



The impact of devolution on affordable rural housing delivery: Risks and opportunities

Commissioned by the Rural Housing Network

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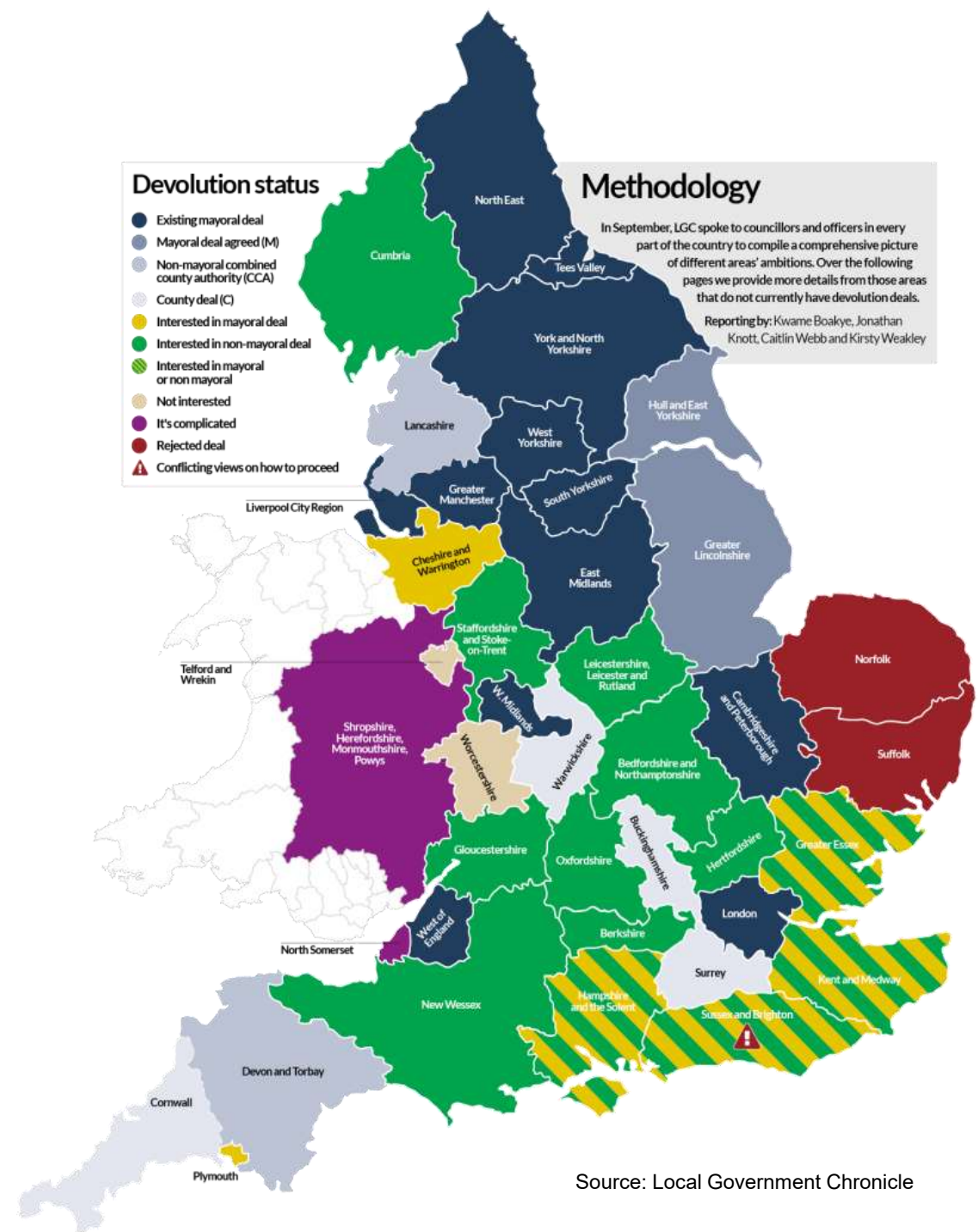
Research objectives

- **Assessing the impact of devolution** – examining how the delivery of affordable rural housing is impacted by the evolving English devolution process.
- **Highlighting good practice** – identifying examples where devolution has supported rural affordable housing provision.
- **Informing future advocacy** – providing evidence-based recommendations that the RHN can use to promote devolution that safeguards and enhances affordable rural housing delivery



Why this matters now...

- Unprecedented change in local government structures
- Government focus on affordable housing & ambitious targets, but no specific rural targets
- Housing and strategic planning a devolved area of competency



The current picture...

- As of early 2025, 20 devolution deals covering various authority types. The White Paper plans English universal coverage through new Strategic/Combined Authorities
- **Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities** access Integrated Settlements and direction-setting power for affordable housing – [varied timescale](#) for routes to this status
- **Foundational and newer Mayoral Authorities** (most of rural England):
 - *Responsibility to produce Spatial Development Strategy to which all local plans align*
 - *In Mayoral areas - call-in and development order powers and control of housing and regeneration grant funding*
 - *More place-based, regional operating model for Homes England - Strategic Place Partnerships*

Work to date: Literature and documents review

- Review of academic studies and policy papers
- Existing or Priority Programme devolution areas with rural character – defined as *rural* or *mixed* under RUC2021 (16 areas) plus 4 ‘outliers’ categorised as urban, but with active RHE service
- As of July 2025, ...
 - *Devolution deals*
 - *Devolution proposals*
 - *Local plans*
 - *Other relevant, publicly accessible documents*

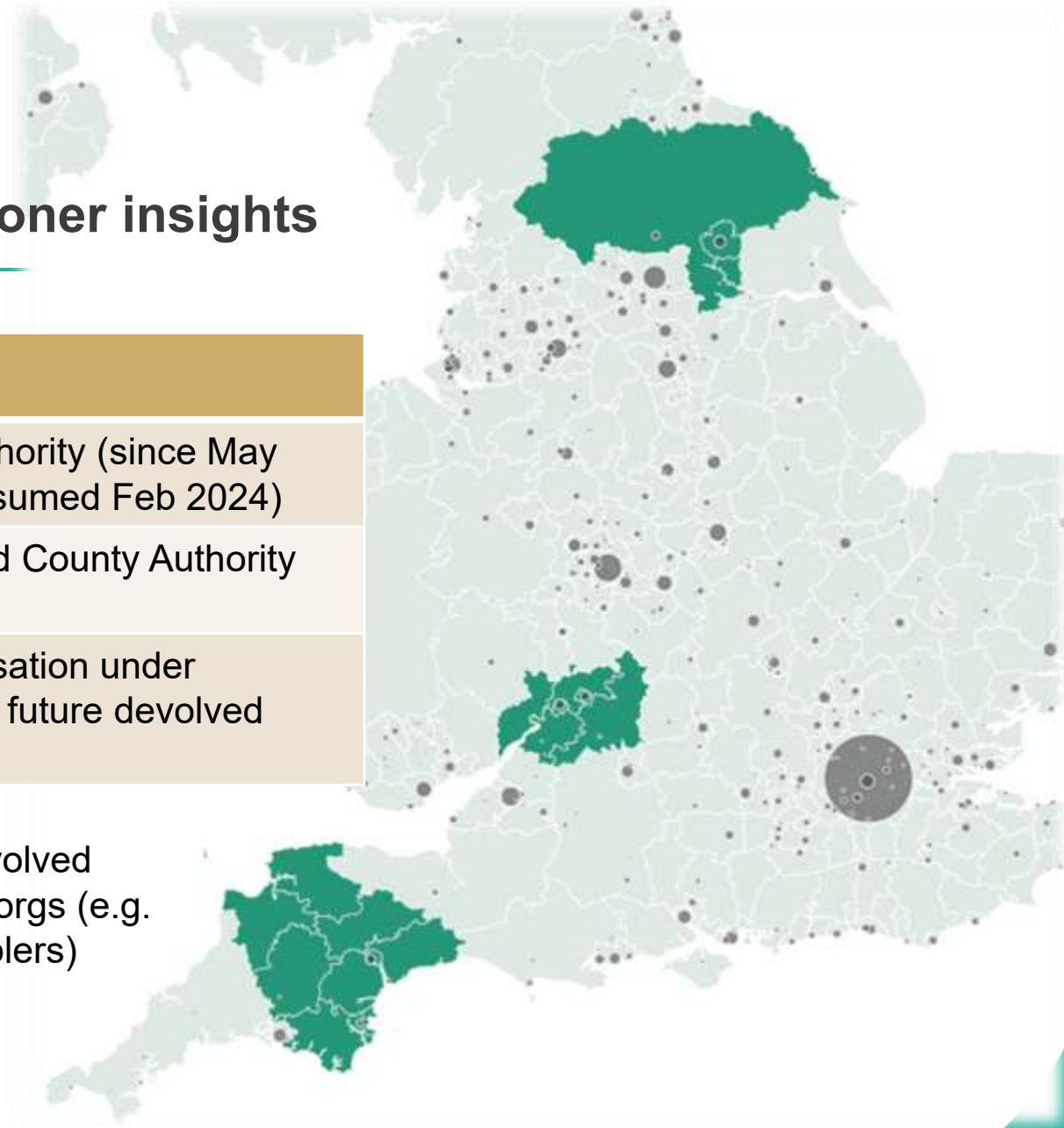


Work to date: Case studies and practitioner insights

Area	Devolution stage and type
York and North Yorkshire (YNYCA)	Level 3, Mayoral Combined Authority (since May 2024 – non-Mayoral powers assumed Feb 2024)
Devon and Torbay (DTCCA)	Level 2, Non-Mayoral Combined County Authority (since Feb 2025)
Gloucestershire	Proposal for local gov. reorganisation under development, uncertainty about future devolved structure

Interviews with relevant actors inc. local government, devolved authority (where applicable), housing providers, national orgs (e.g. Homes England) or third sector (e.g. Rural Housing Enablers)

Mix of experience and speculative insights



Findings in progress: Evidence review

- English devolution since 2000 has been characterized as "asymmetric" and inconsistent, with responsibilities devolved more than actual powers or fiscal autonomy (Denham & Morphet, 2025).
- Devolved nations perceived more positively with stronger affordable housing and social rent investment than in England – *Underlying these policy divergences are deeper political differences regarding the role of the state in addressing inequality (McKee et al., 2017).*
- Current programme takes place against a recent historic context of missed affordable housing targets and erosion of local government capacity - e.g. reported that by 2023 nearly 70% of local plans were out of date (Valler & Phelps, 2025)



Findings in progress: Devolution deals, proposals & docs

- Mixed picture – many contain recognition of rural housing need and the challenges of rural delivery, strong rural focus in some (e.g. Y-NC)
- Others (more commonly mixed areas with larger urban centres) contain no or little direct reference to rural
- Concerns raised in consultation materials at proposal stage:
 - *Reduced local representation/accountability*
 - *Concern over transfer of powers to Mayors given political role*
 - *Overlooking of rural in larger structures with city-focus*

Interviews: reflections on the devolution process

- Essential to leverage partnerships - influencing devolution conversations from an early stage and advocating with **'one voice'**
- In some areas **'housing is rural housing'** – but in mixed or 'rural pocket' areas more readily overlooked. Need to retain rural focus as devolved 'borders' evolve
- Without national rural targets, local personalities, relationships and worldviews become very important. Important that Mayors are **'on-side'**. There is clear opportunity and existing successes here, but also potential challenges
- Co-evolution of the devolution agenda and austerity and scale/speed of structural change: **'It [rural] wasn't on the agenda, but then very little was and that's no criticism. It's just a huge subject area and the timescale is incredibly tight'**

Interviews: Opportunities and risks/challenges

Opportunities

Streamlined strategies, processes and communication, including planning policy consistency across districts (e.g. RES) (*overlap with LGR*)

Infrastructure investment to increase rural viability/sustainability (e.g. transport)

Enhanced working with Homes England in ways not available to councils

Autonomy and funds to support rural priorities (although risks inequalities between Mayoral and non-Mayoral Authorities)

Pooling of resource for increased reach and efficiency (e.g. enabling)

Using devolution structures to strengthen local partnership (e.g. reducing competition between RPs), or to unblock planning issues via Mayoral powers

Interviews: Opportunities and risks/challenges

Risks/challenges

Challenges of aligning diverse local plans to common aims, different housing management approaches, or legacy absence of rural policies

Doesn't address structural issues with planning or finance, although Mayors could have stronger advocacy voice with Gov (again risk of inequalities for non-Mayoral areas)

(Further) dilution of rural voice in larger structures or urban-centric mergers, & distance between communities and decision makers

Amount of time and resource going into restructuring and time for new structures to 'bed-in' – a distraction from 'the work' (*overlap with LGR*)

Disruption to established partnerships and loss of sympathetic councillors and experienced officers (*overlap with LGR*)

Effective practice examples...

- Explicit support for rural delivery infrastructure – e.g. YNYCC’s support for Rural Housing Enabler programme and Community Led Housing, and embedding of rural pipeline within Investment Planning and Brownfield schemes
- Robust evidence base to inform agenda – Devon Housing Commission or N-Y Rural Commission
- Designated member of Authority with rural portfolio – e.g. NECA - to avoid overlooking the rural across devolved competencies
- Framing rural housing in terms of **regional economic growth** – a key Devolution driver – and learning from what has worked or not worked in other regions

Research reflections

Literature quite negative (rhetoric-reality gap), but does not reflect current English devolution programme – does help identify potential risks

Evolving landscape, in devolution *and* housing policy

Even in ‘established area’, devolution feels new and a ‘work in progress’

Challenging for interviewees to disassemble devolution from local government reorganisation which feels more immediate in some areas

Some reluctance to speculate ... *‘too early to say...’*



Next steps

- Complete data collection and analysis
- Report to RHN in October



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