

## Utilisation of Funding

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# Utilisation of Funding

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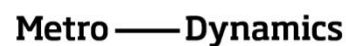
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This review was carried out as part of the ‘[improving public funding allocations to reduce geographical inequalities](#)’ project, funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Economic and Social Research Council. The project aims to propose better ways of allocating public funding in England, based on a much clearer understanding of the funding system and the policy problems arising from it.

This is a multi-partner project led by the University of Birmingham.

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Ministry of Housing,  
Communities &  
Local Government



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council

There is considerable interest in how funding is allocated to local stakeholders to address spatial inequalities and in the amount of funding that is available where. However, funding comes with rules on how, when, where and on what it can be spent. The focus of this review is on the factors influencing how funding is/ can be used to address local priorities that will address spatial inequalities and associated challenges and opportunities.

## Summary

- Key challenges faced by policymakers developing local strategies and with responsibilities for policy delivery at local level include fragmented and complex funding streams, over-reliance on competitive funding programmes, centralised decision-making and continued siloed working across departments, limited capacity at local authority level and short-term funding.
- Factors affecting utilisation include rules regarding use of funding; flexibilities in what funding can be used for, by whom, and where – including scope for making change requests; the time period for utilisation of funding and possibilities for virements and/or carry over to later periods; and local capacity for implementation.
- Optimal utilisation of funding is hampered by highly centralised yet uncoordinated funding processes, which can result in an emphasis on projects rather than place outcome. Complex policy geographies and tiers of government also contribute to problems.
- At local level the ease of alignment and pooling of funding between local partners varies in accordance with many factors such as the nature of the funding, to whom it is allocated, time periods for spending, the extent of local discretion, etc. In general, pooling of funding is more challenging than achieving alignment – but the latter can be difficult.
- Evidence from local stakeholders across several local programmes suggests that ‘joint working nationally’ helps ‘joint working locally’ in utilisation of funding.
- Funding simplification is central to understanding utilisation of funding for addressing spatial inequalities at subnational scales.

## Issues and Findings

### Context

A range of approaches to policy to address spatial inequalities exists (for example, see Todes and Turok, 2018; McCann, 2023). Traditional spatial rebalancing policies have sought to steer investment and jobs from leading to lagging regions. Space-neutral policies geared at maximising growth through increased efficiency have sought to accelerate growth and promote agglomeration by facilitating connectivity and removing barriers to factor adjustments. Both

approaches are characterised by use of a limited number of policy tools – including subsidies, capital for infrastructure, etc. – and a rather narrow policy focus.

By contrast, approaches focusing on place, or people-in-place (in recognition of the difficulty in distinguishing in many instances between people-based and place-based phenomena), focus on strengthening local assets, knowledge and institutions through holistic and integrated strategies cutting across policy domains and multiple layers of governance. These latter approaches emphasise tailoring to, and embeddedness within, geographical context (Barca, 2009). From a utilisation of funding perspective, they are likely to be characterised by a greater complexity of funding streams requiring superior capabilities to implement effectively than the former.

In practice, different policy approaches are often implemented simultaneously, without necessarily a coherent guiding purpose. This can mean that the overall policy rationale is unclear, with different initiatives promoted by separate departments and agencies coming together in place in sometimes seemingly piecemeal ways, so creating a difficult context for utilisation of funding.

## Factors influencing how, and whether, funding for addressing spatial inequalities can be utilised effectively at sub-national scale

A key generic issue is that central government may set priorities and timelines for utilisation of funding that may not align with the needs of local economies and communities. This situation can lead to tensions about the need for central accountability about how resources are being spent and about local flexibility to needs in a specific place. Hence rules and flexibilities about what funding can be used for, where and when matters. The type of funding available has implications for utilisation also, with a competitive approach in which local areas bid for limited funding contrasting with a formula-based approach where funding is allocated to certain local areas. Local capacity to utilise funding is also a key issue. These factors are examined below. The quantum of resource relative to the needs to be addressed is relevant but is outside the scope of this discussion.

### Rules about use of funding

There are several key issues of relevance here. First, funding rules place limits on how funding should be spent. This can limit local innovation in tailoring utilisation of funding to respond to local needs. Secondly, funding may be available in a local area, but the rules associated with it may not be for what a local area has assessed it needs most, so compromising its use. Thirdly, the timeframe for spending project funds may impact on the planning of spending and delivery of initiatives, leading to sub-optimal project outcomes. Fourthly, the administrative and technical capacities of organisations have implications for the effective utilisation of funds since a lack of capacity and expertise can hinder implementation of policy interventions.

## Flexibilities about use of funding

While local areas tend to want flexibilities to tailor services/ support to specific place needs, this can pose tensions with central scrutiny concerns regarding value for money.

In principle, flexibilities over use of funding provide increased possibilities for co-ordination across different policy domains and delivering services that consider local knowledge on specific local needs. Theoretically, greater local flexibility around how to use funds is linked to more effective outcomes. The ability to submit change requests allows adaption to changing needs within a fixed funding envelope. Likewise, the possibility for virement between budget headings may be a useful flexibility.

Alongside greater effectiveness, efficiency has been a goal of place-based pilot policies over the years (Shared Intelligence, 2013). Learning points from selected place-based pilot programmes from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the then Department, Communities and Local Government (DCLG) are outlined below.

The DWP *City Strategy initiative* commenced in 2007 and was premised on giving local partnerships (ranging in size from a group of wards in a single local authority area to regional groupings of multiple local authorities) greater flexibility of working together to foster new ways of working to tailor local interventions to address entrenched worklessness and poverty. The initiative was not primarily about new money but rather the focus was on making better use of existing resources dedicated to addressing worklessness, employment and skills issues at local and sub-regional levels through:

- *aligning* - bringing different funding and resources 'into line' with each other so that they could be used alongside each other in a supportive fashion; and
- *pooling* - merging funding from various sources into a single pot for common use.

Funding available to City Strategy partnerships included direct funding (for example, seedcorn money from DWP to be used in a flexible way to kick start the development of consortia and to help build capacity and support planning processes), funding directed to City Strategy from partners, and additional funding secured from other sources for City Strategy purposes. Across the City Strategy Partnerships there was widespread recognition of some potential advantages of aligning and pooling of funding and resources, including to achieve cost savings, to rationalise activity by reducing duplication, to enhance linkages between providers – including across policy domains, to achieve economies of scale across geographical areas, to fill gaps in provision and to enhance efficiency (Green and Adam, 2011). Some key learning about the challenges and opportunities of aligning and pooling in practice is outlined in Box 1.

**Box 1: Learning on aligning and pooling of funding from City Strategy partnerships in practice**

Between and within partnerships there were variations in emphasis placed on aligning and pooling of funding and resources. There were three types of partner behaviour:

1. full alignment and pooling – ‘here is £X for the partnership to allocate and spend’
2. consultation and alignment – ‘we’ll discuss with you how we spend our money, but we’ll continue to spend it ourselves’
3. independence – ‘we’ll listen, but you [i.e. the partnership] can’t tell us what to do – we’ll continue to invest in our own way’

In all local partnerships most activity related to alignment rather than pooling. Pooling was difficult because of lack of alignment in timelines between different funding sources, bureaucracy – especially when several local authorities were involved, and constraints on pooling funding when instructions on how it should be delivered were dictated nationally. Alignment was more difficult in multi-authority partnerships where alignment had to be across different geographical and political boundaries than in single-authority partnerships. Some local partnerships focused more on strategic alignment of funding whereas others focused on operational alignment. The dynamic economic and policy landscape within which local partnerships operated posed challenges for alignment, necessitating pragmatism in approach. It proved easier to align and pool funding that was awarded to the partnership (rather than to individual partners), discretionary (rather than non-discretionary) and/or flexible. City Strategy partnerships’ central core teams – especially when seen as independent from key local partners – played a key role in orchestrating the alignment and pooling of funding by facilitating horizontal co-ordination.

Source: from Green and Adam (2011); Adam et al. (2017)

Learning from previous place-based pilot programmes from the DCLG – *Total Place* and the *Whole-Place Community Budget* initiative (see Box 2) - offers some useful insights regarding flexibilities in the use of funding at local level. Both pilots demonstrated some positive outcomes, but momentum was either not maintained or the focus became narrower in implementation than in conception.

## **Box 2: Learning from two DCLG place pilots**

In 2009-2010 the *Total Place programme* involving 13 pilot areas sought to enhance understanding of how local public services were funded to achieve greater efficiency through joining up of services, eliminating the duplication of work and breaking down silos both within local government and with partners (Roe, 2024). Given cultural barriers that inhibit communication and collaboration amongst partners across agencies, it made a case for flexible long-term funding for local government to enable complex local issues to be addressed effectively. As noted by Shared Intelligence (2013: 12) it demonstrated “the value of focussing on the totality of spend on a particular sphere of policy across an appropriate geography as a way of capturing evidence of the potential of different patterns of spend to secure improved outcomes”. Yet overall, while generating efficiencies and learning, the impetus of these pilot programmes was not maintained to create sustained system change (National Audit Office, 2013).

On the theme of efficiency and with the aim of using funding flexibly to meet local needs between 2011 and 2013 four pilot areas focused on aligning budgets to increase efficiency and sustainability of local services under the *Whole-Place Community Budget initiative*. The original idea was to test the concept of a single pot for all local public service expenditure (Shared Intelligence, 2013) but in practice there was a shift away from aligning and pooling funding to focus on specific policy outcomes.

As place has become more embedded in government thinking, there is ongoing debate about funding simplification (see Burchell, 2024), including the establishment of funding simplification pilots (Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, 2024). Single/ Integrated and multi-year Settlements for Mayoral Combined Authorities also represent a step towards greater flexibility in how HM Government funding falling under five thematic policy areas (‘themes’) - local growth and place; local transport; housing and regeneration; adult skills; and buildings’ retrofit - can be used (HM Treasury, 2023).

It is also notable that pooled funds have become a more prominent and mainstream feature of the landscape of philanthropic funding in the UK, with funders coming together to contribute funding and delegate authority to achieve an objective where policy interventions are by their nature complex (Baumgartner and Sachrajda, 2023). From a funder perspective the advantages of pooling funding including de-risking through collaboration, sharing learning and building expertise and enhanced likelihood of achieving strategic impact. There are also challenges from a funder perspective of ceding an element of power and control over funding, demonstrating added value, and overcoming operational challenges.

## **Temporal issues**

There has been a general shift over time to a multiplicity of short-term funding streams, reflecting policy and institutional churn. This trend for short-termism and ad hoc decision-making (Frensham et al., 2023; Diamond et al., 2023) has become more pronounced in recent years,



leading to a proliferation in schemes, institutions, measures, and interventions with different foci at a variety of geographical scales adding to complexity (Atherton and Le Chevallier, 2023). As noted by Pugh (2024, 9) “churn and short-termism mean that it is difficult for place-based policy makers to deliver transformative change” (see also Newman et al., 2021), let alone keep abreast of management of projects in what can seem like “an impenetrable landscape that is difficult to grasp” (Tait et al., 2002: 57). This is because the timeframe within which funding can be spent impacts on project planning, implementation and whether expenditure is achieved in full. It also impacts on what can be achieved, which in turn may generate a focus on ‘quick wins’ and ‘shovel-ready’ projects to ensure project spending is realised rather than more ambitious integrated projects addressing underlying fundamentals of addressing spatial inequalities (Tait et al., 2022). An acute example of ‘time compression’ (i.e. curtailment of the period in which funding can be spent) is provided by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (see Box 3). This situation contrasts with consistency in funding, as was the case with EU structural investment funding (Bachtler, 2017), that acted in an anchoring role so enabling leveraging of other funding sources (including private sector funds).

### **Box 3: Time constraints in implementing Shared Prosperity Fund investments**

- Local authorities had to submit investment plans by 1 August 2022, but these plans were not approved by the DLUHC until December 2022, leaving three months for local authorities to spend their 2022-23 allocation
- The DLUHC gave local authorities the flexibility to carry forward their unspent funding, subject to submitting a spending plan to the DLUHC, leading to further delays
- With no guarantee of funding early enabling work was delayed

The DLUHC subsequently set out a revised project adjustment process to allow local authorities to make changes to the scope and scale of projects

Source: National Audit Office (2023)

Even from the same funder there are examples of funds with overlapping objectives but where timing issues make alignment difficult. For example, the DLUHC played a key role in three funds to support interventions to reduce geographical inequalities – the Towns Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, and the Shared Prosperity Fund – but their announcement at separate times meant that local authorities could not align across them to achieve most value. As highlighted by the National Audit Office (2023, 7): “... the deadline for submitting Levelling Up Fund Round 1 bids was before the final confirmation of Town Deals offers. Local authorities also had to submit UK Shared Prosperity Fund investment plans before finding out if they were successful in the Levelling Up Fund Round 2. This meant local authorities did not know what funding they may receive from each fund, preventing effective planning.”

A lack of long-term certainty in funding means that it can be hard to think and act strategically and so tackle the roots of path dependency (Newman et al., 2021). Multi-year settlements and

programmes with longer-term funding, especially when coupled with strategic agency to design policy across policy domains, can help in this regard.

## Geographical issues

In utilising funding, it is important to recognise that different geographies are appropriate for different purposes. The appropriate geographical scale for discharging distinct functions varies by policy domain and may be different for advocacy, strategic planning, and service delivery activities within a particular policy domain (Green, 2023; Etherington and Jones, 2009). This means that in utilising funding different local areas/ regions need to be considered relationally alongside each other, since “impactful place-based activity... requires a flexible approach to geography and a willingness to treat boundaries as a spur to innovation rather than a barrier to action” (Shared Intelligence, 2023: 2).

In practice, geographical boundaries may be seen as barriers, and strict rules about how funding can be utilised sometimes promotes this view. Multi-scalar considerations make for complexity, which is in turn heightened in England where layers of local and sub-regional governance, with a mix of statutory and non-statutory organisations and responsibilities, exist alongside asymmetric devolution of powers. This means that while in theory there might be an ‘ideal’ geographical scale at which to utilise funding, in practice pragmatic considerations (considering institutional structures and capacity at different geographical scales) and governance issues play a part in geographical scales at which funding is utilised. Indeed, the different spatial foci of funding streams can lead to a disjointed set of policy interventions that may work against each other (Tait et al., 2022).

## Capacity issues

Mayoral combined authorities, local government, local partnerships, and local organisations vary in terms of their capacity to bid for funding and to utilise effectively funding that is available. Local government capacity must focus on provision of statutory services, for which there is increasing demand and where unit costs are rising. This means that capacity for design and delivery of non-statutory functions is limited, while at the same time budgetary pressures mean that all local organisations must think carefully about their core business functions. It would be expected that those combined/ local authorities with stronger technical and administrative capacities would utilise funds more effectively, while constraints on relevant expertise and staffing would hinder utilisation of available funds.

## Challenges and opportunities for utilising funding from various sources in a ‘joined up’ way at the sub-national scale

This section builds on the issues outlined above to reflect on the some of the key challenges and opportunities of effective funding utilisation.

Central government departmental objectives overlap across issues and populations. Due to a tendency for silo-based thinking nationally multiple sources of funding can be provided in the same policy domain across different time periods – both from within the same central government department and across government departments. As an illustration of the nature of the issue, spend mapping undertaken for the evaluation of the Partnerships for People and Place (PfPP) initiative showed that there were 38 different grants to 1,613 recipients in Wakefield and 153 grants to 513 recipients in Luton (IPSOS, 2023). At the local scale this means that different funds are disjointed such that they can lead to duplication – and gaps - in coverage. This is not a new issue: the challenges of constantly needing to ‘stitch different funding sources to fit a project’ such that it could be easier to ‘design projects to fit funding’ was highlighted in a report on ‘Fragmented Funding’ by Shared Intelligence (2014). Likewise, work on the Total Place initiative, launched in 2009, found 15 different funding sources in Lewisham to support workless and unemployed individuals (Roe, 2024).

Challenges can increase when local stakeholders are reliant on small pots of short-term competitive funding and announcements about those funds are made too late to enable proper planning (TRL Insight, 2020). Disjointed funding and lack of a strategic overview (due to circumstances) may lead to inefficiencies locally, so hindering desired outcomes at the local level. Rules about when, on what and where funding can be spent may compound inefficiencies and lead to problems in commissioning and staffing. In turn this can create confusion and discontinuities for service users/ beneficiaries of funding.

A further issue is limited understanding amongst some local partnerships of how central government can support place-based challenges. Ideally, in a place-based approach funding would be utilised with account taken of the local complexion of underlying policy challenges and maximisation of synergies with existing initiatives. However, lack of join-up between central and local government, and often funding rules, may mean that funding utilisation is sub-optimal. There are several factors in play here, including a lack of sensitivity to local issues, lack of flexibilities in how funding can be used and how much funding is allocated where.

The *Partnerships for People and Place (PfPP) programme*, delivered by the DLUHC, aimed to test whether closer working between various parts of central and local government could bring measurable benefits to local communities and people programme. Through the PfPP programme 13 local authorities addressed a pre-defined hyper-local challenge deemed important locally. While there were some successes and improved understanding of challenges faced in working across local and national tiers of government, an evaluation of learning from PfPP highlighted the ingrained nature of structural and systemic barriers which stymie join-up between local and central government (Ipsos, 2023).

Box 4 outlines some of the challenges experienced in Birmingham (one of the 13 local authorities included in the programme). The hyper-local challenge in Birmingham addressed through PfPP was concerned with tackling long-term youth unemployment by supporting Year 11 students through a mentoring programme which aimed to connect them into work and other opportunities to improve transitions from school to employment.

**Box 4: Barriers faced by the PfPP student mentoring project in Birmingham to improve transitions to post-16 opportunities and work**

- Tendering for competitive short-term funding can distract from planning and delivery of support
- Limited co-ordination between funding from the DLUHC and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) promoting employment pathways and funding from the Department for Education (DfE) which is focused on supporting further education and training rather than transitions to employment
- Schools adopting universal rather than individualised support for student transitions
- Other services providing support to aid student transitions can be difficult to access without suitable transport

Source: adapted from Figure 6 (Ipsos, 2023)

The challenges identified relate to some misalignment of local policy objectives with central government priorities, as well as in the types of support offered to students by the local initiative vis-à-vis those routinely offered by schools. The difficulties in physical access faced by students to other services highlights issues in joining up between policy domains at local level.

## Characteristics of funding approaches that support local policies to address spatial inequalities

Based on the evidence outlined above, generic features of funding approaches that support local policies to address spatial inequalities mainly relate to greater flexibilities for/on:

- Local adaptations to national policies
- Virements between budget headings, so enabling greater flexibility regarding categories of activities/ services on which funding may be spent
- Iteration during the funding timeframe to address specific local needs/ pivot towards ‘what works’ (rather than being straitjacketed by narrowly defined metrics)
- Longer-term funding – to enable a focus on entrenched issues, including through unblocking of structural barriers

In a similar vein, in preparation for the 2024 UK General Election, Pope and McKee (2024) set out five tests which a plan to simplify funding for local growth should meet to address prevailing shortcomings in the funding system (see Box 5).

### **Box 5: Tests for successful reform of the funding system for local growth**

1. *Is the funding landscape informed by a clear and overarching national strategy for local growth with high-level objectives?* - a cross-government strategy is needed to provide a clear understanding of how different policies and funding streams fit together to drive local growth
2. *Does the reformed system provide longer term certainty?* - coherent local strategies require consistent funding and will provide better value for money
3. *Will the new system give enough flexibility to better align local need and central government objectives?* - to best meet local need and join up projects
4. *Does the plan reduce the administrative burden on local and central government?* - to make funding as flexible as possible, with some central government oversight and a clear strategy
5. *Will central government retain sufficient oversight over how funds are spent?* - flexibility needs to be provided in a way that ensures central government can be confident that the funds are spent effectively and in line with their priorities

Source: Pope and McKee (2024)

## Conclusions

- A degree of flexibility and local discretion lies at the heart of enhanced utilisation of funding to address spatial inequalities given that strict rules about what funding can be used for, how, when, and where pose strategic planning, implementation, and delivery challenges.
- Key criteria for developing funding simplification and greater flexibilities to facilitate effective utilisation of funding include limiting the use of competitive processes, creating fewer but more flexible funding streams and clear and coherent administrative accountability processes.
- The direction of travel is towards funding simplification and greater flexibility in utilisation of funding. Although in 2024 there is greater impetus on funding simplification and flexibilities these issues are not new; discussions about the potential of simplifying funding between central and local government have been ongoing for a significant period.
- The multiplicity of short-term competitive funding streams is now in retreat, with a move towards multi-year integrated settlements – but the nature and depth of agreements differs between local areas, in part reflecting variations in capacity and capability between local areas.
- Successfully addressing spatial inequalities requires joint working across geographical scales and policy domains, but aligning efforts and funding can be challenging.

- Philanthropic funders are showing greater willingness to pool funds to de-risk and to provide longer-term resources to address entrenched problems.
- Longer-term and consistent public sector funding is conducive to leveraging in other funding sources, including from the private sector.

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