INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Completing the map

How the government can extend devolution to the whole of England

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About this report

This report sets out how the Labour government can 'complete the map' of English devolution within this parliament, by establishing new mayors and combined authorities across the half of England left out of the devolution process to date.

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Summary

After a decade of devolution, a dozen English regions are now led by mayors who, in partnership with local government, control key economic powers and budgets. But devolution has unfolded unevenly.

Outside London, almost all of the south has been excluded. So have some big urban areas – including Stoke, Southampton, Hull and Leicester – and most of non-metropolitan England. Overall, almost 30 million people, around half the population, live in places with no devolved settlement.

Labour has come to power committed to widening devolution. Local leaders in 'devolution deserts' have been invited to submit proposals for how they will work with neighbouring areas to take on devolved powers. Ministers now face a set of tricky decisions about what the geography of new devolution arrangements should be and which places to prioritise.

This report is formed of two parts: the first sets out our analysis of how the government should take these decisions; the second looks at the options available to it, and offers recommendations on how it might take forward devolution in each region of England.

How to complete England's devolution map

Our starting point is that 'completing the map' – extending devolution to 100% of the country – should be the explicit objective. This is both fair to places that have been left out and in the government's own interests. More consistent devolution can help Labour achieve its growth objectives and leave Whitehall to focus on national strategic matters that are its comparative advantage.

With political will and sustained focus, the government can complete the map within this parliament. To expedite progress, it should set out more clearly which powers can be devolved and on what basis decisions will be taken. It should also move from bespoke deal-making to a more consistent 'off-the-shelf' offer.

Different places will move at different speeds, so it is not credible to expect all parts of England to take on the same devolved powers at this point. But, at a minimum, by the mid-point of the parliament the government should set out the final map of devolution and a timetable for the implementation of all future deals.

The government does not, of course, have unlimited capacity or political capital, so will have to focus on certain areas for the next wave of devolution. Our view is that ministers should prioritise places that score highly on three criteria: unfulfilled economic growth potential, local political readiness to take on devolved powers, and the level of ambition of local leaders to take on expansive powers and make necessary governance reforms – including adopting mayoral leadership or forming a combined authority.

In many areas, there is no agreed geography for devolution. The government is right to start by inviting places to come forward with proposals. But a fully 'bottom-up' approach is unlikely to complete the map. So ministers have to stand prepared to take the final decisions over boundaries. They should do this taking into account scale, economic geography, local political commitment, ease of implementation, other public sector boundaries, and historic patterns of local and regional identity.

Options and recommendations for each region of England

In some parts of England, the solution is clear. This is the case for most of the existing mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) – including in Greater Manchester, the East and West Midlands, Liverpool City Region, North, South and West Yorkshire, the North East and Tees Valley.

The boundaries of these established MCA settlements should be left untouched. The focus should be on deepening devolution and investing in institutional capacity. The same applies to Greater London.

The provisional mayoral devolution agreements in Greater Lincolnshire, and East Riding and Hull should likewise be implemented as agreed. The existing Lancashire deal should be replaced by a deeper mayoral deal on the agreed boundaries.

In Cheshire, Cumbria, Essex and Kent, devolution should be on the historic county footprints, with MCAs (or mayoral combined county authorities, MCCAs) established across each county. A Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland MCA should also be created.

Other deals should be reopened. The West of England Combined Authority should include North Somerset. The provisional Devon and Torbay deal should incorporate neighbouring Plymouth. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough MCA should probably retain its existing boundaries, but the case for unitarisation (moving from two-tier to single-tier local government) should be considered.

But in many 'devolution deserts', particularly in the south, ministers face a bigger strategic choice between smaller but simpler deals that may enjoy more local support and larger regional deals that offer greater potential for ambitious growth strategies, but will be harder to agree and implement.

Broadly, we have grouped these potential approaches together into two headline options, summarised in the maps titled 'Option 1' and 'Option 2' at the end of this chapter. In reality, however, this is not a binary decision, and ministers might legitimately wish to prioritise different factors in different places.

However, in our view, there is a strong case to be bold and to prioritise the creation of larger scale regional mayoral devolution arrangements in the following four places:

- **Thames Valley** – A mayoral combined county authority across Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire would bring together the world-class research sector in Oxfordshire with neighbouring major urban centres like Reading and Slough to spur growth.

- **The South East Midlands** – A mayoral deal incorporating the historic county maps of Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire would bring devolution to important urban areas such as Luton and Northampton as well as nearby Milton Keynes.

- **Pan-Hampshire** – Local politics have long frustrated progress with devolution, but this may have changed. The government should support the creation of a pan-Hampshire devolution settlement (comprising Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and the urban areas of Portsmouth and Southampton).

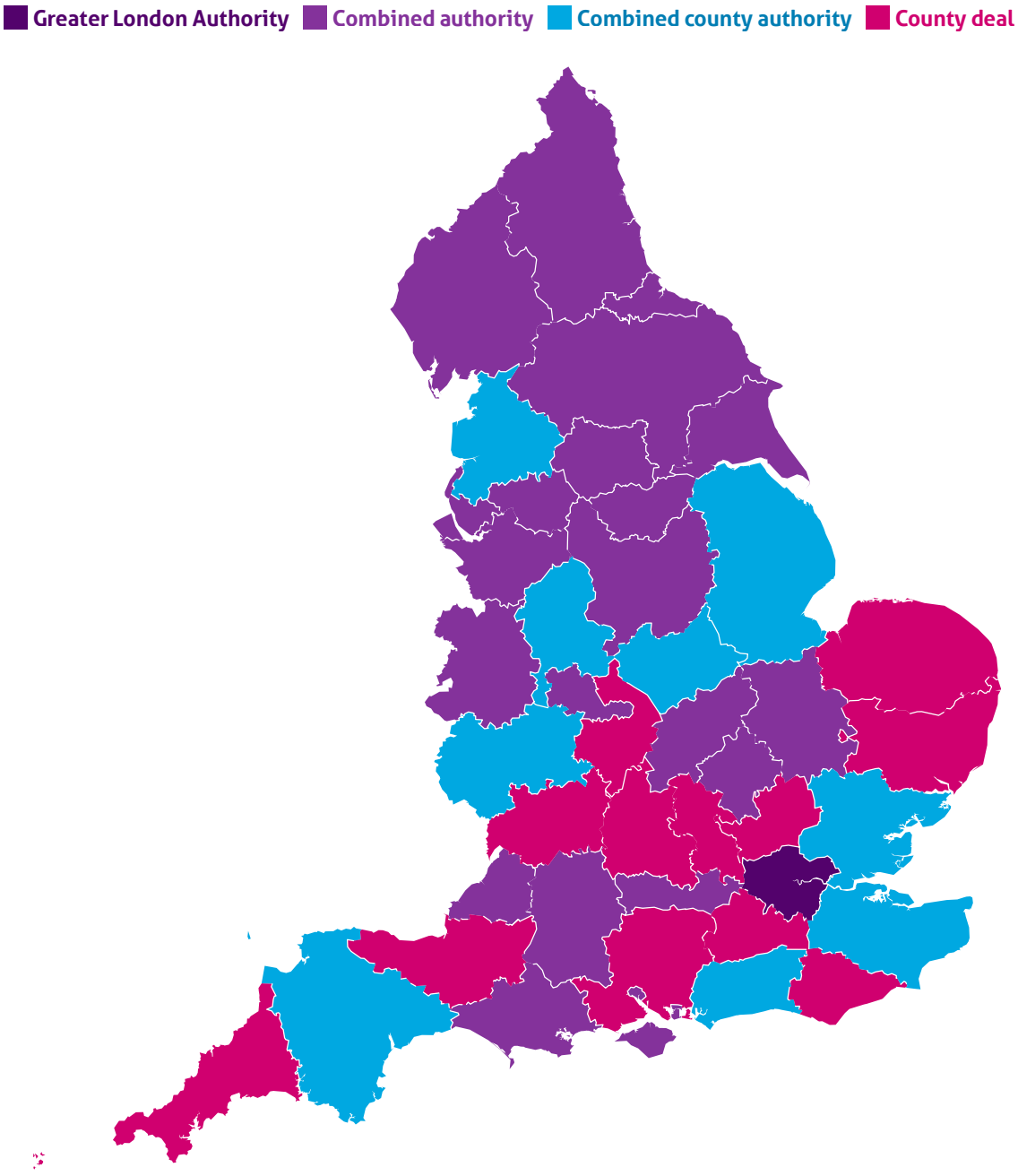
- **Historic Sussex** – A devolution settlement covering East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove would deliver a large-scale deal that aligns with historic boundaries and avoids Brighton having to choose whether to look east or west.

Ministers also face a choice between scale and simplicity in other places such as 'Wessex', East Anglia, Staffordshire and Shropshire, which include medium-sized cities including Swindon, Bournemouth, Norwich and Stoke.

Finally, in places including Surrey, Hertfordshire, Warwickshire and Cornwall, the most logical geography for devolution is the existing county council footprint. However, ministers have ruled out mayoral devolution to single local authorities. The likely options in these places are: non-mayoral devolution or division into two or more unitary councils, followed by the creation of a mayoral combined authority. The answer is likely to differ from place to place.

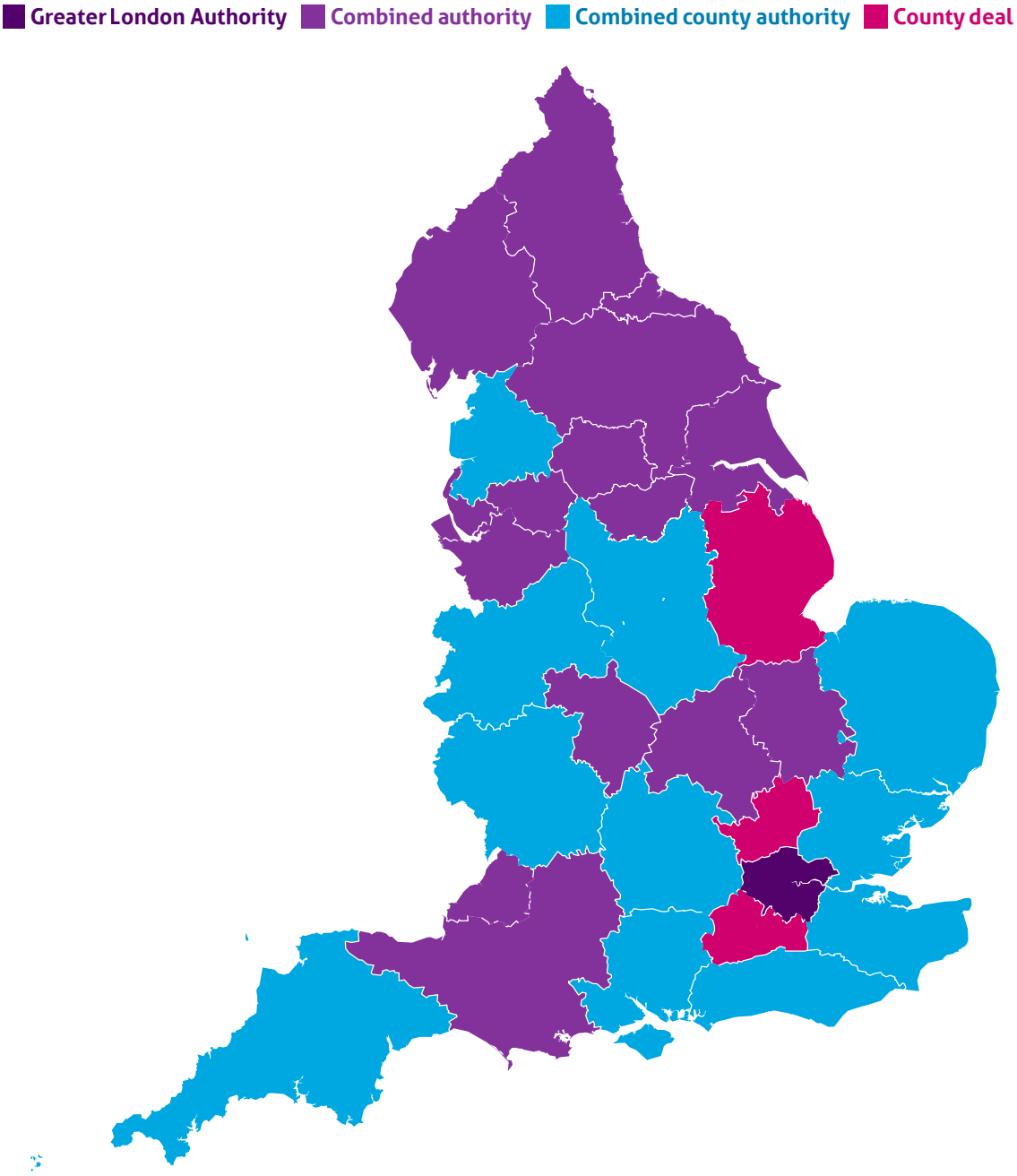
On 19 September, the government announced its intention to proceed with eight provisional deals concluded by the Conservative government, including non-mayoral devolution in Lancashire, Buckinghamshire, Warwickshire, Surrey, Cornwall and Devon. This is a positive sign that Labour is keeping up the devolution momentum – but these reforms should be treated as stepping stones towards more ambitious settlements within the next few years, in line with our detailed regional recommendations.

Figure 1 **Completing the map, Option 1 – smaller-scale deals**



Source: Institute for Government analysis.

Figure 2 **Completing the map, Option 2 – larger-scale deals**



Source: Institute for Government analysis.

Introduction

Metro mayors and combined authorities have been established in a dozen regions over the past decade, taking on a range of powers devolved from Whitehall. Devolution has enabled local leaders to take public control of bus and tram services, to support the regeneration of derelict brownfield land, to tackle local skills shortages, to invest in digital connectivity, and much more.

But despite this progress, half of England's population and almost three quarters of its land area have been left out. This includes nine of the 25 largest urban areas – including Leicester, Portsmouth and Stoke[1] – as well as many non-metropolitan and rural places, especially in the south of England, where devolution has barely taken hold outside London.

Since entering office, Labour has made clear that England's metro mayors will play a central role in helping the government achieve its missions for government. Within days of the general election all the mayors were invited to 10 Downing Street to meet the prime minister and deputy prime minister.[2] The government is also planning to publish an expanded 'devolution framework', with new powers on offer, a devolution white paper, and an English Devolution Bill that will create a simpler process by which powers can be devolved.[3]

In addition, Keir Starmer's government launched a process by which it will extend devolution to new areas. On 16 July 2024, the deputy prime minister, Angela Rayner, wrote to the leaders of county and unitary councils in 'devolution deserts' – areas without a current devolution settlement – asking them to submit 'expressions of interest' by the end of September that set out how they propose to work together with neighbouring authorities to take on devolved powers.[4]

Rayner's letter noted that many local authorities' previous applications to central government had been "held up by lengthy negotiations over powers, geographies, or governance".[5] Labour would, the letter said, move beyond "a deals-based approach, setting out clear conditions and a clear offer in return for places seeing a devolution agreement".[6]

The government is therefore opening the way for devolution to be extended to the whole of England – a policy known in shorthand as 'completing the devolution map'.

This initiative reflects Labour's view – expressed clearly in its manifesto – that over-centralisation is one of the factors constraining the economic potential of many English regions and counties, and that devolution of power across England will therefore help to "kickstart economic growth", the new government's number one mission.[7] Completing the devolution map will help ensure that *all* parts of the country have control of key growth levers such as transport, housing and skills budgets.

Labour has also made clear that, on principle, devolution should be on offer to all parts of the country, since "no place should be left behind by the opportunity to take back control".[8] Completing the map is therefore justified on grounds of fairness, since places with metro mayors have a profile and authority that they can use to bring investment and other benefits to their areas.

Extending devolution to all parts of England should also improve the effectiveness of central government by liberating it from matters that are best left to local institutions and leaders. At present, Whitehall is in the odd position of being *directly* responsible for things like local skills and transport investment decisions in some places, while elsewhere the function is devolved. This makes it harder for Whitehall to maintain a focus on those functions that should be managed centrally, such as setting national strategy, agreeing minimum standards, distributing resources, monitoring performance, and holding places to account.

It is right, then, that Labour prioritises completing the map of English devolution. This paper sets out the Institute for Government's analysis of how the government can achieve this objective by the end of this parliament, expected to be in 2029. We apply a decision making framework that considers a range of criteria to illustrate the options and trade-offs facing ministers as they set about this task.

Our recommendations for devolution deals are based on applying the proposed decision making framework and by reference to publicly available information about the preferences and plans of individual local authorities. However, government should take the final decisions about the geography of devolution following detailed consultation with areas, something we have not had the capacity to do as part of this work.

Part 1: How to complete the map

Ministers can accelerate the devolution process but have to decide which places to prioritise

The commitment to complete the devolution map within this parliament is a realistic goal. Different places will inevitably move at different speeds, so there is unlikely to be a single big bang devolution moment that simultaneously empowers all regions at once. But with political will and sustained focus on this agenda – led from the front by Angela Rayner as deputy prime minister and secretary of state at the renamed Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government – the government can make rapid progress.

At a minimum, the government should set out definitively by the mid-point of this parliament what the final map of devolution settlements will look like and outline a timetable for the implementation of all future devolution deals.

The government will be able to accelerate progress if it adopts an 'off-the-shelf' approach to devolution agreements rather than a bespoke, area-by-area one (although it is not credible for all places to take on exactly the same package of powers). The ultimate objective should be far greater consistency across the country than at present, but government will have to accept that places will move at different speeds, given significant variation in existing institutional capacity and political appetite to take on powers.

Setting out precisely which powers are on offer, and on what basis decisions at the centre will be taken, will also help. So long as such questions are uncertain, then devolution discussions in some areas are likely to stall, as local leaders await clarity on the rules of the game. The government's commitments to expand and legislate for the devolution framework could help in this regard, as could making a reality of the 'devolve or explain' principle that the Institute for Government recommended,[1] and which the government now says it will put into law.[2]

Alongside deciding upon the final geography of the English devolution map, ministers will need to decide which devolution proposals to prioritise. Earlier devolution rounds have shown that Whitehall struggled to meet the level of demand for devolution due to its own capacity and political capital constraints.[3] Although the Labour government signalled in its King's Speech that it will simplify the process for progressing devolution,[4] it seems probable it will still by necessity focus on selected areas for the next wave of deals. Ministers should prioritise places based on three main criteria.

- **Places with the greatest unfulfilled growth potential, primarily containing large urban centres**[*] – whose concentration of people, businesses and markets creates the preconditions for high productivity and so the economic growth that is so central to Labour's missions.[5,6] Many urban areas in the UK are less productive than their international comparators, and the government sees devolution as an important way for these places to 'catch-up' and become more productive.[7]

- **Places whose political leaders and institutions are most ready and willing to take on powers from Whitehall.** Areas that provisionally agreed devolution deals with the last government would seem most likely to be completed soonest (although, as discussed below, in some cases ministers might wish to reopen these). In other areas, local leaders had made substantial progress in building local consensus around a shared plan prior to the election (Greater Essex, for instance), which also suggests a willingness to proceed.

- **Places that exhibit the scale of ambition to help further the government's own missions.** This means giving priority to places that are ready to move swiftly to more expansive devolution deals and to make necessary governance reforms to secure these – including adopting mayoral leadership. However, the government is right to keep open the option of non-mayoral deals, in places where there is weak local support for devolution or limited experience of collaboration across boundaries. In such cases it can be better to focus on agreeing the geography of devolution, and then if necessary implementing a more limited non-mayoral deal as a stepping stone to a deeper settlement in future.

[*] As we laid out previously in *A New Deal for England*, at present, nine of the 25 largest 'primary urban areas' (PUAs) (based on 2021 census data) are without devolution, including Leicester, Portsmouth, Northampton, Bournemouth, Southampton, Stoke, Southend, Reading and Brighton. Source: Figure 1 in Quinio V and Rodrigues G, 'What do the first Census 2021 results say about the state of urban Britain?', blog, Centre for Cities, 1 July 2022, retrieved 17 April 2024, www.centreforcities.org/blog/what-do-the-first-census-2021-results-say-about-the-state-of-urban-britain. Using the alternative ONS definition of 'built up areas' (BUAs), which are smaller than PUAs, there are three additional top-25 urban areas without devolution: Milton Keynes, Plymouth and Luton (though under the BUA definition, Southend and Bournemouth are ranked out of the top 25). Source: ONS, 'Towns and cities, characteristics of built-up areas, England and Wales: Census 2021', ONS, 2 August 2023, retrieved 17 April 2024, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/articles/townsandcitiescharacteristicsofbuiltupareasenglandandwales/census2021

The government should use upper-tier local authorities as the building blocks for its devolution map

There are three types of devolution deal that the government can agree to help in its goal of completing the map:

- **Combined authorities (CAs)** – a settlement that creates a body that brings together groups of neighbouring councils.[8] These require the agreement of all local councils in the region covered (including district and town councils). All existing combined authorities are chaired by directly elected mayors, and are known as mayoral combined authorities (MCAs).

- **Combined county authorities (CCAs)** – similar to CAs, except that CCAs can only be formed in two-tier local government areas, and include as constituent members only upper-tier authorities such as county councils and unitary authorities. This means district councils are not full members of CCAs. More powers are on offer to CCAs with a mayor, known as mayoral combined county authorities (MCCAs).

- **County deals (CDs)** – this as yet untested model would confer additional powers directly upon individual county councils (in both unitary and two-tier areas) and is also known as the 'single local area' (SLA) model. This option was created by the Conservative government, but the new government has now ruled out mayoral SLA deals.[9] As a result, the expectation is that any future county or SLA deal will be concluded on a non-mayoral basis, so will receive fewer powers.

Of these, only the first involves district councils as full partners. However, the previous government made clear its intention to conclude the remaining devolution deals only with upper-tier authorities.[10] By writing only to upper-tier authorities Angela Rayner has signalled Labour's plan to continue this approach.

The rationale is that this will both make it easier to agree devolution deals and smooth the operation of devolved institutions once established – involving district councils as full members increases the number of parties with veto powers, which is unlikely to lead to effective decision making. For instance, the East Midlands devolution deal brought together two county councils (Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire) and two unitary authorities (Derby and Nottingham) into the new CCA structure, alongside the elected mayor. Incorporating lower-tier councils – eight in Derbyshire and seven in Nottingham – to the executive board would likely have been a recipe for deadlock and inertia. The poor record of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough MCA (the only existing MCA in a two-tier local government area) has reinforced the view of both major parties that it is best to conclude devolution agreements only with upper-tier authorities.

Nonetheless, it remains important for metro mayors and upper-tier authorities to involve district councils as partners.[11] These councils hold important policy levers in areas such as housing and planning, which enable or constrict the delivery of key devolved powers such as urban regeneration. Upper-tier authorities should therefore take steps to engage districts in decision making – the current East Midlands CCA deal permits the inclusion of up to an additional eight non-constituent representatives on the board from district and borough councils across Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.[12]

An alternative option open to ministers is to pursue unitarisation in some two-tier areas – whereby the county and district system is replaced with a single tier of local government. Large county councils could in some places be subdivided into two or three unitary authorities, which might subsequently form an MCA with devolved powers either on the prior county footprint or with neighbouring areas. Unitarisation can be disruptive in the short term, making it impractical for wholesale reform across England in one fell swoop. Any such reforms would also probably have to be concluded prior to the transfer of devolved powers, so the effect might be to delay the rollout of devolution. But ministers should seek opportunities to pursue unitarisation in places where there is local support and a good case that this would deliver streamlined decision making or better value for money.

Ministers ultimately have to decide the final geography of devolution – weighing up the trade-offs between competing options

The success of devolution ultimately rests on local commitment to making it work. So it is right that the government has started off by inviting places to determine among themselves their preferred geography for new devolution settlements, and to make that case to Whitehall.

However, a fully bottom-up approach to completing the map is unlikely to succeed. Past experience shows that various factors – from local rivalries and identities to party political wariness – can frustrate attempts to reach consensus over the right geography, or can leave places out altogether.

Ministers must therefore stand prepared to take the final decision on the appropriate geography for a given area.[13] This may be the only way to resolve the complex remaining areas of the map and to overcome local political impasses in places where there are two or more potential options for the geographical footprint of devolution.

To decide between options, ministers will need to assess the merits and drawbacks of the different possible approaches, taking into account the following eight key factors (for more detail see Annex 1):

1. **Devolution to a strategic regional scale:** Devolution deals should be implemented in areas with a minimum population of 500,000 people, with preference for devolution to areas with over 1 or 2 million people.

   Larger scale deals can give devolved areas greater ability to tackle structural economic challenges, for instance through the development of regional spatial, growth and transport strategies. They also give devolved institutions – especially directly elected mayors – a louder voice and greater ability to act as champions for their regions. And from the government's perspective, a smaller number of larger regional devolved bodies will be easier to engage with, for instance when it comes to involvement of mayors on the planned Council of Nations and Regions.

2. **No 'devolution exclaves':** The final map should include all parts of England, with no 'devolution exclaves' left out. These areas should also, as a general rule, be contiguous – meaning geographically connected.

   The conclusion of this process should be coverage of 100% of England's population by devolution arrangements. Previous waves of devolution deals have emerged piecemeal, which have sometimes led to small areas being excluded (or excluding themselves) from neighbouring combined authority areas. For instance, North Somerset chose not to join the West of England Combined Authority formed in 2017 and Plymouth is not included in the provisional deals concluded in neighbouring Cornwall and Devon. Given its population of 265,000, Plymouth is too small to have its own devolution deal so will have to be incorporated into a deal with at least one of its neighbours (as discussed below).

3. **Alignment with subnational economic geography:** Devolution deals should be concluded on a basis that, so far as is possible, aligns with the geography of subnational economic activity.

   Devolution is regarded by the government principally as a mechanism for improving economic productivity. As Angela Rayner put it to local leaders: "Devolution underpins our national mission to deliver economic growth for everyone, everywhere."[14] This is reflected in the fact that most of the powers on offer are economic levers such as local transport, housing, infrastructure, spatial planning, skills and employment support functions – all of which operate best at a geography that covers a local labour market.[15] Therefore, devolution should be aligned as far as possible with subnational economic geography, as identified using travel to work, housing market, car use and other economic market indicators, to enable local leaders to take decisions in a joined-up way across these regional economies.

4. **Alignment with existing upper-tier council and combined authority boundaries:** Unless there is a strong case to do otherwise, the government should use upper-tier (county and unitary) local authorities and established combined authorities as the building blocks for new devolution settlements.

   If the government wants to make rapid progress with its growth agenda – and related objectives such as planning reform and housebuilding – it should conclude agreements that limit institutional disruption and ensure as smooth a transition as possible. However, in some places there may be a good argument for revisiting existing devolution agreements and forming new combined authorities, especially if the government is minded to give greater weight to larger-scale deals. There may also be a case to proceed with unitarisation of some two-tier local government areas. Though unitarisation might delay the rollout of devolution, it could also pave the way for more effective combined authorities that are better placed to take on deeper powers over the longer term.

5. **Evidence of local political commitment:** The government should favour devolution to places where there is local commitment to work together across boundaries, as indicated by public statements by political leaders and other key stakeholders.

   The success of devolution ultimately rests upon the willingness of local political leaders and other key stakeholders to collaborate on the proposed boundaries.[16] In places with weak local support, devolved institutions are likely to suffer from internal disputes and collective action problems: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority is widely seen as the product of central intervention rather than local consensus, which led at least initially to poor performance.[17] So ministers should tread carefully when proposing devolution in areas with shallow support. In such cases, it might be sensible to proceed incrementally, for instance concluding a more limited non-mayoral deal initially.

6. **Successful track record of joint working at this scale:** Government should prioritise areas with a successful track record of joint working across boundaries, since devolution requires local leaders to shift their frame of reference for decision making from the local to the regional.

   Devolution is likely to be most successful in places with established relationships and a culture of joint working across boundaries, in particular between local authorities that might be coming together to form a new combined authority. This might be reflected in the existence of informal joint bodies – such as local public service leaders forums – or in the development of previous joint economic strategies or devolution proposals.

7. **Alignment with other public sector boundaries:** Government should seek to align the boundaries of devolution deals with other public sector geographies to enable better co-ordination.

   The ability of metro mayors and other local leaders to improve local outcomes is enhanced when the geography of devolved institutions is in alignment with other public service boundaries. In particular, it is helpful when the geography of deals aligns with government 'growth hubs' (which deliver business support services),* Integrated Care Boards in the NHS, which set budgets and plans for NHS services in their areas, and policing** and fire and rescue services.

* The government operates a network of growth hubs, which work with national and local stakeholders such as the chambers of commerce and universities to help support business start up and scale up.

** Mayors are able to request police and crime commissioner (PCC) powers where the PCC and devolved geography boundaries fully aligns, as in Greater Manchester. When boundaries misalign, as in Liverpool City Region, mayors are unable to gain these powers.

8. **Alignment with historic regional or county identity:** The legitimacy and effectiveness of metro mayors and combined authorities is likely to be greater when they reflect historic patterns of local identity.

   In addition to being a lever for improving regional economic performance, devolution is a democratic agenda that gives regions and communities a stronger voice in national debate. It is important that voters can identify with that voice. The government should then, where possible, align the geography of devolution with underlying patterns of local civic identity, including historic county and city boundaries. It may also help if local media – such as BBC radio stations – operate at the same geographical scale, given the important role of the media in holding institutions to account and shaping regional political identity.

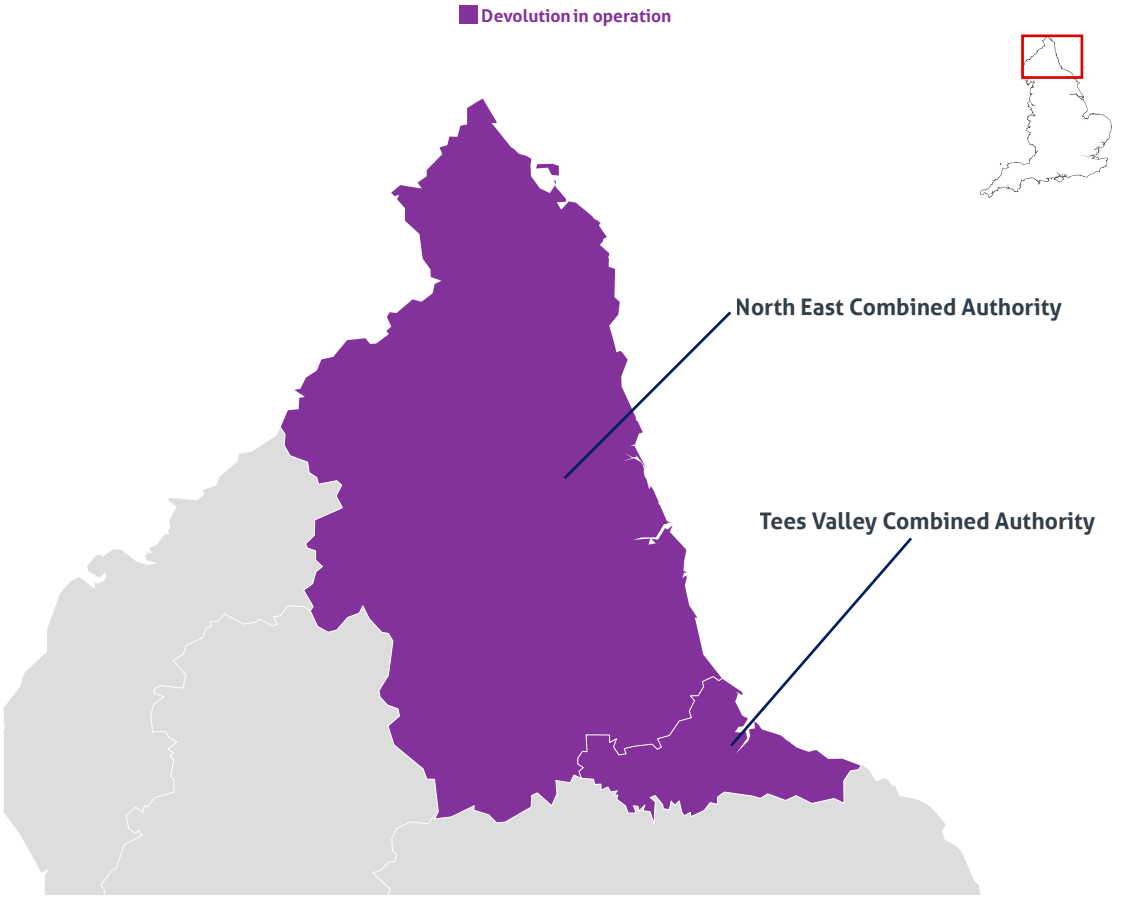
The next sections assess the main options for completing the devolution map in each of England's nine standard 'international territorial level 1' (ITL1, previously known as NUTS1) regions, using the criteria set out above. In reality, as our analysis makes plain, in most of the areas that do not have already have devolution in operation there is no single solution that ticks all of these boxes, meaning that the government will have to weigh up the trade-offs between the competing options.

Part 2: Options for each region

The North East

The geography of devolution deals in the North East is complete but the process is not over

Figure 3 **Devolution to the North East, 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of public information.

Current devolution coverage		
Population 100%	**Economy 100%**	**Landmass 100%**

North East and Tees Valley: Mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) with devolved powers already operational.

- **Recommendation:** Focus on deepening powers of these two MCAs. Leave boundaries intact.

In the North East ITL1 statistical region, there are two operational combined authorities: the North East Combined Authority (NECA), which includes the cities of Newcastle and Sunderland along with rural Durham and Northumberland; and the smaller Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA), which comprises five unitary authorities including Middlesbrough, Hartlepool and Darlington. These two authorities fully cover the region, meaning that the devolution map is complete in this part of England.

Tees Valley agreed a devolution deal with the government in 2015, and became a legal entity in 2016, electing its first mayor in 2017. The current deal covers 699,000 people and has a £15.7 billion economy. This makes the TVCA one of the smallest MCAs, but the case for reopening this settlement is weak. The mayoral combined authority model is now well embedded in local politics and the five constituent authorities have a strong record of working together to deliver a shared regional economic strategy.

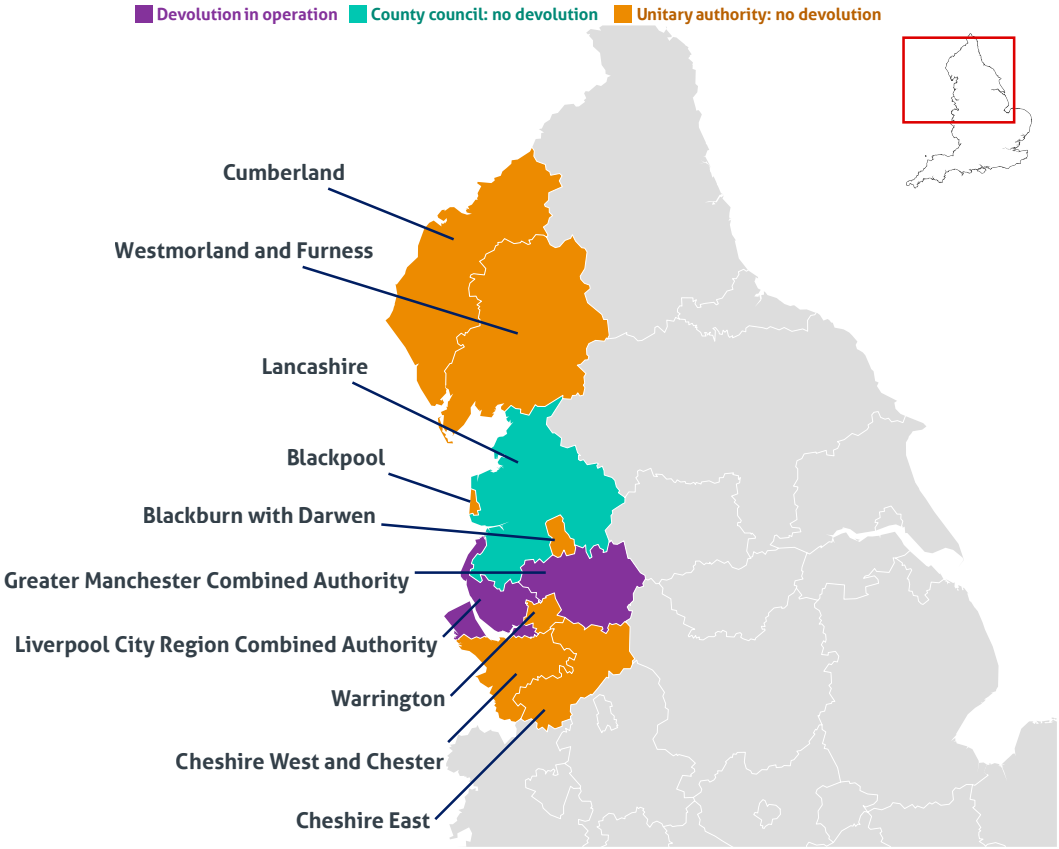
The rest of the North East – covering more than 2 million people – also negotiated a devolution deal in 2015 but opposition to the mayoral model led to the deal being abandoned before the planned election of 2017. Two smaller combined authorities with far more limited powers were established instead. After long negotiations, the seven local authorities of the sub-region eventually agreed to form the new North East Combined Authority, with the first mayor elected in 2024.

The new combined authority and mayor no doubt face challenges in establishing themselves, given the large, complex economic geography and the lack of a shared identity that unites the various cities and counties. However, having finally concluded this deal and got the institutions up and running, to reopen the question of geography would be highly disruptive. We do not recommend this. The focus of government and local leaders in this part of England should be on ensuring that the new institutions operate effectively and on strengthening the powers of the MCA, via implementation of the 'Level 4' deeper devolution deal announced for the North East in March 2024.[1]

The North West

There is a clear route to completing the North West map

Figure 4 **Devolution to the North West, 2024**



Current devolution coverage		
Population 60%	**Economy 59%**	**Landmass 15%**

Greater Manchester (GM) and Liverpool City Region (LCR): Mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) with devolved powers already operational.

- **Recommendation:** Focus on deepening powers of these MCAs, including via implementation of GMCA trailblazer deal. Leave MCA boundaries intact. Explore potential reorganisation of police area to enable devolution of PCC powers to LCR.

Lancashire: Agreement announced in November 2023 to form non-mayoral CCA between Lancashire County Council, Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen.

- **Options:** Implement agreed non-mayoral deal or move directly to more ambitious mayoral model.
- **Recommendation:** Conclude a mayoral (MCCA) deal on this historic county footprint.

Cumbria: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Conclude deal on historic county footprint with or without mayor. No credible options available for incorporation of county into wider regional deal.
- **Recommendation:** Create combined authority (with or without mayor) across the two unitary authorities: Cumberland, and Westmorland and Furness.

Cheshire: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Conclude deal on historic county footprint with or without mayor. No credible options available for incorporation of county into wider regional deal.
- **Recommendation:** Create mayoral combined authority across the three unitary authorities of Warrington, Cheshire East, and Cheshire West and Chester.

In the North West there are two city-regions with existing MCAs: the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA). These cover 2.9 million and 1.6 million people, and economies totalling £89.5bn and £39.6bn, respectively. Both are at an advanced stage of maturity and there is little appetite to reopen these settlements. The focus in these places is on deepening the powers of the existing institutions. However, this leaves 59% of the region's population without a devolution deal. The most sensible way forward is three sub-regional deals, which have relatively self-evident geographies.

In 2023, a non-mayoral devolution deal was agreed between the former government and Lancashire County Council, Blackpool Council and Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.[2] This deal, not yet implemented, would cover under 1.6 million people (20% of the population of the North West) and an economy of £39.6bn. This geography covers several functional economic work areas focused on Blackpool, Preston, Lancaster and Blackburn – though with economic ties to several neighbouring metropolitan areas. The proposal has a clear and historic county identity and aligns well to some public sector boundaries such as the police force area, fire and rescue services and the government growth hub – although not to the NHS Integrated Care Board.

Moreover, it enjoys support from the local authorities, with the leader of each council affirming their support for the deal and encouraging the new government to progress the deal as recently as July 2024.[3] Indeed, there is currently a public debate launched by a newly elected MP and some district councils on whether to go straight for a deeper devolution deal including a mayor.[4]

The government should therefore commit to implementing devolution on this agreed geographical footprint, and work with local leaders to try to get a mayoral settlement over the line.

In Cumbria there is currently no devolution settlement for the two unitary authorities of Cumberland, and Westmorland and Furness. Formed out of the previous county council and six districts in 2023, local leaders have noted that establishment of the new two unitary authorities was in itself a large implementation challenge that delayed any potential progress towards a devolution deal.[5] With the two authorities now up and running, the government should reopen the door to establishing devolution in the county.

In terms of the geography, ministers face a limited choice. On the assumption that Lancashire is proceeding with its own devolution arrangement, the logical solution is for a combined authority across the two Cumbrian unitary authorities, which cover 505,000 people and an economy of £13.3bn. The greatest disadvantage to this geography would be the limited scale of the deal, barely exceeding the 500,000 population threshold. This raises a question about the ability of a new combined authority or mayor to amplify the voice of the county on the national stage or in negotiations with investors.

However, this option has several factors in its favour: the data suggests the area has relatively self-contained economic areas focused on Barrow-in-Furness, Carlisle, Whitehaven and Workington, and the Lake District; it would span the geography of a historic county footprint; and, like Lancashire (above), it aligns well with some public sector boundaries such as the police force area, fire and rescue services and the government growth hub – though, again, not the NHS ICB. In April 2024, both councils committed to joint working with the aim of securing a devolution agreement.[6]

The final part of the region lacking a devolution settlement is the historic county of Cheshire, which contains three unitary authorities: Warrington, Cheshire East and Cheshire West. Together, these three areas have a population of 1.1 million and an economic output of £42.5bn. A combined authority devolution settlement on this footprint would face several advantages in terms of scale and evident local political appetite for working together on this basis.[7]

This geography also aligns fully to the 'growth hub map' and almost entirely to the historic county of Cheshire – one part of the former county area, Halton, is part of Liverpool City Region. As for challenges, Cheshire and Warrington sit between the large urban MCAs centred on Manchester and Liverpool, so the county is pulled in two directions in terms of its economic geography. Any new combined authority in this area will therefore need to develop close working relationships with both GMCA and LCRCA.

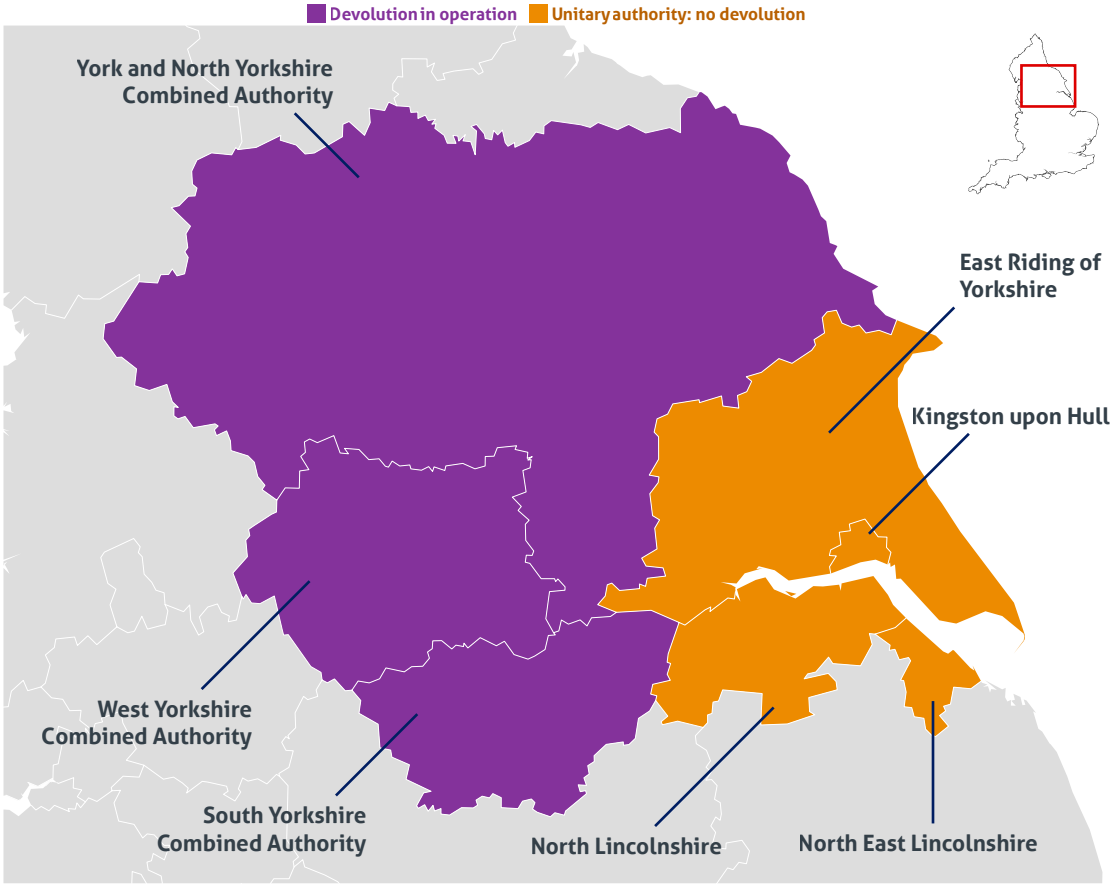
Additionally, there is imperfect alignment with other public sector footprints such as the police area, which includes Sefton within Cheshire rather than the Liverpool City Region. Based on current government policy, this prevents police and crime commissioner functions from being conferred on either the existing mayor of Liverpool City Region or a potential future mayor of Cheshire.* Ministers should therefore explore the potential for transferring Sefton to Merseyside police force to bring the police area geography in line with democratic mayoral boundaries. In the absence of any reforms the police and crime commissioner for Cheshire would need to work closely with a new combined authority – for instance, as a non-voting associate member of the combined authority board – to ensure successful co-ordination.

* Under the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, mayors are permitted to request PCC responsibilities if the geography of their area fully aligns to the PCC footprint.

Yorkshire and the Humber

There is one final jigsaw piece to complete the devolution map of Yorkshire and the Humber

Figure 5 **Devolution to Yorkshire and the Humber, 2024**



Current devolution coverage		
Population 83%	**Economy 82%**	**Landmass 82%**

West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, and York and North Yorkshire: Mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) with devolved powers already operational.

- **Recommendation:** Focus on deepening powers of established MCAs in West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire. Complete implementation of devolution to new York and North Yorkshire MCA. Leave boundaries intact.

Hull and East Riding: Agreement announced in November 2023 to form an MCA between Kingston upon Hull and East Riding of Yorkshire, with 'Level 3' powers.

- **Options:** Implement agreed MCA deal or reopen negotiations to consider a larger Greater Humberside MCA, including North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire.

- **Recommendation:** Carry out further assessment of the respective merits of and local support for these two potential options. Proceed with existing deal unless strong case established to do otherwise.

- **Recommendation:** Consider options for new mechanisms for co-operation between the four MCAs that will cover the historic county of Yorkshire.

The map of the Yorkshire and the Humber region is almost complete, with mayoral combined authorities now established across most of the region. South Yorkshire has had a metro mayor since 2018, West Yorkshire since 2021, and York and North Yorkshire since 2024. These cover 4.6 million people and have a combined economy of £124.6bn. This leaves almost 17% of people in the region without a devolution settlement. Devolution to Yorkshire faced various setbacks over the preceding years due to local political disagreements over the right geography and governance model, but having belatedly reached this point, reopening these three deals – for instance, to seek a larger Yorkshire-wide approach as has previously been advocated – would be disruptive and is not advisable.

In 2023 an agreement was reached between ministers and local leaders to create a new mayoral combined authority in the final part of the region: Hull and East Riding. These two unitary local authority areas are small – with a combined population of 622,000 people and an economy worth £15.9bn. However, this deal has yet to be implemented, creating an opportunity for ministers and local leaders to re-evaluate whether this remains this best way forward.

The two options facing the area are both feasible and offer competing attractions, leaving it down to political judgment by ministers and local leaders as to which route to follow. Option 1 is to progress the pre-existing deal as agreed in 2023. One advantage to this approach is that the deal has already been negotiated and agreed, if only provisionally and subject to ratification votes both in parliament and the two local councils. Another point in favour is that economic data suggests that this geography would represent a reasonably self-contained economic area – though with an economic pull to the city of York. The area also aligns well to the growth hub map, BBC and ITV news regions, as well as to the historic county map. On the other hand, there is a lack of alignment to NHS ICB, PCC and BBC radio regions.

Option 2 for ministers would be to invite the two East Midlands unitary authorities on the southern side of the river Humber (North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire) to join the Hull and East Riding deal to form a larger combined authority (shown in our Option 2 map). The main advantages of this would be a larger scale for the area (up to 950,000 people), better alignment with key economic infrastructure, such as the five key ports located on the Humber bank (Grimsby, Immingham, Killingholme, Hull and Goole), and alignment to the chamber of commerce footprint.[8] It would also fully align with the Hull Enterprise Zone.*[9] This geography aligns well to other public sector boundaries such as BBC radio station coverage, NHS ICB and PCC boundaries. Finally, there is a history of joint working between these authorities as shown by the Hull and Humber city deal agreed in 2013.[10]

On the other hand, negotiating a whole new deal on these boundaries would likely delay the implementation of devolution in this region. Incorporating North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire would also require a reopening of the Greater Lincolnshire agreement (see below). This approach might also suffer from a weak sense of shared local identity: it would in effect restore the boundaries of Humberside County, which was controversial at the time of its creation in the 1970s. Some today still oppose the Humberside geography, with recent calls for Royal Mail and the BBC to change footprints and branding in the area.[11,12]

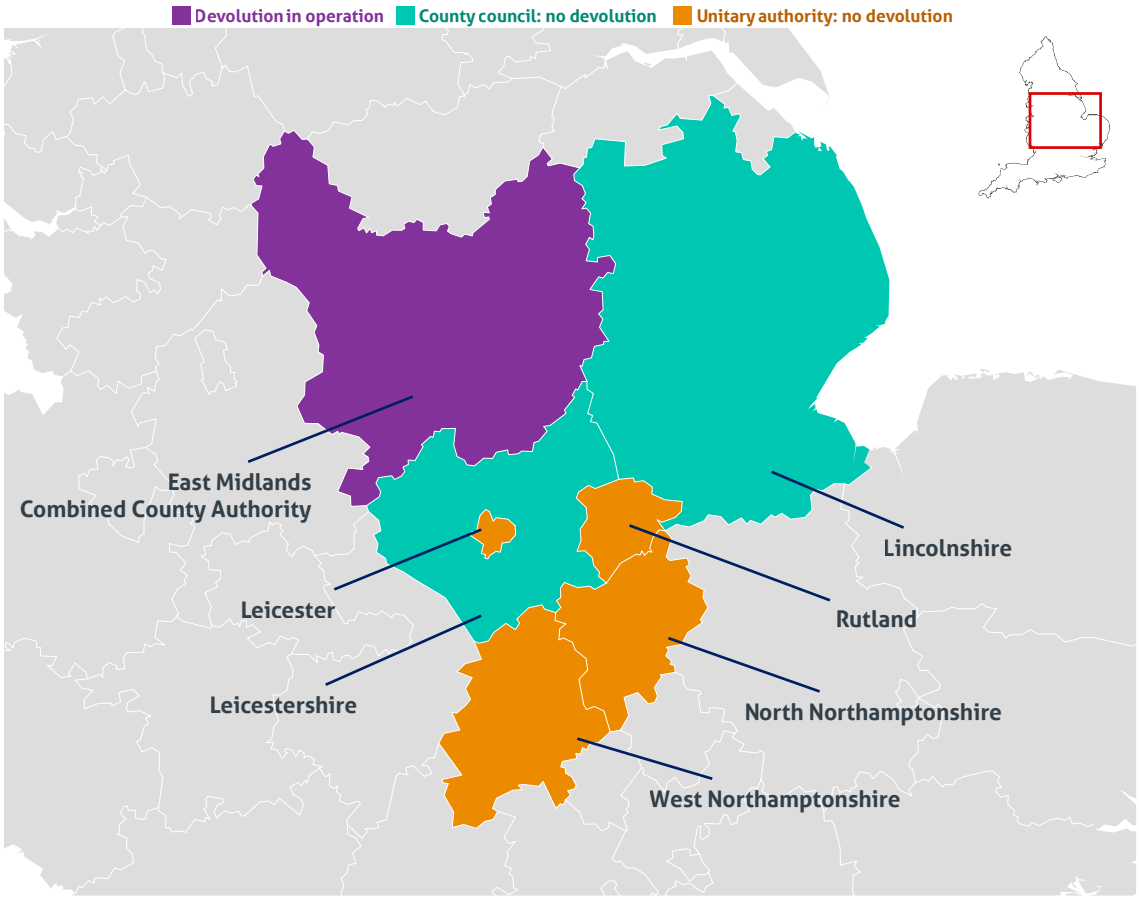
Once the Yorkshire and the Humber geography is decided, the four metro mayors (assuming the final deal is on a mayoral basis) should work together closely, exploiting the strong regional identity across the historic county of Yorkshire to promote the county to investors and to improve transport and other connectivity between the four areas. Such co-operation could take different forms, ranging from informal or occasional shared initiatives to a more institutionalised machinery for joint working on a pan-Yorkshire basis. The government should encourage and support such initiatives to emerge.

* The Hull Enterprise Zone sees tax breaks and government support targeted at ports, logistics and renewable industries in an area spanning both sides of the Humber Estuary.

The East Midlands

The final geography for the East Midlands may depend on interconnected decisions in neighbouring regions

Figure 6 **Devolution to the East Midlands, 2024**



Current devolution coverage		
Population 45%	**Economy 44%**	**Landmass 30%**

Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Derby: 'East Midlands' mayoral combined county authority (MCCA) with devolved powers operational since May 2024.

- **Options:** Continue with devolution on existing MCCA scale or expand to include the neighbouring areas of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (LLR).

- **Recommendation:** Complete the implementation of devolution to existing MCCA. Start negotiations for deeper devolution deal. Leave boundaries intact.

Greater Lincolnshire: Agreement announced in November 2023 to form an MCCA between Lincolnshire County Council, North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire with 'Level 3' powers.

- **Options:** Implement agreed MCCA deal or reopen negotiations to conclude a smaller Lincolnshire county deal (without North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire), either with non-mayoral powers or, following unitarisation, the creation of an MCA.

- **Recommendation:** Carry out further assessment of the respective merits of and local support for these different options, including for unitarisation. Proceed with Greater Lincolnshire MCA deal unless strong case established for other options.

Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (LLR): Discussions under way for a combined county authority (CCA).

- **Options:** Conclude and implement deal on this scale or seek to incorporate this area within East Midlands mayoral CCA.

- **Recommendation:** Conclude mayoral CCA deal on LLR footprint.

Northamptonshire: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Create combined authority across West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire unitary authorities or seek a 'South East Midlands' combined authority including authorities in neighbouring Bedfordshire plus Milton Keynes.

- **Recommendation:** Create a South East Midlands mayoral combined authority.

The East Midlands ITL1 statistical region hosts the first combined county authority – the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA), which despite its name does not cover the entire East Midlands region. This was formed after four local authorities (Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire) joined together to form a combined authority covering just under 2.3 million people, approximately 45% of the total population of the region.

In 2023, a mayoral combined county authority was also agreed for Greater Lincolnshire, comprising the local authorities of Lincolnshire County Council, North East Lincolnshire, and North Lincolnshire (see Yorkshire and the Humber map).[13] This would cover a population of 1.1 million people and an economy of £29.0bn. As with interlinked options outlined for Hull and East Riding, this deal has not been implemented and ministers should reappraise the options for this area before progressing.

The first option facing ministers would be to implement the pre-existing deal. Any such deal benefits from a large regional scale, a historical identity with full alignment to historic county boundaries and alignment to some public sector geographies such as the growth hub map. Moreover there remains local appetite to progress this deal, with the leader of Lincolnshire County Council on 19 July 2024 emphasising the advanced state of preparations for mayoral devolution locally.[14] On the other hand, if ministers choose to progress on this basis North Lincolnshire and Northeast Lincolnshire would be unable to combine with the Hull and East Riding – blocking the potential economic benefits of a Humberside footprint.

Alternatively, ministers could choose Option 2, proceeding with a deal on the footprint of Lincolnshire County Council, thus enabling a broader scale for the Hull and East Riding deal. This approach delivers a better alignment to the PCC and NHS ICB boundaries but the other benefits of Option 1 are foregone, including scale – reducing the area to a population of around 783,000 and an economy of £18.1bn. Given the government's decision to rule out mayoral deals with individual county councils, there are two plausible routes to a devolution deal on this footprint: a non-mayoral county deal with limited powers or unitarisation, as was proposed in March 2023 by the leaders of three districts, followed by the creation of a mayoral combined authority.[15] The case for unitarisation should therefore be considered by ministers – although such reorganisation would likely delay the establishment of a combined authority.

Ultimately, both here and in Hull and East Riding ministers will need to choose whether they have the political capital and interest to prioritise the economic potential that could come from a Humberside grouping and weigh that against the real implementation challenges that would come from unpicking pre-existing deals that have ongoing political support. The interlinked nature of these options illustrates the importance of the government taking decisions in the round about how to complete the map.

Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (LLR) currently lacks a devolution settlement and Option 1 would be to proceed with devolution on this footprint. The proposed area would deliver a medium sized area of 1.15 million people and a £31.6bn economy. This geography performs strongly in terms of alignment to policing and NHS ICB boundaries, TV and radio regions, and local political support – with the three councils agreeing in October 2023 to enter into negotiations on the basis of a non mayoral devolution deal.[16]

One disadvantage of this approach concerns the pairing with Rutland, which historically has been separate from both Leicester and Leicestershire. However, there is little alternative – as England's smallest county, with a population of just under 41,000 people, excluding Rutland would result in a devolution exclave.

A more stretching second option would be to expand EMCCA to include LLR. This would create a devolved institution at a large strategic scale that could speak with authority on behalf of the four historic East Midlands counties it would cover. EMCCA could also benefit from the inclusion of another major urban area – Leicester – which is under an hour away from Derby and Nottingham by road and around half an hour away by rail – as well as the inclusion of the East Midlands airport within its borders.

There are, however, some clear disadvantages. There would be significant implementation and administrative challenges in reopening the EMCCA deal that has only just taken effect. It is also unclear whether there is enough political support from either EMCCA or the LLR councils to renegotiate along these lines. There is also little prior history of joint working between the LLR councils and those in EMCCA. By contrast, the two cities and two counties that make up EMCCA were covered by the D2N2 Local Enterprise Partnership for many years, and have now been working together since 2022 to conclude and implement their new deal.

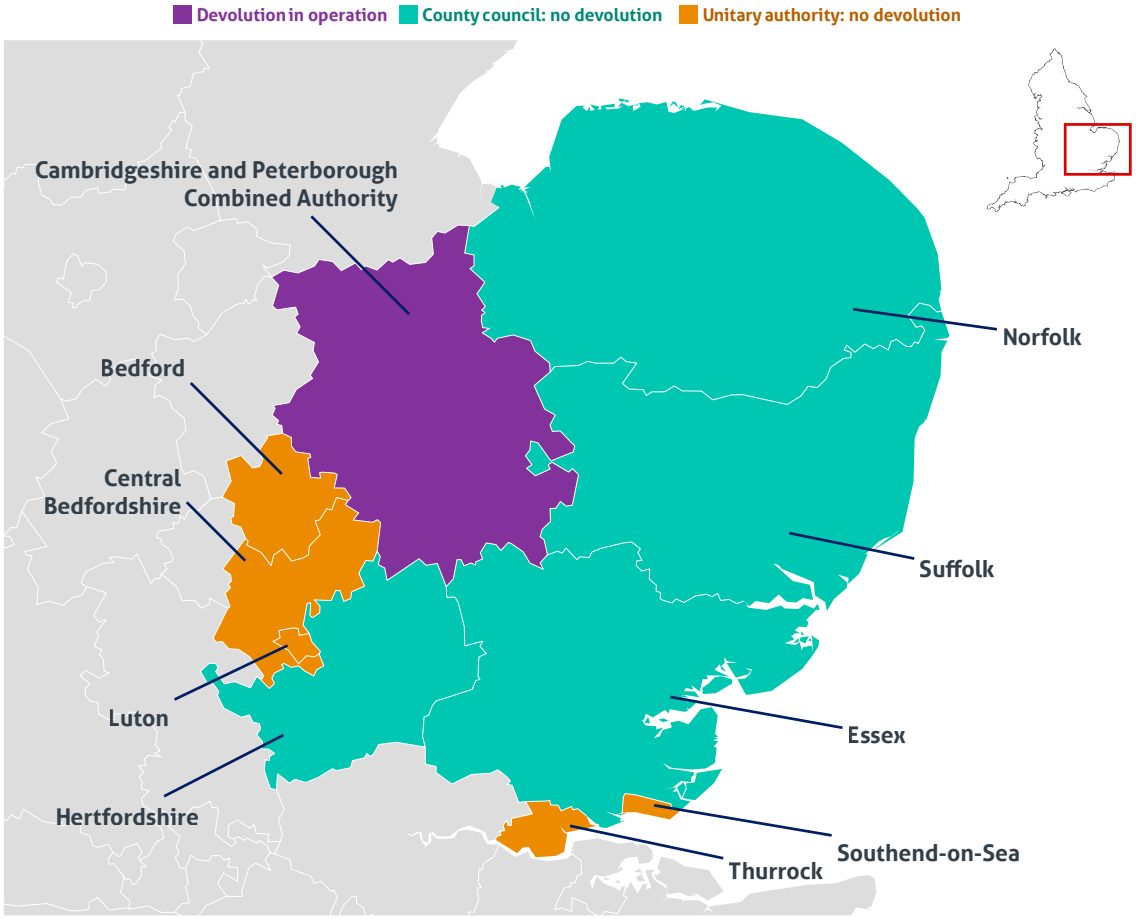
The most sensible approach therefore appears to be to leave EMCCA to become embedded, while concluding a separate LLR deal, preferably with a mayor.

The final areas requiring a devolution settlement are the two unitary authorities of West and North Northamptonshire. A combined authority devolution settlement between the two would generate a population of 802,000 people with a gross value added (GVA) of £22.8bn. Although a relatively small devolution settlement, it would align well to policing and NHS ICB geographies and has reasonable alignment with earlier historic boundaries. Any such geography would nest several TTWA areas within the county boundaries. An alternative, more stretching South East Midlands geography is discussed below.

The East of England

Completion of the East of England map depends on making progress in the tricky areas of East Anglia and the South East Midlands

Figure 7 **Devolution to the East of England, 2024**



Current devolution coverage		
Population 14%	**Economy 16%**	**Landmass 17%**

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough: Mayoral combined authority (MCA) with devolved powers already operational.

- **Recommendation:** Focus on improving the effectiveness of this MCA and leave boundaries intact. Consider case for unitarisation of Cambridgeshire.

Essex: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Implement a non-mayoral combined county authority between Essex County Council, Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea unitary authorities or move directly to more ambitious mayoral model on this 'Greater Essex' footprint.

- **Recommendation:** Seek to agree terms for the creation of a mayoral combined county authority across the three councils of Greater Essex.

Norfolk and Suffolk: Agreements announced in December 2022 to form two 'directly elected leader' (mayor by another name) county deals. Government has now abandoned these deals.

- **Options:** Press ahead with devolution on historic county footprints (without mayors) or move directly to joint East Anglia CCA deal across the two counties.

- **Recommendation:** Seek to negotiate joint East Anglia CCA deal across the two counties.

Hertfordshire: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Agree a non-mayoral county deal on this historic county footprint or following unitarisation, pursue a mayoral combined authority.

- **Recommendation:** Conclude non-mayoral county deal as interim step. Assess case and support for unitarisation, followed by mayoral combined authority.

Bedfordshire: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Create combined authority (with or without mayor) between Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Luton and neighbouring Milton Keynes or create a combined authority with these four unitary authorities and neighbouring unitary authorities of West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire.

- **Recommendation:** Create a 'South East Midlands' mayoral combined authority across the six unitary authorities.

The East of England is home to one area with an existing MCA and devolution settlement: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This covers 919,000 people and has an economy of £31.0bn. But this leaves the remaining 86% of the population without a settlement. Under the previous administration county deals were agreed for Norfolk and Suffolk, though the Labour government has decided not to proceed with them.[17]

Essex currently lacks a devolution deal and has a population of almost 1.90 million and an economy of £50.8bn. The most obvious option for ministers is to progress a deal on the historic county footprint, implying a CCA formed of Essex County Council together with Thurrock and Southend unitary authorities. This 'Greater Essex' geography benefits from a large scale, a historic identity and reasonable alignment to earlier maps (with the exception of areas that were subsumed into Greater London). Further, aside

from the strong economic pulls to London and to a lesser extent to the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough region, the area has several functional economic areas focused on the Chelmsford, Harwich, Colchester and Southend-on-Sea/Basildon areas.

The greatest challenge with making progress with this deal has been political: opposition from local Conservative MPs managed to delay the deal prior to the 2024 general election.[18] With many of these MPs losing their seats, however, and the remaining ones having relatively less influence under a Labour government, local political dynamics have changed. There has also been disagreement between the three councils involved about whether to adopt a mayoral model, which likely led Whitehall to deprioritise this potential deal in favour of places more willing to move faster.

Moving forward on the Greater Essex footprint is the most sensible option for ministers, though persuading local leaders to accept mayoral leadership might still prove challenging.

Neither Norfolk nor Suffolk have devolution settlements. In 2022 both secured separate county deals, in which devolved powers would be conferred upon the county council itself, which would switch to a 'directly elected leader' (a mayor by another name) leadership model. The implementation of these deals was initially paused following the election of the new government.[19,20] In September 2024, the government informed Norfolk and Suffolk councils it would not implement these deals, on the grounds that the role of mayors in driving economic growth should be kept separate from the role of council leader, which comes with extensive responsibility for delivering local public services.[21]

The first option remaining open to ministers is to agree non-mayoral deals on these county footprints. The geographies have several advantages as both areas are at a reasonable scale (with populations of 932,000 and 776,000 respectively and economies of approximately £21bn each), both have historic identities and their suggested footprints align to earlier historic county boundaries along with several public sector boundaries such as the growth hub, police force areas, and fire and rescue areas. Economic indicators suggest they have relatively self-contained labour markets focused on areas such as Norwich, Great Yarmouth, King's Lynn and Thetford in the case of Norfolk, and Lowestoft, Bury St Edmunds, Ipswich and Felixstowe in the case of Suffolk. But such deals would not meet the government's ambitions to expand mayoral devolution across the country and would mean that local leaders gain fewer powers and resources than other devolved areas.

The alternative option is a combined county authority spanning both halves of East Anglia. The main advantage to this approach would be a more ambitious scale – with a population more in line with neighbouring Essex. This geography would also align to the previous LEP geography, at which scale a joint Norfolk and Suffolk economic strategy was formulated as recently as 2022. Disadvantages include the lack of historic East Anglia identity – with rivalry between the two counties – and a lack of alignment to growth hub and other public sector boundaries. There would be implementation challenges too, in that a new institution would take time and effort

to establish. Nonetheless, if ministers wish to prioritise scale and ambition, along with mayoral leadership, then pushing for an MCCA deal on these boundaries appears to be the best option.

A third option that might come before ministers could be to adjoin Norfolk and Suffolk to CPCA. A devolution deal on this footprint was mooted in 2016 but collapsed.[22] This approach would achieve a greater scale. However, the disadvantages likely outweigh this – the CPCA has struggled to operate effectively in part due to a lack of coherent economic geography. This option would not improve on this. An alternative path for CPCA would be to explore unitarisation of Cambridgeshire, before reforming the MCA on the same footprint. Under the current arrangements Cambridge City is a district council while Peterborough is a unitary authority. This is something on which the city council has actively canvassed its residents.[23] As we have argued previously, unitarisation could help to create more stable and effective institutions in the longer term, although there are implementation costs in the short run.[24]

Nearby Hertfordshire, with a population of 1.2 million and an economy of £46.4bn, also lacks a devolution deal. The most probable way forward for a devolution deal covering this area is via a county deal, with powers directly conferred upon the county council. The key advantages of this geography are the scale, the alignment to historic boundaries, and coterminosity with public sector boundaries such as the growth hub, police force areas, and fire and rescue areas. Working with county structures would lead to fewer implementation obstacles and the leader of Hertfordshire County Council has already responded to the deputy prime minister's letter calling for devolution of further powers to Hertfordshire.[25]

The greatest difficulty for this area is an economy that is defined by close economic ties to Luton and Bedfordshire in one direction and London in the other. But there is no obvious alternative geography under active consideration, so any effort to unite Hertfordshire with any of its neighbours would likely be a longer and more uncertain process.

However, based on the government's recent announcements in relation to Norfolk and Suffolk, it appears that the option of securing extensive powers by switching to a directly elected leader model is no longer on the table. Therefore, the options facing Hertfordshire are to either agree a non-mayoral deal in the short term, and/or to undertake unitarisation within the county as a basis for a future mayoral combined authority. Unitarisation to a single unitary authority was evaluated in 2020 and raised the prospect of significant savings,[26] and although the leader of Hertfordshire Council has raised his opposition to the scheme,[27] ministers should revisit the plans for bifurcating the county to both realise these potential efficiencies and lay the groundwork for a potential mayoral combined authority.

The segment of the East of England that has made least progress towards a devolution deal is Bedfordshire. In this area, the three unitary authorities of Bedford (190,000 people), Central Bedfordshire (308,000 people) and Luton (231,000 people), and the neighbouring unitary of Milton Keynes (298,000 people) alone are too small to arrive at individual devolution settlements.

The first option facing ministers is therefore to agree a combined authority deal for the four areas. This option would deliver a reasonable scale deal (1.03 million people and an economy of £32.9bn), which has closely related economies, aligns well to the NHS ICB boundaries and almost fully aligns to the historic county boundaries of Bedfordshire (with the exception of Milton Keynes, which is part of Buckinghamshire). The main disadvantages are twofold: first a lack of alignment to other public sector boundaries such as the growth hub, police force, and fire and rescue boundaries, and second, few deals having been proposed on the footprint previously, implying little history of prior joint working.

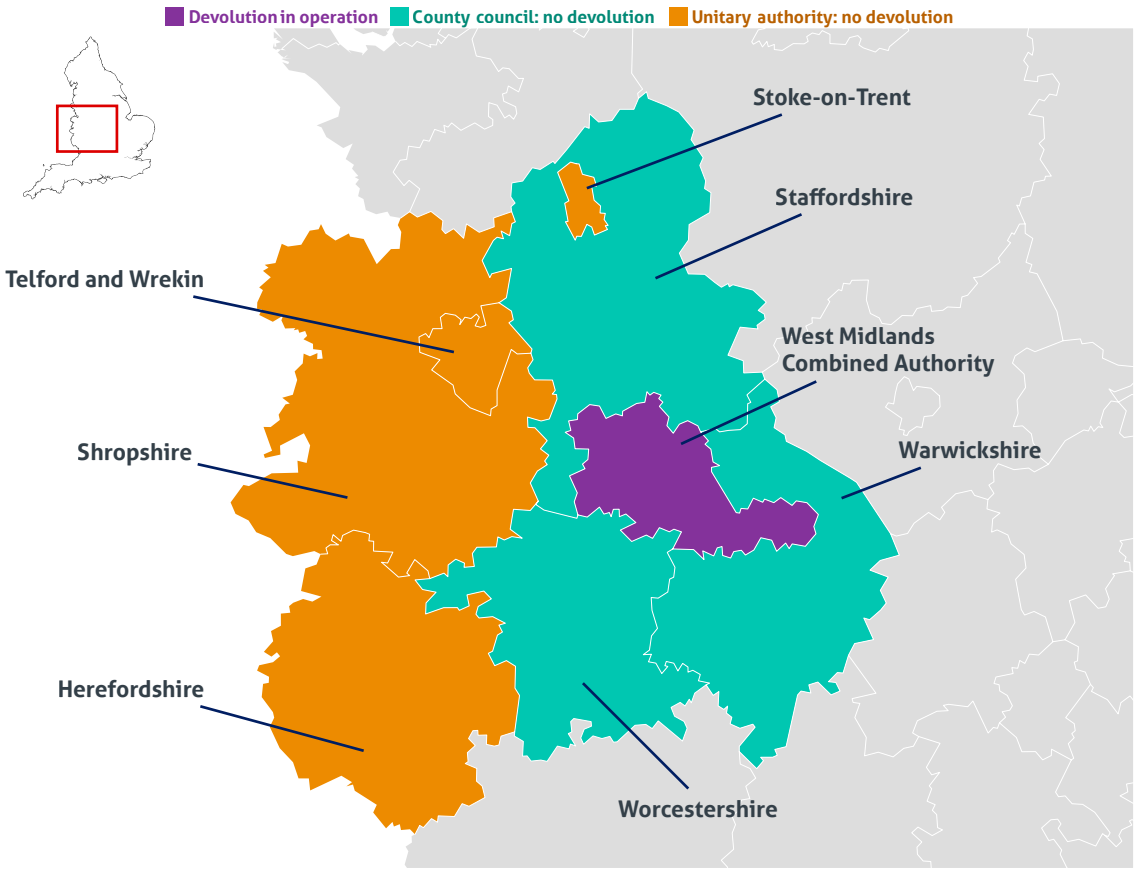
The second and more ambitious option for ministers would see the creation of a 'South East Midlands' combined authority spanning Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes. Combined the area would have a population of 1.8 million and an economy of £55.7bn. The chief advantages of this are the scale of the deal, close economic ties and political support for this geography, including previous efforts towards a proposed devolution deal on this basis in 2023 and recent reports of progress being made towards a devolution proposition on this footprint.[28,29]

There is also good transport infrastructure – travel across the area is mostly possible within one hour by car. Additionally the geography aligns well to the former LEP and the current growth hub. The main disadvantages of this approach are twofold: first a lack of alignment to some other public sector boundaries such as the PCC, fire and rescue services, or NHS ICBs. Second, Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes have historically been geographically distinct administrative areas.

The West Midlands

In the West Midlands many county areas have made little progress towards devolution – completing the map here will be a tricky task

Figure 8 **Devolution to the West Midlands, 2024**



Current devolution coverage		
Population 49%	**Economy 48%**	**Landmass 7%**

West Midlands: Mayoral combined authority (WMCA) with devolved powers operational, covering Birmingham, Coventry, Wolverhampton and nearby suburbs.

- **Options:** Leave WMCA boundaries intact or potential expansion of WMCA to include existing 'non-constituent members' such as Warwickshire.

- **Recommendation:** Focus on implementation of 'trailblazer' deal with WMCA. Seek opportunities for further deepening of powers. Leave boundaries intact.

Warwickshire: Provisional 'devolution framework agreement' announced in March 2024 to implement non-mayoral county deal.

- **Options:** Finalise and implement provisional non-mayoral deal or seek to incorporate within the WMCA (or other new neighbouring MCA) or undertake unitarisation and establish an MCA on this footprint.

- **Recommendation:** Press ahead with devolution on this historic county footprint. Conclude non-mayoral deal as first step, while exploring case for other reforms.

Shropshire, and Telford and Wrekin: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Create a combined county authority (with or without mayor) or create a larger CCA with neighbouring Stoke and Staffordshire.

- **Recommendation:** Carry out further assessment of the respective merits of and local support for these two potential options.

Stoke and Staffordshire: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Create a combined county authority (with or without mayor) or create a larger combined authority with neighbouring Shropshire, and Telford and Wrekin.

- **Recommendation:** Carry out further assessment of the respective merits of and local support for these two potential options.

Worcestershire and Herefordshire: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Create a combined county authority (with or without mayor) or create a larger combined authority also including Gloucestershire.

- **Recommendation:** Carry out further assessment of the respective merits of and local support for these two potential options.

In the West Midlands ITL1 statistical region there is one city-region deal with existing MCA and devolution powers, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), centred on Birmingham but also including the cities of Wolverhampton and Coventry. This covers almost 3.0 million people and has an economy of £76.3bn, though covers just 7% of the regional landmass. The remaining 51% of the wider West Midlands statistical region population currently lacks a devolution settlement. A non-mayoral devolution agreement was announced under the previous government covering Warwickshire, though this has yet to be implemented.

The first option for ministers regarding both WMCA and Warwickshire is to continue on this current path: to support WMCA to take on further powers without changing its boundaries and to progress the provisional Warwickshire deal. Having been formed in 2016, with a mayor elected a year later, WMCA is now a mature combined authority at the forefront of the devolution process, as one of two MCAs in the process of taking on 'trailblazer' powers, along with Greater Manchester. As a well-embedded institution, there would have to be a very strong case to change its geographic footprint, given the political and administrative challenges that would inevitably arise from any decision to reopen the settlement.

The Warwickshire deal would deliver a non-mayoral county devolution deal for a population of almost 618,000 and an economy of £20.5bn. There are multiple travel-to-work areas within the county, including one focused around the Warwick and Stratford-upon-Avon area and others focusing on Coventry and the Birmingham metropolitan area. It aligns well to multiple public sector geographies (including PCC, fire and rescue services, and growth hub boundaries) and the decision to proceed with a deal is a demonstration of intent locally. The key disadvantages to this approach would be both the relatively small scale of population covered by this deal and the limited powers that would be on offer under a non-mayoral deal. Therefore, this should be treated as an interim step. However, recent government announcements imply that mayoral devolution on an exclusively Warwickshire footprint would require the county to be reorganised into at least two separate unitary authorities, an option explored though not ultimately taken forward in 2020.[30,31]

In theory the alternative option as regards WMCA would be to expand its geography to include one or more of its surrounding authorities, in particular those authorities that currently have a non-constituent member status on the WMCA board. Perhaps the most likely of these is Warwickshire (shown in our Option 2 map) because it would help to deepen economic ties between Coventry and Warwickshire, and it may make sense to bring one of the key housing areas from the Birmingham commuter belt within WMCA's spatial planning remit.

Under the previous government, the then levelling up secretary, Michael Gove, made serious progress down this path.[32] But this option seems unlikely. There is little apparent political support within WMCA for this – indeed the West Midlands mayor, Richard Parker, openly opposed this model when mooted in 2023.

An alternative option could see the two neighbouring unitary authorities of Shropshire, and Telford and Wrekin, also non-constituent members of WMCA, become full participating members too. However, this has its own difficulties, including that as a rural county Shropshire is not closely connected to the urban core of WMCA – and is also not geographically connected with the WMCA region. There would also be substantial costs and disruption involved in restructuring WMCA to accommodate any new members, which would likely distract its leadership from delivery of existing devolved functions. For these and other reasons the most sensible way forward is to leave the WMCA boundaries intact.

Shropshire, and Telford and Wrekin, with a population of 521,000 and an economy of £14.0bn, should therefore be included in a new devolution settlement. The first option facing ministers is a CA deal based on the historic county boundary footprint. The advantages to this deal are the area's historic identity – its map has changed little since 1851 – alignment to BBC and ITV news regions and full alignment to the fire and rescue and NHS ICB boundaries. It also has a reasonable economic geography with relatively self-contained travel to work areas (TTWAs).

The disadvantages, however, are threefold. First, the lack of scale, barely surpassing the 500,000 minimum threshold; second, a lack of alignment with some key public sector boundaries such as PCC and growth hub maps; and third, potential political opposition, with local leaders voicing opposition to the prospect of these two areas joining together in July 2023.[33]

Stoke and Staffordshire, with a population of 1.16 million people and an economy of £29.5bn, currently lacks a deal. Here, ministers face a relatively clear-cut choice of supporting the two areas to form a CCA (Option 1). Economic spatial data suggests there is a strong economic relationship between the two areas (the proposed geography fully nests two TTWAs including the TTWA covering Stoke and northern Staffordshire – car use data from the same period suggests a common travel area across Stoke and Staffordshire).

There is again a clear historic identity, with a full alignment to the 1974 geography and almost full alignment to much earlier maps (with the exception of the parts of Staffordshire that joined WMCA). The map also aligns well to BBC and ITV TV regions and the BBC radio regions, along with public sector geographies such as the PCC and ICB boundaries. Finally, there is current political support locally for a geography on this basis, though local leaders have ruled out an elected mayor.[34]

The second option facing ministers is to encourage a partnership between Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, Staffordshire and Stoke. This would result in a combined population of almost 1.7 million people with an economy of £43.5bn. The distance between the urban areas of Stoke, Stafford, Telford and Shrewsbury is not far, and reachable within an hour's travel by car – car and bus use data suggests a reasonable amount of interchange in these areas.

Moreover, they share some strategic priorities as orbital areas to the WMCA. Although many of the public sector geographies considered in this paper do not align with this pairing, this geography would fully nest the fire and rescue services and NHS ICBs for Staffordshire and Shropshire within the boundaries. The greatest disadvantage to this approach is the current level of political support within Staffordshire and Stoke for their own separate deal.

The last areas in the West Midlands lacking devolution are Herefordshire (a population of 190,000 and an economy of £4.5bn) and Worcestershire (a population of 614,000 and an economy of £15.6bn). The choice facing ministers is more complex here – Herefordshire is too small to have a devolution deal in its own right and must consider working with a neighbouring geography.

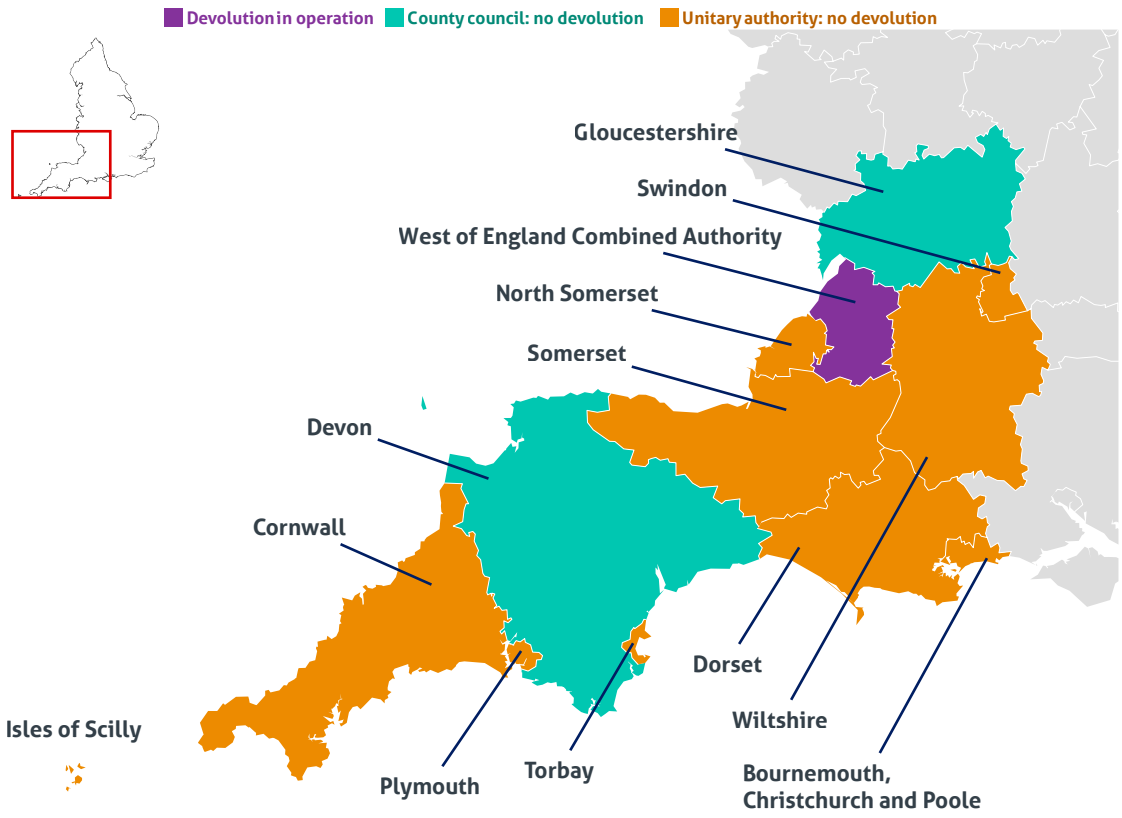
For this reason the most realistic option for the government is a pairing with Worcestershire. This aligns well to other public sector footprints such as the fire and rescue service and the ICB boundaries as well as the local chamber of commerce. This would deliver a combined population of 804,000 and an economy of £20.0bn. While the separation between these two counties has a long history – they share common BBC and ITV news regions and also a local BBC radio service. The greatest disadvantage for this deal is political opposition, with Herefordshire Council and two local MPs raising concerns about any form of pairing.[35,36]

A more stretching second option for both areas would be to explore a relationship with Gloucestershire (see South West map below) as well, leading to a combined population of 1.47 million and an economy of £37.5bn. These three councils have already reached a memorandum of understanding in relation to sustainable waste management, illustrating the potential for joint working between these councils.[37] There are disadvantages to this approach, with no alignment with the public sector footprints or local media regions mentioned above.

The South West

In the South West there are simpler decisions to make but these will require stronger political resolve

Figure 9 **Devolution to the South West, 2024**



Current devolution coverage		
Population 17%	**Economy 22%**	**Landmass 5%**

West of England: Mayoral combined authority (WECA) with devolved powers already operational, covering Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, and South Gloucestershire.

- **Recommendation:** Incorporate North Somerset into expanded WECA. Focus on improving governance and capacity. Consider case for deeper powers.

Devon and Torbay: Agreement announced in January 2024 to form non-mayoral CCA between Devon County Council and Torbay unitary authority.

- **Options:** Proceed with Devon and Torbay deal, incorporate Plymouth unitary authority or conclude a joint deal with Plymouth and Cornwall.

- **Recommendation:** Reopen the deal and incorporate Plymouth. Make case for adoption of mayoral leadership model.

Cornwall: Agreement announced in November 2023 to conclude non-mayoral county deal. Earlier mayoral deal rejected by Cornwall County Council.

- **Options:** Press on with existing devolution deal or agree a joint deal with Devon, Torbay and Plymouth.

- **Recommendation:** Press on with devolution on agreed county footprint. Consider case for deeper devolution of powers directly to Cornwall County Council. Ensure that Isles of Scilly are involved as appropriate in delivery of devolved powers.

Gloucestershire: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Conclude either a non-mayoral county deal or a larger CCA deal including neighbouring Herefordshire and/or Worcestershire.

- **Recommendation:** Carry out further assessment of the respective merits of and local support for these two potential options.

'Wessex': No devolution agreement yet reached in the five unitary authorities of Somerset, Dorset, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP), Wiltshire and Swindon.

- **Options:** Create combined authorities based on the historic counties of Dorset (including BCP) and Wiltshire (including Swindon) and a non-mayoral county deal with Somerset or create a combined authority spanning all five areas.

- **Recommendation:** Subject to local agreement, seek to conclude a Pan-Wessex combined authority deal (ideally with mayor) across the five unitary authorities.

In the South West there is just one city-region with an existing MCA and devolution powers – the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). This covers 982,000 people and has an economy of £39.4bn. This, however, leaves a clear majority of the region's population (83%) without a devolution settlement, although a further two devolution deals were agreed – but not implemented – under the previous administration, covering Cornwall, and Devon and Torbay. (A more limited devolution settlement has been in force in Cornwall since 2015, but this did not confer powers in line with the previous government's devolution framework.)

Though operational, ministers should re-examine WECA's devolution deal. This combined authority includes the cities of Bristol and Bath, but excludes nearby North Somerset: bringing North Somerset in would restore the Avon metropolitan geography dating from 1974. The economic case for this proposal is clear. The area has strong economic connections to Bristol, particularly the northern part of North Somerset. North Somerset also forms part of the commuter belt for Bristol and hosts major economic assets for the city such as Bristol International Airport and Royal Portbury Dock. Moreover, the North Somerset property market plays an important housing supply role for the Bristol area as well as collaborating on economic matters such as the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership.[38]

Reopening this settlement would be disruptive to the operation of the existing combined authority and could open up new internal tensions, in a body whose effectiveness has already been undermined due to disputes among local leaders.[39] Further, there has been historic opposition to the restoration of an Avon footprint.[40] However, a failure to deliver this change risks leaving North Somerset as a 'devolution exclave' – arguably it could join a new deal with Somerset, but this would make less sense, given North Somerset's strong economic ties to Bristol.

Ministers should also reopen the Devon and Torbay deal agreed under the Sunak administration, which, if implemented, would leave Plymouth as a 'devolution exclave' in between Devon and Cornwall and with a population of just under 269,000 – below the minimum threshold for a devolution deal.[41] Option 1 for ministers would be to seek a pairing with Devon and Torbay. Plymouth has historically been a part of Devon, Plymouth's travel to work area extends further into Devon than into Cornwall, and the deal is better aligned to public sector boundaries such as the NHS ICB.

As with the WECA deal the greatest challenge might be political, given that Plymouth opted to withdraw from negotiations with Devon and Torbay at an earlier date.[42] Yet a high level of political turnover in recent local elections might have altered the local political dynamics. For instance, the leader of Plymouth council recently indicated that he would be open to entering negotiations, at least for a non-mayoral deal.[43] There is also evidence of support for this larger footprint from several new MPs elected to represent seats in the area.[44]

Neighbouring Cornwall agreed a non-mayoral devolution deal in November 2023 that built on a previous limited devolution of powers in 2015.[45] Ministers need to decide whether to proceed with the current deal, which covers a population of 578,000 and an economy of £18.0bn. There are several advantages to this approach, including good alignment to public sector boundaries, including the growth hub, fire and rescue services, and the NHS Integrated Care Board, and local political support with Cornwall County Council in July 2024 requesting yet further devolution powers.[46] This option also reflects the strength of Cornish identity, which a significant minority (almost a fifth, 18.1%, of Cornwall's population) identified as their primary national identity in the 2021 census.[47]

The greatest disadvantage for this deal is the small scale of the footprint and the fact that Cornwall has close economic ties with Plymouth, which would be left out of this devolution area. Finally, unlike in the 2015 agreement, the Isles of Scilly were not a formal signatory to the 2023 deal.[48] Instead, the government and Cornwall Council agreed they would work with the Council of the Isles of Scilly to determine how the isles will be involved in the implementation of the deal.[49]

Option 2 for Cornwall, Devon, Plymouth and Torbay would be for these local authorities to form a combined county authority. This would cover a population of 1.8 million and an economy of £49.4bn. Aside from achieving a better scale, the main benefits of this approach would be to more fully encapsulate the commuter area for Plymouth. A 'South West Peninsula' deal on this footprint would also align to the police force area. There is also some evidence of local political support: the leader of Plymouth Council in September 2024 expressed his openness to the idea,[50] and media reports suggest that the leaders of Plymouth and Cornwall councils have met to discuss devolution.[51]

Nonetheless, this second option would be more challenging to implement. A peninsula combined authority spanning Devon and Cornwall would not, of course, align with Cornish identity, and it would require unpicking two devolution deals and the creation of a new combined authority, bringing together the two historic counties. It would also likely face local political opposition, given that the leader of Cornwall Council voiced opposition to a larger scale geographic footprint as recently as July 2024.[52]

Gloucestershire also currently lacks a devolution deal and with this county ministers face two options. Option 1 is to support a non-mayoral county deal for the area. Option 2 is to encourage Gloucestershire County Council to join with a neighbouring authority, as part of a CCA deal (as discussed in the West Midlands region section above).

Option 1, based on the current county footprint, would mean that this would be a relatively small devolved area with a population of 659,000 and a GVA of £20.4bn, although it would align with policing and NHS ICB boundaries. Option 2 would be to enter into a larger scale deal with the neighbouring areas of Herefordshire and Worcestershire (see above).

Finally, there are five remaining unitary authorities in the South West where ministers will need to decide whether to progress smaller scale pairings or support recent efforts to combine. Option 1 would follow historic county boundaries – this would imply a combined authority for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) and Dorset (789,000 people), a combined authority for Wiltshire and Swindon (756,000 people) and a non-mayoral county deal for Somerset (581,000 people). In the first instance there is a track record of negotiations for each of these deals, each deal matches well to economics and has a sensible historic basis.

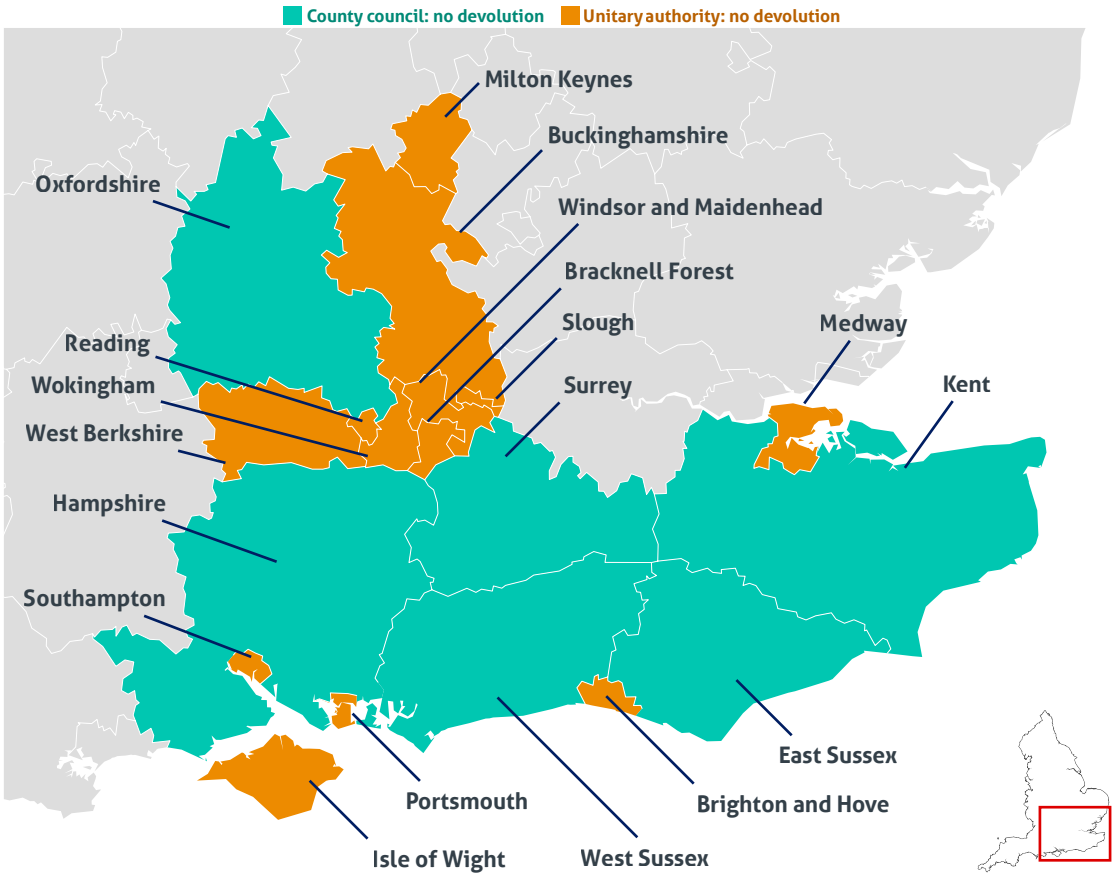
This would appear to be a collection of relatively easy but unambitious deals to progress, at least on a non-mayoral basis. However, broadly each of these areas struggles to align to other public sector geographies (with the exception of Dorset and BCP, which has coterminous policing geographies).

Alternatively, in Option 2, ministers could pursue the bolder path of seeking to combine the area into a larger 'Wessex' combined authority. With discussions among council leaders on this footprint reportedly under way,[53] this geography would see 2.1 million people represented at a combined authority level with a regional economy of £61.9bn. This would achieve the level of scale required for strategic planning and would benefit from the advantages of scale and a more significant national voice. Yet this is a more complex proposition and doesn't resolve the issues of alignment with public sector boundaries highlighted above. Also, given the early stage of negotiations, work would be required to ensure closer working practices between the areas.

The South East

The South East contains some of the most complex decisions but offers great potential for large-scale devolution settlements

Figure 10 **Devolution to the South East, 2024**



Current devolution coverage		
Population 0%	**Economy 0%**	**Landmass 0%**

The South East administrative region (as distinct from Greater London) has no operational devolution arrangements.

Kent and Medway: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Implement a non-mayoral combined county authority deal or move directly to more ambitious mayoral model.
- **Recommendation:** Create a CCA deal (ideally with mayor) across Kent and Medway. Consider case for unitarisation of Kent into two or three smaller councils, enabling MCA deal.

Sussex: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Create combined county authority (with or without mayor) across West Sussex, and Brighton and Hove, and agree a non-mayoral county deal with East Sussex or create combined county authority across the three authorities (Historic Sussex).

- **Recommendation:** Create a CCA deal across Historic Sussex, ideally with mayor or else on non-mayoral basis as first step toward future deeper deal.

Surrey: Provisional 'devolution framework agreement' announced in March 2024 for a non-mayoral county deal.

- **Options:** Implement agreed non-mayoral deal or following unitarisation, pursue an MCA model.

- **Recommendation:** Conclude non-mayoral county deal as interim step. Assess case and support for unitarisation, followed by mayoral combined authority.

Hampshire: No devolution agreement yet reached.

- **Options:** Agree a non-mayoral deal for Hampshire and create a combined authority (with or without mayor) for the three unitary authorities of Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight or create a combined county authority spanning all four areas.

- **Recommendation:** Create combined county authority (ideally with a mayor) across Hampshire, Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight.

Thames Valley: Devolution framework agreement announced in March 2024 for non-mayoral county deal in Buckinghamshire, though not covering Milton Keynes. No devolution deal agreed for Oxfordshire or the six unitary authorities in Berkshire (West Berkshire, Reading, Wokingham, Bracknell Forest, Windsor and Maidenhead, Slough).

- **Options:** Agree a non-mayoral county deal for Oxfordshire, a CA deal for Berkshire and implementation of the non-mayoral devolution framework agreement for Buckinghamshire in 2024 or move directly to more ambitious Thames Valley combined county authority (with or without mayor).

- **Recommendation:** Enter negotiations to create Thames Valley combined authority, with or without mayor. Include Milton Keynes in 'South East Midlands' deal (discussed above).

Despite the size and scale of the South East – with a population of 9.4 million and a £336.2bn economy – it is currently the only English region to lack an implemented devolution settlement. To date, the challenge for devolution in the South East has been the economic gravity of London, which defines much of the economic activity in districts in the home counties orbiting the capital. But in addition to an enabling role to the capital in terms of housing, international trading infrastructure such as ports and airports, and out-of-town business hubs, these areas have devolution potential in their own rights. Often densely populated and with several large urban centres such as Reading, Portsmouth and Milton Keynes, there remains significant potential to spur economic growth through greater devolution. Some progress was made under the previous government: a devolution 'framework agreement' was agreed with Surrey County Council in 2024, but this did not reach the implementation stage.

The county of Kent – which includes Kent County Council and Medway unitary authority – currently lacks a devolution deal. Kent has a population of 1.9 million people and an economy worth £50.7bn. Unlike in some other areas of the South East, the only realistic geographic option facing ministers is for a devolution settlement across these two upper-tier counties. Advantages to this geography include scale (Kent covers a similar population to existing MCAs such as in the North East), a clear historic county identity and good alignment to public sector boundaries such as the growth hub, the NHS ICB and the police force. Moreover, with the exception of the Tunbridge Wells area, which has close economic ties to East Sussex, the county geography has several self-contained economic units.

Another strength for this geography is the political support from senior figures, including the leader of Kent County Council, who suggested a devolution deal on this footprint in July 2023.[54] While there is appetite for a devolution deal on this footprint adopting the mayoral model has faced local opposition and proved to be a stumbling block in discussions with the previous government.[55,56] Ministers may have to decide how hard to press Kent to accept a mayoral system and what inducements to offer to get such a deal over the line.

In terms of governance, a Kent and Medway deal would likely involve the creation of a combined county authority, with or without a mayor. The alternative would be to split Kent into two or three unitary authorities then to bring the new unitaries back together as a combined authority.[57,58] As noted above, local government reform can be sensible where there is local support, but implementation does take time and would likely delay progress with devolution.

In neighbouring Sussex, also with no devolution deal, there are two county councils – in West Sussex (901,000 people) and East Sussex (555,000 people) – along with a unitary authority in Brighton and Hove (280,000 people). Here the decision facing ministers is more complex. This is in part due the question of where to locate Brighton – an area with close economic ties to West Sussex but a stronger historic tie to East Sussex.

The first option (Option 1a) would be to combine Brighton and Hove with West Sussex in a CCA deal and seek a separate non-mayoral county deal for East Sussex. These pairings benefit from a good alignment to the growth hub map. It also respects the underlying economic relationships, including strong connections along the A23 corridor to Gatwick airport and with the closely linked economies of Worthing and Shoreham.[59]

There are some disadvantages to this approach: there is no historical map on these boundaries; it doesn't align to other public sector boundaries and has faced political opposition from the leader of Brighton and Hove Council;[60] moreover, this would leave East Sussex as a small-scale deal with limited devolution powers. While ministers could consider an alternative pairing for Brighton, combining it with East Sussex (Option 1b), this would work against the grain of economic activity on the ground and may not resolve the political roadblocks.

Option 2 facing ministers would be to restore the historic footprint of Sussex in a three upper-tier authority CCA deal. There are several advantages to this approach. First, it achieves a better scale with a population of 1.7 million people and an economy of £48.7bn. Second, it better respects the economic geography of Brighton and Hove, which relies on both West Sussex and East Sussex for housing and labour markets. Third, on identity grounds this would align to earlier historic county boundaries. Fourth, it aligns well to both NHS ICB and police force areas. Sussex also has its own BBC radio service.

The main challenge of this approach is that there has been limited public discussion of a Sussex-wide devolution settlement in recent years.[61] One reason for this is party politics, with the two counties leaning Conservative, and Brighton and Hove dominated by Labour and the Greens. The leader of Brighton and Hove Council has recently indicated an appetite to explore new devolution options.[62,63] Though this may require the investment of more political capital, ministers should strongly consider this option given the underlying economic, identity and scale advantages of this option over Option 1a or Option 1b above.

Neighbouring Surrey, which covers 1.2 million people and has an economy of £51.3bn, secured a non-mayoral county devolution agreement in 2024.[64] This deal has yet to be implemented so ministers and local leaders will still have to decide whether to proceed with this approach. There are several advantages to a deal on this footprint. The scale of the deal is relatively large, and has an alignment with historic county boundaries and several local public services, including the growth hub, NHS ICB, fire and rescue services, and police force areas. Finally, having concluded a deal on this basis recently, it is a good indicator of local political buy-in. However, as a non-mayoral deal, the powers on offer are limited.

Assuming the government remains set against mayoral county deals, a potential alternative path to deeper devolution would be for Surrey to unitarise the county. This was considered in 2020, when the Surrey Leaders' Group – comprising the leaders of all borough and district councils – supported creating three unitary authorities.[65] If this reform were implemented, then the next step could be the establishment of a mayoral combined authority at the county scale, with the several unitaries as constituent members.

One challenge for this area is that its economy is defined by close economic ties that pull in several directions (London, the Gatwick airport area, and Berkshire). This may complicate spatial and strategic planning over the longer term and will require good partnership working with neighbouring areas.

In earlier devolution rounds Surrey, East Sussex and West Sussex county councils considered a larger scale joint devolution deal and combined authority across the three county areas.[66] Although there are some advantages – this would create a much larger scale regional authority with a powerful voice – there are drawbacks in terms of identity, alignment with public sector boundaries and underlying economic geography – with many areas of Surrey holding strong ties to London. Ministers should instead ensure the devolution settlement for Surrey enables it to develop and deepen its strategic relationship with London rather than Sussex.

In the south-western tip of the region, Hampshire and the Solent also lacks a devolution settlement. The area comprises Hampshire County Council (1.4 million people) and three far smaller unitary authorities: Portsmouth (210,000 people), Southampton (256,000 people) and the Isle of Wight (141,000 people).

The first option facing ministers is to progress two separate deals: a non-mayoral county deal with Hampshire County Council and a combined authority 'Solent' deal involving the three unitary authorities of Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight. This approach would deliver a large-scale devolution settlement for Hampshire county and would enable the three Solent unitary authorities to agree a strategic plan focused around their maritime economies. It would also align the devolution geography with the growth hub map used by government. There is evidence of local political support for this approach, at least among the three unitary authorities, who as recently as June 2023 opposed a devolution relationship with Hampshire.[67]

However, there are disadvantages to this approach too, including the small scale of the Solent deal, the lack of alignment to the functional economic area – separating the commuter belts for Southampton and Portsmouth, the lack of alignment to public sector footprints such as policing and the NHS ICB, and a lack of meaningful identity with no historic county map to support this split. A deal on this footprint would also exclude key parts of the Portsmouth/Southampton conurbation such as Fareham, Gosport and Eastleigh, unless Hampshire County Council was itself reorganised into one or more unitary authorities.[68] There are significant implementation barriers to this approach: there is no settled agreement on what shape this new reorganisation would take, and it is unclear there is the appetite to do this within Hampshire.

The second option is a pan-Hampshire CCA devolution deal covering a population of 2.0 million people and an economy of £70.0bn. The advantages to this approach are a large-scale deal (with an economy equivalent to West Yorkshire), better alignment to historic county identity and full alignment to TV and radio regions. With the exception of the growth hub map, this better aligns to public service boundaries such as the police force and the NHS ICB. Furthermore, it has a fairly well-defined economic geography even if the northern part of the county faces an economic pull towards London.

As noted above, a significant challenge is political. A pan-Hampshire deal has been promoted by the county council[69] but has historically faced opposition from the unitary authorities. Other important local anchor institutions, such as the University of Southampton and Hampshire Chamber of Commerce, have also backed a pan-Hampshire deal.[70]

Ministers may now have the opportunity to reopen discussions about this larger scale devolution approach, should they be willing to invest time and negotiating capital in getting such a deal agreed by all local partners. Recent statements by the leaders of Southampton and Hampshire suggest there is a renewed optimism about devolution to the region,[71] and in September 2024, it was reported that all four councils were submitting a joint expression of interest on a pan-Hampshire footprint to the government.[72] This is a welcome move, but if talks break down, ultimately, ministers may need to impose a final geography on the area.

The local authorities in the Thames Valley – Oxfordshire County Council, Buckinghamshire Council and the six unitary authorities in Berkshire (West Berkshire, Reading, Wokingham, Windsor and Maidenhead, Slough and Bracknell Forest) have also yet to agree a devolution deal with Whitehall.

Ministers face two options for this region. The first would see devolution deals based broadly on the 1974 county boundary footprints. This would imply a non-mayoral county deal for Oxfordshire (750,000), a CA deal for Berkshire (970,000 people) and implementation of the non-mayoral devolution framework agreement announced for Buckinghamshire in 2024 (567,000 people). The advantages of these three deals are they have relatively clear identities aligned to historic county footprints, both the Oxfordshire and Berkshire deals are at a reasonable scale and these two deals align well to public sector geographies such as the growth hub and fire and rescue services. Additionally, all three footprints appear to have local political support for moving forward on this basis.[73,74,75]

There are drawbacks to this combination of deals. Buckinghamshire is a small-scale deal, which doesn't fully align with historic boundaries and, with the exception of the growth hub map, doesn't align to local public sector geographies. If ministers proceed with this route they will need to accept these as clear trade-offs.

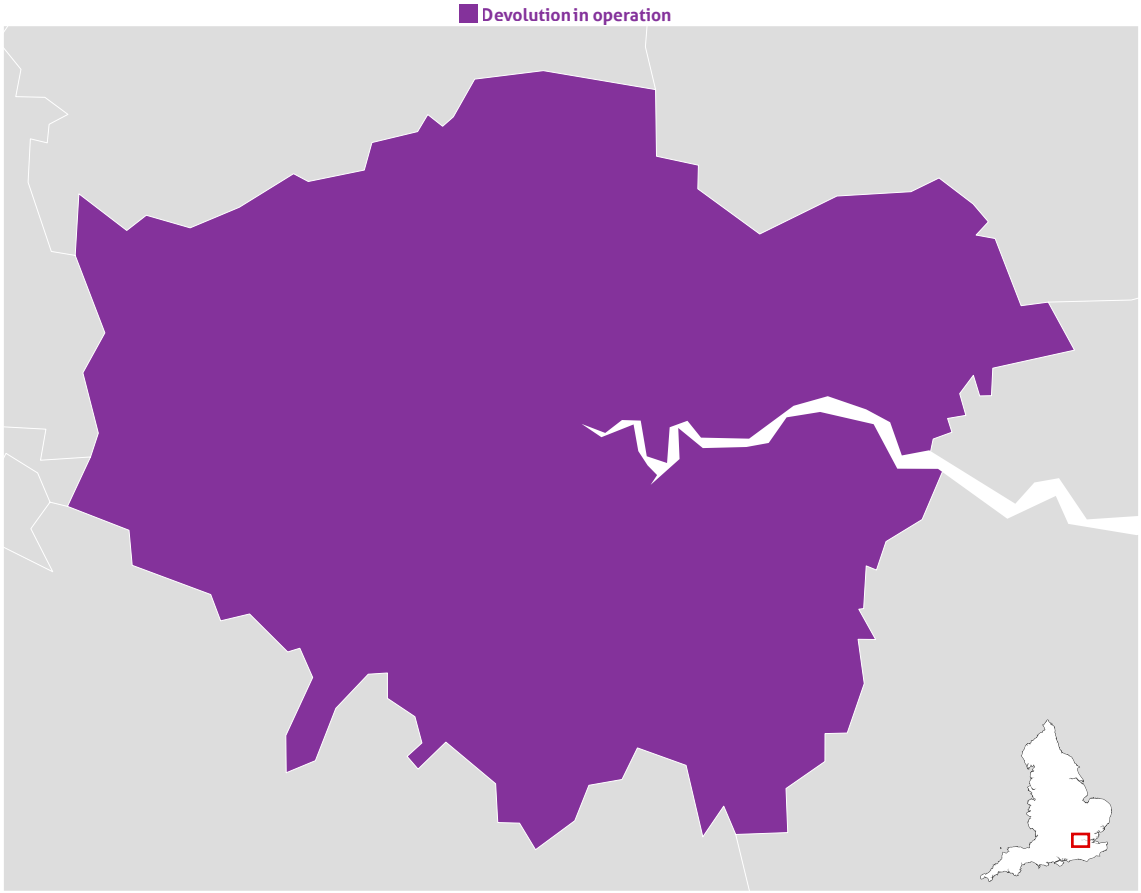
A more ambitious deal, Option 2, would more closely align to the PCC footprint of Thames Valley. This would deliver a CCA encompassing Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, a combined population of 2.3 million and an economy of £101.0bn. The greatest disadvantages for this approach are the separate media regions, the lack of alignment to earlier geographic footprints and no current public support from key political figures in the region – indeed the leader of Oxfordshire County Council has expressed public reservations about any deal that would incorporate Oxfordshire into a larger combined authority.[76]

However, there are several advantages to this more stretching approach. First, the scale is closer to the largest pre-existing devolution settlements (other than London) in terms of its population and economic output. Second, there is good travel infrastructure along the M4 corridor meaning most major urban areas travelable within one and a half hours' drive. Third, this better aligns to some public sector boundaries. Fourth, if this deal were carried out alongside the South East Midlands proposals above this opens the possibility of strong pan-regional partnerships along the Cambridge–Milton Keynes–Oxford Arc, which might facilitate greater research hub investment.[77]

London

London has a well-established devolution settlement based on agreed boundaries that should be retained

Figure 11 **Devolution to London, 2024**



Current devolution coverage		
Population 100%	**Economy 100%**	**Landmass 100%**

Greater London: devolution settlement based on an elected mayor and assembly (jointly known as the Greater London Authority, or GLA).

- **Options:** Continue devolution on established Greater London footprint or (in theory) consider options for expansion of Greater London to create larger 'London City Region'.

- **Recommendations:** Leave boundaries intact. Consider ways to improve co-ordination with home counties. Explore options for more formal joint working arrangements between GLA and London boroughs. Consult on options for deeper devolution to GLA.

Devolution to London was restored in 2000, a decade and a half after the abolition of the Greater London Council. Since then, London has had a stable devolution settlement based on an elected mayor and assembly (jointly known as the Greater London Authority or GLA), elected across the capital's 32 boroughs and the City of London, to represent the capital's almost 9 million people.

The powers of the mayor and assembly remain a subject of active debate,[78,79] but there has been no serious discussion over whether the geographical footprint should be re-examined. There is an arguable case on economic grounds for expansion of the boundaries of Greater London to include parts of the home counties whose economies are closely linked in terms of labour and housing markets to the capital. The case for a 'London City Region' scale devolution deal has been made, for instance, by the Centre for Cities.[80]

However, although a functional economic analysis lends some support to this revised geography, most other relevant factors point in the other direction – towards retaining the existing Greater London footprint. Expansion of London's boundaries would be highly disruptive and time-consuming, both to local government and to the GLA itself, with any benefits from the change far from certain. Such reform would face substantial local political opposition, not least from the neighbouring county areas that would see their own boundaries changed.

The current geography of Greater London also aligns well with other public sector boundaries – such as the police and fire services – and is founded on a strong sense of London-based civic identity that is unlikely to be shared by residents of those parts of Essex, Surrey or Hertfordshire who might be carved out and welded into an expanded capital city region.

For these reasons we do not suggest altering the boundaries of this mature devolution settlement, although government could encourage greater joint working between London and its neighbouring counties on some policy areas such as management of suburban train services.[81]

Conclusion

The new Labour government has been clear that "no place should be left behind by the opportunity to take back control",[82] and has launched a process to extend devolution to those cities and counties of England that currently lack any kind of settlement.

In each region of England, there are several potential ways by which the government can complete the devolution map. Our analysis has outlined the main options on the table and illustrated the trade-offs between them. The proposals broadly fall into two categories: simpler, smaller devolution arrangements – typically based on historic county boundaries (Option 1), or larger and more complex but potentially transformational deals that bring neighbouring counties together at a regional scale (Option 2). What shape the final map takes will ultimately depend on ministerial preferences over how to weigh up the trade-offs between the competing options.

There is a credible way to complete England's devolution map within this parliament. It is now up to the government – working with local leaders – to set out how it will reach this destination.

Annex 1: Methodology

In our recent report *A New Deal for England*[*] we outlined a decision making framework for evaluating future devolution deals. The framework builds upon the three criteria outlined under the previous government (size, functional economic area, identity), drawing on findings from Institute for Government research on what makes for a successful devolution deal and the depth of powers required for different levels of government. It outlines five success criteria and some metrics that can be used to help inform the judgment.

Criteria	Metrics
Geography	Population size. Is the population of the proposed region similar to existing combined authorities? Is it too small (e.g. below 0.5 million) or much larger than international comparators (3 million).
	Residual area size – whether a deal on the proposed footprint would leave residual areas that are too small for their own deals (and would become 'devolution exclaves').
Economics	Travel to work area – establishing the local labour markets by considering how aligned a given proposal is with travel to work areas (TTWAs). Does the proposal contain multiple nested TTWAs, and if so are they fully contained within the proposed footprint?
	Transport areas – how does the footprint align to existing bus/ car usage?
	Housing area – how well does the footprint align to local housing markets?
	Travel time to HQ – establishing the time it takes for a round trip from major centres to the proposed headquarters for the area.

[*] Paun A, Pope T, Fright M, McKee R and Allen B, *A New Deal for England*, Institute for Government, May 2024, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/next-government-complete-english-devolution

Implementation	How well does the footprint align with other public sector boundaries such as: the police authority, the LEP, any transport authority, the ICS, the LSIP, utility supplies?
	Is there a pre-existing structure for partnership working, e.g. a public sector leaders board for the area?
	Will there be any disruption to pre-existing governance structures?
Politics	Have local leaders and institutions produced a shared economic strategy?
	Were previous devolution deals attempted on similar boundaries and where challenges occurred have they been resolved?
	Has there been consistent commitment from local political leaders and local authorities to work together on this footprint?
	Is there support from local MPs for a devolution deal?
	Is there evidence of support from other local institutions, such as business lobby groups, universities and major regional employers?
Identity	Is there alignment with historic or other local boundaries?
	Is there evidence of public support, e.g. via polling or consultations?
	Is there meaningful media coverage for the locality, i.e. how well does the footprint align to ITV/BBC media regions?

The decision making framework outlined above remains the full framework against which government should evaluate future devolution deals. Lacking the resources of government, in our analyses we have evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of potential devolution deals using a subset of the framework, focusing on eight key questions:

1. **Does the region have sufficiently strategic regional scale?** Following the approach laid out in the levelling up white paper, no deal should be below 500,000 people. Ideally, it should be a similar size to pre-existing combined authorities, which is not too small (i.e. a population of 0.5 million) and, where possible, areas should be seeking more ambitious, regional devolution to areas of more than 1 or 2 million people. Population figures have been calculated from ONS data.[83] Figures for the percentage of landmass covered by devolution have been calculated using ONS data.[84]

2. **Does the area have a sensible geography?** Building on the above, when arriving at a deal in a particular region this should not create a neighbouring residual area that is too small to arrive at its own deal. The geography should be meaningfully connected so there should be no spatial exclaves, arbitrary land corridors or irregular spatial dimensions like doughnuts.

3. **Does the proposed area align to pre-existing patterns of economic activity?** Given the economic powers conferred on mayors, an ideal devolution settlement would cover the level of the local labour market. This may not always be possible and in some instances several local labour markets may need to be nested within a given area. While there is no single method to measure a functional economic area, several options can be considered such as travel to work areas (TTWAs) and transport networks.[85] This estimation approach is not, however, without flaws, researchers need to pass judgments on the level of 'closure' for an area, in reality boundaries may be 'fuzzy' and overlap, and economic areas can change over time.[86]

   Moreover many TTWAs and alternative TTWAs derive from census data – given the significant disruption to regular working practice due to the pandemic in 2021, our analysis draws from the most recent reliable published data, that from 2011. An interactive version of this map can be seen via the ONS at https://ons.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=397ccae5d5c7472e87cf0ca766386cc2 and a map that overlaps this data against council boundaries can be seen via the House of Commons library.[87] Drawing on 2011 data, therefore, limits the accuracy of this analysis as it may reflect an economic picture from a decade ago. A more accurate and up to date picture may be possible for government based upon mobile phone data. Figures for the economic value of different areas have been calculated from ONS data.[88]

4. **Would the proposed deal lead to significant implementation challenges?** If the government wants to progress devolution to local areas at pace and avoid systematic political challenges, wholesale local government reform is not practical. Government should also be mindful of deciding geographies that significantly differ from pre-agreed boundaries – particularly when significant efforts have been made to deliver on this basis. For this reason, we have cross-referenced pre-existing deals, their stage of implementation and where negotiations reached an advanced stage in local areas.

5. **Is there evidence of local political commitment to the proposed deal?** Local politics is a critical factor for ensuring buy-in from local decision makers. As our previous research shows, a common vision reflecting a broad base of political support matters for the successful establishment and implementation of a devolution settlement.[89] This requires a shared narrative that shows how all benefit within the region and requires collective leadership that is built on trust and strong relationships. To identify this we have followed a limited qualitative research approach, which cross-references local media reports, the history of devolution bids on a similar geography and where bids failed whether these issues remained unresolved. Given the importance of local MPs as representatives for their area we

have checked, where possible, to see whether there is support for a geography and whether there is support from key anchor institutions like business lobby groups, universities and major regional employers.

6. **Is there a successful track record of joint working at this scale?** A successful devolution requires strategic collaboration between local authorities at every stage in the cycle, from negotiations with government through to implementation of the final deal. Areas that have deeper joint working across boundaries with a successful record of collaboration are better placed for effective decision making once combined authorities are established. We have assessed this using a qualitative research approach that examined the current status of local devolution negotiations and in limited instances cross-referencing other public domain information on inter-local authority agreements.

7. **Do proposed boundaries align with other public sector boundaries?** Mayors and the combined authorities operate at a strategic level to help improve local areas. There is a potential for this to occur more effectively when there is co-ordination across public sector bodies, including those in central government, such as growth hub boundaries, and those locally such as the local growth hub, NHS Integrated Care Boards, LSIP and former local enterprise geographies. Under current legislation, where a CA fully aligns with the boundaries of a police force area, the mayor can take on the role of the police and crime commissioner.[90] For these reasons we have cross-referenced the templates of these geographies as outlined in a previous Institute report.[91]

8. **Do proposed boundaries reflect local identity?** Due consideration needs to be given to current and historic local government boundaries. In our analysis we have cross-referenced against the 1974 and 1851 English county boundary maps. Alignment to historic maps alone is not a precise indicator and the strength of identity varies between areas and can change over time.[92] For this reason we have also triangulated against BBC and ITV news regions and BBC local radio regions to see whether all areas in a proposed geography have shared a common media coverage historically.[93,94,95] Effective local media coverage also matters as it may shape the identity of an area and will help to hold new combined authorities to account in the future.[96]

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Part 1: How to complete the map

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