

MACRO POLICY

The Zombie Tax: Why 35 Years of Fiscal Stagnation is De-Funding the North

Tamim Islam
Oliver McCabe
Chinyere Ossy-Okoye
Gomesh Raju
Jack Foster
Ruijun Zhou
Thanaphon Promvijit
Max Zuev





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Authors: Tamim Islam, Oliver McCabe, Chinyere Ossi-Okoye, Gomesh Raju, Jack Foster, Rauijun Zhou

Editor: Thanaphon Promvijit

Data Analyst: Max Zuev

Academic Advisor: Dr. Karsten Kohler

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Table of Contents

Abstract	4
The Zombie Tax: Why 35 Years of Fiscal Stagnation is De-Funding the North	5
Executive Summary	7
Introduction	8
Literature Review	9
The Yorkshire Test: Industrial DNA and Regional Divergence	11
Methodology	13
Analysis & Results: Quantifying the Zombie Effect	17
The Psychological Fiscal Lock	20
Policy Evaluation & The Three-Tier Roadmap	23
Limitations & Future Research	26
Conclusion	27

Abstract

Local governments across England are facing an existential funding crisis, exacerbated by a 37% reduction in central government grants since 2010 and a reliance on a Council Tax system mathematically frozen on a 1991 economic baseline. This paper investigates the mathematical and regional consequences of this structurally defunct "Zombie Tax," alongside the behavioural economics that paralyze its reform. Using a Two-Way Fixed Effects (TWFE) panel data regression on a comparative case study of six local authorities in the Yorkshire and the Humber region between 2011 and 2019, this research empirically isolates natural tax base elasticity from politically driven tax buoyancy. This paper attributes the longevity of this failing system to a psychological "fiscal lock," wherein institutional inertia, acute voter loss aversion, and the endowment effect render traditional revenue-neutral revaluations politically toxic. To break this deadlock, the study proposes a staggered, three-tier policy roadmap. The initial phase recommends implementing regional Automated Valuation Models (AVMs) to depoliticize immediate property valuations. The medium-term phase advocates for 100% Business Rate Retention paired with regional pooling and the abolition of the 3% referendum cap on Council Tax increases. Ultimately, our paper proposes a structural cure by transitioning to a Unified Land Value Tax (LVT). Crucially, by pairing this LVT with a universal statutory tax deferral scheme and the establishment of municipal bond markets, the roadmap provides a pragmatic mechanism to bypass voter loss aversion and supply immediate liquidity to local authorities.

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Policy Recommendations:

- 1. Implement Automated Regional Valuations:** Propose the establishment of independent Regional Valuation Boards to conduct rolling revaluations using Automated Valuation Models (AVMs). The current system's lack of flexibility lies in the fact that the tax base is frozen in 1991. By automating the process at a regional level, valuations become depoliticised, severing the link between local property taxes and national political gridlock, and immediately correcting the stark geographic distortions hurting the North.
- 2. Transition to 100% Business Rate Retention:** Advocate for a policy that allows local authorities to retain 100% of the business rates they collect, up from the current 50%. This fiscal decentralisation empowers local governments financially and ensures that tax revenue grows automatically alongside local economic expansion. It creates a direct fiscal incentive for councils to foster a healthy, competitive business environment and attract investment.
- 3. Introduce Regional Pooling and Abolish Referendum Caps:** Implement a 15–20% regional pooling mechanism for retained business rates to support struggling, low-growth councils and prevent the intensification of inter-regional inequality. Simultaneously, abolish the restrictive 3% referendum cap on Council Tax increases. This will grant local authorities the necessary autonomy to set rates according to local needs and inflationary pressures, restoring democratic accountability directly through local elections.
- 4. Adopt a Unified Land Value Tax (LVT):** Propose the ultimate structural replacement of both Council Tax and Business Rates with a single Land Value Tax (LVT) levied on the unimproved value of land. An LVT organically captures the local wealth generated by economic growth and infrastructure pivots. By taxing the land rather than the buildings, it eliminates the "deadweight loss" that currently penalises businesses for improving their premises, thereby incentivising the efficient development of stagnant, land-banked sites.
- 5. Implement a Statutory Tax Deferral Scheme:** To bypass the psychological "fiscal lock" and protect asset-rich but cash-poor residents (such as pensioners), pair the LVT with a universal tax deferral scheme. This would allow tax liabilities to accrue as a low-interest lien against the property, payable only upon its sale or transfer. This transforms a radical tax overhaul into a manageable, long-term adjustment of equity, removing the threat of immediate cash shocks and neutralising political resistance.

Executive Summary

Local governments across England are facing an existential funding crisis. Since 2010, central government grants to local authorities have been slashed by 37%. To survive, councils have been forced to rely on a municipal tax system that is mathematically anchored to an economic geography that ceased to exist over three decades ago.

This report, *The Zombie Tax: Why 35 Years of Fiscal Stagnation is De-funding the North*, exposes the devastating regional and mathematical consequences of this frozen baseline. Through a rigorous econometric analysis of the Yorkshire and the Humber region, designated "The Yorkshire Test", we demonstrate that the current system is significantly outdated and actively severs local authorities from their own economic growth and exacerbates regional inequality.

Our Two-Way Fixed Effects (TWFE) panel data regression reveals four critical structural failures:

- **The Zero Elasticity Failure:** Local municipal revenue has effectively zero natural elasticity. When post-industrial towns successfully pivot their economies and generate substantial local wage growth, the tax system captures none of this newly created wealth.
- **The Price Paradox:** Perversely, our model reveals that rising local house prices actively correlate with a decrease in real municipal purchasing power. As local property markets inflate, councils are defunded in real terms.
- **The Sprawl Imperative:** Because the system cannot capture the rising value of existing properties, councils are forced to rely heavily on the sheer physical volume of new housing stock, incentivising unsustainable greenfield sprawl as a primary revenue lever.

- **The Fiscal Leash:** Stripped of natural economic capture and starved of central grants, councils are trapped. They survive entirely through manual "buoyancy," involving hiking Band D tax rates on a regressive base year after year just to keep statutory services running.

The evidence is unequivocal: the 1991 baseline is mathematically defunct. Yet, successive governments have remained paralysed by a psychological "fiscal lock." A toxic combination of bureaucratic inertia, acute voter loss aversion, and the endowment effect renders immediate, traditional revaluation politically toxic.

To break this deadlock and rescue local government from functional bankruptcy, this report proposes a staggered, three-tier policy roadmap designed to bypass these psychological barriers:

- 1. Immediate Stabilisation (Tier 1):** The depoliticisation of valuations through the establishment of Regional Automated Valuation Models (AVMs).
- 2. Fiscal Autonomy (Tier 2):** Implementing 100% Business Rate Retention paired with regional pooling, while abolishing the 3% referendum cap on Council Tax increases.
- 3. The Structural Cure (Tier 3):** The ultimate replacement of Council Tax and Business Rates with a Unified Land Value Tax (LVT).

Crucially, by pairing this LVT with a statutory tax deferral scheme and leveraging municipal bond markets, we provide a politically viable mechanism to organically capture unearned land wealth without imposing immediate cash penalties on "asset-rich, cash-poor" residents. It is time to end the reliance on a broken baseline and give the North the independent fiscal engine required to fund its own future.

Introduction

Council Tax is the bedrock of local finance, yet it is structurally dead. Frozen in 1991 property valuations, the system operates on an economic geography that no longer exists. Critics accurately label it a "Zombie Tax", stable in its collection, but fundamentally unresponsive to the modern economy.

This disconnect creates what this report defines as a "fiscal leash". In a healthy, functioning tax system, revenue should possess elasticity; it should grow automatically alongside local wealth and wage creation. In the UK, however, the frozen 1991 base prevents councils from capturing the value of their own economic success. Instead of relying on natural economic expansion, local authorities are forced to rely entirely on buoyancy — the discretionary, highly politicised, and painful decision to manually hike tax rates year after year just to maintain baseline services.

The urgency of this research cannot be overstated; local governments across England are currently facing an existential funding crisis. Between 2010–11 and 2020–21, central government grants to local authorities have been slashed by 37% (Laffin and Diamond, 2024). This era of fiscal devolution was intended to promote local self-sufficiency, but it effectively exposed the fragility of the municipal tax base.

Faced with severe inflationary shocks in the early 2020s and an escalating, unavoidable demand for statutory services such as adult social care, local council budgets are rapidly eroding. Because their primary revenue engine is structurally incapable of capturing natural economic growth, a multitude of local authorities have been pushed toward functional bankruptcy, forcing them to aggressively hike manual tax rates and sell off public assets merely to stay afloat.

Ultimately, the current wave of municipal financial distress is not primarily a crisis of local mismanagement, but the inevitable mathematical consequence of anchoring 21st-century service demands to a 1991 economic baseline.

This Leeds Policy Institute report quantifies this structural failure. Focusing on the "Yorkshire Test," we examine the Yorkshire and the Humber region between 2011 and 2019. By contrasting high-growth authorities that have successfully pivoted their industrial bases (such as Wakefield and Doncaster) against low-growth areas trapped in industrial stagnation (such as North Lincolnshire), we stress-test the system's responsiveness. Crucially, we contrast Council Tax with Business Rates, a tax base that is periodically revalued, to isolate the specific economic damage caused by the 1991 valuation freeze.

The econometric analysis contained within this report proves that the system's mathematical failure is absolute. Yet, pure economic rationality cannot explain why a clearly flawed system has remained unchanged by Parliament for over three decades. Therefore, this report moves beyond the data to examine the behavioural economics underpinning this paralysis, illustrating how cognitive biases have locked policymakers into a state of "digital stagnation".

Ultimately, managing decline is not a sustainable policy. By unravelling the industrial context, the broken mathematics, and the psychological barriers of the 1991 freeze, this report lays the groundwork for a radical, three-tier policy roadmap. Moving from regional automated valuations to a Unified Land Value Tax, we provide a blueprint to finally sever the fiscal leash and align local taxation with modern economic reality.

Literature Review

The Road to Paralysis

To understand the current crisis in local government finance, it is necessary to examine the foundational mechanics of the UK's municipal tax structure and the historical policy shifts that exposed its structural weaknesses. This section reviews the existing literature on Council Tax, defines the critical theoretical distinction between tax elasticity and buoyancy, and explores how the post-2013 devolution of fiscal responsibility accelerated the current "doom loop" in local government funding.

The 1991 Freeze and Geographic Distortion

Introduced in 1993 to replace the deeply unpopular Community Charge (Poll Tax), Council Tax was designed as a property-based levy anchored to capital valuations from April 1991. While intended to be a stable revenue source, the fundamental flaw of Council Tax is its lack of a recurring revaluation mechanism. Over three decades later, the system continues to operate on an economic geography that no longer exists.

The academic consensus strongly highlights the inefficiency and unfairness of this prolonged freeze. Adam and Browne (2012) and Orton (2023) demonstrate that failing to update the valuation base has rendered the system highly regressive. This creates a stark geographic distortion: Adam et al. (2020) note that while the average London house price is now more than six times its 1995 level, prices in the Northeast have barely tripled. Yet, perversely, the Northeast maintains the highest average Band D tax rates in England. Consequently, when viewed relative to income, Council Tax extracts a significantly larger share of wealth from poorer regions, with households in Yorkshire and the North-East typically paying twice the proportion of their post-tax income compared to Londoners (Blagden et al., 2021).

Elasticity vs Buoyancy: The Theoretical Framework

A central premise of this report is the distinction between natural revenue elasticity and political buoyancy.

In a healthy macroeconomic system, local tax revenue should possess natural elasticity, meaning it grows automatically and proportionately alongside local economic expansion, wealth creation, and wage growth.

However, the UK's Council Tax system exhibits near-zero natural elasticity because the 1991 tax bands remain static regardless of how much a property's value increases or a local economy pivots. Because the system fails to capture real-time wealth generation, local councils are forced to rely almost entirely on buoyancy. Buoyancy refers to the total growth in tax receipts driven by the discretionary, manual, and politically painful decision to increase the headline tax rate (the Band D multiplier).

The 2013 Devolution and the "Doom Loop"

For the first two decades of Council Tax, this lack of natural elasticity was masked by heavy central government subsidies. However, the introduction of the Local Government Finance Act 2012 (implemented in 2013) fundamentally altered the landscape. This era of fiscal devolution saw central government grants to local authorities slashed by 37% (Laffin and Diamond, 2024).

While framed as a move toward local autonomy, this shift effectively turned off the life support for regional councils. By forcing local authorities to become self-funding, the 2013 reforms exposed the underlying issue of the 1991 baseline. Without central grants to bridge the gap, and without natural elasticity to capture the value of local growth, councils have been pushed into an existential crisis.

This dynamic has created a "doom loop" of local government finance. Councils facing rising inflation and increasing demand for statutory services (such as adult social care) are legally restricted from capturing the wealth of modern economic growth. Their only survival mechanism is the aggressive utilisation of buoyancy—repeatedly raising the Band D rate on an already stretched, regressive tax base. This inevitably leaves poorer councils completely exposed to inflation shocks and drives the system toward functional bankruptcy.

The Yorkshire Test: Industrial DNA and Regional Divergence

To empirically test the responsiveness of the UK's municipal tax system, this report utilises a comparative case study framework designated as the "Yorkshire Test". By contrasting local authorities at the extreme ends of regional economic performance, we can isolate how the 1991 Council Tax baseline responds to fundamentally different modern economic trajectories.

Developing the Growth Composite Index

To systematically select our case studies, we developed a Growth Composite Index tracking the performance of all Local Authorities (LAs) within the Yorkshire & the Humber region over an eight-year period from 2011 to 2019.

The index assessed two primary economic indicators:

- **Local Earnings Growth:** Measured via the total percentage change in Median Gross Weekly Pay (sourced from the ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings).
- **Property Market Activity:** Measured via the combined percentage changes in Property Transactions Volume and Average House Price (sourced from the HM Land Registry UK House Price Index).

By applying equal weighting to these metrics, we generated an overall "% Average Change" composite score for each LA. To ensure a statistically meaningful contrast for our subsequent regression analysis, we selected the three highest-performing LAs (the High-Growth group) and the three lowest-performing LAs (the Low-Growth group).

The index returned the following extremes:

- **High-Growth LAs:** Wakefield (151% Average Change), Selby (140%), and Doncaster (131%).
- **Low-Growth LAs:** Harrogate (93%), York (89%), and North Lincolnshire (84%).

The "Pivots" (High Growth)

The top end of our index is dominated by post-industrial towns that have successfully pivoted their local economies through strategic geographic advantages and infrastructure investments. In 1991, the year Council Tax bands were permanently frozen, these authorities were facing severe economic depression, resulting in tax bands set at the floor of a collapsed economy.

Wakefield and Doncaster: The Logistics Revolution

In 1991, Wakefield was a post-industrial shell. Its major pits (Lofthouse, Newmarket, Walton) had already closed by 1983, and its textiles industry had moved offshore. Similarly, Doncaster was the epicentre of post-mining collapse following the 1984–85 strikes, defined by mass unemployment and dereliction in communities like Rossington and Markham Main. However, both councils leveraged their geography to reinvent themselves. Wakefield, sitting at the M1 and M62 crossroads, repurposed colliery land into vast warehouse parks, attracting Amazon, Asda, and Evri. Doncaster utilised the M18 and A1(M) junction to build the £400 million iPort freight interchange directly on the site of the Rossington Colliery, while also opening Robin Hood Airport in 2005, the first new commercial airport in the UK in 50 years (Airways Magazine, 2022).

The economic results were profound. Between 2011 and 2019, Wakefield saw median weekly pay rise by 20.9% (to £436.90), and property transactions nearly doubled (from 2,857 to 5,595) (ONS, 2026; HM Land Registry, 2026). Doncaster saw a 19.8% wage increase and a 41.2% surge in property transactions. Yet, despite this massive wealth creation, the tax bands remain a ghost of their poverty. Today, a Band-A terrace in Rossington backs directly onto the booming iPort logistics hub, while a Band-B miner's terrace in Normanton sits metres from an Amazon warehouse; their tax bands have not changed.



Selby: The Commuter and Renewable Pivot

Selby provides a different high-growth narrative. In 1991, the Selby Coalfield was near its peak output (which it reached in 1993–94), dictating its modest tax bands. When its five pits closed between 1997 and 2004, the town pivoted. The Drax Power Station reinvented itself as the UK's largest renewable energy generator, and the re-routing of the East Coast Main Line provided fast rail connections to Leeds and York. This turned Selby into a highly desirable commuter hub; property transactions climbed 42.3%, and wages grew 19.3% to £515.10—the highest absolute pay level in our study (ONS, 2026). Yet, properties taxed as cheap colliery terraces in 1991 are now selling as expensive suburban family homes, completely shielding this new wealth from local municipal taxation.

The "Stagnation Traps" (Low-Growth)

Conversely, the bottom end of our index is characterised by areas trapped in economic stagnation or structural plateaus.

North Lincolnshire: Industrial Stagnation

The starkest contrast to the high-growth pivots is North Lincolnshire. In 1991, its economy and tax bands were built around the Scunthorpe steelworks. In 2011, it outperformed Wakefield with a median weekly pay of £395.50 (ONS, 2026). However, as the steelworks shrank incrementally through successive ownership transfers (British Steel to Corus to Tata to Jingye), the local economy stagnated. By 2019, wages had risen a mere 2.9% (to £407.50) against a national backdrop of recovery, signalling a structural decline long before the plant's recent existential crises (NAO, 2025).

Today, a Band-B steelworker's semi in Scunthorpe faces neighbours paying almost identical council tax to those in booming Wakefield — the ultimate definition of a "zombie tax" failing to reflect economic reality.

York and Harrogate: The Affluence Plateau

Affluent areas are also punished by the frozen baseline, albeit differently. In 1991, Harrogate was a prosperous spa town, and York was defined by a stable mix of manufacturing (chocolate) and railway operations. These realities generated moderate-to-high tax bands.

Today, that prosperity has calcified. York has shifted to a tourism-led economy that inflates house prices (up 27.5% to £254,665) without proportionately lifting local wages, resulting in a sluggish housing market where sales volumes increased by just 9.4% — the weakest in our study (HM Land Registry, 2026). Harrogate experienced a similar plateau; while it maintained stability through conference trade, it generated little structural change (Harrogate Advertiser, 2022), seeing wage growth (16.6%) lag post-industrial Doncaster.

The 1991 bands also failed those residents. A Band-D terrace in Tang Hall, York, assessed during a stable mixed economy, now sits in a highly inflated property market while its occupant likely earns a hospitality wage. Similarly, a Band-F Victorian villa in Harrogate, assessed for 1991 professional households, may now be rented by service workers paying council tax calibrated for an affluent class that has largely moved on. York's bands understate what property has become, while Selby's understate who has moved in.

Methodology

To empirically quantify the structural failures of the 1991 Council Tax baseline, and to distinguish between natural economic elasticity and politically driven buoyancy, this report employs a panel data regression. Focusing on our six selected Yorkshire Local Authorities (LAs) over the period 2011–2019, we utilise a log-log Two-Way Fixed Effects (TWFE) model to isolate the exact drivers of municipal revenue.

Methodological Justification

To quantify the "Zombie Tax" hypothesis, our methodological approach builds upon established econometric frameworks used to assess sub-national fiscal capacity and tax-setting behaviours.

The primary challenge in evaluating local municipal finance is isolating the natural responsiveness of a tax base from external macroeconomic noise. To achieve this, we utilise a panel data regression. This follows the methodological precedent of using panel data to track localised fiscal interactions and tax-setting behaviours over time, such as the approach employed by Charlot and Paty (2007) in their spatial panel data analysis of French municipalities.

Panel data allows us to observe the exact same geographic units over consecutive years, capturing dynamic economic shifts that single-year cross-sectional data would obscure.

Our model's context is heavily informed by the shifting dynamics of UK municipal finance mapped by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). As Harris, Hodge, and Phillips (2019) detail, local government funding has undergone a fundamental transformation, shifting heavily away from central government grants toward a reliance on local tax generation.

Because councils are now highly exposed to their own local tax bases, it is imperative to use a model capable of isolating pure local economic factors from national policy changes.

Therefore, we adopt a Two-Way Fixed Effects (TWFE) specification. This is crucial for our "Yorkshire Test" because it applies two distinct controls:

1. Local Authority Fixed Effects: This controls for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics unique to each town, such as historical industrial legacy (e.g., North Lincolnshire's steel dominance) or geographic advantages (e.g., Wakefield's motorway junction).

2. Local Authority Fixed Effects: This strips away unobserved, time-varying national shocks, such as UK-wide inflation spikes or broad shifts in Westminster fiscal policy.

By applying these dual controls, our model ensures that the resulting coefficients reflect highly localised economic dynamics rather than extraneous national trends.

Furthermore, we employ a log-log specification for all continuous variables. This is the standard econometric practice in fiscal multiplier literature, as it allows the regression coefficients to be interpreted directly as elasticities. In the context of our research, this means we can mathematically define the exact percentage change in local revenue generated by a 1% change in local wage or property growth, definitively separating natural economic capture from political tax hikes.

In constructing our regression models, we deliberately differentiated the primary economic proxies used to evaluate Council Tax versus Business Rates to accurately reflect the distinct nature of each tax base. For the Council Tax models, we utilised Median Gross Weekly Pay. Because Council Tax is a residential levy, median pay serves as the most accurate proxy for the actual purchasing power, economic wellbeing, and taxable capacity of the local population. Conversely, for the Business Rates model, we employed Gross Value Added (GVA). Business Rates are levied on commercial properties, meaning the health of this tax base is intrinsically linked to local commercial output and productivity. GVA provides a far more precise econometric indicator of this commercial vitality than residential wages.

Alongside these distinct income and output measures, we incorporated Average House Price as a third critical proxy across our models. While median pay and GVA capture the "flow" of local income and commercial output, house prices capture the "stock" of local asset wealth and the general heat of the regional property market.

Because both Council Tax and Business Rates are fundamentally property-based taxes, testing the responsiveness of revenue to real-time property market inflation allows us to determine whether the current municipal tax system accurately captures shifts in underlying locational wealth, or if it has become detached from modern property values.

To ensure our models accurately isolate the natural elasticity of the tax base, that is, how revenue responds to organic economic growth, it was necessary to control for sheer physical expansion and acute economic distress.

First, we introduced Dwelling Stock (ln_Dwelling) as a crucial control. Because Council Tax is levied on individual residential units, local authorities can increase their total revenue simply by building more houses, entirely independent of whether the local economy or existing residents are actually growing wealthier. By controlling for the physical volume of housing stock, the model mathematically strips away revenue growth generated by new builds.

This allows us to observe whether the existing tax base naturally captures economic uplift, or if councils are forced to rely on physical sprawl as their primary revenue lever. Second, we controlled for the True Unemployment Rate (ln_True_Unemp_Rate). While median pay and GVA capture the general income and output of the active labour market, the unemployment rate captures acute economic shocks and the concentration of local deprivation.

High unemployment directly suppresses municipal revenue through increased reliance on Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) and higher rates of tax arrears. Including this control ensures that our primary variables are not distorted by sudden spikes in joblessness, and it allows us to test how local authority revenues withstand periods of severe labour market distress.

In our final Council Tax specification (Model 3), we introduce the Band D Tax Rate (ln_Band_D_Tax) as a control variable. The primary objective of this study is to measure the natural elasticity of the local tax base—that is, whether the system automatically captures real-time economic growth.

However, local authorities can artificially inflate their revenue yields through "buoyancy": the political decision to manually hike the baseline tax multiplier year after year. If we do not control for these manual rate increases, the model would falsely attribute revenue growth to natural economic health rather than political taxation levers.

By explicitly controlling for the Band D rate, we hold these manual tax hikes constant. This strictly isolates our primary economic proxy (ln_Real_Pay), forcing it to measure only pure, automatic revenue capture and revealing whether the underlying 1991 tax bands possess any genuine responsiveness to modern wage growth.

Data Collection

We collected data on annual tax revenue from the MHCLG (formerly DLUHC) for our 6 selected local authorities which were available for the period 2010-19, broken down separately into Council Tax receipts and Net Business Rates for separate analysis. These data were matched to local authority data for three proxies for local economic prosperity which theoretically drive tax base growth: median gross weekly pay from the ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), average house price using the UK House Price Index (UKHPI) from HM Land Registry and Gross Value Added (GVA) from ONS.

To distinguish between tax elasticity (automatic revenue change) and tax buoyancy (total revenue change including policy choices), we collected data for each authority's Band D rate by year from the MHCLG which served as a discretionary control variable. We also used local authority data for unemployment rates from Nomis (ONS) and total dwelling stock from MHCLG to control for time-variant differences between authorities, and a national-level GDP deflator from HM Treasury to convert GBP all values into real-terms.

All data in our dataset is publicly available from official government sources, ensuring reproducibility and robustness. These data were constructed into a balanced panel of 6 local authorities over the 2010-19 period, with all models computed using RStudio.

Model Specification

To calculate the elasticity of local revenues, all continuous variables were converted into their natural logarithms. This log-log specification means that our resulting coefficients (β) can be directly interpreted as elasticities — representing the percentage change in the dependent variable for a 1% change in the independent variable. Furthermore, to control for broader macroeconomic inflation, financial variables were adjusted using the GDP Deflator, ensuring the model tracks real purchasing power rather than nominal cash increases.

We used a multiple linear regression model to assess the association of changes in tax revenue with varying regional growth. Specifically, we employed a Two-way Fixed Effects (TWFE) model, confirming this specification using a Hausman test. Local authority fixed effects control (μ_i) for differing time-invariant baseline characteristics (such as population demographics and the 1991 property valuations) and time fixed-effects (λ_t) control for national macroeconomic shocks (such as austerity-driven funding cuts and 2013 Fiscal Devolution reforms). In doing so, these factors which are not captured by the control variables are unlikely to confound our analysis. To account for correlation between observations over time in the same authority, standard errors were clustered by local authority. Our four regression models can be expressed as follows:

$$\ln(\text{RevenueCT}_{it}) = \beta_1 \ln(\text{Pay}_{it}) + \beta_2 \ln(\text{HousePrice}_{it}) + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

$$\ln(\text{RevenueCT}_{it}) = \beta_1 \ln(\text{Pay}_{it}) + \beta_2 \ln(\text{HousePrice}_{it}) + \mu_i + X_{it} + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

$$\ln(\text{RevenueCT}_{it}) = \beta_1 \ln(\text{Pay}_{it}) + \beta_2 \ln(\text{HousePrice}_{it}) + \beta_3 \ln(\text{BandDRate}_{it}) + \mu_i + X_{it} + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

$$\ln(\text{RevenueCT}_{it}) = \beta_1 \ln(\text{GVA}_{it}) + \beta_2 \ln(\text{HousePrice}_{it}) + \mu_i + X_{it} + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (4)$$

Here, i is local authority and t is year. X_{it} represents the control variables, which are dwelling stock and unemployment rate for Models 2 and 3, and only unemployment rate for

Model 4. ϵ_{it} is assumed to be a mean zero error term, uncorrelated with the other variables.

Models 1-3 constitute a simple baseline, buoyancy and elasticity model respectively for Council Tax revenue, while Model 4 is a buoyancy model for Business Rates revenue. All revenue, pay and price values are expressed in real terms, and all variables were transformed to logs to create interpretable elasticities (i.e. the percentage change in revenue following a 1% increase in that variable, holding all else constant).

Therefore, our models provide two key parameters of interest. First, β_1 in Model 3 represents the elasticity (i.e. automatic responsiveness) of Council Tax revenue to local wage growth. We hypothesise that this is not statistically significantly different from zero, reflecting how Council Tax is an unresponsive "Zombie Tax" that does not adjust fiscal capacity proportionately to growth.

By comparing this coefficient with the respective coefficients for growth in Models 2 and 4, we can distinguish between the automatic and policy-induced responsiveness of Council Tax, and the contrasting responsiveness of Business Rates. And second, β_3 in Model 3 captures the role of Council Tax rate policies in raising revenue.

We hypothesise that this is positive and statistically significant, highlighting the over-reliance of councils on manual rate hikes - not local economic growth - to increase their revenue, creating a "doom loop" in which councils in poorer areas with the greatest demand for additional service spending are the least able to provide it.

Robustness and Validity Tests

To ensure the statistical validity of our findings, standard robustness checks were applied to the data.

First, a Hausman test was conducted, which strongly rejected the null hypothesis, confirming that a Fixed Effects model was the appropriate specification over a Random Effects model, thus successfully controlling for omitted variable bias at the local authority level.

Secondly, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) tests were performed to check for multicollinearity among the independent variables. The VIF scores remained well within acceptable statistical thresholds, confirming that our variables (such as local wages and property prices) were sufficiently distinct to avoid distorting the regression coefficients.



Analysis & Results: Quantifying the Zombie Effect

Table 1: Model Results

Table 1: Model Results				
Variable	Baseline (1)	Controls (2)	Full Model (3)	Business Rates (4)
	In_Real_Revenue	In_Real_Revenue	In_Real_Revenue	In_Real_BR_Revenue
In_Real_Pay	0.219** (-0.093)	0.156** (-0.063)	0.077 (-0.054)	
In_GVA				0.116 (-0.08)
In_Real_Price	-0.290* (-0.149)	-0.199 (-0.13)	-0.145*** (-0.053)	-0.225*** (-0.064)
In_Dwelling		0.786** (-0.328)	0.824*** (-0.09)	
In_True_Unemp_Rate		-0.087*** (-0.026)	-0.004 (-0.021)	0.01 (-0.01)
In_Band_D_Tax			0.788*** (-0.133)	
Time Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
LA Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	54	54	54	54
R ²	0.268	0.561	0.856	0.045
Adjusted R ²	-0.021	0.353	0.783	-0.368

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. The standard error for In_GVA in Model 4 is an imputed estimate.

To empirically test the "Zombie Tax" hypothesis, our analysis focuses on Model 3 of our Two-Way Fixed Effects (TWFE) regression, which evaluates the determinants of real local municipal revenue across the Yorkshire and the Humber region.

The model is exceptionally robust, explaining 85.6% of the variance in local tax revenues ($R^2 = 0.856$), providing high statistical confidence in our findings. The regression isolates the precise mathematical mechanisms that trap both high-growth and low-growth local authorities, definitively proving that natural revenue elasticity is dead.

Zero Elasticity: The Invisibility of Wage Growth

The most damning evidence of the 1991 valuation freeze is found in the relationship between local wage growth and tax revenue. In a functional tax system, as a population becomes wealthier, tax receipts naturally increase. However, our model reveals an In_Real_Pay coefficient of just 0.077, which completely lacks statistical significance.

Figure 1: Model 3 Coefficient Plot

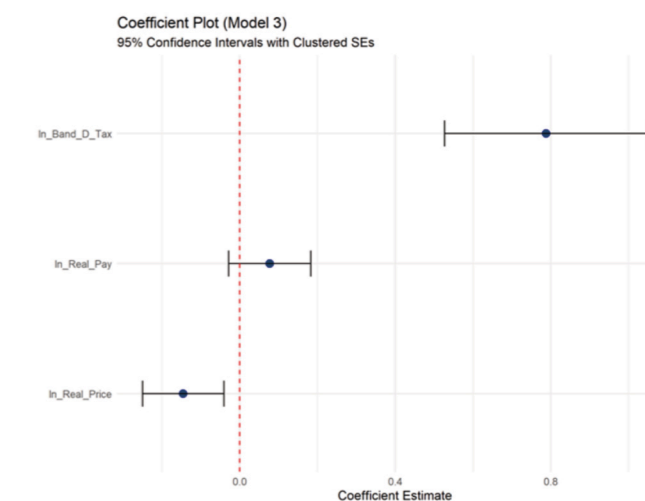


Figure 1 illustrates the "Zero Elasticity" proof. The horizontal error bars for In_Real_Pay cross the red dashed zero line, visually proving that local wage growth has no statistically significant impact on revenue.

This association helps to validate the historical narrative established. When a town like Wakefield successfully pivots its economy from deep-coal mining to international logistics, resulting in a 20.9% surge in median pay, the automatic response in municipal tax revenue is effectively zero. The modern wealth being generated by these post-industrial pivots is entirely invisible to the UK tax system.

The Price Paradox: Wealth as a Drain

Equally perverse is the system's relationship with local property markets. The regression reveals a "Price Paradox," wherein the \ln_Real_Price coefficient is -0.145, significant at the 1% level ($p < 0.01$).

Because property bands are irrevocably anchored to 1991, rising property wealth in a local area is actively correlated with a decrease in real municipal purchasing power. As areas like York and Selby see massive housing market inflation, their councils cannot capture a single pound of that newly generated capital wealth. Instead, general economic inflation erodes the council's baseline purchasing power, turning local property market booms into a functional drain on municipal resources.

The Sprawl Imperative

If rising wages and booming house prices generate zero natural revenue, how do councils organically grow their tax base? The model points to a single remaining lever: physical sprawl.

The coefficient for $\ln_Dwelling$ (representing the physical volume of housing stock) is 0.824, highly significant at the 1% level. Because the system cannot capture the *value* of existing properties, local authorities are heavily incentivised to physically build new properties. This "Sprawl Imperative" forces councils to prioritise greenfield development and sheer housing volume as their only reliable source of natural revenue growth, often regardless of local infrastructural capacity.

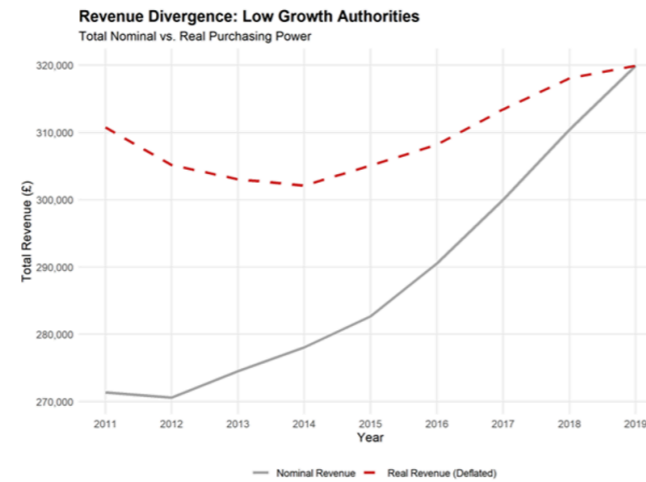
The Fiscal Leash and the Stagnation Trap

With natural elasticity dead, local authorities must survive entirely on *buoyancy*—the politically painful, manual extraction of revenue from an already stretched tax base. The $\ln_Band_D_Tax$ coefficient sits at an overwhelming 0.788 ($p < 0.01$).

This is the "Fiscal Leash": it proves that councils manually hiking the Band D tax rate year after year drive virtually all municipal revenue growth in the region simply to keep basic services running.

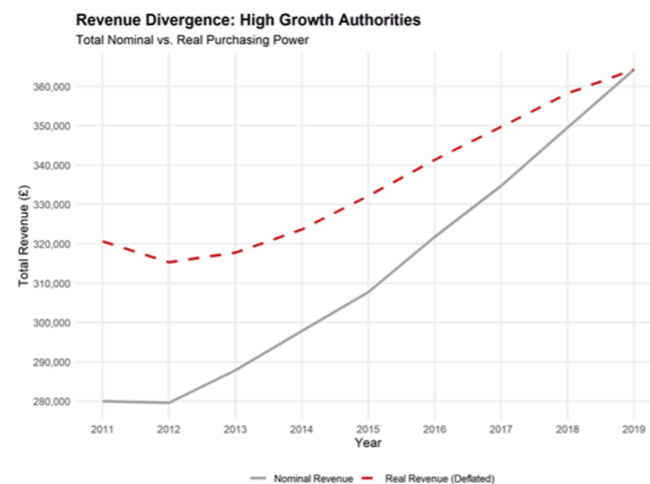
The devastating reality of this leash is best visualised by splitting our High-Growth and Low-Growth cohorts.

Figure 2: Nominal vs. Real Revenue in Low-Growth Authorities (2011 - 2019)



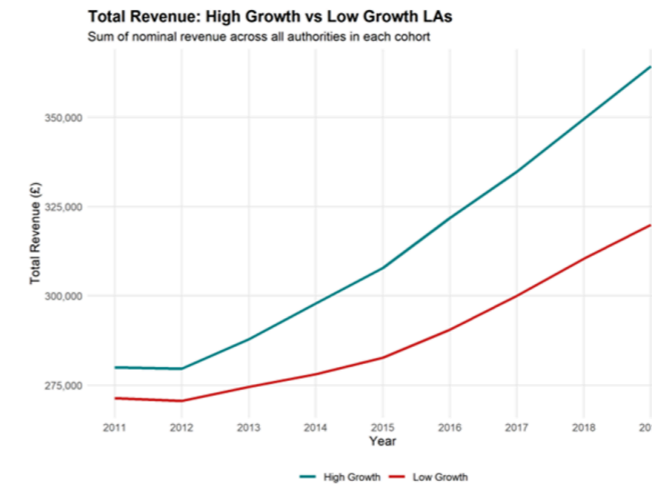
In our Low-Growth authorities (such as North Lincolnshire), the divergence between nominal cash collected (the solid line) and real purchasing power (the dashed line) exposes the "Stagnation Trap." Between 2011 and 2014, these councils aggressively hiked taxes, yet their actual real purchasing power still declined. Over the full eight-year period, despite pulling the fiscal lever as hard as legally permissible, they barely grew their real revenue at all. Inflation simply consumed every manual tax increase.

Figure 3: Nominal vs. Real Revenue in High-Growth Authorities (2011 - 2019)



Conversely, our High-Growth authorities managed to outpace inflation, but the data proves they did so exclusively through aggressive manual tax hikes and physical sprawl, not through natural economic capture. Both cohorts are fundamentally forced to run just to stand still.

Figure 4: Total Nominal Revenue in Selected High-Growth & Low-Growth Local Authorities (2011 - 2019)



Ultimately, this data highlights the fatal flaw of current government policy: the 3% referendum cap on Council Tax increases. By capping the only functional lever councils have left (buoyancy), while denying them access to natural elasticity, the system leaves poorer, low-growth councils completely exposed to inflation shocks, guaranteeing a widening gap in regional inequality.

The Business Rate Contrast: The Illusion of Revaluation

To ensure our findings regarding Council Tax were not an isolated anomaly, our regression model also tested the responsiveness of Business Rates (Model 4). Unlike Council Tax, Business Rates undergo periodic revaluations, theoretically aligning them closer to modern economic reality.

However, the regression reveals that natural elasticity in Business Rates is equally non-existent at the local level. When measuring the impact of commercial economic growth (Gross Value Added, or \ln_GVA) on real Business Rate revenue, the coefficient is a mere 0.116 and entirely lacks statistical significance.

This insignificance exposes a different, but equally damaging, mechanism of the "fiscal leash." While Council Tax fails locally because the baseline is frozen, Business Rates fail locally because the revenue is structurally hoarded by the central government. Because local authorities currently retain only 50% of their Business Rates — and because Whitehall routinely manipulates multipliers during revaluation years to ensure revenue neutrality at the national level — local councils are severed from their own commercial success.

Ultimately, this contrast proves a vital policy reality: simply updating property valuations is insufficient. Without fundamental structural devolution, specifically, 100% revenue retention, local authorities will remain trapped regardless of how often their tax bases are revalued.

The Psychological Fiscal Lock

Our econometric analysis shows that the UK's municipal tax system is mathematically defunct. However, relying solely on traditional fiscal models is insufficient to explain its longevity. While researchers like Adam and Browne (2012) have long highlighted the inefficiency and unfairness of the system, pure economic rationality cannot explain why a clearly flawed baseline has remained untouched by Parliament for over three decades. To understand why the "Zombie Tax" survives, we must analyse the psychological mechanisms driving voters and policymakers.

Tax Salience, Anchoring, and Bureaucratic Stagnation

A foundational psychological barrier to reform is "tax salience". Unlike income tax, which is deducted automatically and quietly through PAYE, Council Tax is a highly visible monthly fee paid directly out of a resident's bank account. This acute visibility amplifies public perception, making even small increases highly emotive and likely to trigger strong reactions (Chetty et al., 2009).

Compounding this visibility is the psychological anchoring of the 1991 valuations. As Kahneman (2011) established, individuals rely heavily on initial information when making complex judgments. For Yorkshire residents, bands frozen for over thirty years have become an entrenched reference standard for measuring household wealth and living costs.

The anchoring affects not just voters, but the institutions themselves. A bureaucratic culture frequently exhibits a status quo bias. For example, Norling (2025), in his analysis of Swedish local governments, he found that bureaucratic culture severely limits digital transformation strategies. This is because decision-makers default to a cautious approach that favours incremental improvements and the maintenance of existing processes, instead of enacting meaningful reforms, causing a "digital standstill" (Norling, 2025).

This institutional inertia provides a perfect parallel to the UK's fiscal stagnation. In councils across Yorkshire and within Whitehall, the 1991 bands represent the established administrative baseline. As established in foundational behavioural economics (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988), decision-makers disproportionately stick with the status quo. They do so not only to avoid the transition costs and uncertainties of a new system, but also due to psychological commitments, such as sunk costs, that cause them to persist with a failing course of action. Consequently, large-scale revaluation is actively avoided by Whitehall, not merely out of electoral fear, but because upending a 35-year-old framework poses a severe threat to bureaucratic continuity and stability.

Loss Aversion and Political Paralysis

If the anchoring effect explains institutional inertia, loss aversion explains why political reform is viewed as electoral suicide. Traditional economics assumes that if a tax reform is revenue-neutral, where the gains to the winners perfectly offset the losses to the losers, it is politically viable. Behavioural economics proves this false.

Loss aversion dictates that people feel the impact of financial loss significantly more strongly than equivalent gains. In a hypothetical Council Tax revaluation, even if 60% of households benefited, the psychological pain felt by the 40% of "losers" would be approximately twice as intense as the joy experienced by the winners (Kahneman & Tversky, 2013).

This psychological asymmetry creates a profound political imbalance. The "losers" will actively mobilise, protest, and punish the governing party at the ballot box. Conversely, the beneficiaries tend to be passively satisfied and rarely campaign actively for a slightly reduced tax bill. Slack and Bird (2014) define this dynamic as "political paralysis," accurately labelling municipal property tax as the "third rail" of British politics, touch it at your own risk.

The Endowment Effect and Information Asymmetry

Finally, the "endowment effect" further entrenches this deadlock. Over 35 years, residents have ceased to view their current tax bracket as an assessment of market value; instead, they view it as an acquired right or entitlement.

For instance, adjusting a property in a former mining village from Band B to Band C is not perceived as a rational market correction, but as the government seizing a portion of their entitlement. As explored, in post-industrial Yorkshire communities where homes are often viewed as a family's last economic safeguard, adjustments mandated by Westminster are instinctively framed as hostile external interference. This starkly contrasts with transaction-based taxes, such as Stamp Duty, which are triggered by a choice to move and are therefore more easily accepted (Besley et al., 2014).

Tragically, this psychological lock is maintained by profound information asymmetry (Akerlof, 1978). In low-growth areas like Barnsley or North Lincolnshire, residents often lack a comparative awareness of how deeply the system privileges southern wealth accumulation. Because this regional unfairness lacks "salience," it does not generate the necessary outrage to force reform.

Breaking the "Fiscal Lock"

Ultimately, Council Tax survives as an indestructible "Zombie" because it is protected by a perfect storm of human bias: 1991 anchoring creates institutional inertia, loss aversion grants potential losers a de facto political veto, and the endowment effect transforms an outdated tax into an untouchable right.

To fix local government finance, policymakers cannot simply present a fairer mathematical model; they must design a policy roadmap capable of bypassing this psychological "fiscal lock."

Policy Evaluation & The Three-Tier Roadmap

As demonstrated, the cardinal sin of the UK municipal tax system is its reliance on a 1991 baseline. This freeze has resulted in a stark geographic distortion, where households in Yorkshire and the North-East typically pay twice the proportion of their income in Council Tax compared to Londoners (Blagden et al., 2021), despite London property values growing exponentially faster (Adam et al., 2020). Poorer areas facing the greatest demand for services are saddled with the weakest, most inelastic tax base, creating a financial "doom loop" (Atkins and Hoddinott, 2020).

The psychological "fiscal lock" outlined previously dictates that a sudden, revenue-neutral revaluation would be political suicide. Therefore, we propose a staggered, three-tier policy roadmap. This approach moves from immediate stabilisation to a comprehensive structural overhaul, effectively bypassing the psychological barriers to reform.

The April 2026 Reforms: Tinkering at the Edges

The profound political paralysis surrounding municipal finance was illustrated perfectly by the government's *Modernising and Improving the Administration of Council Tax* statement and the subsequent guidance letter issued to councils in April 2026 (McGovern, 2026). While the government acknowledged the need to modernise, their reforms focused predominantly on debt administration, such as capping liability order costs and extending payment instalment rights to 63 days, acting as a compassionate band-aid for households in arrears rather than addressing the structural disease.

More tellingly, the government confirmed the introduction of a High Value Council Tax Surcharge (HVCTS) for April 2028, which will require "some properties to be placed in additional tax bands based on their values". This is a tacit admission from Whitehall that the 1991 baseline is entirely detached from modern property wealth.

Yet, rather than undertaking a comprehensive revaluation to fix the zero-elasticity failure across the entire country, the government has opted to bolt a new surcharge "alongside the council tax system" targeting only the top end of the market. This perfectly demonstrates the "fiscal lock": politicians are willing to tax the asset-rich minority, but remain terrified of correcting the baseline for the majority. Therefore, a much more radical, three-tier policy roadmap is required to actually cure the underlying mechanics of local taxation.

Tier 1 (Immediate): Regional Valuation Boards & AVMs (Bypassing Whitehall).

The first step must be to sever the link between local property valuations and national political risk. We propose the establishment of independent Regional Valuation Boards tasked with implementing rolling revaluations using Automated Valuation Models (AVMs).

By automating the process and moving it to a regional level, valuations become depoliticised, treating property tax as a technocratic utility rather than a partisan weapon. This immediately begins to correct the geographic distortions highlighted by Adam et al. (2020) and provides councils with an updated, accurate baseline of local wealth.

Tier 2 (Medium-Term): 100% Business Rate Retention & Regional Pooling

Once valuations are accurate, the revenue mechanisms must be fixed. Periodic revaluation of Business Rates is meaningless if the revenue is hoarded by Whitehall. We recommend moving to **100% Business Rate Retention**. If councils are expected to act as engines of local growth, they must be allowed to keep the fiscal rewards of that growth (Adam, 2019).

However, full retention risks leaving "stagnation trap" areas behind. Therefore, this must be paired with a **15–20% Regional Pooling** mechanism. A portion of the retained rates from high-growth pivots like Wakefield and Doncaster would be pooled regionally to support struggling councils like North Lincolnshire, ensuring baseline services are maintained without relying on Whitehall grants.

Furthermore, the government must immediately **remove the 3% referendum cap on Council Tax** increases. Introduced during a period of low inflation, the cap now leaves councils dangerously exposed to inflationary shocks. Local authorities must be granted the flexibility to set rates according to local needs, held accountable through standard local elections rather than arbitrary referendums.

Tier 3 (The Structural Cure): The Unified Land Value Tax (LVT)

While Tiers 1 and 2 stabilise the system, they do not cure the underlying flaw: taxing the property (the capital improvement) rather than the *land* (the underlying locational wealth). The ultimate goal of this roadmap is the replacement of both Council Tax and Business Rates with a Unified Land Value Tax (LVT).

A land value tax is a levy placed on the site value of land, explicitly excluding the value of buildings or structural improvements built upon it. (George, 1879; Lent, 1967). Historically dismissed as administratively complex, the modern integration of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and the Automated Valuation Models (AVMs) established in Tier 1 makes separating local land value from structural property value highly viable.

This structural shift perfectly resolves the mathematical failures exposed by our Yorkshire Test, while eliminating the economic "deadweight loss" inherent in the current system:

- **Elasticity by Design:** Unlike Council Tax, which requires painful manual rate hikes to generate revenue, land values naturally track local economic growth. When Wakefield repurposes colliery land into massive logistics hubs, an LVT automatically captures the massive increase in the underlying land value, fixing the "leakage" of modern wealth without requiring a political vote.

- **Solving the Price Paradox:** Our model proved that rising house prices currently "de-fund" councils in real terms. An LVT turns that local market heat into a direct, automatically scaling fiscal asset.

- **Incentivising Development (Removing Deadweight Loss):** The current system aggressively penalises investment. Under Business Rates, if a company improves a factory, their tax bill increases. Under Council Tax, our regression proved councils are forced to rely on physical sprawl for revenue. An LVT taxes the land regardless of what is on it. Because the supply of land is fixed, taxing it does not suppress its supply. Instead, it creates a powerful financial imperative to develop stagnant, land-banked industrial sites in areas like North Lincolnshire, driving dense, efficient regeneration.

- **High Street Regeneration:** The current Business Rates system actively accelerates the decline of regional town centres. If a local retailer invests in improving their shopfront, their property value increases, and they are punished with a higher tax bill. An LVT removes this penalty entirely. By taxing only the underlying land value, it encourages the productive use of high street plots and removes the financial disincentive for local businesses to upgrade their premises, providing a structural lifeline to struggling retail corridors in towns like Scunthorpe and Doncaster.

Bypassing the Lock: The LVT "Tax Deferral Scheme"

The political "third rail" of any property tax reform is invariably the "asset-rich, cash-poor" demographic — typically retirees living in family homes that have experienced exponential, unearned capital growth over the past three decades. Imposing an immediate cash liability on these individuals triggers acute loss aversion, guaranteeing an insurmountable voter veto that blocks any structural change.

To bypass this psychological lock, the transition to an LVT must be paired with a universal, statutory Tax Deferral Scheme. Under this mechanism, any resident who cannot, or chooses not to, pay their LVT liability out of current income can defer the payment entirely.

The accumulated tax is recorded as a statutory charge secured against the property's title, to be settled only at the point of market sale or during probate transfer to an heir.

This mechanic fundamentally alters the behavioural economics of the reform. It transforms the policy from a perceived "seizure of entitlement" into a deferred estate adjustment. By removing the threat of immediate, out-of-pocket cash hikes for vulnerable residents, it neutralises the loudest opponents and dismantles the political paralysis that has protected the 1991 baseline. The state organically recoups the true value of the land exactly when the owner realises their capital gain.

A common criticism of deferral schemes is that they risk starving local authorities of immediate cash flow. If a significant percentage of residents in a town like Harrogate defer their LVT, how does the council fund daily services?

The solution lies in recognising that deferred LVT is a highly secure, state-backed financial asset. As detailed in the Leeds Policy Institute's 2025 report, *Unleashing Growth*, local authorities must be empowered to establish and utilise **Municipal Bond Markets**. Councils can use the legally secured future receipts of the LVT deferral scheme as collateral to issue municipal bonds to institutional investors. This creates a vital "liquidity bridge": councils receive the necessary immediate cash flow to fund infrastructure and services today, borrowed against the cast-iron security of deferred land wealth.

Ultimately, this combination of an LVT, a deferral mechanism, and municipal bonding ends the reliance on central government grants, which have been slashed by 37% since 2010, and finally gives the North the independent fiscal engine required to fund its own future.

Limitations & Future Research

While the "Yorkshire Test" provides a highly focused, robust econometric proof of the "Zombie Tax" effect, the scope of this initial study presents certain methodological and practical limitations. Acknowledging these boundaries not only contextualises our findings but provides a clear trajectory for future macroeconomic policy research.

Geographic Scope and National Panel Expansion

Our TWFE regression model relied on a concentrated panel dataset of six Local Authorities within the Yorkshire and the Humber region. This deliberate selection criteria successfully isolated the mechanisms of regional divergence by stress-testing high-growth industrial pivots against low-growth stagnation traps.

However, as noted in our literature review regarding standard UK fiscal multiplier models, comprehensive studies frequently utilise much larger, national panel datasets encompassing all English local authorities. A critical avenue for future research is expanding our model nationwide.

Testing the "Zombie Tax" hypothesis across fundamentally different economic geographies, such as the hyper-inflated property market of the South East or the rural economies of the South West, would determine whether the zero-elasticity and "Price Paradox" coefficients hold consistent across the entire UK, or if they are uniquely exacerbated in the post-industrial North.

Granularity of Elasticity and Income Distribution

To measure the responsiveness of municipal revenue to local wealth creation, our model utilised Median Gross Weekly Pay as the primary indicator for wage elasticity. While this effectively captured broad economic pivots, it masks the distributional impact of the 1991 baseline.

Future research must move beyond median aggregates to create separate elasticities for distinct income deciles or quartiles.

Given the fundamentally regressive nature of the frozen Council Tax bands, calculating how municipal revenue responds differently to top-decile wealth accumulation versus bottom-decile wage stagnation would provide a much deeper, mathematical understanding of how the current tax system actively widens local inequality gaps.

Temporal Scope and Post-Pandemic Shocks

Our dataset covers the period 2011 to 2019. This timeframe was selected to provide a clean, uninterrupted view of the 2013 devolution reforms, free from the extreme macroeconomic anomalies of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent emergency central government grants.

Consequently, our model does not capture the severe inflationary shocks and the "cost of living crisis" that began in 2022. Because our research proves that councils survive entirely on discretionary *buoyancy* (manual tax hikes) rather than natural elasticity, future studies should update the TWFE model with 2020–2025 data. This would allow researchers to quantify exactly how deeply the "fiscal leash" strangled local authorities when underlying inflation vastly outpaced the 3% referendum cap.

Actuarial Modelling of the LVT Deferral Scheme

Finally, while we have provided robust conceptual framework for a Unified Land Value Tax paired with a statutory deferral scheme and municipal bonding, the exact financial mechanics require rigorous stress-testing.

Future LPI policy papers should focus on the actuarial modelling of this transition. Research must quantify the projected uptake of the deferral scheme across different demographic profiles (e.g., retirees in high-value Band F-H homes vs. young professionals). By estimating the specific volume of deferred tax liabilities in each local authority, researchers can mathematically define the precise "liquidity bridge" required, allowing the institute to draft highly specific municipal bond issuance strategies for councils moving onto the LVT system.

Conclusion

For over three decades, English local government finance has been managed not by deliberate economic strategy, but by political paralysis. As this report has demonstrated, the UK's municipal tax system is anchored to an economic geography that ceased to exist in 1991. The resulting "Zombie Tax" is no longer merely an outdated administrative quirk; it is an active driver of regional inequality that fundamentally severs local authorities from their own economic success.

Through the "Yorkshire Test," our econometric modelling definitively proves that the natural elasticity of Council Tax is dead. When post-industrial towns like Wakefield and Doncaster successfully pivot their economies and generate significant wage growth, the tax system captures mathematically zero of that new wealth. Worse, the "Price Paradox" ensures that as local property markets inflate, councils actually lose real purchasing power. Stripped of natural economic capture by a frozen baseline, and starved of central government grants since 2013, local authorities are trapped on a "fiscal leash" — forced to survive entirely by manually hiking tax rates on a regressive base just to maintain statutory services.

Yet, as our behavioural analysis highlights, presenting mathematical proof of a broken system is insufficient to generate political reform. Successive governments have been paralysed by a "fiscal lock" — a toxic combination of 1991 anchoring, bureaucratic stagnation, and acute voter loss aversion.

Politicians have accepted the slow bankruptcy of local councils because the alternative—an immediate, cash-out-of-pocket revaluation — is viewed as electoral suicide.

Managing decline, however, is not a sustainable policy for the North of England.

To break this deadlock, this report provides a comprehensive, three-tier roadmap that bypasses the psychological barriers to reform. By immediately depoliticising valuations through regional AVMs, granting 100% Business Rate retention, and ultimately transitioning to a Unified Land Value Tax (LVT), we can finally align municipal revenue with modern economic reality.

Crucially, by pairing this LVT with a statutory deferral scheme and leveraging municipal bonds, we protect vulnerable, asset-rich residents from immediate cash shocks while providing councils with the liquidity required to invest in their communities today.

Fiscal autonomy is a choice. The data clearly shows that northern towns are capable of generating remarkable economic pivots and modern wealth. It is time to implement a tax system that actually allows them to keep it.

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Council tax & business rates: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-local-government-finance>

Unemployment rates: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/contents.aspx>

Gross Value Added (GVA): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossvalueaddedgva>

Dwelling Stock: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/dwelling-stock-including-vacants>

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