



The Chartered
Institute of Logistics
and Transport

Devolution and transport

PAPER

Introduction

This paper examines how current forms of devolution in England, particularly the emergence of Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs), affect transport policy, delivery, and outcomes for rural areas. While devolution itself is not new, the scale and structure of recent reforms create a new landscape in which rural economies may either benefit from greater regional coordination or risk being overshadowed by dominant urban centers.

The paper explores whether these new governance arrangements can strengthen rural connectivity, performance, and productivity, and what strategic intentions government holds for rural areas beyond their role as green belt buffers. With Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland having undergone

significant devolution, their experiences provide valuable insight. In developing the paper, consideration has been given to these experiences to understand the lessons learned and identify opportunities that may inform future policy development.

Why transport matters for rural economic growth and regional equality

Transport underpins economic performance by enabling the movement of goods, services, and people. For rural areas, connectivity is not merely a convenience but a determinant of economic viability. Poor transport links restrict access to labour markets, education, healthcare, and supply chains, contributing to demographic decline and reduced productivity. Conversely,

integrated and reliable transport networks can unlock rural potential, supporting small businesses, tourism, agriculture, and freight-dependent industries.

Strengthening rural transport is therefore essential not only for local prosperity but for balanced regional growth. The question is whether the new MCA structures can deliver this.

Defining devolution in the current context

Devolution in the UK has multiple layers. Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland operate mature political models shaped by constitutional and historical factors. While best practice from these nations remains valuable, this paper focuses on English regional devolution, where the most significant changes affecting rural transport are occurring.

In England, what is commonly referred to as ‘devolution’ is better understood in the two parts below.

This two-stage model creates larger, more powerful authorities that encompass both major urban centres and extensive rural hinterlands. The central question is whether this scale enables better outcomes for rural areas or risks marginalising them.

Structural consolidation

Local and unitary authorities are brought together under a Mayoral Combined Authority, which becomes the Local Transport Authority (LTA) for the region. This shifts strategic transport planning from individual councils to a larger regional body.

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Devolution of additional powers

MCAs receive further responsibilities, often including transport, planning, economic development, and skills, enabling them to shape regional priorities and investment.

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What is the strategic ambition for rural areas?

A key challenge is the lack of a clear national policy intention for rural areas. Beyond protecting green belt land, government strategy often lacks a coherent vision for rural economic development, transport connectivity, or demographic sustainability.

This paper therefore asks:

- ***Can rural areas become stronger, economically and socially, through the MCA model?***
- ***Do MCAs have the incentives, frameworks, and accountability mechanisms to deliver for rural communities?***
- ***How should performance be measured to ensure rural needs are not overshadowed by urban priorities?***

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Scope of devolution and implications for transport

Transport responsibilities now sit across multiple layers

- **Local authorities:** local roads, bus priority, parking, active travel, local planning.
- **MCAs:** strategic transport planning, Local Transport Plans, bus franchising, rail partnerships, economic development.
- **National government:** strategic roads, rail infrastructure, freight corridors, aviation policy.

The principle of appropriateness remains essential: not every function should be devolved to the lowest tier. Freight, minerals planning, and cross-boundary connectivity often require regional or national coordination.

From pros and cons to performance and outcomes

Rather than debating the merits of devolution itself, which is already embedded, the focus should shift to performance, particularly in mixed urban–rural regions.

Key tests for MCAs should include:

- **Connectivity:** Are rural communities better connected to jobs, services, and markets?
- **Integration:** Are bus, rail, active travel, and road networks planned as a coherent system?
- **Frequency and accessibility:** Are rural services improving or declining?
- **Freight efficiency:** Are supply chains supported, especially where rural roads bear disproportionate burdens?
- **Economic impact:** Are rural businesses benefiting from regional investment and planning?

The MCA model offers potential economies of scale and the ability to plan strategically across wider geographies. But this potential must be realised in practice.

Policy frameworks and governance realities

M CAs operate within increasingly robust frameworks – National Policy Statements, National Planning Policy Framework, Local Transport Plans, Local Plans, environmental duties, economic strategies - which require them to demonstrate coherent, evidence-based decision-making across their entire region.

However, tensions exist:

STBs vs MCAs

Sub-national Transport Bodies have developed strong strategic capabilities but lack statutory transport powers. This is with the exception of Transport for the North where their statutory status brings with them consultee roles which assists in bringing regional perspectives. As MCAs grow in authority, duplication and uncertainty arise. STBs' expertise - especially in freight - must not be lost. As an example, the extensive work and expertise developed by Transport East and Transport for the North on Rural Transport should be harnessed.

Urban dominance

In some MCAs, such as West Yorkshire, there is a risk of inward-looking priorities that overlook rural areas within and beyond their boundaries. Rural roads often carry freight serving urban economies, yet investment may not reflect this.

Reform beyond transport

Transport reform is not happening in isolation. Reorganisations in policing, health and other public services may increase travel distances and uncertainty for rural residents, compounding existing challenges linked to distance and limited public transport.

In other areas, for example the discussion on graduated driving licenses, needs consideration in the rural context and the impact this has on both public transport needs and accessibility issues.

This reinforces the central message: rural communities face additional pressures and must be actively listened to as reforms take shape.

Cross boundary issues

Transport networks do not respect administrative borders. Examples include:

- **North Yorkshire roads carrying trunk haulage between West Yorkshire and Scotland.**
- **Rail and bus networks across the old West Riding cutting across North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, and Lancashire.**
- **Rural–urban commuting patterns that span multiple MCAs.**
- **Cheshire West and Chester and Shropshire which support movements from the North West/Midlands (and beyond) to the Port of Holyhead (for the Republic of Ireland/ Northern Ireland)**
- **Gloucestershire/Herefordshire/ Shropshire which support North East Wales to Mid and South Wales movements and v.v. and movement from the South West to/from South Wales**
- **Cross Border rail services from rural areas into urban areas both for passenger and freight – which can get squeezed out due to MCA priorities who desire more control over their congested networks where has rural and cross border services want more access. (The current railways bill is relevant in that regard).**
- **One of the best examples of this cross border complexity will be at Chester which will be in the new Cheshire and Warrington MCA but it is the hub for North Wales/Chester area to the adjacent areas of the Merseyside/ Greater Manchester and longer distance movements to London, West Midlands, Marches and South Wales.**
- **A classic example of this arose back in 2021 as part of the Manchester Recovery Task force (MRTF) timetable consultation for services in the North West and North Wales into Manchester. Three option groups were presented one of which would have diverted North Wales services to Manchester Victoria and losing connectivity to Manchester Airport.**
- **There are also Scottish (Dundee) and Northern Ireland (City of Derry) examples aviation Public Service Obligations (PSO) examples which protect access into Heathrow and Gatwick.**
- **Airports may serve catchment areas beyond the administrative area in which they sit. For example, passengers at Stansted Airport, in Essex and the East Anglia region, but 45% have origins and destinations in Greater London. East Midlands Airport is the second largest airport in the UK for freight and serves a much wider catchment then the East Midlands.**

Some MCAs, such as York & North Yorkshire, appear more attuned to rural needs due to the geography and leadership of the region.

Freight and rural complexity

Freight movements highlight the need for systems thinking. Rural areas often host critical infrastructure such as quarries, seaports, airports and distribution corridors, yet they may not receive proportional investment. Poor connectivity can constrain growth, suppress economic activity, accelerate population decline, and undermine regional productivity. As the rail landscape evolves with the formation of Great British Railways and the increasing role of Mayoral Combined

Authorities in shaping local rail access and service integration, it becomes even more important to ensure that rural freight and connectivity needs are fully recognised within these emerging structures.

A universal access obligation for transport, tailored to support the foundational economy through the local context, could help ensure rural equity for both passenger and freight movements.

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Learning from existing governance

STBs have demonstrated the value of regional coordination, evidence-based planning, and shared expertise. Their best practices should inform future MCA models, including:

- **Collaborative planning with DfT and local authorities.**
- **Data sharing and technical capability.**
- **Long term strategic planning across boundaries.**
- **Rural mobility innovation (e.g., Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence).**
- **Freight Forums (Transport East/Transport for the South East/England's Economic Heartland and Western Gateway/Peninsula Transport).**
- **Airport Transport Forums (required at larger airports to co-ordinate surface access).**
- **Although not an STB, mention should be made of the work of the Mesey Dee Alliance which is a cross border strategic partnership of local authorities, businesses and universities across Flintshire, Wrexham, Wirral and Cheshire West and Cheshire. One of its key aims is to address administrative barriers caused by the England – Wales border which complicates planning and transport. This is the most advanced of the three Welsh Cross Border 'zones' the other being Mid Wales to the West Midlands and South Wales to the South West.**

These lessons remain relevant regardless of future governance structures.

Conclusion and recommendations

Devolution is already reshaping transport governance. The task now is to ensure it delivers for rural areas. Key recommendations include:

- **Define the strategic ambition for rural areas within national and regional policy.**
- **Adopt a performance based approach, focusing on connectivity, economic outcomes, and social equity rather than structural debates.**
- **Apply the principle of appropriateness, with strategic planning at MCA/STB level and delivery at local level.**
- **Preserve and transfer expertise, especially from STBs, to avoid capability gaps.**
- **Use systems thinking to manage cross boundary impacts and multimodal networks.**
- **Guarantee baseline access, ensuring rural communities and businesses receive appropriate, locally informed transport provision.**
- **Communicate clearly using accessible language and visual tools to explain governance and outcomes.**

With the right frameworks and accountability, MCAs can strengthen rural economies and improve regional productivity. But this requires deliberate focus, robust performance measures, and a clear national vision for rural areas.

Devolution presents a significant opportunity to improve connectivity and regional productivity. But it will only succeed if rural communities are informed, represented and recognised as central to economic growth.

Next steps

We plan to engage with national government and local authorities, but we are always interested to hear from or about other interested parties, so if you have any comments on what you have read, please contact the CILT(UK) Policy Group:

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