AN INDEPENDENT PROPOSITION FOR CONSIDERATION

DevolvED

Creating the Conditions for People and Places to Flourish

Education, Enterprise and Public Services for Human Flourishing and Regional Prosperity

CENTRAL PROPOSITION

The development of people strengthens the possibilities of place; the development of place expands the possibilities available to people.

Executive policy brief | The next phase of English devolution

A proposition for consideration by national government, regional leadership and institutional partners

Purpose: to invite consideration of a bounded, evidence-led Discovery process — not to seek advance approval for a new governance settlement.

EXECUTIVE DECISION BRIEF

The Executive Proposition

The next phase of English devolution offers an opportunity to reconsider how public institutions, education, enterprise and regional leadership work together to expand opportunity and improve the lives of people and communities.

England possesses strong educational institutions, research organisations, businesses and public services. Yet outcomes that matter most to people often depend upon relationships between organisations operating within different statutory, financial and accountability arrangements.

DevolvED proposes that human flourishing and sustainable regional prosperity become mutually reinforcing purposes of public policy, with education, research and the development of human capability occupying a foundational position within regional strategy.

Education is not simply a service supplying skills to an existing economy. It also helps create the knowledge, creativity, technical capability and innovation through which future opportunities emerge.

The objective is unity of public purpose, not uniformity of institutional control.

Three possible instruments merit investigation: a Regional Education Strategy to establish shared ambition; a National–Regional Partnership Agreement to clarify cooperation within lawful governmental powers; and a Regional Education and Prosperity Agreement (REPA) co-created by willing institutions following Discovery.

National educational standards, local-authority statutory duties, institutional independence and existing accountability requirements would remain protected.

The immediate request is for relevant national and regional representatives to nominate a small scoping group and agree, in principle, a short, bounded Discovery design exercise. Within four weeks of an initial meeting, the group would seek to produce an agreed question, geography, partner map, evidence plan, resource estimate and decision gateway. Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent are suggested as a possible setting only; no pilot, statutory change, funding commitment or institutional endorsement is sought in advance.

THE DECISION SOUGHT

Agree to explore the scope, evidence requirements, legal boundaries, resource implications and decision gateways for Discovery.

Why Now? The Opportunity of Devolution

England's continuing programme of devolution creates an opportunity to reconsider not only where public decisions are made, but how those decisions might be connected more effectively around the needs and aspirations of people and places.

Devolution has commonly been discussed through the transfer of responsibilities, the establishment of regional institutions, investment decisions and the development of local economic strategies. These are important dimensions of public policy. Stronger regional leadership can potentially bring decisions closer to the circumstances they are intended to address, improve democratic visibility and enable more coherent approaches to matters such as transport, infrastructure, economic development and relevant devolved skills functions.

Yet the transfer of powers does not automatically produce better outcomes. A region may acquire additional responsibilities while the relationships between education, enterprise, research and public services remain largely unchanged. Equally, institutions may continue to fulfil their individual obligations effectively while important opportunities are lost because their activities are insufficiently connected.

This is particularly significant where the outcomes sought by public policy depend upon several organisations acting within different statutory and financial frameworks. Educational participation is influenced by health, housing, transport and family circumstances. Progression into employment depends not only upon qualifications but also upon access to opportunities, guidance and the wider economy. Research and innovation may generate considerable public value, but their application often requires cooperation between universities, colleges, enterprises and public institutions.

The development of stronger regional democratic leadership provides an opportunity to examine these relationships more deliberately. Regional authorities may be well placed to identify shared challenges, connect relevant investment decisions and convene institutions around ambitions that extend beyond the responsibilities of any one organisation. National government remains essential in protecting educational standards, entitlements and equity, while educational institutions and public bodies retain their distinctive missions and statutory responsibilities.

The question is not simply what powers should be devolved, but what additional public value devolution could make possible.

The Problem: Fragmented Opportunity

England possesses schools, academy trusts, further education colleges, universities, enterprises and public services of considerable strength. Many demonstrate educational excellence,

research distinction, technical capability and effective public stewardship. Existing partnerships also make important contributions to local and regional development.

The challenge is not that these institutions are inherently ineffective or unwilling to collaborate. It is that their responsibilities, funding arrangements, accountability systems and planning horizons are often organised around different institutional purposes, while the lives of individuals and the development of places are shaped by their combined effects. Fragmentation is a proposition to investigate, not an established explanation for unequal outcomes.

Consider the experience of a young person approaching the end of compulsory schooling. Their educational progression may depend upon the availability of appropriate post-16 provision, accessible transport, effective careers guidance, financial support, health and wellbeing, and the opportunities offered by employers and further education institutions. Each of these matters may fall within a different organisation's responsibilities.

A school may provide excellent education while a learner struggles to access a suitable college course. A college may offer high-quality technical education while transport arrangements make attendance difficult. A university may generate research of considerable economic or social significance while regional enterprises lack the means to engage with it. Public services may face challenges for which relevant research or technical expertise exists nearby, but productive relationships have not developed.

None of these examples establishes that a particular institution has failed. They illustrate how the effectiveness of individual organisations does not necessarily ensure the coherence of the wider system.

The consequences can be particularly significant for people experiencing disadvantage. Where educational participation depends upon secure housing, reliable transport, access to support or the ability to navigate unfamiliar institutions, differences in personal circumstances can become differences in substantive opportunity.

An institution can fulfil its responsibilities effectively while the wider system still fails to provide the opportunities that people need.

DevolvED seeks to examine the space between institutional performance and collective public value.

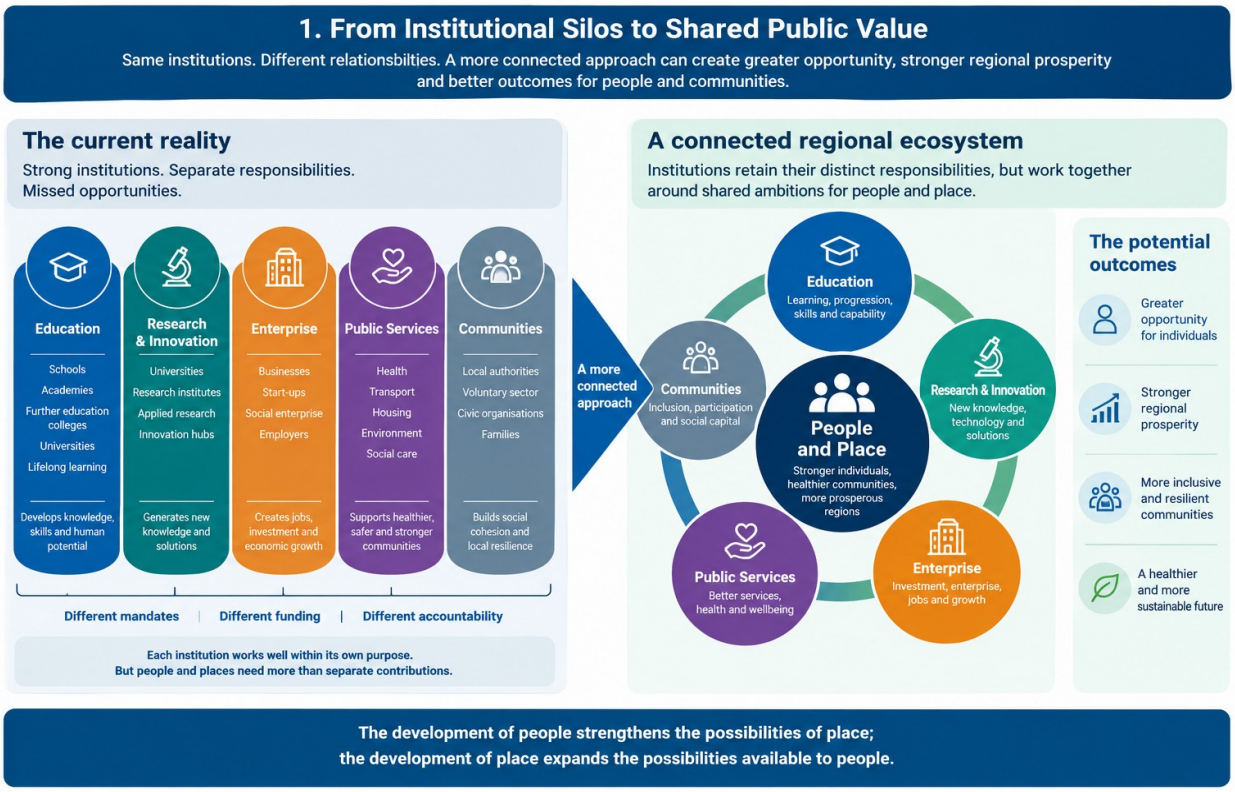


ILLUSTRATION 1 | FROM SILOS TO SHARED PUBLIC VALUE

Human Flourishing: A Broader Purpose for Public Policy

The intellectual foundation of DevolvED is the proposition that public policy should be concerned not only with economic performance and the delivery of services, but with the opportunities people possess to develop their capabilities, participate in society and pursue lives they have reason to value.

This understanding draws upon the capabilities approach associated with the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. It recognises that development cannot be adequately understood through income, economic output or the formal availability of services alone. What matters is also whether individuals possess the substantive freedom to benefit from opportunities and exercise meaningful choices about their lives.

Education occupies a foundational position within this conception. It develops knowledge, understanding, judgement, creativity and the capacity for independent thought. It enables individuals to engage with ideas beyond their immediate circumstances, participate in civic life and respond to changing personal and economic conditions. Its significance extends well beyond preparation for employment, although meaningful work and economic participation remain important dimensions of human wellbeing.

The wider conditions of people's lives also matter. Health, housing, transport, family circumstances, financial security and the quality of local institutions influence whether educational and economic opportunities are genuinely accessible. The work associated with Michael Marmot's examination of health inequalities demonstrates the importance of these interconnected social conditions.

A region may possess excellent educational provision, productive enterprises and substantial public investment while some communities remain unable to benefit fully from the opportunities available. Equally, improvements in educational participation, health, social inclusion and civic capability may generate substantial public value that is not immediately visible through conventional measures of economic growth.

This does not diminish the importance of productivity, investment, employment or financial sustainability. A prosperous economy provides resources and opportunities essential to individual and collective wellbeing. Rather, DevolvED proposes that economic development and human flourishing should be understood as mutually reinforcing purposes.

People and Place: A Reciprocal Relationship

The central proposition of DevolvED is that the development of people and the development of place are inseparable.

Places shape the opportunities available to individuals through their educational institutions, economic circumstances, public services, infrastructure, cultural assets and communities. At the same time, the knowledge, creativity, technical capability, enterprise and participation of individuals influence the development of those places.

A region with accessible education, effective transport, productive enterprises, strong public institutions and opportunities for cultural and civic participation can expand the possibilities available to its population. Conversely, a population able to develop knowledge, expertise, creativity and confidence can contribute to the renewal of its economy, the improvement of public services and the creation of new opportunities for future generations.

Education is especially significant because it contributes not only to the preparation of individuals for existing opportunities, but also to the creation of opportunities that do not yet exist.

Schools develop the foundations of knowledge, understanding and intellectual curiosity. Further education colleges contribute technical expertise, applied learning and relationships with enterprises and communities. Universities generate research, advanced scholarship, professional capability and new knowledge. Employers translate ideas into products, services

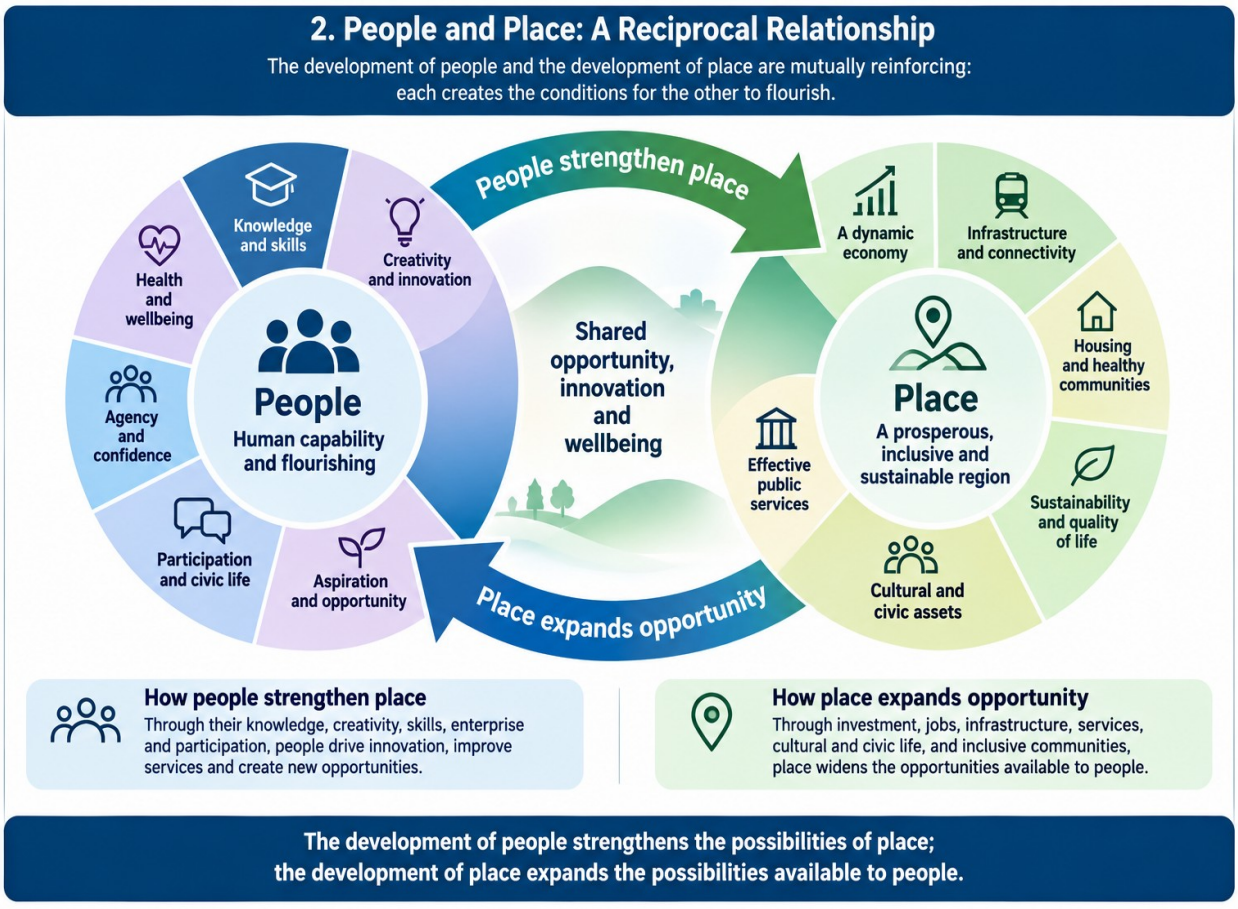
and employment, while public services and community organisations contribute practical expertise and understanding of the challenges facing society.

These contributions are distinctive, but they can also be complementary. Research may lead to new technologies; technical education may enable their adoption; enterprise may create new applications and employment; and public institutions may provide settings in which innovation improves services and strengthens communities.

Regional prosperity is therefore not simply a predetermined economic condition to which education must respond. It is also something that education, research, enterprise and human capability can help create.

The proposition can be expressed in a single principle:

ILLUSTRATION 2 | PEOPLE AND PLACE



Education as a Creator of Regional Futures

The relationship between education and economic development is often described in terms of skills supply. Employers identify their requirements, regional organisations assess labour-market demand, and educational institutions are encouraged to prepare people for the opportunities

available. These functions matter. They can improve the relevance of provision, support employment and strengthen productivity.

But they offer an incomplete account of education's contribution to the development of a region.

Education does not merely prepare people to participate in an economy whose future has already been determined. Through the development of knowledge, understanding, creativity, technical expertise and research, it can help create the industries, services, enterprises and forms of employment that will shape that future.

Schools provide the foundations of intellectual development, equipping young people with knowledge, understanding, curiosity and the capacity to learn. Further education colleges develop technical and professional capabilities, often connecting advanced practical knowledge with the requirements of enterprises and communities. Universities contribute scholarship, research, independent inquiry and the generation of new knowledge. Adult and lifelong learning enable individuals to develop capabilities throughout changing personal and economic circumstances.

These contributions cannot be reduced to workforce preparation. Education possesses intrinsic intellectual, cultural, social and civic value. Nevertheless, the knowledge and capabilities it creates also influence the possibilities available to regional economies.

A university research programme may generate a technology that leads to new commercial applications. A college may help smaller enterprises adopt unfamiliar processes or develop advanced technical capabilities. A school may introduce young people to scientific, creative or entrepreneurial possibilities that would otherwise remain beyond their experience. Collaboration between researchers, enterprises and public services may produce approaches that improve health, environmental sustainability or the effectiveness of public institutions.

The future economy is therefore not simply something that education must anticipate. It is also something that education and research can help bring into being.

Every Future Matters: The 14–25 Journey

The years between 14 and 25 offer a particularly compelling illustration of the relationship between education, human development and regional opportunity.

During these years, young people deepen their knowledge, develop their identities, encounter new responsibilities and make decisions that may influence their futures. They move between schools, sixth forms, further education colleges, universities, apprenticeships, employment and other forms of learning. Some follow relatively direct academic pathways; others pursue technical education, combine learning with employment, change direction or require opportunities to return following interrupted participation.

The diversity of these experiences is a legitimate feature of human development. Yet the arrangements supporting them are frequently organised around institutional boundaries rather than the continuity of the learner's journey.

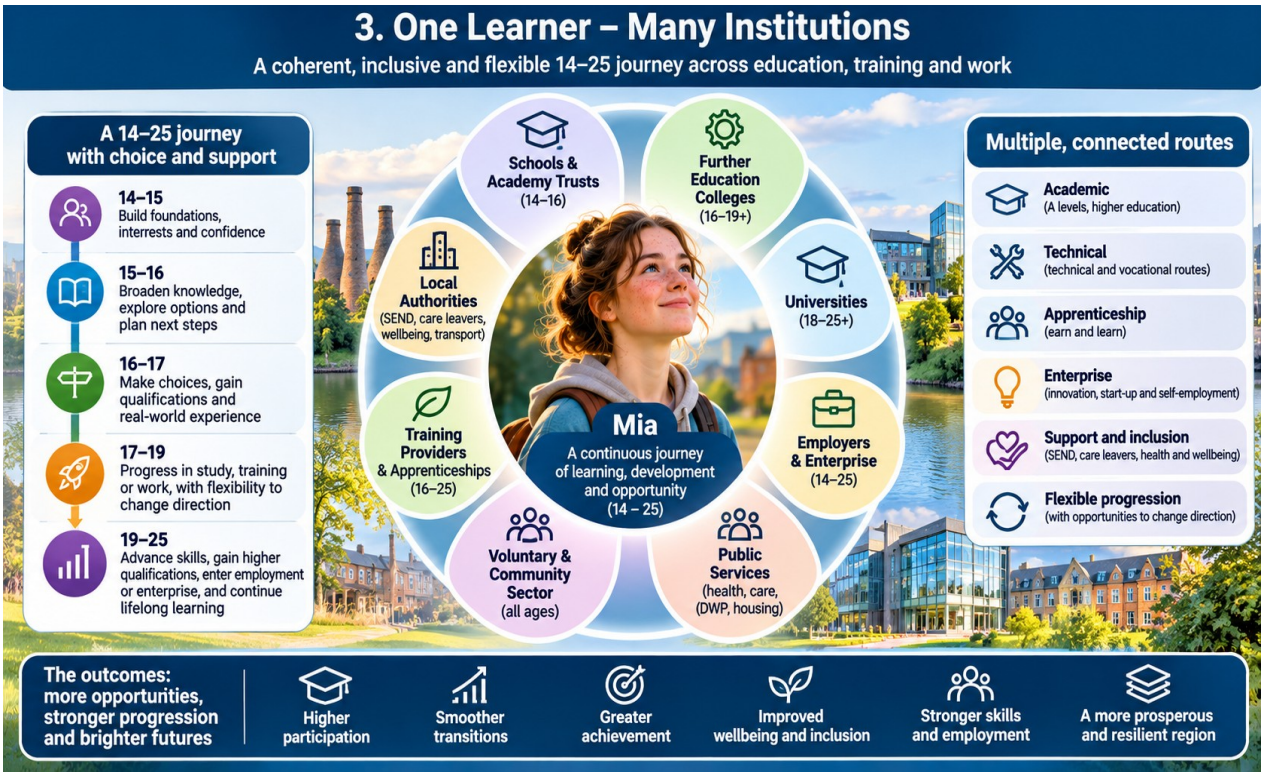
Each institution has its own responsibilities, admissions arrangements, funding systems, information requirements and support services. These differences often serve necessary purposes, but they can also create difficulties at precisely the moments when young people are making significant decisions.

For a learner approaching the age of 16, progression may depend upon the relationship between qualifications, guidance, accessible provision, transport and financial circumstances. Another young person may possess the capability to pursue higher education or technical training but encounter barriers associated with health, disability, caring responsibilities or insecure accommodation. A care-experienced learner may face educational transitions alongside changes in living arrangements and personal support.

The consequences of fragmentation are not confined to those experiencing disadvantage. Young people more generally may have limited opportunities to encounter research, enterprise, creative activity, public services and the wider resources of their region.

A more connected regional approach could examine whether schools, colleges, universities, employers and relevant public services can improve transitions, widen access to opportunities and support more coherent progression.

ILLUSTRATION 3 | A LEARNER, MANY INSTITUTIONS



Learning with Purpose: Connecting Knowledge with Opportunity

If the 14–25 journey provides a practical context for examining the coherence of educational opportunity, Learning with Purpose offers an educational principle through which that opportunity might be enriched.

Young people require rigorous teaching, secure disciplinary understanding and the intellectual foundations necessary for further learning. Mathematics, science, literature, history, the arts and other fields of study possess significance beyond their immediate practical application. They develop ways of understanding the world, evaluating evidence, exercising judgement and appreciating human experience.

Learning with Purpose does not propose replacing this foundation with loosely structured projects or treating educational activity as valuable simply because it takes place outside a classroom.

Instead, it asks how established knowledge might be connected more deliberately with opportunities for inquiry, meaningful application, creativity and contribution.

Consider young people investigating the energy performance of housing within their community. A properly designed learning experience might draw upon scientific understanding of heat transfer, mathematical analysis of energy consumption, environmental knowledge, communication and engagement with technical specialists. Learners could encounter authentic questions, investigate evidence and consider possible responses.

The educational value would not arise simply from undertaking a practical challenge. It would depend upon the quality of the teaching, the structure of the experience, the knowledge acquired and the standards against which learning was assessed.

A region possesses resources that can enrich such experiences. Universities offer research expertise and specialist facilities. Colleges contribute technical knowledge and applied learning. Enterprises provide professional experience and opportunities to encounter innovation. Public services, cultural organisations and voluntary bodies offer insights into the circumstances and challenges of communities.

Individual schools and colleges may not always have the capacity to establish these relationships independently. A more connected regional ecosystem could examine whether such resources might become more accessible, particularly for learners whose circumstances restrict their opportunities.

Rigorous knowledge and understanding + meaningful inquiry and application + agency, judgement and creativity.

Research, Enterprise and the Creation of Regional Prosperity

A more connected relationship between education and regional development must extend beyond the experience of individual learners. It should also consider how research, technical expertise, enterprise and public-service innovation contribute to the renewal of regional economies.

Universities and further education colleges are not simply providers of qualifications. Together they form a substantial part of a region's knowledge infrastructure: creating knowledge, developing people, supporting innovation and connecting local challenges with national and international expertise.

Higher education has three distinct but connected contributions. Universities create new knowledge through independent research and scholarship; they help apply that knowledge through enterprise, professional education, public-service partnerships and innovation; and, as autonomous civic institutions, they can help shape the long-term development of their regions. Further education contributes essential technical expertise, applied learning and routes into advanced capability. Neither sector should be reduced to meeting short-term vacancies.

Enterprises contribute investment, practical knowledge, entrepreneurial judgement and the ability to translate ideas into products, services and employment. Public services can identify challenges requiring scientific, technical or organisational innovation, while community organisations contribute understanding of lived experience and local priorities.

The potential value lies in the relationships between these capabilities.

A university discovery may stimulate a new enterprise or transform a public service; applied research and technical expertise may help smaller businesses adopt new processes; and collaboration across universities, colleges and industry may create progression routes and opportunities that no partner could sustain alone. Universities also have a potentially valuable role in independent evaluation of regional interventions. In a Staffordshire context, the distinct capabilities of Keele University and the University of Staffordshire would warrant exploration with those institutions, without presuming their participation.

These relationships already exist in many places, sometimes with considerable success. DevolvED does not assume that regional collaboration is absent or that a new governance structure would necessarily improve it.

The question is whether a more coherent regional strategy could identify gaps, strengthen effective relationships and support opportunities that are otherwise difficult to realise.

ILLUSTRATION 4 | CREATING REGIONAL FUTURES



International Experience: Learning from Regions That Create Their Futures

DevolvED is a proposition developed for the particular institutional, constitutional and economic circumstances of England. It does not depend upon the assumption that arrangements established elsewhere can be transferred directly into English governance.

Nevertheless, international experience provides useful illustrations of how education, research, technical capability, enterprise and public leadership can contribute to regional development when their relationships are sustained over time.

Brainport Eindhoven in the Netherlands provides a particularly relevant illustration. Its regional innovation ecosystem connects Eindhoven University of Technology, universities of applied sciences, vocational and technical education, research organisations, major technology businesses, specialist suppliers and public authorities. Organisations such as Brainport Development support sustained cooperation around innovation, talent and regional development. The significance is not a single institution directing the others, but complementary organisations building capacity together over time.

For DevolvED, Brainport raises a practical question: could regional partnerships connect university research, technical education, enterprise investment and public leadership more deliberately to create future industries and opportunities, rather than responding only to current

labour-market demand? Its particular industrial history and Dutch institutional arrangements cannot simply be replicated in England.

The Basque Country in Spain offers a distinct and equally important example. Its regional industrial development has been supported by relationships among vocational education, applied research, technology centres, universities, enterprises and public institutions. The Mondragon cooperative and industrial ecosystem, and the Basque vocational education and applied-innovation landscape, illustrate how technical capability and enterprise development can be closely connected.

The Basque lesson is not simply that colleges should supply skilled workers. Technical and vocational institutions can participate in innovation itself: helping firms test processes, diffuse technology, develop products and improve productivity. The interplay of higher education, vocational learning, research and industrial strategy is especially relevant to places seeking economic renewal.

For DevolvED, the question is how England might strengthen the relationship between further education, universities, applied innovation and regional enterprise without importing the Basque Country's particular political powers, funding arrangements or cooperative traditions.

Singapore offers a contrasting, nationally coordinated approach to human capability: close attention to education, employer engagement, continuing training and the renewal of skills across working lives.

As a city-state, Singapore has powers and circumstances unlike those of English regions. Its relevance is therefore a question rather than a blueprint: how might a region make lifelong learning, progression and adaptation more accessible while respecting national responsibilities and institutional autonomy?

Taken together, the three examples offer different mechanisms, not one transferable model: Brainport illustrates sustained knowledge–industry collaboration; the Basque Country highlights technical education and applied innovation as drivers of industrial renewal; and Singapore illustrates long-term commitment to lifelong capability. Discovery should test which, if any, of these mechanisms could add value within existing English arrangements.

A Regional Education Strategy: Connecting Ambition with Opportunity

If education and the development of human capability are to occupy a more central position within regional development, there must be a means through which that ambition can influence practical decisions.

DevolvED proposes examining the potential value of a Regional Education Strategy.

Its purpose would not be to create a separate regional education system or transfer responsibility for schools, colleges and universities to mayoral authorities. Nor would it simply reproduce existing skills plans or institutional strategies.

Instead, it would establish a shared understanding of how educational excellence, participation, progression, lifelong learning, research and innovation contribute to the development of people and place.

Such a strategy would begin with evidence about the region's circumstances. This would include educational attainment and participation, access to provision, progression between institutions, the experiences of learners, patterns of disadvantage, research capabilities, technical expertise and the relationships between education and regional enterprise.

It would also examine the wider conditions affecting opportunity. Decisions about transport, housing, health, economic investment and public services can influence whether individuals are able to benefit from education. Equally, educational institutions and research organisations can contribute knowledge and expertise to the development of those wider services and policies.

A Regional Education Strategy could make these relationships more visible and establish a limited number of priorities around which relevant organisations might cooperate.

Those priorities would need to emerge from engagement with educational institutions, local authorities, enterprises, public services, communities and learners. They could not be determined solely by regional government, nor could they override the statutory or professional responsibilities of participating organisations.

The strategy would also need to recognise and build upon existing arrangements. Local Skills Improvement Plans, DfE regional improvement arrangements, Civic University Agreements, institutional strategies, economic development programmes, research partnerships and local authority responsibilities already provide important mechanisms for cooperation.

Any additional regional strategy would therefore have to demonstrate what it contributes beyond these arrangements.

Not simply: What skills does the region's existing economy require?

National Stewardship and Regional Leadership: Complementary Responsibilities

The institutional credibility of DevolvED depends upon a clear understanding of the relationship between national government, regional democratic leadership and existing educational and public-service institutions.

England's education system operates through a combination of national policy, statutory responsibilities, institutional governance, professional regulation and local public duties. These arrangements reflect important principles of educational entitlement, accountability, independence and public protection.

DevolvED does not propose that regional devolution should automatically displace them.

National government would continue to exercise its lawful responsibilities for educational policy, standards, entitlements, funding and accountability. Relevant departments and national bodies would retain their statutory and regulatory functions.

Local authorities would continue to discharge their statutory duties, including responsibilities concerning children with special educational needs and disabilities, children in care and other matters assigned to them by law.

Academy trusts, schools, further education colleges and universities would retain their respective governance arrangements, legal obligations, professional responsibilities and institutional independence.

Mayoral strategic authorities, meanwhile, could contribute through the powers, resources and responsibilities lawfully available to them. These may include functions relating to economic development, transport, investment and aspects of adult skills, depending upon the particular devolution settlement.

Their contribution would lie principally in identifying shared regional priorities, connecting relevant decisions, convening institutions and accepting accountability for the responsibilities and resources within their control.

A mayoral authority may have an important strategic interest in educational opportunity without possessing direct authority over the institutions that provide education. Equally, national government may retain responsibility for educational standards while recognising that decisions concerning transport, economic development or regional investment affect the circumstances in which those standards can be achieved.

The opportunity is to develop a more coherent relationship between these responsibilities.

Such cooperation would need to be accompanied by clarity about decision-making, funding, accountability and the limits of institutional commitments.

Unity of public purpose, not uniformity of institutional control.

The DevolvED Architecture: Three Complementary Instruments

DevolvED identifies three possible instruments through which shared ambition, governmental responsibility and institutional cooperation might be connected.

They are complementary, but they are not interchangeable. Each would serve a different purpose and derive its legitimacy from different forms of authority or agreement.

A Regional Education Strategy would articulate the region's ambitions for educational excellence, inclusion, participation, progression, lifelong learning, research, innovation and human development.

It would establish the priorities around which cooperation might be valuable and provide a means of connecting educational opportunity with wider regional development.

It would not itself transfer statutory powers or place educational institutions under regional governmental control.

A National–Regional Partnership Agreement would establish a negotiated framework between central government and the relevant mayoral strategic authority, with the involvement of other departments or public bodies where appropriate.

It could clarify agreed responsibilities, resources, decision-making arrangements and accountability mechanisms in support of shared priorities.

Such an agreement would operate within the lawful powers of the parties concerned. It could not, merely by being signed, confer new statutory powers, alter existing legal duties or commit independent institutions without their agreement.

The Regional Education and Prosperity Agreement (REPA) would be the proposed framework for practical cooperation among willing institutions and partners. It would connect the shared ambitions of the Regional Education Strategy with institutionally authorised commitments: for example, improving 14–25 transitions; widening access to university, college and research resources; developing joint enterprise and innovation challenges; or improving lifelong learning and public-service collaboration.

REPA would be co-created only after Discovery, not presented as an agreed charter in advance. Participating academy trusts, schools, colleges, universities, employers, local authorities, public services and community organisations would determine together a small number of priorities, the contribution each could realistically make, governance and participation standards, responsibilities, resources, accountability, review arrangements and measures of additional public value.

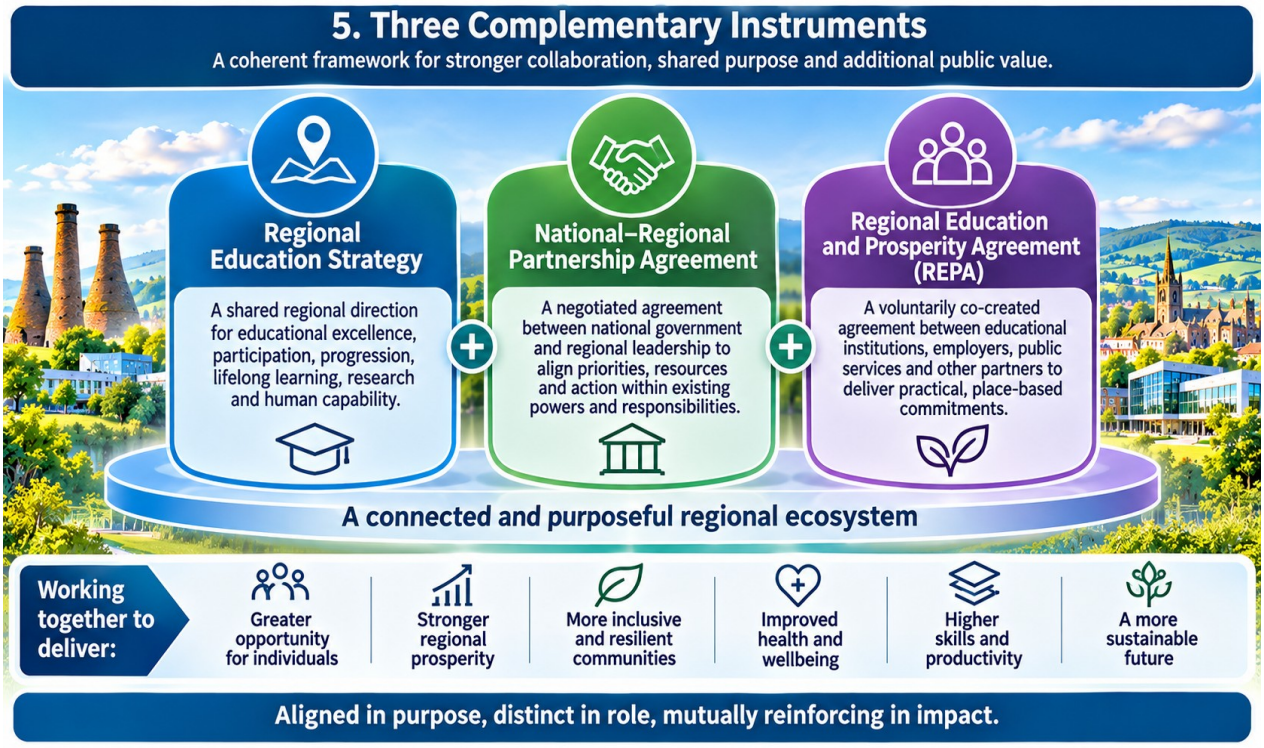
The agreement would be voluntary and proportionate. Partners would commit only through their own lawful governance processes; statutory duties, academic and institutional independence, national accountability and funding conditions would remain intact. REPA would not be a regional regulator, a substitute for existing partnerships or a mechanism for mayoral direction of educational institutions. Its distinctive value would need to be demonstrated against simpler ways of cooperating.

The three instruments therefore have separate functions: the Regional Education Strategy sets shared direction; a National–Regional Partnership Agreement clarifies lawful governmental

cooperation; and REPA enables willing institutions to translate selected ambitions into practical, accountable action. They are not three tiers of a new education hierarchy.

A practical REPA test: would the commitments produce benefits that would not otherwise occur, who would be accountable for delivery, and how would costs, learner outcomes and wider regional value be assessed? If these questions cannot be answered, the case for REPA would not yet be established.

ILLUSTRATION 5 | COMPLEMENTARY INSTRUMENTS



What Changes — and What Does Not

The credibility of DevolvED depends upon distinguishing its ambition for stronger regional cooperation from proposals to redistribute statutory authority or reorganise educational institutions.

The proposition does not assume that more effective regional development requires the creation of a single education authority, the transfer of schools and colleges into mayoral control, or the establishment of additional regulatory structures.

Its central concern is whether the relationships between existing organisations can be made more purposeful, coherent and accountable where the outcomes sought depend upon their combined contributions.

A Regional Education Strategy could establish a clearer relationship between educational development and the wider ambitions of a region. Decisions about transport, investment,

enterprise and relevant public services could take greater account of their consequences for educational participation and human capability.

National government and regional leadership could develop more explicit arrangements for cooperation where shared priorities cross administrative or departmental boundaries.

Educational institutions, research organisations, enterprises and public services could identify opportunities for joint action that extend beyond the capabilities or responsibilities of individual organisations.

The experiences of learners and communities could become a more prominent consideration in assessing whether institutional arrangements are producing the public value intended.

National government would retain its statutory responsibilities for educational policy, standards, entitlements and accountability.

Local authorities would continue to exercise their statutory duties, including responsibilities for children with special educational needs and disabilities, children in care and safeguarding functions assigned to them by law.

Academy trusts, schools, further education colleges and universities would retain their governance responsibilities, institutional independence and relevant legal obligations.

Professional educational judgement, academic freedom, appropriate regulation and established routes of public accountability would remain essential safeguards.

The proposed agreements would not override these responsibilities. Any changes requiring legislation, funding approval or other statutory authorisation would remain subject to the appropriate processes.

Cooperation should strengthen institutional effectiveness, not diminish institutional responsibility.

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent: A Possible Setting for Discovery

DevolvED is a national policy proposition. Its underlying questions concern the relationship between education, human development, regional prosperity and public governance across England.

However, propositions of this kind cannot be evaluated adequately through conceptual argument alone. Their feasibility and value must be examined within the circumstances of actual places and institutions.

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent offer one possible setting for such an investigation.

The area encompasses urban and rural communities, universities, further education colleges, schools and academy trusts, research capabilities, enterprises and public-service organisations. It contains differing patterns of educational opportunity, economic activity and access to services, alongside institutions and communities possessing substantial knowledge, experience and ambition.

These characteristics could provide a useful context for examining how educational development relates to regional prosperity and whether stronger cooperation between institutions could create additional value.

EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT | WHY THIS AREA MERITS EXAMINATION

51% of children in Stoke-on-Trent live in low-income families, compared with 38% nationally (Ofsted area profile; underlying deprivation data).

42% of school-age pupils in Stoke-on-Trent are eligible for free school meals, compared with 27% nationally (Ofsted area profile).

170 children looked after per 10,000 in Stoke-on-Trent, compared with 67 nationally (Ofsted area profile).

25% of Staffordshire 19-year-olds with an education, health and care plan had attained Level 2 in the cited 2023 data, compared with 88% of those with no identified SEN (Staffordshire SEND JSNA 2025).

5.2% of Stoke-on-Trent 16–17-year-olds were NEET or had activity not known, versus 5.8% nationally in the 2025/26 DfE release. This measure is not evidence of an above-national local NEET problem.

Evidence note: These figures cover different geographies, dates and populations. They indicate unequal needs and transition challenges, not proof that fragmented governance causes them. Discovery should test causation, local variation and viable responses.

Sources: Ofsted Explore an Area (Stoke-on-Trent), explore.ofsted.gov.uk/local-authorities/E06000021/; DfE participation and NEET 2025/26, explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk; Staffordshire SEND JSNA 2025, staffordshire.gov.uk.

Within this wider geography, North Staffordshire could offer a more focused context for investigating the 14–25 learner journey.

The exploratory ideas associated with Every Future Matters and Learning with Purpose could contribute to that inquiry, particularly in relation to educational transitions, purposeful learning,

engagement with enterprise and the accessibility of opportunities across institutional boundaries.

Such an investigation might consider whether young people experience coherent routes between school, further education, higher education, training and employment; whether barriers associated with transport, personal circumstances or institutional arrangements restrict participation; and whether regional educational, research and enterprise resources could be made more accessible.

It could also examine opportunities to strengthen relationships between universities, colleges, enterprises and public services in support of innovation, technical capability and lifelong learning.

The selection of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent would not imply that the relevant authorities or institutions had already endorsed DevolvED. Nor would exploratory work associated with Every Future Matters constitute an agreed regional programme.

Discovery: From Ambition to Evidence

The principal recommendation of DevolvED is that national government, relevant regional leadership and willing institutions should consider a structured programme of Discovery.

Discovery would not be a preliminary implementation exercise or a consultation designed to secure endorsement of a predetermined model.

It would be a disciplined investigation into whether the proposition is necessary, feasible, affordable and capable of generating additional public value.

The inquiry would begin with the circumstances of the region rather than with a preferred institutional solution.

It would examine educational participation and progression, the experiences of learners and communities, existing institutional capabilities, research and enterprise relationships, and the wider social and economic conditions affecting opportunity.

It would also map the partnerships and governance arrangements already in place. Many institutions collaborate effectively, and existing strategies, programmes and networks may provide sufficient mechanisms for addressing some of the challenges identified.

A central task would therefore be to distinguish problems requiring new forms of cooperation from those that could be resolved by strengthening existing arrangements.

Discovery would then examine the potential contribution of the three proposed instruments.

Would a Regional Education Strategy improve the coherence of regional decisions? Could a National–Regional Partnership Agreement support more effective cooperation between

authorised governmental parties? Would a separately co-created REPA enable willing institutions to undertake practical commitments that existing arrangements do not adequately support?

These questions would require legal, financial and operational examination, including consideration of the resources needed, the administrative burden imposed and the responsibilities of participating organisations.

The process should also establish how any subsequent activity could be evaluated. A credible assessment would need to distinguish the outcomes of particular educational or economic interventions from the additional value, if any, created by the proposed institutional arrangements.

ILLUSTRATION 6 | EVIDENCE-LED PROGRESSION



Demonstrating Additional Public Value

A policy proposition concerned with human flourishing and regional prosperity must ultimately be assessed through the difference it makes.

DevolvED therefore places evaluation at the centre of its proposed development, rather than treating it as an activity undertaken after implementation.

The concept of additional public value is particularly important.

If a regional partnership supports an initiative that institutions were already intending to undertake, its contribution may be limited. If comparable outcomes could be achieved through

existing arrangements at lower cost, the case for introducing new institutional mechanisms would be weakened.

The evaluation must therefore ask not only whether beneficial outcomes occur, but whether the proposed approach contributes to those outcomes in ways that justify the resources, complexity and institutional attention required.

The first concerns the effectiveness of particular activities. For example, a programme intended to improve transitions between educational institutions might be assessed through participation, progression, learner experience and sustained destinations.

The second concerns the value of the proposed governance arrangements. Did a shared Regional Education Strategy identify a priority that would otherwise have received insufficient attention? Did cooperation between national and regional government enable a necessary decision or alignment of resources? Did voluntary institutional commitments make possible an activity that existing arrangements would not have supported?

Positive outcomes from individual projects would not, by themselves, establish that a new regional governance model was responsible.

A credible evaluation would also consider distributional effects. Improvements in aggregate performance may conceal continuing barriers for particular communities or groups. A proposition concerned with human flourishing must examine whether additional opportunities are genuinely accessible.

An initial meeting should test whether the proposition addresses a material gap in existing arrangements and whether the relevant government, regional and institutional representatives wish to explore it. The immediate ask is to nominate a small cross-sector scoping group, not to approve a programme or governance structure.

Within approximately four weeks of that meeting, the scoping group would aim to produce a short Discovery terms-of-reference paper: the problem statement; possible geography and partners; comparison with existing mechanisms; legal and financial boundaries; data requirements; indicative cost and capacity; and a proposed decision process. All timings are indicative and subject to partner agreement.

If the scoping paper establishes sufficient merit and capacity, a bounded Discovery phase of approximately three to four months could map the 14–25 journey, relevant HE/FE and innovation assets, existing partnerships and barriers to access; assess options and additionality; and consult potential partners without presuming their consent.

A decision gateway approximately one month after Discovery would consider a concise options appraisal, baseline measures, legal and financial assessment, partnership willingness, proposed accountabilities and an evaluation framework. Possible decisions would be to stop, strengthen existing arrangements, undertake limited further design or authorise a tightly scoped demonstration.

Only after that gateway, and subject to separate approvals, might willing partners consider a limited six-to-twelve-month demonstration with agreed resources, measurable outcomes and independent evaluation. REPA commitments would be co-created after Discovery, not pre-negotiated as a condition of participation.

The next stage of DevolvED should be proportionate to the maturity of the proposition.

The immediate objective is not to establish a new regional settlement, launch a large programme of interventions or seek premature commitments from educational institutions.

INITIAL DISCUSSION (week 0): establish interest, nominate a scoping group and confirm that no approval of a new settlement is being sought.

SCOPING (weeks 1–4): produce terms of reference, evidence plan, partner map, resource estimate and decision criteria.

DISCOVERY (indicatively months 2–5): assess unmet need, current provision, institutional relationships, HE/FE and enterprise opportunities, lawful options and likely additional public value.

DECISION (indicatively month 6): publish an options appraisal and decide whether to stop, adapt, strengthen existing arrangements or consider a bounded demonstration.

THE ASK | A SMALL DECISION NOW, A BETTER-INFORMED DECISION LATER

Outcomes of Discovery: (1) evidenced problem and baseline; (2) map of existing partnerships and gaps; (3) tested options, including no new structure; (4) legal, resource and delivery assessment; (5) potential partner roles and safeguards; (6) an evaluation and decision framework.

Success at this stage means an informed, defensible decision—not the launch of DevolvED. Any later demonstration would require separate agreement, funding and governance approvals.

A subsequent decision gateway would determine whether there is a credible case for more detailed institutional design or limited demonstration.

Only if that case were established would participating organisations be invited to consider specific commitments, subject to their own governance arrangements and the legal authority available to them.

This approach would protect against the premature creation of additional committees, agreements or reporting requirements.

It would also enable government and regional partners to learn from the process even if the evidence suggested that the most effective response was to strengthen existing arrangements rather than introduce new ones.

Initial consideration: Is there sufficient interest and a credible policy question?

Discovery: What does the evidence establish about need, feasibility, cost and potential additionality?

Decision gateway: Is there a justified case for further design or demonstration?

Possible demonstration: Can selected activities and institutional relationships be tested under agreed conditions?

An Invitation to Government and Regional Partners

The next phase of English devolution offers an opportunity to reconsider the relationship between the development of people and the development of place.

The central argument of DevolvED is that educational excellence, human capability, research, enterprise and public-service effectiveness should be understood as interconnected contributors to regional prosperity and human flourishing.

Education is not simply a means of supplying the workforce required by an existing economy. It is also a source of knowledge, creativity, judgement and innovation through which individuals and institutions can help create new economic and social possibilities.

Equally, the opportunities available to individuals depend upon the wider conditions of the places in which they live. Transport, health, housing, investment, enterprise and public institutions influence whether educational achievement can be translated into meaningful participation and opportunity.

These relationships suggest that the development of people and place should be considered together.

The proposition does not require the abandonment of national educational stewardship, the weakening of statutory duties or the transfer of institutional control to regional government.

It invites examination of whether stronger relationships between existing responsibilities could create additional public value.

A Regional Education Strategy might provide shared direction. A negotiated National–Regional Partnership Agreement might clarify the contribution of authorised governmental parties. A separately co-created Regional Education and Prosperity Agreement might enable willing institutions to undertake practical commitments.

Whether these instruments are necessary or desirable remains to be established.

The appropriate next step is therefore a programme of Discovery, capable of testing the proposition against evidence, institutional realities, legal responsibilities, affordability and credible alternatives.

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent could provide one possible setting for such work, subject to the agreement of relevant partners. Its significance would lie in the contribution that a carefully designed inquiry could make to wider national understanding.

The larger ambition is to place human flourishing at the centre of the relationship between national policy and regional development.

INVITATION

Consider a jointly scoped Discovery programme to establish whether more connected education, enterprise and regional governance can create additional public value.

Selected intellectual foundations: Amartya Sen (capabilities); Michael Marmot (social determinants); OECD Learning Compass 2030. International illustrations: Brainport Eindhoven, Basque Country and Singapore. Full source verification and bibliographic references should accompany circulation.