

2014/48

16 Sept 2014

Pocket Watch – Devo-max now for education and training?

Introduction

It may not be devo-max as the Scots might recognise it but devolving public services in some form is fast becoming the new must have in policy manifestos south of the border. It's less new in education where local commissioning of support services in schools, colleges and universities has been around for some time, where both Parties have been promoting a locally driven growth agenda as a way out of the recession and where community groups have been encouraged to manage schools and employer groups to take over apprenticeships. Either way, central government planning it seems is out and locally determined provision in. The theory is that a 'consumer-orientated' system, one intended to bring both efficiency and responsiveness, is what's needed, though how far the two can happily co-exist is debatable. Whether this will spread to other services such as health as Simon Jenkins indicated in the [The Guardian](#) this week remains to be seen but it's certainly becoming a force in the world of education as some of these latest developments indicate.

Some latest developments

The model advocated in reports over recent years by think tanks such as IPPR and Policy Exchange is to beef up the city region, give it greater control over budgets and powers to manage provision and free it up to run services such as children's provision and youth training where often local needs differ from national priorities. The '*most radical*' example of this approach emerged in a [report](#) last week by another think tank, ResPublica, which took the Greater Manchester area as a case study and argued that gradually handing over the total budget, some £2.25bn currently, to the Combined Authority would allow it to manage services such as health and welfare, education and skills training more effectively and much closer to customer needs. It proposed this as "*a blueprint for independence for cities in England.*"

In many ways the report builds on the New Deal for English councils proposed by Ed Miliband a couple of months ago. That Deal proposed bundling up the management and funding of a number of services such as youth training and support activities and devolving them "*to partnerships of local authorities at city and county region*" to commission. A similar approach is under consideration as part of the Deputy Prime Minister's Northern Futures discussion where further devolution is due to be announced by the Chancellor later this autumn. Nor does it end there: there has been considerable debate recently about the outsourcing of children's services, regional commissioners are being introduced to the school system and we haven't even mentioned HE.

Where does all this leave things?

Divesting the state of much of the management of public services and handing it over to local ownership may sound attractive especially in an election year when there is disenchantment with central government provision but there are risks as has been evident in both the school and hospital systems. Replacing one set of bureaucracies with another is one risk, ensuring equity and balance in delivery is another but arguably the biggest risk is to local accountability. Labour for example was keen that its New Deal for English councils came with a strong system of checks and balances covering spending and performance. For all Parties however, the seven principles that form the basis of the '[Ethical Standards for Providers of Public Services](#)' as listed recently by the Committee on Standards in Public Life offers a good starting point.



Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)

Pocket Watches are intended to provide quick, informal updates on national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.

Is devo max the new mantra? Sept 2014