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# Devolution within devolution? A SWOT analysis of introducing combined authorities to Scotland

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## IMPACT

This analysis of a pressing public debate will interest local authority stakeholders, the Scottish Government, UK and Scottish policymakers, and professionals in urban planning and economic development. It explores the question of whether Scotland should adopt mayoral combined or strategic authorities on the English model. The article argues that Scotland must resist a simple 'copy-and-paste' importation. While the English experience shows that mayoral authorities can raise visibility, improve co-ordination, and sharpen economic growth agendas, they remain tightly constrained by Whitehall and risk entrenching inequalities. In Scotland, such reforms could aggravate the dominance of the populous 'central belt' region between Edinburgh and Glasgow, clash with existing institutional traditions, and even undermine the devolved settlement. Instead, the authors urge practitioners to take the opportunity to think differently: to design decentralization that is consensual, locally rooted, and distinctively Scottish. This article provides analysis to guide an evaluation of these choices before any significant, and potentially difficult to reverse, steps are taken - and supports the notion that copy-and-paste approaches to institutional reforms are misguided.

## ABSTRACT

Mayoral combined authorities, introduced in England after 2009, institutionalize limited policy levers over a range of areas. In Scotland, few new local government powers have emerged since devolution. However, since 2014, devolved administrations have pioneered 'deal' structures, introduced in England in 2013. Scottish Labour and other stakeholders have proposed exploring mayoral combined authorities for Scotland, but what are the merits? The authors conducted a SWOT analysis, identifying strengths and weaknesses of the English model to assess opportunities and threats for Scotland. The article highlights strengths, such as improved economic alignment and agenda-setting power, and weaknesses related to democratic accountability and a lack of substantive powers. In Scotland, there are opportunities to address some problems caused by 1990s reforms of local government, but threats lie in factors such as a lack of enthusiasm from the Scottish local government sector and the country's economic geography. The authors, therefore, caution against straightforward importation. The paper provides a novel demonstration of the utility of SWOT analyses in analysing political and administrative reform ideas, and further reinforces insights from public policy and administrative scholarship which emphasise the difficulties of 'copy and paste' approaches to reform.

## KEYWORDS

Decentralization; devolution; local government; mayoral combined authorities; Scottish politics and policy

## Introduction

Representing the most consequential reform to English local government in a generation, mayoral combined authorities (CAs), soon to be known as strategic authorities (SAs) following the *English Devolution White Paper* (MHCLG, 2024) and *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill 2025*, have emerged and evolved in England following cajolement and encouragement from the UK government since 2009. Headed by directly elected 'metro' mayors, they represent a new form of 'meso' level governance, which institutionalizes a limited array of levers over some policy areas, such as transport and economic development. They are now seen as the appropriate means to make up the shortfall in devolution in England since 1999, with a focus on these governance reforms being an essential tool in

achieving the government's growth mission (MHCLG, 2024), in line with OECD research (OECD, 2020; Jong et al., 2021).

This raises new and challenging issues for the Scottish Government and Parliament, which have experienced an expansion and then recentralization of their devolved competences since 1999 (Morphet, 2021) but where no substantial new powers or responsibilities have been granted to Scottish local government. However, the devolved administrations, including Scotland, have been the forerunners of the 'deal' structures (Morphet, 2022) that have also been introduced in England including an enhanced model of trailblazer devolution deals (TDD) for Greater Manchester and the West Midlands introduced in 2023, with integrated settlements for these areas (Morphet & Denham, 2023) confirmed in the 2025 Spending Review. The *English Devolution White Paper* (MHCLG, 2024) states all English deals will be abolished, including these new TDDs;

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instead, the focus will be on the integrated settlements model, which will be common across England and for which criteria and a programme for initial implementation is set out.

This focus on the relationship between governance models and economic growth creates a challenge for Holyrood. Should it accept that Scotland is equivalent to an English mayoral strategic authority as could be inferred from the parity of membership between first ministers and mayors on the Prime Minister's new Council of the Nations and Regions? Will economic growth in Scotland be adversely affected if the changes proposed in England generate economic growth? Will local authorities in Scotland be clamouring for a mayoral SAs in order to receive the same benefits as England—not least as their institutional structures are already complete and do not require local government reform as in England? What will happen with deals in the devolved administrations, with their centralized controls, if these are abolished in England? Finally, will Scottish local authorities now require integrated settlements from the Scottish government? This article examines these issues for Scotland, primarily through a SWOT analysis, after a consideration of the context for these English institutional reforms of sub-national government.

### Scottish local government—post-devolution developments

The present role of local government in Scotland was set by the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994, implemented in 1996, prior to the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The Act created 32 unitary local authorities with uniform competences. It also abolished the two-tier system of local and regional councils that had existed since 1973. The legislation that introduced these changes was adopted 'based on little meaningful public consultation' (McConnell, 2004, pp. 47–50). The nine regional councils had covered the entirety of Scotland's mainland and islands, and took the form of units such as Strathclyde (stretching from the Scottish lowlands, via Glasgow, to parts of Argyll) and Lothian (covering the area around Edinburgh), but also smaller regions such as the Borders and Fife. As such, they varied greatly in size, reflecting Scotland's diverse population geography, with the largest region numbering over two million (and therefore over half of Scotland's population) and the smallest only 130,000 (Mair, 2016), and creating incoherences between rural and urban areas. They enjoyed powers over a range of policy areas including education, social services, police, fire, sewage, roads, transport, and strategic planning—and were responsible both for policy formulation and implementation within these competences. However, they did not fully cohere with other areas of policy with a territorial element, particularly health (Mair, 2016). They were a central feature of Scottish governance in the pre-devolution era, and their loss has, generally, been lamented (even if few considered them flawless).

The decision to abolish the regional councils and replace them with a slimmed down model of local government replicated developments in England, which had had its urban county councils (such as Tyne and Wear, Greater Manchester, and most notably the Greater London Council)

abolished by the Conservative government. In Scotland, the decisions to abolish the regions, and change some boundaries of the new unitary authorities were controversial. The changes reflected longstanding tendencies in UK governance, which errs towards seeing local government as a delivery agent of the centre, and therefore 'casts the public as consumers of services, rather than citizens within an active local democracy' (Mair, 2016, p. 109).

There was also a clear partisan and ideological dimension. Conservative electoral decline in Scotland was a factor and so too was the longstanding pressure for local government reform within the Conservative Party and government, related to broader objectives to streamline the state (Midwinter, 1993). For example, the new boundaries in the Labour-dominated Greater Glasgow region seemed to be creatively drawn in order to cleave more affluent areas out of the Glasgow Council area and instead place them into the neighbouring suburban council areas (Ascherson, 1993). The combined effect of the reforms was to reduce the scale, scope, and reach of Glasgow City Council, and to weaken the political grip of the Labour Party in the region: in the words of the Secretary of State for Scotland Iain Lang, to '[lift] the baleful socialist shadow which stretches across the 'central belt' of Scotland and far beyond to the outlying areas' (HC, 14 July 1993, col. 998). The boundaries were, at least in part, the result of politically and ideologically motivated reasoning, carried out in the dying days of a politically doomed government, and clearly with little anticipation or forethought for the subsequent devolution settlement (Faulds, 2025, p. 5; Mair, 2016; Pugh & Connolly, 2016).

They created a system of local–central relationships marked by 'constitutional and legal subordination, financial dependency and low council profiles' (McGarvey, 2020). As early as 2014, COSLA (the umbrella body for local authorities in Scotland) bemoaned Scotland's development into 'one of the most centralized countries in Europe' (COSLA, 2014, p. 6). It is therefore all the more surprising that successive Labour and SNP executives/governments retained the arrangements after devolution. The most significant developments in Scottish local government in the post-devolution period include the 2007 Concordat and the 2023 Verity House Agreement (both between the Scottish local government sector and SNP-led governments) that sought to recast Holyrood-local relations, with the former emphasising partnership working and the latter 'local by default' (COSLA and Scottish Government, 2007). Each, while consequential, has not shifted the perception of increased centralization. One significant change for our purposes relates to the creation of 'city deals', negotiated directly by Westminster with Glasgow and Edinburgh, and, by 2023, covering the whole of Scotland. These saw the creation of city region structures to administer the deals, which consist of funding from (mainly) Westminster to pursue their centrally agreed goals related to economic growth. These bypassed, and thus undermined, devolution—representing a questionable basis on which to pursue a distinctively Scottish version of SAs/CAs (Morphet, 2022).

### SAs in England

CAs were introduced in England in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 after a

period of change in territorial emphasis in England. Between the 1930s and 2004, the sub-national focus had been on regions, with economic plans prepared in the post 1945 period, followed by the introduction of Government Offices for the Regions—and haphazard local government reform in the 1990s (Mawson, 2009; Morphet & Denham, 2023). This was followed, in 1998, with the introduction of Regional Development Agencies and (advisory) Regional Assemblies. The expected shift to democratically elected regional assemblies did not occur after a failed referendum in the North East of England in 2004, which marked a shift in scalar focus from regional to sub regional functional economic areas in line with Krugman (1980) and OECD (2019) research and advice. This change rescaling emerged in the Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration (SNR) (HMT, 2023) and in England these functional economic areas were known as ‘functional economic market areas’ (DCLG, 2010).

At the same time, there was a switch in the focus for English local government which had been promised new freedoms and flexibilities after a period of increased state control through performance, primarily through the best value regime. Local authorities were also reformed in their structures after the 2000 Local Government Act, which introduced executive and backbench councillor roles and shifted away from a committee system. The backbench councillors were expected to focus on their communities and this was reinforced through the principle of ‘new localism’ (Corry & Stoker, 2002) and Communities in Control (DCLG, 2008). The performance regime was reduced while local authorities worked together to negotiate multi-area agreements with central government. The regional structures began to be phased out. The subsequent 2009 Act introduced CAs in association with regional leaders boards and a greater role for MPs. The first CA was created in Leeds in early 2010 prior to the general election.

The incoming Coalition government removed all existing regional structures, introduced business-led and non-statutory Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in 2010 and then the potential for local authorities to work sub-regionally from 2012 onwards through the creation of its first deals programme—that for City Deals. Simultaneously, the government was negotiating how it would implement new EU Partnership Agreements to be introduced in 2014 which, for the first time, incorporated the increased principle of subsidiarity (Arribas & Bourdin, 2012), incorporated into the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) in 2009. The first UK submission was unacceptable to the European Commission as it was considered too centralized and the subsequent re-submission led by the Treasury was timed with Chancellor George Osborne’s announcement of the new arrangements for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in October 2014, with the promise of more to follow.

Progress was slow in negotiating further CAs while there was political pressure from other parts of England for similar funding arrangements but without the mayoral model. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government pursued an increasingly centralized and privatized approach to pandemic management, bypassing the established national emergency planning procedures that relied on local initiatives (Morphet, 2021). The pandemic provided visible evidence of the devolved powers held by first

ministers and this encouraged CA mayors to represent their areas to government in increasingly vocal ways. While having few powers, they started to use their convening role (i.e. their ability to bring together local and regional stakeholders) to bridge gaps for their localities (Morphet, 2021; Kippin & Morphet, 2024). After the pandemic, the Westminster government sought a pan-UK approach in ‘levelling up’ the UK (DLUHC, 2022), stating its intention to implement deals everywhere. At the point of publication of the *Levelling Up* white paper, all local authorities in the devolved administrations had concluded deals with the government, which cut across the devolution settlement (Morphet, 2022). Meanwhile, in the CAs, where mayors had been elected, and in London which had had a strategic local authority since 1999 with a directly elected mayor, there was frustration at the slow progress in the government’s fulfilment of its devolution promises.

The incoming government promised more devolution (Labour Party Manifesto 2024) reinforcing this in both their first budget and the publication of the *English Devolution White Paper* with its promise of structural governance reforms in England to complete what was omitted in 1999. CAs are now to become SAs and the Bill to enact these changes promises to create strategic scale institutional change with bespoke growth strategies (Reeves, 2025).

### Political and policy considerations in applying the English model in Scotland—issues for the 2026 elections for the Scottish Parliament

In recent years, the Scottish Government has been accused of replicating Westminster by accumulating too much power for itself, evident in reforms such as a freeze on council tax and the creation of national police and fire and rescue services (Vampa et al., forthcoming). The CA model in England has offered a visible counterweight to the partly analogous power of Westminster, and created momentum towards the creation of meaningful sub-national decision-making—as well as the potential (if not necessarily at present the reality) for more (Kippin & Kippin, 2024). Further, CAs have been held up as a potential means of improving the governance of Scotland’s two largest cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh, each of which has been the subject of longstanding complaints related to the performance of their city councils, and to potentially rethink problematic boundaries. The country’s other cities: Aberdeen, Dundee, Perth, Inverness, Stirling, and Dunfermline, are rarely mentioned as potential benefactors in this debate owing to their diminutive comparative size. For instance, the fifth largest locality in Scotland is Paisley, part of Greater Glasgow. Dunfermline, the sixth largest, would be a candidate for inclusion within an expanded Greater Edinburgh region. Much of Scotland, of course, is definitively rural. The supposed benefits of the importation of CAs or SAs can be summarised as:

- As an antidote to the Scottish Government’s ‘centralization’ (Anas Sarwar, Leader of Scottish Labour, quoted in Brown, 2022).
- Replicating the ‘benefits experienced by areas led by English Combined Authority Mayors and [pushing] devolution back to local authorities’—Secretary of State

for Scotland Ian Murray between July 2024 and September 2025 (quoted in Brown, 2025).

- As a means of aligning governance functions with democratic accountability (Dickson & Barnes, 2024).
- To improve economic and policy innovation (Reform Scotland, 2022).
- To improve the governance of Scotland's big cities, including in terms of democratic accountability (Hoolachan, 2024).
- To dilute the central belt's dominance of Scottish politics (Findlay, 2024).
- To provide Scotland's large cities with a 'seat at the table' in UK fora (Sweeney, 2024).

### The application of a SWOT analysis to Scotland's central/local dilemma

Using the device of a 'SWOT' analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of the introduction of CAs/SAs in the Scottish context are discussed below and summarised in Table 1. This heuristic is used frequently in strategic management planning, including in the public sector and public sector research, and provides a simple and intuitive means of evaluating the broad merits and demerits of an approach, idea, policy, or reform agenda, and has been deployed, as of 2010, thousands of times in peer reviewed academic research (Helms & Nixon, 2010). Appearing less frequently in political science research, it has been adopted most consequentially by Patrick Dunleavy and colleagues in exploring public service reform agendas, and in evaluating the broad health and strength of UK democracy (Dunleavy et al., 2011; Dunleavy et al., 2018). Beyond our immediate task of providing a framework for discussion and analysis as to the merits of adopting municipal CAs in Scotland, the

authors considered it appropriate for our purposes to develop, identify and clarify a future direction of research in this area.

Co-ordination between authorities already exists in Scotland's current deal structures, although they do not have Strategic Authorities. The feature that attracts UK government support for SAs in England is through the provision of directly elected mayors—something that does not feature in the Scottish local government system. There are substantial drawbacks, largely related to questions over legitimacy, mayors with few functions and competences, increased centralization by the UK government, reducing devolved administration powers, fettering devolved administration funding through pre-commitment requirements and economic geography. We explore these below.

### England: Strengths and weaknesses

#### Strengths

The soft power of CA mayors has been demonstrated (Kippin & Morphet, 2024; Kippin & Kippin, 2024) and the introduction of this sub-national tier of government in England has been seen to offer many strengths and opportunities, set out more explicitly in the *English Devolution White Paper*. These are primarily based on the research of the OECD (2019) which demonstrates that, where there is strong governance and leadership at sub-national level, this can add to national GDP and regarded as central to the government's growth mission. Other key benefits identified include the opportunities to align local governance and economic geography, which could create more trust in local services and increased efficiency in their operation. A strengthening of the voice of these sub-regions through the Council of

**Table 1.** SWOT analysis of CAs in the English and Scottish contexts.

Strengths of the English model	Weaknesses of the English model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alignment of local governance and economic geography</li> <li>• Increased potential for collaboration between local stakeholders</li> <li>• Increased local economic activity</li> <li>• Increase the profile and visibility of government (particularly cities)</li> <li>• Some evidence of innovative and popular public policy developments</li> <li>• Individual popularity of (some) mayors</li> <li>• Cross-party support for their establishment and strengthening</li> <li>• Potential to take on greater role in policy areas</li> <li>• Greater democratic accountability than predecessor organizations (unlike LEs, Regional Development Agencies)</li> <li>• Visible and identifiable local leader</li> <li>• Strength of local advocacy</li> <li>• Strength of local initiatives and solutions</li> <li>• Meets some of the OECD requirements for national growth in GDP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of substantive powers and resources</li> <li>• Not established as a 'class' of local government</li> <li>• Competences and functions partial and small</li> <li>• Institutional precarity and 'transactional' relationship with central government</li> <li>• Lacks genuine democratic legitimacy</li> <li>• Low public knowledge of or interest in most mayors and authorities</li> <li>• Inconsistency of powers, funding, role etc.</li> <li>• Some worrying signs of corruption, waste, and incompetence in certain authorities</li> <li>• Operational focus on central government away from CA local authority leaders</li> <li>• Staffed by seconded or former civil servants</li> <li>• Funding deals require to be approved by Whitehall civil servants</li> <li>• Doesn't deal with the accounting officer issue, i.e. remains with permanent secretaries and not with mayors or their chief executives</li> </ul>
Opportunities if adopted in Scotland	Threats to Scottish CAs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obvious candidate 'city regions'</li> <li>• Help larger cities 'compete' with English rivals by placing institutional structures on an equal footing</li> <li>• Creates a common approach of functional economic areas across the UK which could improve integration, economic performance, representation and public recognition</li> <li>• Could create a focus on and powers to address longstanding local public transport issues</li> <li>• Similar in nature to discarded 'regional councils'</li> <li>• Help 'shake up' under-performing local government in Scotland's big cities</li> <li>• Create more stable, permanent version of model in Scottish context</li> <li>• Improve 'centralized' Scottish governance</li> <li>• Collaboration between different mayors and authorities</li> <li>• Build on existing 'deal' relationships</li> <li>• Creates similar structures to those that exist in EU</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential for increased clientelism</li> <li>• Potentially viewed as semi-legitimate English 'imposition'</li> <li>• Reinforces rather than attenuates geographic inequalities</li> <li>• Increased bureaucracy and workload for stretched and overburdened local government</li> <li>• No traditional structures or appropriate nomenclature for directly elected local government figures in Scotland</li> <li>• Little appetite within Scottish local government</li> <li>• Disrupts longstanding stability of Scottish local government structures</li> <li>• Undermines existing devolution settlement already initiated through growth deals and Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023</li> <li>• Leaves equivalence with English institutions unresolved</li> </ul>



the Nations and Regions and the Deputy Prime Minister's Council of Mayors in England could create opportunities for mayoral influence at a UK scale in ways that have not been experienced before and improve the opportunities for local advocacy. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill 2025 also provides the opportunity to complete the 1999 devolution settlement by addressing governance in England with constitutional reform promises but no mechanisms revealed as to its delivery.

### Weaknesses

However, the proposals set out in the *English Devolution White Paper* show weaknesses as they still offer a more constrained, menu-driven approach to devolution in England than was offered in the first iteration of devolution in 1999. For example, a devolved administration for England is not being set up, which remains reliant on UK ministers for policy and priorities. The mayoral council offers a new way of coming together, but this remains under the control of central government. While the abolition of deals is welcomed, the new integrated settlements remain a mixed bag. The *English Devolution White Paper* states that the funding decisions and programmes will be under local control in some places, while the departmental chapters suggest specific purposes for the integrated settlement. The *English Devolution White Paper* retains the original control mechanism of the integrated settlement through the programme board, which is chaired by a senior Whitehall official (HMT, 2023). There is also no assessment of the proportion of public expenditure that will be devolved and the principles adumbrated in the 2024 Labour Party Manifesto and *English Devolution White Paper* are clouded by a volume of detail in the departmental chapters, hiding the small scale of what is on offer.

While the *English Devolution White Paper* states the government's intention to create a lasting subnational governance structure for England, supported by local government reorganization, there is little that suggests how this will be achieved. The creation of individual SAs will remain through secondary legislation. The example of the Mayor of London's powers, established in 1999 at the same time as the devolved administrations and frequently cited in the *English Devolution White Paper*, is described as 'bespoke' (p. 36), thus leaving this generic and strong model unused. There are also many references to a new devolution framework enshrined in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill 2025—although it is unclear what principles are being used. A further way of strengthening devolution in England could be through the reform of the House of Lords into a second chamber reflecting nations and regions, as set out in the Labour Party Manifesto, but the *English Devolution White Paper* is silent on this.

## Scotland: Opportunities and threats

### Opportunities

There are several reasons to support the notion that the expansion of CAs/SAs into Scotland is both viable and worthy of consideration. The most notable is that Glasgow and Edinburgh both have an international profile, are of

significant size and status, and lack governance structures which align with the broad region they sit at the heart of (Sweeney, 2024). Adoption of the CA/SA model, complete with high-profile directly-elected mayors, would likely enhance the external visibility of these two cities and increase their ability to contribute to Scottish and UK-level policy-making. Structural reform might provide new impetus to address urban policy challenges, such as transport system integration, decay of the public realm, and housing crises, that are not necessarily priorities for the Scottish Government, but also beyond the means of strained local authorities to address to an adequate degree.

Next, the context of a coherent overall governance picture in Scotland provides an opportunity to fine-tune the model within the parameters of a more consensual and orderly multi-level relationship. In contrast with England, where the relationship between Westminster and the local authorities is top-down, often adversarial, and distant, the relationship in Scotland (though strained in recent years) operates on a different set of parameters (Leach et al., 2017; Cairney & McGarvey, 2012). Given the greater coherence—at least in terms of form and powers—of the unitary authorities in operation in Scotland, which themselves match up more clearly with other territorial boundaries, there is scope for more consistent arrangements. These might exploit Scotland's clearer and more predictable division of powers than the partial, negotiated, and transactional approach that has evolved in England. There is also scope to achieve greater consistency with standard practice in Europe, where agglomeration within large conurbations is the norm, in line with the Scottish Government's aspirations to retain as much of a European approach to policy-making as is plausible within the confines of Brexit (Lock et al., 2021; Kaye, 2025).

### Threats

There are, however, serious threats to the viability of this agenda. The most obvious is a lack of enthusiasm for structural reform on the part of the Scottish local government sector, where powerful stakeholders have been a force for continuity with the retention of the pre-devolution local government boundaries and competences (McGarvey, 2011, 2020). Adoption of the model would require either the hard work of persuasion and cajolement of local authority stakeholders, or a 'Westminster style' act of imposition, which has generally been avoided since devolution (and in any case hardly addresses concerns about Holyrood centralization). Related to this is the looming presence of HM Treasury, which has enjoyed ownership of the English 'devolution' agenda, and is liable to seek to gain further influence over any developments beyond deals in Scotland. This may threaten the perceived legitimacy of any new structures along these lines in Scotland, and therefore the integrity of the devolved settlement. A January 2025 announcement by the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer confirmed that the Treasury sees Scotland—and indeed the Glasgow city region—as very much a part of its agenda for 'regional growth' (Reeves, 2025). A further issue relates to the 'true' presence of the 'meso' in Scottish governance. UK government announcements suggest a desire to place mayors on something approaching an equal footing with the devolved

first ministerships, through fora such as the Council of the Nations and Regions (Stride, 2024).

While there are further issues to consider in any implementation of reform, there are also the links with economic geography and whether this is urban in focus or relates to economic areas. While Glasgow and Edinburgh represent city regions for urban and political agglomeration, with each sitting at the heart of large conurbations with integrated economies and travel-to-work areas, the same is not true elsewhere in Scotland. For instance Scotland's third largest city, Aberdeen, has a similar population to Oldham or Trafford (both constituent parts of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority) although some proposed English SAs have the same level of population and/or are largely rural. Relatedly, the initial impetus for agglomeration in England arose in part from a concern about the country's geographic inequalities and a persistent 'north/south' divide which disadvantaged large, de-industrialized cities (Kippin & Morphet, 2024).

In Scotland's case, the viable city regions are considered advantaged relative to the rest of the country (which is not to imply a uniformity of wealth across these urban areas). Indeed, narratives of regional or geographical inequality in Scotland tend to describe the central belt (or at least Edinburgh) as being advantaged, or prioritized, by policy-makers (see Vampa, 2024). The creation of powerful mayoralties in Edinburgh and Glasgow risks exacerbating perceptions—and perhaps the reality of—territorial inequalities between the country's more populous and economically vibrant central belt and the large rural hinterlands and extremities that feel 'left behind' by comparison. Other parts of Scotland lack an urban core altogether, and would appear to be an uneasy fit for a mayoral structure. For instance the geographic Highlands, dominated by the Highlands Council Area, is equivalent in geographical size (if not population) to the country of Belgium. Any proposal to decentralize Scottish governance within the devolved system must grapple meaningfully with the extreme diversity of population distribution, geographical diversity, and economic activity—or risk repeating the more negative elements of the processes of regionalization described above. Table 1 demonstrates that this is far from an exhaustive selection of issues.

## Discussion and conclusion

The operation of the CAs system in England has not demonstrated any marked increase in devolution, nor any consistent form and shape to provide a template which other political systems should automatically aspire to adopt, even taking into account some promising developments in improved visibility, enhanced co-ordination, national agenda-setting, and innovative policy outputs. At the very best, this is a model in a state of considerable flux and, although all CAs have shared common identifying features, there are significant varieties in the range of powers on show, although there is a commitment to standardize these. Nonetheless, there are undoubtedly issues around centralization *within* the devolved system, and under-performing governance in Scotland's large cities. Therefore, we do not consider that stasis is the best option. Rather, there is an opportunity to adopt a more considered, bottom-up, and less transactional model of decentralization within the Scottish system, which

sits coherently and consistently within the UK polity, and which does not create obvious winners and losers based on political geography, and which more clearly realizes important benchmarks of decentralization.

This should be congruent with the virtues of post-devolution Scottish governance and the aspirations of landmark agreements, such as the Concordat and the values elaborated upon in the Christie Commission (Christie, 2011). It should also avoid the missteps of the past, working to avoid new concentrations of power, too-distant governance units, and high-handed acts of dubious legitimacy. While England has evolved into a 'patchwork quilt' of overlapping competences and non-contiguous boundaries, few such issues have arisen to any great extent in Scotland. This is a strength of current arrangements. South of the border, years of incremental and piecemeal reforms have generated a public governance system characterised by muddled, overlapping, and non-contiguous responsibilities and too-strong a role for the centre. These arrangements are opaque, unresponsive, and confusing for citizens. Scotland should be wary of any steps in this direction, and ensure that no area of the country is left relatively disadvantaged by renewed subnational arrangements. This research reinforces the supposition that policy reforms in general, and institutional reforms in particular, are difficult to replicate across different contexts where institutional traditions and governance arrangements differ – even when formally part of the same country.

Besides inactivity, the Scottish Government has a range of options. One is the possibility of adopting a city-wide model of governance for Edinburgh, Glasgow, and perhaps the two areas centred around Aberdeen and Dundee, with a consistent range of powers, and a governance model which mitigates against dominance by the largest unit. A second approach is to adopt the SA model of groups of local authorities, as in England, across the whole of Scotland's geography, potentially creating some equality of representation such as through SAs or a mayoral council. Such debates may also provide an opportunity to reconsider Scottish sub-national governance in the round, such as the boundaries and competences of local authorities, which are problematic. As such, in keeping with newer and more established Scottish traditions of politics and policy-making (and in line with the spirit of post-devolution agreements, such the Concordat between Holyrood and local government), any version of the CA/SA model in Scotland must emphasise its consensual and collaborative potential, rather than its promotion of dominant authorities to rule above the rest, or otherwise emerge as agents of the 'centre'. The longer term implications for devolution in Scotland should also be considered if this initiative is to be seriously considered.

## Disclosure statement

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