DEVOLUTION IN LONDON: THE UNFINISHED STORY

Centre for London Briefing

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CENTRE FOR LONDON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Devolution to London so far

- Since the Greater London Authority (GLA) Act was passed in 1999, the capital has developed mature, competent city-wide institutions and has become a model for devolution to other English cities.
- In London, governance is split between the GLA and 32 councils (and the City of London), but the Mayor is scrutinised by the elected London Assembly, rather than London boroughs themselves. In Mayoral Combined Authorities, mayors are directly accountable to councils. London's arrangement leads to arguably stronger decision-making, but can confuse accountability.
- Devolved transport policy has seen London successfully increase sustainable travel and reduce car use, while devolution and delegation have enabled the building of the Elizabeth Line, and successes in housing and skills policy.

The road ahead for London

- But devolution to London is not a 'job done'. Compared to other comparable global cities, its hands are tied. The capital still has very limited control over its revenue and spending, while the 'trailblazer deals' to Greater Manchester and the West Midlands go further than London's settlement in some regards.
- There have long been calls for deeper devolution to London to enable it to grow sustainably, but momentum has stalled since the pandemic.
- London needs a new wave of devolution to contribute to boosting the UK's flatlining economic growth. But it also needs new devolved levers to create good growth – ensuring that prosperity is inclusive through long-term, tailored investments and consistent governance.

We lay out a set of principles for the next wave of devolution to London.

Purpose before financing

Devolution for good growth

Thinking longer term

Hard-wiring devolution

Sending power downwards

Scrutinising local power

LONDON'S DEVOLUTION SETTLEMENT

A brief history

The modern era of devolution to London began in 1999, when the Greater London Authority (GLA) Act passed, creating the GLA in July 2000. This followed a 14-year period in which London had no city-wide elected government, after the abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986. From its foundation, the GLA has been funded by central government grants and a precept from council tax revenues raised in London – in the years to come, it would also receive funding from transport levies like the congestion charge, the Community Infrastructure Levy, and a small supplement on business rates to fund Crossrail.

At its origin, the GLA's remit was intended to be strategic, rather than direct – laying out a framework for London's development, rather than delivering services. The most significant example of this design is the Mayor's power to write a 'London Plan', a spatial plan for the city to guide its development. In 2007, the Greater London Authority Act expanded the authority's power, mainly by involving the Mayor more directly in housing strategy, investment, and planning. Perhaps most important, it created the Mayoral power to call-in major planning applications, taking them over from a borough council, rather than just applying the pre-existing power to veto.

In 2011, the Localism Act devolved the powers of the Homes and Community Agency for London (an arm of what is now Homes England) to the GLA, enabling it to acquire land and invest London's share of national affordable housing funding. Coupled with the Public Bodies Act 2011, the Localism Act also saw the government abolish the London Development Agency (a regional development agency), shifting its responsibilities into the GLA, and open the door to Mayoral Development Corporations in London. On a more local level, it also saw the creation of neighbourhood forums for neighbourhood plans. But the Act also abolished many of the institutions and infrastructure that scrutinised local government, like the Audit Commission and Standards for England, which ultimately harmed local authority governance.[i]

In late 2017, Central Government signed a Memorandum of understanding with London Councils, the Mayor, and several NHS bodies to agree to devolve aspects of health and care services to London, enabling city-wide collaboration and co-creation of some NHS services. Otherwise, health has not been a major part of London's devolution journey, unlike in Greater Manchester, where the creation of the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership has been widely studied.[ii]

As of 2024, the GLA has some level of devolved control over transport, development and spatial planning, economic development, health, culture and emergency services, environmental policy, and adult education. Councils also exercise control over housing, social services, education, aspects of transport policy, street maintenance, waste, local urban planning, and recreation.

London's governance

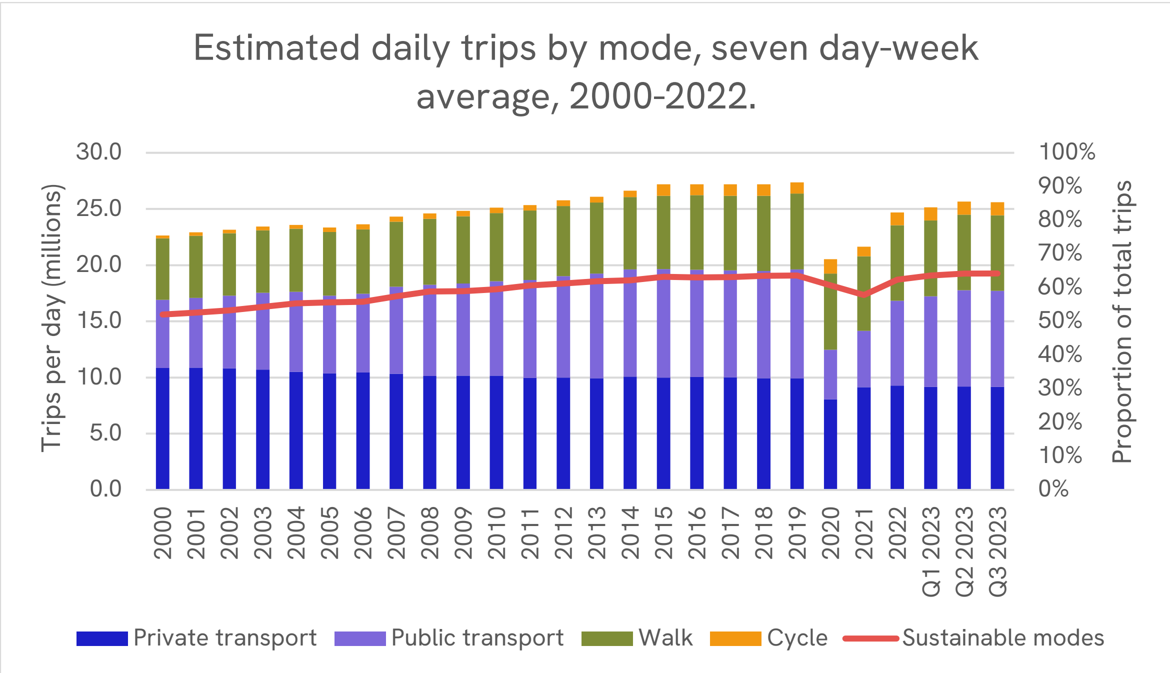
The Mayor is scrutinised by the London Assembly, a body of 25 members elected from 14 large constituencies, which has the (so far unexercised) power to amend the Mayor's budget and strategies with a two-thirds supermajority. This arrangement differs significantly from other models of English devolution. Combined Authorities (CAs), contrastingly, are made up of multiple individual councils that share responsibilities and resources.

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (a Mayoral CA) is governed by one councillor from each of the area's 10 component boroughs and the Metro-Mayor, who is directly elected and sits as chair of the GMCA. Although the Mayor has some executive powers, many important policy questions are voted on by GMCA members. In London, borough councils do not have formal input into most aspects of mayoral policy. This arguably allows for more unified decision making – Greater Manchester was unable to pass a 'London Plan'-style city-regional spatial plan for some years because of the disagreement of one member council – but can reduce accountability and reduce the effectiveness of mayoral policies that are unpopular among borough councils, like the Ultra-Low Emissions Zone.

London's devolved governance remains fragmented. The GLA, borough councils, and sub-regional partnerships co-exist with the GLA's 'functional bodies' which operate under mayoral direction but outside City Hall, like Transport for London (TfL), the Mayor's Office on Police and Crime (MOPAC) and the London Fire Commissioner, and Mayoral Development Corporations in Old Oak Common and the Olympic Park.

Transport: a devolution success

The most widely recognised benefits of devolution to London are visible in its transport system, under Transport for London. Integrating transport planning across the bus and tube systems, alongside other modes, has laid the groundwork for the lowest modal share for private transport anywhere in the UK.[iii] In London, disincentives to drive, like the Congestion Charge and ULEZ, have been combined with targeted investments in public transport to enable sustainable travel. As a result, air pollution in the capital improved at five times the rate of the national average from 2016 to 2019, and sustainable transport has continued to grow, though the pandemic has caused progress to stall.[iv] [v]



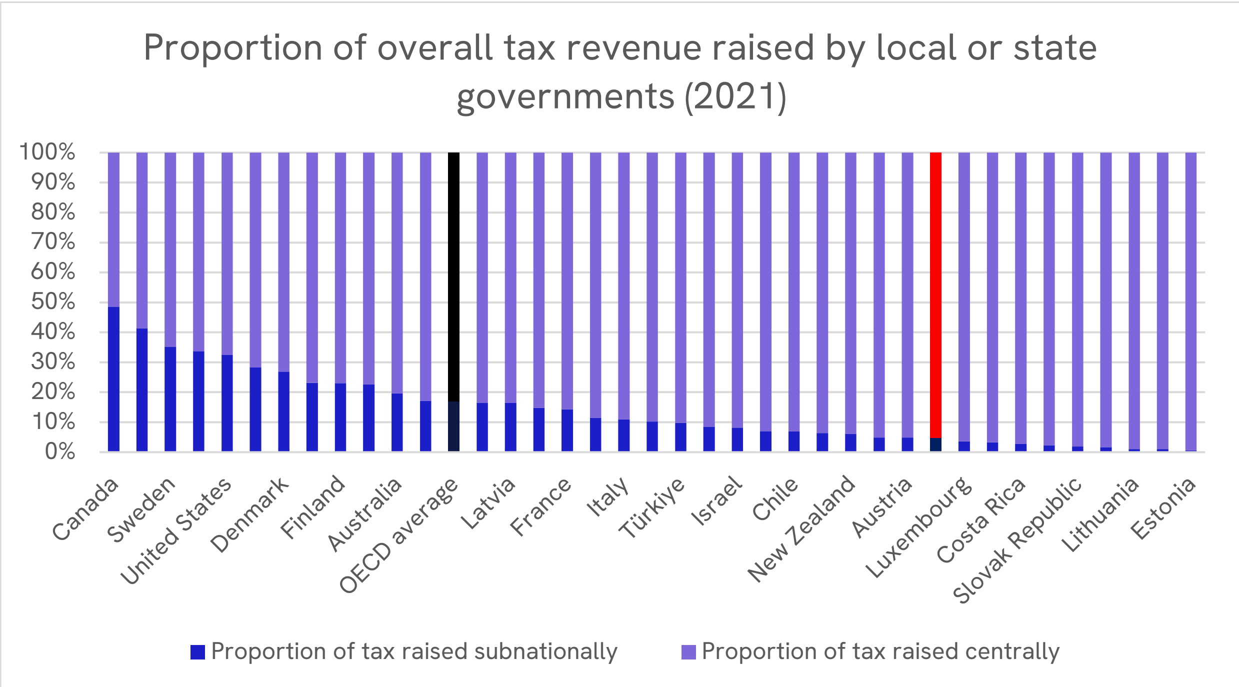
Of course, significant capital investment into London's public transport, much of which was made available by the UK Government, has been key to the network's improved performance. But devolved financing has also played a crucial role in London's transport success. Out of the roughly £19 billion cost of the Elizabeth Line, around 70% was funded by the capital itself.[vi] Alongside voluntary contributions from landowners and borrowing based on future revenue, the GLA's Business Rate Supplement on firms raised more than £4 billion, and the Mayoral and borough Community Infrastructure Levies unlocked £2 billion. One analysis found that the areas served by the new line saw just under 200,000 new office jobs created from 2018 to 2023, notably more than in other parts of London, and created significant value in local real estate markets.[vii] In another instance of devolved financing, the Northern Line Extension to Battersea Power Station was partly funded using Tax Increment Financing (TIF), diverting future growth in business rates and future developer contributions to paying for infrastructure up-front.

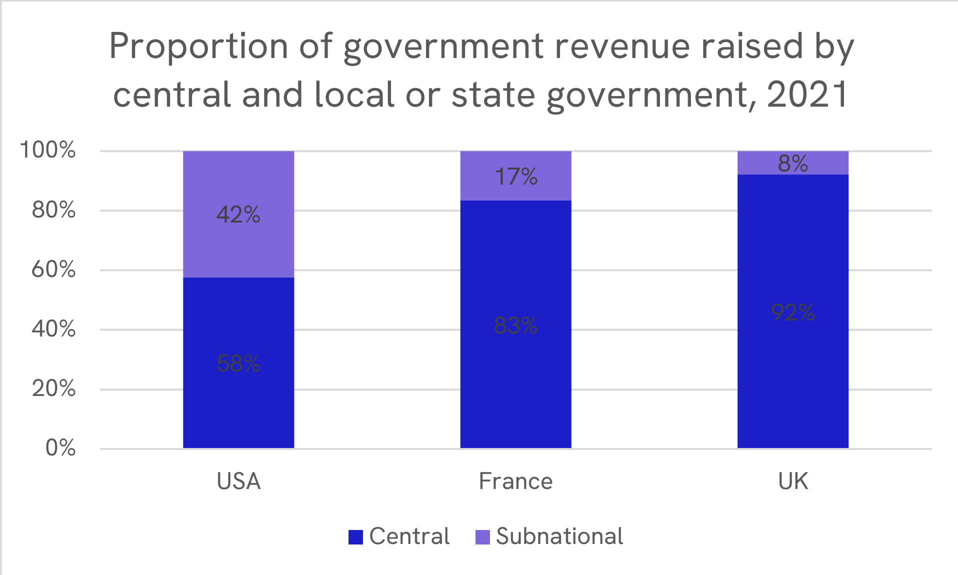
The successes of devolution to London are visible in a number of other areas. In housing, evolving mayoral policy has seen the proportion of affordable housing per scheme referred to the Mayor (which occurs in the case of large or strategic developments) rise from 25% to 37% from 2011 to 2022.[viii] In adult education, despite only partial devolution of administration, the delegation of the Adult Education Budget to the GLA saw enrolments rise significantly more than in non-devolved areas.[ix] In these areas, local and city government have deeper knowledge of local circumstances and have provided greater policy consistency than Whitehall.

LONDON IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

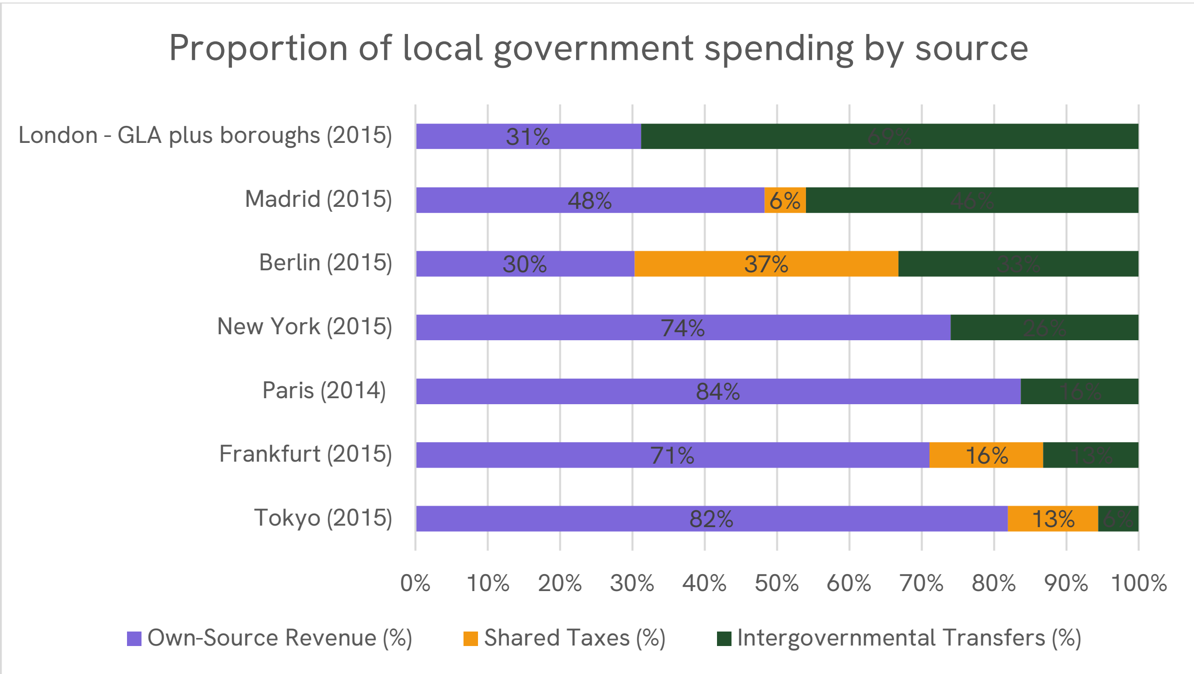
Local authorities and the Mayor rely on funding from central government

Despite the devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and some English city-regions since 1999, the UK is among the most centralised developed countries in the world. No other G7 nation collects a lower proportion of overall tax locally. Out of all the tax revenue raised to fund government in the UK, less than 5% is raised by sub-national government (including local, regional, and devolved administrations), significantly below the OECD average and far lower than comparable countries like the US and France, which raise 32% and 14% respectively.[x]





This leaves English city-regional government dependent on grants from central government – in 2015, 69% of the Mayor of London's budget was funded by central government transfers, while cities like Madrid, New York, and Paris received, respectively, 32%, 26%, and 16%, of their budgets from central government.[xi]



But grants have been cut since 2010. London boroughs receive 15% less, in real terms, than they did in 2010, while serving much larger populations, and an increasing number of councils are on the edge of effective insolvency.[xii]

Local authorities have relatively little control over local taxes

Local authorities raise a greater share of their revenue than the Mayor. In the year before the pandemic (after which emergency grants related to the Covid pandemic complicate the picture), government grants provided 22% of local authority funding in England, with 52% coming from council tax and 27% from retained business rates.[xiii]

However, councils have very little control over the taxes they rely on. Despite council tax providing the approximately half of their funding, local authorities cannot adjust the out-dated property valuations on which the tax is based. They have very limited control over reliefs, while the top rate they can charge is effectively capped by the requirement to hold a referendum if they wish to increase the council tax rate by more than a set percentage. This means that London's local authorities cannot reform the tax, even though it is regressive, requiring the owners of cheaper properties to pay more, proportionately, than those who own some of the most expensive properties in the country.[xiv]

The power to adjust the key aspects of business rates is also held by national rather than local government. Local authorities cannot control the 'multiplier' to determine charges (however, the GLA levies a business rate supplement to fund the Elizabeth Line). Since 2013/4, local government in England has been allowed to retain 50% of its business rate revenue and 50% of the growth in its revenue against a 2013/14 baseline. More recently, from 2018-19, London piloted the retention of 100% of business rate revenue on a pooled, pan-London basis, followed by 75% retention from 2019. This policy ended following the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, due to uncertainty over business rates income. Business rates revenue is also highly unstable, due to irregular property revaluations and frequent appeals, both of which cause significant shocks for local authorities, and is forecast to fall over time as a proportion of GDP.[xv] One GLA official has noted that devolution to allow London to reform the tax would significantly decrease the uncertainty of the budget-setting process, by reducing volatility.[xvi]

Many high-profile capital projects within local authorities are financed using competitive funding pots, administered by central government. Frequently competing for short-lived funding pots for specific projects is expensive and time-consuming for local authorities. One analysis estimated that English local authorities spent up to £73 million on developing bids for the Levelling Up Fund, three quarters of which were rejected.[xvii] After bids for the second round of the Levelling Up Fund had been submitted, the government declared that councils that had been successful in the first round could not be funded again, causing substantial wasted spending from councils that were declared ineligible.[xviii] Multi-year funding settlements designed as part of a coherent national strategy, rather than piecemeal competitive grants, would give local authorities the certainty to invest over the long-term.[xix] Labour has pledged to give multi-year financial settlements for local authorities.[xx]

Some of London's devolved powers remain vulnerable to central government intervention. Most dramatically, in 2020, the Housing Secretary, Robert Jenrick, refused permission for the draft London Plan, requiring the Mayor to significantly alter the document and delaying its publication for a year. More recently, disagreements between the Mayor and the current Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities resulted in central government intervening in devolved planning policy in the capital to encourage an increase in building on brownfield sites. No matter one's view on the policy substance of such cases, they clearly go against the grain of 'putting power in local hands', as the Levelling Up White Paper pledged.

THE FUTURE OF DEVOLUTION

The cases made for further devolution to London

Since the GLA came into being, there have been regular calls for further devolution to London, each citing the success of previous devolutionary reforms. But in many key areas, particularly regarding fiscal devolution, little progress has been made.

The most detailed assessment of the case for fiscal devolution and how it could be implemented was in the reports of the London Finance Commission (LFC). A group of expert representatives from local authorities, the GLA, think-tanks and the private sector, the LFC was first commissioned by Mayor Boris Johnson in 2012. Their 2013 report, 'Raising the Capital' called for all property taxes in London to be devolved to the GLA. This included business rates, council tax, capital gains tax, annual tax on enveloped dwellings, and stamp duty, granting the Mayor the power to adjust council tax band levels and revalue domestic properties, and to retain 100% of business rates revenue and to set the multiplier. This new revenue would be counterbalanced by a reduction in government grant, making it fiscally neutral on 'day one'.

In the wake of the Brexit referendum and widespread calls to 'take back control', Mayor Khan recommissioned the LFC to produce 'Devolution: a capital idea' in 2017. This second paper reaffirmed the Commission's first report and called for assigning a proportion of the income tax and VAT generated in London to the capital, devolving a variety of smaller charges and taxes, and piloting land value taxes.

The current political climate

During the pandemic, it seemed like these efforts were finally beginning to bear fruit. The 2022 Levelling Up White Paper proposed deepening devolution across England, raising hopes that the door was open to further reforms. But since then, momentum has stalled. Even as 'levelling up' has lost political currency, a lingering reaction against policies designed to help the capital has remained among policymakers in central government. The terrain on which the next election will be fought is good economic growth – the UK's failure to match growth rates seen before the global financial crisis has cost the average worker £10,700 a year in lost wage rises.[xxi] But even the best-designed programme of investing in left-behind regions will not revolutionise the country's growth rate in the short- to medium-term, though it is critical for our long-term prospects. London's economy will be key to fixing the country's growth problem – the city's flatlining productivity growth rate is responsible for up to 42% of the country's shortfall from its pre-crisis performance.[xxii]

Nonetheless, there is growing recognition that recreating the pre-2008 economic model in London, with growth driven by an ascendant financial services industry, is not a sustainable or practical option. There is evidence that much of that growth was driven by unsafe levels of leverage and risk-taking, and that it did not lead to broad-based wealth increases, but did help to supercharge the capital's overheated housing market.[xxiii] [xxiv] [xxv] Further, the unique historical circumstances of the 1990s and 2000s that drove the service-sector boom – most notably, the historic wave of globalisation in Eastern Europe and East Asia – are unlikely to be repeated. In fact, London's unusually large exposure to global trends, like the downturn in world trade and increased aversion to risk after the Great Financial Crisis (GFC), is likely a major cause of the capital's struggle to match previous growth rates in the financial sector.

Those arguing in favour of further devolution in the 2020s will need to make the argument that London's economy needs a new, fairer model and that greater fiscal and policy powers are how to achieve it. There is a clear appetite for further devolution to London among the general public in the capital. More than half of Londoners back transferring more powers over public spending to London (against 16% who oppose it), and local government enjoys far higher trust from the public than Whitehall.[xxvi] [xxvii]

Even within the UK Government's existing framework for devolution, there is patently further to go in London. In some areas, the 'trailblazer' deals agreed with the Greater Manchester and West

Midlands Combined Authorities go further than London's existing settlement. Both will retain 100% of business rate revenues for ten years. New elements of the adult education system have been devolved to the two regions, and Greater Manchester was granted blanket approval for large-scale private rented sector selective licensing schemes within their area, while each London borough still has to apply for permission from central government. Most importantly, both city-regions have been granted a 'single departmental settlement' – a unified budget for a spending review period containing all the disparate funding streams they are owed – granting more flexibility and fewer reporting requirements than London receives. At the very least, London's government should push for these provisions to be extended to the capital.

The key political question is what London should do with further powers – i.e. what vision of the future should supporters of devolution make to voters?

The principals of further devolution to London

Purpose before financing

We believe that fiscal devolution is essential for empowering local and city government to turn around their local economies. However, London's government needs to lay out a compelling vision for what it will do with devolved powers and financing before it is likely to win them. The case for devolution must be politically attractive to voters, as well as technocratically sound.

Devolution for good growth

That vision should centre on creating a new model for good growth in London. This has long been an aspiration of London's city and local government – finding a way to both boost growth, and capture its proceeds to reduce deprivation. But we believe that we have reached the limit of what the city can achieve with its current suite of powers.[xxviii]

Thinking longer term

Devolution is not just about the formal handover of specific powers. Flexible funding is almost as important as the delegation of particular programmes. Most obviously, local authorities across the country would benefit from longer-term financial settlements to allow for budgeting and investment. In London, the 'single financial settlements' created for regions with trailblazer deals are the critical prize.

Hard-wiring devolution

Local government has no guaranteed status within our constitutional settlement and is entirely a creature of central government's whims. Devolution should be hard-wired into statute, so that government cannot overrule devolved decisions without significant difficulty, and so that devolved authorities have codified representation in national decisions.

Sending power downwards

Devolution is not about replacing one set of distant politicians with another. Reversing centralisation cannot stop at the borough council level – it's about promoting democracy and community control. The principle of subsidiarity, that power should be exercised as close to those affected as possible, should be a red thread running through the next wave of devolution.

Scrutinising local power

We can only ask the centre to let go if local government can ensure accountability and high standards. If the next 5 years is to see a generational shift in power towards local government, we need to rebuild the infrastructure of scrutiny and governance.

This could entail the creation of Local Public Accounts Committees – independent bodies with oversight over all public spending in a local area – along with an independent regulator at the national level to rebuild governance and audit capacities.[xxix] The decline of independent local media is another key critical part of the story of centralisation and requires urgent attention. Part of the answer could be reallocating spending on public notices from dominant corporate publishers to independent local outlets.[xxx]

What should be devolved?

With those principles in mind, there are several low-hanging fruits which would have an outsized impact on London.

If the purpose of devolution to the capital is supporting the creation of a new, fairer model of economic growth, the city will need more control over skills. London has fewer apprentices per 1,000 residents than any other English region, even after accounting for sectoral differences in regional economies, and is suffering from extensive skills shortages in key areas, particularly in the green economy.[xxxi] There have long been calls for the Apprenticeship Levy, like the Adult Education Budget, to be devolved to London. This would allow for local authorities, employers, and city government to collaborate on a tailor-made system for London that addresses the inflexibilities and limitations of the current Levy regime. That system could help the city fill its skill shortages and train the workers needed for a green transition.

Transport is another area where relatively small changes could drive good growth, while allowing London to build on its successes in sustainable infrastructure. Though it was blocked in late 2016 by Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling, TfL has repeatedly expressed its interest in taking over the franchise of South London's suburban rail routes, services which are well-known to suffer from insufficient capacity and poor reliability. When TfL took over suburban rail services in North and East London in 2007, ridership rose by 80% in four years, and increased capacity led to significant growth in housebuilding along the line.[xxxii] Centre for London analysis from 2016 found that a similar programme in South London – known as 'metroisation' – could more than double rail capacity on these lines and accelerate the development of around 13,000 additional homes, just within south Central London.[xxxiii] Combined with a mayoral Outer London Transport Strategy that aims to fill gaps in the network, building on the success of the Superloop, this could make a meaningful impact. Connecting more Londoners to the city's employment hubs would improve their access to well-paid jobs and address skills shortages, while boosting orbital connections could enable new polycentric economic hotspots to form in Outer London.

But tackling London's biggest challenges will require substantial government investment. Centre for London believe that the devolved financial levers laid out by the London Finance Commission are still the answer. London needs to invest into green infrastructure, including refreshing its now almost empty pipeline of major public transport projects – projects like the Bakerloo Line Extension, the DLR extension to Thamesmead, and Crossrail 2 are dormant for the foreseeable future. It desperately needs a way to fund a large expansion in affordable housebuilding and to enable the planning system to operate more efficiently, to address crushing affordability challenges. But at a time when public finances are extremely constrained, asking national government for the sums required will be a challenge.

Part of the solution should be devolving London's property taxes to its city and local government, with the freedom to update the property values and charging rates underlying council tax, and to tailor the business rates multiplier, while retaining its receipts. Given the scale of London's inequalities, there's an argument for devolving a small portion of the city's income tax revenues to the GLA,[xxxiv] all of which would create a broad, stable tax base for London's government. If fiscally neutral on day one (cancelled out by an equal reduction in government grant), these reforms would provide a stronger incentive for local and regional government to drive economic growth, while funding the sustainable investments needed to revitalise the capital.

Smaller revenue raisers, like a 'tourist tax' and a smart and fair system of integrated road user charging, would widen the sources of funding available to the capital's government and enable longer-term planning, combatting the volatile investment rates that have reduced the UK's competitiveness.[xxxv] Capturing the land value uplifts generated by public investment could help recoup some of the costs of major infrastructure projects. Fiscal devolution could enable the city to go from the worst-performing region in the UK in terms of decarbonising its housing stock, to a leader.[xxxvi] It could fund the upgrades required to keep the city's public transport functioning, such as replacing out-of-date trains on the Bakerloo and Piccadilly lines, and making strategic investments in projects like extending the DLR to Thamesmead.

Together, all these reforms could give London the levers to create a new, fairer economic model, to help power the United Kingdom's recovery. It could address its housing shortage, build a stronger public transport system, and successfully navigate the net-zero transition. It is in the whole country's interest for London to be firing on all cylinders, and in every Londoner's interest for the city to become less manifestly unequal. Continuing London's devolution journey, alongside its partners in mayoral and non-mayoral combined authorities, could help it get there.

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