

Reclaiming Yorkshire: A Blueprint for True Local Power

Executive Summary

The United Kingdom's highly centralized governance structure, exacerbated by an outdated electoral system, has demonstrably stifled local representation and undermined regional development, particularly in areas like Yorkshire. The First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system distorts local council representation, leading to disproportionality, suppressed diverse voices, and reduced accountability. Concurrently, central government initiatives, such as "Northern Powerhouse" and "Levelling Up," have often proven to be superficial, characterized by insufficient funding, retained Westminster powers, and a persistent financial dependency that renders local efforts ineffective.

This report proposes a comprehensive blueprint for genuine local power, centered on a two-house Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMPR) system for both local and national governance. At the local level, this system would feature a Party-List PR house for party-aligned representatives and a Schulze Single Transferable Vote (STV) house for independent candidates, ensuring both ideological proportionality and granular community-level representation. Nationally, a similar two-house structure would prevent complete party dominance and necessitate cross-chamber collaboration. Beyond electoral reform, the blueprint advocates for substantial legislative and fiscal autonomy for regions like Yorkshire, drawing on successful models from unitary states such as Germany and Spain. This includes regional control over taxation, industrial strategy, environmental stewardship, infrastructure development, and tailored public services.

The proposed transformation aims to foster a more robust, responsive, and equitable democracy, empowering local communities to shape their own futures, drive sustainable economic growth, and address unique regional needs with genuine authority and accountability.

1. The Case for Proportional Representation in Local Councils

Problem: The Distorting Lens of First Past the Post (FPTP) in Local Governance

The First Past the Post (FPTP) system, which governs local council elections in England and Wales, is increasingly recognized as fundamentally flawed and ill-suited for contemporary multi-party politics. Designed to sustain a system dominated by two major parties, its application in an era of diversifying political preferences yields chaotic and unpredictable outcomes, as voters increasingly express dissatisfaction with traditional political establishments.

The inherent disproportionality of FPTP is evident in the stark contrast between vote shares and seat allocations. Recent local elections illustrate this vividly: Reform UK secured 41% of seats despite polling only 31% of the vote, while Labour, with a 14% vote share, obtained a mere 6% of seats. Conversely, the Liberal Democrats, with 17% of the vote, surprisingly outperformed the

Conservatives (23% vote share) by winning 23% of seats compared to the Conservatives' 19%. Such disparities underscore the system's tendency to over-reward some parties while severely under-representing others, leading to outcomes that do not accurately reflect the electorate's collective will.

The inconsistency of FPTP's effects across different geographical areas further highlights its arbitrary nature. For instance, Reform UK's vote share was five points higher in Cambridgeshire than in Oxfordshire, yet its seat return in Cambridgeshire was eight times greater. Similarly, a 33% vote share in Leicestershire translated into 46% of seats, while a slightly higher 37% in Derbyshire yielded a disproportionate 66% of seats. This geographical lottery means that similar levels of support can result in vastly different political power, undermining the principle of equal votes.

In Yorkshire, the consequences of FPTP are directly observable. The election of the new York & North Yorkshire mayor, David Skaith, with just 35.1% of the vote, exemplifies how candidates can win significant positions with the support of a minority of the electorate. This outcome means that nearly two-thirds of voters did not directly endorse the winning candidate, diminishing the democratic mandate and potentially fostering a sense of disenfranchisement among the majority.

Beyond numerical distortions, FPTP actively stifles diverse voices and reduces accountability. The system inherently suppresses political diversity, creating significant barriers for smaller parties, independent candidates, and grassroots movements to gain meaningful representation. It favors geographically concentrated support, rendering votes for parties or candidates with broader but less localized appeal effectively "wasted". This phenomenon is widespread, with 57.8% of voters in the 2024 general election being unrepresented because their preferred candidate did not win. The unequal value of votes, where it took an average of 23,500 votes for Labour to win a seat compared to over 820,000 per Reform MP in 2024, compels tactical voting. Voters are often forced to choose a candidate they do not genuinely prefer, merely to prevent a less desired outcome, further eroding the authenticity of representation and voter engagement. The system's design also concentrates power within major parties, leading to reduced accountability. FPTP creates "safe seats" where election outcomes are largely predetermined, allowing politicians to rely on party loyalty rather than active representation of diverse local needs. In Yorkshire, this manifests in areas like North Yorkshire being reliably Conservative, while South Yorkshire remains historically Labour-leaning. This dynamic can lead to a lack of responsiveness from elected officials, as their re-election is often secured regardless of their performance or engagement with the broader electorate. This also reinforces "regional fiefdoms," where one party dominates, effectively silencing minority voices within those regions and exaggerating perceived social and geographical divisions.

The increasing prevalence of "no overall control" in local councils—161 in Great Britain in 2025, a significant increase from 145 in 2024—signals a growing voter dissatisfaction with traditional party dominance and the system's inability to produce clear majorities. While this might appear to introduce diversity, it often results from fragmented vote shares that the FPTP system struggles to translate into stable governance, leading to complex coalition negotiations and potential instability.

The fundamental design of FPTP, intended for a two-party system, is increasingly incompatible with the evolving multi-party political landscape in the UK. This incompatibility leads to severe disproportionality between vote share and seat share, which is not merely an inefficiency but a fundamental breakdown of the system's ability to accurately reflect the electorate's will. When a significant proportion of votes are effectively "wasted" and winning candidates secure mandates on low vote shares, it erodes public trust in the electoral process and the legitimacy of elected

bodies. This dynamic fosters voter apathy and a pervasive sense that the system is unfair and unresponsive, rather than a true reflection of collective preference. Furthermore, the FPTP system creates "safe seats" and "regional fiefdoms," where the electoral outcome is largely predetermined. In such constituencies, the necessity for local politicians to be highly accountable to the broader electorate beyond their core supporters is diminished. This weakens the direct connection between local representation and the diverse needs of the community. This lack of genuine local contestation and accountability under FPTP contributes to the perceived weakness and diminished role of local government. When local voices are stifled, and diverse opinions struggle to gain a foothold, it reinforces the narrative that central government must retain control, as local bodies are not seen as sufficiently representative or capable. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where the inherent flaws of FPTP at the local level implicitly justify continued Westminster centralization, further disenfranchising regions like Yorkshire.

The following table illustrates the distortion caused by FPTP in recent UK local elections, including specific examples relevant to Yorkshire:

Table 1.1: FPTP Distortion in UK Local Elections (with Yorkshire Examples)

Party / Outcome	Projected National Vote Share (2025)	Actual Seat Share (2025)	Distortion Examples / Impact
Reform UK	31%	41%	Polled 5 points higher in Cambridgeshire than Oxfordshire, yet seat return increased eightfold.
Labour	14%	6%	Secured just 6% of seats on 14% of the vote.
Conservatives	23%	19%	Won 19% of seats on 23% of the vote.
Liberal Democrats	17%	23%	Outperformed Conservatives in seats despite polling 6 points lower.
York & North Yorkshire Mayoral Election	N/A	David Skaith won with 35.1% of the vote.	Winner elected on a low share of the vote, diminishing democratic mandate.
Overall Trend	N/A	161 councils under 'no overall control' (up from 145 in 2024).	Reflects increasing voter dissatisfaction and system's inability to produce stable majorities.

Solution: A Proposed Two-House Local Council System under Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMPR)

To fundamentally address the systemic distortions and democratic deficits inherent in the current FPTP system at the local level, a novel Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMPR) system is proposed for local councils in Yorkshire. This innovative structure, featuring

two distinct houses, aims to combine the benefits of proportional representation with robust independent and local accountability, thereby fostering a more truly representative and dynamic local democracy.

House 1: Party-List Proportional Representation (PR) for Party-Aligned Representatives

The first house of the local council would be elected via Party-List Proportional Representation. In this system, voters would cast a single vote for their preferred political party. Seats in this house would then be allocated proportionally to the total party votes received across multi-member districts, ensuring that the political composition of the council accurately reflects the overall party preferences of the electorate. Parties would present pre-ordered lists of candidates (closed lists), or the system could allow voters to influence the order of candidates within a party's list (open lists), providing flexibility in candidate selection. To ensure precise proportionality, various apportionment methods, such as the Sainte-Laguë method (known for being generally unbiased) or the Hare quota, could be employed. Electoral thresholds could be set to prevent excessive fragmentation, ensuring a workable number of parties are represented. The primary benefits of this house include a significant reduction in disproportionality and "wasted votes," as every vote contributes to a party's overall seat share. This fosters multi-party legislatures, encouraging political parties to develop broader, more appealing policy platforms to maximize their vote share, which can lead to more collaborative and consensus-driven governance. Moreover, this system inherently diminishes the opportunity for gerrymandering, as seats are allocated proportionally across larger multi-member districts, making it considerably more challenging to manipulate boundaries for partisan advantage.

House 2: Schulze Single Transferable Vote (STV) for Independent Representatives

The second house would be uniquely composed entirely of independent candidates, ensuring a dedicated space for non-partisan voices. Voters would cast a single transferable vote by ranking individual candidates by name in carefully managed multi-member constituencies. The Schulze STV method would be the chosen mechanism for this house. This multi-winner ranked-choice system is particularly noted for its resistance to tactical voting and its ability to elect a Condorcet winner—a candidate who would defeat every other candidate in a head-to-head contest. A critical rule would be that candidates are prohibited from appearing on a party list for House 1 and simultaneously running as an independent for House 2, ensuring a clear and uncompromised distinction between the two chambers.

This independent house would establish a direct and robust link between representatives and their local constituents, directly addressing the "severed link" often observed under FPTP. It would provide a genuine pathway for diverse, non-party voices and grassroots movements to gain representation, even without the backing of traditional party machinery. The STV mechanism ensures that votes are not "wasted," as voter preferences are transferred if a candidate is elected with a surplus or eliminated, maximizing the impact of each ballot. This design fosters greater voter engagement and allows for the election of individuals based on their merit, local appeal, and specific community advocacy, rather than strict adherence to party lines.

Specific Benefits of this Combined Local System

The dual-chamber MMPR system offers a synergistic approach to representation and

governance, creating a more dynamic and responsive local democracy for Yorkshire.

Firstly, it ensures **true representation and competition** by providing both broad ideological proportionality (via Party-List PR in House 1) and granular, community-level representation (via Schulze STV for independents in House 2). This creates a dynamic where political parties are incentivized to appeal broadly across the region, while independent representatives can focus intensely on specific local issues and advocate for distinct community needs. This structure fosters genuine competition, even for smaller political entities and diverse viewpoints that are often marginalized under FPTP. The Condorcet property of Schulze STV ensures that the most broadly preferred independent candidates are elected, further legitimizing their role and enhancing their capacity to represent community consensus. This contrasts sharply with the current system, where many voters feel unrepresented and their choices are effectively "wasted".

Secondly, the system is **optimized against gerrymandering**. While Party-List PR inherently reduces the impact of boundary manipulation by allocating seats proportionally across larger multi-member districts, the multi-member constituencies of STV further mitigate this risk. By ensuring that substantial minority groups can elect representatives within these districts, regardless of how boundaries might be drawn to favor one party in a single-member contest, the system dilutes the effectiveness of gerrymandering. This structural resilience protects the integrity of local representation from partisan manipulation.

Thirdly, it leads to **increased politician accountability**. Representatives elected through Party-List PR are accountable for their party's overall platform and performance across the region, encouraging them to pursue broadly appealing policies. Concurrently, independent representatives elected via Schulze STV are directly accountable to their constituents for their individual actions, local advocacy, and responsiveness to specific community concerns. This dual accountability mechanism ensures that politicians in both houses are incentivized to work diligently to represent their constituents, as their success depends on different but complementary forms of public support. This moves beyond the "safe seat" phenomenon under FPTP, where accountability can be weak due to predetermined outcomes.

Finally, the existence of two distinct houses, each with its own mandate and electoral logic, **fosters genuine collaboration and compromise** for legislation to pass. This prevents any single party or bloc from dominating local governance and compels negotiation between party-aligned and independent representatives. The requirement for cross-house consensus encourages a more consensual approach to policy-making, leading to more robust, widely supported, and nuanced local decisions that truly reflect the diverse interests of Yorkshire's communities. This fundamental governmental restructuring at the local level would create a more robust and responsive democracy.

Best Practices for Designing Multi-Member Constituencies under STV

The effective implementation of Schulze STV for the independent house relies heavily on the careful design of multi-member constituencies.

The **district magnitude**, which refers to the number of members to be elected in each constituency, is a crucial determinant of the system's proportionality. While larger districts generally lead to greater proportionality by allowing smaller groups to elect representatives, a balance is necessary to maintain a recognizable local link and ensure representatives remain connected to their communities. Academic consensus suggests that districts with **three to seven seats** tend to perform effectively, with odd numbers (3, 5, or 7) often preferred. This range allows for diverse representation while maintaining a manageable constituency size,

ensuring that a meaningful proportion of the electorate can elect a candidate of their choice. **Boundary design** is equally important. Constituencies should be drawn to align with "natural, administrative and locally recognised boundaries". This approach helps preserve community identity and ensures that representatives are genuinely connected to the areas they serve, rather than serving artificially constructed electoral units. The inherent flexibility of STV in geographic boundaries can also enhance accessibility and representation for dispersed populations within Yorkshire.

From the voter's perspective, the STV ballot is no more complicated than other forms of ranked-choice voting, requiring voters to rank candidates by preference (1, 2, 3, etc.). While the underlying calculation process for Schulze STV is computationally more complex than traditional STV, often requiring computer assistance, the voter experience remains straightforward and intuitive. This ensures that the benefits of sophisticated electoral mechanics are realized without imposing an undue burden on the electorate.

The effective implementation of this dual-chamber system ensures that broad ideological representation is achieved through the party-list house, while granular, community-level representation is secured through the independent house elected by Schulze STV. This design creates a system where parties are compelled to appeal to a wider base and are held accountable for their overall platform, and concurrently, individual, non-partisan candidates are empowered to ensure specific local needs and minority voices are heard and directly represented, fostering granular accountability. The Condorcet property of Schulze STV ensures that the most broadly preferred independent candidates win, further legitimizing their role. This dual structure prevents any single party from monopolizing power and compels cross-house collaboration, leading to more nuanced, locally-responsive policy-making. It transforms accountability from a top-down party-line dynamic to a multi-faceted system where both party performance and individual constituent service are rewarded, making local governance more robust and reflective of Yorkshire's diverse communities.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of STV in achieving proportionality and diverse representation is directly tied to the district magnitude. By designing constituencies with an optimal number of seats (e.g., 3-7) and aligning them with natural, administrative, and locally recognized boundaries, the system inherently dilutes the impact of gerrymandering. This structural design ensures that even in areas with strong party leanings, significant minority groups can elect a representative in the independent house, breaking down the "fiefdom" effect. It also reinforces the local link, making local government more genuinely reflective of its communities' diverse sentiments, thereby strengthening its legitimacy and capacity to push back against centralizing tendencies.

Table 1.2: Proposed Two-House Local Council Structure: Roles and Election Methods

House	Primary Role	Election Method	Voter Action	Key Benefits	Overall System Benefits
House 1 (Party-List PR)	Party-aligned representation, policy development	Party-List Proportional Representation (PR)	Choose party	Proportionality, reduced wasted votes, diverse party representation, anti-gerrymandering	Enhanced representation, optimized against gerrymandering, increased politician accountability, fostering

House	Primary Role	Election Method	Voter Action	Key Benefits	Overall System Benefits
					cross-house collaboration
House 2 (Independents via Schulze STV)	Independent representation, local accountability, community advocacy	Schulze Single Transferable Vote (STV)	Rank individual candidates	Direct constituent link, independent voice, minority representation, resistance to tactical voting	

2. The Illusion of Local Power: How Westminster Undermines Devolution in Yorkshire

Problem: Central Government's Hampering of Devolution Initiatives

Despite the persistent rhetoric surrounding initiatives like "Northern Powerhouse" and "Levelling Up," current devolution efforts in the UK, particularly within Yorkshire, are widely perceived as largely symbolic or "false promises". This perception stems from a consistent pattern of central government retaining significant control, providing insufficient funding, and maintaining key legislative powers, thereby rendering local efforts largely ineffective.

The "Levelling Up" agenda, despite its stated ambition to address regional disparities, has faced considerable criticism for its centralized management and inadequate financial backing. Reports indicate that the funds allocated were "thinly spread," overly focused on infrastructure projects directed by central government, and lacked clear success criteria, making it difficult to assess their true impact. A government watchdog, the Industrial Strategy Council, explicitly noted that these plans were "insufficient and centrally managed, rather than being controlled by regions". Further scrutiny revealed a concerning pattern of "pork barrel politics" in the allocation of "Levelling Up" funds. Analysis by the *Financial Times* indicated that the methodology used to determine funding ignored standard poverty indicators, instead classifying wealthier, Conservative-voting areas as "priority one" regions, often ahead of more deprived Labour-voting areas. This was corroborated by *The Guardian*, which found that Conservative-run local authorities received significantly higher per capita grants (£93) compared to Labour-run ones (£65). Such findings strongly suggest that funding decisions were politically motivated rather than genuinely needs-based, severely undermining the credibility and effectiveness of the entire initiative.

Yorkshire, a key target for "Levelling Up," has experienced direct financial erosion due to central government policies. North Yorkshire, a significant part of the region, has already lost £14 million from the Rural Services Delivery Grant, and projections indicate an additional £27 million annual loss from the government's "fair funding review". Local leaders have vocally criticized this, describing it as "taking money off rural areas and putting into urban areas," characterizing it as a "ruthless way to shift monies". This directly translates into tangible cuts to essential local services, including social care, support for children with special needs, and critical road maintenance, exacerbating issues like the pervasive problem of potholes, which disproportionately affect rural areas with extensive road networks.

Adding to the financial constraints, the proposed 100% council tax equalisation would further

centralize financial control. This measure would offset a council's full tax base when determining its funding, effectively transferring money from areas with a relatively high council tax base, such as North Yorkshire, to those with a lower base. This policy not only disincentivizes local efforts to grow the tax base but also met with limited support, with only one in four councils backing the approach in previous consultations. Broader trends in council funding across the UK reveal a staggering £11.3 billion cut since 2010, leading to the loss of over 500,000 council jobs and significant reductions in vital services such as parks, children's centers, and youth services. These cuts disproportionately impact vulnerable populations and reduce the money circulating within local economies, creating a downward spiral in employment prospects.

Westminster's continued retention of key legislative powers and the resulting financial dependency further illustrate the superficiality of current devolution. While Combined Authorities (CAs) and Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) have been established in parts of Yorkshire, such as Hull and East Yorkshire, and are gaining some powers over transport and skills funding, central government frequently imposes "detailed and specific targets" across these and other areas, including housing, net zero, and business support. This means that even where powers are ostensibly devolved, the central government dictates the parameters and objectives. Mayoral strategic authorities remain "largely dependent on central government grants," with minimal additional revenue-raising powers beyond a small precept on council tax. This profound financial dependency means that local efforts, even when well-intentioned, are often rendered ineffective due to budgetary constraints and central mandates. The UK's sub-national revenue autonomy, at 35%, is significantly lower than the EU average of 53%, starkly highlighting this dependency. This financial stranglehold perpetuates the perception that current devolution is a "false promise".

The underlying issue is Westminster's deeply ingrained tradition of centralized policymaking, which operates on the flawed assumption of "homogenous needs across regions". This approach has directly contributed to persistent interregional economic disparities, particularly between northern and southern England, which are among the most severe in developed countries. A top-down approach inevitably limits the effectiveness of place-based initiatives, as central government lacks the granular understanding necessary to effectively micromanage or respond to local complexities and unique needs.

The current approach to devolution, characterized by delegation without genuine legislative and fiscal power, leads to local bodies primarily administering central government agendas. This dynamic fosters significant frustration at the local level and undermines efforts to address deep-seated regional inequalities, as evidenced by the persistent productivity gap in the North. The frequent "churn" of these policies further indicates a lack of long-term commitment and stability, which is essential for effective regional development.

The profound financial dependency of UK local authorities on central government grants, coupled with significant budget cuts, represents the primary lever of control and constraint. This financial reliance means that even when legislative powers are nominally transferred, the central government retains ultimate authority through its control over funding. Budget cuts, funding reviews that redistribute resources away from certain areas, and the absence of robust local revenue-raising powers directly constrain local councils' ability to act independently and effectively. This fiscal centralization undermines the "social contract" between local government and its citizens, as accountability shifts upwards to the funding source rather than downwards to the local taxpayer. It stifles local innovation and the development of tailored solutions for public services, as local authorities are compelled to prioritize adherence to central funding criteria over unique regional needs. This financial stranglehold is the most significant barrier to "true local power" in Yorkshire.

The following table summarizes key instances and impacts of central government undermining devolution in Yorkshire:

Table 2.1: Central Government Undermining Devolution in Yorkshire: Key Instances and Impacts

Initiative/Policy	Central Control/Interference	Impact on Yorkshire/Local Councils
"Levelling Up" Agenda	Centrally managed funds, lack of inflation-proofing, "pork barrel politics" in fund allocation.	Estimated £560m loss due to lack of inflation-proofing (IPPR North). Funding decisions often politically motivated, not needs-based.
"Fair Funding Review"	Shifting money from rural to urban areas.	North Yorkshire anticipates £27m annual loss. Direct impact on social care, children's services, road maintenance (potholes).
100% Council Tax Equalisation	Offsetting full council tax base when determining funding; disincentivizing local tax base growth.	Transfers funding from areas with higher tax bases (e.g., North Yorkshire) to lower ones, limiting local financial autonomy.
Overall Council Funding Cuts	£11.3 billion cut from council budgets since 2010; over 500,000 council jobs lost.	Significant reductions in services (parks, children's centers, youth services). Reduces money in local economies, leading to job losses.
Retention of Key Legislative Powers	Westminster retains control over strategic planning, transport, economic development, despite creation of Combined Authorities.	Local authorities constrained by central mandates; cannot fully tailor policies to regional needs.
Financial Dependency	Mayoral Strategic Authorities largely dependent on central government grants; limited additional revenue-raising powers. UK sub-national revenue autonomy (35%) significantly lower than EU average (53%).	Local efforts rendered ineffective due to financial constraints; perpetuates "false promise" of devolution.

Solution: Pathways to Enhanced Devolution and Decentralization

Achieving genuine local power in Yorkshire necessitates a fundamental departure from Westminster's current "deal-based" and financially dependent model. A systemic shift towards granting substantial legislative and fiscal autonomy is required, drawing valuable lessons from successful international examples of decentralized governance within unitary states.

Models for Transferring Specific Legislative Powers

Devolution in the UK has historically relied on conventional statutes, which inherently allow the central government to unilaterally withdraw powers, creating an unstable foundation for regional autonomy. A pathway to enhanced devolution for Yorkshire would involve establishing a more robust statutory framework, potentially moving towards a quasi-federal arrangement within the unitary state. This would ensure that powers transferred to regions are more difficult to revoke, providing the long-term stability essential for effective regional governance. While the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill aims to create a "Strategic Authority" framework as a step towards this, its provisions need to be significantly deepened to confer true legislative authority.

Drawing from international models, specific legislative powers could be transferred:

- **Germany (Länder):** German states (Länder) operate within a federal system that, while distinct from a unitary state, demonstrates how significant legislative autonomy can be embedded. The Länder possess exclusive legislative jurisdiction over crucial areas such as **police, culture, education, and universities**, as well as local authority matters. They are also primarily responsible for implementing federal legislation within their territories. Critically, the Bundesrat, Germany's upper house, ensures that states have direct influence on federal lawmaking, with its explicit consent required for bills that affect state finances or administrative duties. This model illustrates how substantial legislative autonomy can exist, ensuring regional needs are intrinsically integrated into national policy.
- **Spain (Autonomous Communities):** Spain stands as a highly decentralized unitary state where its regional governments, known as Autonomous Communities, particularly in regions like the Basque Country and Catalonia, enjoy "extensive powers". This includes significant legislative competencies across a wide range of policy areas.
- **Canada (Provinces):** Although Canada is a federal state, its division of powers offers valuable insights into effective decentralization. Canadian provinces hold primary responsibility for essential public services such as **education, healthcare, social welfare, and highways**. They also possess exclusive rights over natural resources within their borders. This robust provincial autonomy allows for significant policy variation and responsiveness to provincial priorities and unique regional needs.

For Yorkshire, this would translate into the transfer of full legislative control over critical regional policy domains. This includes the ability to set regional planning policies, manage and develop transport networks, formulate and implement economic development strategies, establish local environmental policies, and exercise genuine authority over key public services like education and healthcare. This moves beyond the current limited "oversight" or "coordination" roles typically granted to Combined Authorities, empowering Yorkshire to legislate for its own distinct future.

Mechanisms for Greater Regional Control over Local Taxation and Revenue Retention

Genuine legislative power is intrinsically linked to and contingent upon fiscal autonomy. The prevailing UK model, where a vast majority (95%) of tax revenues are collected centrally and then redistributed via grants, must undergo fundamental reform.

Key mechanisms for enhanced regional fiscal control in Yorkshire would include:

- **Regional Income Tax:** Following the successful model implemented in Scotland,

Yorkshire should be empowered to set its own income tax band thresholds and rates on non-savings and non-dividend income for its residents. This would provide a substantial, locally-controlled revenue stream directly tied to the region's economic performance and population's prosperity, fostering a direct link between regional governance and local economic health.

- **Full Retention and Reform of Business Rates:** Instead of the current system where local authorities retain only 50% of business rates, subject to complex redistribution mechanisms, Yorkshire should have the authority to fully retain all business rates collected within its jurisdiction. Accompanying reforms should include replacing the current fixed yield system with a fixed rate, conducting more frequent property valuations to ensure fairness and accuracy, and extending reset periods to provide greater financial predictability and long-term planning certainty for local authorities. This would significantly increase the financial rewards available from supporting local economic growth.
- **Enhanced Council Tax Powers:** Local authorities within Yorkshire should be granted the freedom to raise council tax rates without requiring central government referendums. Additionally, they should be empowered to introduce additional council tax bands to better reflect local property values and economic conditions, ensuring that local taxation is more responsive to regional wealth and needs.
- **Introduction of Local Sales and Other Taxes:** Empowering Yorkshire to levy new local taxes, such as a regional sales tax or a tourism tax, would provide additional revenue streams tailored to specific regional economic activities. Such taxes are common in many European countries and US states, demonstrating their feasibility and effectiveness as local revenue generators. The ability to introduce environmental taxes could also provide both revenue and policy tools for sustainability.

Lessons from Germany and Spain underscore the viability of these fiscal decentralization mechanisms. Germany's Länder collect the vast majority of taxes within their territories, and Spain's Autonomous Communities possess the power to collect and regulate their main tax sources. These models demonstrate that significant tax collection and setting powers can be decentralized effectively within a unitary framework, fostering genuine budget-making autonomy at the regional level.

Case Studies of Successful, Genuinely Empowered Regional Governance Models from Other Unitary States

The UK's current devolution model is often described as a "fragmented patchwork" of "deals," which makes it inherently susceptible to central government whims and the unilateral withdrawal of powers. This ad-hoc nature significantly limits the potential for genuine local power and long-term strategic planning. In contrast, countries like Germany and Spain, despite being unitary states, demonstrate more robust, constitutionally or statutorily entrenched regional autonomies. Their regional governments possess significant, defined legislative and fiscal powers, rather than merely delegated functions, providing a stable foundation for self-governance. For Yorkshire to achieve "true local power," the UK must transition from a "deals-based" approach to a systemic, statutory framework that entrenches regional powers. This means shifting from a model where central government *grants* powers to one where regional authorities *possess* inherent and protected competencies, making them less vulnerable to political "churn" and ensuring long-term stability for regional planning and investment. This structural change is crucial for fostering a sense of ownership and accountability at the regional level, enabling regions to genuinely drive their own development agendas.

Furthermore, the observation that UK local authorities are "largely dependent on central government grants" and exhibit low revenue autonomy highlights a critical impediment to genuine decentralization. This profound financial dependency means that even when legislative powers are nominally devolved, the central government retains ultimate control through the "power of the purse." Budget cuts, funding reviews that redistribute resources away from certain areas, and the lack of robust local revenue-raising powers directly constrain local councils' ability to act independently and effectively. In contrast, countries like Germany and Spain empower regions to collect and regulate a significant proportion of their own taxes, fostering a direct "social contract" between local government and taxpayers. When regions have the power to raise and retain their own substantial revenues (e.g., regional income tax, control over business rates), they gain genuine budget-making autonomy. This financial independence directly enables them to fund their own priorities and tailor public services to local needs, rather than being constrained by central funding decisions or competitive bidding processes. Without substantial fiscal autonomy, any legislative powers devolved remain limited, perpetuating the "illusion of local power" and hindering the region's ability to drive its own economic and social development.

Specific examples include:

- **Germany:** Germany, while a federal state, offers a compelling model for robust regional influence. Its Länder feature large expenditure decentralization and a significant degree of tax autonomy, with states collecting the vast majority of taxes. Critically, the Länder exert substantial influence on federal legislation through the Bundesrat, their representation in the federal upper house. The Bundesrat's consent is required for approximately 40% of all federal bills, particularly those affecting state finances or administrative duties, ensuring that regional perspectives are integrated into national policy-making. Länder also hold exclusive legislative powers in key areas such as education, culture, and police, enabling them to tailor public services and policies to specific regional needs and cultural contexts. This demonstrates how significant autonomy can be achieved even within a system that maintains national unity.
- **Spain:** Spain is a highly decentralized unitary state where its Autonomous Communities have been granted extensive legislative and financial powers. Some, like the Basque Country and Navarre, operate under a "concerted taxes" system, allowing them to collect and regulate their main tax sources (e.g., income tax, VAT) and then pay a fixed amount (the *cupo*) to the central government for national functions like defense and foreign relations. This model provides a high degree of fiscal and legislative autonomy, enabling these regions to manage their own budgets and priorities with considerable independence.
- **Canada:** As a federal state, Canada's division of powers provides valuable insights into how legislative and fiscal autonomy can be distributed. Canadian provinces possess exclusive legislative authority over critical areas such as healthcare, education, social services, and natural resources. This allows for significant provincial variation in policy and service delivery, directly responsive to local populations' needs and preferences. Furthermore, provinces have concurrent taxation powers with the federal government, enabling them to levy their own personal and corporate income taxes, as well as sales taxes. This robust provincial autonomy ensures that regions have the financial means to support their legislative responsibilities and drive their own development agendas.

These international examples demonstrate that genuine decentralization is achievable and effective, providing blueprints for Yorkshire to move beyond the "illusion of local power" towards

a future of true self-determination.

3. Beyond the Ballot Box: Why Electoral Reform Alone Won't Fix the System

Problem: Limitations of National Electoral Reform without Fundamental Decentralization

While electoral reform, particularly the adoption of a proportional representation (PR) system at the national level, is a crucial step towards a more representative democracy, it alone cannot fully address the deep-seated issues of centralization in the United Kingdom. A proportionally elected Parliament, even one that accurately reflects the national vote share, could still result in distant decision-making and a pervasive lack of genuine regional understanding.

The UK has historically been one of the most centralized countries in the Western world, with Westminster politics and Whitehall bureaucracy deeply ingrained in almost every aspect of public life. This centralized model of public service delivery has been "tested to destruction," leading to a lack of excellence and proving both ineffective and expensive due to attempts to micromanage services from the centre. Even with a more proportional Parliament, the inherent tendency of central government to retain and exert power would likely persist. Ministers and civil servants, accustomed to a top-down approach, might continue to believe that "many of the key decisions can only be made centrally," particularly concerning interest rates, taxation policy, and major infrastructure investments.

This centralization means that a proportionally elected Parliament could still suffer from a significant disconnect from the diverse needs and realities of regions like Yorkshire. It is inherently "impossible for the centre to truly understand, let alone micromanage, what happens in schools, hospitals, town halls and police stations across the country". Decisions made in Westminster, even by a more proportionally representative body, would likely continue to be based on a generalized, often homogenous, understanding of national needs, rather than the nuanced, specific requirements of local communities. This can lead to insufficient consultation with diverse local needs, as central policy frameworks struggle to accommodate regional variations.

Furthermore, economic prosperity itself is deeply dependent on local factors, including land use, transport connections, and the availability of public goods and services. The people and businesses within local economies are best placed to understand their unique strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, if a proportionally elected Parliament were to maintain control over these critical local policy decisions—such as education, policing, transport, and especially planning—it would continue to hinder the ability of regions to unlock their full potential and tailor development to their specific contexts. Electoral reform alone, without a corresponding and fundamental dispersal of legislative and fiscal powers, risks merely creating a more representative *central* government that remains distant and unresponsive to the genuine needs of its diverse regions. The problem is not just *who* is elected, but *where* power resides.

Solution: A Proposed Two-House National System under Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMPR)

To truly decentralize power and ensure both national proportionality and robust regional and

independent representation, a two-house national system under Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMPR) is proposed. This model fundamentally restructures governmental power, moving beyond mere electoral reform to foster a more responsive and collaborative democracy.

House 1: Party-List Proportional Representation (PR) for National Party Representation

The first national house, equivalent to the current House of Commons, would be elected via Party-List Proportional Representation. In this system, voters would cast their ballots primarily for political parties, and seats would be allocated proportionally to the total party votes received across the national electorate. This ensures that the composition of the primary legislative chamber accurately reflects the national distribution of political support, significantly reducing the disproportionality and "wasted votes" inherent in the current FPTP system. The outcome would be a multi-party parliament that more genuinely represents the diverse ideological landscape of the UK.

House 2: Schulze Single Transferable Vote (STV) for National Independent Representation

A second national house, which could be a reformed House of Lords or an entirely new chamber, would be composed exclusively of independent candidates. These independents would be elected by name using the Schulze Single Transferable Vote (STV) method in carefully managed multi-member constituencies across the country. As with the local model, candidates would be strictly prohibited from simultaneously appearing on a party list for House 1 and running as an independent for House 2, ensuring the integrity and non-partisan nature of this chamber. This house would provide a direct conduit for local and regional concerns to reach the national legislative arena, ensuring that decisions are informed by a deeper understanding of diverse community needs.

Specific Benefits of this Unique Two-House National Model

This unique two-house national model offers several profound benefits that would fundamentally restructure governance and foster a more robust and responsive democracy:

Firstly, it would **prevent complete party control** over the legislative process. By having two chambers elected on different principles—one reflecting party proportionality and the other empowering independent, locally-rooted voices—no single party or coalition could unilaterally dominate the national agenda. This internal check and balance would necessitate broader consensus for legislation to pass, ensuring that laws are more widely supported and less prone to partisan overreach.

Secondly, this structure would **mitigate the "cult of personality" phenomenon**. In a system requiring cross-house consensus, the legislative process would become less reliant on the charisma or dictates of individual party leaders. Instead, it would compel genuine debate and negotiation between representatives from different electoral mandates, fostering a more deliberative and less centralized form of governance.

Thirdly, it would **ensure broader representation beyond strict party lines**. The independent chamber, elected by STV, would provide a powerful platform for diverse interests, minority viewpoints, and non-partisan expertise that might otherwise struggle to gain traction within a

party-dominated system. This ensures that the national legislature is more reflective of the multifaceted nature of society, rather than just party political divisions.

Fourthly, the requirement for legislation to pass through two distinct chambers would **necessitate genuine collaboration and compromise** between the two houses. This inherent need for negotiation would lead to more thoroughly debated and robust laws, as different perspectives and mandates would have to be reconciled. This collaborative dynamic would foster a culture of consensus-building rather than adversarial politics.

Finally, this structure would **decentralize power not just through voting, but through a fundamental governmental restructuring**, fostering a more robust and responsive democracy. By distributing legislative authority across two chambers with distinct electoral bases and mandates, the national government would become more attuned to diverse public interests and less susceptible to control by powerful, narrow interests. This inherent governmental restructuring would ensure that the national legislative process is more inclusive, deliberative, and ultimately more legitimate in the eyes of the populace.

4. The Practical Utopian: A Blueprint for a Truly Decentralized UK

The failures of the current centralized system, as highlighted in previous sections, underscore the urgent need for a transformative shift towards genuine regional autonomy. This section outlines a concrete blueprint for substantial decentralization, empowering regions like Yorkshire to control their own destinies across key policy domains.

Solution: Concrete Decentralization Blueprint for Regions like Yorkshire

Achieving true local power for regions like Yorkshire requires moving beyond token devolution deals to a comprehensive framework of substantial autonomy. This blueprint outlines practical proposals across fiscal, economic, environmental, infrastructure, and public service domains, drawing on successful international precedents.

Fiscal Autonomy

Genuine regional autonomy is fundamentally dependent on the ability to raise and retain a significant proportion of local taxes, thereby controlling regional budgets independently of central government. The current UK model, where 95% of tax revenues are collected centrally, creates an unsustainable financial dependency.

For Yorkshire, mechanisms for enhanced fiscal autonomy would include:

- **Regional Income Tax:** Following the precedent set by Scotland, Yorkshire should be granted the power to set its own income tax band thresholds and rates on non-savings and non-dividend income for its residents. This would provide a substantial, flexible, and locally-accountable revenue stream directly linked to the region's economic performance.
- **Full Control Over Business Rates:** Instead of the current system where local authorities retain only 50% of business rates and are subject to complex redistribution mechanisms, Yorkshire should fully retain all business rates collected within its jurisdiction. Reforms should include replacing the fixed yield system with a fixed rate, conducting more frequent

property valuations (ideally annually or biennially) to ensure accuracy and fairness, and extending reset periods to provide greater predictability for long-term regional financial planning. This would significantly increase the financial rewards available from supporting local economic growth.

- **Enhanced Council Tax Powers:** Local authorities in Yorkshire should gain the freedom to raise council tax rates without requiring central government referendums. Additionally, they should be empowered to introduce additional council tax bands to better reflect local property values and economic conditions, ensuring local taxation is more responsive to regional wealth and needs.
- **Regional Sales Tax and Other Local Levies:** While the UK currently operates a national VAT system, models from other countries demonstrate the feasibility of regional sales taxes. For example, US states and Canadian provinces levy their own sales taxes, often with varying rates and exemptions. Yorkshire could explore a regional sales tax, or more immediately, be empowered to levy new local taxes such as a tourism tax, as advocated by many English mayors and commonly implemented across Europe. The ability to introduce specific environmental taxes could also provide both revenue and a policy tool for promoting sustainable practices.

These mechanisms, drawing from models in Germany and Spain where regions collect and regulate a significant proportion of their own taxes, would foster genuine budget-making autonomy for Yorkshire.

Industrial and Economic Control

Granting regions control over their industrial strategies is crucial for fostering local industries aligned with regional strengths and environmental goals. The centralized approach, assuming homogenous needs, has contributed to severe interregional economic disparities.

- **Strategic Planning and Diversification:** Regions with a legacy of "old industries," such as parts of Yorkshire impacted by de-industrialization (e.g., Wakefield and Castleford), require tailored strategies for reconversion and economic diversification. This involves building on existing regional capacities to cultivate new businesses in sectors like green energy, advanced manufacturing, and agriculture, rather than relying on a narrow industrial base.
- **Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI):** Models from Europe, such as the EU's Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) framework, demonstrate how designated territories can develop integrated development strategies and manage substantial funds from various thematic objectives. This enables urban areas, like Leeds and Manchester, to establish specific strategies for growth sectors.
- **Public-Private Partnerships and Local Action:** Successful regional economic planning, as seen in Manchester, Essen, Lille, and Bilbao, relies on strong administrative cooperation, public-private partnerships, and local action plans. For example, Manchester's focus on knowledge-based industries (digital, creative, biotech) and large-scale regeneration, supported by ERDF funding, transformed its economy. Essen's shift to a diversified service sector and cultural industries, coordinated by the Ruhrverband, showcases regional control over economic transformation. Bilbao's project-based regeneration, including the Guggenheim effect, was driven by regional autonomy and multi-level cooperation. Yorkshire could adopt similar approaches, with its Combined Authorities gaining full authority to develop and implement regional economic strategies, attract investment, and support innovation, moving beyond centrally imposed

targets.

Environmental Stewardship

Decentralizing environmental policy allows for tailored approaches that are more attuned to specific local needs and ecological conditions, fostering greater accountability and participation.

- **Localized Policy Development:** Regions should have greater power over local environmental policies, including sustainable land management, flood prevention, and renewable energy projects. This allows for policies to be designed for specific regional ecologies and challenges, such as Yorkshire's varied topography and flood risks.
- **Water Resource Management:** Decentralization could empower river basin authorities or local water management boards to make decisions about water usage, irrigation practices, and pollution control within their specific catchment areas, leading to more efficient and equitable water distribution.
- **Renewable Energy Projects:** Germany's decentralized energy system, where local and regional levels have gained significant importance in expanding renewable energies, offers a compelling example. Citizen participation in local energy transitions has increased awareness and knowledge, fostering local value creation through jobs and tax revenues. Scotland's devolved powers for environmental protection, climate change, pollution, waste management, and flood and coastal protection provide a UK-based precedent for such transfers.

Infrastructure Development

Decision-making for transport networks, digital connectivity, and public utilities can be effectively decentralized to ensure projects genuinely serve local needs, rather than being dictated by a distant central authority.

- **Transport Networks:** While the UK government's Transport Decarbonisation Plan exists, clarity on local roles is needed. Regional authorities like the Hull and East Yorkshire Combined Authority are beginning to gain control over transport funding, allowing local leaders to improve public bus and rail services and roads based on regional priorities. Models like Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in the US demonstrate how regional bodies, comprising local government and transportation agencies, can plan, design, and prioritize transportation infrastructure, channeling funding to serve metropolitan planning areas. Yorkshire needs similar authority over its road, rail, and public transport networks, including the ability to integrate services and address connectivity gaps like those between Bradford and Leeds or Sheffield and Barnsley.
- **Digital Connectivity:** Decentralized Physical Infrastructure Networks (DePINs) offer models for localized control over digital infrastructure. Examples like Helium, which built a decentralized 5G cellular network, illustrate how community-driven initiatives can provide cheaper and faster home internet by leveraging wireless links. European Digital Infrastructure Consortia (EDICs) provide a legal framework for Member States to set up and implement multi-country digital projects, allowing flexibility in governance and funding. Yorkshire could establish regional digital infrastructure consortia to drive broadband and 5G deployment tailored to its specific needs, ensuring widespread connectivity for businesses and residents.
- **Public Utilities:** The management of essential public utilities such as water, gas, electricity, and waste disposal can be decentralized to improve responsiveness to local

populations. While some European countries have seen liberalization and privatization, semi-autonomous public utilities models exist where local and regional authorities maintain significant control. Belgian regions, for instance, have achieved substantial functional autonomy over economic development and agriculture, including the use of environmental taxes to fund environmental protection. Yorkshire could establish regional public utility boards with greater autonomy over service provision, infrastructure upgrades, and environmental standards, ensuring these essential services are managed in line with local priorities and accountability.

Tailored Public Services

Greater regional autonomy over the delivery and adaptation of public services like education and healthcare is vital for fostering innovative, locally-responsive models that genuinely meet the diverse needs of different communities within Yorkshire, rather than being constrained by a rigid national template.

- **Healthcare:** Semi-autonomous hospital models have proven reasonably successful across Europe, granting hospitals greater discretion in operational and strategic decisions, leading to improved responsiveness to local population needs. While the UK's NHS operates on a Beveridge model (tax-funded, government-provided), Germany's Bismarck model (social insurance funds, private providers) and Switzerland's cantonal autonomy demonstrate how decentralized decision-making can lead to superior health outcomes and patient satisfaction, despite potential geographical disparities. For Yorkshire, this could mean regional health boards with significant control over budget allocation, service commissioning, and adaptation of care models to address specific health inequalities and demographic needs within the region, moving beyond a "one-size-fits-all" national template.
- **Education:** European education systems offer models where local communities or regions have significant control. While compulsory education is a common principle, the right to establish private schools or parental choice in public school character (e.g., denominational schools in Prussia) demonstrates local adaptation. In Germany, Länder have exclusive legislative powers over education and universities. This allows for educational policies and curricula to be tailored to regional economic needs and cultural contexts. For Yorkshire, this would entail greater regional control over school funding, curriculum development, teacher training, and the establishment of educational institutions that align with local industry demands (e.g., advanced manufacturing, green technologies) and community values, fostering local talent pipelines and addressing specific educational attainment gaps.

Implementing these decentralized models would allow Yorkshire to innovate and adapt public services to its unique demographic, economic, and social landscape, fostering a stronger sense of local ownership and improving service quality and responsiveness.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Yorkshire's Future

The current state of governance in the United Kingdom, characterized by a centralized Westminster and an electoral system that distorts local representation, has demonstrably hindered the potential of regions like Yorkshire. The analysis has shown how the First Past the Post system systematically misrepresents voter preferences, stifles diverse voices, and

concentrates power, leading to a democratic deficit at the local level. Concurrently, central government initiatives, despite their stated aims, have often amounted to an "illusory devolution," characterized by insufficient funding, retained legislative powers, and a pervasive financial dependency that prevents genuine local autonomy.

The blueprint presented in this report offers a comprehensive and integrated pathway to true local power. By introducing a two-house Mixed-Member Proportional Representation system at both local and national levels, the proposal addresses the fundamental flaws of electoral distortion. The local two-house model, with its Party-List PR chamber for party-aligned representation and a Schulze STV chamber for independent voices, ensures both ideological proportionality and granular community-level accountability. This synergistic design fosters genuine competition, optimizes against gerrymandering, and necessitates collaboration, leading to more robust and representative local governance. Similarly, the proposed national two-house system would prevent complete party dominance, mitigate the "cult of personality," and compel cross-chamber compromise, fundamentally restructuring governmental power to be more responsive to diverse public interests.

Crucially, this blueprint extends beyond electoral reform to advocate for substantial legislative and fiscal autonomy for regions like Yorkshire. Drawing lessons from successful unitary states such as Germany and Spain, it proposes concrete mechanisms for regions to raise and retain a greater proportion of their own taxes, thereby gaining genuine control over their budgets and fostering a direct social contract with their taxpayers. The transfer of significant legislative powers over industrial and economic strategy, environmental stewardship, infrastructure development, and tailored public services would enable Yorkshire to align policies with its unique strengths and needs. This shift from delegated functions to inherent competencies would provide the stability and ownership necessary for long-term regional development.

Reclaiming Yorkshire's future is not merely an aspiration but a necessity for a more equitable and prosperous United Kingdom. This blueprint provides a practical, academically rigorous framework for achieving true local power, fostering economic prosperity, enhancing social equity, and cultivating a more robust, responsive, and legitimate democracy across the region. The transformation proposed is ambitious but essential, offering a path for Yorkshire to become a vibrant model of decentralized governance, where decisions are made closer to the people they affect, and local communities genuinely shape their own destinies.

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