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The scale of the century? – the new city regionalism in England and some experiences from Liverpool

Olivier Sykes  and Alexander Nurse 

Department of Geography and Planning, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

Attention to the city regional scale has fluctuated over time as governments in different countries have sought new ‘territorial fixes’ to respond to changing systems of production, flows of goods, capital and information, environmental challenges, and demands for renewed political legitimacy of collective action. In England, there have been successive cycles of rescaling, particularly since the 1970s when metropolitan governance structures were created only to be abolished the following decade. Larger regional territories were favoured in the 1990s and 2000s, however, from the mid-2000s onwards the city-regional scale again rose to prominence. The 2010s saw attention shift back to sub-regional territories with the creation of ‘Combined Authorities’ for ‘larger than local’ but ‘smaller than regional’ areas, including for many city-regions. This paper considers the new city regionalism in England and the experience of the Liverpool City Region (LCR). It concludes that whilst exogenous political economic factors and state strategies may stimulate rescaling of territorial governance, it is important to recognize that it is also shaped by distinctive local contexts and practices.

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1. Introduction

City regionalism is currently enjoying a renaissance in many countries (Jones, Lord, and Shields 2015, 6; Sturzaker and Nurse 2020; Demazière and Sykes 2019). Attention to this strategic scale has fluctuated over time as states have sought new ‘territorial fixes’ (Deas 2014) in response to changing systems of production, flows of goods, capital and information, environmental challenges, and demands from citizens for renewed legitimacy to underpin collective action. In the United Kingdom there have been successive cycles of territorial reform, particularly since the 1970s. Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the creation of the Greater London Authority are key changes. In England, outside London the pattern of reform has been less consistent with more frequent shifts in the scalar focus. Metropolitan governments were created in the 1970s

CONTACT Olivier Sykes  olivier.sykes@liverpool.ac.uk  Department of Geography and Planning, University of Liverpool, Roxby Building, Liverpool, L69 7ZT, UK

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only to be abolished by the mid-1980s. From the 1990s into the early part of the 2000s larger regional territories were favoured (Jones and McCleod 1999). The city-regional scale then returned to prominence both in the work of researchers and through initiatives driven by local government cooperation in certain large metropolitan areas – notably Manchester (Hodson et al. 2020). In the 2010s the emphasis on sub-regional territories was accentuated with the creation of ‘Combined Authorities’ for ‘larger than local’ but ‘smaller than regional’ areas, notably many city regions (Harrison 2012). These shifts have redefined the key scales and sites at which certain competences are concentrated and exercised. They have been driven both by a combination of ‘exogenous’ structural shifts and state-strategy, and endogenous dynamics within territories. The present paper engages principally with the second of these drivers through a consideration of the experience of the Liverpool City Regions (LCR) in adapting to the ‘new city regionalism’ in England. The paper firstly reviews the evolution of sub-state government in England from the reforms of the nineteenth century through to the creation of Combined Authorities (CAs) in the 2010s. Secondly, it situates the new city regionalism in England against its wider context and identifies a set of analytical themes. Thirdly, the experience of the Liverpool City Region (LCR) in adapting to the new city regionalism is considered in light of these. This account is supported by a review of published materials and an interview with the leader of the team developing the new Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for the city region. Finally, the conclusion considers the extent to which exogenous political economic factors and (nation) state strategies and practices in given localities interact in the rescaling of territorial governance.

2. Historical background

2.1. *Scaling-up local government to meet the requirements of an urban nation (1888–1972)*

In the nineteenth century England experienced rapid urbanization and structures of local government were reformed to address the representative, economic, social and physical needs of expanding urban areas (Briggs 1963; Hunt 2005). Thus ‘The Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1894 introduced a comprehensive pattern of county councils, and district and parish councils’ and the 1888 Act created ‘61 “county boroughs”, large or historically significant urban areas falling outside county council administration’ (Sandford 2019, 6). This system was to remain largely unchanged (though with some boundary changes, Dockerill 2020) until the final third of the twentieth century. The 1930s and 1940s saw reflection, on the regional, industrial and planning issues facing the UK. The Barlow Report (1940) considered the distribution of the industrial population; the Uthwatt Report compensation and betterment (1942); the Scott Committee (1942) rural land use, and, in the same decade Patrick Abercrombie prepared his two plans for London. The later 1940s saw the introduction of a comprehensive planning system and the state also pursued a new towns programme and regional policy (Alexander 2009). Yet it has been argued that ‘most of the period from 1945 to 1974 was distinguished by the perpetuation of a fragmented system of local government and planning’ and that this ‘worked against the capacity to plan metropolitan regions as a whole, and also frequently divided responsibility for homogenous metropolitan areas between urban

and shire authorities' (Roberts, Thomas, and Williams 1999). The Herbert Commission on local government in London (1960); the Redcliffe-Maud Commission on local government in England (Wise 1969); and, the Wheatley report on local government in Scotland (1969) were to lead to a sequence of reforms in response. A Greater London Council (GLC) was established in 1964 and major reform under the Local Government Act, 1972, introduced a two-tier local government structure across England and Wales based on county and district councils, and six new Metropolitan County Councils (MCC) in the largest English conurbations to address key strategic planning and development issues (Table 1). The Herbert Commission had in fact recommended a more widely drawn area for the GLC, whilst a dissenting report by a member of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission, Derek Senior, had recommended 'the creation of 35 city regions and 148 districts' with a 'map of recommendations for areas' which 'placed greater weight than the main report on patterns of economic activity and less on traditional units, believing that local authorities should be based on "the potential service and commuting hinterlands of a major centre for the functions associated with planning, transportation and development"' (Sandford 2019, 8 citing Royal Commission on Local Government in England 1966–69b, 20).

Under the new system, the MCCs provided a strategic overview and capacity to act in relation to: land use planning (through county structure plans), transportation, economic development, environmental enhancement & waste management – local planning was to be the responsibility of individual lower tier metropolitan districts.

2.2. *Smaller scales for a smaller state? – dismantling the metropolitan scale (1980s)*

The fracturing of the social democratic and Keynesian political-economic consensus and rise of 'neoliberal' perspectives promoting a smaller state in the 1970s, saw planning increasingly perceived as a potential hindrance to the efficiency of land markets and the development industry. The context was also challenging for regional policy, with state spatial policy in many countries focussing increasingly on 'urban problems' in the face of economic restructuring, mass unemployment and urban unrest (Couch, Sykes, and Börstinghaus 2011; Demazière and Sykes 2021). Regional policy in many countries became mainly concerned with 'emergency' interventions, leading Desjardins (2017, 66) to speak of 'L'aménageur comme pompier' (the regional planner as 'firefighter'). There was also an ideological undercurrent to these evolutions, notably in the UK, where regional policy was considered by elements of the government to

Table 1. Metropolitan counties in England, 1974–1986.

Name of Metropolitan County	Constituent Local Authorities (municipalities)
Greater Manchester	City of Manchester, City of Salford, Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan
Merseyside	City of Liverpool, Knowsley, St. Helens, Sefton, Wirral
South Yorkshire	City of Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham
Tyne and Wear	City of Newcastle, City of Sunderland, Gateshead, South Tyneside, North Tyneside
West Midlands	City of Birmingham, City of Coventry, City of Wolverhampton, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall
West Yorkshire	City of Leeds, City of Bradford, City of Wakefield, Calderdale, Kirklees

be likely to be palliative at best, and at worst divert state resources from where they could be more precisely targeted to support productivity, or address market failure. Simultaneously, local government was frequently caricatured as an inefficient and potentially unruly entity, with the potential to disrupt central state strategy and policy agendas.

Under the Conservative government, the MCCs and the GLC were abolished in 1986, with strategic and local planning powers being transferred to their former constituent local authorities. Some argued that this led to a loss of strategic overview, as interventions targeted more discrete areas and locations within conurbations, notably the large urban regeneration sites created by industrial restructuring (Couch, Sykes, and Börstinghaus 2011). A new system of 'Unitary Development Plans' (UDP) combined general/strategic (Part I) and more specific policies (Part 2). The wider strategic dimension was to be provided by an informal system of collaboratively produced Strategic Planning Guidance (SPG). Joint boards were also maintained to coordinate functions such as Policing, fire services, public transport and, in some areas, waste management. Despite this, it has been argued that there nevertheless emerged a 'strategic policy vacuum' (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 2007, 31). Inter-municipal cooperation kept the metropolitan scale 'alive' providing some strategic thinking and a proto city regional institutional ecology took root in some places, notably Greater Manchester (Pike et al. 2015).

2.3. Bigger is better? – the return of the 'larger than local' scale and the experiment in English regionalization (1990–2010)

When attention to 'larger than local' development issues re-emerged in the 1990s, this was with a scalar orientation towards large 'standard regions' rather than the metropolitan scale (Jones and McCleod 1999). The election of the Blair government in 1997, saw the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) tasked with developing Regional Economic Strategies (RES) and Regional Assemblies to ostensibly oversee their work (Hall 2007; Shields and Wray 2019). Devolution to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland marked a significant constitutional change, whilst the new Greater London Authority (GLA), with its power to make and adopt a metropolitan-scale Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) – the London Plan; reintroduced the metropolitan scale of government in England's capital for the first time since the 1980s. In 2004 the regional planning system was reinforced in England with statutory Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) replacing advisory 'Regional Planning Guidance' (RPG). County Structure plans were abolished with Local Development Frameworks (LDF) being introduced having to accord with the relevant RSS for their region. The RSS structure also allowed for sub-regional plans to be prepared for relevant sub-areas such as city regions.

Regionalization was undermined, however, by difficulties in complementing the technocratic 'output' problem solving legitimacy of regional planning with the 'input' legitimacy of the governed (Taylor 2019). A referendum in 2004 saw the establishment of an elected regional assembly in the north east of England attacked by the populist press and decisively rejected by voters (Shaw and Robinson 2007). This led to greater attention to other scales such as the city region, the local government area, and the neighbourhood level.

2.4. The 'return of the city region' (2000s–2020)

The 'Urban Renaissance' policy agenda (1997–2010) (Rogers 1999), coupled with shifts towards reinvigorated urban economies, led to a 'return of' and 'return to' the city (Rae 2013). This reflected the wider trends within globalization (Sassen 1991), notably new rounds of urban-focussed accumulation (Harvey 1989), and cultural movements (Florida 2004). In England, there was a new acknowledgement of the economic, social, cultural importance of cities. City-regions were conceived of as drivers of regional economies, change, innovation, and creativity in a more knowledge-based economy – though it was also suggested that England's 'Core Cities' were still not 'punching their weight' in comparison with Europe's other leading regional cities (Parkinson et al. 2004). Recalling the debates of the 1960s and 1970s, there was also attention to 'functional' geographies (e.g. Travel to Work Areas). At the same time the regional scale was being critiqued as too vast in comparison to sub-areas such as city-regions, with increasing calls for more sub-regional organization of local development. City regions were presented by their advocates as more coherent 'larger than local' spaces, with sufficient critical mass in economic, spatial management and governance terms, and greater potential for citizen identification. The 'economic' and 'political' case for city regions argued that they could both help bridge economic gaps across England and reboot the process of devolution and democratic engagement.

The example of London, with its elected mayor and Greater London Assembly (GLA), and responsibilities for: strategic spatial planning (with the creation of a London Plan); housing; transport (with a generously-funded transport authority, Transport for London); economic development; environment; Policing; fire and emergency planning; Culture/sport; health; and, energy, also served as an inspiration. Elsewhere the city regional principle was reflected in the Northern Way Growth Strategy (NWGS) led by the three northern RDAs with the aim of bridging the £29 billion output gap between the north of England and the rest of the UK. This sought to promote partnership working in the North and was principally focussed on eight city regions seen as the key to making the northern economy grow faster (Table 2).

In the late-2000s Multi Area Agreements (MAAs) sought to foster cross-boundary working (Nurse 2012), whilst in 2009 new legislation allowed the creation of new inter-municipal entities called 'Combined Authorities' (CAs). This paved the way for a return of 'Harder city-regional structures' (Hodson et al. 2020, 203) in the following decade.

Table 2. The eight city regions of the northern way growth strategy (2004).

Region	City Regions
North East England	Tees Valley
North West England	Tyne and Wear
	Central Lancashire
	Liverpool City Region
Yorkshire and the Humber	Manchester City Region
	Hull and Humber Ports
	Leeds City Region
	Sheffield City Region

2.5. *Regions out, city regions in – post-2010 rescaling*

The 2010–2015 Coalition government introduced consequential changes to how sub-national development was scaled and administered, with stated aims of rebalancing the economy, reducing the budget deficit, and encouraging localism (Sturzaker and Nurse 2020). Severe public spending cuts were enacted impacting the ability of local authorities to provide services and deliver a local policy agenda. The structures of regional economic and spatial planning were rapidly abolished (Nurse 2015a) and economic development functions passed to sub-regional ‘Local Enterprise Partnerships’ (LEPs), ostensibly centred on functional economic areas (DCLG 2010a; DCLG 2010b; Pugalís 2011). This was a much finer geography, with 39 LEPs replacing the 8 English RDAs, with many being based on city regions. The LEPs could bid for ‘Growth Deals’ and were required to draw up multi-year strategic economic plans, setting out the priorities for long-term growth in their areas. Land use planning reverted to local planning authorities and in some places community, or business-led, neighbourhood plans were adopted.

In 2011 came a series of ‘City Deals’ (DCLG 2011), initially with the Core Cities.¹ These offered an increase in economic planning powers in return for referenda on changing their mode of governance towards having a directly elected executive mayor (this was rejected in all but one case, Bristol, in 2012) (Sandford 2015).

In 2011 the first sub-regional Combined Authority (CA) was created for Greater Manchester, generally seen as having been the most successful city region at sustaining inter-municipal city regional working after the abolition of metropolitan scale government in the mid-1980s. This ‘exemplar’ (Hodson et al. 2020, 201) English city-region has been closely scrutinized by commentators (Jenkins 2015), academic observers (Haughton et al. 2016) and those watching from other places (Parkinson et al. 2016). Further CAs were created in 2014 and 2016 with these bodies acquiring devolved powers over economic and transport planning, and bringing together the leaders of each LEP’s constituent local authority districts as a means of restoring some accountability to sub-regional decision making (Nurse 2015a).

In June 2014, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced plans for what he termed the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ (NP) (Osborne 2014). This was underpinned by notions of urban agglomeration and aimed to rebalance the UK economy away from London and the South East. It primarily centred on the heavily urbanized east–west belt running from Liverpool, across Manchester, and over the Pennines to Leeds and Sheffield, as a place where it was argued that comparable economies of scale and agglomeration could be achieved (Figure 1).

The NP was to be realized through the negotiation of ‘devolution deals’ between the leaders of each city region and central government. The basic ‘deal’ would be £900m spread over 30 years to spend on local infrastructure projects, control over skills agendas, and the assumption of control over policing and fire services. Extra powers and resources could also be negotiated, for example, Manchester secured a further £300m for housing, and in 2015 assumed control over health spending (Sandford 2020, 18–20). Each city region was expected to introduce a directly elected ‘metro-mayor’ with the first elections in some areas taking place in 2017. Promises were also made of investment in infrastructure for expanded travel-to-work areas in

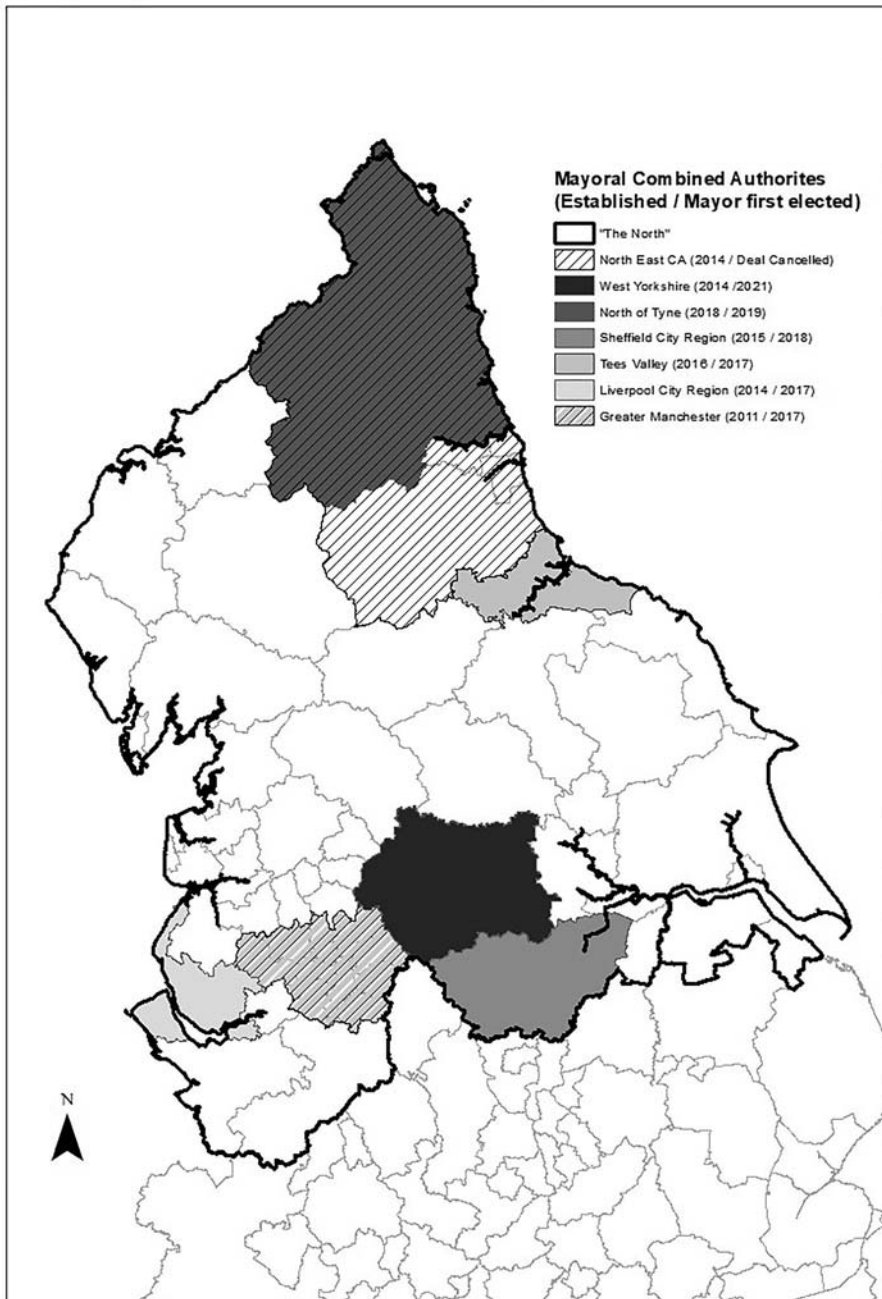


Figure 1. The Sub-regions within the Northern Powerhouse. Source: Alexander Nurse with 'Office for National Statistics, 2011 Census: Digitized Boundary Data (England and Wales) [computer file]. UK Data Service Census Support. Downloaded from: <https://borders.ukdataservice.ac.uk/>

the north, notably rail electrification, and a mooted high-speed east-west rail link termed HS3. In time the NP was joined by the Midlands Engine and other similar initiatives.

3. Situating city regionalism in England

3.1. Developing themes of enquiry

The recent evolutions outlined above amount to the biggest shift in how the largest English city regions are governed since 1986 and the abolition of the Metropolitan County Councils, but where do they fit in relation to the ‘global trend towards devolution’ (Rodriguez-Pose and Gill 2003, 336) of recent decades? There are a number of themes within the wider literature on city regionalism and scale construction which can inform the identification of contemporary themes of enquiry in relation to the new city regionalism in England (Sections 3.2–3.6). Rodriguez-Pose and Gill (2003, 334) contend that in analysing processes of devolution, there are three factors which might be considered ‘subnational legitimacy ... decentralisation of authority and resources’. Jonas and Moisió (2018, 351) meanwhile draw attention to the links between the rise of city regionalism and state interests and strategy arguing that ‘that city regionalism is becoming an important medium through which the state exercises its powers in the 21st century’. Similarly, Sturzaker and Nurse (2020) situate their account of the evolution and rescaling of planning and urban governance in the UK within a framework that relationally connects episodes of rescaling and institution building at lower scales with the policy agendas and strategies pursued by central government. Given that city regionalism is shaped by such strategising and the interests of diverse actors at different scales, the question arises of who is privileged by processes of rescaling (Jessop 1990; Beel, Jones, and Rees Jones 2018)? This relates to the question of the degree subnational legitimacy (Rodriguez-Pose and Gill 2003) which newly configured scales may accrue. Notably whether new territorial configurations like city regions can build democratic ‘input’ legitimacy and support from the governed (e.g. in the form of engagement with events like elections), to complement the ‘output’ legitimacy in terms of results (e.g. raising competitiveness; addressing challenges of sustainable development etc.) which is often cited by states, local actors, and professionals as a justification for their creation (Taylor 2019).

The interrelated issues outlined above also reinforce Jonas and Moisió’s (2018) conclusion that ‘city regionalism is a contingent expression of wider territorial-political dilemmas confronting the national state which are partly informed by, but not reducible to, global neoliberal logics of economic growth and competition’ (366). They also echo debates surrounding the New Regionalism and New Economic Geography in the 1990s and 2000s where some accounts were accused of ‘following a functionalist discourse of globalisation backed up by neoliberalism’ with ‘regional analysis’ being ‘shrouded in a crude economism exhibiting little imaginative understanding of local structures of feeling, [and] place-based identities’ (Jones and MacLeod, 1999). In response Lovering (1999, 393) called for ‘a renewed emphasis on careful theoretical work’ and ‘more discriminating empirical studies’. Work at the time which did empirically explore the emergence of regional institutions, such as that by Burch and Holliday (1993), pointed to the importance of ‘voluntaristic’ action by local actors and ‘the role of personality and circumstance’ in such processes (46–47; 49). More recently, Sturzaker and Nurse (2020), have similarly emphasized, that the form city regionalism takes in a given context emerges from an interplay of wider forces, the distinctive histories of sub-state territorial governance in different states, and the experience of specific city regional territories. Recognizing such issues, the themes below are informed by the

wider literature on city regions, but also ‘inductively’ derived from the evolving English situation. They are now briefly reviewed before the paper moves on to consider the case of the Liverpool City Region.

3.2. City regional governance in England and the state (is it here to stay?)

The English case provides striking evidence to support the idea that accounts of the emergence of city regions need to consider the strategising and interests of the state in which they are situated (Moisio and Jonas 2018). Taking a ‘long view’ of the history of frequent rescaling in England, for example, it is clear that the state at different times has seen an interest in promoting, or discouraging, the emergence of institutions and governing capacity at city regional scale. An initial theme of enquiry when considering the new city regionalism in England then, is whether the metropolitan city-regional scale is ‘here to stay’ this time? Will it be the ‘scale of the century’, or just of a decade at most, in-keeping with past cycles of sub-national rescaling and searches for new ‘spatial-fixes’ (Harvey 1989)? Many of the new CA boundaries in the larger urban areas bear a striking geographical resemblance to those of the MCCs (Table 1 above) even though functional and Travel to Work Areas have expanded since the 1970s. Devolution in England remains active, even if other scales and territories have vied for attention in recent years, notably the UK state scale since the 2016 EU referendum (Sturzaker and Nurse 2020) and UK-subsumed territories like Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The growing number of CAs, signing of devolution deals, and discursive staying power of the NP initiative, however, suggest that the city regional agenda is here to stay in England, for the time being at least.

3.3. Legitimacy and citizen ‘buy-in’ to the new city-regional scale

As noted above, one theme that Rodriguez-Pose and Gill (2003, 334) contend is important in analysing processes of devolution is ‘subnational legitimacy’. Here it can be observed that, whilst the political and legislative basis of CAs and devolution ‘deals’ seems quite resilient, its local ‘input’ political legitimacy (Taylor 2019) still appears weak. In bringing forward the CAs, the 2010–2015 coalition sought to bolster the legitimacy of a process largely informed by the economic and business focused LEPs (Pugalís and Fisher 2011) through direct elections for CA mayors. However, voter turnouts in the first elections held for CA mayors in some areas in 2017 were disappointingly low for those hoping to see a reinvigoration of representative democratic participation at a strategic ‘larger than local’ scale (Table 3). Though it is true that voter turnouts for local

Table 3. Electoral turnout figures for combined authority Mayoral elections, 2017.

Combined authority	Ballots at the count	Turnout (%)
Cambridgeshire & Peterborough (C&P)	204,302	33.6%
Greater Manchester	573,543	28.9%
Liverpool City Region	291,449	26.1%
Tees Valley	103,767	21.3%
West Midlands	523,201	26.7%
West of England	199,519	29.7%
Total	1.9 m	27.8%

elections in England are generally low compared to many other parts of Europe (Wilks-Heeg and Clayton 2006), this was still arguably an indicator of low citizen ‘buy-in’ to the new scale.

However, legitimacy may not simply be derived from the input of electoral events, but as Schmidt (2013) notes through ‘throughput’ legitimacy derived from more ongoing citizen engagement in governing decisions. In some places (notably Greater Manchester), there is emerging evidence that a ‘hardening’ of city regional governance structures and notably the introduction of statutory spatial planning at the metropolitan scale has potential to create an arena through which citizens might engage more ‘disruptively’ in city regional politics and agenda setting than was the case under previous more informal ‘public-private’ city regional ‘regime led’ governing arrangements (Hodson et al. 2020, 214).

3.4. Spatial selectivity and planning

The spatial selectivity of city regional agendas and the inter-regional city regionally focussed initiatives like the NP (Nurse 2015b), with their focus on larger urban places, now evolves against a background where smaller so-called ‘left behind’ towns and areas are in political focus (Halliday and Walker 2020). Here again the city regional agenda becomes enmeshed with state strategy and power projection (Jonas and Moisio 2018). Notably in the English context it must sit alongside the national government’s sponsorship of an agenda for towns and smaller places – one which has rapidly become mired in accusations of cronyism and political ‘pork barrelling’ (Knott 2021).

At the intra-city regional scale there are also questions about how city regional agendas can be advanced coherently and consensually if there are trade-offs to be made between different areas – between central cities and peripheral cities/towns, peri-urban and rural areas etc.? New inter-scalar relations and tensions may arise around how a wider, or ‘aggregate’, city regional interest is defined and pursued, especially if any constituent sub-areas feel it is not in their best interests – e.g. the development of major infrastructure schemes, or key sites, which lie on the territory of given municipalities within a city region.

One arena and mechanism through which these issues may be addressed is through spatial planning at city regional scale as a key facet of the institutional ‘hardening’ of this scale (Hodson et al. 2020). The return of the city since the 1990s has led to regrowth and processes of re-urbanization (Dembski et al. 2019) and regeneration, which have seen many major urban centres near saturation in terms of the remaining land/sites available for development (O’Brien and Matthews 2015). Consequently their surrounding city-regional spaces are increasingly seen as yielding viable sites to continue urban growth agendas. But aligning the interests of different constituent territories and citizens, and seeking consensus around a strategic vision and planning policy at city-regional scale can be challenging. The first campaign for the election of city-regional mayor for Greater Manchester in 2017, for example, became politicized around the emerging Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF) and proposals for revisions to Green Belt designations (Fitzgerald 2017). As Moisio and Jonas (2018) note ‘bringing together systems of governance and city-regions is often characterized by political struggles and heated contestation’ and ‘The same applies to the tailoring of city-regional spatial planning systems

which would deal with issues such as land use, transportation, housing or economic development'. Given that the model and scope of the renewed metropolitan spatial planning varies between city regions, one theme of enquiry might be how this interacts with, and perhaps shapes, the tone and capacity of spatial governance at this scale.

3.5. Austerity

Rodriguez-Pose and Gill (2003, 334) contend that one factor to be considered in analysing processes of devolution is the 'decentralisation of authority and resources'. The city regional agenda in England in the 2010s has evolved against the background of the wider impacts of the socially regressive austerity cuts which have been made to the budgets of many of the local governments which constitute the CAs in the 2010–2020 period. Whilst the entrepreneurial orientation of evolving city-regional governance can lead to bullish claims being made about future prospects – for example, the 'heroic GVA growth assumptions of 2.5% year on year' in the draft GMSF (Hodson et al., 2006); these sit alongside the reality for many municipalities of deep cuts to core budgets. Such cuts have hit many places in the north of England hardest (Centre for Cities 2019). Though devolution deals bring a certain amount of new resources to the CA areas (Pidd 2020), the underlying picture is one where their constituent authorities' core budgets have often been heavily reduced.

3.6. The 'European question'

The city regional agenda has had to evolve against the backdrop of the consequences of the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union in 2016. Here again state level processes and interests set the context for the city regional agenda. The 'great majority of available evidence suggests that Brexit is likely to make the UK's interregional inequalities worse than they already are' (Billing, McCann, and Ortega-Argilés 2019, 757). It also modifies the opportunity structures of place-based policy, given the large role that the EU has played in regional policy in the UK over the past 40 years (Sykes and Schulze-Bäing 2017).

Engagement with the European context has also been a driver of much thinking about city regions in England in the 2000s and 2010s, including that of central government. Research has demonstrated that 'countries that have high-performing cities beyond the capital city also have higher-performing and better balanced economies' (Parkinson 2019, 105). And EU support has not just been significant in quantitative financial terms, but has had other qualitative elements which have boosted place-making and governance potential, such as the stability of multiannual funding programmes and, relatedly, the enhanced autonomy that comes with having a dedicated and 'independent' source of support with which to engage in negotiations with other actors (e.g. national government and the private sector). These attributes have been particularly significant in the context of the austerity of the 2010s discussed above (Nurse and Fulton 2017).

In the wake of the 2016 EU Referendum the pursuit of national scale industrial policy (Mance and Bounds 2016) came to the fore, but as some have noted this is not a substitute for more place-based forms of policy (Industrial Communities Alliance 2017). Questions remain too about how well-tailored new Local Industrial Strategies (LISs) aligned to

national sectoral goals will be to the place-based potential of different territories (Billing, McCann, and Ortega-Argilés 2019; Nurse and Sykes 2020), or even if these documents will be retained (Hill 2021). A replacement for the EU Cohesion Policy following 'Brexit' is to be called the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) which has raised concerns about recentralisation of funding (House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee 2020). Combined with the accusations of political favouritism and lack of objectivity associated with other funds ostensibly dedicated to 'levelling-up' and the development of towns (Knott 2021) this means that the funding context for city regional development remains uncertain and contested.

The remaining sections of this paper explore the themes above in the context of the Liverpool City Region (LCR) and its new city regional Combined Authority.

4. The new city regionalism in practice – some scenes from Liverpool

4.1. Context

Liverpool is the main city of a conurbation of approximately 1.5 million people. Most of this is within the metropolitan county of Merseyside which had a Metropolitan County Council (MCC) from the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s. At that time, against a complex backdrop of long term social and economic decline (Cocks 2010; Couch 2017; Murden 2006; Parkinson 2019; Sykes et al. 2013; Shaw and Sykes 2016), municipal governance in Liverpool was tumultuous. Local leaders of the 'Militant' tendency pursued a policy of municipal development at odds with the financial restraints imposed by the central government of Margaret Thatcher (Parkinson 1985; Frost and North 2013). The abolition of MCC in 1986 removed the metropolitan scale of comprehensive government, though joint authorities remained to coordinate transport, waste, policing, and fire services. The MCC had also prepared a structure plan which promoted urban regeneration and set out a Green Belt for the metropolitan area (Dockerill and Sturzaker 2019). The need for regeneration in the 1980s led to the creation of the central government initiative, the Merseyside Development Corporation, whose remit covered much of the inner urban areas of the conurbation including large areas of dockland and waterfront.

As the 1990s dawned the agenda of new leadership in the core city of Liverpool was to 'make the place normal' (Leader of Liverpool City Council, Harry Rimmer, cited in Parkinson 2019, 47). The decade was also characterized by vision and strategy making at the metropolitan scale driven by the designation of the area as an EU Cohesion Policy 'Objective One' region. This status reflected the fact that GDP per capita in the sub-region was below 75% the average of that in the then EU 15 states. To access the large sums of support available from the EU to address this situation, the local authorities and their partners in the city region were required to work together to define strategic objectives at the city regional scale (Parkinson 2019; Sykes et al. 2013). As well as the high level of funding for initiatives to support the social, environmental, and economic recovery and development of the area, this need to work in a coordinated manner provided a considerable fillip to partnership and joint-working.

Major programmes of EU support were renewed in the 2000s helping the city region and its people to develop in social, economic, physical and environmental terms, with the progress being marked symbolically by the award of the status of European Capital of

Culture (ECoC) 2008 to Liverpool. The early years of preparing this were beset by instability and resignations at the Liverpool Culture Company set-up to deliver the event (O'Brien 2011). But the city and its partners turned things around dramatically and ECoC 2008 delivered an extensive cultural programme and an estimated £753.8 million in additional direct visitor spend across Liverpool, Merseyside and the wider north west region (Garcia, Melville, and Cox 2010). ECoC 2008 also contributed to a positive shift in perceptions of Liverpool and Merseyside, both within the area and beyond (García 2010). The expectations of some commentators that Liverpool would not be able to successfully deliver were confounded. However, the wider context for the city's development was again changing with the global financial and economic crisis ushering in new more challenging times. Despite this, Parkinson argues that in 2010 it was clear that 'Liverpool had had a very good decade' even if a new 'age of austerity' had arrived (2019, 96; 110–114). The following paragraphs examine the subsequent decade through the lens of the themes on the new English city regionalism outlined above.

4.2. The new city regional governance and Liverpool

A significant feature of the ECoC 2008 programme was that, whilst it was clearly centred on Liverpool, it also had a sub-regional dimension with other parts of the city region hosting events. This demonstrated that action branded under the name of the 'core' city of Liverpool could successfully generate benefits across the wider area. Of the Metropolitan County Councils created in the 1970s (Table 1 above) only one had featured the name of the core city in its title – 'Greater Manchester', with 'Merseyside' being used as the title of the conurbation on the river of the same name. This was to change in the 2010s with the creation of the Liverpool City Region CA in 2014.

Another significant development in local governing arrangements was the creation of an elected mayor for the core city of Liverpool. Referenda on the creation of elected mayors for the Core Cities in 2012 had resulted in only one positive result in Bristol. However, in Liverpool the city council voted to adopt the mayoral model in return for a City Deal in 2012 (Nurse 2015a). There are mixed views about the position of directly-elected 'Mayor of Liverpool'. The first incumbent, Joe Anderson of the Labour Party, faced severe challenges to developing a forward-looking agenda due to the austerity imposed on the city in the 2010s, but there is also a recognition that the elected mayoral model has 'provided clearer leadership, engaged the private sector, built links with government and raised the profile of the city nationally and internationally' (Parkinson 2019, 104).¹ Significantly the position was already in existence when the new Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) was established in 2014, and the Mayor of Liverpool had been in place for five years by the time a City Regional Mayor was elected in 2017. The LCRCA is thus one of two where there is both a directly-elected mayor for the core city and the wider city region/CA area. This illustrates well Hodson et al.'s (2020, 204) observation that 'Re-scaling to English city-regions involves some 're-design of governance' even while other pre-existing institutional structures and arrangements remain'.

The LCRCA comprises the five original local authority districts of the MCC – Liverpool, Knowsley, Sefton, St Helens, Wirral, and the additional area of Halton. Initially the

democratic leadership of the CA was provided by a City Region Cabinet comprising the political leaders from each local authority district, with one of their number being elected as leader. When the LCRCA came into being on the 1st of April 2014, an immediate point of potential contention arose in the new governance of the city region. The Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, argued that his national profile as the mayor of a Core City meant that he should lead the City Region Cabinet. This was in contrast to the convention seen in other CAs where a non-core city district had taken on the leadership to ensure balance between the core and periphery (Nurse 2015a). Though Anderson eventually backed down, and the LCRCA was initially led by Phil Davies, the leader of the neighbouring local authority of Wirral, this bumpy start did not ease a fractious relationship between the City of Liverpool and the wider city region (Nurse 2015b).

The LCRCA proceeded for the next year with its remit of delivering a transport and economic growth agenda, before the next step in the devolution agenda saw the adoption of bespoke 'Devolution Deals' in 2014 which transferred further powers over economic and transport budgeting, in return for the establishment of an elected 'Metro Mayor' for the city region (Sandford 2019). Given that the LCR is a stronghold of the Labour Party, and that its candidate would be effectively ensured of victory, much attention was given to a primary process to select its candidate (Sturzaker and Nurse 2020). As in other CAs the primary came down to a battle of local candidates versus those with a national profile, with Mayor of Liverpool Joe Anderson taking on two national Labour Members of Parliament – Luciana Berger and Steve Rotheram. Steve Rotheram was selected as the candidate and elected as LCR Mayor in 2017.

Much of Rotheram's early period in office was characterized by ongoing tensions between the core city and its periphery – not least the ambiguity and overlap between his role and that of the Mayor of Liverpool. Building upon his election manifesto (Rotheram 2016) and areas of power, Rotheram sought to place a greater focus on the districts within the city region, championing a town centre fund and placing a heavy focus on a skills agenda particularly relevant to the peripheral districts. Elsewhere, he mirrored priorities of other candidates for elected CA mayoralities, appointing a Cycling Commissioner to champion the delivery of active travel, and also linking with other metro mayors including the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, to champion strategic transport reform, including pushing for the renationalisation of Northern Rail which provides key links between Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and beyond.

Reviewing the situation at the end of the decade, Parkinson emphasizes that 'building identity, collaboration and trust in a city region is easy to aspire to and difficult to achieve' and that the LCR has made progress, with 'commitment and confidence' being 'higher'. However, he also observes that 'in terms of capacity to deliver and commitment to the city region, Liverpool had more to do' (2019, 107).

4.3. Legitimacy and citizen 'buy-in'

As noted already, citizen engagement with the new city-regional governance is a key question which looms in the background of the city-regional movement in England. In Greater Manchester, it has been argued by some that the creation of this new arena (notably with links to spatial planning) has helped to disrupt (to an extent) established

modes of ‘public-private’ regime-based city-regional governing (Hodson et al. 2020). Yet the GM city-regional mayoral elections in 2017 only attracted a turnout of 28.9%, whilst in the LCR Steve Rotherham may have been elected with 59% of the vote, but this was on a 26.1% turnout (Table 4) (the election for the Mayor of Liverpool in 2016 had a slightly higher turnout of 30.9%).

The figures in Table 4 also show that there is a certain ‘fade’ effect in terms of turnout from the core city of Liverpool (28.6%) to the peripheral area of Halton (20.5%). Overall, turnout levels were higher in the core city of Liverpool and the more coastal and central authorities of Wirral and Sefton, than in the eastern and southern parts of the city region. New elections for the offices of both Mayor of Liverpool and LCRCA Mayor are due to be held in May 2021. These will generate new figures on turnout which it will be instructive to compare with figures from earlier polls.

4.4. Spatial selectivity and planning

A task of governance at the city-regional scale—where a competence for spatial planning has been attributed, is that of exercising spatial selectivity as regards the growth and kinds of development which will be sought in different parts of the territory. This can be a complex process which brings together the city regional authorities, local authorities (typically with local planning competences), private developers, the public, and special interest civil society groups. The model of spatial planning at the city-regional scale in England varies – for example, the role of the GMSF is different from that of the Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) being prepared in the LCR. The GMSF and the West of England Spatial Plan prepared for the West of England CA area have the status of a joint local plan, are based on local plan legislation, and are notably able to address the often-controversial issue of Greenbelt allocations. The SDS for the LCR is based on the regulations for the London SDS and has been described as a ‘lighter touch and strategic approach’ (LCR Planner, interview with authors, March 2020). Given that the latest iteration of the SDS for London (the ‘London Plan’) was completed in 14 months, there is some optimism that this model will facilitate a less drawn out process in the LCR than that experienced in GM.

The SDS model in the LCR still addresses housing numbers for the CA territory, but can also incorporate emergent themes like climate change, public health and social inclusion, providing a context for local plans and Supplementary Development Documents (SDPs) to address these issues. The LCRCA is also the only CA which has development management powers and is a statutory consultee on local planning decisions – though it is recognized such powers need to be deployed with sensitivity to the views of

Table 4. Percentage and rank of turnout by local authority in Liverpool City Region Mayoral election.

Authority	% Turnout LCRCA Mayoral Election, 2017	Rank Turnout in LCRCA Mayoral Election, 2017
Liverpool	28.6%	1
Wirral	27.8%	2
Sefton	26.9%	3
St. Helens	22.9%	4
Knowsley	22.7%	5
Halton	20.5	6
Overall	26.1%	–

the constituent local authorities. The LCRA also has ‘call in powers’ to review local planning decisions, but these can only be used with the consent of the leader of the local authority concerned. The SDS can only be adopted by unanimity of the leaders of the six LCR local authorities and the CA mayor.

There was some reticence at first regarding city regional spatial planning, with the Mayor of the LCR being conscious of how politicized and complex the process had become in GM around the GMSF and the Greenbelt issue. Proposed revisions to the Greenbelt have also proved controversial in parts of the LCR (Dockerill and Sturzaker 2019), but as they are still dealt with as a local planning matter this has not yet impacted on the wider SDS process in the same manner. Among the suite of strategies that the CA can produce, the SDS is the only one with real regulatory weight which means it has been seen, alongside the power to control some funding, as one of the levers which the Mayor of the LCR can use to promote his manifesto.

Within the LCRCA there are regular Chief Planners Meetings, to which neighbouring West Lancashire and Warrington are also invited. There are also meetings with authorities on the borders of the LCR reflecting Parkinson’ (2019, 106) observation that the city region is not ‘hermetically sealed’ and that ‘many of its residents’ work outside it and many who live outside travel to work in it. So far, the experience of renewed city-regional spatial planning has not generated the controversy seen in other CA areas around new plans, and seems to have succeeded in demonstrating its relevance to key political figures. It will be interesting to witness to what extent it achieves a higher profile in subsequent elections for the Mayor of the LCR, and whether the consensual atmosphere which seems to reign at present around strategic planning in this stereotypically fractious city region will be maintained once the SDS begins to exert more influence over spatially selective decisions. Previously, for example, there were some tensions, around the strategic Liverpool Waters mixed-use development scheme located in Liverpool when attempts by the leaders of the LCR LEP to intervene in the process were firmly rebuffed by the Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, citing the primacy of Liverpool City Council’s planning powers (Nurse 2015a).

4.5. Austerity

Despite the progress in institution building outlined above and the resources brought by city and devolution ‘deals’ to Liverpool and the LCR, no account of these developments can ignore the ‘lost decade’ (Toynbee and Walker 2020) of austerity which has marked the country and city since 2010. Cuts to local budgets precipitated the turbulent politics of Liverpool in the 1980s, pushing it to ‘the brink’ of political and financial collapse (Parkinson 1985), and in the 2010s ‘it can be argued that the impact of the government’s cuts on the city’s finances has been greater and more difficult to manage than those faced by the Militant Labour council in the 1980s’ (Parkinson 2019, 110). The facts bear out such analysis, as ‘When adjusted for inflation, Liverpool City Council has £436 million less to spend per year now than it did in 2010, which equates to a 63 percent cut in its overall budget’ (Liverpool Express 2019). The ‘Government’s own figures show Liverpool’s Spending Power has reduced by a cumulative 21.3% in 2019/20 compared to 2010/11’ when ‘average reduction for all English authorities over this period was 10.2%’ (Liverpool Express 2019). Overall, Liverpool has had the biggest cut in its funding of all the Core

Cities and in the LCR ‘this cut was matched by Knowsley. So the two city region authorities with that were the highest ranked in the Index of Multiple Deprivation received disproportionately heavy cuts to their funding from central government’ (Parkinson 2019, 110). Set against the scale of such cuts and those to come, in 2020, Liverpool City Council alone, needed to find another £19 million in savings and a further £25 million in 2021. Since 2010 it has also lost more than 2,500 staff (Liverpool Express 2019). The additional £30 million annually for 30 years for the wider LCR under its 2016 ‘Devolution Deal’ to be added to repackaged existing funding seems modest indeed in the face of such deep cuts.

4.6. *The European question*

The rising profile of city regions in England is part of the wider experience of city-regional development and governance in Europe (Demazière, Desjardins, and Sykes 2020). But in Liverpool the ‘European question’ has a particular salience, being bound-up with the identity and history of the city in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and forming a cornerstone of the narrative of how the city fought back against the doctrine of ‘managed decline’ discussed by some at the highest levels of the Thatcher government in the 1980s (BBC News 2011). The EU invested significant resources into Merseyside. The 2000–2006 EU Objective One programme, for example, saw £840 million (Network for Europe n.d.) flow into the area, which with ‘match funding’ gave a total investment of over £1 billion over 6–7 years (compare this with LCRCA’s devolution ‘deal’ worth £900 million ‘over thirty years’). Parkinson (2019, 65) concludes that for a place like Liverpool ‘the sheer scale of EU Objective 1 funding caused a step-change in its confidence and gave its leaders the stability of funding over a long period to plan for change’. As a result, ‘Huge progress was made in a relatively short space of time’ and it ‘moved from a vulnerable post-imperial to a stronger more diverse economy embracing knowledge, science and innovation, culture and tourism’. The European question though is about far more than funding levels and the economy for Liverpool, but about a renewal of governance culture, confidence, and a distinct identity, and it came as little surprise when the city voted heavily to stay in the EU in the 2016 EU referendum (Nurse and Sykes 2019).

5. Conclusion

The evolution of city regionalism in England is bound-up with successive cycles of rescaling of sub-state government which have sought to provide institutions at the ‘right scale’ and with the right powers, but which have often stalled due to lack of finance, or been reversed by subsequent national legislative changes and policies. It provides an operative example of Jonas and Moisiso’s (2018, 351) contention ‘that city regionalism is becoming an important medium through which the state exercises its powers in the 21st century’. The case of the Metropolitan County Councils which existed from the 1970s into the 1980s illustrates this well, demonstrating the mutable quality of institutions and scales of government in a polity without a constitutionally established structure of governance tiers. A scale of governance can be brought into being, or abolished, quickly with little, or no meaningful consultation, through an Act of Parliament, or executive action, often

depending on the political and ideological agenda, of the government of the day. The experiment in English regionalization in the 1990s and 2000s, was summarily terminated thus by an incoming government in 2010.

In the past decade England's experimentation with sub-state governance settled on the scalar fix of sub-regional territories such as city-regions, argued to better reflect 'functional' geographies (e.g. Travel to work areas; transport; housing and labour markets) than more expansive regional territories. Again, state strategy has promoted this, but the powerful bottom-up dynamics which have also been at play at different times, and in different places must also be acknowledged. These have drawn on legacies stretching back to the 1990s which saw varied efforts by local authorities, business interests and others to work together to create metropolitan/city regional governing capacity – for example, the 'Manchester model' of city-regional cooperation which made it an exemplar for others, and ensured that the Greater Manchester city region was at the front of the queue for new institutional arrangements in the 2010s.

Other drivers of devolution to English city regions include the economic objective of addressing regional imbalances in England (the 'North-South' divide and its variants). The new structures are the product of an ongoing process of searching for the next 'larger than local' 'spatial fix' to resolve these issues. Today inter-municipal cooperation is being advanced through Combined Authorities (CAs), some led by elected Mayors. These are able to negotiate devolution 'deals' with central government. In the north of England such institutional change has taken place against the backdrop of the Northern Powerhouse initiative. Yet though sub-state devolution is still on the agenda in England, it also faces some competition from more centrally driven initiatives such as the 'national' (UK) industrial strategy and its requirement for Local Industrial Strategies which reflect its themes (Nurse and Sykes 2020). That the latter may now apparently be shelved despite the effort and resources invested in their development (Hill 2021) is again an illustration of how state centralism calls the shots in the English/UK polity and can reshape policy agendas and resource allocations overnight.

As noted earlier, Rodriguez-Pose and Gill (2003, 334) contend that it is important to consider 'subnational legitimacy' when analysing processes of devolution. Whilst the devolution agenda ostensibly dovetails well with the spatial economic concerns and initiatives discussed above and has a clear legislative basis, it remains uncertain how, or whether, it will reinvigorate citizen engagement in the face of desperately low levels of voter participation in democratic processes at sub-state scales. The turnouts for the first elections for CA mayors in 2017 – when fewer than a third of eligible voters participated (Table 3) – suggest there is some way to go in securing the sought-after citizen 'buy-in' to the new sub-state scalar settlement. Centralist tendencies in the 'Brexit' state (Ward 2020), and accusations that the allocations of funding made in lieu of lost EU investments in different territories are politically motivated (Bounds and Smith 2021), may yet further undermine the sense that meaningful authority and autonomy is vested at the devolved scale.

The new structures also need to address the issue of spatial selectivity, and the question of how to reconcile the interests of complex and diverse territories at the intra-city regional level – for example, 'core city' and wider 'city regional' agendas. The return of strategic spatial planning in some city regions provides one possible arena of tension here – for example, if CAs take decisions from a perspective of a strategic/collective

wider territorial interest, such as releasing Greenbelt land for housing, or planning infrastructure development, which particularly affect and/or prove unpopular in certain sub-territories of a city region. It is the attribution of powers over greenbelt allocations to the GM city region which has led to planning there being perceived as a higher stakes and hence more political affair than in the LCRA. How spatial planning is configured at city regional level thus may not only define parameters of possible action as regards planning agendas, but also influence the wider ‘tone’ of debate and spatial governance processes.

Finally, echoing previous studies and the debates of the 1990s and 2000s around New Regionalism and the importance of local specificity in institutional emergence (see Section 3.2 above), the case of Liverpool and the LCRCRA reminds us that configurations of the new city-regional governance are also strongly shaped by place-based, historically rooted factors. Local political cultures differ from place to place making it hard to always ‘read off’ changes simply from wider structural forces and state strategy. For example, the new CAs in the proximate city regions of Liverpool and Manchester illustrate the influence of institutional and political management differences within the same polity. In the LCR there are two executive Mayors (for the core city of Liverpool and the LCR) who can both claim an electoral mandate, creating scope for in-built competition. Differing institutional configurations and competences at a more local level thus interact to generate particular political and policy dynamics. Ultimately, whilst ‘rescaling’ is often considered from the perspective of wider structural ‘exogenous’ political-economic shifts and state strategies, we should not forget that the places it affects have their own distinctive contexts and histories which shape the material practices of rescaling as it occurs ‘on the ground’.

Note

1. The Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, was arrested in December 2020 as part of a Police investigation into building contracts in the city and subsequently stepped-down (Turner-LE and Thorp 2020; Thorp 2020). The contest to secure the Labour Party nomination to stand for election as Mayor of Liverpool in 2021 has also been mired in political controversy (Pidd and Wolfe-Robinson 2021) and in March 2021 a critical government inspector’s report into aspects of governance and management at Liverpool City Council was published (Caller 2021).

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ORCID

Olivier Sykes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2634-2629>

Alexander Nurse  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0325-4420>

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