

How governance in the UK compares to its peers

A study of 10 peer countries reveals that the UK's piecemeal approach to devolution is **unique** amongst the medium and large countries studied in that:

- The UK is by far the most centralised democratic country.
- It has the largest councils, which makes them remote from the people.
- The three devolved nations and local government have by far the fewest devolved responsibilities and the least financial control.
- England, the largest nation, has no powers at all and no parliament.
- The outcome is the UK is placed last out of the countries studied for freedom, satisfaction with life, and GDP per capita, and one from last for trust in government.

The purpose of this report

To enable EGF and its Advisory Board to draw on international experience when proposing policies for lasting decentralisation.

Structure

The report compares the Tiers of government of the countries on topics such as size of governing bodies, members' pay, responsibilities devolved, authority for expenditure and funding, and who decides tax types and rates.

Each Tier ends with [How the UK compares with the other countries](#) and [Unusual features of the other countries](#). An appendix gives a closer look at the UK's County, Unitary & Borough councils.

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A dash in tables denotes that figures are too varied to be meaningful.

Note: all data are pre-2020 to exclude the effect of Covid-19

Country Overview

The 10 countries were selected because their outlooks and ways of operating are similar to those of the United Kingdom.

All are democracies with a separation of power between the legislative, the executive and the judicial branches of government. Six countries have federal systems: Australia, Canada, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and USA. The other five have unitary systems.

Countries have been grouped by population size for ease of comparison as:

small: Norway 5m, Singapore 6m, Switzerland 9m, Sweden 10m

medium: Australia 25m, Canada 37m, Spain 47m

large: Germany 83m, Japan 126m, USA 329m

UK 67m

Place in world leagues

Countries	Trust in Government	Satisfaction with life	GDP per capita	Freedom
Median				
Small	4	7	10	9
Medium	17	11	28	6
Large	26	15	19	18
UK	23	18	22	23

Closer to the people

The table shows that countries with smaller populations have a significantly better performance in terms of prosperity, satisfaction with life and trust in government.

The lower tiers of government tend to manage affairs that most affect people's daily lives: housing, schools, rubbish collection, potholes, rates. Lower tiers are better-placed to know the needs of their community, to design services to meet these needs, and to be held to account for their performance by citizens. But they can only do this to the degree that they can control fund-raising and where the funds are spent.

Decentralisation will not change the 'post code lottery' where there are significant variations in the quality of services today, as this is the outcome of good or poor management. However, it should lead to greater innovation and services which better meet the needs of the local community.

Governance Overview

Political Style

There is a trend in favour of coalition and/or consensus politics. Three of the countries, including the UK, have a strong two-party system and two, Japan and Singapore, have political systems dominated by one party. Most countries are experiencing a rise in populism of the left, right or both.

Direction of Devolution

The direction of devolution is from the top Tier of government downward in all countries except Australia and Switzerland. The latter has taken subsidiarity further than any other country studied.

Electoral Systems

The full terms of office range from 3 to 6 years with 4 years being the most common. Some countries hold intermediate elections for a proportion of members.

A first past the post (FPP) system is used for Parliamentary elections in five countries and some form of proportional representation (PR) for all elections in the other six. Some of the FPP countries use PR for local elections.

Legislation process

In the majority of countries, including the UK, a new Bill is introduced by the government, debated in the Lower House three times with scrutiny by specialist committees before being presented to the Upper House. Changes to a Bill suggested by the Upper House need to be approved by the Lower House. Formal ratification is then made by the monarch or President.

Direct democracy

In all but two of the 11 countries, citizens can propose topics which parliaments or local governments must consider, provided a sufficient number of signatures are collected.

In some states of the USA, and in Germany, Japan, Norway and Switzerland, a citizen's proposal for legislation which reaches a high threshold of signatures can be put to a binding referendum.

Switzerland practises direct democracy to a greater degree than any other country studied. There are several Federal referendums in Switzerland each year, on top of significant numbers of referendums and initiatives across Switzerland's Cantons and municipalities.

In the UK and Spain, petitions which reach a certain level of support can be considered for debate within Parliament, but there is no binding, legal mechanism whereby citizens can secure referendums on policy or constitutional changes.

Recall

Five of the countries have some form of recall below national government whereby whole assemblies, elected members, mayors or senior officials can be forced to resign provided sufficient signatures have been collected. The process, with high thresholds, is designed to mitigate against undue consideration being given to frivolous proposals.

Income equalisation

Six countries use some form of *horizontal* income equalisation whereby local authorities transfer money to each other according to an agreed formula. Three use a *vertical* system where central government provides the funds, and two, provide only mandated funds from central government.

How the UK compares to the other countries studied

- The UK is one of the most centralised countries and has one of the lowest rankings for satisfaction with life, trust in government, prosperity and freedom.
- England, which contains around 85% of the UK's population, has no parliament or assembly at all and is governed directly by the UK Parliament. This allows Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs to vote on matters that only affect England, whereas English MPs cannot vote on matters which only affect the three nations.

- The UK is the only country where governing bodies in the same Tier of government have different responsibilities and powers.
- The UK, along with the USA, has a wide range of different electoral systems for Parliamentary, national and local government elections. The UK uses FPP for Parliamentary and some local government elections, and three variations of PR for other local elections. It has the greatest variety of systems of the countries studied.
- Unlike most countries, the UK does not have a codified constitution, but an unwritten one formed of conventions, Acts of Parliament and court judgements.
- The UK is the only country studied that allows recall at a national level. This is only possible in cases where a Member of Parliament has committed some form of misconduct. There is no recall for local government.

Unusual features of the other countries studied

- Parliament is not superior to States and Cantons in Australia and Switzerland, but has equal standing. States and Cantons can legislate on any subject other than the few (such as defence and foreign affairs) which are solely the prerogative of the Federal Government.
- Australia and Switzerland are the most devolved of the countries studied.
- In Switzerland:
 - Cantons, and not the Federal Government, are responsible for the collection of tax.
 - Cantons spend 30% more than the Federal Government.
 - The degree of direct democracy is greater than in any other country at every tier of government.

Tier 1 Parliaments, Central Governments

All countries have two houses of Parliament, with the exception of Singapore, Norway and Sweden which have only one.

Lower House of Parliaments

The Lower Houses are the more powerful bodies, particularly with regard to control of the national budget. The upper house tends to be more deliberative with powers limited in most cases to delaying or suggesting revisions to legislation.

Lower Houses of Parliament

Country	No of MPs	Population/ member	Turnout at last election, %
Median			
Small	180	38,000	77
Medium	338	134,000	76
Large	435	270,000	54
UK	650	100,000	67

The population per MP in Lower Houses increases with the size of the country.

Members of the Lower Houses of Parliament

Country	Weeks sitting/year	Pay ratio
Median		
Small	24	1.9
Medium	25	2.8
Large	30	3.1
UK	30	2.8

Note: The weeks of sittings vary depending on the time table. No data is available for Japan.

Full or part-time

MPs in Lower Houses are full-time except in Switzerland where they are part-time.

MPs' pay as a ratio to the national average wage

The average salaries of MPs are about a third lower in small countries than in medium and large countries. Switzerland and Norway have the lowest pay ratios. UK MPs are paid a similar rate to representatives in other countries.

Weeks of sitting per year

In federal countries, the Lower Houses tend to sit for shorter times, reflecting the lighter workload.

Turnout at last election

The small and medium countries tend to have a significantly higher turnout than the larger countries. Turnout is particularly high in Singapore (94%) and Australia (91%) where voting is compulsory, and in Sweden (87%) where parliamentary, county and municipal elections are all held on the same day.

Switzerland has the lowest turnout in national elections of any country studied. This may result from citizens feeling that they have less knowledge about national affairs such as defence and foreign policy.

The UK has a similar turnout to the three large countries studied.

Responsibilities

Central government in all countries studied has responsibility for defence and foreign policy, the economy immigration, national policing and national infrastructure.

Central governments hold few other major responsibilities exclusively in the federal countries, with some responsibilities shared between central and state governments and some held principally by state governments.

Tier 1 Expenditure as % of total government expenditure

Country	Central gov	Nation, State	Local gov
	Tier 1 %	Tier 2 %	Tier 3 %
UK	70	9	21
Norway	67	-	33
Australia	60	40	-
USA	51	49	-
Sweden	48	-	52
Canada	29	51	21
Spain	43	39	18
Germany	37	33	31
Japan	65	-	35
Switzerland	23	53	24

Source: OECD, *Government at a Glance*, 2019. Social security data have been allotted to the appropriate Tier of government. Data for all countries most recent year. UK data are authors' calculations. Singapore is not an OECD member.

The median average of central government expenditure for the large countries is 51% and 43% for medium countries.

Who collects taxes

In the UK, as in most of the countries studied, central government collects taxes. The exceptions are Switzerland where the Cantons, not central government, have this responsibility, and Germany where it is jointly administered by the federation and states.

Upper House of Parliaments

The Upper House acts as a check on the Lower House and so tends to be more deliberative with powers limited in most cases to delaying or suggesting revisions to legislation. Only Norway, Singapore and Sweden do not have an Upper House.

The Upper Houses of Parliament

Country	Members	Population/ member
Median		
Small	46	185,000
Medium	105	328,000
Large	100	1,200,000
UK	795	83,000

Note: Switzerland is the only small country to have a second chamber.

Members of the Upper Houses of Parliament

Country	Weeks of sitting/year	Pay ratio
Median		
Small	12	1.2
Medium	26	2.8
Large	25	2.8
UK	30	2.6

Full or part-time

Upper House representatives are all full-time, with the exceptions of Switzerland and the UK, where they are part-time.

Members' pay as a ratio to the national average wage

The pay ratios for members of the Upper Houses are similar to those in the Lower Houses.

Weeks of sitting per year

The Upper Houses sit for roughly the same amount of time as the Lower Houses.

Elections

Only Australia, Japan, Switzerland and the USA hold elections for the Upper House. In the other countries, members tend to be appointed by Tier 2 governments. The logic for this is that citizens have less interest and knowledge of the business of central governments, such as defence and foreign affairs, and Tier 2 appointees are better equipped to contribute and to monitor the Lower Houses.

Turnout at last election

The turnout at the last election was 91% in Australia, 35% in Japan, 48% in Switzerland and 50% in the USA.

How the UK compares to the other countries studied

- The UK is the most centralised of the countries studied, apart from Singapore, and has more control over education, employment, energy, health and social security.

- The degree of financial control exercised by UK central government is the highest of any country studied (except for Singapore) and is third highest of the 37 OECD countries. It is almost twice the OECD average.
- England, which contains around 85% of the UK's population, has no parliament or assembly at all and is governed directly by the UK Parliament. This allows Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs to vote on matters that only affect England, whereas English MPs cannot vote on matters which only affect the three nations.
- The main arguments against an English Parliament are that English MPs would dominate the UK Parliament and cost. This would be no change from the current situation where English MPs dominate Parliament and the cost would be small if the number of MPs were reduced in line with the devolution of responsibilities.
- The House of Commons has 650 MPs, a very high number compared to other large countries. If the UK had the same population per member as the Lower House of Germany it would have 516 MPs; as Japan 339 MPs; and as the USA 131 MPs.
- The House of Lords has 795 peers, by far the highest number of members in any Upper House. If the population per member of the House of Lords was the same as the Upper House of the Japan it would have 125 members; as Germany 55 members; and as the USA 20 members.
- The UK Parliament sits for one of the longest times at about 30 weeks depending on the timetable. The Lower House in the USA also sits for 30 weeks, in Germany for 21, in Switzerland for 12.
- The UK and Canada are the only countries where the government effectively appoints members to the Upper House. Only in the UK are members appointed for life.

Unusual features of the other countries studied

- In Spain and some states of the USA, citizens can propose legislation. This can be put to a local referendum provided the required number of signatures are obtained.

- In Australia and Singapore, voting is compulsory in Parliamentary elections, leading to high turnouts of 91% and 94% respectively in their most recent elections.
- In Sweden, Parliamentary, county and municipal elections all take place on the same day. This results in a high turnout of 87%.
- In Canada, the Upper Chamber is not elected. Instead, it is appointed by local governors on the advice of the sitting Prime Minister.
- In Germany, the Upper Chamber is not directly elected but made up of representatives from each state in proportion to population.
- In Norway, the tax system is highly transparent: every citizen's tax return is publicly available.
- In the USA, in addition to town and parish councils, there are Special Service Districts and Independent School Districts. They are legally separate from county, municipal and township government, and have substantial administrative and fiscal independence. Two thirds are managed by locally elected officials and the rest are supervised by the municipalities or counties.

Tier 2 Nations, States, Cantons

Governance

Tier 2 government in the UK covers the national parliaments/assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The constitutions of the federal states tend to devolve considerable power and responsibilities to Tier 2 government. Switzerland, and to a lesser extent Australia, are exceptional in terms of the degree of power held by the Cantons and States.

Unitary governments tend to be more centralised and can re-allocate devolved responsibilities at will.

Tier 2 Governance bodies

Country	Tier 2	Population/ unit	Members / body	Populatio n/member	Turnout at last election, %
Median	States Nations				
Small	20	400,000	80	7,000	65
Medium	13	2,800,000	59	49,000	66
Large	47	5,000,000	110	46,000	51
UK	3	3,100,000	90	42,000	56

The USA is the only country to have bicameral state legislatures.

Members

Country	Weeks sitting/year	Pay ratio
Median		
Small	-	-
Medium	12	2.0
Large	16	2.2
UK	21	2.7

Full or part-time

Members tend to be part-time in smaller countries and the USA, and full-time in other countries and the UK.

Ratio of pay to national average

Members of the UK national parliaments are more highly paid than their equivalents in the medium and large countries.

Weeks of sittings per year

National parliaments in the UK sit for longer, around 21 weeks per year, compared to an average of 16 weeks in the large countries.

Turnout at last election

Turnout is highest in Australia where voting is compulsory and in Sweden where voting is held on the same day as national elections. The UK is in line with the other large countries.

Legislative process

In the medium and large countries, Tier 2 tends to replicate the procedures and settings of the national government.

In Switzerland, the USA and some states in Germany, Tier 2 governments are obliged to consider legislation subject to a number of citizens voting for the initiative.

The UK is the only country where the devolution of responsibilities is not consistent between Tier 2 governance bodies.

Responsibilities

Excluding the two more centralised unitary states of Japan and Singapore, Tier 2 governments are responsible for economic planning, transport, education, health, housing, justice, infrastructure, energy, culture, environmental policy and agriculture.

Responsibilities are clearly defined in the medium and large countries, either by the constitution, legal judgements, or in the case of Japan by long-established practice.

Tier 2 Expenditure/source of funds

Country mean	Expenditure % of total gov expenditure	Raised locally %	Funds Block grants %	Mandated grants %
Small	16	64	25	10
Medium	45	73	10	18
Large	24	65	8	27
UK	5	18	78	2

Note: data for Singapore have been excluded as it is so strongly centralised.

Tier 2 governments have higher levels of fiscal autonomy in federal countries. Canada and Switzerland have the greatest fiscal control at 47% and 37% respectively.

More local control over revenue and expenditure has recently been ceded to Scotland and Wales. Their Parliaments can now set the rates and bands for income, land and landfill taxes, and stamp duty. Scotland also receives 50% of Scottish VAT revenue but the rates are still set by Westminster. As a result, Scotland now controls 31% of its funds and Wales 20%.

Main taxes

Every country, apart from Singapore, has some form of local income tax allocated or collected by Tier 2. The main taxes are VAT, sales and property taxes.

Source of funds

The UK raises the smallest proportion of its funds locally.

Who decides tax type and rates, and who collects taxes for Tier 2

Country	Tax type	Tax rate	Who collects
Norway	Central	Central	Central
Singapore	Central	Central	Central
Sweden	Central	Tier 2	Central
Switzerland	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2
Australia	Joint	Joint	Tier 2
Canada	Joint	Joint	Central
Spain	Joint	Joint	Joint
Germany	Joint	Joint	Tier 2
Japan	Joint	Joint	Central
USA	Tier 2	Tier 2	Tier 2
UK	Central	Joint	Joint

How the UK compares to the other countries studied

- The UK arrangements are unparalleled. It is the only country where devolution has been introduced piecemeal with no consistency of how powers and responsibilities are allocated to parliaments and assemblies.
- England, the largest nation, does not have any form of government at all.
- The devolved nations have less control over the funds they can spend or raise through taxation when compared to the medium and large countries studied.
- The Barnett Formula, used to calculate income equalisation, has been condemned as dysfunctional by Lord Barnett, who devised it as a short-term solution in 1978 while serving as Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Unusual features of the other countries studied

- The Cantons and States in Switzerland and Australia have far greater powers than any other Tier 2 governments.
- In Switzerland, the higher degree of autonomy has allowed Cantons to develop innovative policies in accordance with local traditions and needs.
- In Switzerland, and some states in the USA and Germany, Tier 2 governments are obliged to consider legislation subject to a number of citizens voting for the initiative.

Tier 3 Unitary, Borough, County councils

Governance

For simplicity, the word *council* is used to describe all Tier 3 governance bodies.

In the UK, this covers unitary, borough and county councils. More details for the uniquely complicated structure of UK Tier 3 government can be found in Appendix 2.

In Australia, Canada, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the USA, Tier 2 decides what powers are devolved to Tier 3. The result is a wide variation within each country of the powers exercised in this Tier.

Tier 3 Governance bodies

Country median	Councils	Population/ council	Members/ council	Population /member	Turnout at last election, %
Small	422	12,500	36	550	60
Medium	563	45,000	14	5,000	67
Large	1,718	100,000	37	1,800	53
UK	214	310,000	58	4,400	35

Population per council

The number of councils rises broadly in line with the population size of the country.

Turnout at the last election

Turnout in elections is higher in small and medium size countries.

Legislation process

In Germany, Japan and Switzerland, the electorate can have some direct say over legislation, either through public town hall meetings or referendums.

Full time or part time

Smaller countries tend to have part-time members and larger countries a combination of full-time and part-time.

Responsibilities

Tier 3 councils tend to have responsibility for: cleaning, housing, water and roads, energy, education, social care, some health care, parks and planning. This is similar in the UK, although the division of responsibilities between the five types of local government vary considerably (see Appendix).

Tier 3 Expenditure/source of funds

Country	Expenditure as a % of total gov spend	Raised locally %	Funds Block grants %	Mandated grants %
Mean				
Small	19	71	13	14
Medium	10	83	3	14
Large	24	52	18	26
UK	10	37	47	16

Expenditure as a % of total gov spend/ source of funds

Councils in federal countries generally have much higher levels of fiscal control – 79% of funds in Canada are raised locally, 78% in Spain and 68% in Switzerland.

Main taxes

The most frequent tax is property taxes. Sales, business, and consumption taxes are also used in some countries.

Tier 3 Who decides tax type and rates/who collects

Country	Tax type	Tax rate	Who collects
Norway	Central	Central	Central
Singapore	Central	Central	Central
Sweden	Central	Tiers 2+3	Central
Switzerland	Tier 2	Tiers 2+3	Tier 2
Australia	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 2+3
Canada	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 3
Spain	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 3
Germany	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 2+3
Japan	Tier 3	Tier 3	Central
USA	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 3+4
UK	Central	Tier 3	Tier 3

How the UK compares to the other countries studied

- The UK is unique among the countries for the piecemeal way in which responsibilities and powers have been devolved to councils.
- The average population of UK councils is over three times higher than in the other large countries and is eight times that of the medium countries. They are therefore more distanced from the voters
- Turnout in council elections, at 35% is lower than other countries where it is above 50%. This may reflect voter views that local government is unimportant as central government controls the services and funding, not their local council.
- UK councils have fewer responsibilities than other countries studied.
- Expenditure controlled by UK councils is far less than in other countries and varies widely. English Metropolitan Boroughs spend 12% of total government expenditure, County Councils 10%, Unitary Authorities 6%, and London Boroughs 2.5%, their counterparts spend 20% in Canada, 23% in the USA and in 34% Japan.
- The UK is the only medium and large country where the central government decides the types of taxes that can be set and limits councils to using only property taxes.
- In the UK, a local referendum can be held to approve or reject changes to the system of local government.

Unusual features of the other countries studied

- In Japan, citizens, with written support of 2% of the electorate, can demand of their municipal government in a referendum: the dissolution of an assembly, the recall of a governor, a mayor, an assembly member or prominent public servant; the enactment or amendment or abolition of local ordinances; or an administrative audit.

Data too varied to be meaningful

Pay to national average, weeks of sitting per year, frequency of elections.

Tier 4 Districts

Governance

Only Germany, Spain, the USA and England have Tier 4 governments.

Districts Country Median	Councils	Population/ council	Members/ council	Population /member	Turnout at last election, %
Spain	82	105	-	-	-
Germany	11,000	7,000	50	140	54
USA	36,000	12,000	-	-	-
UK England only	192	292,000	43	6,800	35

Full time/part time

Councillors tend to be part time.

Responsibilities

The responsibilities of Tier 4 vary widely. However, the main ones are planning, school administration, and cultural and leisure activities.

Tier 4 Expenditure/source of funds

Country Median	Expenditure as a % of total gov spend	Funds Raised locally %	Central grants %
Spain	0.4	54	46
Germany	3	49	51
USA	-	-	-
England	2	39	61

Tier 4 government in England raises the least locally of any country.

Main taxes

The main taxes in all countries at Tier 4 are property taxes.

Source of funds

Tier 4 in the UK raises less of its funds locally.

Tier 4 Who decides tax type and rates / who collects taxes

Country	Tax type	Tax rate	Who collects
Spain	Tier 2	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 2+3
Germany	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 2+3	Tiers 2+3
USA	Tiers 2+3+4	varied	Tier 4
England	Central	Tier 4	Tier 4

How the UK compares to the other countries studied

- Parliament decides the responsibilities and powers of Tier 4 English district councils, whereas these are decided by Tier 2 in Spain, Germany and the USA.
- Turnout in UK elections is just 35% compared to 54% in Germany. This may reflect voter views that local government is unimportant as central government controls the services and funding, not their local council.
- The UK is the only country where the central government determine the type of taxes for districts councils but they set their own tax rates. However, any increase in the rate above 2% must be approved a local referendum.
- Tier 4 government in the UK raises the least funds locally of any country.
- Once again, the centralised UK has the fewest councils with 30 times the population of other large countries.

Data too varied to be meaningful

Pay to national average, weeks of sitting per year, frequency of elections, turnout at last election.

Tier 5 - Parish councils

Governance

Only Spain, the USA and the UK have Tier 5 government.

In the USA, in addition to town and parish councils, there are Special Service Districts and Independent School Districts. They are legally separate from county, municipal, and township government, and have substantial administrative and fiscal independence. Two thirds are managed by locally elected officials and the rest are supervised by the municipalities or counties.

Town and Parish councils

Country	Councils	Population/ council
Spain	8,100	5,800
USA	39,000	14,500
England	10,000	5,600
Scotland	1,200	4,600
Wales	730	4,300

Population/unit of government

Councils in the USA are bigger than those in Spain and the UK.

Full time/part time

Councillors tend to be part time.

Tier 5 Expenditure/source of funds

Country	Expenditure as a % of total gov spend	Funds Raised locally %	Mandated grants %
Spain	10	68	32
USA	-	-	-
UK	0.1	-	100

Responsibilities

The responsibilities and powers for Tier 5 are defined in the Constitution in Spain, by state law in the USA and in Acts of Parliament in the UK.

In Spain, Tier 5 has considerably more responsibility and powers than Tier 4. They include responsibility for public services, planning, health and education.

In the USA, responsibilities include education, environment, housing, fire services, roads, social services, transport, and water supply.

In the UK, Parish councils are responsible for services such as management of town and village centres, litter, verges, cemeteries, parks, ponds, allotments, war memorials, and community halls.

In Scotland, Community Councils have fewer powers than their equivalents in England and Wales.

Main taxes and who decides tax type and rates, and who collects

In Spain funds are raised through property taxes. In the USA the source of funding is more diverse.

How the UK compares to the other countries studied

- UK parish council expenditure is very small and represents 0.1% of total government expenditure compared to 10% in Spain.
- UK Parish councils have no fund raising powers and receive all their income from grants whereas in Spain 68% of their income is raised locally.

Data too varied to be meaningful

Number of members, population per member, pay to national average, weeks of sitting per year, frequency of elections, turnout at last election, who decides tax rates and type, who collects taxes.

Tier 6 – Spanish Towns & Parishes

Only Spain has a Tier 6 government, which are subdivisions of a few municipalities. There are 3,400 councils with an average population of 150 covering under 2% of the population.

Full time/part time

Councillors tend to be part time.

Legislation process

Parishes are run by directly elected mayors, who form councils.

Responsibilities

Beaches, building and opening licenses, cemeteries, children's services, culture, elderly care, local medical offices, parks and gardens, protected housing, public schools, rural roads, public safety, sewerage, sports, street lighting, urban planning, urban roads, waste collection, water supply, women's services and youth services.

Expenditure and source of funds

Unlike UK parishes, they spend 0.1% of total government expenditure and raise 40% of this locally.

Data too varied to be meaningful

Number of members, population per member, pay to national average, weeks of sitting per year, frequency of elections, turnout at last election, who decides tax rates and type, who collects taxes.

A closer look at UK Tier 3 – County, Unitary & borough councils

Governance

There are five Tiers of UK governance:

Parliament

Nations

Counties, Unitary authorities, Boroughs

Districts

Parishes

Responsibilities of Tier 3 councils

The UK is unique among the countries studied in that it has five different types of councils in Tier 3 and each has widely varied responsibilities and powers.

There is little apparent logic in the division of responsibilities for each type of council. For example, District councils have responsibility for building regulations but County councils do not; on the other hand, County councils have responsibility for libraries while District Councils do not.

County councils

In England, County councils are responsible for 80% of services, including children's services and adult social care.

Many County councils are subdivided into District councils, titled district, borough or city council. They are responsible for more local services such as housing, planning, waste and leisure but not children's services or adult social care.

Unitary authorities

They can be titled Council, City Council or Borough Council. They are responsible for providing all services in their areas.

Northern Ireland has more limited responsibilities than elsewhere in the UK. Councils provide some neighbourhood services such as waste collection and street cleaning, but they have no responsible for education, libraries, or social care.

London

Local government in London has two tiers: a citywide, strategic tier known as the Greater London Authority. It is comprised of the Mayor of London and the London Assembly, both directly elected; and a local tier, the 32 London boroughs and the City of London Corporation.

The GLA is responsible for strategic planning, policing, the fire service, most aspects of transport and economic development. The boroughs are responsible for local services not overseen by the GLA, such as local planning, schools, social services, local roads and refuse collection.

Metropolitan districts

These are effectively unitary authorities, the name being a relic from past organisational arrangements. They can be titled metropolitan borough or city councils.

Combined authorities

There are also combined authorities, formed by mutual agreement between councils, to pool their operations such as transport and economic policy, for which they receive additional powers and funding from central government.

Councillors

There are approximately 17,500 councillors in England, of whom 9,000 represent Tier 3. These represent:

England

County councils	1,700
Unitary authorities	3,100
London boroughs	1,800
Metropolitan boroughs	2,200

Scotland 1,200

Wales 1,300

Northern Ireland 500

Tier 3 Councils

averages	Councils	Population/ council	Members/ council	Population /member	Election turnout, %
England					
County councils	26	840,000	63	13,000	35
Unitary authorities	55	230,000	55	4,000	35
London boroughs	32	290,000	57	5,100	39
Metropolitan boroughs	68	270,000	62	4,400	38
Scotland	32	170,000	38	4,500	47
Wales	22	143,000	57	2,500	42
Northern Ireland	11	172,000	42	4,100	53

Pay of members

In England, councillors receive a 'members' allowance' set by each council. Council leaders are typically paid £30,000 a year.

In Scotland, the pay of councillors is linked to the pay of Scottish public sector workers. The basic annual pay for councillors is £16,927.

In Wales, the basic salary for councillors is £13,868.

Payments to elected officials have little coherence. For example, mayoral salaries range from £30,000/year to £200,000/year with lower paid individuals often having greater responsibilities than their higher paid counterparts.

Elections

The term of office is normally four years. Scotland and Wales have reduced the voting age to 16. The voting systems used are to elect councillors are:

- England: first past the post. In some councils, elections are held for a proportion of the Council seats every two or three years
- Scotland: single transferable vote, which allows voters to rank candidates
- Wales: first past the post

- Northern Ireland: single transferable vote.

Referendums are allowed on whether to have directly elected mayors (Chief Executives) or Council Leaders (Non-executive Chairpersons).

Turnout

Average turnout in English Tier 3 elections (36%) are lower than in the three nations (50%) and the large countries studied (60%).

Some unsuccessful initiatives to improve localism

In addition to the complex range of elected bodies, central governments have set up a significant number of organisations and quangos in their attempts to enhance localism. These include Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Clinical-Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs).

Originally these were intended to enhance local control over planning for the local economy, the delivery of local healthcare and the supervision of local policing.

However, partly as a result of their low level of local accountability, these organisations have inadvertently become agents of greater centralisation-by Whitehall or party political control.

Legislative process

Most local authorities in England are run by a cabinet of councillors. Some authorities use a committee system, in which decision-making is delegated to committees of councillors from all parties. Budgetary decisions in these cases must still receive the support of a majority of councillors.

Expenditure as a % of total gov spend/ source of funds

	Funds raised locally, %	Grants from Tier 1, %	Grants from Tier 2, %
England	49	51	-
Scotland	42	-	58
Wales	33	-	67
Northern Ireland	92	-	8

Almost the only taxes allowed to be levied by local government in England are property taxes. In addition, they receive income from a proportion of the business rates levied in their areas, from council house rents and from charges for services.

Who decides tax type and rates/who collects taxes

The types of taxes that can be levied is decided by Parliament for English councils and by the parliament/ assemblies in conjunction with the councils for three nations

The tax rates are set by councils who also collect the tax. However, an increase in a local tax rate of more than 2% must be approved in a local referendum.

Fair Funding Review

This review, started in 2016, was expected to change how central grants are distributed between local authorities. The government had intended to publish a proposal for consultation in order to implement changes in time for the 2021/22 financial year. This has been postponed for the indefinite future.

Sources

House of Commons Library, *Local government in England: structures*, Briefing Paper Number 07104, 8 June 2020

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<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/local-government>

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/english-devolution-combined-authorities-and-metro-mayors>

The Effective Governance Forum

The role and complexity of government has changed substantially since the Northcote-Trevelyan Report was published in 1854 but the mechanics of managing government have remained virtually unchanged.

The objective of the Effective Governance Forum is to demonstrate how UK government should be structured, using modern management practice and radical decentralisation, to significantly improve public services at substantially reduced cost.

Authors

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