

Norwich and Exeter Success

Is there any irony in the juxtaposition of the Queen's Speech proposing a "Decentralism and Localism Bill" alongside a "Local Government Bill" that will reverse the moves towards unitary councils for Norwich and Exeter? One can argue that the decision by John Denham on the unitaries was poorly-timed, fundamentally political in character; and that the reversion to the two tier status quo was clearly signalled in the Conservative party manifesto. However, this begs the question of whether, and under what circumstances, the status quo will be "good" for the future success of the cities concerned in particular and for small/medium-size cities across England in general.

Norwich and Exeter are both by some distance, the largest urban areas in Norfolk and Devon respectively, and the most prominent economic drivers for their counties. They are both "underbounded" as districts, and this was a very major weakness of the unitary solutions proposed. However, the status quo hardly presents a satisfactory model for coherent city leadership. Under the status quo, county council expenditure and strategic priorities clearly dwarfs city council decision-taking and influence. I know from personal experience that Norfolk's cabinet and I am sure that Devon County Council (similarly) are committed to a successful "core city". However, the leadership reality of the counties is that Norfolk Cabinet has no member representing a Norwich electorate, and eleven of Norwich's thirteen county councillors are in opposition. In Devon, one of nine cabinet members represents Exeter voters and of the nine Exeter county councillors, seven are in opposition. And it really does seem ironic when more Devon cabinet members live in the "Greater Plymouth" area (itself of course a unitary city) than do in Exeter.

So, if the two tier structure makes coherent local authority city leadership problematic, what does the local authority "family" in these sub-regions have to do to ensure future success for these two genuinely vibrant cities, each of huge potential?

Firstly, they will need to put any lingering acrimony from the local government reorganisation process behind them. Second, they need to work genuinely on a "Greater Norwich" and "Greater Exeter" basis to develop a broadly-based prospectus and delivery plan of how public policy can help shape future success (including globally competitive economic strengths) over the coming difficult public investment period. Thirdly, they need to facilitate buy-in to this process from key national, sub-national public partners, and from private and third sector role players – i.e. something akin to a bespoke Greater Norwich/Greater Exeter approach to "Total Place". Fourthly, the County Council will need to prioritise this "successful city" work, sometimes making hard choices about the conflicting demands of other parts of the county. The corollary is the city council acting strategically for the good of their whole functional economic area and the wider sub-region.

If this could be achieved (and it is a big 'if'), this would provide a model for other small and medium size cities in two tier areas that would be of genuinely national significance. Therefore, there is, I believe, a responsibility on government implementing this Local Government Bill, to itself incentivise future local authority collaboration to deliver Norwich and Exeter's future success.

Perhaps, there is no irony in the juxtaposition of the two Queens Speech Bills. But, at the least, the Norwich and Exeter case demonstrates that "localism" is considerably more complex and ambivalent than the political "sound-bites" of Conservatives and LibDems during the general election campaign. This complexity will also need to be recognised in how they bring forward the bigger "Decentralism and Localism Bill". But that is another piece...