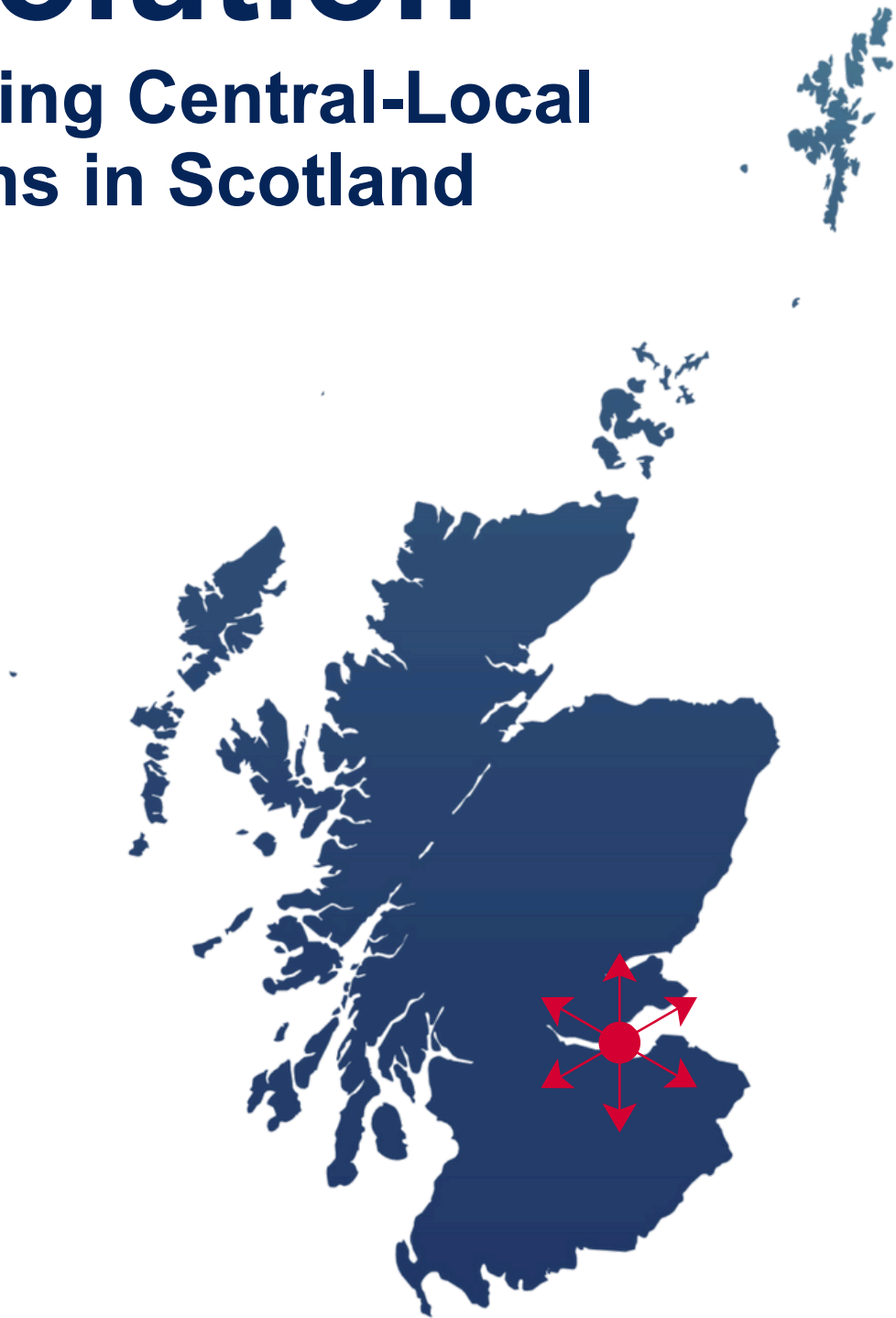


Reinvigorating Devolution

Enhancing Central-Local
Relations in Scotland



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**CENTRE ON
CONSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE**

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This report was also generously supported by the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust
[grant number SRG23\230264]

The findings and analyses presented in this report were discussed at a workshop held at the University of Edinburgh in June 2025. The authors wish to thank all participants for their valuable comments and suggestions. Responsibility for the content of the report, however, rests solely with the authors.

Summary

This report examines how devolution has reshaped territorial governance in Scotland while leaving deeper questions of central–local balance unresolved. It highlights three interrelated dynamics. First, economic and demographic activity has become increasingly concentrated in Edinburgh and the East-Central Belt since 1999, widening gaps with other parts of Scotland. Second, political power has also centralised at Holyrood, with local authorities constrained financially and institutionally, limiting their role as meaningful counterweights. Third, public opinion reflects these imbalances, with many Scots in rural and peripheral areas perceiving devolution as having disproportionately benefited central and affluent regions.

A growing debate in Scotland is now focused on the concentration of power in Edinburgh and the limited capacity of local governance. In this context, attention has turned to reforms trialled in England in response to over-centralism, particularly combined authorities and directly elected mayors, which are seen by some as possible approaches to addressing Scotland's own challenges. Although not directly transferable, these English innovations offer insights into the opportunities and limitations of institutional reforms to strengthen local accountability and voice.

The report concludes by reflecting on how Scotland might pursue its own path toward more territorially balanced and responsive governance, while also shedding light on the evolving trajectory of devolution across the UK.

Key Findings

- **Economic and demographic concentration:** Since the inception of devolution, Edinburgh and the East-Central Belt of Scotland have continued to consolidate their position as dominant hubs of productivity and population growth. Over the last 25 years, the gap between these areas and the rest of Scotland has widened markedly.
- **Institutional centralism:** Power in Scotland has become increasingly centralised at Holyrood. Local authorities remain fiscally constrained and lack the autonomy to act as meaningful counterweights.
- **Public perceptions of imbalance:** Survey evidence shows that many Scots, especially in rural and peripheral areas, believe that devolution has benefited central and affluent regions more than their own.
- **Shared challenges across the UK:** Issues of spatial inequality, local disempowerment, and political disconnect are not unique to Scotland. England's experience with combined authorities and directly elected mayors offers useful – though not directly transferable – lessons.

Principles for Reform

Rather than proposing specific institutional changes, the report outlines eight principles to guide a more balanced approach to central-local relations in Scotland (and beyond):

1. **Territorial equity** – Address internal disparities and support all regions.
2. **Democratic subsidiarity** – Empower decision-making at the most local appropriate level.
3. **Institutional distinctiveness** – Avoid one-size-fits-all solutions or wholesale adoption of English models.
4. **Local legitimacy** – Reforms must be rooted in place-specific needs and values.
5. **Flexibility** – Allow for diverse institutional arrangements across Scotland.
6. **Capacity building** – Strengthen local government resources and capabilities.
7. **Strategic coherence** – Clarify responsibilities and improve coordination across levels.
8. **Public engagement** – Involve citizens meaningfully to rebuild trust and legitimacy.

Scotland now faces a critical moment to reimagine how power is shared within its borders. The goal is to create a more responsive, inclusive, and territorially balanced system of devolved governance.

1. Uneven Scotland? Territorial inequalities and centralism after devolution

This section looks at how power and resources have become increasingly concentrated in central parts of Scotland since devolution began. We focus on three main areas: economic and demographic trends, institutional settings, and public opinion.

First, we show that there has been a major shift in Scotland's economic geography. Edinburgh and the East-Central Belt are now the main centres of productivity and population growth.

Second, we explore how political power has become centralised. Most authority has remained concentrated in the devolved institutions at Holyrood, with limited effort to devolve powers further to local councils.

Finally, we examine public opinion, which mirrors these developments: many people in Scotland believe that devolution has mostly benefited Edinburgh and other wealthy, urban areas.

A socio-economic shift to Edinburgh and East Central Scotland

At the end of the 20th century, Edinburgh was already significantly more economically productive than the rest of Scotland. This reflected broader trends such as deindustrialisation and the shift towards a more service-based and financialised economy – sectors in which Edinburgh has particular strength. Over the 25 years since devolution, Edinburgh's economic dominance has grown even further.

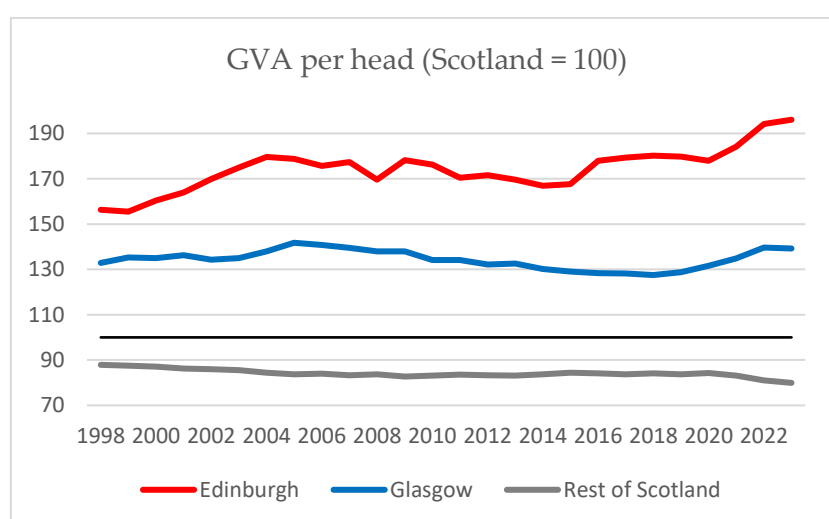
Figure 1 illustrates this by focusing on Gross Value Added (GVA) per head – a measure of the economic value generated per person, commonly used to assess productivity at the regional level. In this analysis, we set the Scottish average (GVA per head across the whole country) at 100 and show how different areas compare to that baseline.

In 1998, Edinburgh's GVA per head was already around 50% higher than the national average. By 2023, it had risen to nearly double the Scottish average. This rise was especially steep in the early years following the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, before stabilising, and then accelerating again after the 2014 independence referendum.

Glasgow, by contrast, has maintained a relatively stable position over this period. Its GVA per head has consistently remained around 30% to 40% above the Scottish average. Unlike Edinburgh, which has seen accelerating growth and widening advantage, Glasgow's productivity relative to the rest of Scotland has not significantly shifted.

The rest of Scotland has fared even less well: areas outside the two major cities have shifted from being just 10% below the national average in the late 1990s to 20% below it in recent years. This points to a growing productivity gap between Edinburgh and much of the rest of the country.

Figure 1. The growing economic gap between Edinburgh and the rest of Scotland



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data by [ONS](#)

While comparisons with England should be made with caution due to differences in scale, it is striking that Edinburgh's economic dominance within Scotland has grown even more rapidly than London's has within England. The gap between Edinburgh and the rest of Scotland has widened more quickly than the equivalent gap between London and the rest of England (Figure 2).

There is, of course, an important difference in the territorial structure of the two economies. In England, no city outside the capital plays a role equivalent to that of Glasgow in Scotland. The closest comparison – shown by the blue line in Figure 2 – is arguably Greater Manchester. Its GVA per head remains below the English average, although it has improved over the past decade and now outperforms several other English regions.

In Scotland, by contrast, the presence of Glasgow historically supported a more balanced economic geography¹ – at least within the Central Belt. However, the gap between Edinburgh and Glasgow has continued to widen, pointing to a steady shift toward a more centralised, Edinburgh-led economy.

This trend becomes even clearer when we move beyond the cities themselves to consider their wider surrounding areas. As shown in Figure 3, the productivity gap between East-Central Scotland (around Edinburgh) and the West-Central Scotland (around Glasgow) has grown substantially over time. In 1998, the gap stood at around 25 percentage points relative to the Scottish average. By 2023, it had increased to nearly 40 points – a marked widening that reflects the growing concentration of economic activity in and around the capital.

¹ In contrast to England, where the rationale for city-regional mayors has often rested on the need to boost the relatively low productivity of large cities outside London, Scotland presents a different picture. Large cities outside Edinburgh (including also Dundee and Aberdeen) already tend to have productivity levels above the national average. This means that the rationale for city-regional mayors in Scotland is less about "levelling up" urban productivity and has therefore carried less weight in the policy debate – although, as we show later in the report, the growing debate around the creation of regional mayors is also driven by rising concerns about the shift of power and resources to Edinburgh.

Figure 2. The consolidating economic gap between London and the rest of England

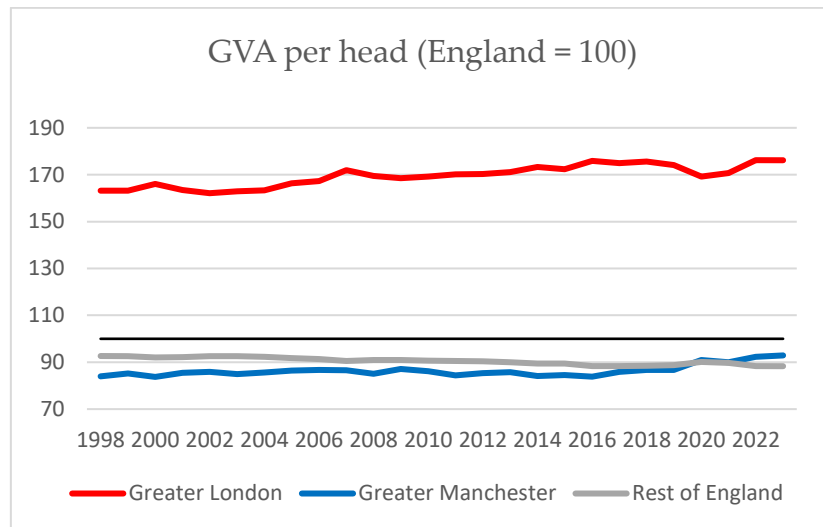
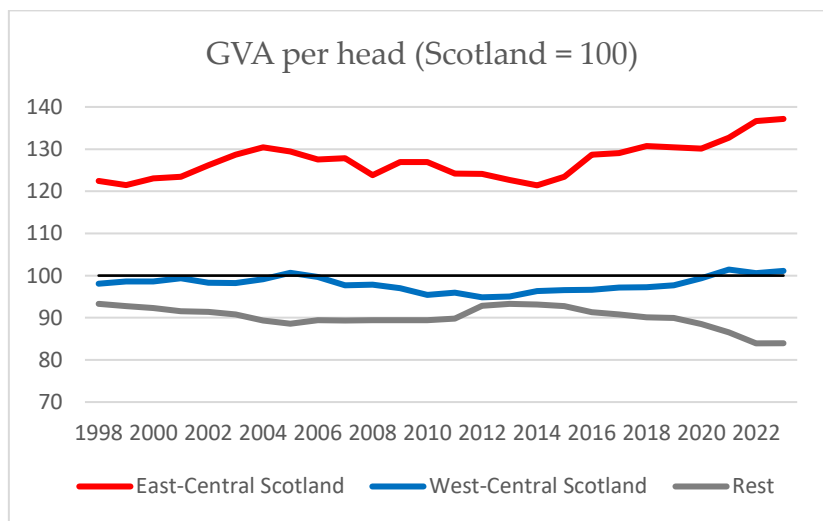


Figure 3. Wider regions, similar patterns: the growing dominance of East-Central Scotland

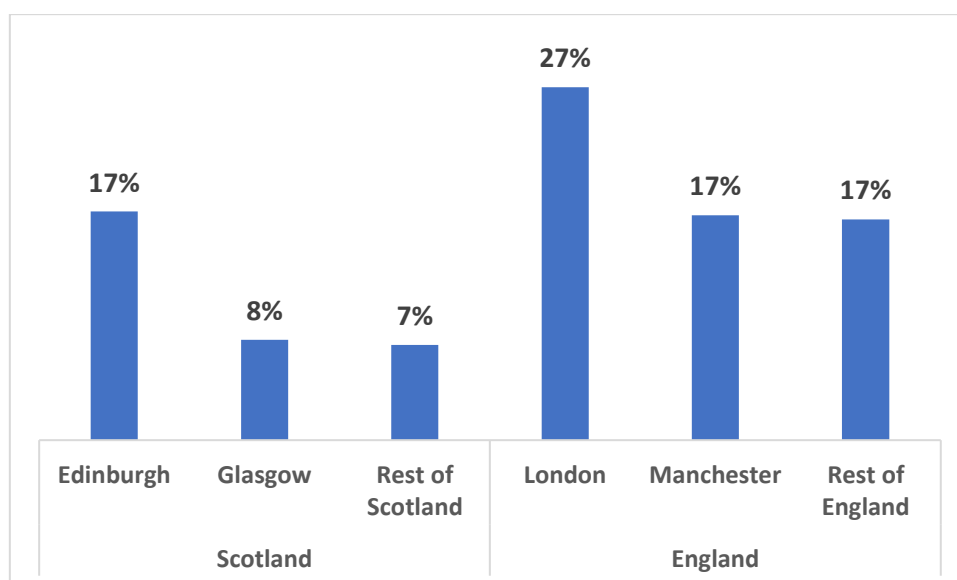


The economic strength of Edinburgh is further reinforced by demographic trends, which show the city and its surrounding areas increasingly attracting population growth. Between 1998 and 2023, Edinburgh's population grew by 17%, compared to just 7–8% in both Glasgow and the rest of Scotland (Figure 4). This reflects the capital's role as a key hub for employment, education, and quality of life. The contrast becomes even more striking when we look beyond the cities themselves to their wider regions of East-Central and West-Central Scotland (Figure 5).

In England, London has experienced even stronger population growth than Edinburgh. However, the demographic gap between London, on the one hand, and Manchester and the

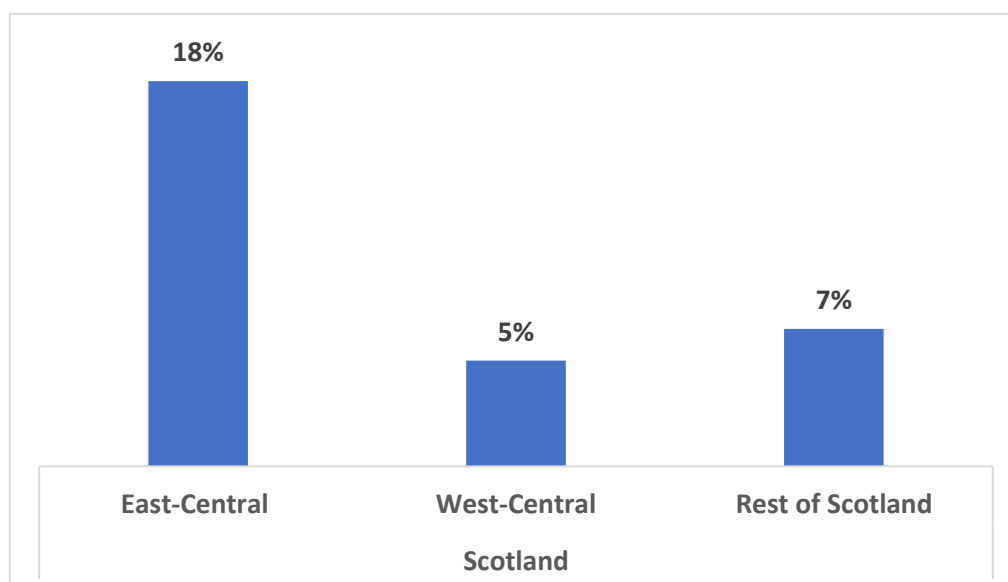
rest of England, on the other, is less pronounced than the divide between Edinburgh and the rest of Scotland.

Figure 4. Population growth in Scotland (Edinburgh/Glasgow) and England (Greater London/Greater Manchester) – 1998–2023



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data by [ONS](#)

Figure 5. Population growth (1998-2023) in wider areas around Edinburgh and Glasgow



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data by [ONS](#)

Figure 6 brings together the two key trends discussed above – population growth and rising productivity – to show how they translate into changes in the overall economic weight of different areas within the Scottish economy. Put simply, areas that experience both population growth and increased productivity naturally come to account for a growing share of the national economy over time.

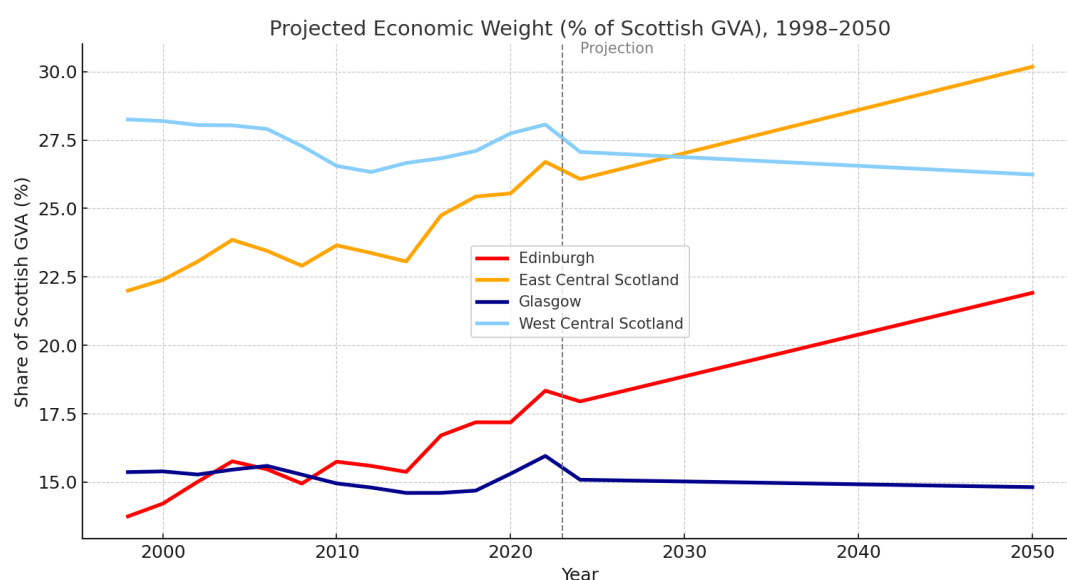
This is exactly what we observe in Edinburgh. The city has become not only more productive per person but also more populous, and as a result, its contribution to Scotland's total economic output – measured as a share of Scottish GVA — has risen steadily over the past 25 years. In 1998, Edinburgh accounted for less than one-sixth of Scotland's total GVA. If the trend observed over the past 25 years continues at a similar pace, it could represent more than one-fifth by 2050 – approaching the kind of economic dominance Greater London has long exercised in England, albeit on a smaller scale.

The wider East-Central Scotland region, which also includes Edinburgh's surrounding areas, is following a similar trajectory. As shown by the orange line in Figure 6, its share of Scotland's total GVA is projected to increase from around one-fifth in 1998 to almost one-third by 2050.

Glasgow tells a different story. With limited population growth and relatively flat productivity levels, its share of Scotland's total GVA has remained largely unchanged. The same pattern is evident across the broader West-Central Belt. Edinburgh overtook Glasgow as the country's primary economic engine soon after becoming the seat of the Scottish Parliament and Government, and East-Central Scotland is now on course to surpass a stagnating West-Central Scotland in overall economic weight.

Taken together, these data tell a clear and compelling story: Scotland's economic centre of gravity is shifting decisively eastward. This trend has major implications for regional development, infrastructure investment, and long-term policymaking. The East-Central Belt – anchored by Edinburgh – is booming, while the West-Central Belt has remained relatively stable. And this does not even account for areas beyond the Central Belt: if the patterns of the past 25 years continue, much of peripheral Scotland risks being increasingly left behind.

Figure 6. Shifts in economic weight of Edinburgh, *Glasgow*, East-Central and West-Central Scotland



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data by [ONS](#)

Centralising institutional structures?

While the trends outlined above have unfolded during the period of devolution, it would be misleading to conclude that they occurred *because of* devolution. Similar – or even more pronounced – shifts might have taken place in the absence of devolved institutions. However, the fact that patterns and trends of territorial imbalance in Scotland closely resemble, and in some respects exceed, those observed in England raises an important question: to what extent have Scotland's devolved institutions been designed – and evolved – to tackle spatial inequalities, beyond giving voice to Scottish-wide interests within the UK?

This question shifts the focus from Scotland's evolving socio-economic geography to its institutional architecture. As Edinburgh and the surrounding East-Central Belt have grown stronger, it is legitimate to ask whether this reflects not just market-driven dynamics but also institutional choices – in particular, a tendency towards centralisation within Scotland itself, and the limited empowerment of local government.

When devolution was introduced, it was widely expected to bring decision-making closer to communities. Yet, even before the creation of the Scottish Parliament, there was already a clear awareness of the risks that devolution might lead to a concentration of power and resources, and of the need to strengthen local authorities.² In the early 2000s, [journalistic](#) and academic debates began to question whether the promise of territorially diffuse benefits from devolution was being fulfilled. Scholars such as Charlie Jeffery and Martin Laffin questioned whether the new devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were replicating the centralising tendencies of the UK Government, rather than fostering a more decentralised political culture (Jeffery 2007; Laffin 2004, 2007). As Jeffery noted, devolution risked becoming a form of “decentralisation of centralism” where powers were transferred from Westminster only to be concentrated again at the devolved level.

These concerns received considerable attention in the early years after devolution but have since been overshadowed by major constitutional and political events – most notably the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the Brexit process, and the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of these turning points reinforced the visibility and central role of the Scottish Government and Parliament, further consolidating authority at Holyrood.

Yet the question remains: has devolution in Scotland stopped at Holyrood? Although this issue has received less attention from academics and media commentators in recent years, it has remained a central concern for local government associations, democratic reform advocates, and policy-focused think tanks. These groups have consistently highlighted the gap between devolved and local government and the need for a more balanced distribution of power.

Rather than charting a distinctive path, Scotland's system of governance increasingly mirrors the centralised model of Westminster. The limited fiscal autonomy of councils, the absence of a strong commitment to subsidiarity, and persistent weaknesses in local democracy point to an unresolved institutional challenge. If devolution is to address Scotland's internal territorial inequalities, it may require a renewed focus on local empowerment – not just national autonomy.

² In the final report of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, “[Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right](#)”, there are several passages highlighting the important role of local government as a safeguard against centralism and in support of the principle of subsidiarity.

Public perceptions of devolution benefits: territorial divides and government's bias

Addressing the spatial and institutional dynamics discussed above is particularly important in light of how people across Scotland perceive the territorial distribution of devolution's benefits. Recent survey data, collected as part of a British Academy-funded project led by one of the authors of this report, reveal notable patterns of public opinion.

The findings presented here are based on a representative survey conducted in both Scotland and Wales.³ Among other questions, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "Having a Scottish/Welsh Parliament and Government has brought significant benefits to my local community." Responses were captured using a five-point Likert scale – from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" – with an additional "don't know" option available.

Figure 7 shows that 42% of respondents in Scotland either tend to agree or strongly agree with the statement. In Wales, the figure is lower, with fewer than one in three expressing a similar view. However, these headline numbers conceal important territorial differences, which reinforce several of the trends discussed earlier and point to deeper links between public perceptions and the design of devolved institutions.

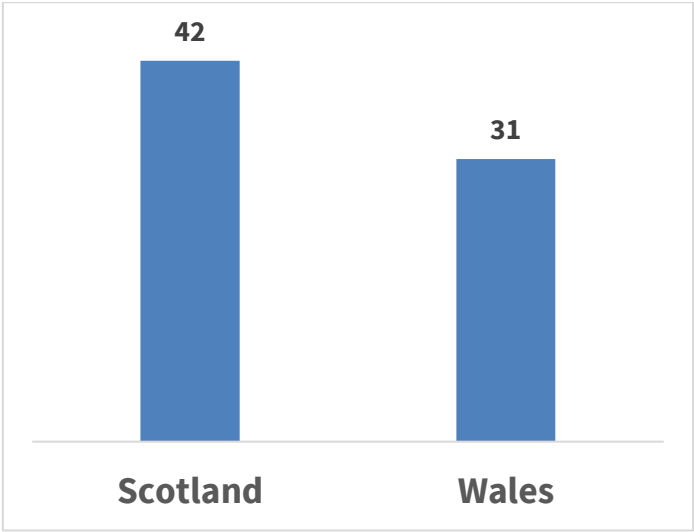
Most strikingly, there is a clear gap between residents of the capital cities and those living elsewhere. In both Scotland and Wales, people in Edinburgh and Cardiff are significantly more likely to view devolution as having benefited their local communities (Figure 8). In Scotland, the divide is even more pronounced when we compare residents of urban areas – primarily located in the central belt – with those living in suburban or rural parts of the country.

As shown in Figure 9, more than half of urban respondents in Scotland report that devolution has brought local benefits, compared with just around one-third of those in rural areas. The urban–rural divide in Scotland is notably sharper than in Wales.

These findings highlight the importance of recognising not just national-level support for devolution, but also how its perceived benefits are distributed across different types of places – and how that distribution shapes public attitudes.

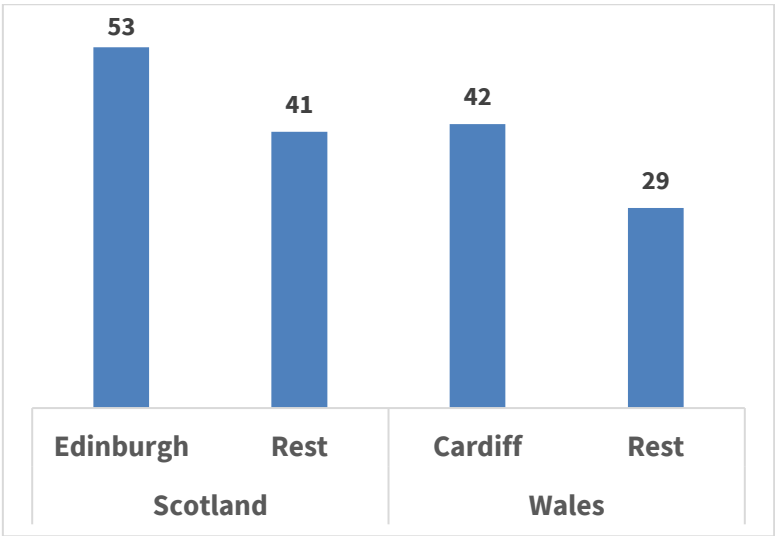
³ Results based on representative samples of 1,028 respondents in Scotland and 728 in Wales. The fieldwork was carried out between 8 and 20 December 2023 by Deltapoll, a professional public opinion consultancy, using established online sampling techniques designed to ensure demographic and political representativeness across each population.

Figure 7. Survey Results: % of respondents agreeing that devolution has brought benefits to local communities



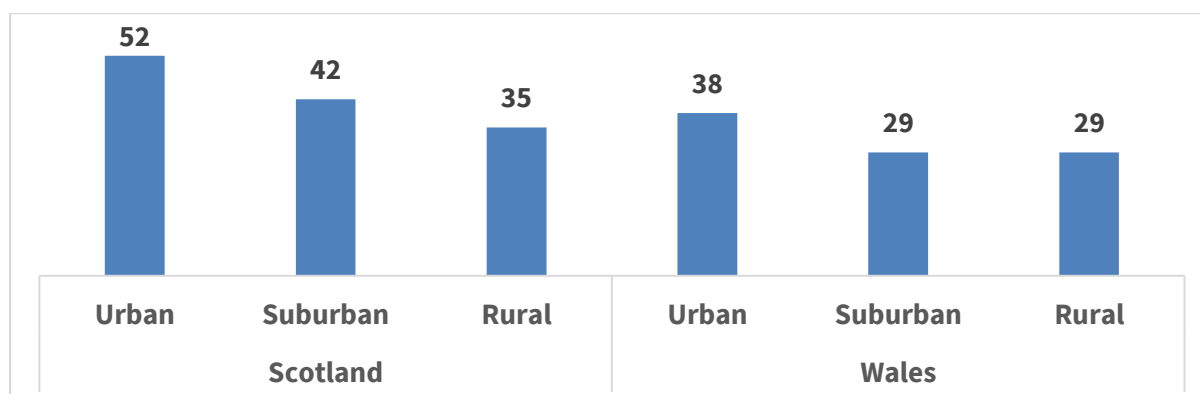
Authors' own elaboration based on survey data by Vampa (2025a) available [here](#)

Figure 8. Survey Results: % of respondents agreeing that devolution has brought benefits to local communities (capital vs rest)



Authors' own elaboration based on survey data by Vampa (2025a) available [here](#)

Figure 9. Survey Results: % of respondents agreeing that devolution has brought benefits to local communities (urban, suburban, rural areas)



Authors' own elaboration based on survey data by Vampa (2025a) available [here](#)

These patterns are further reinforced by public perceptions of territorial bias within devolved governance. As illustrated in Table 1, significant proportions of citizens in both Scotland and Wales believe that their devolved governments tend to favour affluent, urban, and central areas over more peripheral or disadvantaged regions.

To measure perceptions of territorial bias, respondents were presented with three 7-point scales, each asking whether the central or devolved government favoured: (a) rich over poor areas, (b) urban over rural areas, and (c) centre (around Edinburgh or Cardiff) over periphery. Each scale was explicitly directional: 1 indicated bias toward disadvantaged areas, 7 indicated bias toward advantaged areas, and 4 was clearly defined as 'equal treatment'.

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses across these categories:

- Bias towards poor, rural, peripheral areas (merging responses 1–3)
- No bias (4, indicating equal treatment between the two poles)
- Bias towards rich, urban, central areas (merging responses 5–7)
- Don't know

These findings add an important dimension to the discussion of institutional centralisation. They suggest that the concentration of political and economic power in and around Edinburgh and Cardiff is not only measurable in terms of outputs such as productivity and investment, but also deeply felt in terms of public trust and democratic legitimacy. Addressing these perceptions – whether rooted in reality, experience, or a sense of neglect – will be critical to restoring confidence in the ability of devolved institutions to serve the whole of their respective nations.

Table 1. Distribution of responses on perceived territorial bias of Scottish and Welsh governments (%)

	Scottish Government	Welsh Government
Rich vs Poor Areas		
<i>Poor bias</i>	23.9	19.6
<i>No bias</i>	22.1	38.1
<i>Rich bias</i>	42.9	48.4
<i>Don't know</i>	11.1	13.6
Urban vs Rural Areas		
<i>Rural bias</i>	14.2	17.9
<i>No bias</i>	19.1	14.8
<i>Urban bias</i>	54.9	53.3
<i>Don't know</i>	11.9	14
Centre vs Periphery Areas		
<i>Periphery bias</i>	11.8	11.1
<i>No bias</i>	22.6	8.9
<i>Edinburgh/Cardiff bias</i>	52.7	67.3
<i>Don't know</i>	12.9	12.6

Authors' own elaboration based on survey data available [here](#)

The opinion data presented above suggest that concerns about centralisation within devolved government are not unique to Scotland – they are also relevant in devolved Wales. In Scotland, devolution has undoubtedly brought political institutions closer to citizens and strengthened the democratic sphere at the national level. Yet it is striking that many of the challenges so central to the debate on regional inequality in England – including spatial unevenness, political disconnection, and the emergence of so-called 'left-behind' places – are also deeply present within Scotland. These issues have simply received less public attention, largely overshadowed by the broader constitutional debate around Scotland's place in the Union.

As the polarisation around independence has begun to fade – or at least lose prominence in everyday political discourse – the issue of internal centralism in Scotland is gaining visibility. A growing number of political voices, particularly those critical of the SNP-led Scottish Government, have begun to question the concentration of power in Edinburgh and the lack of effective local governance. In this context, attention has turned to institutional reforms trialled in England – particularly the creation of combined authorities and directly elected regional mayors – as possible models for addressing Scotland's own governance challenges.

The Labour Party has already floated such proposals in [its 2024 general election manifesto](#) for Scotland. While other political actors – including the governing SNP and some local authorities – remain cautious or sceptical, it is worth examining what lessons can be drawn from the English experience. Combined authorities in England have produced mixed results, and any discussion of similar reforms in Scotland must consider both their achievements and their limitations.

What is clear, however, is that the pressures facing Scotland are not so different from those in England. Uneven development, demographic decline in peripheral areas, and growing dissatisfaction with centralised governance are shared challenges across the UK. The recent rise of Reform UK in parts of Scotland is a warning sign (Vampa 2025b): political discontent rooted in territorial inequality will not remain dormant. It is in the interest not only of opposition parties but also of the Scottish Government itself to take these issues seriously – and to engage in a meaningful conversation about how power, voice, and opportunity are distributed across all parts of the country.

The next section of this report turns to England's experience with sub-national reform – exploring whether the model of combined authorities and directly elected mayors might offer relevant insights for Scotland's ongoing debate.

2. Learning from England? Opportunities and limits of combined authorities and directly elected mayors

The introduction of ‘devolution deals’ in England from 2014 was heralded by then-Chancellor George Osborne as a ‘devolution revolution’. These new institutional arrangements extended devolution to England, which until then – with the exception of London – had remained the ‘gaping hole’ in the process. Yet, more than a decade on, the promised ‘radical changes’ in how England is governed have not fully materialised.

In this section, we take stock of the English experience first, to assess the process in a longitudinal perspective, so as to understand the key idiosyncrasies that underpin it; and second, to develop an analysis of the opportunities and challenges that have emerged so far from the case of sub-national reform in England. This is particularly relevant for the purpose of this report, especially considering recent discussions about drawing on England’s model of combined authorities and directly elected mayors as a possible reference point to address persisting centre-local relation issues in Scotland. To be sure, while not directly transferable, elements of the English arrangements highlight possible mechanisms for strengthening regional coordination, local voice, and strategic capacity that could be useful for/applied to other areas. At the same time, however, this also offers the opportunity to consider what has not worked so far in England, and thus to develop critical reflections that could be useful for the Scottish case.

Devolution and sub-national governance reform in England: a (complex) process, not an event

Devolution in England started to take shape, beyond London⁴, just over a decade ago – well after the other UK nations. But the question of how to find a suitable form of decentralisation for the largest nation of the UK has much deeper roots. Indeed, as Figure 10 illustrates, addressing the so-called ‘English Question’ has been at the centre of sub-national governance reform debates and agendas for a long time. Notably, this path has been punctuated by attempts to deal with different yet deeply intertwined processes.

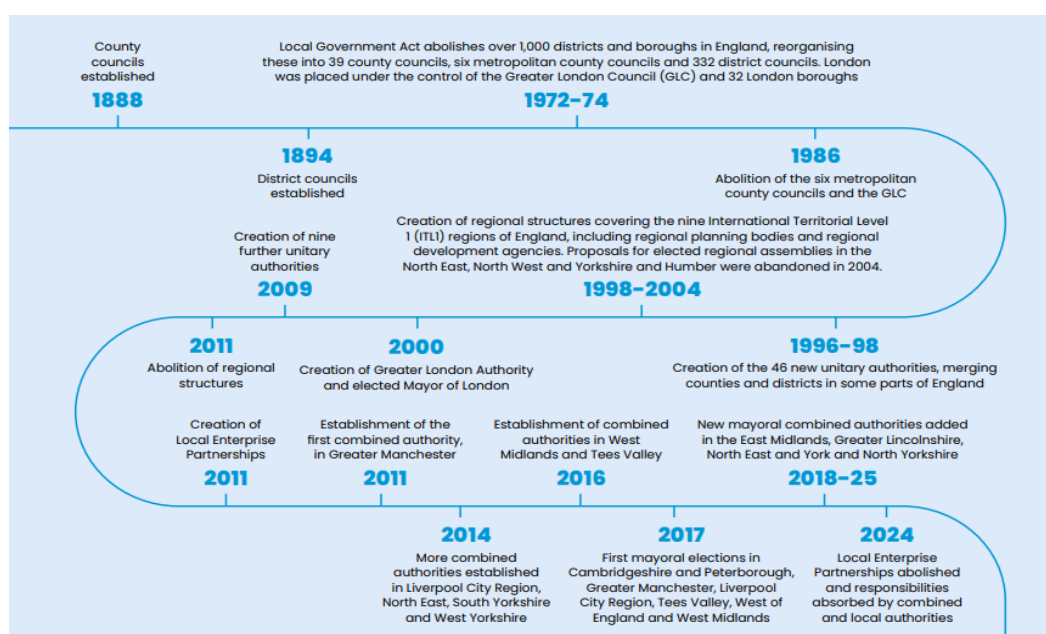
Over the past century subsequent rounds of reforms affecting local government have led to the emergence of an extremely uneven system of governance – where different areas have tiers of government of varying geography, size and degree of proximity to local communities. Unlike the other nations of the UK, where devolution has always had a distinctive link to the representation of specific identities, in England such debates have always revolved around issues of regional inequalities, with devolution seen as a ‘means’ to address persisting gaps especially between the north and the south of the country (Berry and Giovannini, 2018). These considerations began to take shape as concrete government policy agendas from the 1990s. Along the way, different models of ‘rescaling to rebalance the economy’ have been proposed and devised – from John Prescott’s Regional Assemblies and Northern Way agendas in the 2000s, via George Osborne’s ‘Devo Deals’ and Northern Powerhouse programme and Boris Johnson’s Levelling Up strategy, to the most recent English Devolution White Paper and Bill. This has led to a continuous cycle of institutional and policy churn that has added further complexity to an already compound system of sub-national

⁴ The London case may also provide important lessons for how directly elected mayors may be able to gain considerable autonomy and exercise political entrepreneurship, working with but not accountable to local authorities. While we do not directly consider it here, it may nevertheless illustrate both the opportunities and tensions that arise when devolved leadership develops its own power base alongside existing local government structures.

governance, but prevented the development of a coherent strategy able to address the 'English Question' in a comprehensive way (Giovannini, 2021; Webb et al, 2022; Berry and Giovannini, 2018; Pike et al, 2016). Combined authorities and directly elected mayors can thus be seen as the latest – and so far, the longest-lasting – iteration of a process that has been 'in the making' for a long time.

Overall, while local government reform and devolution should have developed in conjunction with the intent of creating a sustainable system of sub-national governance, in practice the two processes have taken different trajectories that have intersected only sporadically (typically contiguous to 'big electoral events'), in a partial way, and promoting contradictory principles. This has created a growing chasm between processes of sub-national governance reform that focus on different scales, but are intrinsically connected and should have been treated as such. The result is a set of territorial architectures that are marked by overlaps and incongruences, and often struggle to 'connect' (Giovannini and Griggs, 2022).

Figure 10. The long and winding road to English Devolution.



Source: Anderson and Arnold, 2025

Taking stock of the English experience of Mayoral Combined Authorities

As noted above, Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) are the result of a long history of attempts to deal with devolution in England, that frames the agenda as tightly connected with plans to rebalance the economy. The creation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) in 2014 paved the way for a process aimed at creating a new tier of government that would fill the 'missing middle' of English sub-national governance. The rationale was (back then, but still is) that introducing combined authorities of local councils operating in areas defined by a (more or less) coherent functional economic geography, and placing at their top a directly elected leadership figure would help boost local economies, address regional inequalities and provide a direct point of contact for/with central government (UK2070 Commission, 2020; Raikes et al, 2019). To be sure, in 2014 Chancellor George Osborne also had political interests in setting up Mayoral Combined

Authorities, as new directly elected mayors were seen as a potential way for the Conservative party to make inroads in areas (especially in the North of England) that, back then, were off limits for his party.

Since then, the political landscape of England has changed in a profound way. In some areas, the introduction of ‘metro-mayors’ and combined authorities has led to economic and democratic improvements. But in others, these new institutions are still ‘settling-in’, and socio-economic divides persist. Indeed, over the past 11 years, different views (on geography, scale, powers, etc.) on MCAs have been put forward. Yet – despite ebbs and flows in support for these institutions, and differences across the country – MCAs have started to become embedded in the local fabric of (at least some parts) of England. Furthermore, as the results of the last mayoral elections held in May 2025 have clearly shown, MCAs are becoming distinctive political arenas, which can provide the space for voicing discontent towards the status quo. Yet, turnout for mayoral elections remains low (averaging around 30%). While in general local elections tend to attract fewer voters, the low turnouts across all MCAs highlight ongoing questions about the impact of sub-national governance on renewed participation and local democracy in England.

In any case, unlike previous attempts, MCAs have increasingly become a key feature of England’s regional landscape – as underlined by the continued commitment to develop devolution around these structures included in the English Devolution White Paper (2024) and Bill (2025). Thus, it is worth reflecting on what the MCA model has achieved so far, and the opportunities and limitations it offers for sub-national governance in England – especially to reflect on what can be learnt from it. Below, we provide summary of this, based on extant analysis and evidence.

Opportunities

- **Visibility and access:** One of the key benefits of the MCA model has been increased regional visibility through both the structures of the MCA and election of a mayor. As envisioned by George Osborne, directly elected mayors provide a recognisable public figurehead for combined authorities, able to promote and speak for their area on national and international stages. Through the establishment of MCAs, mayors and other MCA officials can directly engage with government ministers and Whitehall officials, offering opportunities to feed into national decision-making and policy-making processes (Anderson and Arnold, 2025: 12). In other words, they have provided a new space for ‘access to the centre’ that, as noted by MCAs officials, is not available to councils and their leaders (ibidem).
- **Place-based leadership:** Place matters in the delivery of effective sub-national leadership. Emphasising the importance of place-based governance has become a common feature in the parlance of mayors, with emphasis placed on tailoring policy interventions to tackle and address place-specific issues (Ayres et al 2025). In contrast with Whitehall’s functional siloes, MCAs are able to take a ‘joined-up approach’ to governance, looking at issues through multiple policy lenses. By aligning powers across transport, housing, skills and economic development, MCAs can envision an ambitious, place-based approach that encourages experimentation and innovation. The Greater Manchester’s Bee Network is a good example of this, providing a joined-up travel network across bus, tram and train routes, as well as an initiative to champion and accelerate ‘a local, place-specific approach to net zero’ (GMCA 2023). As noted in the section on ‘limitations’, though, place-based leadership capacity varies from area to area.

- **Collaborative governance:** The MCA model has increased opportunities for enhanced working between MCAs and central government and across MCAs themselves. At the vertical level (MCA-to-central government), there are increasing opportunities for MCAs to inform central government priorities and policies, as well as to work together, harnessing knowledge from different governmental spheres and sectors, to co-develop and co-design policy and initiatives. Horizontally (MCA-to-MCA), there is a strong sense of cooperation and collaboration between MCAs. The UK Mayors forum, which brings together mayors (and other officials) on a regular basis has proved a useful structure for MCAs, providing a platform to facilitate shared learning across MCAs as well as a forum through which to engage collectively with government (Anderson and Arnold 2025). The next step in this process, would be to include also local government in the process.
- **Generative Power:** Hitherto, the functions and competencies of MCAs remain rather limited, with fiscal powers largely small in scope and volume. However, to fill this gap, mayors have become adept at leveraging their leadership styles and informal governance to go beyond the limitations of their institutional resources and exercise power in their respective places (Giovannini, 2021; Sandford, 2020). Mayors, for example, can convene a diverse range of stakeholders to bring together different perspectives, knowledge and capabilities, often with the objective to deliver co-created solutions to tackle specific issues. Homelessness and rough sleeping have been areas in which the exercise of generative power by mayors (notably the Mayors of Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City-Region) has had a significant impact. Despite neither mayor having formal powers over these areas, they have framed tackling the issue as a priority of their MCAs (Blakeley and Evans, 2023: 149-155). Again, as noted below, there are variations in MCAs' ability and capacity to harness generative power.

Limitations

- **Unevenness:** Notwithstanding increased visibility and access, the asymmetric character of English devolution means this is not the same for all MCAs. Owing to several factors, such as population and geographical size, institutional longevity, party politics, and mayoral leadership style, there is significant variation in the experience and capacity of mayors and MCAs to engage with and thus collaborate with and influence government (Giovannini, 2021). Given the framework for devolution deals, with varying degrees of devolution depending on the set-up of the combined authority and election of a mayor, perceptions of an MCA hierarchy exist, with some MCAs, for the reasons outlined above, favoured by central government over others. Illuminating this point, in a recent report one mayor commented: "some mayors carry more weight than others. We're not all equal" (Anderson and Arnold, 2025: 14).
- **Significant differences across places:** A serious challenge for the MCA model in England relates to the differences between the areas that have gained devolution, as well as those that remain without. Even though the English Devolution White Paper and Bill committed to broaden and deepen devolution extending it to the whole country, this process is still in progress and will take time to be realised in full. Meanwhile, MCAs that are at a more advanced stage of development (such as the so-called 'trailblazers') continue to steam ahead – but many other areas are trailing

behind. In addition, MCAs bring together at least two local authorities, with local authority leaders serving in the MCA cabinet, but party-political incongruence is a typical feature of the model, at times leading to difficult relationships between the MCA and local authorities (Giovannini, 2018). In 2024, for instance, the Government issued a 'best value notice' to the West of England Combined Authority as a result of the 'poor state of professional relationships' between the mayor and the MCA's three constituent local authorities (Soule 2024). There also continues to be a gap between metropolitan and rural/coastal areas, with the former still at the forefront of the devolution agenda.

- **Institutional memory and capacity:** MCAs have developed in an incremental, ad hoc manner. While more areas have been added to the map in recent years, it has also become clear that not all places start from the same point. Some areas, like Greater Manchester, could build their MCA on strong foundations, provided by long-established collaboration and cooperation across the ten councils that make up the CA. Others, like the West Midlands, were quick in harnessing the opportunities offered by their devolution deal, and build capacity at speed. But many other MCAs did not have any form of institutional memory or capacity to rely on. These differences have led to divergences in terms of MCAs' institutional performance, and their ability to make the most out their devolution agenda. Rather than a flexible model, this has the potential to generate 'two classes of MCAs' that operate at different speeds – the 'winners', and the ones that have to 'play catch-up'.
- **Resource limitations:** The establishment of MCAs has resulted in the transfer of some policy responsibilities and functions from central government to sub-national spheres, but England remains a largely centralised country. Indeed, the MCA model pales in comparison with the devolved models of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with MCAs holding no exclusive autonomy over policy areas, no legislative authority and very limited financial resources. As Morphet and Denham (2024: 768) argue, reforms in England amount to 'devolution in name only'. The recent rollout of trailblazer devolution deals to some MCAs has resulted in expanded responsibilities and additional powers, as well as the establishment of a single settlement to consolidate various funding streams into one funding package, but these nonetheless remain limited within the wider centralised structures of England's territorial governance. In a context of persisting austerity, this has led to a mismatch between the powers and resources passed down to sub-national tiers of government – leading to what Rodríguez-Pose and Vidal-Bover (2022) aptly call "unfunded mandates". These limitations can impact directly on the alleged goal of the devolution agenda in England – i.e. addressing socio-economic inequalities. Indeed, as noted by Warner et al (2024) the "ad hoc 'rollout' of English devolution has exacerbated the imbalances between places in relation to powers, resources, and capacity, threatening to worsen existing spatial disparities". And even if, as explained in the section on opportunities, metro mayors have made use of soft powers to circumvent some of these issues, it is also true that not all areas have access to the formal and informal resources necessary to develop and use soft powers.

Overall, the analysis developed here suggests the introduction of Mayoral Combined Authorities have helped advance a new form of localism (Giovannini, 2021) which has the

potential to bring a host of benefits to local places, and improve sub-national governance dynamics. But this process is still uneven and marked by important limitations.

3. The case for a distinctive Scottish approach

There have been calls for Scotland to adopt the English approach to Metro Mayors, including by the Leader of Scottish Labour, Anas Sarwar (Boothman, 2024; Lang, 2023). A key rationale for this relates to inequality within Scottish devolution (as discussed above). However, other motives have also been ventured. For instance, there are longstanding issues with local government arrangements in Scotland. The 1996 reform to local government boundaries and powers, abolished the powerful ‘regions’ of Scotland, and was highly controversial at the time. It created a system of large (amongst the most populous in Europe) unitary councils which oversee all the functions of local government (previously split between local and regional tiers). The changes had a clear political motive, and at their core was the aim of abolishing the Strathclyde region and lifting the “baleful shadow of socialism”, in the words of the former Secretary of State for Scotland Ian Lang, from the West of Scotland (quoted in Acherson, 1993). Surprisingly, the unitary system was retained post-devolution, in spite of a broad consensus amongst political elites that the new system represented a retrograde step. Its retention undermined the foundational aspirations for ‘subsidiarity’ in Scotland’s new devolved era (Scott et al, 1994). Successive administrations at Holyrood have sought to work within the parameters of this inherited system, perhaps not wishing to open a Pandora’s box of costly and politically contested reform – in spite of the obvious limitations of the present arrangements.

Glasgow is both worst affected by, and typifies, the shortcoming of the post-96 system (Midwinter and McGarvey, 1997). Firstly, there is no substantive city-wide governance arrangements for Scotland’s largest city, with the broader conurbation split between Glasgow City council and seven other authorities. In addition to the lack of a strategic city-level tier, the 1996 boundaries, via a series of creatively drawn boundary lines, separated the core city from its affluent suburbs, which have, amongst other consequences, placed a low ceiling on Council Tax revenue levels – something bemoaned by the city’s current leadership (Sanderson, 2023). Thirdly, the city ‘lags behind’ its English counterparts economically, while struggling with the same policy issues that dynamic Mayors in Manchester and Liverpool have made progress in addressing (Swinney and Rollison, 2025). The Glasgow City Region Deal, agreed between the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local partners, has gone some way towards addressing the absence of strategic collaboration across the wider conurbation. Like other Scottish [City Region Deals](#), it brings substantial investment and promotes joint working at a cross-council scale, supporting infrastructure and innovation. However, because the model is project-based rather than institutional, it provides only limited democratic accountability and does not create a durable regional tier. There is also a risk that such deals concentrate resources disproportionately in major urban cores, thereby reinforcing – rather than reducing – territorial inequalities within Scotland.

At the same time, there are strong reasons to suppose that a straightforward importation of the model from England is problematic, and, at the very least, requires some qualification. Firstly, there is little appetite within the Scottish local government sector for this model. Given the absence of a ‘bottom up’ movement for creating combined authorities, reform would likely need to be strongly encouraged – or even enforced – from Holyrood. Such a move hardly addresses concerns around centralisation. Secondly, outside of Glasgow, there are few obvious candidates for this model. Aberdeen, Scotland’s third largest city, is smaller in population than Birkenhead or Wolverhampton. Dundee is approximately the same size as Telford. While Edinburgh is a solid candidate, the evidence suggests that it is far from disadvantaged by the current arrangements.

This brings us onto the most obvious objection: if the logic of introducing combined authorities is to address regional inequalities, either within Scotland or across the UK, then what logic is there in creating new structures to boost economic growth in the wealthiest and most economically active areas of the country? The Scottish central belt, and Edinburgh in particular, is often considered to be the beneficiary of existing inequalities, as shown in the first part of the report. In this context, such moves risk further sucking economy activity towards the centre and away from the areas which need the most help, reinforcing patterns of centralisation.

Any solution must therefore consider the status of the country's vast rural areas, which account for the majority of Scotland's territory. This is most clearly the case for the Highlands, a huge region represented by a council covering an area the size of Belgium, and which suffers from an ageing and declining population, and related issues with economic growth (Burnett and Danson, 2022). The situation is similar in the Hebridean islands. Neither is an obvious fit for a Mayoral model. There is thus a pressing need to consider such developments in the grand scheme of Scottish governance, and to consider what forms of institutional solution are more likely to be accepted as legitimate, to function effectively, and to avoid exacerbating the problems that such innovations set out to address.

A cut and paste job of the arrangements in Manchester or Birmingham might work reasonably effectively for Glasgow or Edinburgh, but the partiality and incoherence of arrangements in England should not be uncritically replicated. Instead, any solution should come as part of a holistic rethink of central/local government relations, which leaves no part of the country behind, is (and is viewed as) democratically legitimate, and which strengthens rather than circumvents Scottish national level institutions. This may mean the adoption of different models in different parts of the country. Most importantly, reform should emerge not through the imposition of an externally generated template, but instead through careful consideration of local needs, values, and democratic principles. Just as Glasgow is not Manchester, Scotland is not England. A quarter century of devolution shows the value of generating Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. Local government should be no exception.

4. Rebalancing power within devolution: Principles for reform

Drawing on the preceding analysis of territorial inequalities, institutional centralisation, and comparative lessons from England, we propose the following principles to guide future reform of centre-local relations in Scotland:

1. Territorial Equity

- Reform should be driven by a clear commitment to reducing **territorial inequalities**, ensuring that the benefits of devolution are shared across all parts of Scotland – not just concentrated in the capital and East-Central Belt.
- A central objective must be to **tackle spatial imbalances** in economic development, investment, and political attention, especially in areas facing demographic decline or economic stagnation.

2. Democratic Subsidiarity

- Decision-making powers should be exercised at the **lowest appropriate level**, consistent with the principle of subsidiarity.
- This implies empowering local communities through **genuine decentralisation**, rather than replicating top-down dynamics at the devolved level.

3. Institutional Distinctiveness

- Scotland's approach to central-local relations must reflect **its own geography, history, and political culture** rather than importing institutional models wholesale from other contexts.
- Reform should seek to **complement rather than bypass** national-level devolved institutions and align with Scotland's wider constitutional trajectory.

4. Responsiveness and Local Legitimacy

- Any reform must be grounded in a **bottom-up understanding of local needs and values**, not only expert assessments or national priorities.
- Structures should be viewed by local populations as **legitimate, transparent, and democratically accountable** – especially in areas that feel neglected or underrepresented.

5. Flexibility and Differentiation

- Scotland's diverse territorial landscape – including cities, towns, rural regions, and islands – requires **tailored governance solutions**.
- A one-size-fits-all model is unlikely to succeed; instead, reforms should allow for **variable arrangements** that match local capacity and strategic needs.

6. Capacity and Capability

- Strengthening local government must include investments in **institutional capacity, leadership, and fiscal autonomy**.
- Without enhanced capabilities, newly devolved powers risk becoming **unfunded mandates**, which could exacerbate rather than mitigate existing inequalities.

7. Strategic Coherence

- Future reforms should pursue **coherent territorial governance**, avoiding fragmentation and duplication.
- This includes clearer **alignment of responsibilities** between national, regional, and local levels, as well as mechanisms for **coordination and joint working**.

8. Public Engagement and Trust

- Reform processes must actively **involve citizens and communities**, building democratic trust and ownership of institutional change.
- Addressing widespread **perceptions of central bias** – as highlighted in the survey data presented here – will be key to restoring confidence in devolved governance.

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