

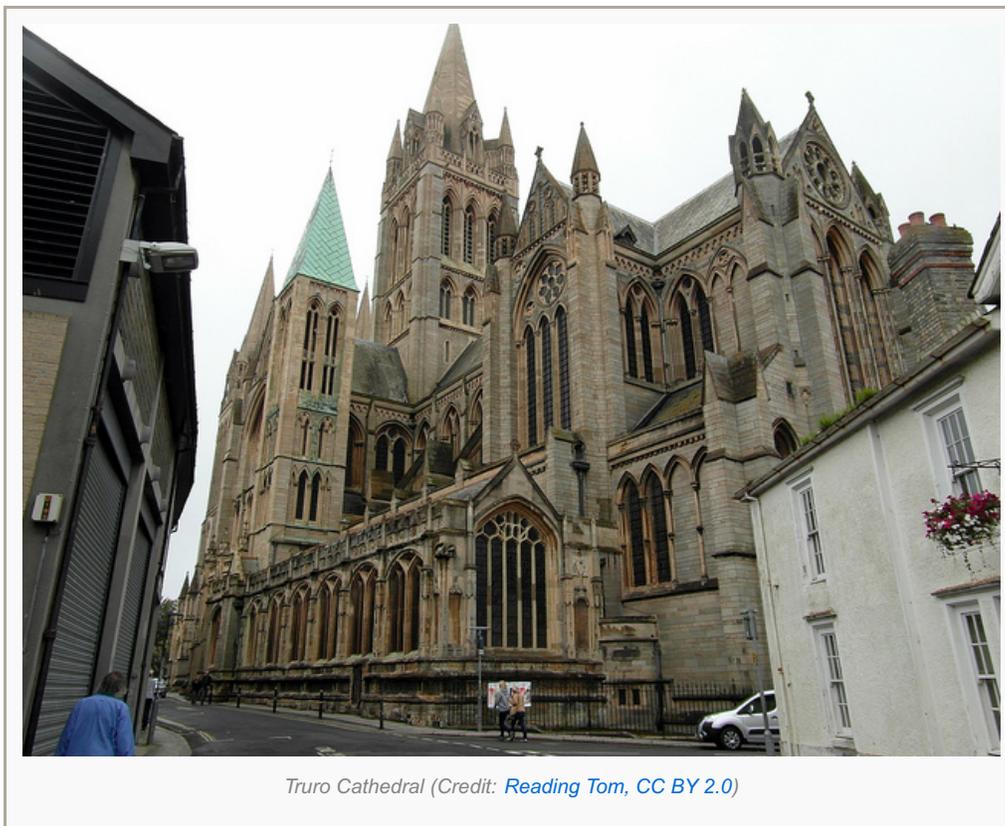
Cornwall is a logical place to begin with rural devolution, but a coherent UK-wide plan is sorely needed

democraticaudit.com/2015/07/28/cornwall-is-a-logical-place-to-begin-with-rural-devolution-but-a-coherent-uk-wide-plan-is-sorely-needed/

By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Government has announced that the south-west county of Cornwall will be the first rural area in the country to receive powers over elements of public policy, following on from the City-region deals. **Joanie Willett** argues that Cornwall is a logical place to start owing to its rich cultural history and distinctive identity. However, an ad-hoc approach to the governance of the UK will not do, and a coherent, nationwide plan is urgently required.*



Truro Cathedral (Credit: [Reading Tom, CC BY 2.0](#))

The government announced last week that Cornwall is to be the [first rural region to receive a devolution deal](#) in this latest round of debate into political decentralisation in the UK. For a decade since the failed North East Assembly referendum in 2004, devolution to the English regions was completely off the agenda. Moreover, with the abolition of the regional tier of governance (the Government Offices and the Regional Development Agencies), power became ever more concentrated in central government, and the UK became more firmly one of the most centralised states in Europe. So what does this devolution deal mean for Cornwall and the UK? And does it represent a real step-change in British politics?

The Scottish independence referendum was the key which forced a debate about the relationship between the centre and the regions, and brought the English Question back to the agenda. It also introduced the notion of English Votes for English Laws, and tools to address the power imbalances that have arisen because of the ad-hoc development of the British constitution.

In this kind of discursive environment regions that had wanted some form of decentralisation saw the opportunity to lobby for more powers. The Local Government Association (LGA) has been recommending that the Local Authorities that it represents and supports take advantage of the window of opportunity and prepare their own

representations for decentralisation. The LGA calls this [Devo-Next](#) and supplies a range of tools to support local councils to put together their decentralisation bids. Central government is fully behind this agenda, and the [Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill](#) is currently on its third reading.

It is no surprise that Cornwall was a front-runner in this agenda. The region has had a well motivated and vigorous campaign for devolution for decades, which has been particularly vocal in the past 15 years. The last time that devolution was on the UK agenda, Cornwall was deeply disappointed not to have been considered for a regional assembly. Locals launched a petition collecting 50,000 signatures in less than a year, which was a massive achievement for a paper petition, and demonstrated the depth and strength of local support.

The reason for this was twofold. On the one hand, Cornwall is a historic nation, with its own language, flag, and historic traditions. But despite its well-deserved reputation as a fantastic place to visit on holiday, it is also deeply spatially and economically peripheral to the rest of the UK. It remains one of the poorest parts of Britain with the lowest average wages and local contributions to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Demonstrating some of the extremes of inequality in contemporary Britain (one of the wealthiest states in Europe), Cornwall receives European Structural Funding, given to the very poorest regions of the EU. Truro, the capital of Cornwall is a 4 ½ hour train journey from London, compared to the 2 ½ hours that it takes to get from Newcastle to London over a similar distance, and the public service funding formula means that Cornish services routinely receive less per capita than their counterparts elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, in a context of chronic underinvestment, this has led to a widespread feeling that central government neglects and overlooks Cornwall's problems, the remedy for which is to have political decisions about local issues, made locally. Indeed, a wealth of evidence supports the idea that decisions made locally can be much more responsive to local needs, contexts, and nuances, and for many people in Cornwall, some form of regional devolution is essential if the area is to redevelop its flagging fortunes. Calls for a Cornish Assembly have become so mainstream that even the Local Authority, Cornwall Council, positions itself as a supporter of the agenda.

Cornwall Council began working on its [Case for Cornwall](#) in late 2014, and by July 2015 it had been agreed by full Council. The positioning by supporters is that its calls for an integrated transport network, control over all publically owned property in Cornwall (including that owned by the NHS, and the Department for Work and Pensions), and the capacity to develop integrated public health services between the NHS and health and social care, represents an important step in the journey towards a Cornish Assembly. The CFC also calls for a share of certain forms of taxation raised in Cornwall, the ability to make their own decisions about how European structural funding is spent, and a range of measures to improve links between education provided and the needs of local businesses. But in consultations this was never claimed as devolution, as [the headline following governmental approval](#) now proclaims.

This question of whether Cornwall really has received devolution from central government is a fascinating issue of discourse. The CFC was roundly criticised by many supporters of a Cornish Assembly as severely lacking in ambition and falling far short of meaningful devolution. Indeed, no legislative powers have been requested or granted. Instead, devolution here means the 'freedoms and flexibilities' to implement central government policy, at a local level. Moreover, the *actual* 'devolution deal' was made before central government had formally received the Case for Cornwall, and is widely recognised as falling a long way short of the proposals in the CFC.

So what does this 'devolution deal' mean for Cornwall? Undoubtedly, political decentralisation to the rest of the UK is necessary and over-due, and clearly there is an enormous amount of will on the behalf of the Tory government to deliver what it can call 'devolution'. However, with extra powers mainly being about making local decisions about the implementation of national policy regarding service delivery, and with a heavy emphasis on efficiency savings, the campaign for a Cornish Assembly clearly still has a long way to go.

Regions, counties, and city regions will of course want (and many already have received) similar powers, but in the UK, we still urgently need a coherently thought through debate on how we would like British politics to work. The

relationship between central government, local government, and individual citizens is too important for our democracy to leave it to develop ad-hoc, in response to knee-jerk policies, and as generators of spin.

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Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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