

By Philip Brien

13 December 2024

---

# Public spending by country and region

## Summary

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Spending per person, 2023/24
- 3 Detailed comparisons of countries and regions
- 4 Further reading

### **Disclaimer**

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing [‘Legal help: where to go and how to pay’](#) for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

### **Feedback**

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email [papers@parliament.uk](mailto:papers@parliament.uk). Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk). If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email [hcenquiries@parliament.uk](mailto:hcenquiries@parliament.uk).

# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2 Spending per person, 2023/24</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3 Detailed comparisons of countries and regions</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1 Current and capital spending	7
3.2 Spending per job	9
3.3 Changes over time	10
3.4 Spending by function	11
<b>4 Further reading</b>	<b>16</b>

## Summary

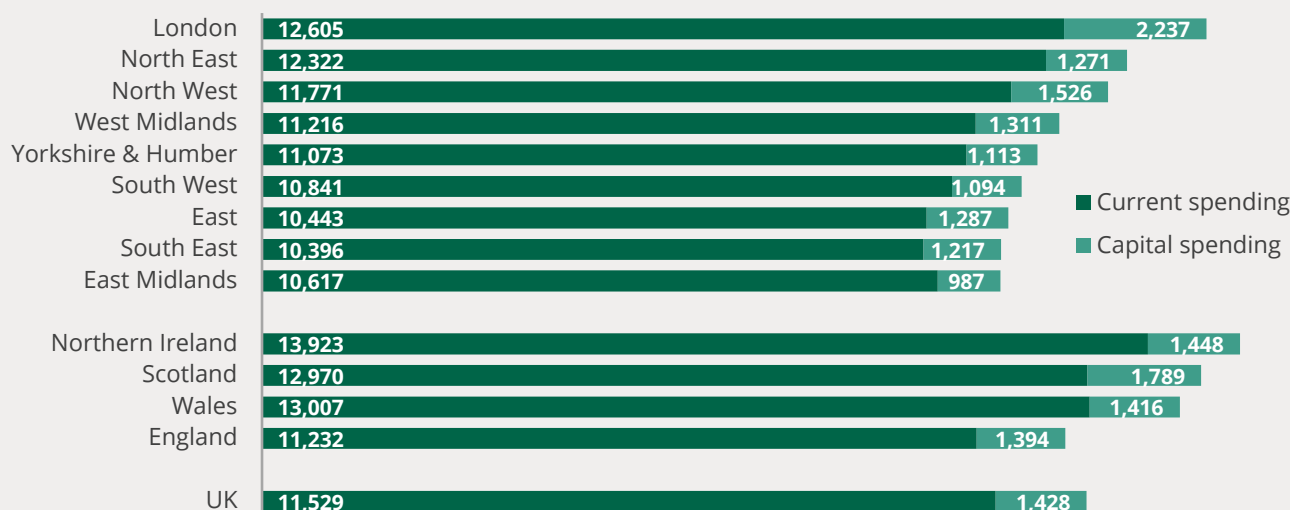
This briefing paper gives figures on the level of public spending in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It also gives figures for the English regions.

In 2023/24, public spending per person in the UK as a whole was £12,958. In England, it was £12,625 (3% below the UK average). This compares with:

- Northern Ireland: £15,371 (19% above the UK average)
- Scotland: £14,759 (14% above the UK average)
- Wales: £14,424 (11% above the UK average).

### Current and capital spending per person, by country and region of the UK

£ per person, 2023/24



Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, table A.3b

Among the English regions, public spending per person was lowest in the East Midlands at £11,603 (10% below the UK average) and highest in London at £14,842 (15% higher than the UK average).

Across the UK, more money is spent on social protection than on any other function, followed by health. The breakdown is reasonably consistent across all countries and regions.

Almost all of the data in this briefing comes from HM Treasury's [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), which also contains a detailed functional breakdown and a database that can be used for further analysis.

# 1 Introduction

Public spending refers to all spending by any part of the public sector, including central government, local government, and public corporations. For many types of public spending, we have a good idea of how much benefits each part of the UK. This ‘identifiable expenditure’ (or identifiable spending) covers around 82% of total public spending and is the focus of this briefing.<sup>1</sup> The remaining 18% is regarded as benefiting the UK as a whole and therefore is not attributed to a particular region or nation – examples include spending on defence or debt interest.

For Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the data includes spending by the devolved administrations but also spending in these countries by UK Government departments. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions is responsible for social security spending throughout Great Britain. This means that DWP spending on social security in Scotland is included under Scotland in the charts and tables below.

These figures show the amount of money that was spent in each country and region; however, this does not reflect the process of allocating money in the first place. Spending is first divided up among the government departments in Spending Reviews every few years, and it is then up to each department to decide what to spend this money on.<sup>2</sup> For more on this, along with sources of other local data on spending, see the Library’s research briefing [How is public spending allocated to local areas?](#)<sup>3</sup>

Parliament has no direct role in allocating spending, but it does approve the government’s departmental spending plans as part of the Estimates process. For more on the most recent set of Estimates, see the Library’s research briefing [Main Estimates: Government spending plans for 2024/25.](#)<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For further information on the classification of spending, see the [explanatory notes](#) accompanying HM Treasury’s Country and regional analysis: 2024 publication.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Spending Reviews, see section 3 of the Library’s research briefing [Autumn Budget 2024: Background briefing](#).

<sup>3</sup> Commons Library research briefing CBP-9926, [How is public spending allocated to local areas?](#)

<sup>4</sup> Commons Library research briefing CBP-10054, [Main Estimates: Government spending plans for 2024/25](#)

## 2

## Spending per person, 2023/24

The chart below shows public spending per person for each country and region. The figures show considerable variation between the different parts of the UK. For example, public spending per person in 2023/24 was £12,625 in England compared with £15,371 in Northern Ireland – a difference of around £2,700. Public spending per person in Northern Ireland is 19% higher than the UK average, in Scotland it is 14% higher and in Wales 11% higher. There are also differences in spending levels between the English regions, where spending per person ranges from £11,603 in the East Midlands to £14,842 in London.



Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, table A.1b

The figures are intended to give a broad overview and cannot be regarded as a precise measure. This is because it is not always easy to decide who benefits from particular spending, and simplifying assumptions are made in compiling the data.

Comparisons are also difficult because the scope of the public sector varies between countries. For example, water supply is in the public sector in Scotland and Northern Ireland but in the private sector in England and Wales. For these reasons, small differences in spending between regions should not be regarded as significant.

## 3 Detailed comparisons of countries and regions

### 3.1 Current and capital spending

Public spending in the UK can be divided up into two main categories:

- **‘Current’** or ‘resource’ spending is money spent on things that are used up, such as salaries;
- **‘Capital’** or ‘investment’ spending is money spent on things that last, such as buildings, vehicles or financial assets.

#### Current spending

In 2023/24, a large majority (89.0%) of identifiable public spending in the UK was current spending. Its breakdown between countries and regions is shown in the chart below.



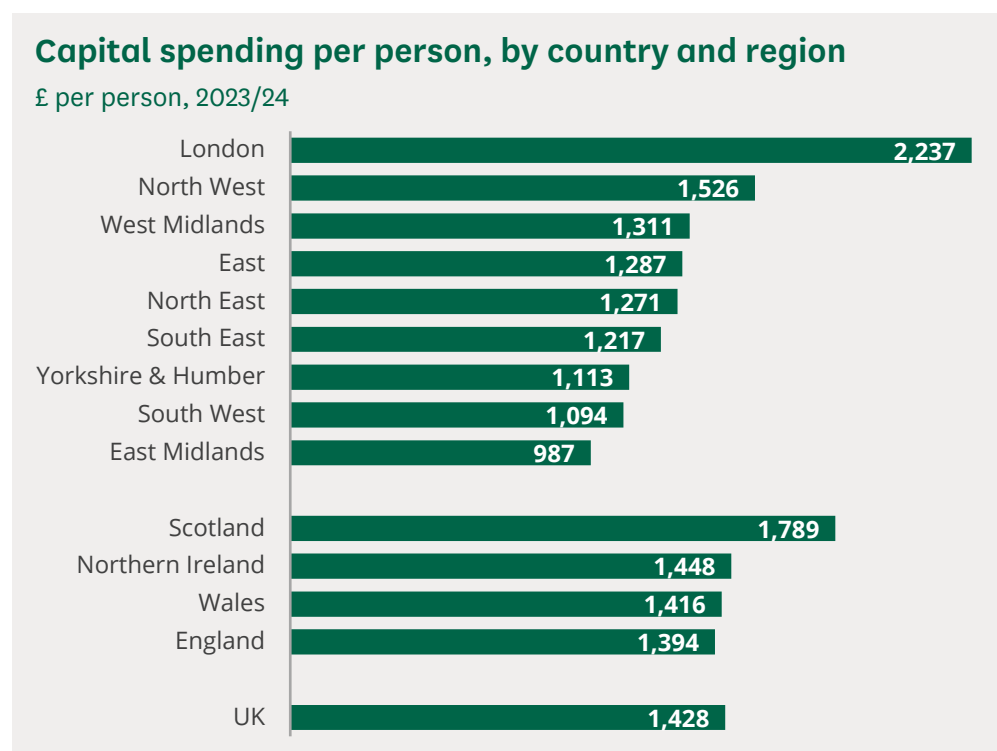
Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, table A.3b

As is the case for overall public spending, current spending per person was higher in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the UK. Within England, London had the highest public spending per person. London’s spending tends

to be higher than in other regions; HM Treasury says that this is partly because it is relatively expensive to provide public services in London, because of the high costs of staff and infrastructure.<sup>5</sup>

## Capital spending

In 2023/24, 11.0% of identifiable spending in the UK was capital spending. This broke down across the different countries and regions as follows:



Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, table A.3b

Scotland had the highest capital spending out of the four parts of the UK by this measure, at £1,789 per person, while England had the lowest at £1,394. Among the English regions, London had the highest spending, at £2,237 per person, while the East Midlands had the lowest at £987.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies explained in its 2020 Green Budget report that London's capital spending is largely driven by high spending on transport, particularly spending on the railways.<sup>6</sup> HM Treasury's Country and regional analysis 2024 says the same thing, noting that London's capital spending includes spending by Transport for London (TfL) and that this spending also benefits commuters who live outside London but use TfL services.<sup>7</sup>

However, this is not the whole story – six English regions would have had levels of capital spending per person lower than London in 2023/24 even if

<sup>5</sup> HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024

<sup>6</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Levelling up: where and how?](#) (Chapter 7 of Green Budget 2020), 2 October 2020

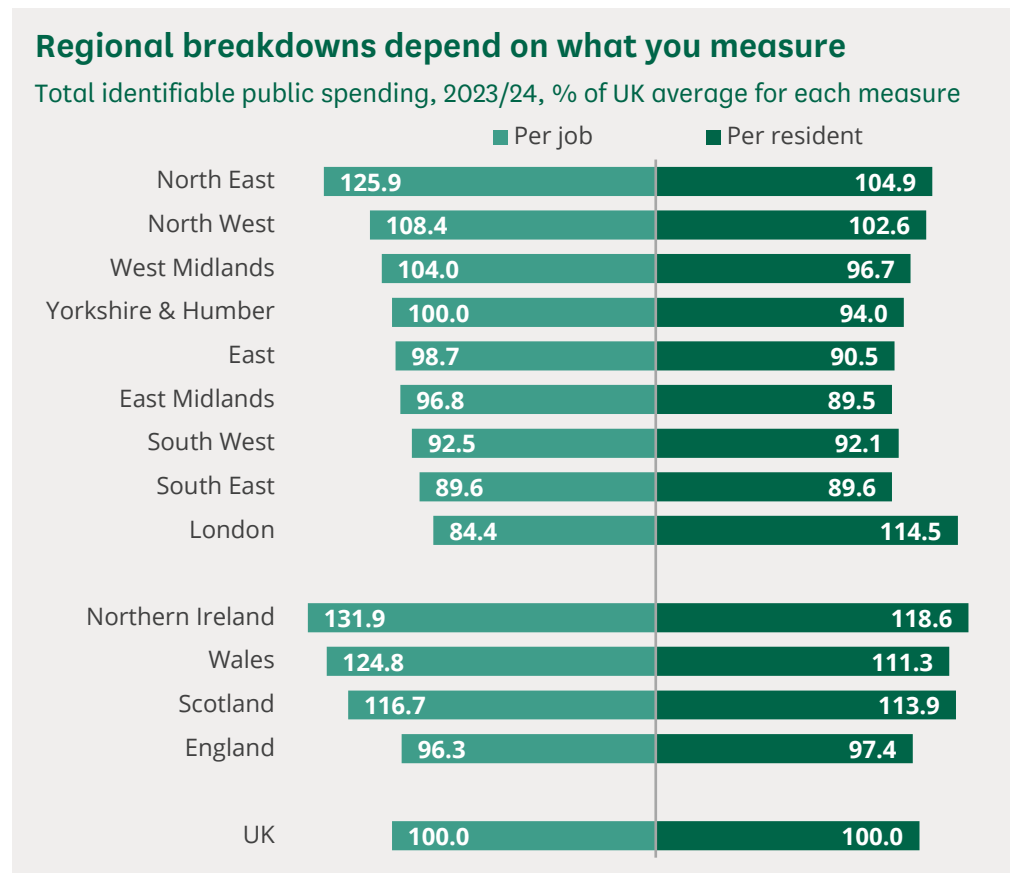
<sup>7</sup> HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024



London's transport spending were removed.<sup>8</sup> See section 3.4 for more information on spending by government function.

## 3.2 Spending per job

Spending per person is a fairly standard way of representing spending and is the figure that appears in the Treasury's analysis. However, it is not the only option for presenting spending figures. If we divide total spending by the number of jobs in each region, rather than the number of residents, this changes the breakdown:



Source: Library calculations, based on HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, and ONS, dataset [S01: Regional labour market summary](#), jobs data for March 2024

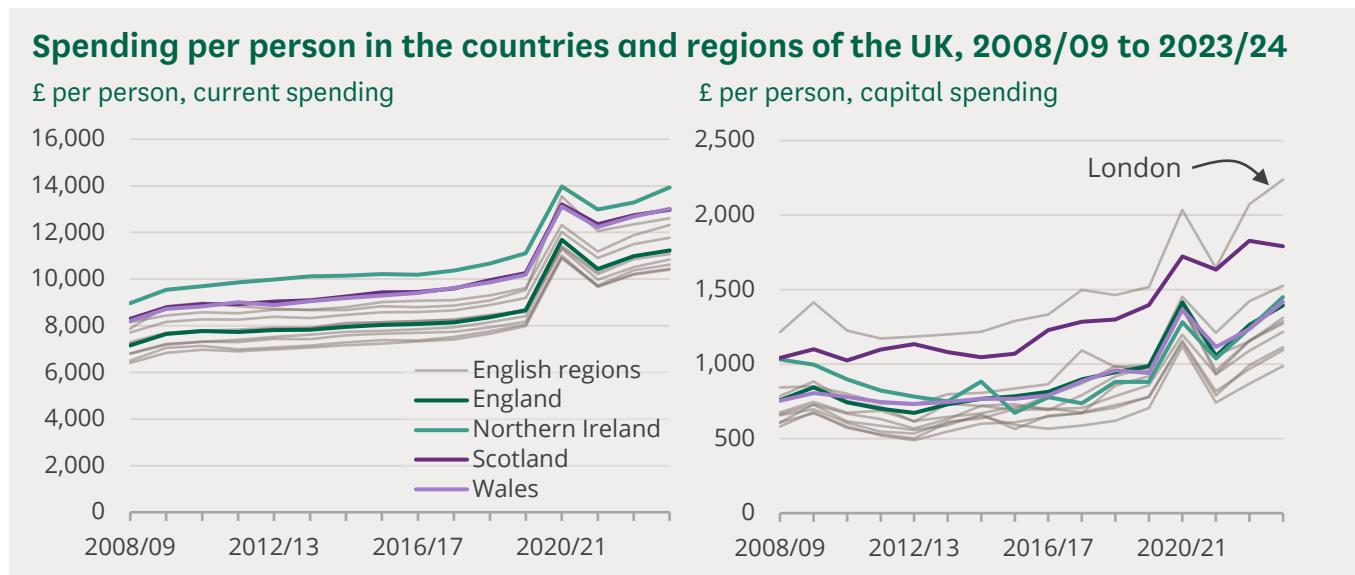
In particular, London's position completely shifts between the two measures. Its large number of jobs relative to its number of residents (because so many people commute in) means that its spending per resident is the highest of all the countries and regions of the UK (at 114.5% of the UK average), but its spending per job is the lowest (84.4% of the UK average).

<sup>8</sup> Library calculation, based on HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024

## 3.3

## Changes over time

Public spending grew slowly for most of the 2010s, although it was already beginning to accelerate somewhat before a sharp increase in all countries and regions during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> The changes were far more uniform for current spending than they were for capital spending, as the charts below show.



Note: Because of methodological differences between different editions of the data, figures from before 2019/20 may not be directly comparable between years, and should be taken only as a rough guide.

Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, and earlier editions.

These charts show changes in spending per person for every country and region since 2008/09.

**Current** spending had a fairly consistent pattern between the countries and regions before the pandemic, with the level of spending increasing for most regions between 2018/19 and 2019/20, before increasing sharply everywhere in 2020/21. Spending then fell back somewhat in 2021/22, but remained much higher than in previous years. This expansion in spending was not entirely uniform across countries and regions, with London's spending per person increasing proportionally more than any other region.

**Capital** spending tends to be much more volatile, and some areas did much better than others. Although all parts of the UK had capital spending per person higher in 2023/24 than it had been pre-pandemic, Northern Ireland had the largest proportional increase (from 13% below the UK average in 2019/20 to 1% above it in 2023/24), and Scotland the largest decrease (from 37% above the UK average in 2019/20 to 25% above in 2023/24).

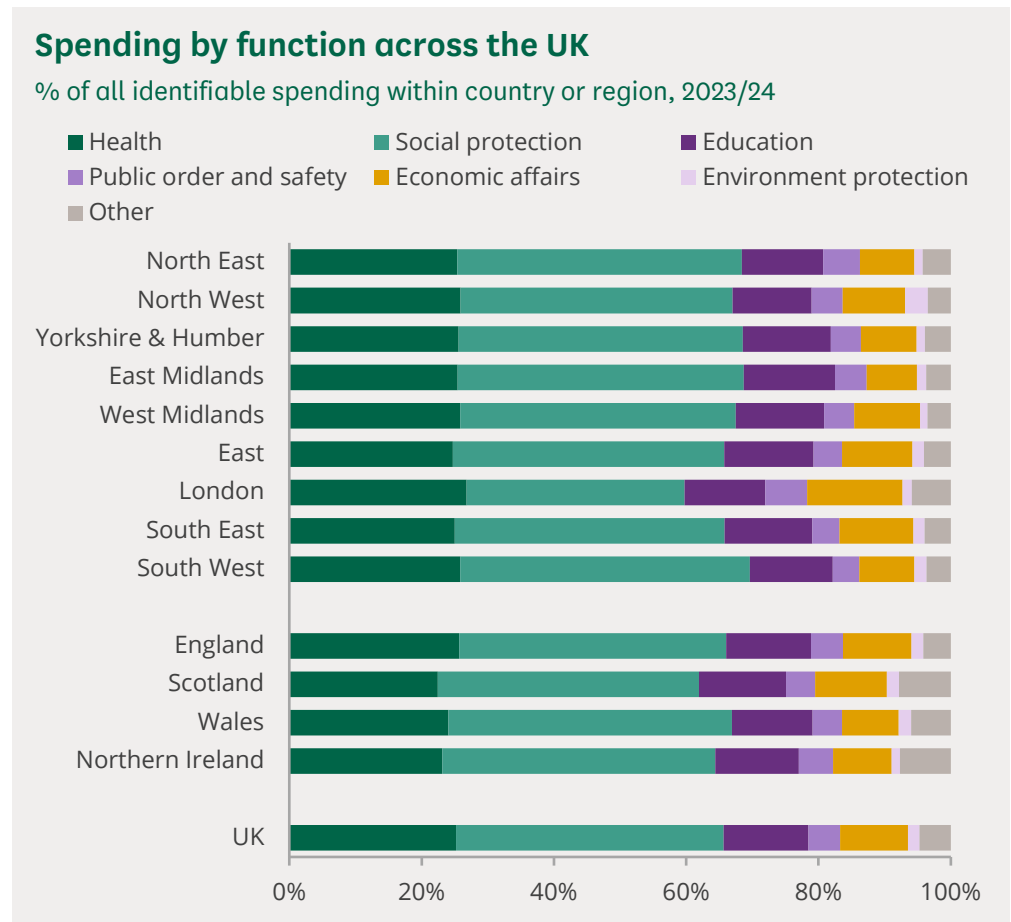
<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see the Library's research briefing [Public spending during the Covid-19 pandemic](#).

## 3.4

## Spending by function

## Total spending

The data published by HM Treasury also includes a breakdown of spending by function – that is, what the money has been spent on. We can use this to show that spending is typically spent on largely the same kind of things in the different countries and regions across the UK.



Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, database

There are some key differences – for example, London spends proportionally less on social protection than any other country or region, and England as a whole spends more on health than the other three main parts of the UK – but the overall pattern is consistent. Social protection makes up the largest proportion of spending in every country and region, followed by health, education, and economic affairs (except in London, where economic affairs, which includes transport, accounted for more than education).

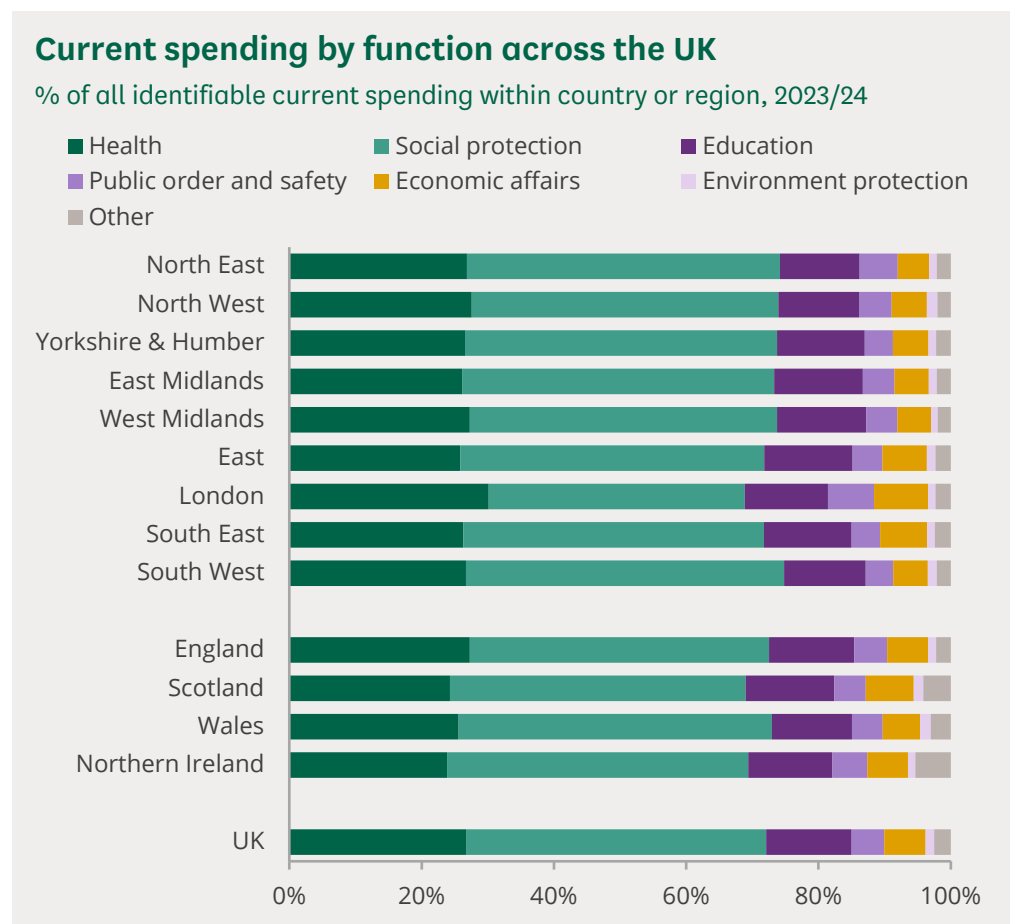
Spending on economic affairs made up a far larger proportion of public spending in 2020/21 and 2021/22 than it had in 2019/20, largely because of extra spending on things like the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS). It continued to be higher than normal in 2022/23 because of energy bills support, but fell back in 2023/24.

Digging more deeply into the data, we can find some specific areas of spending that are very different between different areas. The largest difference is found in spending on “housing and community amenities, not elsewhere classified” – in Northern Ireland, spending on this function in 2023/24 came to about £144 per person, far above the UK average of about £9 per person. This is mostly because a large proportion of Northern Ireland’s local authority spending (about 28%) was classified under this heading.

Other functions reflect different ways that the public sector is organised in different places. Spending on “water supply” was £267 per person in Northern Ireland and £129 per person in Scotland (where the water supply is nationalised), and pennies per person everywhere else in the UK (where it is in the private sector).

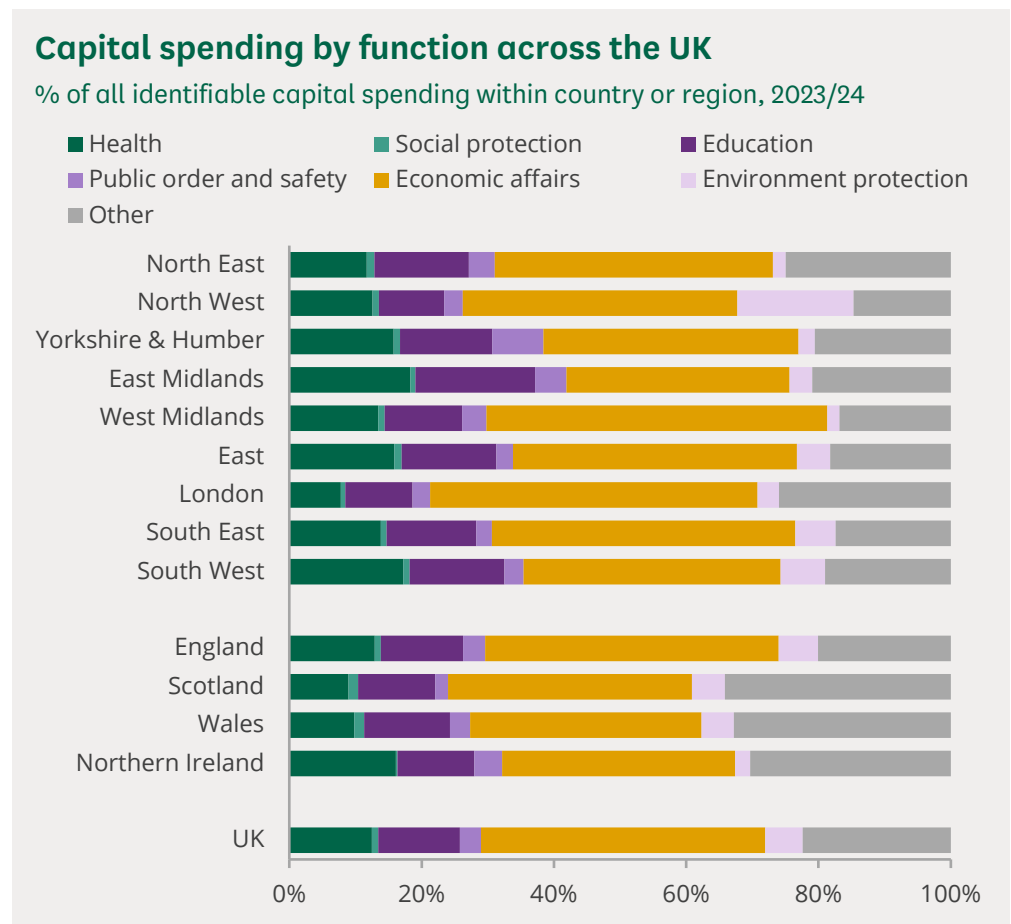
## Current and capital spending

We can also do similar analysis for current and capital spending, as follows:



Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, database

The proportion of current spending allocated to different functions of government is reasonably consistent between countries and regions. The biggest variation from the UK average in 2023/24 was seen in London, which had a higher proportion of spending on health and a lower proportion on social protection than in any other country or region.



Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, database

The capital spending breakdown is very different to that for current spending (largely because very little social protection spending is capital) and is much more varied. The largest variations are seen in spending on economic affairs (which includes transport, as discussed in section 3.1 above) and on environment protection. The North West's 18% of capital spending on environment protection is over twice as high as the proportion spent on it by any other region or country, probably because the Sellafield nuclear site is in this region and processes much of the UK's spent nuclear fuel.

## Changes in spending during the covid-19 pandemic

The covid-19 pandemic resulted in much higher spending in 2020/21 than in 2019/20, and these increases were not evenly distributed across the country. The map on page 15 shows how much spending per person increased for the four functions of government where the overall increase was greatest: economic affairs (which included several of the covid-19 employment and business support schemes), health, education, and social protection. Note that these increases represent all public spending on these functions, not just that specifically intended to deal with the effects of the pandemic.

The map shows that spending on economic affairs accounted for a much larger increase in spending than any other function. Increases in this spending were particularly high in London (where spending on economic

affairs increased by £2,921 per person between 2019/20 and 2020/21) and lowest in Northern Ireland (an increase of £1,611 per person).

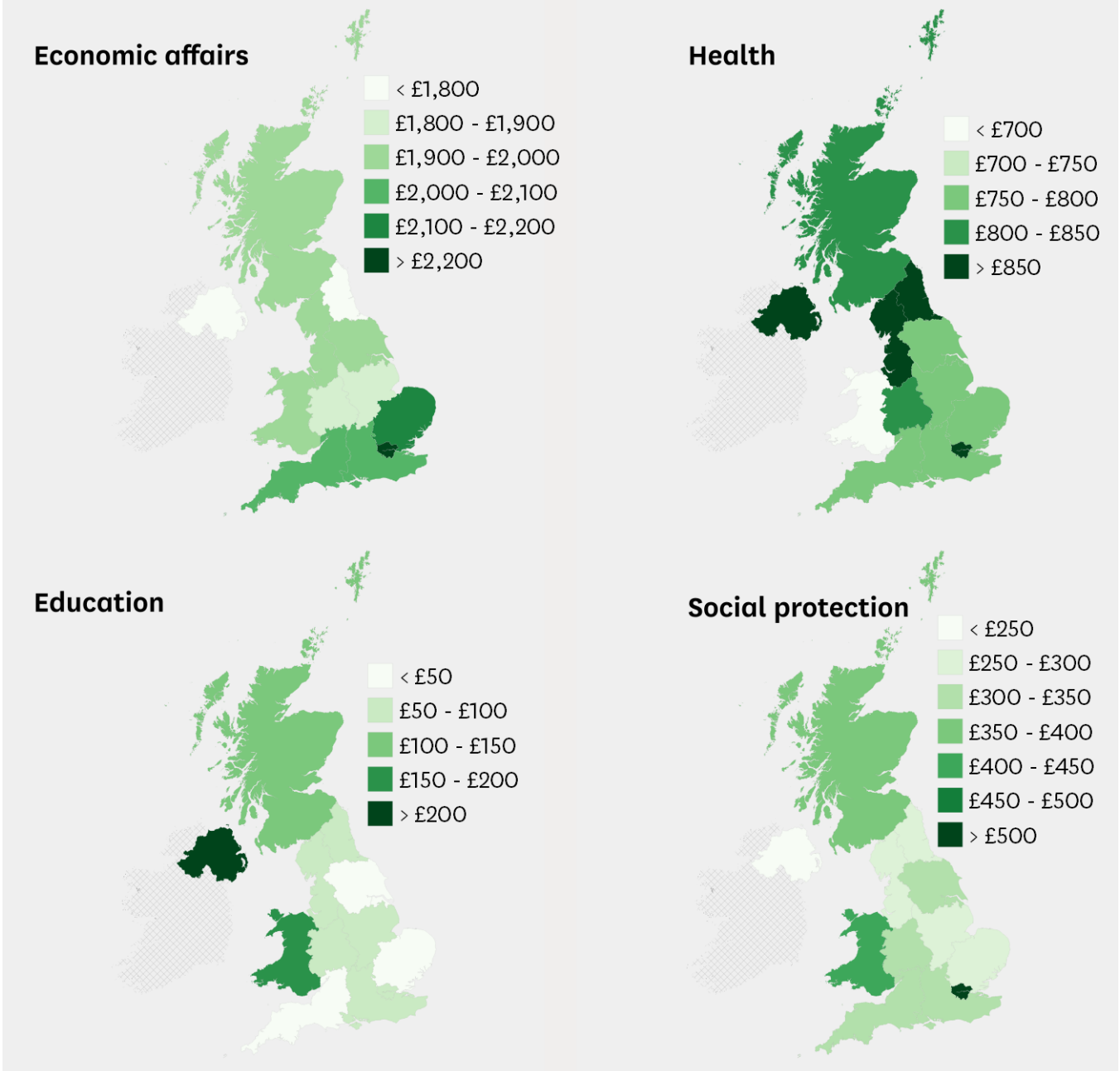
However, health spending increased more in Northern Ireland (£873 per person) than it did anywhere else, with the lowest increase being found in Wales (£692 per person). Spending increases in general were much more modest for education and social protection; for education, the largest increase was found in Northern Ireland (£233 per person) while for social protection it was London (£527 per person).

Much of this extra spending did not continue into 2021/22. In particular, spending on economic affairs fell in 2021/22 by around 40-60% in every country and region of the UK, as schemes such as the CJRS (furlough) and various business support grants were wound down.

However, spending remained well above 2019/20 levels for almost every major function in every country and region. Health spending in 2021/22 was around 30% higher than in 2019/20 in most countries and regions, while education spending was over 8% higher everywhere.

## Changes in public spending per person in 2020/21, by country and region

£ per person, increase in spending on specific function between 2019/20 and 2020/21



Note: Colour ranges represent different amounts of money for each function in order to show differences more clearly.

Source: HM Treasury, [Country and regional analysis: 2024](#), 20 November 2024, database

---

## 4 Further reading

The ONS publishes [alternative data on public spending and revenue](#) in the countries and regions of the UK. This includes an estimate of each country and region's net contribution to the public finances.

Information on each country and region's economic performance can be found in [Regional and National Economic Indicators](#) (SN 06924).

Statistics and analysis on the economic impact of the covid-19 pandemic, and the spending measures that the government took to deal with it, can be found in our briefing paper [Coronavirus: Economic impact](#) (CBP 08866).

Other Library briefings on public spending include:

- [Public spending: a brief introduction](#) (CBP 08046)
- [The public finances: a historical overview](#) (CBP 08256)
- [Main Estimates: Government spending plans for 2023/24](#) (CBP 09805)
- [Public spending during the Covid-19 pandemic](#) (CBP 09309)
- [How is public spending allocated to local areas?](#) (CBP 09926)
- [Financial scrutiny in Parliament](#) (CBP 10104)




The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk).

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe) or scan the code below:



 [commonslibrary.parliament.uk](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk)

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)