

N O R T H



WHAT ROLE CAN ENGLAND'S REGIONAL MAYORS PLAY IN POVERTY REDUCTION?

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Summary

- The Prime Minister's Direction of Government Statement prioritises tackling the cost of living crisis by achieving good growth in every postcode through an acceleration and deepening of English devolution and rejection of a "failed economic model" that "does not trickle down" to many parts of the country.
- How far English regional government can be scaled at pace with the capacity to lead a more inclusive growth agenda will now become a defining question for the Burnham government.
- New research conducted by the University of York's Cost of Living Research Group highlights a key gap in devolution plans to date that pose a risk to this agenda. The research comprised interviews with policy leads in ten different regional strategic authorities between May and August 2026.
- Our data shows English devolution has paid comparatively little attention to the question of what role English regions can and should play in reducing poverty and inequality, a predominant emphasis on conventional growth models contributing to the implicit assumption that growth will automatically trickle down to all communities.
- Strengthening the role of regions in reducing poverty and inequality can play a vital role in achieving good growth, but this requires new ways of working. The current powers of English regions leaves them well placed to provide strategic leadership in poverty prevention activity, but mayors need to lead from the front on this agenda and regional authorities need support to build their capacity and skills in an area of policy where their expertise is often limited.

Recommendations

1. Mayoral leadership is vital in shaping whether or not regions play an active role in poverty reduction agendas. Where mayors have chosen to make poverty reduction a visible priority, staff working within authorities have followed suit. However, in many regions, including some Labour controlled regions, poverty does not feature prominently in mayoral political priorities and this has translated into policy inaction on the ground.

2. English regions are ideally placed to provide strategic leadership in poverty prevention agendas and should frame their role in this way. Adult skills and employment, housing and transport all tap into structural determinants of poverty. However, not all regions adopt such a strategic positioning of their role, missing the opportunity to connect key elements of the policy ecosystem that can help reduce the risk of individuals falling into poverty through inclusive growth agendas.

3. Regional authorities need support in developing their capacity to tackle poverty and inequality. Expertise and staffing reflects the conventional growth focused model of devolution to date, meaning few regions reported confidence in their ability to provide strategic leadership in poverty reduction as part of a genuine inclusive growth agenda. The regions need more support from Westminster and Whitehall in building their skills and capabilities in this area.

Background

The Prime Minister's recent Direction of Government Statement placed the highest priority on tackling the UK's cost of living crisis by achieving good growth in every postcode, backed by "the biggest redistribution of power this country has seen" to empower English regions to deliver change through an acceleration and deepening of current devolution plans.

The statement made clear the Prime Minister's view that this agenda demands new ways of thinking about growth, arguing "For 40 years, too many places have been drifting [...] People yearn to see them restored [...] but they see no hope if we continue on the same path with a failed economic model, which does not trickle down much to places like theirs".

How far English regional government can be scaled at pace with the capacity to lead a more inclusive growth agenda will now become a defining question for the government.

New research conducted by the University of York's Cost of Living group shows devolution to date has paid comparatively little attention to the question of what role English regions can and should play in reducing poverty and inequality, a predominant emphasis on conventional growth models contributing to the implicit assumption that growth will automatically trickle down to all communities.

Mayoral Leadership

Mayoral leadership is vital in shaping whether or not regions play an active role in poverty reduction agendas.

Although the national Child Poverty Strategy envisages a key role for the English regions in tackling poverty, they have no statutory anti-poverty function. In the absence of statutory functions on poverty, strong political leadership is needed to establish this activity at regional level.

Where mayors have chosen to make poverty reduction a visible priority - such as in the North East where Kim McGuinness's election campaign centred on child poverty as her top priority - staff working within authorities have followed suit, an established democratic legitimacy for anti-poverty action providing them with confidence to take bold policy action. In many other regions, however, including some Labour controlled ones, an absence of a clear anti-poverty focus in this Mayor's political priorities has translated into policy inaction on the ground.

Our interviewees noted that Mayors can face political challenges in successfully framing anti-poverty agendas. Highlighting poverty can risk stigmatising their region and may undermine efforts to build cross-sector consensus. Reframing the narrative around 'financial hardship' or 'cost of living support' may be helpful for building broad coalitions. Linking anti-poverty work to the regions' core economic remit through 'inclusive growth' can be effective and is well-grounded in evidence of links between regional inequality, poorer educational outcomes and lower productivity.

Powers and Capacity

Regional authorities need support in developing their capacity to tackle poverty and inequality.

Interviewees noted anti-poverty work can be creatively embedded within the regions' core areas of competence, e.g. adult skills: linking training with employers in local growth industries to raise incomes; transport: capping bus fares, providing free travel for vulnerable groups, connecting disadvantaged areas to jobs; housing: affordable housing targets and retrofit schemes to cut household energy costs.

However, limited powers and Treasury demands to justify spending against statutory functions can hinder regions' ambitions in tackling poverty. Histories of high staff churn due to reliance on short-term competitive funding leave some regions without the in-house skills to deliver. Similarly, while a strengthened evidence-base would enable regions to pilot, evaluate, and share best practice in the longer-term, at present many lack the necessary specialist analytical capacity. Regions also report widespread frustration over barriers to accessing national DWP and HMRC datasets, which are vital for such work and to practice on the ground such as data driven benefit take-up activity.

Strategic Focus on Poverty Prevention

English regions are ideally placed to provide strategic leadership in poverty prevention agendas and should frame their role in this way.

The statutory powers of English regions are geared towards playing a lead role in poverty prevention; adult skills and employment, housing and transport all tap into structural determinants of poverty. However, not all regions adopt such a strategic positioning of their role, missing the opportunity to connect key elements of the policy ecosystem that can help reduce the risk of individuals falling into poverty through inclusive growth agendas.

Regions can excel at creating cross-sector partnerships, using statutory powers to bring in public sector partners and their Mayoral convening power to engage private and voluntary sector partners. Interviewees highlighted the efficacy of using regional networks to organise systems-level anti-poverty action. Examples include coordinating local councils to make a consistent school holiday food offer and linking employment and health services to deliver integrated access-to-work schemes.

Regions can lead enhanced data analysis capacities, with a view to helping local services deliver targeted poverty interventions, for example by analysing administrative data to identify households missing social security benefit entitlements. They can also bolster existing local authority and community welfare capacity by targeting mayoral funding to enhance or extend their support services.

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