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THE FUTURE OF ENGLAND
THE LOCAL DIMENSION

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IDEAS to
CHANGE OPINIONS

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

The Future of England Survey (2011 and 2012) demonstrated a growth in 'Englishness' as a social and political identity – particularly vis-a-vis 'British' and 'European' identities. The 2012 survey also asked questions about local identity and attachment.

Eighty per cent of survey respondents said that they felt strong attachment to their 'local area' compared with 75 per cent to England and 66 per cent to the UK. Local authorities also fared better than the UK government in terms of people's sense of local efficacy and influence. And people's trust in local councils and local councillors is consistently higher than trust in parliament and local MPs or ministers.

When asked about existing institutions, only 3 per cent of people felt that councils currently have the most influence over the way England is run, but six times as many think that councils should have the most influence.

In the future, 28 per cent of people think that some kind of subnational institution should have the most influence over how England is run – only slightly fewer than those favouring the UK parliament (30 per cent) or an English parliament (30 per cent) – and 39 per cent believe local authorities should have more powers.

There was less enthusiasm, however, for policy variation at the local level. This was particularly true as regards education, childcare and social care, where less than 20 per cent of people thought that these should be matters for each local authority to decide. In other areas such as housing, planning and public transport, respondents were less concerned about local policy variation.

The report concludes that:
- National decision-makers should recognise that there is a far greater appetite on the part of the general public for stronger local democratic institutions and more local determination of policy issues than is commonly assumed.
- While there is value in exploring the idea of an English parliament and 'English votes on English laws', it may well be that local or subnational solutions to the English question can address the perceptions and concerns of the English public. A proper central/local settlement in England offers the possibility of reviving England's overcentralised and flagging democratic system.
- The Future of England survey has opened up new questions. Future iterations of the survey should include some additional and more sophisticated questions to explore these areas further.

1. INTRODUCTION

Issues of social and political identity have come to the fore in Britain in recent years in three inter-related contexts: devolution to Wales, Northern Ireland and particularly to Scotland; the UK's relationship with the European Union; and in an emerging debate about the role of London in relation to other cities and regions.

Social and political identity is complex and contested terrain. Social psychologists, cultural theorists and political scientists all take quite different approaches to the way we identify and behave in a world which is both increasingly global but at the same time more diverse and fragmented. Within this literature the relationship between local, national and global identities is a particularly interesting one. Rejecting any notion of a singular ethnic or religious identity, Amartya Sen, for example, argues in favour of plural identities (Sen 2006), while others emphasise that in our post-Fordist 'information age', local – very often urban – identity is superseding that of the nation state (Castells 1996, Soja 2000).

In January 2012, IPPR, working with the Universities of Cardiff and Edinburgh, published *The dog that finally barked: England as an emerging political community* (Wyn Jones et al 2012). In it the authors showed that people in England increasingly stress the English aspects of their Anglo-British identity and that this identity is becoming increasingly politicised, with support growing for the idea that England should receive proper recognition within the governing structures of the UK. In a subsequent report, *England and its two unions: Anatomy of a nation and its discontents* (Wyn Jones et al 2013), the authors found English identity to be strengthening and also identified a strong hostility among the English towards the European Union.

It would be easy to conclude from both reports that there has been a rise in attitudes typified by the 'little Englander' stereotype, and that perceived hostility towards Scots and 'Europeans' – indeed, towards foreigners in general – is symptomatic of a growing fear that such outsiders are a real threat to the material interests of the English. Beyond such initial impressions, however, there is a deeper current of change. The apparent groundswell of Englishness has much to do with questions about the legitimacy of the Westminster and Whitehall-based political institutions that govern England and about our traditional understanding of the nature of the United Kingdom. Moreover, in such questions, notions of local as well as national identity have a role to play.

Issues of social and political identification in the UK are of more than just academic interest. The referendum on Scottish independence later in 2014 gives very real salience to questions about national and local identity, and aspects of Scottish identity will play a very real part in that debate. But whatever the outcome, in terms of independence or further devolution, the debate about Scotland's future will also shine a spotlight on the 'English question': whether Scottish MPs should have a say on English matters and, more generally, how England should govern itself. Social and political identification could provide the key to resolving these difficult questions.

Both of the IPPR reports on Englishness drew heavily upon the Future of England survey, first carried out in September 2011 and then repeated in 2012,[1] following the Queen's diamond jubilee and the London Olympic and Paralympic games. In the second survey in 2012, a number of new questions were added concerning people's attitude towards local identity and local government.

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1   All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,600 English adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 23rd - 28th November 2012. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all English adults (aged 18+).

Although it is not possible to compare directly the relationship between national (English/British) and 'local' identities in the way the previous reports have done, nor to deduce longer-term trends in local identity, this new data is able to highlight some interesting attitudes towards local attachment and local governance. Set alongside data drawn from other sources, it is possible to argue that English local identity could play an important role in addressing some of the reasons that appear to be contributing to the rise in Englishness.

Drawing upon new analysis of the 2012 Future of England survey, this short paper explores three key questions:

• What do people in England think about their local area and the way in which it is governed?

• In the context of ongoing concerns about the governance of the UK, to what extent do local institutions offer a solution to the 'English question'?

• To what extent do people in England perceive that there are limits to English localism?

Each of these questions is considered within the context of a growing debate on devolution and decentralisation in England. Aside from issues of social and political identity, there is increasing concern that the UK – and England in particular – is overly centralised. In economic terms, there is concern in many circles that the recession has widened the gap between London's economy and the rest of England, with significant consequences for the public finances. In terms of public service delivery, there is growing acknowledgment that the 'Whitehall knows best' approach to service design and delivery has not served people well and that, as a nation, we need to provide greater scope for local innovation and improvement in services. To address these concerns, this paper concludes by considering how trends in identity and attachment might contribute to or expand emerging debates about devolution and decentralisation in England.

2. LOCAL ATTITUDES AND DECENTRALISATION

Local identities are important to people. Although local identity tends to be more nebulous and dynamic than national identity, our attachment to places can be strong and sit quite comfortably alongside any sense (shifting or stable) of national identity. Furthermore, it is at the local level that people feel they wield more influence and have greater trust in their elected representatives.

Local attachment

The 2012 Future of England survey included two direct measures of national identity in England. In the first, respondents were asked to choose which national identities they would apply to themselves (as many or as few as they wished, from a range of options). They were then asked to choose one option that 'best describes the way you think of yourself' (that is, a 'forced choice' or Moreno question). Along with the census question on nationality, it is these results that have been used to make a case for the rising tide of Englishness.

These questions of national identity don't include a 'local' dimension and so it is impossible to assess how local identities sit alongside national identities. That said, 6 per cent of respondents to the 'forced choice' question refused to choose between English or British identities and instead claimed to be 'Other'. Of these 'other' identities, a significant proportion were Scottish, Irish and Welsh, and 37 of these 254 respondents claimed a more local or regional identity, such as Londoner, 'Brummie', Cornish, 'Geordie' and 'Yorkshireman'.

More generally, the survey asked how strongly attached people felt to different tiers of spatial identity: local, national, British and European. Eighty per cent of respondents said they felt strong attachment to their 'local area', compared with 75 per cent who felt strong attachment to England and 66 per cent to the UK.[2]

Figure 2.1
Strong attachment to different spatial identities, by English region (%)
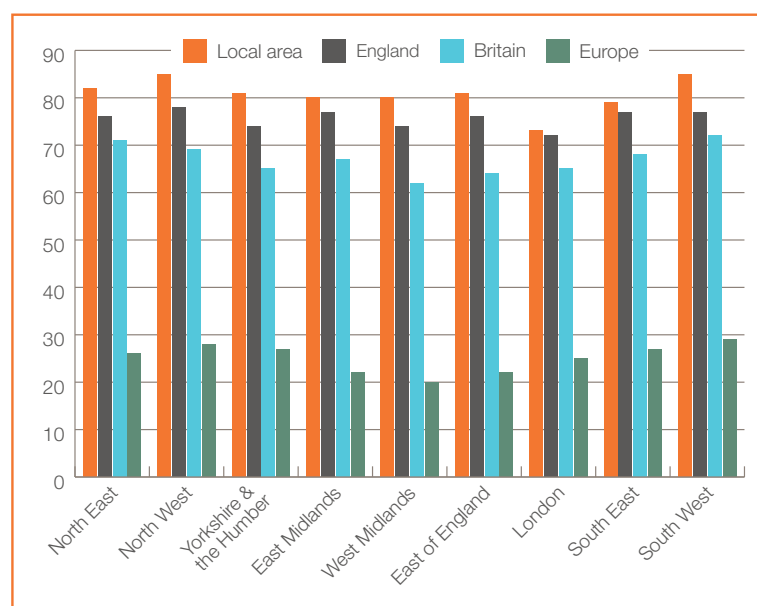
Source: FoES 2012
N = 3,600

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2   The survey did not attempt to define 'local area' and so it is likely that different respondents will have had in mind different conceptions of what the term might mean, from village / neighbourhood to city / city-region. Future surveys will attempt to clarify this.

As set out in figure 2.1, there was little difference in local attachment from region to region; it was lowest in London and the South East, where it was almost equal to attachment to England, at around 75 per cent. The importance of the local area was notably high among older people, with 90 per cent of over-60s reporting strong local attachment.

While it is clearly risky to draw firm conclusions about the relative positions of national and local identity using responses to these different questions, it is clear that local attachment and identity have real salience for many people, and particularly for older people.

Local efficacy

The Future of England survey also asked people about their sense of efficacy at different levels. When asked if they agreed that their local authority 'didn't care much about what people like me think', 68 per cent of people said that they agreed. While this might seem poor, it was better than people's attitudes towards the UK government (74 per cent) and the European Union (84 per cent). Interestingly, it was the London Assembly (54 per cent) and London mayor (45 per cent) that faired best on this efficacy measure.

A similar pattern emerges when people were asked whether they agreed that 'people like me don't have any say about what [different institutions] do'. Once again local authorities (66 per cent) ranked better than the UK government (75 per cent) or European Union (87 per cent) but slightly worse than the London Assembly (65 per cent) and London mayor (62 per cent).

While this highlights an overall sense of disengagement with the political process, once again these results seem to suggest a level of affinity with the local authority and perception of efficacy at that level that is more favourable than for national government. And one could go further: where those powers and processes are more tangible and territorially defined – as in the case of London with its elected mayor – the sense of local political efficacy is even greater.
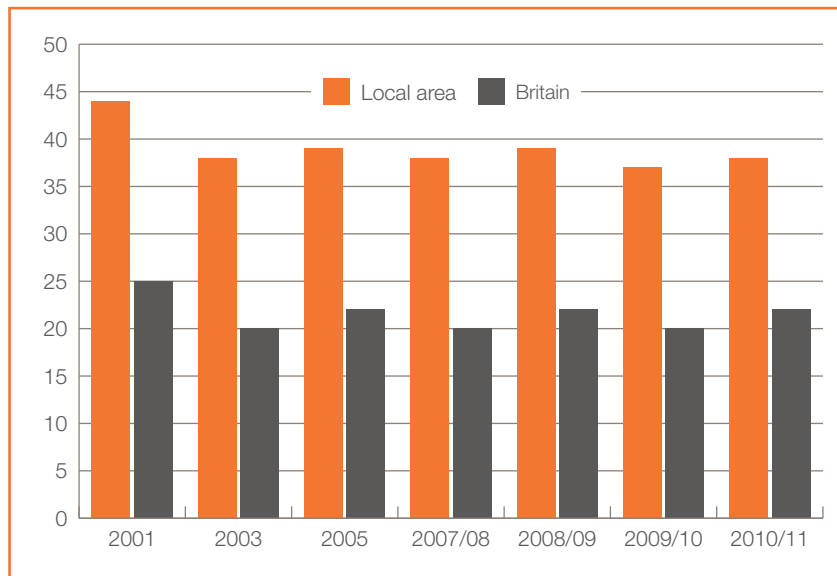
These results are corroborated by the longer-term findings of the national citizenship survey. In its last release (2010/11) it showed that the public have consistently felt that they are more able to influence decisions affecting their local area than they are those affecting Britain as a whole (see figure 2.2). This sense of local efficacy has declined a little since 2001 but it might be expected that people will always feel more able to influence local than national matters.

Local trust

The relative strengths of local attachment and efficacy shown by the Future of England survey are given further weight by a number of other significant studies comparing local and national perceptions of 'trust' in different institutions.
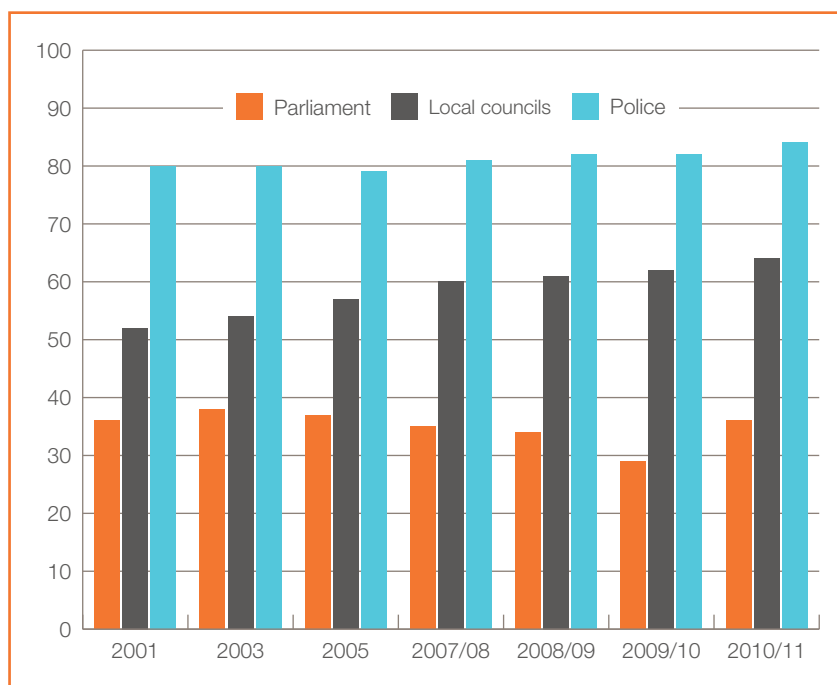
The national citizenship survey asks a very simple question about levels of public trust in police, councils and parliament. While the police have consistently received the top score over the decade to 2010/11, local councils have scored better than parliament, and trust in councils has been consistently rising, where it has fallen for parliament (see figure 2.3). The particular dip in parliament's rating can probably be accounted for by the expenses scandal in 2008 (and trust in parliament rebounded somewhat in 2010/11); however, unlike for local councils – for which trust has risen year on year – it was on a downward trajectory anyway.
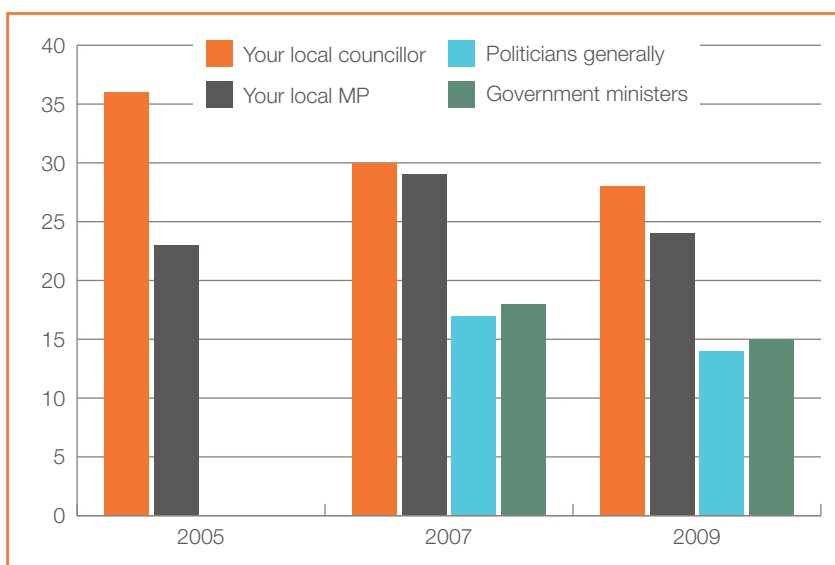
Source: CLG 2011

Source: CLG 2011

These variations in public trust can be seen in relation to politicians as well as their institutions. Before its abolition, the Standards for England regulator carried out regular monitoring of public perceptions of public trust in politicians. Their findings have shown that the proportion of people who believe local councillors tell the truth 'always' or 'most of the time', although falling, is consistently nearly twice that of government ministers and politicians generally (see figure 2.4). The results for whether the public think politicians

'rarely' or 'never' tell the truth shows a similar pattern, suggesting that the public are able to discern between local and national politicians and that they are more favourably predisposed towards the former.

Source: Standards for England / Ipsos MORI 2009

In summary, for most people, personal identity is complex. Individuals inhabit complex and 'nested' identities, which cannot be forced into particular categories or boxes. Alongside their national identities, many people have very strong relationships with their local areas, and this is reflected in their sense of greater efficacy and political trust at that level. Outside London and the South East, people feel a stronger attachment to their local area than they do to any notion of England or Britain; and, as might be expected, they clearly and consistently feel more able to influence decisions in their locality and more trusting of both local institutions and local politicians.

Public perceptions therefore run counter to the normative assumptions on the part of national politicians and Whitehall officials, who often insist that local agencies cannot be trusted with many of the powers that are currently held centrally. Addressing this discontinuity between public perception and national political opinion might be an important way of reconnecting politics with the wider population.

3. LOCAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE ENGLISH QUESTION

Although local attachment, efficacy and trust seem strong compared with feelings of Englishness or Britishness, it would be unwise to assume that these indicators necessarily imply a desire or mandate for a greater role to be given to local political institutions or other means of local democratic governance. The connections between attachment to place or even political trust and the institutional arrangements that might follow are complex and not always linear. They are tied up in wider perceptions of historical and cultural formation which evolve only very slowly.

Despite this, the emerging strength of local sentiments cannot be overlooked by those who are concerned with political and institutional reform, not least because it can help to explain why independence movements – such as that in Scotland – very often focus upon the formation of new political and democratic institutions. Given that there appears to be a rise in Englishness at a time when strong local attachments exist, it is legitimate to ask whether new local institutions and governance might have a role to play in addressing the so-called English question: how is England to be governed?

As part of the FoES survey, people were asked which institution (from among those which already exist) currently has the most influence over the way that England is run. Unsurprisingly, 55 per cent of respondents believed that the UK parliament is the dominant force, with the European Union ranked second (31 per cent). Only 3 per cent of people felt that local councils currently have the most influence over the way England is run.

However, when asked which institution should have the most influence over the way England is run, the picture was very different. While the UK parliament retained the greatest overall support (71 per cent), six times as many people thought that local councils *should* have the most influence over the way that England is run as thought it currently does, rising to 18 per cent. Only 2 per cent of respondents felt the European Union should have the most influence on the way England is run.
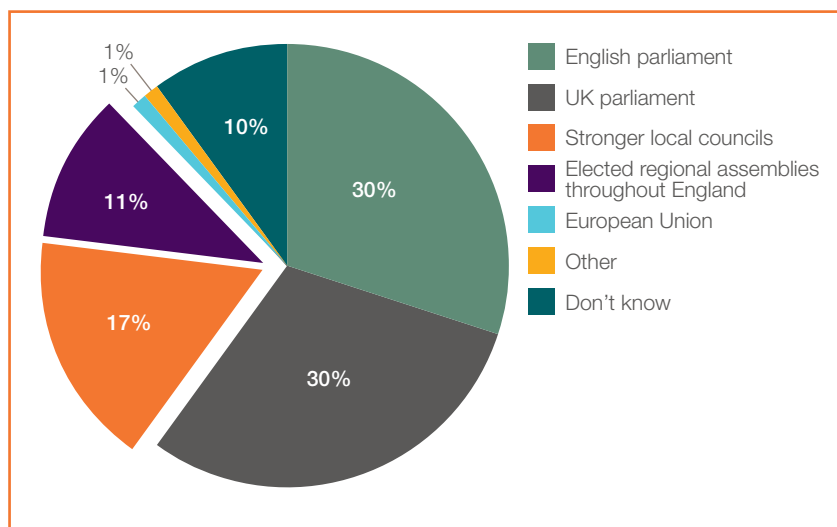
Figure 3.1
Among existing institutions, which has / should have the most influence over the way England is run? (%)
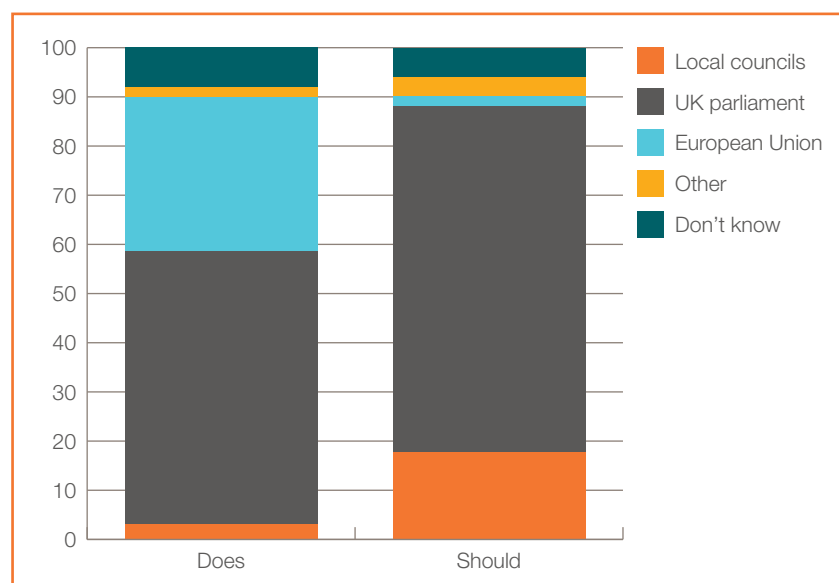
Source: FoES 2012
N = 3,600

When people were asked about different and new forms of democratic institution in England, two further matters stood out. First, there is a significant interest in the idea of an English parliament – 30 per cent of respondents felt that this institution should have the most influence, the same number as those who preferred a UK parliament.[3] But perhaps more surprisingly, nearly the same proportion (28 per cent) felt that either stronger local councils or elected regional assemblies should have the most influence. It is also interesting to note that of those who chose 'other', many suggested very local, neighbourhood or work-based institutions. Although local and regional institutions are by no means the same thing, it would appear that some form of subnational governance has almost as much support as an English parliament or retaining the existing UK parliamentary structure.

Figure 3.2
Among different possible institutions, which should have the most influence over the way England is run? (%)
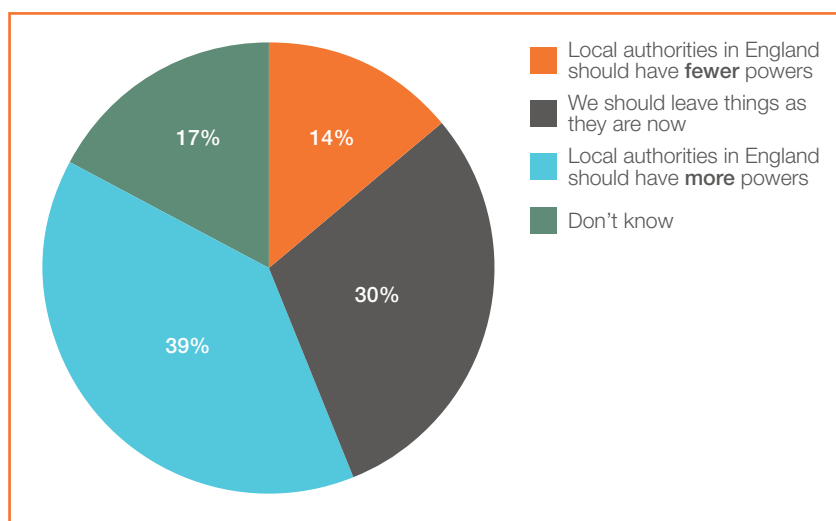

Source: FoES 2012

There are some further interesting patterns within these figures. Support for an English parliament seems particularly strong among the over-60s (36 per cent) and also among Conservative voters (42 per cent). Among the 18–24 age group, however, the strong preference is for more influential subnational institutions (30 per cent, versus only 18 per cent in favour of an English parliament). In the 25–39 age group, 30 per cent prefer subnational institutions. Among Labour voters, 36 per cent prefer subnational institutions, with nearly a quarter of that group favouring stronger local councils.

Finally, when asked specifically about local authorities' powers 39 per cent of all respondents said they should have more powers and just 14 per cent said they should have fewer (see figure 3.3).

Again, there are interesting dimensions to this headline figure. Nearly half of Labour voters say local authorities should have more powers, and this view enjoys particularly strong support in the North East and North West regions. This may be an incumbency effect, as the majority of these northern councils have strong Labour majorities, but once again it suggests that there is a clear appetite among the general public on the political left and in some of the big cities for greater local devolution.

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3   Respondents were not given the option of selecting 'English votes on English laws' (EVoEL), an idea that also has significant popularity among many reformers.

Figure 3.3
Support for changes to
extent of local authority
powers (%)

Source: FoES 2012

In summary, although many commentators look to an English parliament or to revised
procedures for English matters within the Westminster parliament as the obvious
means of addressing the English question, there exists alongside this a clear desire on
the part of the public for more powerful subnational institutions. And these need not
be seen as either/or choices: some form of new England-wide governance could be
combined with strengthened English subnational institutions. Many people would prefer
enhanced local councils; slightly fewer back some kind of elected regional assembly[4]
– but either way, it is clear that not only do people feel more attachment to and trust
in their local areas and local politicians, many would seem to support stronger local
democratic institutions as well.

4   Respondents were not offered the option of city-regions.

4. THE LIMITS TO ENGLISH LOCALISM

With such attachment to local place and apparent support for greater powers for local institutions, one might ask why England today remains quite so centralised. Why has England failed to devolve powers to the local level to the extent that other developed nations have done over recent decades? One of the principal reasons given by national politicians, particularly those on the left, is that they fear that more local control will lead to greater place-to-place variation in the quality of local services, with some areas falling significantly behind others – the so-called 'postcode lottery'.

In order to explore this issue, the Future of England survey asked respondents whether they felt that certain policies should be the same across the whole of England or should be matters for local authorities to decide.

Figure 4.1
Preferred level of consistency across England, by policy area (%)
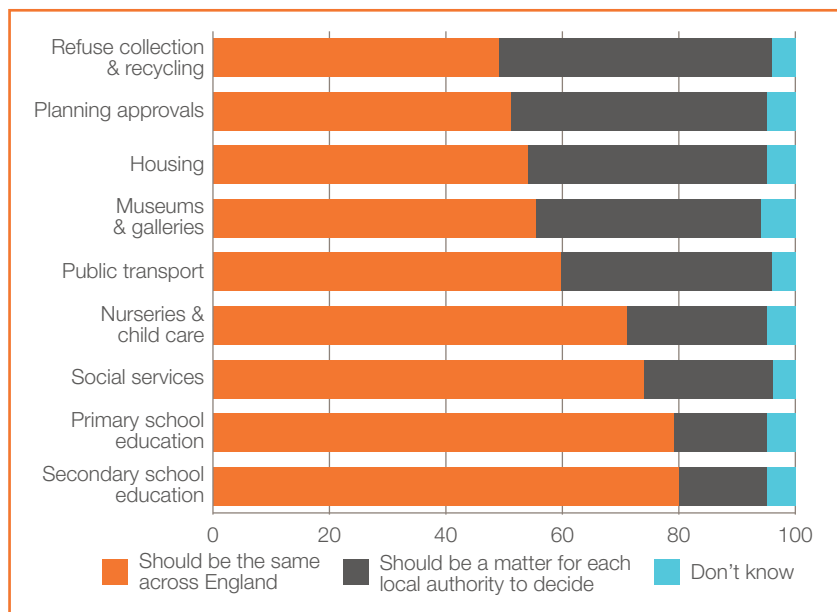
Source: FoES 2012

It is clear that however much people might trust their local politicians and institutions, when it comes to key service areas they are very concerned that there should not be significant policy variation from place to place. This is particularly true for primary and secondary education, for social services and for nurseries and childcare.[5]

On the face of it, one would expect the public to be quite satisfied with the current state of affairs, particularly as regards primary and secondary education, where policy is set nationally and is largely the same across England. Local determination of policy has been reduced over the past decade. One suspects, however, that the strength of feeling in these policy areas, expressed through the survey, is actually a reflection of *dissatisfaction* and the sense that there is currently too much variation between schools, as evidenced through school league tables and the like. That is, support for consistency is not support for the status quo but for further improvement.

The danger here is that in answering the question, respondents might be confusing cause and effect. While there is a clear strength of feeling in favour of *policy* being the same

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5   One suspects it might also be true in healthcare, although this was not part of the survey question.

across England, one wonders whether respondents are really seeking greater similarity of *outcome*. The real question is whether, although people might perceive that having the same policy nationwide might lead to more equal outcomes across England, consistently high standards across *all* schools might in fact be better achieved by increasing local determination of policy. This matter requires further exploration in future surveys.

Looking beyond education and social care, it is interesting to see that in other policy areas people seem much more relaxed about local variation. Even in quite significant areas such as housing, planning and public transport, people seem satisfied that local authorities should be able to set policy locally, in response to local conditions. Once again, this poses a challenge to central government, as English policymaking in such areas remains considerably more centralised than in other European nations (Cox 2014).

Generally speaking, the results are similar for different types of voter, different age groups and between different regions, but there are a small number of services that are of particular concern to certain groups. Women, for example, have a strong preference for childcare policy to be the same nationwide; older people want greater uniformity in relation to public transport policy. Conservative voters have a strong preference for planning policy to be the same across England; ethnic minorities believe quite strongly that this should be a local matter.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Across England, attachment to local place is high. Even in London and the South East, where local attachment is less distinct from English identity, local attachment is still strong. Such attachment also translates into a strong desire for more powerful local institutions. As one might expect, people feel much more able to influence decision-making locally than they do at the national level, and so giving more powers to local areas would appear to be an important way to reinvigorate local democracy. Trust in local politicians and local institutions is consistently higher than trust in national politicians and bodies – this is particularly true in the case of the London mayor and Greater London Assembly.

National decision-makers should recognise that there is a far greater appetite on the part of the general public for stronger local democratic institutions and more local determination of policy issues than is commonly assumed.

Ideas that 'people hate their local councillors', 'local authorities can't be trusted' and there are 'high levels of local apathy' would appear to circulate only within a self-serving Westminster bubble, although they can be reinforced by MPs, who are often at loggerheads with councils in their constituencies over local issues. Positive views of local democracy are obfuscated further by a 'London effect' which, due to its weaker local attachments and stronger local institutions, seems not to recognise the weakness of local democratic institutions in other parts of the country.

In some respects, the UK government has acknowledged the strength of local attachment in places where social and political identification has been strongest – Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London – by offering significant new powers and institutions. In England, attempts to devolve to regional assemblies and create 'city mayors' were broadly rejected in large part on account of the failure of central government to conceive of sub-national institutions that had local salience and fit with local attachments, and by its failure to offer the devolution of any significant new powers. But this should not be the end of the story. The success of the London 'metro mayor' and the demands by other city-regions for greater autonomy in economic development and public service reform come at a time when the debate around the future of Scotland is pushing the English question to the forefront.

While there is value in exploring the idea of an English parliament and 'English votes on English laws', it may well be that local or subnational solutions to the English question can address the perceptions and concerns of the English public. A proper central/local settlement in England offers the possibility of reviving England's overcentralised and flagging democratic system.

Where there is a degree of equivocation about localism, it is around particular public services. In some policy areas, it would appear that people are willing to accept a degree of local variation in services and that they feel local councils should determine policy for themselves – crucially, this includes housing and planning. However, in education and social care, it would appear that people have a greater fear of the postcode lottery. While on the face of it this suggests there should be a reduced level of local determination for such services, in reality such fears may well be driven by people's heightened perception of local disparities created by the current, highly centralised regime. Indeed, while it may seem counterintuitive, a greater level of local policy variation – with the closer involvement of parents and other local stakeholders – may well be the recipe needed to raise school standards and ensure greater national consistency of outcomes. At the very least, greater local efficacy might reduce people's concerns that school standards should be the same everywhere.

The Future of England survey has opened up new questions. Future iterations of the survey should include some additional and more sophisticated questions to explore these areas further.

For example, it would be helpful:

• to have a better idea of how people understand their 'local area'
• to be able to compare more directly people's attachment to their local area with their attachment to ideas of England and Britain
• to know more about people's perceptions of different forms of local institution and their preferences for different types of local institutional reform
• to test further whether fears of a postcode lottery apply to service outcomes or to policy determination and delivery.

In sum, this short paper attempts to open up a new flank in the debate about the future of England. Although there are many proponents of decentralisation and devolution, their case is normally heard in the context of economic development or public service reform. This paper suggests that the drive for reviving local democracy in England runs deeper, that it taps into people's social and political identification. If Englishness is the dog that finally barked, local devolution could be its proverbial bone.

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