

Devolution: A beginner's guide

UK Nations

Since 1999, the way the United Kingdom is run has been transformed by devolution - a process designed to decentralise government and give more powers to the three nations which, together with England, make up the UK. The United Kingdom is made up of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Devolution essentially means the transfer of powers from the UK parliament in London to assemblies in Cardiff and Belfast, and the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh.

When did it begin?

Public votes were held in 1997 in Scotland and Wales, and a year later in both parts of Ireland. This resulted in the creation of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Devolution applied in different ways in each nation due to historical and administrative differences.

What powers are devolved?

The table below gives an overview of the main powers given to the Northern Irish and Welsh assemblies, and the Scottish Parliament.

MAJOR DEVOLVED POWERS

SCOTLAND

Agriculture, forestry & fishing
Education
Environment
Health
Housing
Justice, policing & courts*
Local government
Fire service
Economic development
Some transport

*Scotland has always had its own legal system

More on devolution from BBC Democracy Live

What powers are not devolved?

WALES

Agriculture, forestry & fishing
Education
Environment
Health & social welfare
Housing
Local government
Fire & rescue services
Highways & transport
Economic development

N. IRELAND

Agriculture
Education
Environment
Health
Enterprise, trade & investment
Social services
Justice & policing

The UK government is responsible for national policy on all powers which have not been devolved. These are known usually as "reserved powers" and include foreign affairs, defence, international relations and economic policy.

This table gives an overview of the main non-devolved powers.

MAJOR NON-DEVOLVED POWERS

SCOTLAND

Constitution
Defence & national security
Foreign policy
Energy
Immigration & nationality
Trade & industry
Some transport
Social security

** - specified as "nuclear energy & installations"

+ - Non-devolved powers in Wales are by implication all those not set out in the 2006 Government of Wales Act

WALES

Defence & national security
Economic policy
Foreign policy
Energy
Immigration & nationality
[see footnote +]

N. IRELAND

Defence & national security
Foreign policy
Nationality
Energy**

The Westminster Parliament is technically still able to pass laws for any part of the UK, but in practice only deals with devolved matters with the agreement of the devolved governments.

Devolution in Northern Ireland

Stormont

The Northern Ireland Assembly sits at Stormont in Belfast

Devolution here is slightly different to Scotland and Wales, with government powers divided into three categories: transferred, reserved and excepted. The power-sharing agreement between the Nationalist and Unionist communities in Northern Ireland is critical to the functioning of the assembly; devolution of powers has been suspended and reinstated several times since its inception in 1998. In addition to the main devolved powers shown in the table, the assembly can also legislate on culture, arts and leisure, learning and employment and regional and social development. In March 2010, an agreement was passed to transfer powers of justice and policing to Northern Ireland. Reserved powers - which could be transferred in the future with cross-community consent - include prisons and civil defence. A third category - excepted powers - includes matters such as parliamentary and assembly elections, international relations and defence. These cannot be transferred without primary legislation from Westminster.

Devolution in Scotland

Scottish parliament building

The Scottish parliament is based at Holyrood in Edinburgh. Scotland has a "parliament" as opposed to an "assembly" - the crucial difference being that Holyrood is a legislation-making body, passing bills in various areas of its many devolved responsibilities. The Scottish parliament also has the power to raise or lower the basic rate of income tax by 3p in the pound - although this so-called "Tartan Tax" has never been used. In addition to the main devolved powers shown in the table, the parliament can legislate on tourism, economic development, planning, natural and built heritage, sport and the arts, as well as statistics, public registers and records. The primary powers retained by Westminster include foreign policy, defence and trade and industry.

Devolution in Wales

Welsh Assembly building

The Welsh Assembly building is in Cardiff. The Government of Wales Act of 2006 gives the Welsh assembly powers to make its own laws, but limits its scope to defined "fields"; a broad subject area such as education or health. Within these fields, the assembly is able to enact its own laws, known as measures. The major areas in which the assembly can legislate are listed in the table above. In addition, the assembly can make laws relating to ancient monuments and historic buildings, public administration, sport and recreation, tourism, town and country planning, flood defences, the assembly itself, and the Welsh language. By omission, anything not contained in the current list of measures remains under the control of the Parliament in Westminster. The assembly is split into executive and legislative branches: the Welsh assembly government controls day-to-day running of devolved policy areas within the country, while the National Assembly for Wales scrutinises and debates the assembly government's work. The assembly could increase its powers in the future and may one day evolve into a body similar to the Scottish Parliament. In February 2010, assembly members voted in favour of holding a referendum on devolving further powers from Westminster. This motion must now gain approval from both Houses of Parliament.

Why is there not an 'English parliament'?

The UK government is responsible for all matters in England which have been devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However devolution has caused some tensions, particularly over public spending. The new powers of the Scottish Parliament have allowed it to abolish university tuition fees and prescription charges. These services are not free in England. However Scotland's public services are still paid for by all UK taxpayers under the terms of the Barnett formula, which allocates funding around different parts of the country. Some in England are increasingly unhappy, seeing this as English taxpayers subsidising free services in Scotland. A recent survey of 980 people by the left-leaning think tank the Institute for Public Policy Research suggested 40% of those questioned believe this situation unfair, compared with 22% in 2003.

Delivering the report, Professor John Curtice said if the trends continued, politicians "may no longer be able to safely assume that England can be ignored in the devolution debate".