

# REFORM

## REBOOTING REGIONALISM: AN ESSAY

### Solving England's regional government puzzle

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## ABOUT REFORM

*Reform* is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We believe that the State has a fundamental role to play in enabling individuals, families, and communities to thrive. But our vision is one in which the State delivers only the services that it is best placed to deliver, within sound public finances, and where both decision-making and delivery is devolved to the most appropriate level. We are committed to driving systemic change that will deliver better outcomes for all.

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After a decade of disruption, the country faces a moment of national reflection. For too long, Britain has been papering over the cracks in an outdated social and economic model, but while this may bring temporary respite, it doesn't fix the foundations. In 1942 Beveridge stated: "a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching." 80 years on, and in the wake of a devastating national crisis, that statement once again rings true. Now is the time to fix Britain's foundations.

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*Reimagining the Local State* is one of the major work streams within this programme.

## ABOUT REIMAGINING THE LOCAL STATE

This paper is part of the *Reimagining the Local State* work stream. English local and regional government stands at a turning point. There are signal opportunities for local innovation, close community engagement, and ambitious devolution of powers and responsibilities from the centre. There are also unprecedented challenges, driven by years of fiscal retrenchment and rocketing service demand. This programme will develop policy ideas for the future of devolution, the role of communities, and the structures, practices, and leadership of local government itself. This essay launches a programme of policy research to support the establishment of ambitious regional-scale governance across England.

### Reimagining the Local State Advisory Group

*Reform* is grateful to the expert members of the *Reimagining the Local State Advisory Group* who provide invaluable insight and advise on the programme. Their involvement does not imply endorsement of every argument or recommendation put forward.

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# 1. Introduction: the road to regions

Devolution is on the march — not only in England, but all over the world.<sup>1</sup>

Local government reform, reorganisation, and empowerment have played an important role in the domestic agendas of successive UK governments. As the crisis faced by the sector has grown, so too has the reforming ambition. For the most part, these efforts have taken a regionalist form.

This is a sensible priority to select. Most nations of comparable population and complexity to England operate with a regional tier of government. When they work well, regional tiers enable greater devolution of powers, more strategic central leadership, and better coordination across functional economic areas.<sup>2</sup>

These regional systems are not the place for hyperlocal self-government and local area coordination, nor for the international representation, defence planning, top-level infrastructure, or other concerns of national government. Instead they take a strategic role, specialising in coordinating action across meaningful geographies of identity and economic activity. They operate at a scale above where immediate local interests might inhibit needed change, and below the scale where central administrators would be unlikely to marshal enough contextual information to ensure successful policymaking.

Central government has clearly recognised the need to address this ‘missing tier’ of governance. Through Regional Development Agencies, Local Enterprise Partnerships, various incarnations of whole-of-London governance, the doomed first steps taken toward Regional Assemblies, and on to Combined Authorities and now Strategic Authorities, there has been no shortage of experimentation.

The 2024 English Devolution White Paper marks the most assertive effort yet to finally establish a comprehensive regional governance tier, building upon the spread of Combined Authorities and consistently growing powers of mayors during the previous Government’s Levelling Up strategy.<sup>3</sup>

The plan now is to require — and, if necessary, impose — the establishment of Strategic Authorities across England.<sup>4</sup> These will be developed to mirror the approach of Combined Authorities that have already emerged through a deal-making process with central government. A parallel programme of local government reorganisation — turning all two-tier ‘County and District’ areas into single-tier unitary councils and nudging smaller unitary councils to merge into larger jurisdictions — is intended, in part, to make the creation of this regional tier easier to accomplish.

This is because, at heart, this new tier depends entirely upon the voluntary participation of the existing, smaller tier of local authorities. Combined (and now Strategic) Authorities only exist

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<sup>1</sup> Andres Rodriguez-Pose and Nicholas Gill, ‘The Global Trend towards Devolution and Its Implications’, *Economy*, no. 1 (2008): 19.

<sup>2</sup> Andres Rodriguez-Pose and Nicholas Gill, ‘Is There a Global Link between Regional Disparities and Devolution?’, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 36, no. 12 (2004): 2097–2117.

<sup>3</sup> HM Government, *Levelling Up White Paper*, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*, 2024.

with the support of — and, indeed, have fewer powers and resources than — their constituent authorities.<sup>5</sup> Even the direct decision of a mayor will not necessarily have meaning without the approval of their constituent authorities. In many policy areas the objection of just one council is enough to torpedo an entire regional strategy.<sup>6</sup>

The English Devolution White Paper takes steps to address this. Strategic Authorities are to be placed on a firmer statutory footing and there will be a turn toward majority voting (rather than requiring unanimity) for approval of regional plans. The long-awaited implementation of integrated settlements should also help to ensure that this strategic tier has control over more of the resources that it needs to operate as a fully-fledged tier of government.

Government has set out the further powers that Strategic Authorities will be expected to take on. Notably, these will often be drawn *up* from lower tiers of local government as well as devolved *down* from the centre.<sup>7</sup> In the area of planning, for example, more control of grant funding, affordable housing decisions, and the power to intervene in planning decisions are all to be placed at that regional tier.

There remain, however, deeper challenges with the current approach, which will prevent their readiness to take on greater devolved powers or to operate in highly strategic ways.

Many of the Strategic Authorities which will emerge from the processes set out in the English Devolution White Paper will be too small — in terms of jurisdiction and population — to operate in a genuinely strategic way or ever take on meaningful devolved powers. While the English Devolution White Paper raises the minimum population size to 1.5 million people<sup>8</sup> there have already been ten expressions of interest made by local authorities in establishing authorities with populations of less than one million people.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, four existing Combined Authorities already have populations below one million people.<sup>10</sup> These are not genuine regional bodies, but more akin to sub-regional partnerships.

In comparable countries with established regional governance tiers that take on strategic responsibilities comparable to those intended for Strategic Authorities, the average population size is frequently double the minimum population established in the English Devolution White Paper. France has a total of 13 *Conseils Régionaux*, excluding overseas territories, governing an average population of around 5 million people.<sup>11</sup> The 20 Italian *Regioni* have an average population size of around 3 million people, similar to Canadian Provinces and Regions or Spanish *Comunidades Autónomas*.<sup>12</sup> Germany's 16 *Bundesländer* are of variable size, but

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Pope, Grant Dalton, and Maelyne Coggins, *How Can Devolution Deliver Regional Growth in England?* (Institute for Government, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> BBC Manchester, 'Greater Manchester Spatial Framework New Homes Plan Scrapped', 11 December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Reform Think Tank, 'Snap Analysis: The English Devolution White Paper', Web Page, 16 December 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Shaw, 'Devolution: The Importance of Scale and Coterminosity', Web Page, 28 November 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Shaw.

<sup>11</sup> The National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, 'Population Census', Web page, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 'Continuous Population Statistics', Web page, 2024.

average a population of about 5.3 million, and only two of these regions have populations smaller than one million.<sup>13</sup>

Even setting outright scale to one side, the model used may continue to produce challenges. The planned system of Strategic Authorities is appropriate for creating a metro region, where there is a clear, economically active urban ‘hub’ and a wider surrounding economic geography. A different model would ideally be required for genuine regionalism in more rural areas and regions without a single clear economic core. The current Strategic Authority model will result in undersized jurisdictions in such areas, with increasingly arbitrary geographies needed to ‘fill in the map’ of England with a tier which will be unlikely to function in a genuinely strategic way.

What will be needed, then, to finally establish real regions across England?

- **Regional diversity.** This means allowing different kinds of institutions to operate in different regional contexts. This will — perhaps counter-intuitively — ultimately allow for the greatest possible uniformity of operational powers, in turn creating the conditions for realising the wider benefits of devolution. This will involve the creation of regions with different internal arrangements to secure local buy-in.
- **Pan-regional frameworks and coterminosity.** Formal and informal ways must be found to promote collaborative working between different Strategic Authorities, since certain objectives will transcend the jurisdictions of individual institutions.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, these systems must over time become coterminous with the geographies of other public service systems.
- **Capacity to promote innovation of public services.** This could take many forms, depending on the specific circumstances of each region. It will often mean enabling a strong norm of further devolving powers and responsibilities through smaller tiers of governance, incentivising the integration of public services, and helping to ensure community engagement is happening wherever possible.
- **Larger jurisdictions.** Where pan-regional collaborations do not go far enough, or reach a point where stronger accountability and direct governance will be required, there will soon be clear examples where the scale of some Strategic Authorities is simply inadequate. This will create a growing need for fewer but larger regional authorities, composed on a ‘polycentric’ model (see section two below).

Developing policy in the above areas will not mean abandoning the plans set out in the English Devolution White Paper (although modifying and going further in several areas would be advisable). Rather, it will require decision-makers to recognise that Strategic Authorities — because they are not all going to be genuinely *regional* bodies — represent the beginning, rather than the end, of the evolution of a true regional tier for England.

In practice, that means that Strategic Authorities in areas without a clear economic/urban ‘core’ will ultimately need to be a stepping stone towards larger, truly region-scale governance.

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<sup>13</sup> Federal Statistical Office of Germany, ‘Population by Nationality and Federal States’, Web page, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Broadhurst, Jennifer Ferreira, and Nigel Berkeley, ‘Place Leadership: Developing a Model to Guide Regional Partnerships’, *Regional Studies* 55, no. 3 (2020): 556–67.



Consistent regionalism in England — and the further devolution that this can unlock — will not really be possible until this has happened.

**Figure 1: Comparison of plans for English local government**

Tier	Existing system	2024 English Devolution White Paper	Reform think tank proposal
<b>Largest-scale</b>	<p>Combined Authorities covering c. 50% of the population.</p> <p>Powers devolved through deal-making process in line with four-level 'maturity' framework.</p>	<p>Strategic Authorities across England.</p> <p>Authorities range from non-mayoral 'Foundation Strategic Authorities' to 'Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities' with the highest devolved powers.</p>	<p>Regional Authorities across England.</p> <p>Authorities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mayoral Strategic Authorities</b> for city-centred economic and public service areas;</li> <li>• <b>Provinces</b> for geographically larger areas, led by elected Governors with strong sub-regional partnerships.</li> </ul>
<b>Mid-scale</b>	<p>Combination of unitary authorities and two-tier areas where functions are divided between Counties and smaller Districts.</p>	<p>A consistent tier of unitary authorities with a smaller range of population sizes.</p>	<p>A consistent tier of unitary authorities with a smaller range of population sizes.</p>
<b>Smallest-scale</b>	<p>Town and Parish councils covering a small part of the English population.</p>	<p>Town and Parish councils covering a small part of the English population.</p>	<p>A consistent hyperlocal tier across England, consisting of councils and new '<b>Combined Community Councils</b>' with a larger footprint.</p>

## 2. Understanding what regions need

As a starting point, it is crucial to articulate a vision of English regionalism that reflects the existence of at least two types of regions, each of which will require different kinds of governance. Allowing the emergence of this governance diversity is ultimately the only way to realise a regional tier where all institutions hold similar powers and have comparable responsibilities: an important precondition for the deepest levels of devolution.<sup>15</sup>

This essay sets out a basic distinction between ‘hub-and-spoke’ and ‘polycentric’ regions. In doing so, it aligns with a significant academic policy literature. Ultimately, English regional systems will need to reflect this distinction to perform well. A one-size-fits-all approach will, ultimately, fail.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 2: Defining regional systems**

<b>Hub-and-Spoke</b>	Dominated by a central, economically productive urban core (e.g. London, Manchester, Birmingham).
	Surrounding areas — commuter belts, satellite towns, and smaller cities — are economically and socially linked to the core.
	Functional economic geography radiates out from the core, with infrastructure (transport, housing, and services) designed to serve the central hub.
<b>Polycentric</b>	Lack a single dominant urban centre and consist instead of a network of smaller, dispersed hubs (e.g. East Anglia, Cornwall, the North East).
	Lower population density, with economic activity spread across multiple towns and smaller cities.
	Weaker gravitational pull between hubs. Interconnections are less hierarchical and more distributed.
	Functional economic geography is diffuse, requiring broader coordination across hubs.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Kaye and Rachael Powell, *Devolve by Default: Decentralisation and a Redefined Whitehall* (Reform, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Luke Raikes, *The Devolution Parliament* (IPPR North, 2020).

## 2.1 Hub-and-spoke regions

Hub-and-spoke regions are characterised by a dominant urban core that acts as the economic, social, and cultural centre of the region. Cities such as London, Manchester, and Birmingham exemplify this model, where the core generates the majority of economic activity and attracts the highest concentration of population, businesses, and services.<sup>17</sup>

The surrounding areas — commuter towns, satellite cities, and rural hinterlands — are functionally tied to the core through economic and infrastructural connections. These peripheral areas largely depend on the core for employment, major services, and cultural opportunities, while the core relies on them for labour and housing.

This centralisation lends itself to a governance model that is highly efficient for strategic decision-making. A directly elected mayor with jurisdiction over the entire functional geography can be empowered to coordinate transport, housing and economic development, and there is a firm case for ensuring the mayoralty enjoys substantial executive powers, as is the case in most major cities around the world.<sup>18</sup> Transport infrastructure in hub-and-spoke regions often radiates from the core, prioritising connectivity to the central city. Governance can focus unapologetically on maximising the economic dynamism of the core, with peripheral areas benefiting from spillover effects and explicitly redistributive programmes funded by the proceeds of growth.

However, this model assumes a strong, clear economic geography. This limits its applicability in areas without a dominant central hub. While effective in highly urbanised regions, hub-and-spoke governance risks neglecting the unique needs of peripheral areas if their development is overly dependent on the core.

## 2.2 Polycentric regions

Polycentric regions, by contrast, lack a single dominant urban centre. Instead, they consist of multiple smaller hubs comprised of smaller cities, clusters of towns, and rural economies, each of which may have its own distinct economic, social, and cultural functions and specialisms.<sup>19</sup> Examples in England include the East of England, Cornwall, and the North East. These regions have lower population densities and more dispersed economic activity, with towns and smaller cities acting as interconnected nodes rather than subordinates to a larger metropolitan centre. Economic interdependence exists, but the relationships between hubs are more horizontal than hierarchical, and the region's functional geography requires broader coordination to manage shared challenges.

At present, there is no model in England appropriate for strategic governance of an appropriate scale in polycentric regions. The result is that these places are rapidly being 'left behind' as

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony Breach and Paul Swinney, *Climbing the Summit: Big Cities in the UK and the G7* (Centre for Cities, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> Paul Swinney, *Big Shot or Long Shot? How Elected Mayors can Help Drive Economic Growth in England's Cities* (Centre for Cities, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> John Parr, 'The Polycentric Urban Region: A Closer Inspection', *Regional Studies* 38, no. 3 (2004): 231–40.

simpler economic geographies benefit from devolution. Establishing Strategic Authorities in these places will result in a new patchwork of entities which will be too small to operate strategically.

Governance in polycentric regions must account for this complexity by adopting a more collaborative and decentralised approach than in most hub-and-spoke contexts. This means a combination of sub-regional systems and local authorities which — unlike in the present system — delegate policy areas requiring genuine strategic management over much larger populations to a new, truly regional tier of governance, presided over by a directly elected Governor (see section 4, below).

Governors will be direct peers to the mayors of hub-and-spoke regions. They and their teams will represent the strategic interests of their large regions, engaging directly with Central Government and other directly elected leaders, managing cross-cutting policy areas such as high level economic development and transport, and convening actors from across their jurisdictions to form agreements that allow sub-regions to play to the particular strengths of specific areas and complement the assets present in others.<sup>20</sup> Transport and infrastructure planning must prioritise lateral connectivity between hubs, rather than simply linking all areas to a central core.

Drawing on Elinor Ostrom's work on polycentric governance, these regions benefit from overlapping and multi-layered governance structures that balance local autonomy with the obvious need for genuine region-scale ownership in some strategic areas.<sup>21</sup> This allows for more tailored solutions to local challenges, and more respect for complex, localised identity groupings, while enabling the hubs to collectively address strategic priorities such as economic development and environmental sustainability. However, for this to work, governance systems must prioritise:

- **Autonomy:** Allowing hubs to address local issues independently while contributing to regional goals.
- **Cooperation:** Establishing formal and informal mechanisms for hubs to work together on shared challenges.
- **Adaptability:** Ensuring governance systems are flexible enough to evolve as interdependencies grow and change.<sup>22</sup>

All of this points to a greater role for sub-regional partnerships, which could themselves be at the scale of currently mooted Strategic Authorities.

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Hall and Kathy Pain, *The Polycentric Metropolis: Learning from Mega-City Regions in Europe*, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Elinor Ostrom, *Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems*, Nobel Prize Lecture, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Kaye, *Think Big, Act Small: Elinor Ostrom's Radical Vision for Community Power* (New Local, 2020).

**Figure 3: Hub-and-spoke regions compared with polycentric regions**

	Hub-and-spoke	Polycentric
Population density & economic activity	<p>High population density and smaller geography with concentrated economic activity in the core.</p> <p>Policies prioritise optimising the core-periphery dynamic.</p>	<p>Lower density with economic activity spread across multiple hubs, each playing a distinct but interdependent role.</p> <p>Policies emphasise complementarity, resource pooling, and minimising duplication of effort.</p>
Infrastructure & transport	<p>Transport and infrastructure networks radiate from the core, prioritising connectivity to the central city.</p>	<p>Requires strong inter-hub connectivity, favouring lateral over radial networks to support economic links between hubs.</p>
Identity & cohesion	<p>A strong regional identity is often tied to the core city, creating a shared sense of purpose.</p> <p>Cohesion depends on ensuring economic benefits extend to the wider region.</p>	<p>Identity is more fragmented, reflecting the diversity of hubs.</p> <p>Governance must balance local autonomy with regional unity, often requiring innovative public engagement to ensure broad representation.</p>
Governance structures	<p>Greater scope for centralised decision-making, integrating policies around the core while ensuring peripheral areas benefit.</p> <p>Strategic planning (e.g., transport, housing) is often core-focused.</p>	<p>Requires stronger local and sub-regional governance, with greater autonomy for individual hubs.</p> <p>A coordinating Governor could oversee a coalition of hubs to align regional strategies while respecting local priorities.</p>

### 2.3 The reform process

By aligning governance models with the distinct needs of hub-and-spoke and polycentric regions, England can create effective and responsive regional authorities that enhance economic growth, public service delivery, and, through efficacy, help to foster greater local democratic engagement.

This essay proposes a two-stage process for the establishment of genuine English regionalism that is responsive to the distinction outlined in this section. First, there must be an effort to create consistent strategic authorities throughout England, in line with the process set out in

the English Devolution White Paper. These Strategic Authorities should themselves be strengthened in ways that go beyond the provisions in the White Paper.

After this stage, the rollout of English regionalism will split. Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities, with geographies and populations that align with the 'hub and spokes' model above, will continue to draw down powers in that model.

In other areas, such as more rural areas where multiple Foundation Strategic Authorities have been established, a far larger jurisdiction will be called for — alongside strong sub-regional governance — for genuine regionalism to be achieved.

This essay now turns to a brief summary of each of these stages, both of which will be developed in detail in future papers in the *Reimagining the Local State* workstream.

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## 3. Stage one: getting Strategic Authorities right

The vision established in the English Devolution White Paper is a significant development. Its plans see the evolution of deal-based Combined Authorities into versatile, and universally present, Strategic Authorities.

The intent is for these Strategic Authorities to enable strategic policymaking, particularly promoting growth by shifting to decisions within functional economic geographies, while also supporting the goals of further devolution of powers and the fostering of local empowerment through the consistent presence of directly elected mayors with clear mandates.

As these Strategic Authorities develop, they will also become more assertive within their jurisdictions — with more decisions passing with a simple majority of constituent authorities in support — and more financially autonomous, as integrated settlements roll out. These plans stop short of some powers, such as fiscal devolution<sup>23</sup> or regions assuming control of more critical public service areas such as healthcare,<sup>24</sup> which have both been recommended in recent *Reform* publications. Yet the more general commitment to developing more decisive and autonomous quasi-regional bodies is welcome.

To realise these objectives, however, the organisational evolution of Strategic Authorities must also go further than currently planned. The experience of existing Combined Authorities demonstrates why. Despite successes such as Greater Manchester's transport initiatives or Tees Valley's foreign direct investment growth, most Combined Authorities are underpowered organisations: not fully regional but quasi-regional bodies that are limited in their scope and effectiveness.

While some of the proposals in the English Devolution White Paper will begin to enact the necessary changes for more decisive, autonomous, and strategic organisations, further ambition will be needed. In some cases, this will involve further maturation of Strategic Authorities in metro areas. In others, it will mean that emerging Strategic Authorities are only a stepping-stone to larger, truly regional bodies with the size, mandate, and resources to play their role fully.

In both cases, the current plans for regional devolution must be strengthened.

### 3.1 Decisive governance

Under current plans, the directly elected mayors of Strategic Authorities will lack sufficient executive power, often functioning as 'first among equals' within boards that require majority or unanimous agreement for key decisions. The limited executive power of mayors is mirrored

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<sup>23</sup> Simon Kaye et al., *Back from the Brink: Radical Ideas for Sustainable Local Finances* (Reform, 2024).

<sup>24</sup> Rosie Beacon, *Close Enough to Care: A New Structure for the English Health and Care System* (Reform, 2024).

by the fundamental power imbalance that will persist between Strategic Authorities and the Local Authorities that compose them. This is a challenge recognised in the Government's plans, which will reduce the effective 'veto powers' of constituent local authorities. These proposals should go further.

A highly collaborative approach has become the hallmark of how existing Combined Authorities function. There are many advantages to an approach that prioritises the winning of support from the other public authorities within a jurisdiction, and many mayors seek to avoid the use of any override powers that they do have, preferring to achieve widespread support or unanimity whenever possible.

However, a model that preserves the relative lack of authority and resources compared to constituent authorities will slow decision-making, making strategic action (which may not always be popular in every part of a jurisdiction) and flexible, responsive policymaking much harder. The challenges encountered in establishing Greater Manchester's spatial plan, for example, shows how collaboration has both strengths and limitations.

To enhance decisiveness, the governance processes of Strategic Authorities should be changed to not only remove the veto powers of individual constituent Local Authorities, but to empower mayors to act more effectively in a wider range of policy areas. Doing this would mean going further than current Government plans, fundamentally changing the relationship between Strategic Authorities and their constituent councils. And rather than constructing the decision-making core and portfolio-holding 'cabinets' from the leadership of constituent authorities, mayors should be able to freely appoint their leadership teams.

### 3.2 Accountable structures

Accountability systems for emerging Strategic Authorities currently skew 'upwards' toward central government, for example through the fundamental accountability of the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, and a range of stringent financial reporting requirements. This dynamic will become increasingly unworkable as Strategic Authorities proliferate and become more assertive. It will also continue to limit the 'downwards' accountability to their citizens and constituent authorities.

While mayoral elections provide some direct accountability, low turnout and low levels of public understanding of how local government operates and how mayoral powers fit within the system limits their effectiveness.

As these strategic authorities take on integrated funding settlements, the chief executives of Strategic Authorities should become the Accounting Officers for their organisations and, ultimately, for public services spending across the entire regional system, with local authorities reserving the power for final internal budgetary sign-off and their own responsible officers. This would end the existing system where the MHCLG Permanent Secretary is ultimately the financially accountable person for every local government institution in England. Regional Accounting Officers will be accountable to Parliament as well as a new system of Local Public Accounts Committees, supported by the new Local Audit Office (LAO).



### 3.3 Enhanced capabilities

There is significant variation in the capacity and capabilities of existing Combined Authorities. This variation will be sustained under current plans, with an array of Foundation Strategic Authorities joining Mayoral Strategic Authorities and Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities as the process of establishing the regional tier moves away from deal-making.

Major effort will be required to ensure that Strategic Authorities are consistently capable of taking on new powers, responsibilities, and delivery roles. Part of this will mean supporting the development of policymaking capacity, which will become important as the top-down Whitehall-led model is phased out.<sup>25</sup> A scheme of secondments across English government — including to and from Whitehall — would help to increase mutual understanding as these tiers evolve, improve the overall responsiveness across the system, and ensure that relevant skills are more often in place.

Beyond this, there is pressing need for more structured support, including formal capacity-building frameworks, enhanced networks for peer learning, and resource availability to attract the best talent. Mayoral offices and data and digital teams should be an early priority for workforce development as Strategic Authorities grow and assume more powers.

These are clear areas for organisational development for every Strategic Authority. Some of these Strategic Authorities, under the plans envisioned here, will become the connection-points for a larger, polycentric regional government model. This essay turns to that model in the next section.

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<sup>25</sup> OECD, *The Governance of Land Use of OECD Countries: Policy Analysis and Recommendations*, 2017.

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## 4. Stage two: a roadmap for polycentric regions

The governance needs of polycentric regions, with their dispersed hubs and diverse economic landscapes, require a tailored approach. Unlike hub-and-spoke regions, where decision-making can increasingly centralise around a dominant urban core, led by a mayor and with public service delivery handled by properly resourced local authorities, polycentric regions require an arrangement appropriate to much larger geographies. To operate as true peers of the big cities, and to enable the flourishing of the diversity that will necessarily be present in different parts of these large jurisdictions, more layers of governance — formal and informal — will be required.

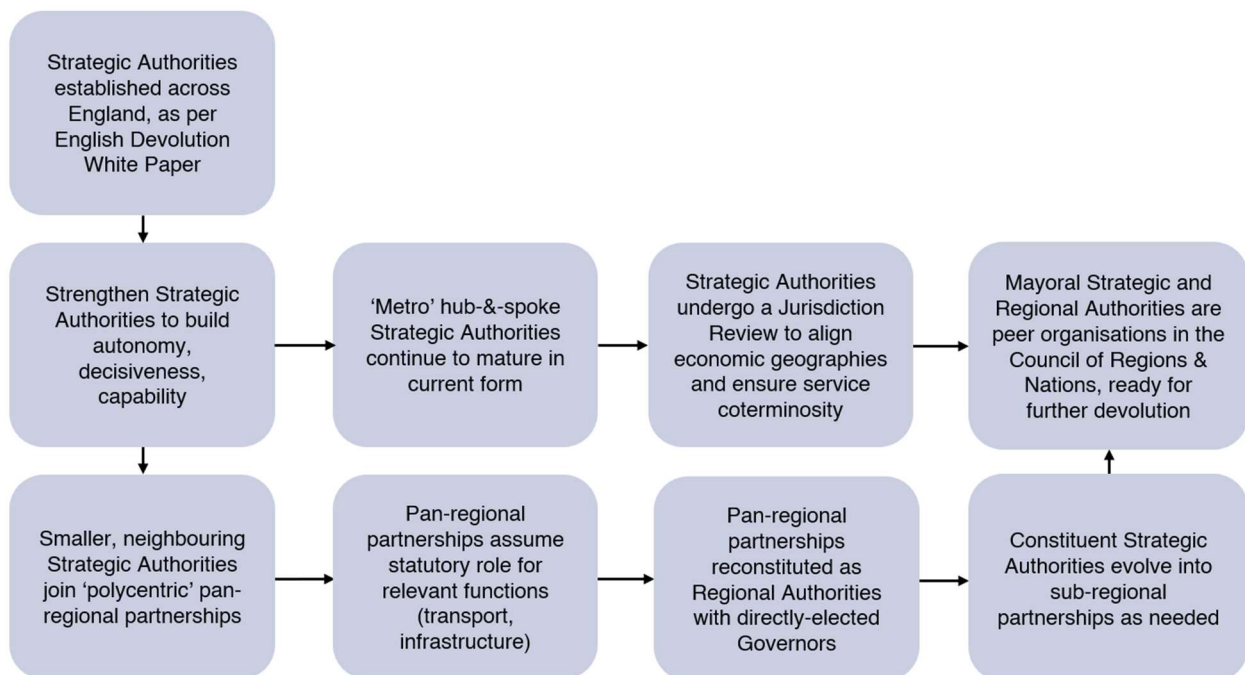
At present, and under current plans, polycentric contexts — smaller cities, networks of towns, and rural economies — will continue to be left behind by devolution.

It will be essential to give these regions the necessary heft and population scale for truly strategic governance. This is the only plausible route for polycentric areas to establish institutions with a potential for devolution comparable to that already emerging within urban contexts. These larger jurisdictions will benefit greatly from the presence of a subregional layer — not a full-fledged tier of local government, but as an intermediary vehicle for collaboration with varying degrees of formality.

In the following plan, it is the Strategic Authorities in polycentric regions that will come together to form the basis for larger regional authorities — after Redcliffe-Maude, these are tentatively labelled ‘provinces’ — and then they themselves take on the role of sub-regional partnerships. These will not function as a full-fledged tier of local government, but instead model their operations on the sub-regional systems that have already emerged across Greater London.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Majeed Neki, ‘London, to Scale: The Role of the Capital’s Sub-Regional Partnerships’, *London School of Economics*, 2024.

**Figure 4: The development of hub-and-spoke and polycentric regions**

## 4.1 Milestones on the way to Provinces

The roadmap below outlines the necessary steps to achieve this while addressing the unique challenges of polycentric governance.

### 1. Establish pan-regional geographies

The first step is for central government to define pan-regional geographies that reflect the economic, social, and environmental interdependencies for polycentric contexts. Boundaries should consider existing functional relationships between existing Strategic Authorities, such as commuting patterns, shared infrastructure, and economic linkages.<sup>27</sup> They should also be seen as an opportunity to rationalise and align various public service provision geographies, to support integrations and efficiencies at a later stage.

This step will ensure that each pan-regional geography is home to a population large enough to create a resource base appropriate for strategic policymaking, while avoiding unnecessary overlap between jurisdictions. The appropriate population of a province would range from 3 to 7 million people.

For instance, a single pan-regional geography for East Anglia, with a total population in excess of 6 million, could be viable. Alternatively, there may be various options for a model that creates two smaller contiguous geographies. In either case, the pan-regional geography would be organised around key hubs like Norwich, Cambridge, and Ipswich, with clear frameworks

<sup>27</sup> OECD, *Regions and Cities: Where Policies and People Meet*, 2013.

for cooperation across transport, housing, and economic development. This geographic clarity lays the foundation for cohesive governance structures later.

### **2. Create formal pan-regional partnerships**

Partnerships should be established to formalise collaboration between Strategic Authorities within the geographies defined in step one. These partnerships can — and very often will — begin as outgrowths from voluntary associations around some specific pan-regional policy effort (such as the collaborations between existing Combined Authorities today, or the networks surrounding Transport for the North). These initially informal associations will help to foster trust and shared agendas, becoming stable platforms for further empowerment, much as Combined Authorities have done since 2019. The situating of resources at this larger scale will make increasing sense as the ambitions of whole-region infrastructure, transport, and other projects grow.

These partnerships will also serve as a platform for addressing cross-boundary issues, coordinating investment in infrastructure and harmonising planning policies. To ensure effective collaboration, governance mechanisms must include robust consensus-building processes. These partnerships will act as transitional entities, enabling hubs to align priorities and pool resources without sacrificing local autonomy.

Central Government should ultimately stipulate that establishment of and participation in these pan-regional structures is mandatory for all Strategic Authorities within a specified geography.

### **3. Establish Provinces**

Provinces will operate as genuine regional authorities. Their establishment should coincide with elections to appoint the first regional Governors in England, ensuring clear mandates and creating the foundations for accountable governance at this scale.

Governors will have parity with the existing mayors of ‘hub and spoke’ Strategic Authorities, and attend the Council of Regions and Nations. They will represent the strategic interests of these much larger geographies, assume powers over policy areas such as transport, economic development, strategic planning, and coordination between sub-regions, and be eligible for flexible, integrated funding settlements. The maturation of provinces as power-wielding institutions and the beneficiaries of devolution should be managed with the same intergovernmental machinery as presided over the establishment of Strategic Authorities.<sup>28</sup>

For lasting, sustainable regional systems at this scale, principles of subsidiarity and ‘double devolution’ should be put into practice, ensuring that the interests of smaller towns and rural areas are not overshadowed by larger economic hubs. Provinces may tend to be comprised of larger numbers of constituent local authorities and sub-regional partnerships (see below), leading to greater political diversity. The behaviours and norms of successful Governors may therefore be quite different to that of mayors in more urban contexts: apolitical, independent-minded, highly pragmatic, and bullish advocates for the kinds of development and investment that can strengthen the networks and dispersed services that are essential in polycentric contexts.

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<sup>28</sup> Simon Kaye, India Woodward, and Giorgia Vittorino, *What Powers Where? Achieving the ‘Devolution Revolution’* (Reform, 2024).

At the same time, it will be important for Governors to enjoy the unequivocal power to mobilise strategic action in a context where disagreement might be more commonplace among constituent authorities.

#### **4. Evolve Constituent Strategic Authorities into Sub-Regional Partnerships**

Sub-regional partnerships may not be a permanent fixture in every part of every Province, but most of them will retain many of the convening capabilities and strategic and economic coordination value that they originally held when established as Foundation Strategic Authorities.

Where directly elected mayors have emerged to lead Strategic Authorities, the new Sub-Regional Partnerships will be able to retain someone in such a role, but public appetite for direct representation at this scale may be limited. Where present, these intermediate-scale strategic bodies represent an important part of the 'layering' that is conducive to the success of polycentric jurisdictions. They will both contribute to the success of the Province and help to promote the distinctiveness and context-sensitivity of policy that affects their jurisdictions in a way that their constituent authorities may not be able to.

#### **5. Transfer of power and resources**

Finally, this process should culminate in the empowerment and maturation of the new Provinces, enabling them to take on genuinely strategic roles. This includes control over transport networks, housing development, and regional economic strategy, as well as the ability to hold integrated budgets and implement regional taxation where appropriate. This should also include mechanisms for more participatory and direct forums for public engagement, such as citizens' assemblies or regional referenda, to enhance democratic accountability and build legitimacy for what is an entirely new scale of governance in England.

By following this roadmap, England can establish effective regional authorities in polycentric areas, bridging the governance gap between local and national levels. These larger, strategic bodies will enable polycentric regions to address shared challenges, unlock their economic potential, and foster a sense of regional identity and cohesion. Crucially, this approach recognises the distinctiveness of polycentric governance and provides a pragmatic yet ambitious framework for its realisation.

## 5. Conclusion

This short essay has set out the central elements of a new approach to regional policy in England. This vision aligns with the objective of the current Government to establish a comprehensive, strategic tier 'above' existing local authorities which can coordinate activities, promote growth, and become the locus for deepened devolution and non-Whitehall decision-making.

This vision would see significant devolution of powers and responsibilities into increasingly confident regional organisations with the right populations and geographies to put them to good use. They will be more accountable, decisive, and autonomous, with powerful directly elected mayors and governors to achieve the potential in every part of the country.

To achieve this, decision-makers must face up to the implications of their policies as they currently stand. Many Strategic Authorities will be hamstrung by a lack of operational scale, and compromised by the metro-centric biases that are embedded in the Combined Authority model from which new devolution efforts have evolved.

Strategic Authorities must therefore be viewed as the beginning, rather than the end, of the development of genuine regionalism in England. The ultimate solution will reflect a distinction between hub-and-spoke metro areas and the very different needs of larger 'polycentric' regions.

This essay, as the opening statement of *Reform's* policy research in this area, has established the overall vision and offered a broad sense of how this distinction should be recognised in policy and achieved in practice. These ideas will be developed further in a series of short reports.

Each report will elaborate on the ideas in this paper. They will also reflect the reality that true regionalism requires a willingness to innovate and adapt, with governance structures that reflect England's diverse economic and social geographies.

By embracing regional diversity, fostering collaboration, and scaling up where needed, a system can emerge that empowers communities, supports growth, and restores public trust: the unfinished business of devolution.

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