

# **Devolution and Subsidiarity**

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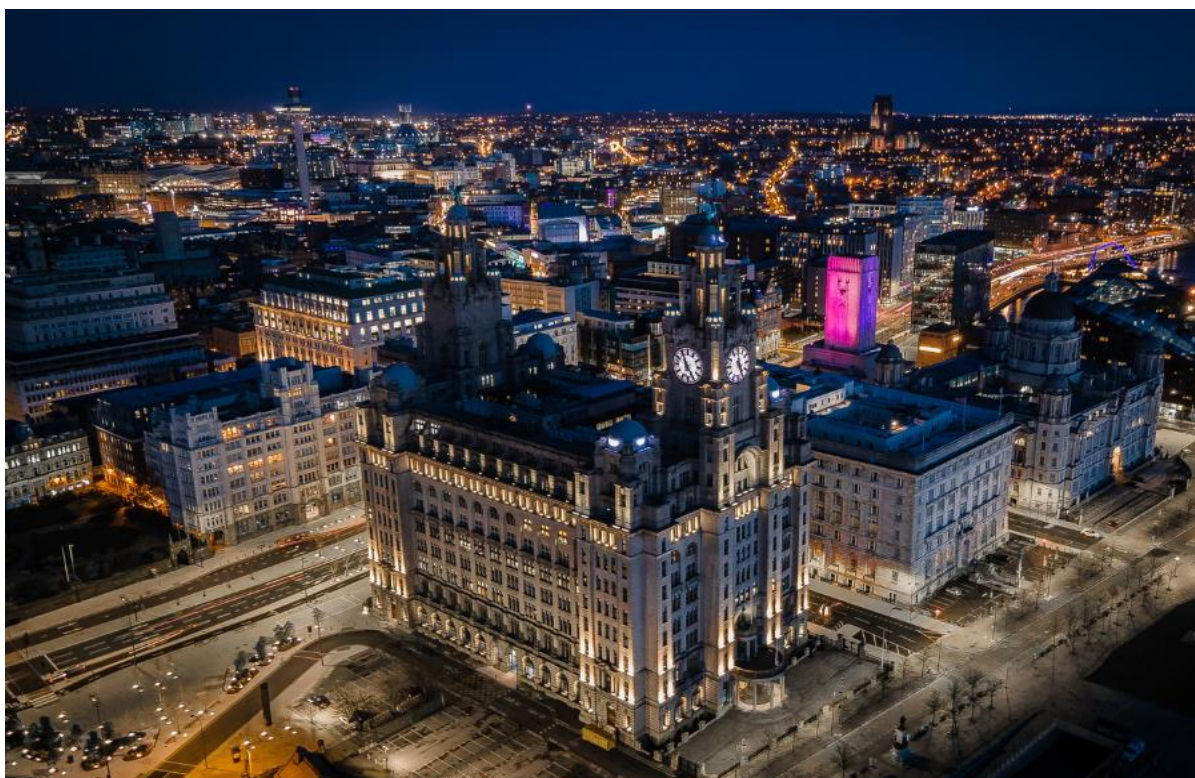
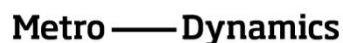


Figure 1- Image from Canva

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

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There has been a global trend towards devolution over recent years, with data showing that subnational authority has deepened in most countries around the world (Hooghe et al, 2023). The United Kingdom, however, remains a stark exception with an exceptionally centralised system of governance. This review examines some key issues relating to the prospect for greater fiscal devolution in the UK, including 1) the rationale for the devolution of funding, 2) the challenges devolution of funding pose for institutional capacity and capability in terms of both strategy and delivery, and 3) how English devolution has evolved and the implications for central-local relations.

## Summary

- The UK's highly centralised political system has been linked to its persistent and entrenched regional disparities.
- Fiscal devolution can offer noted benefits in terms of efficiency, local differentiation and enhanced democratic accountability, but success is not guaranteed. Outcomes depend on the wider political system and the quality and capacity of local institutions.
- Central government will need to overcome its propensity for centralised and siloed working for fiscal devolution to progress.
- Local capacity at the combined authority and local government level will need to be bolstered to ensure that the right structures and accountability frameworks are in place for further fiscal devolution.
- A political consensus is emerging around the need for more devolution, building on the previous Conservative Government's Levelling Up agenda and the new Labour Government's mission-orientated approach to policy making.
- While the Government has yet to announce a distinct plan for further fiscal devolution, commentators offer a series of suggestions for how fiscal devolution might be managed in a fair and equitable way.

## Issues and Findings

### Context

Devolution can be seen to relate to three specific components of governance:

- *Distribution*: the distribution of public investment (such as in infrastructure, research and development (R&D) and other endowments which underpin regional growth).
- *Decision-making*: the allocation of decision-making power over resource appropriation (e.g. tax-raising) and resource allocation (spending and investment) as central indicators of devolution.

- *Institutional quality*: ‘the level of investment and resources to support the capacity and capability of local institutions to develop locally appropriate growth strategies and to target and deliver effective interventions’ (Hoole et al, 2023: 429).

While the direction of change towards more devolution globally is clear, subnational governance has become more differentiated as individual regions or localities acquire distinct powers. Within this global trend, the UK is an international outlier. Ayres (2022) notes that the UK is still one of the most centralised countries of its size in the developed world and English local government has the most circumscribed powers of any equivalent tier internationally. Moreover, England has a highly centralised system of public finances in comparison to other large wealthy countries. Only five per cent of revenues are collected locally in the UK, whereas many comparator countries have much higher proportions of subnational tax revenue (OECD, 2024). Fiscal centralisation also extends to spending decisions: only 20% of all government expenditure is decided at subnational level in England, counter to the trend for greater devolved decisions in most other countries (Studdert, 2023).

## What is the rationale for the devolution of funding?

The UK’s highly centralised system has made it difficult to address spatial disparities at the appropriate level of governance (Pike et al, 2023). Some scholars and public policy commentators have long ascribed the persistence of the UK’s regional disparities to its highly centralised system of governance (Martin et al, 2021). However, despite the attempts of successive UK Governments to rebalance the economy and close regional divides, ‘the UK is still one of the most regionally unequal countries in the developed world’ (Webb et al, 2022: 5). There is now a large OECD-wide literature that points to the fact that decentralised sub-central governance systems are largely conducive to stronger and more balanced growth than highly centralised governance systems (Carrascal-Incera et al. 2020). Indeed, ‘it is this link between governance centralisation and regional imbalances which underpins the argument that the UK’s over-centralised or hyper-centralised system needs to be significantly devolved to levels akin to competitor countries in order to foster stronger and more inclusive productivity growth’ (McCann, 2021: 1). As Mudie et al (2023: 1) argue,

‘our centralised system of governance and finance, characterised by fragmented funding pots and overt ringfencing, does not provide a stable basis for long term planning and investment. Reform is needed, and a consensus is emerging on the potential for fiscal devolution to mitigate these barriers to strategic decision making and investment, and hence spur growth and reduce regional inequality in the UK’.

Fiscal devolution is purported to offer a number of distinct advantages, including yielding an economic dividend by tailoring policies to preferences and circumstances, enhancing the accountability of local politicians, encouraging policy innovation (Eiser, 2020) and improving public services. However, fiscal devolution can also create costs and greater complexity in inter-governmental frameworks, leading to inefficiencies in public service provision, issues of spatial inequality and a lack of coordination (Eiser, 2020). A recent report by the Fabian society (2023) argues that these challenges and complexities can be mitigated by introducing the right type of fiscal devolution in amenable policy areas and at the appropriate territorial scale. For example,

they advocate for subnational fiscal control in the area of economic development to boost local accountability, reduce spatial inequality and free central government from the time and effort of ‘organising and re-organising the deck chairs of local policy objectives instead of delivering on national priorities’ (ibid, 20).

However, despite the growing calls for fiscal devolution in academic and policy circles, evidence of effectiveness is not conclusive. The factors leading to success are often multifaceted and complicated. Many argue that the design and quality of local institutions matters (Rodríguez-Pose and Ketterer, 2020) as well as territorial identity and levels of democracy (Hooghe et al, 2023). Rodríguez-Pose and Mustra (2022) contend that the economic returns of decentralisation are greater in places with more efficient local government. They also suggest that ‘being surrounded by other regions with high levels of decentralisation and with high government quality stimulates the positive effects of transferring powers and resources to subnational tiers of government’ (ibid, 1604).

A recent report by the Institute for Government (IfG) (2023: 4) agrees that fiscal devolution is not a silver bullet for growth. Their report argues that some policy areas are more amenable to devolution than others. So rather than advocating for more devolution as a whole, it is important to explore which tier of government is best placed to deliver specific policy goals and consider the best funding and financing regimes to support these (Green, 2023). The IfG’s paper helpfully sets out some pros and cons of devolving more economic levers and using this framework they argue that the benefits of devolution outweigh the costs in several key policy areas, including skills, transport, employment support and research and development. Like the Fabian Society, they argue it is essential to think carefully about the appropriate tier of government and ensuring the required capacity. Transport, for instance, requires pan-regional bodies alongside combined and local authorities, since some routes and networks span a wide geography (Mudie et al, 2023).

Studdert (2023) argues that the prospect of fiscal devolution is rising up the UK policy agenda. As devolution evolves and is increasingly challenging our centralised governing norms, the need for more local fiscal freedoms is being increasingly discussed in government. This is reflected in recent ‘trailblazer’ deals in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands that will receive new revenue flexibilities, with full discretion over a single, multi-year funding pot and 100 per cent retention of business rates. In its manifesto (2024: 39), Labour said it would ‘transfer power out of Westminster, and into our communities with landmark legislation to take back control’. Since entering office in July 2024, the new government has pledged to deepen devolution settlements in England for existing combined authorities and widen devolution to those areas currently without a deal. A devolution White Paper is imminent and expected to set out plans for more radical devolution reform.

## What challenges does devolution of funding pose for institutional capacity and capability in terms of both strategy and delivery?

### Challenges for the centre

The past few decades have been characterised by numerous reforms and policies aimed at decentralising powers and responsibilities to the subnational tier. However, ‘the system and culture of central government has been too slow to adapt to the changing structures of subnational administration’ (Newman and Kenny, 2023: 6). Central government has been seemingly unable to grasp the potential for place-sensitive policies, therefore undermining the potential of local decision making. Instead, Martin et al (2021: 125) suggest the ‘aim should be to enable and deliver better alignment vertically between mainstream national and subnational policies and expenditure, and horizontally at each level through collaboration between public, private and civic actors’. This involves joining up key policy areas, such as education, health, housing and infrastructure and ensuring that left behind places have adequate resources commensurate with their needs.

There are, however, a number of features of the British Political Tradition that present challenges for fiscal devolution. First, the separation of government departments along functional lines - rather than place-based or problem-based structuring - creates a tendency towards policy siloes (Cairney et al, 2024). These are entrenched through the competing interests of various key power bases, especially in No. 10, the Cabinet Office, and HM Treasury (Warner et al, 2023). Westminster’s political culture of departmental ‘fiefdoms’ is deeply embedded in the British political tradition, with the core principle that secretaries of state are directly accountable to Parliament (Flinders et al, 2024). This can create competition between departments, not only for budgets but also for control over the policy agenda, thus undermining attempts to establish inter-departmental collaboration and coordination with local priorities (Institute for Government, 2023).

Policy short-termism is a further structural barrier to the introduction of longer-term funding settlements with local areas. The literature charts a pattern of short-term policy initiatives that layer incremental change in a haphazard way (Diamond et al, 2024), with a tendency to produce policy fragmentation, increased complexity, and therefore a more challenging policymaking context for local actors (Coyle and Muhtar, 2023). Central power-hoarding combines with fragmentation and short-termism to create challenges to introducing long-term, single pot, discretionary funding to local areas. This has two consequences: first, areas have only limited scope within which to enact place-based agendas, needing in part to defer to Whitehall’s diagnosis of policy problems, its proposed solutions, resource allocation and its identification of success measures. Second, the hazard that conflicting central objectives persist at local level and thus undermine the holism of the local approach. It follows that for the Government to successfully deliver a programme of fiscal devolution it must find ways to overcome these deeply entrenched structural barriers and incentivise inter-departmental working across Whitehall and with local actors.



## Challenges for the sub-national tier

In the UK, local governance capacity is seen as highly variable (Ayres et al, 2018). Central government is seen to have its preferred places and local leaders to work with that can undermine spatial and social justice in granted freedoms and flexibilities (Ayres, 2022). Swinney and Jeffery (2020) suggest that building the required capacity and resilience in local institutions should be the cornerstone of steps towards decentralisation and devolution. Local institutions should be 'empowered with resources and tools, including appropriate legal frameworks, strategic and accountability frameworks, to shoulder the responsibilities associated with taking many of the decision locally which are currently reserved to Westminster and Whitehall' (McCann, 2021: 21).

In the UK, one of the most notable steps in this direction is the recent creation of 'mayoral combined authorities' (MCAs), principally in the larger urban areas, since 2010. They are led by elected mayors, with local authorities in the area as 'members', and they have negotiated bespoke 'devolution deals' with the UK Government. These deals transfer powers and budgets from central government bodies to local leaders, covering matters such as transport, planning and regeneration, housing, skills, and employment support (Paun et al, 2024; DLUHC, 2023). Elected mayors have focused on strategic policy planning, distributing central funding, and their 'convening power', i.e., using their public profile to harness non-public stakeholders to work towards a shared vision (Blakeley and Evans, 2023). However, while the maturing of combined authorities has galvanised leadership capacity in some places, 'there has not yet been a purposeful and systematic drive to rebuild capacity in the local government sector (Mudie et al, 2023: 1).

The former Conservative Government's Levelling Up White Paper (HM Government, 2022) provided extensive analysis of failures emanating from an insufficient regard for place-based policy. Writers aligned to the newly elected Labour Government have proposed extending local powers as a corrective to this (Lucas and Hopkins, 2024). Multiple proposals for strengthening local leaders have appeared (Newman and Kenny, 2023). Nevertheless, this literature has fewer granular analyses of the optimal approach to - and the appropriate rationale for - further devolution of power in England, including plans for fiscal devolution. Under the right conditions of a high quality of local or regional government and low institutional fragmentation, governance decentralisation is positively linked to productivity growth. However, capacity across MCAs is mixed and elected leaders have variable levels of public visibility, which can undermine public trust and perceptions of accountability.

Establishing clear forms of local accountability is also recognised as a particularly important condition for fiscal devolution (Eisner, 2020). A recent report by the Productivity Institute (Newman et al, 2024) agrees that the fostering of economic growth and productivity at a place-based level requires well-designed and well-functioning devolved institutions. The report identifies four different types of accountability and explores how each might be applied to the emerging model of English devolution. These are:

- **Top-down accountability**, which is the prevailing form in the British context.
- **Bottom-up accountability**, which is far less developed in the UK compared to many other states.

- **Inward accountability**, which operates primarily through the institutionalised relationship between the elected metro mayors and their local authority leaders.
- **Outward accountability**, which concerns how these authorities relate to their local communities and voters.

Top-down accountability is seen as the prevailing form in the British context: bottom-up accountability is viewed as far less developed in the UK compared to many other states. Inward accountability operates primarily through the institutionalised relationship between the mayor and the local authority leaders. Finally, outward accountability concerns how these authorities relate to their local communities and voters. The report identifies the inherent limitations of inward and outward accountability in relation to the emerging model of English devolution. One of the challenges for fiscal devolution, therefore, will be refocussing the long-standing emphasis in the UK on top-down accountability to bottom-up accountability. Based on their analysis of these different forms of accountability, Newman et al (2024: 4) identify the following recommendations for designing appropriate accountability procedures, including:

- ***‘Re-design the scrutiny function in Combined Authorities, creating directly elected scrutiny committees where there are more advanced devolution deals.*** Government should stipulate statutory minimum standards across the country. And there should be dedicated members on four- or five-year terms, dedicated resources to support this system, and an expanded research and public engagement function in relation to scrutiny. For Level 4 devolution deals (‘trailblazers’) and above, a directly elected scrutiny committee should be created.
- ***Publish an explicit menu of governance options for MCAs and set out a democratic process for choosing and changing models of leadership.*** All options should include a directly elected leader and representation from local authorities, but different places will need different executive arrangements.
- ***Change the mayoral voting system back to the supplementary vote model and place the Electoral Commission in charge of overseeing any future changes...*** [T]he recent move towards first-past-the-post is a step backwards in terms of local accountability.
- ***Revitalise local media as an anchor for public accountability and democratic life*** by taking forward and building on the recommendations of numerous reports advocating adequate, targeted and long-term funding mechanisms to facilitate and support the inevitable transformation of the sector, while also addressing existing geographical inequalities in local media access and quality. Improving accountability as the English devolution model is developing is vital if we want to tackle some of the causes of the decline of local democracy and for UK government to deliver on the missions of improving economic growth, productivity and living standards across England. For policymakers – both locally and nationally – getting accountability right is a multi-faceted and complex challenge. Bringing together separate debates about citizen engagement, local media, business and employer leadership, accountability to Westminster, and mechanisms for scrutiny under the heading of ‘improving accountability,’ should ensure more joined up and systemic thinking in this area.’



## How has English devolution evolved and what are the implications for central-local relations?

The previous Conservative Government's plan to reduce regional inequality and enhance opportunities for all was epitomised in its *Levelling up* agenda (HM Government, 2022). Levelling up was intended to be bold and imaginative and to remedy the plight of left behind places by addressing the propensity for centralised and siloed control in British politics. The White Paper acknowledged that past attempts at regional rebalancing failed due to a top-down, siloed approach to target setting and implementation. Instead, 12 missions were intended to play a coordinating role by promoting a 'whole system' approach that acknowledges the links between different domains and parts of government. Overall, the 'concept of levelling up enjoyed widespread support' in policy and academic domains (Connolly et al, 2021: 523), although concerns were evident about the scale of both the challenge of spatial rebalancing and the level of resource allocated to it.

Elected in July 2024, the Labour Government has also emphasised the value of 'mission-driven government' to drive growth, improve public health, switch to clean energy, tackle crime and increase equality of opportunity (Labour Party, 2024). They have also emphasised further devolution and the role of elected mayors but, as yet, there are few ideas about what this might look like in practice. The Labour Party manifesto stated that new powers will be available to local leaders in the following areas:

- A. Integrated transport, including municipal bus companies
- B. Planning and housing delivery, and new towns
- C. Employment support schemes
- D. Adult skills
- E. Creating a Local Growth plan
- F. Homelessness

The manifesto also included a number of commitments in areas that are closely related to the above, and mentions working with local leaders to deliver them:

- A. Roads and potholes
- B. Merger of JobCentrePlus and a national careers service
- C. Childcare
- D. Employing more youth workers in the areas of careers and mental health
- E. Reviewing probation services and linking them to employment support and mental health
- F. Prioritising the social determinants of health
- G. Clean power, vehicle charging points, housing retrofit

Making a broad range of powers available through statute will enhance local leaders' ability to join up delivery between these areas. For instance, the manifesto refers to joining up work, health and skills (p43), reducing reoffending (p73), partnership between health and social care (p100),

and partnership to deliver new towns and economic growth (p40). Most combined authorities do not hold powers in all of these areas. The more powers a local leader holds, the broader their capacity is to innovate and improve outcomes. Some combined authorities have struggled to develop a broader strategy because they initially inherited powers, capacity or funding focused on one area - for instance, transport or policing.

While the direction of travel to more devolution is clear, the Government has yet to make an announcement on what it might look like and what levels of fiscal autonomy might be afforded. Nonetheless, the King's Speech in July 2024 identified four important ways that the Labour Government is seeking to build on the devolution reforms of its predecessor. These are helpfully summarised by the IfG (2024: 1) below.

- 'First, it will place into law for the first time the devolution framework that sets out which powers are on the table. This should provide improved transparency and consistency to the process, giving local leaders and other stakeholders clarity about what is on offer.
- Second, it will expand the framework to include other drivers of growth, specifically employment support and strategic planning powers, allowing alignment with other devolved functions such as transport and skills... The government could be even more ambitious in future, devolving apprenticeship and R&D budgets and exploring options for tax devolution too.
- Third, there is a commitment to make devolution "the default setting", giving local leaders the right to request the devolution of functions in the framework, and placing an obligation on the government either to agree or to publicly explain why not. As the Institute has argued, such a reform will ensure that future devolution bids do not disappear into a Whitehall black hole, as has happened in the past.
- Fourth, the bill will reform governance arrangements to make it easier for mayors and combined authorities to make progress with strategic objectives such as spatial plans. This reform could be crucial to Labour achieving its house-building and infrastructure investment objectives'.

There are also ideas emerging from political commentators. For example, Mudie et al (2023) call for:

- Devolution of tax raising powers,
- Multi-year financial settlements for local governments to give places greater certainty over future revenue streams and enabling longer-term economic planning,
- Greater powers for local governments to pool existing budget sources,
- Further devolution settlements for more places, and
- Better targeting of central government funds to local areas, including enhanced support for the poorest places.

These measures place an emphasis on tackling geographical disparities and inequality and not just economic growth. They would also enable localities to pursue place-based programmes of work that require long term and joined up thinking. Such a development may be regarded as an essential element in the pursuit of mission orientated government (Cairney et al, 2024).

The Fabian Society (2024) identify a series of principles for fair fiscal devolution. They contend that a fiscal devolution settlement for England must be:

- Effective at improving living standards,
- Equal and empowering,
- Fair - in all its forms,
- Pragmatic, and
- Accountable.

The Institute for Government (2023) suggests that:

- The government should devolve more economic policy levers to combined authorities in England.

They contend that for many economic policies - including transport, spatial planning and skills - the appropriate geography is one that broadly covers a local labour market. Together, these policies allow a subnational government to develop a proper local industrial strategy, taking advantage of complementarities such as those between skills and employment support, and between different transport modes and spatial planning.

- Funding models need to be reformed to realise the benefits of devolution.

The IfG identified flaws in the current English local government funding system, which is heavily reliant on competitive funding pots that local areas bid into for local economic policies. This undermines many of the benefits of devolution and means that policies are driven by national, not local, priorities. It also exacerbates some of the costs, in particular through the high administrative cost of compiling bids, which is inefficient and favours better-resourced authorities in these competitions (LIPSIT, 2021).

- The government should continue to devolve at different speeds in different places, but work towards a coherent and more uniform settlement.

The IfG finds that the government's current approach to devolution, moving faster in areas with more capacity, is the right one. Local governments need to cover a coherent economic geography and have sufficient capacity to deliver effective policy.

Lastly, the Centre for Cities (Breach, 2023) proposes that devolution must advance across three 'legs of a stool' - distinct aspects of the governance of local economies which together are more than the sum of their parts. These include:

- Powers and responsibilities,
- Geography and governance, and
- Funding and taxation.

They suggest that the next phase of devolution should be delivered in the form of a 'triple deal' to the mayors of Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and London. The report proposes the following revenue-neutral changes:

- The mayors would keep a share of local income tax revenues,

- The mayors would keep local business rates and gain control of the multiplier,
- The mayors would have a single grant, and establish a funding settlement with the boroughs,
- Both the mayors and the boroughs would experience devolution of council tax.

Implementing further fiscal devolution and decentralisation in the UK therefore involves a wide-ranging set of changes, which need to be implemented in the context of the UK's specific and unusual characteristics.

## Conclusions

The trajectory of fiscal devolution in the UK represents a critical response to persistent regional inequalities and the limitations of a highly centralised governance system. While the potential benefits of devolving powers and funding are significant - including more tailored policy-making, enhanced local accountability, and increased economic innovation - successful implementation remains complex. The research literature underscores that devolution is not a simple, universal solution but a nuanced process requiring careful consideration of institutional capacity, appropriate governance scales, and strategic alignment of powers. Key to success will be overcoming deeply entrenched Whitehall cultural barriers, developing robust local institutional capabilities, and creating flexible accountability mechanisms that genuinely empower local communities. As the UK enters a new phase of potential decentralisation, the challenge lies in designing a devolution framework that is both strategically coherent and sensitive to the unique economic and social contexts of different regions.

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