documents, interviews with key actors, news reports, social media and official statistics. The critical realist philosophical approach to this research was judged particularly appropriate to the task. Critical realism enables events to be assessed at the levels of the actual, empirical

and real, which is an approach well suited to the investigation of the world of local governance, as is the narrative presentation. The supplementary *phronetic* approach focuses practical and evaluative rationality on the judgement of concrete situations such as those in the case studies (1.4.1).

The analytic framework for civic leadership developed by Hambleton (2015a), adapted for this thesis, identifies five groups of leading actors in a four-sided framework which is ideal for analysing the events being studied. The four-sided framework was used to place North East England in its relevant context (Chapter 3) while the five leadership groups formed the basis of the NECA case study (Chapter 4), where four of them were major players, and the study in Tees Valley (Chapter 5), where two of them had significant roles.

This case study methodology forms part of what Martin and Sunley (2002: 149) have called 'economic geography proper', though it might equally be referred to as 'political geography proper', so closely connected are the two subjects. This methodology has enabled the research to fulfil its critical realist mission of exploring the institutions and events of North East England at the levels of the actual, empirical, and real (1.4.1) and to progress its search for answers step by step from the concepts and theories of the literature to their regional context and finally to their realisation in the causal mechanisms that resulted in the different devolution decisions of local politicians in the North East and Tees Valley.

If this is a postmodernist age, as referred to in section 2.1.2, metanarratives should be out of favour. The philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard defined postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984: xiv), and a metanarrative is exactly what a top-down, standardized, all-England regional or local economic governance system is or would be. It is not argued here that theorising about ideal devolution governance is without value, but the claim is made that the detailed, ground-level research used in this study is a useful reminder that an understanding of local conditions is also necessary if governance that works in practice is to be established.

8.2.3 Conceptual contributions

This thesis has shown, in answer to its own title question, that institutions can adapt sometimes, but not always, to new models of economic governance. Whether they can

do so depends heavily on their institutional arrangements which, in turn, are formed by their institutional environment. The fundamental answer to the question, then, lies deep in the political and socio-cultural environment of the areas in question, arising from their geography and history.

That informal environment may not necessarily conform to its superficial appearance. As the empirical findings of this study show, while North East England may appear homogenous, the two areas into which it was initially split by localism are divided by differences more profound than the semblances of unity that kept them together until 2010 in what can now be seen, with hindsight, to have been uneasy collaboration. While Tees Valley's five councils were able to maintain their unity in the face of a new political situation, adapt and do a deal, in the NECA area seven apparently similar councils were unable to hold together when faced with a devolution offer which turned out for them to be a challenge rather than an opportunity. Not even the five Labour-controlled councils of metropolitan Tyne and Wear could maintain solidarity.

Institutions, formal and informal, we thus find, can be enablers or obstacles to the collaborative governance of development, adaptable or inflexible depending on their environment. These outcomes show in the North East, but not Tees Valley, a political path dependence which belies the openness to economic and industrial path creation which is shared throughout the region. It is a path dependence with the objective of safeguarding not particular industries or sectors but the political *status quo* on behalf of a governing establishment.

Whether such an establishment could and would adapt to a new governance scheme if it believed the result would be its own loss of power is impossible to say on the basis of the case studies. We have seen that a majority of councils in the NECA area were unwilling to take even what must be judged a small risk of losing power, bearing in mind the strength of their political stranglehold in the area. The fact that their Tees Valley counterparts were willing to accept devolution and a mayor is inconclusive on this question, for the risk must have seemed relatively slight; they can hardly have imagined the transformation of the area's politics that was to occur within four years. Based on these two cases, therefore, the political will to devolve must be considered an attribute peculiar to each area, not something to be simply assumed by

governments on the basis of economic areas defined centrally and the offer of some extra funding.

Hambleton (2015a) (2.2.4) was right to say that successful civic leadership requires the co-operation of leadership groups across society, not just politicians. But this thesis shows that it is not necessarily the case that all five groups identified in Hambleton's model must be involved. Tees Valley's institutions – mayoralty, combined authority and local enterprise partnership – are working with contributions from politicians, officials and business, but unions and the voluntary sector are largely or wholly absent from governance. The model is an ideal, but viable governance that falls short of it is still possible.

Without at least some degree of cross-group co-operation, however, adaptation may well fail, as it did in the North East. There, relations among politicians from neighbouring municipalities, and between politicians and business, never close, broke down over devolution, resulting in the splitting of the area along the Tyne. Officials were never whole-heartedly behind the rejection of the devolution offer, the trade unions exercised their influence elsewhere, in the Labour groups of the local authorities, and the contribution of the voluntary sector is only now being belatedly recognised with a seat on the NELEP board. Collaboration in pursuit of a common purpose was almost totally lacking, and adaptation proved impossible.

In describing these developments, the thesis contributes a contextual, place-based understanding of devolution, how local actors responded to government policies and what conditions must be met to enable institutions to adapt to new models of economic governance. The value of the case studies of this thesis is that they show that different places, even if superficially similar, respond to devolution in different ways, and governments that fail to understand the localities to which they are seeking to devolve are likely to encounter obstacles. That is why this thesis argues for a *phronetic*, or practically rational, context-dependent approach to devolution.

Leadership is one institution, and an important one, whose adaptability, this thesis shows, is dependent upon circumstances. The form it takes – mayoral or collective – depended in North East England in 2015-16 on the willingness of existing governing establishments to accept devolution. Resistance to an elected mayor was one of the

two most important reasons that a majority of the NECA councils rejected a devolution deal, while acceptance of a mayoralty, albeit reluctantly, was an essential step which the Tees Valley leaders agreed to take. The study therefore finds that the traditional English preference for collective leadership over mayoral leadership in local government remains strong though it can sometimes be overcome if the circumstances are right. As with institutions generally, adaptation can sometimes but not always be achieved.

Once established, the style that a mayoralty takes depends in part on the mayor's formal powers, particularly his/her control over the combined authority's budget. But the Tees Valley case study demonstrates that the personality of the mayor is a still more important factor. A less determined and resourceful character than Mayor Houchen could not have forced through the acquisition of Teesside International Airport against the opposition of his entire cabinet (5.5). He also played a significant, though immeasurable, personal role in turning Tees Valley blue in both local and parliamentary elections in 2019.

The case study of mayoral leadership which this thesis provides demonstrates that in the England of the Brexit era a proactive, combative mayor can impose himself on an area by pursuing popular policies and a high media profile, even with a narrow electoral mandate on a low turnout and with, initially, a cabinet consisting entirely of his political opponents. But, as demonstrated in section 6.5.2, such political success, even coupled with the significant institutional adaptations brought by devolution, do not necessarily translate into significant economic improvement, at least in the short term. Whether mayoral charisma, relentlessly positive messaging and a heightened sense of local identity will prove enough to secure more than transient support if economic progress remains difficult to discern will be seen in the mayoral election of 2021.

What all these findings demonstrate is that that governance for economic development in England cannot necessarily be successfully established on the basis of economics alone. Local governance requires the collaboration of local politics as well, and that means taking account of the socio-cultural environment in which politics is embedded. The top-down definition of geographies for governance based on

functional economic areas will work institutionally if local culture and politics are amenable, as in Tees Valley, but not if they are resistant, as in the North East.

The lesson to be taken from the findings is therefore that local economic governance should be built from the bottom up, not imposed from the top according to a one-size-fits-all blueprint. It requires input from more than elected politicians. Local leaders from all sections of society should come together and agree which area they wish to encompass, with its local authorities, and what powers they want devolved. This will enable those on the ground who understand the local socio-cultural and political context to develop a model that works. Governments may cajole. As Rhodes (1996) (2.2.2) points out, they control funding and wield influence; they can indirectly and imperfectly steer. But they should not impose.

Crucially, local leaders must agree collectively that they are willing to accept the government's conditions for devolution, which means, in effect, an elected mayor.

Unless this happens, regions and/or localities will not be fit for the purpose of devolution. They will reveal themselves as lacking the informal institutional environment which would allow them to make the necessary adaptations, and as a result they will not be able to establish the requisite formal institutional arrangements. NECA is a case in point.

This lesson is applicable at any and every level of sub-national governance. Loose but wide co-operation may emerge from the Convention of the North, or from NP11, the group of *Northern Powerhouse* LEPs, or the UK2070 Commission, or some process resulting from them. The IPPR think tank has suggested, and the UK2070 Commission considered, the idea of four economic provinces for England, including one covering the three northern regions, for certain functions, each governed by an indirectly-elected regional council (IPPR, 2018: 244-246; UK2070, 2019b: 63). It may make economic sense, but northern England is no more immune from geographic rivalries than North East England. A province with a centre of gravity in the Manchester-Leeds corridor would not necessarily be any more acceptable in the North East than a region headquartered in Newcastle was in Tees Valley. It has already provoked competing claims to resources, including from the Tees Valley mayor (Bounds, 2019a; Parsons, 2019a; Parsons, 2019c; Houchen, 2019k).

If, as is the widespread demand throughout northern England, regional and/or local government is to be given control over significant new resources, it must show itself to have the solid local support from the public and other leadership groups needed to ensure it has the necessary capacity. That means governance for development must take account of regional/local socio-political circumstances as well as economic functionality. A bottom-up approach is more likely to achieve this, for it is those on the ground who understand the socio-political situation, as argued by Giovannini (2015) and McCann (2019).

Building from the bottom certainly has disadvantages too, at least unless and until the process picks up pace and geographies expand. Small units do not command large resources, and for the *grands projets* envisaged by ambitious regionalists, such as infrastructure, would have to rely on higher levels of governance, such as the pan-regional Transport for the North (TfN), or *ad hoc* arrangements between neighbours. A sceptical former One North East board member, a businessman, asked:

> *What are we going to go back to: parish councils? At the end of the day, particularly in a global world, we are competing globally. You need a scale of economy which allows you to punch your weight in a global market, and the more we splint the more difficult it becomes (Former private sector member of RDA board. December 2017).*

While that may be correct, splinting is not what is suggested here but an attempt to prevent it. What is argued is that it is the division and acrimony caused by attempting to force political communities together against their will – or at least, the will of their elected local leaders - to fit a top-down model that causes splinting, as happened to NECA. It either does not work or, if imposed, is illegitimate and unstable. Instead, let local authorities combine as they wish, with the support of other local leaderships, give them whatever devolved powers and resources they can handle, and let them grow in size, powers and resources when and if they and their voters are ready. It's not ideal but it is practical; it's *phronetic.* Besides, small scale economies can develop successfully too, as argued in section 2.2.3.

A bottom-up solution could find a place within the context of the *Industrial Strategy* White Paper, which envisages working in some cases with smaller geographical units

than the city-regions dominating the debate so far: Grimsby and Harlow are given as examples (BEIS, 2017: 225-226). The UK government reinforced this message in 2018 when the minister responsible, announcing what he dubbed *Northern Powerhouse 2.0,* said the project had been too focused on Manchester and other big cities and would be extended to smaller cities and towns, and spread to rural areas which, moreover, would not have to have a mayor (Bounds, 2018). A £394m growth deal for the Borderlands Partnership, covering mainly rural areas in England and Scotland, was signed in 2019 (Borderlands Partnership, 2019).

Whatever model is chosen, councillors who want the added powers and funding that go with devolution will have to show understanding of why mayors matter so much to ministers, and respond accordingly. This study has explored the reasons the NECA devolution deal broke down from the perspective, mainly, of the local authorities and other North East actors. But the government has its reasons for caution too. As McCann (2016: 501) puts it: 'Resistance to devolution from the centre arises from the fact that central government lacks trust in sub-national government competence or accountability'. Councillors need to show government why they can be trusted with large sums of public money. A report published in 2015, just as the North East was embarking on its ill-fated devolution journey, found that demonstrable trust and unity of purpose were key in giving the government confidence to devolve:

> *It is up to local government and related partners to continue to show that they are prepared to take tough decisions regarding scarce resources. And that when they do take those decisions, they are informed and driven by economic necessity and the best long-term outcomes for an area, not temporary local political accommodation...The government, understandably enough, does not want to see deals which are reluctantly patched together, but robust proposals which will not crack under the first sign of local tension (Grant Thornton and Localis, 2015: 1, 2, 32).*

8.3 Recommendations

This thesis now recommends institutional reforms to make regional/local economic governance more accountable, inclusive, legitimate and transparent, as well as to make it more responsive to local needs and capable of promoting collaboration in

support of a common purpose. These are prerequisites for regions/localities with devolutionary ambitions. The recommendations are designed to achieve these objectives without foisting new structures or new governance geographies on places that have not asked for them. They would facilitate limited but useful change through a process of layering, as described by Martin (2010) (2.1.3), without radically altering structures or redrawing geographical boundaries.

Five of the recommendations are intended for application to all LEPs, one to those like the North East LEP which operate more or less independently of local political control (independent LEPs), one to CAs and two to local authorities.

1. Membership of all LEPs should be reformed to give seats to the voluntary sector, as is already starting to happen, and the trade unions. This would bring together all five civic leadership groups and provide a forum for the development of a sense of common purpose;

2. Consideration should be given to increasing the diversity of the private sector presence on all LEP boards to include more representatives of large, low-pay sectors such as retail, hospitality and social care;

3. On independent LEPs with CA representation, the business sector should retain the chair and remain the largest single group. However, other LEP board members combined should outnumber the business sector by one. This would enable council leaders, the democratically elected element, to prevail in disputes if they can persuade all others to support them. It would incentivize councillors to participate fully and collaboratively;

4. All LEPs should meet in public for that part of their business not subject to statutory confidentiality. This would encourage media attendance and thus public engagement. LEP involvement in economic strategy, policy debates and dealing with economic shocks would receive a higher profile. Contacts between the LEPs and local media would be strengthened, facilitating reporting at the critical realist level of the real rather than just the actual, 'back stage' as well as 'front stage' (Ayres *et al.*, 2017b). This is not always a comfortable process, but an essential part of local democracy;

5. In all cases, LEP responsibilities for inclusion and employability, with their budgets, should be transferred to the local authorities, which are already

involved in much of the work. With their networks of councillors, they are in closer touch with areas of need and the voluntary organisations that are also often involved. This would also give the local authorities a direct stake in the system;

6. In all cases, local authority economic development departments should move in the opposite direction, centralising the economic function in the LEPs and avoiding the type of fragmentation of which the private sector complains (6.2.1). Recommendations 5&6 together would help to realise the hope of combining efficiency with equality, or justice: not exactly the equality between regions sought by Martin (2008) but greater equality for deprived communities within regions. It would be an approach that would see the LEPs focusing on economic efficiency while the local authorities work on social justice;

7. Local authorities should have the option, if they wish, to revert to the local government model preceding the reform of 2000, with government by executive committee rather than restricting backbench councillors to scrutiny. This would restore, where desired, the collectivist approach identified by Wollmann (2008) (2.2.4) as traditional to the English system;

8. The overview and scrutiny committees of CAs should include two non-voting, external members from the voluntary and trade union sectors, mirroring these sectors' representation on LEP boards. This would strengthen these committees' independence, further embed these two civic leadership groups in economic governance, and act as a spur to backbench councillors;

9. Party groups on local authorities should publish their agendas, reports and advice they receive, and minutes, including any voting figures. Groups cannot in practice, and arguably should not, be prevented from meeting privately, but if they are in effect determining or potentially determining council policy, the process should be as transparent as possible.

These recommendations would make the institutions concerned fit, or at least fitter, to implement the general lessons of this thesis and fulfil their ambition for their areas. Those lessons are, to sum up in a single sentence, that whatever governance model emerges for English devolution, if significant funding is ever to be placed under regional/local democratic control, it must be sought in each region or locality by all

civic leadership groups, acting together in pursuit of a common purpose, with public support, building from the bottom, showing willingness to overcome socio-cultural and political obstacles, and instilling in central government the confidence that they can be trusted to deliver.

8.4 Further research

There are 38 LEPs in England and devolution deals have been signed covering 11 areas (Sandford, 2019c). Every case study would add valuable insights into how local economic governance can best work, less with a view to developing a blueprint applicable everywhere, which would be contrary to the *phronetic* approach of this thesis, but rather to see if any general lessons can be learned and to identify pitfalls to be avoided in individual cases.

Most SEPs will complete their 10-year lifespans in 2024, and there will be not just an opportunity but a pressing need for research into what has worked well and what has not. Meanwhile, local industrial strategies are coming on stream and will equally require constant monitoring.

There are philosophical issues too that merit discussion, especially around the related issues of place-based and spatially blind development and the trade-off, if there is one, between growth and social justice (2.1.1). Perhaps the measure of justice should be based on some form of community wellbeing, not simply economic metrics. Why devolve at all – or at least, why go beyond the present limited model - when there is little obvious demand from the public, as opposed to local political elites, and limited discernible evidence of an economic dividend? (2.1.1) For while it may make sense to place decisions over the relatively modest amounts available to LEPs in the hands of local leaders who know their areas, shouldn't control over sums like £250bn (1.2, 2.1.1) be in the hands of the government, acting in the national interest?

These questions demand answers to which there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. They demand practicality, rationality and ethical judgement: they are *phronetic'.*

Appendix A: List of events attended in the course of research

Date	Venue	Organiser	Event
6/9/2016	Sunderland	North East Combined Authority	Leadership Board
10/3/2017	Newcastle	North East Local Enterprise Partnership	North East Strategic Economic Plan: Refresh
31/3/2017	Newcastle	Institute for Social Renewal, Newcastle University	Thriving in Turbulent Times
16/6/2017	Sunderland	Campaign for Real Devolution	North East Devolution Conference
21/6/2017	Newcastle	North East Local Enterprise Partnership and Ward Hadaway	Brexit Conference
11/7/2017	North Shields	Carnegie UK Trust and Institute for Social Renewal	Turning Around Towns in the North East
2/11/2017	Newcastle	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Newcastle University	Social Renewal and Social Justice in the North East region
7/11/2017	Newcastle	Tyne and Wear Citizens	Launch Assembly
22/1/2018	South Shields	North of Tyne councils	Combined Authority public consultation
31/1/2018	Gateshead	North of Tyne councils	Combined Authority public consultation
1/2/2018	Sunderland	North of Tyne councils	Combined Authority public consultation
6/3/2018	Gateshead	North East Local Enterprise Partnership	State of the Region
17/4/2018	Newcastle	The Journal	Transport breakfast
6/7/2018	Newcastle	Great Exhibition of the North	*Northern Powerhouse* Great Futures
6/9/2018	Gateshead	Newcastle City Council	Convention of the North
7/9/2018	Gateshead	Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art	Idea of North
2/10/2018	Newcastle	Café Philosophique	Powerhouse or Underdog? Is Northern Devolution running out of Steam?
14/11/2018	Newcastle	North East Collaboration Working Group	North East Collaboration Conference
16/11/2018	Gateshead	Sovereign Strategy	North East Economic Forum
27-29/11/2018	Lyon/St Etienne	Universities Jean Monnet/Sciences Po	Urban Narratives
17/1/2019	Stockton	Tees Valley Combined Authority	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
24/1/2019	Middlesbrough	Tees Valley Combined Authority	Cabinet
30/1/2019	Sunderland	Sunderland City Council	Council

14/2/2019	Newcastle	North East Local Enterprise Partnership	Strategic Economic Plan: Update
30/4/2019	Newcastle	Tyne and Wear Citizens	Mayoral Assembly
10/5/2019	Newcastle	North East Local Enterprise Partnership	Our Economy 2019
18/6/2019	Newcastle	IPPR North	Economic Justice for the North East
13/9/2019	Rotherham	Leeds and Newcastle Councils	Convention of the North and NP11
26/9/2019	Newcastle	North East Local Enterprise Partnership	Annual General Meeting
17/10/2019	Stockton	Tees Valley Combined Authority	Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Appendix B: Coding

NVivo code headings and the number of sources and references for each:

Code	Sources	References
Accountability	16	32
Attitudes – miscellaneous	15	25
Attitudes – political	23	63
Attitudes to government	15	37
Attitudes to money	24	62
Brexit	9	18
CARD campaign	14	27
Culture	7	18
Democracy	25	83
Devolution – general	20	60
Durham	13	75
Economic theory	18	42
Education and training	16	27
Entrepreneurship	19	51
Fair shares	15	35
Gateshead	13	35
Geography	22	48
Getting by	2	2
Hartlepool	1	5
Health	1	4
Inclusiveness	11	36
Labour Party	9	15
Leadership	11	21
LEPs	31	76
Local identity	15	17
Mayors	35	133
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