Coordination, agenda-setting, and future planning: the role of Combined Authorities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sean Kippin and Janice Morphet

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Introduction

1 Following an intermittent and halting roll-out since they were established in the 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, Combined Authorities (CAs) are now part of English governance (Giovannini, 2021). They represent a 'pooling' of competences of responsibilities by different geographically contiguous local authorities (Sandford 2017) which approximately align with economic geographies (Shutt & Liddle, 2019) and have emerged with strong encouragement from central government (Lowndes & Lemprière 2018; Shaw & Tewdwr Jones, 2017), including financial incentives. Today, they cover most of England's large urban centres, and enjoy a modest and variable range of competences over planning, transport, and economic development (Morphet, 2017; Sandford, 2017). However, they do not form part of a local government system in England as they are *sui generis*, each being created by Parliamentary Regulation, through secondary legislation. Since the establishment of the first CA in 2011, they have grown in profile and recognition, owing in part to the presence of Directly Elected Mayors, who provide a model executive leadership and electoral legitimacy (Fenwick & Johnston, 2020a; Fenwick & Johnston, 2020b).

2 While CAs possess responsibility for a decidedly modest range of policy tools, the COVID-19 pandemic was a test of how these can be deployed in order to assist in attenuating the economic, social, and public health fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic also provided some comparisons between the powers of post-2021 sub-regional government arrangements compared with those implemented two decades

earlier for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London (Mitchell, 2013), which were sharply drawn by First Ministers in Scotland and Wales and starkly lamented by the Mayors of Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City Region (Morphet, 2021). The tumultuous period of the pandemic provided an opportunity to assess the role and influence of CAs and to ask whether this model evolved during and as a result of the crisis. Unlike the earlier cohort of devolved administrations and the creation of a new local authority in London, we discuss the roles and permissions available to the directly elected mayors and their CAs that were able to contribute to the management of the pandemic.

3　In undertaking this assessment, we argue that CA activities and influence were clustered around three main loci. Firstly, they engaged in coordination and mediation between constituent local authorities and communicated their shared preferences and needs to central government. Secondly, they proved influential as agenda setters, drawing attention to, and increased the salience of, issues of regional inequalities and the related shortcomings of the central government response. Thirdly, they acted within their regeneration and planning competences to strategize the post-pandemic economic and urban futures of their city-regions, often constructing narratives of the medium-term future which broke considerably with the recent past. As a final reflection, we draw attention to the inherent instability of these units of territorial governance which rely on central government largesse for funding, a structuring factor which inhibits the ability of CAs to develop as alternative power centres to Westminster and Whitehall, and a dynamic which was much in evidence during the pandemic. Has COVID-19 clarified or muddied the waters of the role of these sub-national institutions (new and old), and what impact will these responses have on the wider devolution agenda?

4　This paper draws on data from a close reading of statements issued by CAs and their leadership during the pandemic, including significant documents released by the CAs, public interviews with key figures, parliamentary evidence sessions, and media appearances. It draws primarily on the activities of three Combined Authorities: The Liverpool City Region, The West Midlands, and Tees Valley Combined Authorities. However, it also, where particularly pertinent, draws on examples from other CAs such as Greater Manchester. The research has not received any external funding support. It contributes to the knowledge of the specific issues around the creation and use of this new tier of government, the strengths and weaknesses of the CA model in comparison with earlier sub-national governance structures, and enables some analysis and conclusions about its emerging role as a form of government within the UK.

The roles of sub-national government in the UK

5　Sub-national government in the UK is both complex and simple (Table 1 sets out, non-exhaustively, the respective roles of key local government institutions in the UK). It is complex because the UK comprises four nations, each of which have forms of subnational governance within them. All have local authorities, while in England there are CAs, neighbourhoods and parishes, and in Scotland there are community councils. Within local government there are also differences. In England, most of the land area is governed in two tier local authority structures, whether in county councils or the GLA in London, which is a local authority. The CAs, of which there are 10, are established by

statutory instruments in Parliament rather than through generic legislation for this type of institutional structure and are not local authorities. The policy permissions set out in the individual Regulations differ between CAs and they do not have the powers to raise funding in the same way as local authorities, including the GLA (Sandford, 2019). The government has incentivised CAs to adopt a directly elected mayor as a form of governance, with those CAs without this system not being offered a government 'devolution' deal. In comparison, the Mayor of London has specific powers for control and funding of transport, housing, health, regeneration, strategic planning, police, fire and emergency services - while also having wider local authority powers that allow fundraising. In the CAs, the mayors have fewer, more specific policy permissions which are conferred (Sandford, 2017; Morphet, 2017) and their funding is granted for specific types of projects, where the projects in the programmes associated with the 'devolution deal' must be approved by central government. Set against this complexity is the simple fact that all sub-national government is created by Parliament, exists at its pleasure, and thus can be dissolved; it is not part of the constitution, is subject to considerable influence by central government, and has been reorganised and recalibrated a number of times.

Table 1. Local Government and Combined Authorities in the United Kingdom

Institution	Role
Local Authority (LA)	Units of local government within a defined geographic area responsible for a defined range of services within a given geographical area, such as (non-exhaustively) social care, education, social housing, planning, and waste collection.
Devolved Parliament (Scotland) or Assembly (Wales and Northern Ireland)	Legislatures (with attendant governments or Executives led by a First Minister) in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland which are responsible for policy areas previously reserved to the UK Government such as (non-exhaustively) health, education, transport, local government, and in some cases justice and policing.
Combined Authority (CA)	An organisation set up in England which enables two or more geographically contiguous local authorities in a given area to pool control and resources over certain policy areas. They are headed by a Metro (or Directly Elected) Mayor, who leads a Cabinet made up of the Leaders of the constituent councils. Their powers are decided by a 'devolution deal' with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Local Government.
Metro Mayor	The directly elected Executive leader of a Combined Authority, with responsibility for leadership of the organisation and for setting up 'Mayoral Corporations' for developments. They provide visible public leadership and act as the public face of the authorities.
Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Local Government	The UK Government department responsible for local government policy in England, including for negotiating devolution deals and fostering and encouraging Combined Authorities. It was known as the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG) prior to 2022, and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) until 2015.

Local Enterprise Partnership	Business-led non-statutory bodies responsible for local government in England, which encompass local government, business and private sector, and voluntary sector representation, covering a defined geographic territory. They replaced Regional Development Agencies which operated on a pan-regional basis.

Source: the Authors

6   In England, when CAs were initially established through the 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, they took on a specific institutional form which was not that of a local authority. There have been few discussions about the implications of this difference in powers (Raikes, 2019). However, in the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a sharp contrast in the permissions held by these directly elected mayors in CAs and the First Ministers (FM) of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The most specific comparisons have been drawn when considering issues such as the ability of the FMs to operate different regimes for closure of their borders, opening of services and public events, shops and schools, and the use of public transport. Nonetheless, the pandemic undoubtedly saw the status of the Metro Mayors elevated, partially as a result of their being seen as somehow equivalent to the FMs by news media. A low degree of public awareness as to the respective competences of these figures may have contributed to confusion as to who was responsible for what and thus could reasonably be held accountable.

7   While the Mayor of London (MoL) has formal responsibility for Transport for London, the services are financially supported by central government, and their income is supplemented by commuters drawn from a much wider area. These services needed to be maintained during lockdown to support public health and to enable essential workers to travel and the construction industry to continue to function. The MoL was forced to seek direct financial support from government and this was only provided in exchange for specific new curbs on services, investment and the reduction in the provision of free travel for the over-60s. The MoL did not have the powers to manage the economy or schools, making these powers appear to be more similar to the permissions of the mayors in the CAs rather than to those of FMs. On the other hand, the MoL was able to maintain his affordable house building programme and introduce local transport measures while the mayors in CAs were criticised for doing less and not providing support funding for post-pandemic initiatives without the recognition that their powers and funding are directly controlled from Whitehall.

8   When the pandemic hit the UK, the devolved governments and their First Ministers still had enough powers to manage it in their own way (Morphet, 2021). For instance, the Scottish and Welsh Governments sought to lift public health restrictions more slowly than did the UK Government. A 'four nations' approach was followed at first, but subsequent divergences were noted (see Kippin & Cairney, 2021; 2022; and Cairney & Kippin, 2022). This served to heighten the understanding of the extent of devolution for those living in England and the London based media which (eventually) learned to specifically differentiate between English and UK measures (Cushion *et al*, 2020). This continued differentiation highlighted the relative powers between the mayors of the CAs and FMs. It also served to enable the Mayor of Greater Manchester, for example, to speak out for his own areas of responsibility on the basis of place-based interests for

managing the pandemic, an issue compounded by the Prime Minister's approach to implementing local lockdowns in 2020 in England without any consultation or additional resources (Kenny & Kelsey, 2020).

The responsibilities of the CA Mayors: literature review

9   CAs are *sui generis* and are not a legally defined institutional structure that is used in any other form of government in the UK. While being characterised as a 'bottom up' governance form, each CA proposal has to be agreed by the constituent local authorities and central government before being implemented (Fenwick & Johnston, 2020). Even then, responsibilities can be removed, such as that of strategic planning for the new mayor of the West Yorkshire CA (WYCA, 2020; Parsons, 2021). Table 2 provides an account of the competences of the Combined Authorities in England, but it is worth noting that any transfer of responsibility has tended to be partial rather than complete. For instance, while each CA enjoys certain transport powers, none has complete authority over the transport infrastructure to the extent enjoyed by the Scottish and Welsh governments. Each CA is a singular statutory body established through specific secondary legislation which defines their area, membership and remit.

10   In terms of their governance arrangements, all CAs are 'corporate bodies formed of two or more local government areas in order to exercise functions on a greater geographical scale than a single authority permits.' (NAO, 2017, p. 11). CAs have no exclusive legal competences and their powers are discretionary rather than statutory (Sandford, 2019, p. 111). This makes them a very different legal form in comparison with local authorities. The GLA is a local authority with a directly elected MoL, created through the 1999 London Government Act. As Travers (2002) states, the GLA was expected to be the model for other (city) regions with both its powers and financial freedoms. However, CAs are instead a stronger and legally confirmed model of pooled powers and resources between local authorities that are set out in the 1972 Local Government Act s101-104. Through the use of these powers, local authorities can come together for agreed purposes, share staff from other local authorities, including Chief Executives, and take joint decisions. Many local authorities have used these powers to manage austerity (LGA, 2016). Both the MoL and the mayors of the CAs have some power over the police, where they are given the powers of the Police and Crime Commissioners outside London.

11   This architecture of informal and incentivised working in CAs has been set within the context of austerity for local government (Gamble, 2015) and has meant that all local authorities have had some necessity to engage in these top-down deal arrangements in order to obtain capital funding for local investment. These deal packages are local agreements to deliver nationally determined projects. Indeed, while often discussed as representing a significant devolution of responsibility away from the famously centralised UK polity, the responsibilities granted to CAs are conditional, and often given due to the potential for local actors to deliver on national government priorities more effectively. In the CAs that have been implemented since 2012, it is clear that the participating local authorities have little notion as to what the Government's objectives are in their negotiations and have shown uncertainty about whether these are public service objectives or wider public service reform. 'The areas we have spoken to think that it is increasingly untenable for Government to insist publicly that the objectives of

devolution are for local areas to define, given the nature of the deal-making process as a negotiation' (Centre for Public Scrutiny, 2016, p. 7).

Table 2. Mayoral Combined Authorities: competences (C) and deal funding (DF) 2022

MCA	Investment fund	Transport Buses (B) Sustainable transport fund (ST) Unified investment plan (UIP)	Strategic planning	Housing deal funding (HDF)/ brownfield and funding (BLF)	Regen and mayoral dev corps (MDC) competences	Skills, business support & adult education	Fiscal – retain business rates (BR) / precept (P)	Police and fire combined powers in mayor (P&F)	other
Cambs and Peterborough	DF	B/ST/UIP		HDF	MDC	DF	P		
Gtr Manchester	DF	B/ST/UIP	C	HDF/BLF	MDC	DF	BR/P	P&F	justice
Liverpool City Region	DF	B/ST/UIP	C	BLF	MDC	DF	BR/P		energy
North of Tyne	DF	UIP		BLF	MDC		P		
Sheffield City Region / South Yorks	DF	B/ST/UIP		BLF	MDC		P		
Tees Valley	DF	ST/UIP		BLF	MDC	DF	P		energy
West of England	DF	ST/UIP	C	HDF	MDC	DF	BR		energy
West Midlands	DF	ST/UIP		HDF/BLF	MDC	DF	BR/P		
West Yorkshire	DF	B/ST/UIP		BLF	MDC		P	P&F	

Source :the Authors

12 It is useful to examine CA purposes as a basis for considering here how they were able to exercise their place-based leadership (Roberts, 2020), particularly during the pandemic. There have been different views on the purpose and functions of the CA institutional model. The National Audit Office (NAO, 2017) suggested that 'the creation of combined authorities was part of public service reform and effectively created a statute-based vehicle to take forward devolution deals' (Murphie, 2019, p. 94), that is, they were statecraft for the implementation of wider mechanisms for centralisation (Morphet, 2017). Others argue that CAs have a role in restoring a longstanding

multilevel governance structure within England, replacing a strategic tier which was removed in 2010 by the Labour Government and then reinforced by the Coalition Government (McGuinness & Mawson, 2017). Others describe them as a 'Long-winded route to restoring the Met[ropolitan] Counties' (Townsend, 2019, p. 124) that were abolished in 1986. Another approach has been to see the creation of CAs as part of a new economic orthodoxy of Functional Economic Areas (Krugman, 1990; Ahrend et al., 2014; Dijkstra & Poelman, 2013) where stronger political leadership within journey-to-work areas can result in stronger GDP both within these areas and nationally (Charbit & Romano, 2017; Bentley et al., 2017).

13   In addition to these specific and functional objectives, others have cast the development of this *meso* government level within broader analytical frameworks. Between 1999 and 2009, there were considerable debates within the UK and the EU about substate government structures (HMG, 1999; EU, 2001; Barca, 2009). The potential for the introduction of a regional government model was one approach in England in 2004, through the North East referendum. Had the referendum resulted in a 'Yes' vote, then a Regional Assembly (RAs) would have been formed. It is interesting to note that in the context of the GLA formed in 1999, the Regional White Paper (2002) proposed that the RAs should have the same kinds of powers as the MoL, that is responsibilities for regeneration funding, improving housing, public transport and tourism (Para 4.2). These functions were not to be taken from local authorities, but rather from existing central government bodies operating at the regional scale. Another major function of the new RAs was to develop and deliver certain EU policies (para 3.7). So, the proposed RAs, which would have been established after a positive referendum result, were modelled on the GLA. However, these were not described as 'authorities', nor was there any expectation that there should be a directly elected mayor (although the RA was to be comprised of representatives of geographical areas).

14   When considering the approach adopted in 2009 for CAs, then the model had changed to one where the CA is described in legal terms as *primus inter pares* alongside its constituent local authorities. The CA was the combination of all the constituent authorities and the powers shared between them. The directly elected mayor had some functions but overall the powers proposed for CAs were far less than those proposed for the RA in 2004. Further, many Metro Mayors are constrained by the presence of a Cabinet made up of Local Authority leaders who wield influence over allocated policy portfolios. One explanation for the change in approach in granting powers could have been that Whitehall simply did not want to give up the regional control and powers that it had accumulated. These had been exercised through the Government Offices for the Regions it created in 1993, and the Regional Development Agencies established in 1998 to manage the EU Structural Funds programmes and associated government investment. Regional Development Agencies were also abolished by the Coalition government which was most strongly associated with the Combined Authorities agenda.

15   As a new form of governance (Ayres, 2017), CAs' have responsibilities which can be described as both specific and weak, and enjoy control over a very limited range of policy instruments (Hood and Margetts, 2007). Their powers are remitted upwards and pooled by local authorities who may still be able to exercise decision-making over the remitted issues. There appear to be no powers delegated from central government and discussions on devolution deals are atomised and competitive. The study undertaken by

the Centre for Public Scrutiny (2016, p. 5) indicated that CAs would prefer public service reform so that they can be direct service providers. Sandford argues that CAs are grant coalitions, with 'a dependence on discretionary central grants, emanating from a rapidly mutating policy environment, [creating]an identifiable pattern of incentives for the priorities adopted by English mayoral combined authorities' (Sandford, 2019, p. 106). Some define CAs as 'spatial imaginaries' (Pemberton & Shaw, 2012; Pike et al., 2019; Bradley, 2019), where there is no cohesion between the areas contained within them whereas Pemberton and Morphet (2014) have described them as 'transitional territorialism', which like Local Enterprise Partnerships, set up to take over the responsibilities of the RDAs after they were abolished in 2010, have fuzzy responsibilities, blurred accountability and a limited institutional life as instrumental intermediary structures. In 2021, the Government announced, following a review (Ney, 2017) that the future role of LEPs would be limited and they would be incorporated within democratic local structures by 2030 - a potential consequence of Brexit.

16   The implementation of the CAs was a government mechanism that chose to adopt networks to reinforce hierarchies (Rhodes, 1981). This was achieved through the horizontal governance aggregations to achieve vertical alignment to government departments, making management easier for Whitehall, particularly the Treasury (Morphet, 2023). Others have made the same point in different ways. For instance, Fraser has argued that scalar types have been used to reinforce local fragmentation and increase central control through an exercise in scalecraft (Fraser, 2010). Given their institutional form, CAs also express an external policy narrative of devolution and localisation of control while the associated lack of powers and tied funding 'deals' have the practical consequence of increasing centralisation (Bulpitt, 1983; Bradbury, 2006). Others go further and argue that CAs are part of a policy of 'new centralism' (Bentley et al., 2017, p. 207; Morphet 2021).

17   If CAs are a tool of statecraft, centralising control at the local level (Bulpitt, 1983), was this approach used to manage the pandemic? While there are long-established procedures for emergency planning between central and local government (Morphet, 2021), these appear to have been overlooked in the initial scramble for the provision of ventilators, PPE and food parcels by central government. The CAs were left without a specific role in management of the pandemic in the same way as local authorities, which was initially attributed to the lack of experience of similar events at the centre of the civil service. However, in practice this quasi-localism was replaced by centralised cronyism (NAO, 2021), pork-barrel politics (Hanretty, 2021) and party-political preferment, a pathway that was also used for local funding and decision making, such as expressed through levelling up and town deals (HMT, 2021).

Combined authorities in the pandemic

18   If the CAs were marginalised from the Government's response to the pandemic, what distinct roles were they able to exercise? While it has been argued that CAs have been blame-takers for austerity through 'scalar dumping' (Shaw & Tewdwr Jones, 2017), the failure of government to explicitly provide or delegate functions to CAs meant that their mayors were unable to exercise many powers in the pandemic. It could be argued that this demonstrated their weakness. However, while CAs were set up to be client bodies, with a small democratic mandate but no legally defined budgets and dependent

on Government, CA mayors could legitimately argue that it was place-based leadership during the pandemic and not their powers, by which their performance (and English devolution policy generally) should be judged. This point was reinforced in the CA elections in 2021 (Giovannini, 2021; Johns, 2021). In contrast, as former Prime Minster Johnson increasingly centralised the management of the pandemic, he shouldered the blame and his approval ratings fell, confirming assumptions about the nature of the UK's 'Westminster Model' (NOP, 2021; Cairney & Kippin, 2022). Once the vaccination roll out had commenced, operating at a local level, his approval ratings increased (prior to his largely unrelated downfall).

19   If the legal and institutional roles of the CAs were marginalised by central government in helping to manage the pandemic, then what have mayors nevertheless sought to contribute? We have identified three distinct soft power roles that have become apparent and sought to investigate how these were implemented and developed during the March 2020-August 2021 pandemic period. These roles are:

   • Coordination and mediation

20   Firstly, CAs have engaged in coordination and mediation between constituent local authorities, communicating their shared preferences and needs to central government.

   • Agenda setters

21   Secondly, CAs have proven influential as agenda setters, drawing attention to, and increasing the salience of, issues of regional inequalities and the related shortcomings of the central government response.

   • Strategizing their future

22   Thirdly, CAs have deployed their powers over regeneration and planning to strategize the economic and urban futures of their city-regions, often constructing narratives of the medium-term future which break with the recent past to varying degrees.

23   The responses of three case study authorities are interwoven throughout the following discussion of these themes, with each authority exhibiting activities that can be grouped under each heading.

Coordination and mediation

24   A primary loci of CA activity during the pandemic was the development of a regional coordination role, encompassing mainly activities within their city-regions, but also between city regions and with central government. This took three primary forms: firstly, by facilitating decision-making on a regional level rather than as individual local authorities. Secondly, by engaging with local stakeholders such as businesses and civil society organisations. Finally, by using their ability to procure or use other formal policy levers to make small interventions, either to demonstrate action and relevance, or to help in whatever (usually small) way they could.

25   Senior policymakers repeatedly referred to the importance of collaboration between constituent authorities. Steve Rotherham said that his 'top priority throughout this crisis has been protecting people's health and safety, as well as their jobs and livelihoods' (quoted in Garnett, 2020). During the acute crisis period of March 2020, Rotherham encouraged local civic leaders to 'come together and do all that we can to stop the spread of the Coronavirus and mitigate the economic, social and health impacts it will have' (Liverpool City Region, 2020), and Combined Authority press

releases stressed the significance of the involvement of the constituent councils. This is unsurprising in some respects, given the composition of the Mayoral Cabinet, which brings together the elected political leaders of the constituent authorities. However, such partnership may not necessarily be taken for granted, given the history of poor relations in Liverpool (and other comparable areas, such as the North East of England, which saw attempts to even create a Combined Authority repeatedly break down).

26   A greater propensity for partnership working can be ascribed to the particular context of the pandemic, in which the consequences of indulging in political and territorial turf wars could be construed negatively by the public, particularly in a context in which 'pulling together' was seen as desirable and necessary (Delevic, 2020). A key example is the Liverpool City Region's participation in SMART (Systematic, Meaningful, Asymptomatic, Repeated Testing), in which the six constituent authorities of the City Region joined together through the forum of the Combined Authority to scale up testing across the area. The goal had been to keep the overall caseload low in order to avoid the placement of the region under Tier 2 restrictions, which would have had implications for many businesses which would have been unable to operate (see below for more details on the 'tiers' challenge). The Liverpool Combined Authority lacked the authority, even nominally, to participate in the delivery of health policy (which was not part of the devolution deal), but it nonetheless played a key role in bringing together different elements of the public sector in the region, stepping outside of its formal powers and demonstrating an ability to act as a forum for cooperation across the region between local authorities, but also beyond.

27   The Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) is the latest institutional manifestation of longstanding collaboration between the different businesses, local authorities, and other stakeholders in the region, geared primarily towards economic development. For instance, following the abolition of the Cleveland County Council in 1996, the area's local authorities collectively set up the body Tees Valley Unlimited, which essentially performed the function of a contemporary Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) (Evenhuis, 2018). Indeed, the Chair of the Local Enterprise Partnership is a 'non-constituent' (politically independent) member of the Cabinet, which had otherwise been made up mainly of Labour politicians working with the Conservative Mayor, Ben Houchen. The partnership working model is evident in the shared approach to identifying a potential site for expanded Covid-related healthcare delivery (Brown, 2020).

28   Such coordination also extended outwards, including *between* Mayors and different CAs, in spite of potential party political or geographic rivalries. For instance, in providing an account of a 'typical' day spent managing the pandemic in April 2020, Andy Street (quoted in Haynes, 2020) of the WMCA recounted:

> "The first external meeting is my weekly call with the M9 – the group of metro mayors around the country. Despite differing political allegiances the group gets on well and we share many common goals. Sadly, instead of discussing the future of devolution, the only topic for conversation is how we as mayors can collectively come up with solutions for our regions, as well as what more support and power we may need from central Government. As always it is nice to hear from Andy Burnham about how the UK's second (West Midlands, obviously) and third (Greater Manchester) regions continue to strike encouraging similarities in their response to the pandemic".

29   Another role lay in the deployment of the modest range of measures at the CA's disposal. For instance, while the TVCA does not enjoy responsibility for public health, it did act decisively early in the pandemic to procure a large quantity of goods seen as relevant to the attenuation of the pandemic. It purchased, according to a BBC News article, 100,000 bottles of hand sanitizer. Interestingly, the purchase was made from a local nail and beauty firm, and perhaps represented an opportunity to ensure that public money on essential equipment was spent locally (BBC News, 2020). Comparable efforts can be seen in the West Midlands (West Midlands Combined Universities, 2020) as regards PPE. In the same period, the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) used its authority to remove tunnel tolls in its role as the local transport regulator, to create an earlier bus service for older people to allow them to avoid busier periods to perform essential tasks such as buying groceries, and to freeze the Mayoral Precept portion of Council Tax (Thorp, 2021). In short, where authorities had relevant discretionary powers, they were willing to use them as part of a broader effort to attenuate the primary and secondary impacts of the virus. However, the scope for doing so was generally rather limited, and highlights the extent to which the exercise of power by CAs and Metro Mayors depended on exploiting their strategic position to encourage collaboration across the city region.

Agenda setting

30   CAs proved influential as agenda setters during the pandemic, '[enjoying] renewed visibility, albeit amid considerable rancour with Whitehall' (Warner et al., 2021, p. 1) and acting as champions of their locality (Giovanini, 2021) in a time of crisis. They drew attention to, and increased the salience of, issues of regional inequalities and the related shortcomings of Central government response to the pandemic in their areas (most notably the issue of the placement of different areas of England into different 'tiers' whereby restrictions would be applied centrally based on the perceived impact of the virus). In this, they wielded soft power to influence public opinion on their own role and the relative actions of central government. During the early stages of the pandemic, the WMCA acted outside of its defined responsibilities to assist in the broader public sector procurement of Public Protective Equipment (PPE). This was described as a 'call to arms' across the region (Med-Tech News, 2020) and involved a process by which the CA first canvassed businesses in the region to identify organisations that could provide relevant equipment, and then sought to identify businesses that had the capacity to modify their operations to produce PPE (having not done so before). The Tees Valley Metro Mayor used his profile to press for a faster pace of payment from public sector partners to hard-strapped local businesses during the pandemic (NEPIC, 2020).

31   This agenda setting role also had a national political component, for instance through their representation of broader sub-regional matters, and an ability to act as a conduit for information and the results of processes of bargaining between local and national government. Undoubtedly, Mayors emerged during the pandemic with their existing credentials as regional figureheads enhanced (Paun et al., 2022). Indeed, the tendency of media to simplify complex issues by reducing them to personal dynamics (or indeed individual ambition) was on full display in the christening of the Greater Manchester Metro Mayor Andy Burnham as the "King of the North", in reference to a storyline

from the TV series Game of Thrones. However, Burnham (together with Steve Rotheram in Liverpool) undoubtedly saw his already high profile increase as a result of the very public falling out with central government over the placement of the region into a higher tier of geographically based Covid-19 restrictions (and crucially without commensurate, in Burnham and his Combined Authority Cabinet Colleagues' view financial support than comparable areas). This very public set of negotiations generated attention to the issue, with a goal of pressuring the government to improve its offer, and perhaps reflected a practical need for government ministers to avoid negotiations with scores of local authorities (a dynamic reinforced by the superior electoral mandate enjoyed by the Metro Mayors).

32   The UK's regional socioeconomic geography also undoubtedly played a role in informing both the activities and perceptions of the Metro Mayors during the Covid period. While of course not limited to the large northern city regions, devolution in England has often been framed in terms of addressing a north/south divide, for instance through the "Northern Powerhouse" agenda (of which the creation of the Greater Manchester city region was one component) (Lee, 2017) The apparently differential treatment of the Manchester and Liverpool CAs in particular and the consequent reaction was the core grievance here (though the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, criticised the Government for placing Birmingham in Tier 3 restrictions – ITV News, 2020**).** In a historically unequal country, with affluent regions south as the South East (and with decision-making power concentrated in London), the Metro Mayors used their heightened profile to draw attention to regional inequalities as they pertain to the management of the pandemic. For example, Andy Burnham told the House of Commons Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee (BEIS Committee, 2020):

> "The lesson of this week, and the reason why this became a fundamental issue for me in the negotiation we have just had, is that Steve and I could tell you that, when we were in Westminster, we were used to seeing the north of England get pushed around and told no. That was just basically what happened but, in some ways, things came to a head because of this simple point: if you are going to lock down people's jobs and lives, and you are going to do that to some places but not others, you cannot do that on terms dictated from 200 miles away".

33   Steve Rotheram, speaking at the same session, agreed:

> "Over the last few weeks, with Andy and others, we have wanted to work to really close that disparity between the north and the south […].. We entered the pandemic with around 70,000 people unable to work due to ill health and, of course, that has only got worse. We have a high prevalence of long-term conditions in the Liverpool City Region, and the disproportionately high number of deaths that have happened over the last seven or eight months will also increase pressures on, for instance, mental health and wellbeing".

34   A final component of the 'agenda setting' role relates to the requirement for Combined Authorities to seek permission, resources, or support for agendas within their city regions from central government. As mentioned, CAs enjoy only a modest range of responsibilities, which, while they may be consequential and effective, do not represent a substantial transferral of power from centre to region. Instead, city regions and their mayors are required to play an advocate role, demonstrating that their priorities represent an effective means of assisting central government in achieving its priorities (usually in terms of meeting economic growth targets). This was on display during the pandemic, where the mayors were required not only to coordinate within their region,

but also to advocate for their regions with central government. For example, the Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority, Andy Street, used his public platform during the pandemic to make the case for a substantial increase in business support for his region and greater responsibilities in terms of decision-making (quoted in Woodcock, 2020).

> "First, thanks for what you've already done – there's been an unprecedented amount of support for business and we mustn't forget that [...], second, let's really make sure the commitment to viable businesses is there. And third, let's think about where the competitive sectors are for Britain on the other side of this. And let's make sure we are making those catalytic investments for them".

35 Street may have been more reluctant to speak publicly about his region's needs, particularly given the fraught nature of relations between high profile Labour mayors and the Conservative government, and may have sought to advocate privately for his region's needs with his party colleagues. Nonetheless, prior to the pandemic, we can see evidence of even Ben Houchen – who is notably close to senior party figures and a 'poster child' for the 'levelling up' agenda – speaking of "banging down the door of government" to gain government funding for his region (Houchen, 2018). Speaking in 2021 while reflecting on the pandemic experience, Steve Rotheram described a key element of his role as having been to 'go out and battle on our behalf to get a fairer share of funding from [central Government] (quoted in The Guide Liverpool, 2021). As such, we can see that Combined Authorities and their Mayors used their platform to articulate specific needs to central government, both publicly and privately. This role took on a more pressing nature during the pandemic due to the existential risks to public health and (perhaps more significantly given the nature and purpose of CAs) the viability of regional economies and businesses.

Strategizing regional economic futures

36 CAs have deployed their responsibilities for economic development and regeneration to strategize the economic and urban futures of their city-regions, often constructing narratives of the medium-term future that break with the recent past. This role is entirely consistent with the original purpose of CAs (Johns, 2021; Giovanini, 2021) and with the Government's preferred arrangements for devolution reflecting 'an economic model strongly favouring private sector-led investment and growth as the path to improved prosperity' (Warner et al., 2021, p. 323). CA interventions have been largely consistent with this overarching goal. Nonetheless, decisions reached in this space are the result of a wide array of bargaining and negotiation with stakeholders, including with organisations over which CAs have no formal control, as described above.

37 We can identify several examples that support this assertion. Firstly, the activities of the Tees Valley Combined Authority represented both a continuation of pre-pandemic objectives to 'level up' the region post-Brexit by delivering the Government's economic growth objectives (associated particularly with the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson). These are evident in the form of activities related to the creation of a Freeport area. This was welcomed by Ben Houchen, the Mayor of the TVCA as follows:

> "The Teesside Freeport marks the start of us returning to our rightful place on the world stage as a global player in advanced manufacturing and engineering. [...] As we look towards our recovery from Covid, this allows us to not only recover but come back bigger, better and stronger than ever' (quoted in Bouabda, 2021)".

38   Houchen also advocated for the development of the Teesside Airport (which the CA returned to public ownership prior to the pandemic) and for the relocation of thousands of Treasury posts to Darlington - which is within the CA area. More broadly, each of the CAs considered here responded in different ways to the UK Government's proposed 'levelling up' agenda, which seeks to address regional disparities in economic prosperity and opportunity. As regards the airport, the timing of its return to public ownership was inauspicious, given the significant reduction in air travel resulting from the Covid-related restrictions. During the pandemic, The WMCA launched the '*Investment Case to Government*' in June 2020, which identified the disjuncture associated with the pandemic as an opportunity to be exploited. The Mayor, Andy Street, commented:

> "As well as safeguarding people's work in the short-term, we also want to use the opportunity created by coronavirus to re-shape our economy over the longer term, and think more about what we can do to become greener and more inclusive" (West Midlands Combined Authority, 2020a).

39   This document formed the basis of the WMCA's plans to 'bounce back' from the pandemic, emphasising plans to safeguard and expand employment, build new homes, support business growth and inward investment, and efforts to boost the region's 'cultural offer' (West Midlands Combined Authority, 2020b, p. 2). This was couched as an opportunity for government to support a process of rebuilding and recovery (ibid: 3) and laid out a series of objectives for the CA, such as improving the region's physical and social infrastructure, supporting the regional economy and supporting skills development, improving public services such as sustaining pre-pandemic efforts to end homelessness and improving 'resilience', and working towards financial sustainability for regional funding.

40   The Liverpool City Region likewise released its *Build Back Better* agenda, which sought to adopt the insights of an industrial strategy which had been waylaid by the onset of the pandemic. *Build Back Better* likewise treated the pandemic as an opportunity 'to reshape our economy and society in a way that is greener, fairer and more inclusive' (Liverpool City Region, 2020b, p. 2) and to create 'the most progressive, values and ethics-led economy in Europe' (ibid, p. 1). It cited positive developments during the pandemic, such as an increased appreciation of green spaces, the potential for social connectedness, and cleaner air. The strategy proposed several projects that would help to build on some of these developments (and aid where the pandemic made things worse) such as bolstering physical infrastructure, supporting research and development, and improving digital connectivity (ibid: pp. 29-34).

41   This last point was developed by Steve Rotheram, who described digital connectivity as a key agenda of the LCRCA and highlighted that its importance had been enhanced by the pandemic (citing blended and online learning and accessing welfare and benefits as examples). Specific plans included building over 220km of physical infrastructure and connecting the city's boroughs to a local supercomputer to deliver ultrafast broadband to enable large scale data analytics. This was justified in terms of attracting inward investment, improving health services, boosting the digital and creative sectors, and improving the region's education offer (The Guide Liverpool, 2021; Liverpool City Region, 2020a). The futuristic language no doubt helped in presenting a vision of both the CA and the city region more generally as forward looking and ambitious.

42   In all, CAs were active in attempting to plot and shape a long-term economic future for their regions. COVID-19 created both a changed immediate environment and a less clear medium- and long-term future, which will be impacted by new patterns of working, a depleted hospitality sector, and a changed city centre (amongst others). The consequences are still emerging at the time of writing in 2023, but we can state with confidence that CAs played a key role in congregating stakeholders, working with local authorities, and bidding to central government for funds to help bridge gaps and to create new opportunities. While this took different forms in different regional contexts, it undoubtedly emerged as a key role for CAs during the pandemic period.

Discussion

43   The three roles described above are not discrete and overlap considerably. For instance, collaboration and mediation took place within a context in which CA leaders were constantly advocating for and within their regions. Long-term economic strategizing involved the necessary use of soft or agenda-setting power or 'voice' (Lukes, 1974) and sought to overtly deal with issues of inequality within and between their areas. Nonetheless, they provide a useful guide to the ways in which the role of CAs were clarified within the context of a pandemic in which bargaining and negotiation were of more immediate importance than in 'normal' times. However, in addition to this overlap, it can be argued that this framework does not capture everything which is significant. One consequence of their flexibility and novelty is that CAs remain ill-defined, with a lack of public understanding about the legitimate scope of their activities, even at elite levels. CAs will continue to find their way, with official and unofficial roles accruing and being shed over time in a process of boundary testing, iteration, and refinement. More powers may accrue to CAs, further contributing to this process, and new CAs will continue to be created (see the example of the North East Combined Authority). The role of CAs is ambiguous and, although the pandemic has helped them to develop and clarify their roles, there remains much scope for subsequent role-carving.

44   Relatedly, CAs also suffer from a lack of understanding as to their role, the attenuation of which is hindered by an identifiable asymmetricity between sub-regions. Individual CAs have different sets of competencies (Morphet, 2017; Johns, 2021), with some enjoying public health responsibilities and others largely confined to an economic role. This is compounded by a second ambiguity about the status of what exactly constitutes their area. The CAs are for sub-regions, while some see them as a replacement for former regional policies. Many public bodies do not enjoy coterminous boundaries with the CA, for instance with local NHS services or LEPs. This has created a barrier to public comprehension of the role of both Mayor and CA, particularly as the profile of other Mayors in other regions increases in step with knowledge of their own, as well as creating possible barriers to the assumption of more. However, the LEP reforms announced in 2021 and the creation of post-pandemic NHS England Integrated Care Boards (ICB), which are for smaller areas than CAs, although they may fit within them, may change this local governance system in time. At present, the government maintains control of the ICB rather than the directly elected mayors, although CAs can make joint appointments with ICBs, which could lead to closer working arrangements.

45   There has been another reform in institutional reporting at the local level which has been introduced through the Levelling Up White Paper (LUWP) (DLUHC, 2022) and the 2022 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 (LURA). Here the government has introduced a Local Government Board in England that will assess individual local authority performance against 12 missions set out in the Act, each of which is accountable to a different government department. The LURA and its local missions are effective over the whole of the UK, although it is not yet clear which systems will be put into place for their implementation and management outside England. This may be an attempt by government to politically address disparities in provision and 'post code lotteries' of which UK voters are notoriously sceptical (Wood, 2014). The LURA also includes provisions for County Combined Authorities (CCAs), and in 2021 the government indicated that any part of England could have a devolution deal by 2030. This would bring England into the same system as the other local authorities in the Devolved Administrations (Morphet, 2023). However, there are still no proposals to create CAs as a generic form of sub-national governance in England or to extend them to the whole of the UK.

46   A third important point is that of the potential for collaboration and partnership between Combined and Local Authorities to persist beyond the pandemic. While there have been obvious successes in proceeding through consensus and unanimity, it may be that the emergency acted as a gel. This undoubtedly worked to the advantage of CAs, which by virtue of their structure and their pan sub-regional status, were able to overcome these divides. Despite this, there is no guarantee that such collaboration will continue now that the pandemic appears to be abating and the normal rhythms of political competition have resumed. The close working relationships that have emerged during the crisis period are specific to individuals who will retire, resign, and be defeated. In all, collaboration, like immunity from Covid-19, may decline over time. That said, there have been few instances since the pandemic of large or public flare ups between the different bodies that constitute the authorities.

47   A final and important point is the vulnerability CAs possess in relation to their funding and their constitutional position more generally. The pandemic demonstrated the high potential for poor relations between central Government and CAs. Given both the lack of a firm legal basis for CAs and the historic precedent of Conservative governments abolishing or disadvantaging local Labour-led government institutions with which they disagree (Kösecik & Kapuc, 2003; Travers, 1990), it is reasonable to question the long-term stability of CAs. The 'limited constitutional protection' afforded to these bodies speaks to their vulnerability in this regard (Johns, 2021, p. 6), and so too does their reliance on central government grants, transfers from constituent LAs, ringfenced precepts on council tax, and borrowing (Johns, 2021, p. 7), and the potential role of emerging 'county deals' (Payne, 2021). CAs could be a form of local government reorganisation by the back door, or simply another sub-national institutional experiment to overcome some perceived issue by Whitehall and Westminster.

48   In all, this article shows that the role of CAs was clarified throughout the pandemic. They facilitated cooperation and coordination between both their member Local Authorities and wider regional stakeholders more broadly (and between one another). They deployed soft power to influence decision-makers in their areas (Johns, 2021) and more broadly. In influencing public opinion, the CAs have put political pressure on the UK Government to treat them more fairly. This has often drawn on longstanding

narratives of spatial inequality between, loosely defined, the North and the South of England, which both the Johnson and Truss governments have addressed through the narrative of levelling up. Finally, they effectively used the pandemic as a jumping off point to strategize an economic future that takes into account the changes wrought by the pandemic. These roles overlapped and reinforced each other, with activities in one sphere creating the impetus for actions in another. The legacy of this period may be the continuation of some of these activities, with a greater degree of authority and visibility than before, at a crucial point in their development. However, it also reveals the limits of their responsibilities and their institutional vulnerabilities.

Conclusions

49   As a final reflection, we draw attention to the inherent instability of units of territorial governance which rely largely on central government largesse for funding, a structuring factor that inhibits the ability of CAs to develop as alternative power centres to Westminster and Whitehall, and a dynamic that has been much in evidence during the pandemic. However, as Giovannini (2021) has commented, the 2021 CA elections demonstrated that this tier of government is recognised as having a role that is different from central government. While being established as another version of a centrally embedded local state, CAs have been able to develop distinctive roles. The thesis of the OECD (Ahrend et al 2014) that strongly defined local leadership creates strength in economically defined geographical areas was accelerated by the pandemic. Despite being run by a range of former or seconded civil servants as well as local government officers, CAs rose to both the immediate and longer-term challenges that emerged. The comparisons with the earlier cohort of devolved administrations created in 1999 starkly exposed the differences in their powers and responsibilities and led the Archbishop of York to call for similar powers to be given to the mayors of CAs as are held by FMs (Cottrell, 2021). As successive Prime Ministers prioritise 'levelling up', it is unclear whether the development and distinctiveness of the roles of CAs and the increased visibility of their mayors will help or hinder their chances of gaining the increased powers and independence from government that they crave. However, tensions between the Mayors of London and the Labour leadership in 2023 show that continued support for more powers, stability, and consistency cannot be guaranteed, even should the next general election bring a more traditionally devolutionist party into office (Topping, 2023).

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ABSTRACTS

Following an intermittent and halting roll-out, Combined Authorities (CAs) are now an established part of English governance. They represent a 'pooling' of competences by different geographically contiguous local authorities which approximately align with economic geographies and have emerged with strong encouragement from central government. Today, they cover most of England's large urban centres and enjoy a modest and variable range of

permissions to act over planning, transport, and economic development. Since their establishment, they have grown in profile, owing in part to the presence of Directly Elected Mayors, who provide the model with executive leadership, visibility, and electoral legitimacy. The period of the Covid-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to assess their role and influence and to explore how this changed during and as a result of this period of sustained national emergency. Drawing upon publicly available data related primarily – but not exclusively – to three CAs (West Midlands, Teesside, and Liverpool), we conclude that they have played three main overlapping roles. Firstly, they have proven to be engaged in coordination and mediation between regional stakeholders. Secondly, they have proved influential as agenda setters, drawing attention to central government failure. Thirdly, they have acted within their regeneration and planning competences to strategise the economic and urban futures of their city-regions.

INDEX

AUTHORS

SEAN KIPPIN

University of Stirling, UK
sean.kippin@stir.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0599-0755

JANICE MORPHET

University College London, UK
j.morphet@ucl.ac.uk
https://orchid.org/0000-0002-5406-7193