

The impact of devolution on local government in Scotland

Following Labour's 1997 General Election victory devolution was granted to Scotland and Wales. This study, by a team from the University of Strathclyde, analysed the impact of devolution on local government in Scotland. The study mapped the changing relationships in the new 'multi-level democratic governance' of Scotland, including the continuing relevance to Westminster in Scottish central-local relations. It assessed the impact of devolution on national local government organisations; the centralisation of political power in Scotland; and the impact of devolution on local public service delivery. The study found:



The great majority of local government interviewees supported devolution politically with virtually none calling for a return to pre-devolution state of affairs. Notwithstanding this endorsement, there were a number of areas where there was dissatisfaction with how devolution has worked out in practice.



Nearly half of councillors (48 per cent) thought devolution had reduced the importance of local government.



While relations between local government and the political Executive were generally much improved compared with those before devolution, relations with the civil service were often marked by mutual distrust.



Westminster has become much less important to the day-to-day operations of Scottish local government although UK party political links remained important.



List MSPs were largely seen as a nuisance who simply chased headlines in local newspapers in order to raise their own profile.



Forty per cent of councillors thought that COSLA had been too close to the Scottish Executive in policy-making terms and only 28 per cent thought that COSLA represented all councils' interests fairly and equally.

This study was based on interviews and surveys of those working in central and local government in 11 Scottish local authorities.

Central-local relations in post-devolution Scotland

The majority of interviewees working in local government believed that the Scottish Executive was striving to be more open and inclusive, and that there was more partnership working. However, most in local government also felt that they were the junior partners in the relationship, with 48 per cent of councillors thinking that devolution had reduced the importance of local government. While there were tensions in the complex relationship between the tiers of government, the general view was that things had improved for local government since devolution.

"Things are better than they were before devolution. They are not as good as they could be but I think that is a development issue; things will improve."
(Councillor)

The research highlighted the continued fragmentation of central-local relations in Scotland. A range of relationships between different departments of the Scottish Executive and different parts of local government was uncovered. At the corporate level of councils, relations with the Executive varied significantly depending on the issue. For example, Directors of Education reported positive relations with the Scottish Executive Education Department. This contrasted with the views of Directors in other local government service areas where, in general, less positive relations seem to exist. The research also highlighted the different perceptions between politicians and senior officers, particularly chief executives, within the case study councils.

Most of the local government interviewees regarded the civil service with a degree of suspicion

and mistrust. They felt that the civil service was largely dismissive of local government and on some issues even hostile to it.

"Devolution has brought the civil service more in the limelight but they don't like it. There is still a tendency to tell things rather than to listen. They are high in arrogance – they have a command model of the world." (Local government interviewee)

On the civil service side of the 'divide' an equal sense of mistrust of local government was found and interviewees expressed unease about local government's capacity to formulate policy and its ability to deliver public services.

"Can [local government] deliver modern, high quality services? If they fail on any Executive priority, that will put strain on the 'partnership'." (Civil service interviewee)

One of the aspirations that underpinned Scottish devolution was that a new form of governance would be created, or, to use the term adopted by many, a 'new politics' would emerge in Scotland. The research found that Westminster remains a major influence not just in financial and policy terms but also as a mindset, one that does not always sit in accordance with the aspirations of devolution.

"In the old days ministers spent 3 days a week in London; there is now more exposure of the civil service to ministers from about grade V and down. The civil service still remains pre-occupied with reacting to 'events, dear boy, events'."

The relevance of Westminster and Whitehall

While Westminster remains important in establishing the financial and policy frameworks within which Scottish local authorities and devolved

government operate, 62 per cent of local councillors said Westminster had become less important to local government. One Scottish Executive Minister commented:

"Westminster has no impact on Scotland; the separation is quite astonishing [it is] much more so than anyone would have realised."

On an interpersonal level, however, it is clear that many councillors still retain significant levels of contact with Westminster MPs. This indicates the continuing importance of UK party political contact within Scottish political networks. These informal party political channels were critical to the management of policy and created a web that bound local government, the devolved administration and Westminster together.

The Executive and Parliament: differing perceptions

While both the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive were inter-linked and formed central elements of the governance framework of Scotland they were also perceived in very different terms by many in local government, who tended to view the Parliament more favourably than they did the Executive. A further issue highlighted by the research was the role of List MSPs. Under the Additional Member System used for the Scottish Parliament elections, these MSPs' seats were allocated according to the total number of votes cast for the political parties. List MSPs were largely seen as a nuisance who simply chase headlines in local newspapers in order to raise their own and their party's profile.

The study found that the advent of the Scottish Parliament with a Labour-led coalition has created new pressures on the Labour-controlled Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).

The key issue that emerged from this analysis was that, while COSLA has pursued a strategy of

partnership in order to try influence the Scottish Executive, most councillors had not perceived the benefits of this approach. Forty per cent of councillors thought that COSLA had been too close to the Scottish Executive in policy-making terms and only 28 per cent thought that COSLA represented all councils' interests fairly and equally.

Devolution and public service delivery

Among both councillors and local government professional associations there were strong feelings that central control of many local government services had increased since devolution. Despite these concerns the general consensus for public service delivery was a positive one. While devolution has not resolved all the problems, it has made some important changes and the machinery of devolution allows closer joint working.

"I think devolution has made a bigger difference than the '97/'99 period. I think devolution was needed to improve decision-making structures and processes in Scotland." (Councillor)

Conclusion

While devolution may not have realised all expectations, it was perceived to have brought significant improvements in the governance of Scotland in the first two years.

In the main the research found that devolution had significantly improved matters by bringing national government closer, geographically, to local government. In addition to being physically closer to local government the research found that the Scottish Executive was perceived as more open and willing to listen to local government than the Scottish Office had been before devolution. In addition, the policy and legislative capacity that devolution brought created far greater opportunities to deal with Scotland's problems.

What is apparent from the research is the need

for a political culture that is willing to overcome the remaining problems of distrust between and among Scotland's public servants. While many had hoped devolution would produce a 'new politics', progress has been limited and Scotland has yet to fully free itself from the 'old politics' of the past. If devolution is to produce new goals and a new history then it must make progress on this issue more than on anything else.

About the project

The research was carried out by John Fairley, Mark McAteer and Mike Bennett of Strathclyde University. The study consisted of 120 personal interviews with Scottish Executive Ministers, civil servants and senior councillors and officials from 11 local authorities. Other key commentators on Scottish political affairs were also interviewed. Five surveys were also conducted, with each producing a representative response rate. Surveys were carried out with elected councillors, and four local government professional associations: the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers (ALACHO) and the Scottish Local Authority Economic Development Group (SLAED).

How to get further information

The full report, **Devolution in Scotland: The impact on local government** by Michael Bennett, John Fairley and Mark McAteer, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 068 7, price £12.95).