LOCALIS

Everything in its Right Place

ESTABLISHING STRONG ORGANISATIONS AND PRACTICES FOR SUCCESSFUL DEVOLUTION

By Sandy Forsyth

About Localis

Who we are

We are a leading, independent think tank that was established in 2001. Our work promotes neo-localist ideas through research, events and commentary, covering a range of local and national domestic policy issues.

Neo-localism

Our research and policy programme is guided by the concept of neo-localism. Neo-localism is about giving places and people more control over the effects of globalisation. It is positive about promoting economic prosperity, but also enhancing other aspects of people's lives such as family and culture. It is not anti-globalisation, but wants to bend the mainstream of social and economic policy so that place is put at the centre of political thinking.

In particular our work is focused on four areas:

- **Decentralising political economy.** Developing and differentiating regional economies and an accompanying devolution of democratic leadership.
- **Empowering local leadership.** Elevating the role and responsibilities of local leaders in shaping and directing their place.
- **Extending local civil capacity.** The mission of the strategic authority as a convener of civil society; from private to charity sector, household to community.
- **Reforming public services.** Ideas to help save the public services and institutions upon which many in society depend.

What we do

We publish research throughout the year, from extensive reports to shorter pamphlets, on a diverse range of policy areas. We run a broad events programme, including roundtable discussions, panel events and an extensive party conference programme. We also run a membership network of local authorities and corporate fellows.

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Any opinions expressed in the report, errors or omissions remain my own.

Sandy Forsyth

A foreword from Local Partnerships

Local Partnerships helps make devolution work in practice. As an inhouse public sector delivery partner jointly owned by the Local Government Association, HM Treasury and the Welsh Government, we support central government, the Welsh Government, councils and combined authorities to turn devolved powers into measurable outcomes. Working solely for the public sector family, Local Partnerships provides a trusted interface between national policy and local delivery.

Devolution in England and Wales has now entered a new phase. The question is no longer whether powers should sit closer to places, but whether the institutions receiving those powers are equipped to use them well. As mayoral and strategic authorities take on wider responsibilities for growth, infrastructure, housing, climate resilience and public service reform, success will depend as much on delivery capability as on constitutional settlement.

Devolution inherently requires collaboration. It relies on strong working relationships between central and local government, and between authorities. Yet the pace and scale of change now expected of local leaders is unprecedented. New strategic authorities are being asked to design operating models, manage complex risks, steward major investment and demonstrate accountability at a speed the system has rarely seen.

This report highlights a critical truth that underpins Local Partnerships' work: devolution will not succeed on structures and legislation alone. Authorities will stand or fall on their ability to translate ambition into deliverable programmes. Where capability is weak or inconsistent, confidence erodes, trust declines and progress slows.

Local Partnerships combines strategic insight with practical, hands-on support to address this challenge. We help new authorities move from legal form to effective institution, support complex investment and assurance decisions, and work with places to deliver programmes on the ground. Our work spans infrastructure, housing, regeneration, climate resilience, waste and energy, alongside wider public service transformation, with a consistent focus on value for the public purse and outcomes for communities.

As devolution continues, the central risk is no longer a lack of ambition, but ambition outpacing readiness. This report demonstrates the importance of building capability alongside devolution, ensuring that newly devolved powers are matched by confidence, competence and delivery discipline. Local Partnerships is proud to operate in this space, helping places bridge the gap between policy intent and lasting impact for the communities we all serve.

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Executive summary

England is currently undergoing a dual transformation: that of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and the expansion of devolution across metropolitan and, increasingly, rural areas. This period of transition will be marked by significant structural changes impacting the organisational culture, service delivery mechanisms, and accountability processes of local and strategic authorities. When it comes to devolution, there is no 'one size fits all' approach: the success of strategic governance is heavily influenced by the specific histories, civic identities, and geographies that define England's places. This report sets out ways in which new and maturing strategic authorities can adapt to the needs of place while still aligning with a national policy that encourages regional growth. The need for a landscape of devolution that supports the genuine decentralisation of responsibilities and resources to regional and local levels, including by means of enhanced fiscal devolution, is sustained throughout this report. Without a strong foundation that elevates place to the centre of policy decisions, the ongoing and potential shift of power into England's regions will not be the success that it can be. The following summary touches on the major themes identified by the report as central to the development of efficient and successful strategic governance.

Place-based and strategic delivery

A core challenge with which policymakers must contend when creating the conditions for strategic governance is the nebulous nature of 'place-based' policy. This report identifies and defines 'place' not just as a geographic concept but as a composite of the tangible and intangible assets available to an area, and the vision towards which those assets are directed. Successful place-based policy must be holistic and asset-based, and must incorporate elements of bottom-up accountability, rather than a continuation of the top-down strategy that has traditionally defined local policy in England. Place-based service delivery, understood here as an emphasis on the holistic approach achieved by means of collaboration between local stakeholders, integrated budgets, and the provision of data to unlock a bespoke offer for place, is gaining traction within national policy narratives. With devolution policy finding recent momentum, now is consequently the time to leverage the direction of devolution, and the burgeoning possibilities it offers to local and regional organisations as they receive greater powers and resourcing, to stimulate the environment needed for a bottom-up and place-based approach to delivery. However, while strategy at the regional level may be seen as a remedy to the some of the inefficiencies of small-scale localism,

defining the most appropriate scale for strategy remains a complex, nuanced task that must also recognise the benefits of catering to local needs — despite the large scale of strategic authority boundaries.

Models of strategic governance

Strategic governance itself concerns how the working parts of England's regions and sub-regions might be able to function in concert to deliver services efficiently. As such, one of the primary tasks of strategic authorities is to convene all those parts and enable collaboration between them, including organisations across the public, private, and third sectors that work in all policy areas that contribute to strategic governance — from social care to public health to transport and more. Combined with effective strategic planning, the collaboration of all such partners is key to providing upstream prevention and reducing demand for services, with the ultimate goal of strengthening delivery for communities.

The government's preferred approach to strategic governance, as evidenced by its place at the forefront of devolution policy, is the Mayoral Strategic Authority, which sees a directly elected mayor providing visible leadership and levering their soft power to influence national policy in favour of their region. Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) are those to which additional powers, most notably in the form of the Integrated Settlement, are granted. Although Cornwall, for example, has already been functioning as a non-mayoral authority with a (minimal) level of devolution, the new, more all-encompassing category of non-mayoral Foundation Strategic Authorities is intended to extend devolution even to areas not yet ready for, or suited to, the mayoral system. Furthermore, both mayoral and foundation combined county authorities are designed to bring the benefits of devolution to more rural areas, moving devolution beyond the urban-centric city-region model.

The regions and sub-regions of England experience significant asymmetries in terms of how far devolution has evolved. Greater Manchester, for instance, benefits from decades of strategic collaboration even prior to the establishment of its combined authority, whereas newer authorities such as Lancashire or Greater Lincolnshire must build up the relationships and working processes necessary for successful strategic policy implementation from scratch. Furthermore, while urban areas can leverage agglomeration (growth through density), which itself has been the emphasis of national policy in recent years, there is a case to be made for national policy to better support non-urban areas and prevent places from becoming left behind. This report examines closely the specific asymmetries that existing strategic authorities must tackle to deliver services, including the frequent lack of alignment across the boundaries

of regional service delivery organisations. The report concludes on five particular characteristics of place that should be addressed if devolution is to be leveraged in favour of place-based policy delivery:

- the history of strategic delivery in a place
- civic identity and regional attachment
- geography and spatial dynamics
- institutional alignment
- human expertise

These elements together dictate the structure and, up to the present, the success of strategic governance. As such, national policy must build a degree of adaptability into its approach to standardisation across local and strategic government within the wider context of devolution.

Governance, leadership, and the role of the mayor

The role of the directly elected mayor is central to the current devolution framework, wherein the mayor provides a clear point of contact for central government and exercises the democratic mandate of their region as a widely recognisable political figure. An examination of different mayoral models in some of the UK's international peers in this report reveals that a well-established framework that defines the role of the mayor in relation both to their own council and to the communities that the mayor and council represent is vital to a well-functioning democracy — and, ultimately, to the ability of the mayor to fulfil the responsibilities of the role.

The authority of mayors is tied significantly to their relationship with the centre. International examples show that, across different models of mayoral power, the success of the mayoral position relies upon both collaboration between mayors and their councillors and the building of strong guardrails to ensure continued performance of the authority beyond the terms of individual mayors. The performance of local government organisations including strategic authorities, is uniquely defined by their leaders. Effective leadership requires unity at the senior level and the ability to embed innovative organisational cultures, particularly if the local government sector is to navigate the upheavals brought by LGR and devolution.

Fiscal measures and funding regional growth

There is no guaranteed correlation between devolution and regional growth, but genuine decentralisation — including fiscal devolution and, significantly, policy tailored to local knowledge — offers significant potential benefits. The 2025 Budget and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment (EDCE) Act signal a shift toward greater fiscal devolution; the forthcoming 2026 Budget, as indicated by the Chancellor in the recent Mais Lecture, is likely to continue this direction. This shift has included, for instance, the potential for MSAs to establish business rates retention zones and even to be allocated a direct share of their region's business rates; the devolution of Integrated Settlements to Established MSAs; and the intention to allow mayors to introduce visitor levies to support investment in local priorities. However, the prioritisation of more mature, 'established' authorities, the traditional deal-first approach, and continued top-down control from Whitehall may stifle genuine regional autonomy and reaffirm existing asymmetries in regional development.

LGR and devolution are inherently linked; success depends on ensuring that structural changes in the short term do not distract from the primary goal of delivering better outcomes for communities in the long term. The sequencing of all this upheaval has thus far been defined by a lack of clarity in terms of how local democratic processes and the delivery of services are to continue throughout LGR and devolution, with the former doubtlessly having a significant impact on the inception and progression of the latter. Institutional maturity conceptually underpins the ability of strategic authorities to meet the expectations of devolution policy, and so, beyond short-term disruption, it will be necessary for the opportunities that an increasingly substantial devolution environment brings for strategic authorities — the delegation of service delivery, funding devolution in the form of Integrated Settlements, and potentially even expanded fiscal devolution — to be matched by the organisational capacity to handle them.

New organisations must ensure that they have a dedicated process of value definition and development to overcome key organisational culture issues brought about by transformation, such as risk management, competing political values, and expertise gaps between political members and officers. Following existing precedent, it may be that approaches such as 'Total Place', which pool local budgets to target upstream needs will help to ensure the delivery of outcomes — strategic authorities are, in theory, ideally placed to provide such cross-departmental, whole-place approaches. New place-based budget pilots represent something of a return to such strategy in national policy and a recognition that strategic authorities might be the organisations to deliver it.

Accountability and scrutiny

As power shifts towards strategic authorities and individual mayors, it is vital that place-based accountability is strengthened. Both internal scrutiny and external oversight need reform.

Internal scrutiny for strategic authorities is currently led by overview and scrutiny committees which the EDCE Act is to retitle as Local Scrutiny Committees. However, these committees often face challenges. Such challenges include resourcing, a lack of expertise among new members, particularly in the context of new, immature strategic authorities, and difficulty reaching quoracy. In order to ensure that the level of internal scrutiny is appropriate for the future powers on offer to strategic authorities — and that these authorities can be considered trustworthy organisations by central government, by their constituent councils, and by the communities that they represent — scrutiny committees need to be empowered, with better training, allowances that reflect the commitment members make to serving on the committees, and constitutional safeguards that provide appropriate checks on the power of strategic authority executives without unduly constraining the mayoral prerogative.

The decline of local media has significantly weakened democratic oversight. While the government's Local Media Action Plan, alongside media-specific programmes such as the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service, is a positive step, independent investigative journalism remains vital for its ability to hold place leaders to account. Furthermore, although potential initiatives such as suggested Local Public Accounts Committees have been posited to ensure external oversight over strategic authority decisions and progress towards their objectives, the current environment for independent oversight is insufficient and concerns abound regarding the efficacy of introducing more bureaucracy. The establishment of the Local Audit Office (LAO), while likely necessary to assist with filling the local audit gap, continues to promote the same top-down control that has stymied the local government sector in England. As such, the LAO cannot be the only form of external scrutiny for strategic authorities if devolution is going to be a serious endeavour wherein trust is extended via bottom-up forms of accountability.

Summary of recommendations

National policy	
Theme	Recommendations
A devolution framework that works beyond the metro-mayoral model: Government's commitment to devolution is growing, but policy remains uneven. A more coherent national framework is needed if devolution is to support places with different geographies, governance models and economic profiles.	Set out a national framework for strategic governance that works for both mayoral and non-mayoral strategic authorities.
	Move beyond a narrowly city-centric model of growth by supporting urban-rural networks, stronger peripheral connectivity, and collaboration across wider regional economies.
	Publish a clear roadmap that both champions genuine fiscal devolution for all types of strategic authority and makes clear how place-based growth and delivery will be promoted within the growing ecosystems of devolution.
Clear institutional settlement after local government reorganisation: As LGR proceeds, ambiguity over who does what risks weakening accountability and frustrating delivery. Roles must be settled early rather than allowed to drift.	Clarify the division of responsibilities between strategic authorities and local authorities as early as possible during each area's reorganisation, identifying which functions are best exercised at strategic scale and which should remain closer to neighbourhoods and communities.
	Require shared outcomes to be agreed early between strategic authorities and constituent councils.

Stronger expectations for scrutiny, governance and external accountability: If devolution is to command confidence, strategic authorities must be subject to credible challenge as well as greater discretion. Current arrangements are too variable and too dependent on local capacity.	Introduce a minimum standard for scrutiny in strategic authorities.
	Fund scrutiny and governance capacity as part of the core devolution offer, including officer support, analytical capability, and risk management.
	Strengthen external accountability for spending decisions, whether through Local Public Accounts Committees or locally embedded accounting arrangements with genuine independence from Whitehall.

Strategic authorities	
Theme	Recommendations
Institutional foundations should be built early, not improvised later: Strategic authorities need to establish basic organisational discipline from the outset if they are to become credible, durable and transparent institutions.	Adopt a written constitution that defines institutional purpose, core values, priority outcomes, and the authority's understanding of place and public value.
	Establish a clear internal settlement between political and professional leadership, supported by formal induction and stronger due diligence for senior appointments.
	Invest early in the organisational basics that make devolution workable, including scrutiny safeguards, financial and risk management, policy capacity, analytical capability, partnership management, and digital systems.

Strategy should be organised around the real geography of place: Not all strategic authorities have a single dominant urban core. Effective governance must therefore reflect how places actually function rather than forcing all areas into one model.	Build a small set of shared outcomes to anchor cross-system working with constituent councils, service partners, and anchor institutions.
	In areas without a dominant city core, organise strategy around networks of towns, transport links, anchor organisations and local economic relationships rather than transplanting an unsuitable city-region template.
Strategic scale should be used to support whole-place working: The value of strategic authorities lies not only in formal powers, but in their ability to align institutions, broker relationships, and support prevention-focused delivery across systems.	Use convening power to strengthen whole-place, prevention-first working across councils, ICBs, transport bodies, and other local partners.
	Align strategic responsibilities more closely with locally identified needs, assets, and delivery relationships so that devolution operates as a practical system of coordination rather than an additional bureaucratic tier.

Introduction

With the English Devolution and Community Empowerment (EDCE) Act now enshrined into law, the advent of mayoral combined authorities, now redubbed as Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs), is complete. The government's agenda grants additional powers and more flexible governance arrangements to mayors and MSAs, leading to fewer but more visible local politicians. Their importance in the local governance ecosystem is set to increase further with the devolution of integrated departmental funding settlements, first to the two 'trailblazer' combined authorities in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, and then out across the country.

For the devolution agenda to be a success in delivering economic growth and improved living standards across the country, MSAs will need a well-established culture of discipline and ingrained capabilities, including accountability, expert risk management, and objective strategy assessment, built on a strong foundation of scrutiny and overview. Yet many new strategic authorities are relatively young, lacking established processes, relationships and expectations. For there to be a chance of success, the lessons of the first wave of new authorities must be well institutionalised across the board, both at central and local levels.

Everything in its Right Place identifies what conditions are required for all strategic authorities — not just those that are already established, or even just those with mayors — to create the greatest public value while working within the current state of devolution. There is a fundamental requirement for these conditions to flourish no matter the situation of the strategic authority, otherwise devolution policy is likely to reach a standstill as demands for greater responsibilities are curtailed by limited trust from the centre. Devolution will fail to deliver regional growth if it remains mere rhetoric; hence, new strategic authorities must proactively work to build institutional maturity, a strong sense of place needs and opportunities, and trustworthy procedures to build up a strong foundation from which England might benefit from genuine decentralisation.

To do so, strategic authorities will require capacity. Devolution policy cannot regress into a chicken-and-egg situation wherein powers and additional resources are only granted if government believes an authority has the existing capacity to manage them; rather, the creation of strategic capacity is the very objective of the creation of a strategic authority. No matter if an authority is urban, polycentric, rural, mayoral, non-mayoral, or represents an economic offer that is otherwise underserved by national policy, the raison d'être of the government's devolution policy needs to be realised in its commitment to the success of the strategic authority. Only then can these institutions achieve their full potential and not merely become an additional layer of governance that draws decision-making away from local communities to assuage government's need for centralised management.

CHAPTER ONE

The current institutional framework

By April 2028, it is intended that all local government will operate within a unitary structure. The 22 areas of England with two-tier local governance were invited by government to propose plans for reorganisation by the end of 2025, with the aim of securing efficiency gains and meeting government-set criteria such as population size and public service delivery. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) will affect 21 county councils, 164 district councils and 19 smaller unitary authorities across large swathes of England's rural, urban fringe and smaller urban areas, accounting for areas inhabited by almost a third of England's population[1]. At the same time, devolution is extending to several new areas that are notably outside the metropolitan centres where it has historically been concentrated. Together, these major structural changes, often marked by uncertainty over timescales, mean that for much of the country the next few years are likely to be defined by a prolonged period of transition[2].

1 Institute for Government (2026) — What is local government reorganisation?

2 Planning Officers Society & Catriona Riddell Associates (2026) — Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution: Managing the impact and maximising the potential for planning and place-making services

1.1 Organisational culture in local and strategic authorities

Although the primary focus of this report concerns the evolution of strategic authorities, it is impossible to approach devolution without acknowledging the real impact that LGR will have, and is already having, in changing institutional and governance structures across local government in ways that affect organisational outcomes even at the strategic level. The amalgamation of smaller councils into larger unitary structures is driven by the pursuit of economies of scale, yet there is no clear assurance that these outcomes will be realised[3]. Fewer councillors and reductions in the number of local authorities will doubtless affect how service delivery, commissioning and accountability function across the board. Consequently, the effects of LGR will not be confined to the authorities being reorganised. They will also be felt at the level of strategic governance, as constituent councils are themselves restructured asynchronously and their organisational cultures evolve unevenly. Where LGR is a necessary precursor to devolution, this instability may be especially acute, heightening political sensitivity among both elected members and local residents.

In periods of change, the internal affairs of local government organisations become key to understanding how the sector is evolving. Key organisational culture issues such as risk management, competing political values, and, especially in the context of brand-new institutions, expertise gaps between political members and officers, are a challenge to pin down in newer organisations without a dedicated process of value definition and development. Similarly, issues abound when it comes to aligning staff within new unitaries or combined authorities with novel goals or performance indicators that might conflict with the aims or working practices of their previous authorities. There is a need for methodologies that encourage established ways of thinking to shift in alignment with different organisational cultures, value systems, management styles, and new institutional and geographic boundaries for service delivery[4].

3 Copus (2021) — The political and governance implications of unitary reorganisation

4 Cresswell, Moizer & Lean (2013) — The role of organisational culture in the merger of English local authorities into a single unitary authority

What is place? Defining a policy concept

The simultaneous progression of both English devolution and LGR is a process centred on concepts that can feel quite nebulous to a layperson, and sometimes even to practitioners. Namely, those concerning the differences between the 'hyperlocal', 'local' and 'regional' in local government, what defines the 'neighbourhoods' and 'communities' for whom these organisations deliver services, and why boundaries are being drawn around areas on the basis of 'place-based' policy. Fundamentally, although at first glance these questions may seem primarily concerned with geography and scale, the commonplace use of these and similar terms in national policy documents, without clear relation to standardised geographic boundaries, makes it vital to form a practicable understanding of what they mean and for whom they hold meaning in the context of local and strategic governance.

> *"Place is an elusive concept — but it boils down to an aggregate of the set of levers available to areas outside of the centre and the set of outcomes that those areas are looking to achieve"*
>
> — RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

For instance, a report from the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) found that perceptions of the characteristics of 'neighbourhoods' changed depending on the level of deprivation in the areas in which respondents lived, as well as on whether they lived in rural or urban areas[5]. As such, it becomes clear that the practical definitions of places are heavily dependent on the context of who is doing the defining. Consequently, because the English political context is so centralised, the use of 'place-based' as a term in national policy can come with a significant built-in barrier: the rhetoric of place obscures a continuation of top-down strategy and ongoing underinvestment across the regions. The devil is, in this case, in the implementation — whether place-based policy actually takes account of bottom-up processes and delivers for those it purports to serve[6].

5 PublicFirst (2025) — Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods: Opinion Research Summary

6 Bailey et al. (2026) — A critical review of the UK's *Modern Industrial Strategy*: lessons for 'place-based' policy

Work in Scotland to establish the definitions and characteristics of place-based policies identified that, within the ambiguities of the 'place-based' approach, are at least some common threads:

- holistic partnership working across all sectors to provide services;
- community- or neighbourhood-level, specifically upstream, actions tailored to those relevant areas;
- building on local assets; viewing people as assets, and;
- the public sector as facilitator rather than deliverer of services[7].

When taken in concert with the evidence from ICON, it can be discerned that, despite the illusiveness of 'place', there are very real, non-abstract entities and relationships that delimit its boundaries. Place is something that can be considered through its networks, its economic patterns, power relations, and the behaviours of its constituent individuals, as well as the enduring institutions that lend a structural cohesiveness — and, at times, stubborn customs — to the enactment of national, local and regional policies. Consequently, it is the role of place-based policy to expand to fit these context-defined entities. With the whole realm of local government experiencing immense change, such contexts become increasingly relevant when it comes to ensuring continued public engagement, strong partnerships, and productivity outcomes that deliver tangible benefits for people, who are among the most defining elements of place.

7 Hopkins et al. (2019) — What is place-based rural policy and what evidence base does it need? Research and knowledge exchange activities

1.2 The place contexts of strategic governance

The realities and asymmetries of place mean that strategic governance must recognise that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to devolution policy. However, these realities are difficult to define succinctly, as regional organisations tend to interact across, and hold responsibility for, different and often overlapping boundaries, the history of strategic governance varies immensely from region to region, and the individuals who keep these organisations running display different kinds of expertise, whether tied solely to their region or sub-region, with relationships built across other local and regional organisations, or rooted in a career forged at the centre, in Whitehall. For some strategic authorities, staff have moved from the centre to the periphery and so bring with them a host of civil service connections that bolster the soft power of their new authority and, furthermore, entrench knowledge of government working within the policy decisions made at the regional level.

However, it is the history of strategic delivery that is perhaps the most significant defining characteristic identifiable when comparing the asymmetries of England's regions and sub-regions. The case of Greater Manchester is often raised to highlight the strengths of strategic working, but the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) builds on the legacy of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA), which was formed in 1986 as an opportunity for representatives from Greater Manchester's ten district councils to enact strategic local governance. It functioned until the establishment of the GMCA in 2011 and consequently provided a substantial foundation for the implementation of strategic policy across the region. Likewise, the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive, administered from 1986 by the Passenger Transport Authority and working with the AGMA, provided something of a constant from which the GMCA has been able to continue the ongoing delivery of transport services across the same geographies. By contrast, one of the newest — and, significantly, non-mayoral — strategic authorities is the Lancashire Combined County Authority, which is currently working to establish a completely new model for transport across its constituent authorities: Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, Blackpool Council, and Lancashire County Council[8].

Furthermore, some authorities, such as Greater Lincolnshire, must contend with the obstacle of polycentric geographies. The GMCA, in theory, works well because its strategic policy can be run from its centre across closely bounded urban areas. Its transit networks are established in such a way that its constituent members can easily access its headquarters, while its urban centre can leverage economies of scale

8 Lancashire Combined County Authority (2025) — Report of the Head of Paid Service

and agglomeration to bring the benefits of regional economic growth. That is not to say that polycentric strategic authorities, or those whose economies may be unable to rely on agglomeration strategies, are doomed to fail. However, they must be organisationally prepared to function without a clear geographic core and to build effective policies for diverse levels of urbanism. Similarly, national policy needs to accept that it is dealing with a pluralistic nation[9].

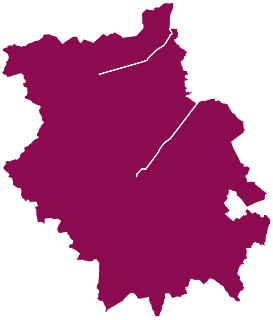
1.2.1 The moving parts of strategic governance

Given the complexities of strategic place governance, the argument for devolution hinges upon a clear understanding of what the context-dependent institutional framework looks like across England, and whether the establishment of strategic governance institutions in each sub-region reasonably follows from the existing structures that these places have developed, in some cases, for decades. As such, what follows is a short summary of how some of the strategic- and local-level organisations for service delivery function within the boundaries of each existing strategic authority, an exercise that highlights how asymmetric some of those boundaries are: some are coterminous, some fragmented, some are predominantly urban, some — especially newer authorities — are predominantly rural, some adhere to existing geographies, and some have established novel structures for delivery[10]. The geographies constructed by new strategic-level governance structures, as outlined below, evidence the translation of New Labour's regional policies — most notably the introduction of Regional Development Agencies — into the coalition government's urban-centric approach to devolution policy, which has relied on the success of city-region-based Local Enterprise Partnerships to mitigate regional inequalities.

9 Bailey & Hildreth (2025) — Beyond the agglomeration orthodoxy: rethinking industrial strategy

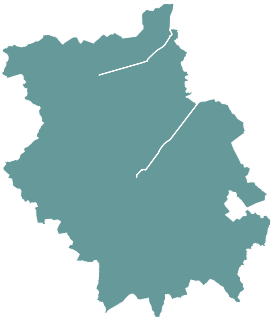
10 Data for all maps in this section sourced from ONS (2026) — Open Geography portalx

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority



Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service

NHS Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board



The Business Board

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough: Districts and unitaries as of 2025

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), when it was established in 2017, amalgamated the regional economic responsibilities of what was, at the time, called the 'Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership' (LEP). The LEP's functions relating to economic growth, investment and some labour market policymaking are now covered by the Business Board within the CPCA, working across the same geography. LEPs were first introduced in 2011 to take on the work of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) within local authorities, RDAs having been abolished as part of the government's austerity programme at the time. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough had previously sat within the East of England RDA, which covered a much larger area, including Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, Bedfordshire, and Hertfordshire.

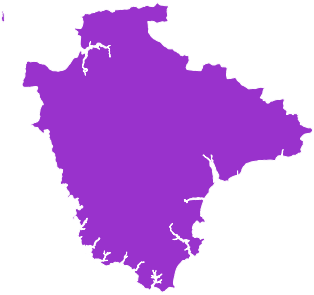
Although the CPCA has been relatively well aligned with other regional operators, it should be noted that the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board (ICB) also covers Royston, which is located in North Hertfordshire, south of Cambridgeshire. In 2026, mergers of ICBs across England will see a new 'Central East ICB' established across the areas currently covered by Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB, Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB, and Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB[11]. ICB restructuring is intended to reduce overall ICB costs by 50 per cent, with many ICBs already working in 'clusters' ahead of the mergers. The CPCA area will also be impacted by LGR, as the current two-tier system in Cambridgeshire will require restructuring to meet the government's demands for unitarisation.

The alignment of the CPCA's boundaries with those of the Fire and Rescue Authority (FRA) means that the FRA's powers will be assumed by the CPCA under the EDCE Act[12].

11 NHS Confederation (2025) — ICB clusters and mergers: what you need to know
12 MHCLG (2025) — English devolution: Area factsheets

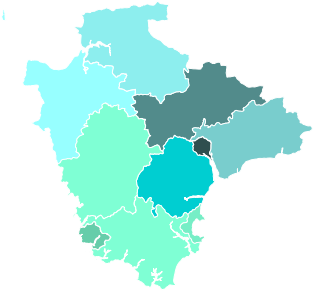
Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority

Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service



NHS Devon Integrated Care Board

Heart of the South West



Devon and Torbay: Districts and unitaries, 2025

Devon, Somerset, Dorset, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, the West of England, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire and Swindon together formed the South West RDA. After the changes brought by austerity, the Heart of the South West LEP was formed across Devon, Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay.

Plymouth and Torbay were historically included within Devon County Council until their reorganisation as individual unitaries. The geography of Devon County, with the initial exception of Plymouth City Council, has been mirrored in the establishment of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority in 2025. Plymouth has, however, agreed to align itself with Devon County Council and Torbay Council as part of the establishment of an MSA — at present, the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority is one of only two non-mayoral Foundation Strategic Authorities[13].

A merger between the Devon ICB and the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly ICB has been approved for 2026 or 2027.

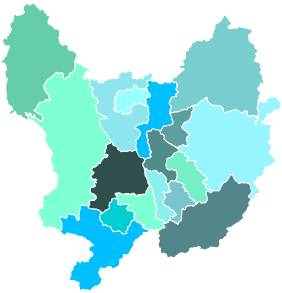
13 Plymouth City Council (2025) — Devolution

East Midlands Combined County Authority

Nottinghamshire Fire and Rescue;
Derbyshire Fire and Rescue

NHS Nottingham and Nottinghamshire ICB;
NHS Derby and Derbyshire ICB

D2N2 LEP



East Midlands:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

The East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) was established following the precedent of the D2N2 LEP, encompassing the counties of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire in the first of the 'Mayoral Combined Authority' deals enabled by the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, which allowed devolution to extend to more rural areas than the established city-region model. Initial devolution discussions included Leicestershire and Lincolnshire as representatives of the whole East Midlands region, but, due to concerns about the functionality of the mayoral model, in the case of Leicester City Council, and issues surrounding complex regional identities and political hesitance, only the constituent parts of the D2N2 LEP decided to join forces[14].

This has resulted in something of a binary model of regional service delivery, in which most regional organisations across this area are split between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire respectively. However, Nottingham and Derby are still geographically proximate, and the coming upgrade of the Midland Main Line (following the cancellation of part of HS2) will allow high-speed trains to run between the two cities, contributing to the cohesiveness of the region. There have even been suggestions for a new tram network in Derby, with connections to the existing tram system in Nottingham, cementing the importance of this two-city nodal centre of EMCCA[15]. Some of the most significant infrastructure in the region — the East Midlands Airport and the Kegworth Interchange on to the M1 — is positioned outside the EMCCA boundaries in Leicestershire. However, it remains part and parcel of the East Midlands offer, thus constituting part of the mayor's responsibilities in campaigning for the East Midlands area and highlighting how complex and interconnected strategic delivery and politics can be[16].

14 LeicestershireLive (2022) — County will not join East Midlands neighbours in £1bn funding bid without Leicester

15 BBC News (2026) — Transport group suggests £405m Derby tram network

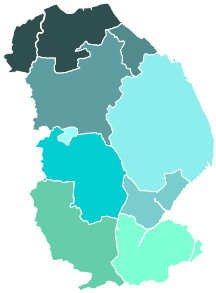
16 Insidermedia (2025) — Improving M1 junction key to development of land at East Midlands Airport and Ratcliffe power station, says East Midlands mayor

Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority

Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue

NHS Lincolnshire Integrated Care Board

Greater Lincolnshire LEP



Greater Lincolnshire:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

The Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority covers a generally rural area derived from the geographic precedent of the Greater Lincolnshire LEP, encompassing the boundaries of Lincolnshire County Council, North East Lincolnshire and North Lincolnshire. Its rurality defines its service needs, necessitating investment in transport infrastructure and health services[17]. An initial devolution deal in 2016 fell through when members of the constituent authorities raised concerns about whether the metro-mayoral model could work in Lincolnshire's specifically rural context and continue to provide full democratic empowerment for the communities spread across Greater Lincolnshire, alongside other concerns about the future of district councils under a devolution framework[18]. North East Lincolnshire and North Lincolnshire continue to be served by Humberside Fire and Rescue and the Humber and North Yorkshire ICB, while the Lincolnshire ICB is set to merge with the Derby and Derbyshire ICB and the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire ICB by 2027.

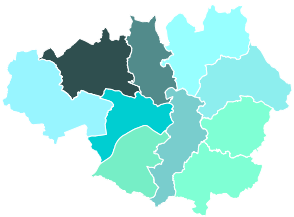
17 Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority (2025) — Meeting of Mayors
18 South Kesteven District Council (2016) — Agenda Item: Devolution — Greater Lincolnshire

Greater Manchester Combined Authority

Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue

NHS Greater Manchester ICB

Greater Manchester LEP

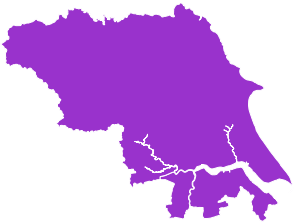


Greater Manchester:
Unitaries, 2025

As highlighted previously, Greater Manchester benefits from a significant and cohesive history of strategic governance. The creation of the Combined Authority was only a transformation in so far as it introduced the 'metro mayor'; otherwise, the history of service provision across the region has remained unchanged. Thus, the institutions in place today at the strategic level across Greater Manchester are among the most mature in England. The alignment of service providers across shared boundaries illustrates the cogency of the GMCA's remit, while the way the GMCA's constituent boroughs orbit a single large urban centre satisfies the conditions for agglomeration. Additionally, the success of the GMCA in implementing the integrated Bee Network for transport has been taken as inspiration by other combined authorities wishing, for instance, to franchise their own bus networks.

Hull and East Yorkshire Combined Authority

Humberside Fire and Rescue



NHS Humber and North Yorkshire ICB

Hull and East Yorkshire LEP

Hull and East Yorkshire:
Districts and Unitaries, 2025

Prior to 2010, the RDA for Yorkshire and the Humber ('Yorkshire Forward') served the entirety of the East Riding of Yorkshire, most of North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, and some of North and North East Lincolnshire. However, the unitary authorities of North Lincolnshire, North East Lincolnshire, Kingston upon Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire only came into being following the dissolution of Humberside, a region that now exists only in the continued functions of the Humberside Fire and Rescue Service. Created in 1974, the region of Humberside was seen by many as a failure, given that its residents did not identify with its boundaries: the connections, both physical and intangible, between the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire geographies were ostensibly fragile and ultimately failed to sustain an operational area for governance, highlighting the real importance of civic identities in forming functional governance structures. By contrast, the establishment of the new Hull and East Yorkshire Combined Authority in 2025 appears to have had much greater coherence, both in terms of close geographic alignment — wherein the more rural East Riding of Yorkshire fully surrounds the more urban Kingston upon Hull unitary authority — and in terms of the strong 'Yorkshire' identity[19]. However, the Humber Enterprise Zone, which sits on both sides of the River Humber, may still highlight the strategic importance of the Humberside region as a single entity.

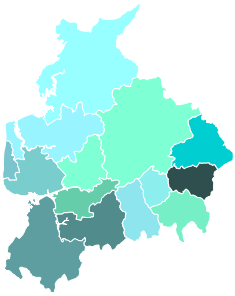
19 BBC News (2021) — Yorkshire strength of identity revealed by survey answers

Lancashire Combined County Authority

Lancashire Fire and Rescue

NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB

Lancashire LEP



Lancashire:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

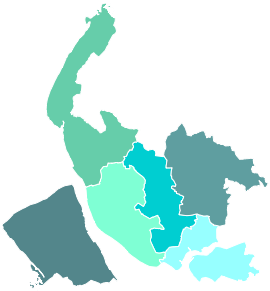
The Lancashire Combined County Authority (LCCA) is one of the newest strategic authorities and has adopted both the functions and the boundaries of the Lancashire LEP. Beyond its historic identity as the 'County of Lancaster', Lancashire's modern administrative boundaries have been narrowed by the separation of Merseyside and Greater Manchester into their own sub-regions. What remains is a significant area in the North West that is both polycentric — with urban centres in Blackburn, Blackpool, Preston, Burnley and Lancaster — and immensely varied in terms of development density, with the National Landscape of the Forest of Bowland extending across Lancashire's north-eastern boundaries. The LCCA is therefore characterised by geographic fragmentation.

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

Merseyside Fire and Rescue

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB

Liverpool City Region LEP



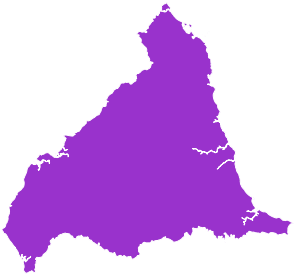
Liverpool City Region:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) brings together the urban areas that comprise the Merseyside region: Liverpool itself, the Wirral, Sefton, Knowsley, St Helens and Halton. The organisations that deliver services across this area are largely coterminous with the LCR, barring the ICB's wider footprint, which includes Cheshire, and the fact that Halton is served by the Cheshire FRA. Like the GMCA, its significance as an urban centre has allowed it to benefit from strategic policy directed at encouraging the effects of agglomeration, and the LCRCA's focus on supporting local businesses has seen significant growth in business density and marked improvements in employment density across the area. Even though, traditionally, by many measures the LCR has lower productivity and higher deprivation than the English average, the process of devolution — and, in future, the scheduled provision of an Integrated Settlement — has seemingly brought benefits in terms of providing a strategic, place-based approach to growth in the LCR[20].

20 Liverpool City Region (2025) — Liverpool City Region Growth Plan: Evidence Base

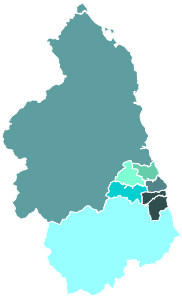
North East Combined Authority

Northumberland Fire and Rescue;
Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue;
County Durham and Darlington Fire
and Rescue



NHS North East and
North Cumbria Integrated Care Board

North East LEP



North East:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

The North East as a region is defined by a very strong identity and sense of place: recent YouGov polling identified that almost half of those who live in the North East have a "very strong" attachment to their region[21]. To contextualise that figure, a similar proportion of Welsh people feel a very strong attachment to Wales, while only 32 per cent of North Easterners feel a very strong attachment to England. In theory, therefore, the North East Combined Authority, which encompasses almost the entirety of the region, barring the unitary authorities that make up the Tees Valley Combined Authority — although these areas are served by the North East and North Cumbria ICB — should be able to capitalise on the depth of attachment that its constituent communities feel to the region. Fairly detached geographically from the rest of England, the post-industrial economic context of the North East means that economic growth, investment, and the national Industrial Strategy are of immense significance to the future of the region[22].

21 YouGov (2025) — Nearly half of North Easterners have a very strong attachment to their region, though this is true of just 11% of East Midlanders

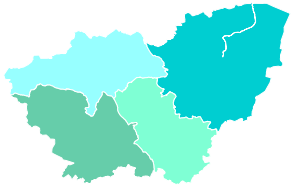
22 North East Combined Authority (2025) — North East Mayor responds to Industrial Strategy

South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority

South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue

NHS South Yorkshire ICB

South Yorkshire LEP



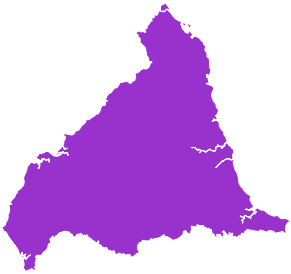
South Yorkshire:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

The South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, established in 2014 as the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority and renamed South Yorkshire following its first mayoral election in 2018, shares its boundaries with the South Yorkshire FRA and the South Yorkshire ICB. The original Sheffield City Region extended to the Derbyshire Dales, North East Derbyshire, Bolsover, Chesterfield and Bassetlaw, but these districts all withdrew from the mayoral devolution deal. In the case of Chesterfield, the withdrawal occurred under the shadow of legal action from Derbyshire County Council, which expressed concern that the city region had failed to consult Chesterfield's residents on whether they wanted to join the combined authority. On the basis of a lack of shared civic identity, residents expressed scepticism about inclusion within the boundaries of Sheffield and South Yorkshire[23]. Nottinghamshire also raised concerns about Bassetlaw's incorporation into the region. As such, the final South Yorkshire MCA settled into an area much more aligned with established county boundaries. The cities and towns of Sheffield, Doncaster, Barnsley and Rotherham provide a fairly dense urban landscape across the sub-region, flanked to the west by the rural scenery of the Peak District National Park.

23 The Guardian (2016) — Sheffield region's bid to absorb Chesterfield faces legal setback after ruling

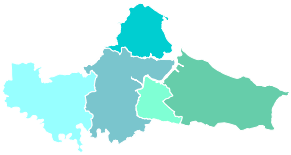
Tees Valley Combined Authority

Cleveland Fire and Rescue



NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board

Tees Valley LEP



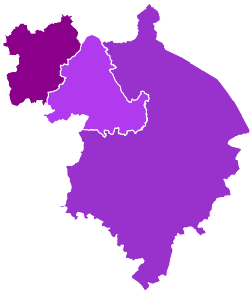
Tees Valley:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

Just south of the North East MCA, the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) is a densely populated, mostly urban authority that covers the area formerly controlled by Cleveland County Council — abolished in 1996 but remembered in the continued service areas of Cleveland Police and Cleveland Fire Brigade, notwithstanding the fact that Darlington, a member of the TVCA, is served by County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service. The geography of the TVCA is most easily identified by the presence of the River Tees, whose catchment these authorities encompass, and within which sits the Teesside Freeport. The Teesside Freeport enjoys tax reliefs designed to incentivise investment, development and employment across what has been hailed as "Europe's largest brownfield site"[24]. As such, Tees Valley received notable recognition to its industrial significance in the national Industrial Strategy.

24 The Guardian (2021) — Low taxes and levelling up: the great freeport experiment comes to Teesside

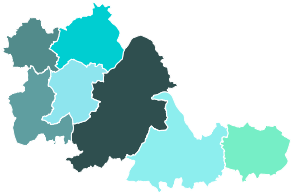
West Midlands Combined Authority

West Midlands Fire and Rescue



NHS Coventry and Warwickshire Integrated Care Board; NHS Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board; NHS Black Country Integrated Care Board

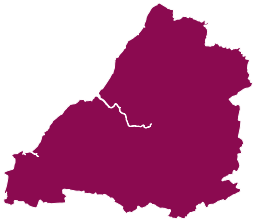
Coventry and Warwickshire LEP; Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP; Black Country LEP



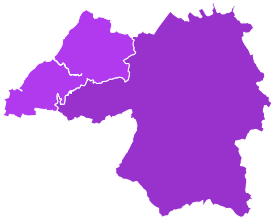
West Midlands: Districts and unitaries, 2025

The geographic scope of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) derives from the boundaries of the West Midlands County Council, itself dissolved in 1986. Very much an urban authority, the history of economic strategy in the region is more fragmented than might otherwise be assumed. Three LEPs covered the region from Warwickshire in the south to East Staffordshire, covered by the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP, in the north. These three LEPs represented the distinct economic areas encompassed by the West Midlands, but the presence of overlapping boundaries, with some local authorities belonging to more than one LEP, meant that the integration of LEP functions into the WMCA was likely an exercise in efficiency.

The West of England Combined Authority

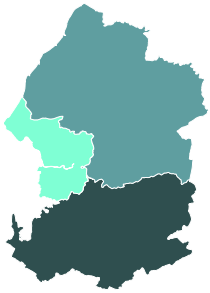


Avon Fire and Rescue



NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board; NHS Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire Integrated Care Board

West of England LEP



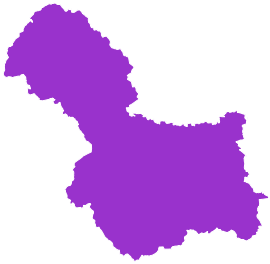
The West of England: Districts and unitaries, 2025

While North Somerset is, and has been, enfolded within the boundaries of Avon FRA and the West of England LEP, following the geographical precedent of the original Avon County Council, the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) itself is more tightly centred on the urban core of Bristol and its close neighbour, Bath. North Somerset's leader called for its inclusion within WECA prior to the 2021 local elections, but the mayor of Bristol at the time, Marvin Rees, vetoed the proposal on financial grounds[25,26]. However, the results of a consultation considering WECA's expansion into North Somerset, following the Labour government's push for more extensive devolution across England, found majority support for the proposal among local residents and businesses, with Whitehall having offered an additional £15 million in funding for the region if North Somerset does join the combined authority[27,28].

25 BBC News (2020) — North Somerset Council joining Weca 'could secure vital funds'
26 BBC News (2026) — Could North Somerset finally 'tie the knot' with Weca?
27 West of England Combined Authority (2026) – Clear majority backs North Somerset joining combined authority
28 North Somerset Council (2026) — Consultation on North Somerset joining combined authority

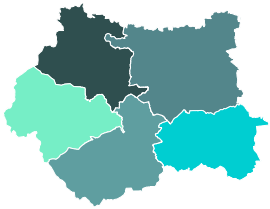
West Yorkshire Combined Authority

West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue



NHS West Yorkshire ICB

Leeds City Region LEP (as of 2022)



West Yorkshire:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

The West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) follows the boundaries of the original West Yorkshire County. In a slightly unusual case, before 2021, the Leeds City Region Partnership extended beyond the boundaries of West Yorkshire, including the City of York, Barnsley and some additional areas of North Yorkshire. However, the establishment of WYCA was a direct result of a devolution deal for Leeds City Region, and government guidelines stipulating that districts could not sit within more than one LEP meant that Harrogate, Craven and York withdrew to the York and North Yorkshire LEP, while Barnsley withdrew to the South Yorkshire LEP when LEPs transferred their functions to local authorities in 2021[29]. Craven itself, still served by West Yorkshire's ICB, is no longer a district, having been absorbed into the North Yorkshire unitary authority in 2023.

29 Harrogate Advertiser (2020) — Harrogate forced out of Leeds City Region LEP by new Government guidelines

York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority

North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue

NHS Humber and
North Yorkshire Integrated Care Board

York and North Yorkshire LEP

York and North Yorkshire:
Districts and unitaries, 2025

The York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority (YNYCA) is another predominantly rural CA, with its only urban centres being the City of York and North Yorkshire's largest town, Harrogate, while much of its land mass stretches across the North York Moors. North Yorkshire's creation as a unitary council unified seven district councils in 2023 — Craven, Hambleton, Harrogate, Richmondshire, Ryedale, Scarborough and Selby — and the existing county council, to the concern of some district authorities worried about the withdrawal of decision-making from the local level[30]. This year, the YNYCA will make a bid for 'Established' MSA status, which will bring more powers and the potential for an Integrated Settlement to make its way to the YNYCA. If the YNYCA achieves this, it will become the first rural combined authority to achieve 'Established' status[31].

1.2.2 Summarising the place context

Place-based delivery is, by definition, shaped by the asymmetries of place. The above catalogue of strategic authority circumstances reveals that the most important characteristics which a transition away from 'one size fits all' policy solutions and towards genuinely place-based thinking in strategic delivery must account for include:

- the history of strategic delivery in a place;
- civic identity and regional attachment;
- geography and spatial dynamics — including whether urban centres exist to leverage agglomeration, or whether polycentric regions must build policies for more diverse levels of urbanism;
- institutional alignment, and;
- human expertise — the soft power of strategic leaders and local government connections to the civil service increasingly define how the peripheries of governance in England are shaped.

These elements together dictate the structure and, up to the present, the success of strategic governance. As such, national policy needs to accept that, while creating a standardised structure for local government is a laudable exercise, this must happen with an acknowledgement of England as a nation of multiple forms. Likewise, those delivering services at the strategic level will become aware of, or will already have experienced, issues of coterminosity and fragmentation in boundaries. Where

30 BBC News (2023) — North Yorkshire Council: New local authority begins work
31 The York Press (2026) — York and North Yorkshire authority seeks established status

efficiency is desired, it may be that policy will need to counteract excessive fluidity in service delivery boundaries[32]. However, the progression of organisational changes across all forms of delivery — such as the integration of ICBs, the abolition of Police and Crime Commissioners and the integration of their powers into the responsibilities of mayors, and LGR — means that institutional alignment remains up in the air and is likely to remain so until, or unless, full unitarisation is achieved.

> *"History matters massively. Central government needs to acknowledge that more clearly and put in a clearer plan for working out how those places that are further behind are going to catch up."*
>
> — RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Foundation Strategic Authorities

The government has recognised the importance of the spatial dimension in strategic planning through provisions in the Planning and Infrastructure Act and the creation of Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs) by upper-tier and unitary authorities. SDSs will cover every area in England, with the government acknowledging that strategic planning should, wherever possible, align as far as possible with devolution geographies — in other words, the boundaries of strategic authorities[33]. To ensure that every area can benefit from this kind of strategic alignment, the national policy agenda to extend devolution — and therefore those devolution geographies — into every area not already covered by a strategic authority is very welcome. Beyond the transfer of additional powers to mayoral authorities, and the extension of non-mayoral devolution deals already initiated by the previous government, the introduction of the Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA), a strategic authority without a mayor, may prove pivotal in responding to England's varied governance and economic geographies[34].

A recent announcement confirms that all areas without devolution to this point will be able to express interest in becoming an FSA, as a step towards full mayoral devolution. It is likely that areas due to produce SDSs that do not currently have a

32 Shaw (2024) — Devolution: the importance of scale and coterminosity
33 Fahnbulleh MP (2026) — Foundation Strategic Authorities: Statement UIN HCWS1335
34 Sandford (2025) — English devolution: Mayoral strategic authorities

devolution deal in place will be among the first to express interest. The question remains, however, whether non-mayoral authorities and areas that do not exhibit the more monocentric geographies characteristic of metro-mayoral areas will benefit to the same extent under the current model of devolution. It may be that FSAs work effectively to develop regional maturity; on the other hand, it may be that these areas remain underserved by the English devolution programme.

In any case, better alignment between governance structures and spatial strategy, together with the standardisation of non-mayoral strategic areas within policy rhetoric under the 'FSA' label, may prove instrumental in ensuring that the benefits of devolution do not bypass particular places. The potential for the visitor levy to extend to FSAs is a positive sign of their full inclusion in a genuinely decentralising settlement.

1.3 The question of agglomeration

The combined authority model is largely predicated on agglomeration theory: the assumption that, as urban spaces become structurally linked, there will be significant productivity gains within and across them. Policy interventions prioritising urban growth and promoting business clustering in urban centres reflect this emphasis on the agglomeration model[35].

The process of devolving powers and resources based on a city-first approach also assumes that intervention in urban areas is the most efficient allocation of resources. The fact that some regions need and receive different forms of support, and that policy naturally takes an asymmetric approach to an asymmetric reality, is not necessarily a bad thing. However, it is very important to question the underlying assumptions when it comes to how these supports are allocated, particularly when national policy has directed that all places, not just metropolitan areas, are to undergo significant transformation in terms of governance and delivery to align with policies on devolution and unitarisation.

From the perspective that situates them within their global context, it makes sense for policy to favour cities as geographies that attract investment, compete for business and provide a strong collective identity across large areas. Mayors are, in the political imagining of the MSA system, extolled as representatives of the greater whole, able to leverage their soft power to channel the opportunities of the world, and of British national policy, into their respective places.

35 Bailey & Hildreth (2025) — Beyond the agglomeration orthodoxy: rethinking industrial strategy

However, when policy relies, first, on the convening power of individuals constrained by political loyalties and, secondly, on the judgement of central government actors in responding to asymmetries between places that must rely on those individuals to represent them, the resulting environment of territorial competition will single out those urban areas with the most prominent mayors, or the mayors most politically aligned with the national government's goals[36]. The issue is only more pronounced for those strategic areas either without large cities or without mayors to represent them. The embedding of deal-making processes into the system of devolution, and the early reliance on a competitive process of bid-making for the apportioning of City Deal funding, whether rightly or wrongly, compounds the burden on those individuals who have become representatives of place to ensure that their areas of responsibility find themselves atop this churning hierarchy of sub-regions[37].

Furthermore, a process of territorial abstraction can occur when city-regions are built around their centres without their peripheries being fully taken into account[38]. Ultimately, by continuing to opt for policies that favour urban agglomeration as a catalyst for regional economic growth, successive governments have only succeeded in exacerbating inequalities within urban areas and failed to move the needle sufficiently on economic growth outside London and the South East[39,40]. The habit of establishing devolution in areas of 'low-hanging fruit' such as Greater Manchester, although helpful where it has enabled policymakers to identify what works, may have left other areas in the lurch, having to play catch-up with already established strategic-level bodies. Although the national Industrial Strategy emphasises opportunities for growth not necessarily aligned with urban-centric agglomeration policies, such as freeports and economic zones, there is much more to be done in terms of aligning the UK's most promising sectoral clusters with the diverse needs of place and the technologies that drive industrial change and support growth[41,42].

36 Warner et al. (2024) — The challenge of devolved English governance and the rise of political spatial inequality
37 Ayres, Flinders & Sandford (2017) — Territory, power and statecraft: understanding English devolution
38 Beel, Jones & Rees Jones (2016) — Regulation, governance and agglomeration: making links in city-region research
39 Warner et al. (2024) — The challenge of devolved English governance and the rise of political spatial inequality
40 Social Mobility Commission (2024) — Spatial agglomeration, productivity and inequality
41 Department for Business and Trade (2025) — Industrial Strategy
42 Bailey & Hildreth (2025) — Beyond the agglomeration orthodoxy: rethinking industrial strategy

As Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) areas come on stream, shaped by a politically entrenched narrative of metro-mayoral superiority and destabilised by the hurried process of LGR, it becomes imperative that devolution begins to work for non-urban areas. These new strategic authorities will represent large areas of rural land across Cumbria, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, Sussex, Essex, Cheshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. With populism, and territorial populism in particular, on the rise in areas that have experienced a sense of being 'left behind' amid widening spatial inequalities, alongside anti-urban sentiment, it becomes even clearer that policy must work better for non-urban areas. There is typically strong support for bottom-up solutions and innovative governance, with regional diversity reflected in diverse industrial, strategic and socioeconomic policy approaches[43]. Ideally, such solutions can align with new initiatives such as Local Growth Plans, a statutory requirement for MSAs introduced by the EDCE Act, to support growth through strategic means designed to work across large and diverse geographies.

43 Bailey & Hildreth (2025) — Beyond the agglomeration orthodoxy: rethinking industrial strategy

CHAPTER TWO

The context of delivery

The government is advancing devolution in several key ways. *Spatially* (in terms of widening the coverage of strategic governance), *financially* (in terms of the expansion of devolved funding) and *fiscally* (in terms of the potential devolution of powers regarding the raising and retention of local tax revenue). The DPP will see six new areas become MSAs on a fairly rapid timetable. The speed of the timeframe is compounded for four of the six DPP areas that will undergo LGR in parallel[44].

44 MHCLG (2025) — Devolution revolution: six areas to elect Mayors for first time

2.1 The national policy environment: Devolution

The new multi-year Local Government Finance Settlement will provide Mayoral Capacity Funding to build the expertise that mayors need to deliver on their new responsibilities, funding for homelessness and rough sleeping, and alignment with the Integrated Settlement for the seven 'established' MSAs. It also introduces two notable approaches to fiscal devolution[45]. First, a new offer for MSAs to receive a direct share of local business rates (although the details remain to be confirmed) and second, confirmation of the intention to allow mayors to introduce visitor levies to support investment in local priorities.

Moreover, in her recent speech at the 2026 Mais Lecture, the Chancellor announced that a roadmap for future fiscal devolution is to be published with this year's Budget, in a novel approach for government that links fiscal devolution (rather than merely centrally linked funding) to its own national growth agenda[46]. There is significant international precedent for the local distribution of a wide range of taxes, including income tax, which may see inclusion within the fiscal devolution roadmap. England, a historically centralised country, could do well to learn from its international peers when it comes to setting out a framework for devolution. Fiscal devolution as an aspect of the genuine decentralisation of power is correlated with regional growth and there are numerous routes via which the presently crisis-ridden state of local government finances in England could be mitigated by fiscal reform in favour of devolved taxation[47,48].

One glaring potential obstacle to successful regional growth by means of devolution is how the current government's emphasis on mayoral authorities as a testing ground for devolution might impact those areas passed over for their lack of a mayoral or strategic representative body. However, evidence does suggest that larger organisations can produce the greater bureaucratic efficiency that will be necessary to make the most of fiscal devolution, making strategic authorities the obvious vehicle for delivery. There also remains certain details in the existing fiscal system for the government to iron out — not least the council tax system that remains significantly regressive and unfit for the present day despite the recently announced council tax surcharge[49]. The devolution of powers, including those of a fiscal nature, can support regional growth in England, but it is the nuances of the English system; political,

45 MHCLG (2026) — Explanatory note on Mayoral Strategic Authority funding 2026 to 2027: final
46 HM Treasury (2026) — Mais Lecture 2026
47 Sima, Liang & Qingjie (2023) — The impact of fiscal decentralisation on economic growth: A comparative analysis of selected African and OECD countries
48 Localis (2024) — Biting the Bullet: Funding local government in this parliament and beyond
49 IPPR (2025) — Towards a fair and proportional property tax

historical, and in terms of the state of Labour's devolution strategy, that will define the ultimate outcomes of this agenda.

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act

As the embodiment of the current trajectory of national policy on devolution, the EDCE Act, now enshrined into law (as of late April 2026), is notably weighted towards the mayoral side of devolution — leaving some representatives of non-mayoral authorities concerned about how the new framework that the EDCE Act will introduce is going to work for them. This new framework is, however, an opportunity to provide clarity for stakeholders across all levels of governance and place-relevant sectors, providing greater structure to what has always been a negotiation-led institutional tradition. The fact that the EDCE Act predicates the extension of devolution beyond existing metro-mayoralties is likely to change the political environment of England, as more non-urban areas receive greater powers and more funding and as the national political environment moves away from its traditional binary.

The EDCE Act also sets out the mandate for LGR. Alongside the statutory mandate for MSAs to produce Local Growth Plans and for all strategic organisations to produce Spatial Development Strategies, local authorities have been left somewhat concerned about their continued ability to have control over specifically local placemaking. The question of where the local fits into the EDCE Act coincides with calls for greater clarity as to the 'community empowerment' aspect of the new legislation. In particular, the Act's introduction of new neighbourhood governance arrangements does require significantly more detail as to what this model is expected to look like on the ground, if devolution is going to successfully align strategic governance with the needs of communities, and delivery at the hyper-local level[50]. Furthermore, one of the most significant changes wrought by the EDCE Act is going to be the establishment of the Local Audit Office (LAO) to close the 'local audit gap' that has significantly constrained the effectiveness of local government in recent years. Again, the attempt to establish better local accountability practices will be vital to ensuring that the devolution agenda does not preclude local government's democratic legitimacy. Getting the balance right between strategically led efficiency gains and still delivering for local communities will be vital for the success of future devolution.

50 We're Right Here (2025) – Will the 'English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill' deliver real community power?

2.1.1 Connecting governance to growth

Despite the pace with which successive governments have pursued an all-encompassing devolution framework, analysis from the Institute for Government (IfG) of the UK's international peers suggests no clear correlation between devolution and regional growth[51]. However, the whole picture is more complex. Studies of regional growth, for instance, rely heavily on the use of proxy measures to enable quantification and comparison, which may not always provide a completely accurate image of correlative relationships and may also give rise to levels of misinterpretation. However, when it comes to levels of decentralisation, rather than devolution, there is some evidence of a correlation with balanced economic growth[52].

The IfG study acknowledges that there are potential benefits arising from the devolution programme — the ability to tailor policy using local knowledge, to coordinate across policy levers, to innovate, and to strengthen local institutions and leadership — as well as some potential costs, including the loss of economies of scale, the risk of harmful competition, failures to coordinate across places, and the risk of exacerbating inequalities. The research suggests that the relative effectiveness of the devolution of powers to strategic-level authorities relies on the policy area, as some see more benefit from that wider, co-ordinated regional level than others. Such policy areas that might benefit from a strategic perspective include skills policy, spatial planning, and transport policies, but on the other hand the IfG report suggests that employment support should be delivered locally.

One challenge in linking combined authorities to regional growth is the thin evidence base. Greater Manchester, the longest-standing combined authority, is still itself relatively new. Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham has only recently been able to justifiably point to early indicators of the model's success for the region. He argues this reflects a decade-long approach to growth that has made Greater Manchester the country's fastest-growing city region[53]. Existing evidence does suggest that constituent authority areas across the country have performed better in terms of GVA than non-combined authority areas[54]. However, growth prior to the pandemic, and the impact of the pandemic on growth, has varied across the board for combined authority

51 Institute for Government (2023) — How can devolution deliver regional growth in England?

52 Hoole, Collinson & Newman (2023) — England's catch-22: institutional limitations to achieving balanced growth through devolution

53 Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2025) — A decade of good growth in Greater Manchester

54 Wong & Zheng (2023) — UK2070 Commission Go Local: The socio-economic landscape of combined and local authority areas in England

regions, represented, for instance, by relative changes in real GDP and labour productivity over the past decade[55]. This underlines that devolution is not necessarily a panacea for resilient, long-term economic development on its own.

Nonetheless, a separate line of argument positions combined authorities, and English devolution more broadly, as potential drivers of the government's growth mission. The capacity for strategic authorities to test and tailor solutions to local opportunities and constraints is often framed as an asset for regional growth[56]. The ability for strategic authorities to direct the path of the government's growth directive will in theory ensure its ongoing effective delivery. In keeping with this trend, the 2025 Budget foregrounded the MSA as a delivery vehicle in several ways, such as[57]:

- A new local growth fund for the mayoral city regions in the North and Midlands.
- A £500 million Mayoral Revolving Growth Fund for established MSAs in the North and Midlands.
- Considering the allocation to MSAs of a direct share of business rates from across their region.
- The potential for MSAs to establish business rates retention zones within their regions under standardised criteria.
- Aligned with the Industrial Strategy, allocating a Creative Places Growth Fund to selected MSAs.
- Highlighting the devolution of housing funds within the Integrated Settlements of established MSAs and confirming the allocation of the 2025 Spending Review's Integrated Settlement funding.
- Launching five 'place-based budget pilots' within MSAs and supporting Greater Manchester's development of the 'Prevention Demonstrator' to make use of budgets pooled locally.

However, there are still significant concerns about the ad-hoc nature of the government's push for devolution, not least because of the way that its policy regime, and that of the previous government, has failed to convince commentators that the

55 See North East Evidence Hub (2025) — Labour productivity (GVA per hour worked) & North East Evidence Hub (2025) — GDP

56 Amery (2025) — The potential role of devolution to combined authorities in the government's mission to 'Kickstart Economic Growth'

57 HM Treasury (2025) — Budget 2025: Strong foundations, secure future

state has moved significantly away from its traditionally top-down and centralised model of power[58,59]. It's one thing to promote the combined authority as a structure to provide strategic policy that is bespoke to regional conditions, but another to limit funding opportunities only to 'established' authorities and to assume that a fragmented environment of deal-making should continue to represent the political powers of strategic authorities and mayors[60].

Furthermore, the danger of tailoring interventions to the place level is that places with only minimal existing capacity for growth (due to, say, high densities of low-wage industries) are unlikely to unlock entirely new growth opportunities[61]. As such, strategic policymaking needs to address existing productivity differences, particularly in the growth context, so that MSAs might be able to provide the place-based and cross-cutting support that the Industrial Strategy requires to drive long-term growth across the UK's regions[62]. Relatedly, the narrow focus of the Industrial Strategy's 'IS-8' draws questions of the strategy's suitability for all regions across the country. The issue remains that when resource allocation to regions is predicated on their existing quality, those regions that require the most external uplift within this centralised funding system may suffer under an asymmetric national growth environment, a system exacerbated by the deal-first approach when it comes to the direction of MSA responsibilities[63].

2.2 Clarifying levels of governance

There is a significant ambiguity in the division of responsibilities for economic development, skills, and transport between strategic authorities and their constituent councils. This ambiguity can create tension, and this tension is exacerbated by the significant budget constraints among local authorities. Questions of duplication or redundancy in responsibilities therefore can provide a challenging backdrop for the relationships between local and strategic officers. The changes brought by the implementation of the EDCE Act may muddy the waters of local democracy further. In such a context, it will be an absolute imperative that those who lead and manage

58 Hildreth & Bailey (2023) — Levelling up beyond the metropolis: is the UK government's preferred governance model appropriate?

59 Denham & Morphet (2024) — Centralised by design: Anglocentric constitutionalism, accountability and the failure of English devolution

60 Luke et al. (2025) — Will Labour's governance approach lead to mission success or mission failure?

61 Mealy & Coyle (2022) — To them that hath: economic complexity and local industrial strategy in the UK

62 Westwood & Van Ark (2025) — Industrial Strategy — taking a punt?

63 Hoole, Collinson & Newman (2023) — England's catch-22: institutional limitations to achieving balanced growth through devolution

the institutions of place are clear in their objectives and in the workflows that will implement those objectives.

Mayors should be able to provide clarity and legitimacy in the process of communication with central government, but further questions surrounding the impact of the size of a strategic authority or the political affiliation of the mayor on the effectiveness of such communications should not be glossed over. If strategic governance is to function and function *well*, a balance between bottom-up efficiency and top-down direction must be found, and, additionally, guardrails must be available as a means for strategic governance to function *beyond* the role of the mayor. To achieve such guardrails, an understanding of the capabilities and the potential limitations of the mayoral model must be reached.

2.2.1 The role of mayors

The modern-day elected mayor is a relatively recent innovation within the English context. The Local Government Act 2000 allowed for local authorities to change from the existing committee model to an executive model with a leader and cabinet[64]. It made provision for councils to hold referendums for voters to decide if they would like a directly elected mayors to lead their authority. These new directly elected mayors were to control the council's executive functions and chair the cabinet, ostensibly with greater recognition among the public due to having been directly elected to their position[6566]. However, the mayoral model for local authorities has never proved a particularly popular option. There are currently only 13 local authorities with directly elected mayors despite more than 50 referendums having taken place, and several councils have tried and subsequently abandoned the model — most recently, when constituents in Bristol voted to abolish the position in the city council in 2022.

It is then perhaps surprising that the metro-mayoral model has become the go-to model for English devolution. But metro-mayors owe their history to the London mayoralty. Likewise established in 2000, the Greater London Authority (GLA) comprises the mayor and a 25-member assembly. Only three men have held the prestigious title of London Mayor, each lasting in office for at least two terms. The first cohort of metro-mayors, and every wave of strategic authority mayor since 2017, have functioned within a system derived from that original GLA precedent in a manner presented as

64 Legislation.gov.uk (2000) — Local Government Act 2000
65 Local Government Association (2026) — How are decisions made?
66 Sandford (2025) — Directly-elected mayors

bringing powers to England's regions[67]. Like the London Mayor, strategic authority mayors have powers over economic development, planning and transport over the cross-boundary areas of combined/strategic authorities, with the proviso that they must consult their cabinet and require a two-thirds majority of cabinet support for their strategies. It has been argued that this means that metro-mayors, particularly in comparison to some international examples, do not have the full executive autonomy that they should[68]. However, in England, the authority of mayors is tied significantly into their relationship with the centre; they have the responsibility of representing their strategic region to national government and work within a framework where the devolution of resources is predicated on negotiations.

The mayors of strategic authorities, as leaders, need to provide some clarity to the structures of governance that will drive the next chapter of English local government. They are in a unique position to do so, with significant powers, a democratic mandate, and party-political connections at a time when politics is undergoing a historic shift away from England's two-party tradition at the same time as local government is experiencing its own transformation of historic proportions. Even without full executive autonomy, those mayoral positions that have been in place for almost a decade have displayed, in some cases, significant progress derived from the ability of mayors to represent their regions and provide strategic leadership. But if the government are to achieve the regional growth that their policy agenda intends, then mayors (and especially newly elected mayors) must be both given the autonomy to establish working strategic governance even in areas otherwise new to it and be provided with the incentives to utilise their authority for growth.

2.2.2 International precedent

England is an infamously centralised country, so it can be challenging to devise best practice in terms of establishing a level of strategic governance and the role of mayors using existing precedent built into the English system. Authorities such as GMCA have developed a significant expertise and proficient use of the mayoral model since its establishment, but England has no real signposting for how the mayoral model should function if standardised across the whole country — although with the current government aiming to establish greater fiscal devolution against a backdrop of more widespread mayoral strategic bodies, it may be that some understanding of best practice must arrive sooner rather than later.

67 HM Treasury (2014) — Manchester to get directly elected Mayor
68 Centre for Cities (2024) — Do metro mayors need more authority over decision-making?

Many of the UK's international peers enjoy a much more established form of devolution — largely to the benefit of growth at the sub-national level — but there are a number of different ways that a model for mayoral governance can present, and much of this diversity boils down to how much power the mayor has as an individual[69]. The mayoral model is defined by the election method, the roles, functions and powers of mayors, and the characteristics of the role of directly elected mayor as it relates to local government as a management system in the round[70]. Many countries, to align with a trend towards strengthening local political leadership, have opted for directly elected 'strong mayors' that have significant power in relation to the management of local government (for instance, veto power or lack of powerful scrutiny mechanisms). Others have weaker mayors that, while maintaining the role of political leadership, are under greater obligation to the agendas of their councils. England's mayors sit at a challenging crossroads: while they enjoy significant authority over the running of MSAs, the lack of genuine devolution in England means that their powers are limited. The following section investigates two examples of countries in which the role of local government, as in England, is a disputed territory, but where mayors have a distinct role to play in the future of devolution, with the hope of deriving learnings that should inform the establishment of stronger foundations for the role of mayors in England going forward.

New Zealand

Since 1989, New Zealand has directly elected mayors for each of its 67 territorial authorities. New Zealand uses a two-tier system of local government, with 11 regional councils covering the whole country except for five unitary territorial authorities. Significantly, regional councillors are set to be abolished and replaced with 'Combined Territories Boards' comprised of the territorial authorities' mayors as part of a swathe of reforms aimed at cost reduction[71]. The full extent of powers that the mayors themselves enjoy arose from the need to provide the mayor of Auckland, following the amalgamation of the city's eight multi-tier councils into one 'super-city' council, with additional powers to, ostensibly, choose to whom and how to delegate mayoral responsibilities[72]. New Zealand's mayors do not have veto powers, although their councillors do, and have thus consistently found their progress stymied by the

69 Morphet & Denham (2025) — Falling short? English Devolution Policy, OECD evidence and constitutional change

70 Jäntti et al. (2026) — Mayors as local leaders — a systematic literature review on European mayor research

71 Beehive.govt.nz (2025) — Simpler, more cost-effective local government

72 Mahoney (2021) — Leading locally: how New Zealand's mayors get things done

will of councillors, given that councils require a majority to proceed on decisions. These councillors are themselves not beheld to political parties, with most issues being decided on a case-by-case basis rather than along party lines.

New Zealand's local government thus uses a 'weak' mayoral model. This model is ultimately predicated on the ability for councillors and mayors to form effective relationships, with informal collaboration cited as crucial to its success[73]. The role of a mayor is one of a spokesperson that can shape council agendas and as an intermediary between the council and the communities that it represents. Challenges to mayors in New Zealand are, as in England, fundamentally defined by funding and capacity, while the non-partisan system can produce a greater risk of clientelism — particularly as mayors try to build support in their own councils. The risk here is exacerbated by the lack of a clear scrutiny and accountability function.

In recent years, calls for reform in New Zealand have emerged that situate decentralisation within a wider national political focus on wellbeing, joined-up public services, place-led prioritisation of policy, and sensitivity to the needs of communities[74]. Some are concerned that the recent regional council reforms are merely part-and-parcel of government policy that has traditionally failed to collaborate with its local counterparts and, in a manner reminiscent of backlash to LGR policy in the UK, that it will only weaken the local democratic mandate[75]. However, supporters of enhanced local democracy in New Zealand have pointed to the English precedent of mayoral elections as propping up democratic participation[76]. The traditionally non-partisan nature of local politics in New Zealand means that mayors remain, often, independent, but an increasing number of candidates, since the Auckland reforms, have begun to declare their political affiliations[77]. The similarities with the English system are hard to miss: a mayoral model flourishing from the roots of an urban prototype with an intended byproduct of raised support for public participation in local democracy. But the power of elected council members in the New Zealand system arguably ensures a greater trust between mayoral councils and communities — although it is not without its frustrations for mayors with their own agendas. The New Zealand example suggests it would benefit the English system to strike a balance that avoids impeding the strong progress allowed by

73 Ibid.
74 Reid (2019) — Examining the case for decentralisation
75 Dalziel (2025) — The real regional reform hidden behind scrapping of councils
76 Reid (2024) — Revitalising New Zealand's democracy from the bottom up: local government's contribution
77 Webster et al. (2019) — Auckland, New Zealand — fair game for central party politics

mayoral leadership, while strengthening the role of councillors in strategic authorities, remembering that these are also elected officials themselves.

Poland

On the other side of the spectrum, mayors in Poland hold singular and significant executive power over the functions of local government, from local budgeting and investment decisions to the relations between local political representatives and their communities[78]. After a series of local government reforms spanning more than a decade, Poland saw the advent of the directly elected mayor in 2002 — in line with a wider trend for direct election of the local government executive across Europe[79]. However, while mayors in Poland do hold this 'strong' power, unlike in the English system they are only found at the municipal level. There are almost 2,500 municipalities in Poland, with an average population of 15,500 as of 2016, meaning that mayors are conceptually tied to a more fundamentally local level of governance rather than representing larger county or regional populations and structures[80].

What the Polish system reveals is that the actual relative strength of a mayor relies not only on a mayor's powers, but also on whether that mayor's municipal government is unified, has majority support for the mayor, or is more divided[81]. Increasingly, Polish local government has seen local mayors enjoying multiple terms elected, and this trend has led to a growing body of literature examining the relative merits of multi-term mayors — something that some of the more established strategic authorities in England are beginning to experience themselves[82]. A significant finding from the Polish context has been that mayors with a lot of experience serving three or more terms are found to be correlated with increased investment spend, higher levels of EU funding, and better overall fiscal performance[83]. This finding demonstrates that where significant responsibility is granted to the individual, a place will rely on that individual's experience. In this case, the success of mayors that have held longer terms suggests the benefits of an ability to form and hold working relationships with relevant place stakeholders, a level of soft power derived from widespread

78 Radzik-Maruszak (2016) — Changes and challenges; Local representative democracy in Poland
79 Zawadzka (2024) — How divided government challenges strong mayors: the case of Poland
80 UCLG & OECD (2016) — Poland: Unitary country
81 Zawadzka (2024) — How divided government challenges strong mayors: the case of Poland
82 Gendźwiłł & Swianiewicz (2017) — Breeding grounds for local independents, bonus for incumbents: directly elected mayors in Poland
83 Siwińska-Gorzelak & Bukowska (2025) — Reelected mayors and local fiscal policy outcomes. Are incumbent mayors more competent compared to newly elected ones?

recognition, and an element of fiscal nous. Political turnover is a natural part of democratic institutions, but it is worth noting that an embedded focus on growth-oriented policies is desirable at the local level.

As dissimilar as the Polish and New Zealand examples appear to be, what unites the local government context of these two countries is an academic concern over a renewed recentralisation of the state. In Poland as in New Zealand, local self-government is increasingly seen as a method to counteract the accumulation or continued retention of power at the centre[84]. Because of the centrality of the mayoral model to local government in Poland, and of the historic role of cities in resisting "illiberal" state policies, it becomes clear that the presence of powerful individuals beholden to local — parochial, even — desires is essential to support a functioning democracy[85]. Moreover, in both cases, it becomes clear that regardless of the relative strength of the mayor in proportion to that of the council, there must be well-functioning accountability mechanisms that are independent of political membership alongside a well-established framework defining the role of the mayor in relation to both the council and respective communities.

2.2.3 Defining 'strategy' in policy

Beyond clarifying the role of the mayor for MSAs, strategic authorities in general would certainly benefit from a level of coherency when it comes to defining what, exactly, is so strategic about the strategic authority. There must, after all, be good reason for the brand new and overarching legal definition that covers so many multitudinous and diverse organisations from the newest Foundation Strategic Authorities to very well-established combined authorities. In a governance context where the universal strategic authority seems to be becoming a settled matter, barring any significant obstacles to the current national agenda, there arises a whole new genre of policy critique focussed on how these strategic authorities should be enabled, or that some may fail, to genuinely deliver strategy and "make devolution work"[86].

84 Lackowska & Akształn (2025) — Recentralisation shift in Poland between 2015 and 2023: severe, though fragmented

85 Cieślak (2025) — Local self-government against the state: Resistance of Polish municipalities to creeping centralisation

86 Institute for Government (2025) — How strategic authorities can develop effective local economic plans: Making devolution work

Ultimately, strategy can be considered the amalgamation of two characteristics: the appropriateness of scale and the ability to utilise systems at that scale to engender a set vision for the future. The question of scale is one that has driven much of the rhetoric surrounding local government policy in recent years, not least evidenced by the 'guiding principle' set out in the English Devolution White Paper that unitary local government under LGR should cover areas of a population size greater than 500,000 on grounds of efficiency[87]. This is despite no independent evidence being cited by government to justify the creation of such large bodies, as well as many of the new unitary authorities announced in the DPP areas going on to now account for populations significantly below this guiding principle anyway[88,89]. The government has claimed that planning in England has been traditionally undertaken at a scale that is "too local", and so it becomes implicitly evident that the state considers a renewed strategic framework to be a remedy to inefficient localism[90]. Recent academic work has sought to problematise the concept of defining scale in relation to strategy, and more work needs to be done on settling upon a recognition of what scale requires, and feasibly benefits from, a strategic perspective[91,92].

An example textbook definition of strategic planning is as follows:

> "Strategic planning in the municipal setting prescribes a systematic process that enables a community's leadership to understand the numerous future environments in which the community will exist, establish consensus about how best to achieve its most desired vision, and illuminate the actions that will most likely make that happen — all within the context of expected available financial and human resources"[93].

Policy and service delivery at both the place level and the 'strategic' level — where the defining difference again returns to that question of scale — are complex in terms of the moving parts involved in aligning stakeholders, ensuring community participation, and enabling accountability across the decision-making process.

87 MHCLG (2025) — Local government reorganisation: summary of feedback on interim plans
88 Local Councils Network (2025) — No evidence exists to support mega councils, study reveals
89 Steve Reed MP (2026) — Local Government Reorganisation: Statement made on 25 March 2026
90 MHCLG (2025) — Factsheet: Strategic planning
91 Ongaro et al. (2026) — Interrogating "scale" in strategic management-at-scale: lessons from collaborative governance
92 Papanastasiou (2016) — How does scale mean? A critical approach to scale in the study of policy
93 Gordon (2005) — Strategic planning for local government: Second edition

In consequence of their situation alongside and in authority over such complex processes, strategic authorities are often upheld as offering the ideal template for holistic service delivery, particularly in terms of breaking down the departmental siloes that have traditionally defined place-level governance and managing that complexity of moving parts.

Strategic planning must find a balance between the economic development with which government justified its creation and the pressures of democratic engagement[94]. In theory, this balance is something that mayors can facilitate with both their connection to voters and their relatively unimpeded decision-making. But offering effective economic development is, naturally, a challenging process. The abolition of regional strategic spatial strategies by the Localism Act 2011 resulted in the growth of a significant gap in strategic planning at the regional level. Only now is this gap being addressed by the return of strategic planning and Strategic Development Strategies, and strategic planning remains significantly influenced by the coherency of the geographies with which strategic authorities, and other SDS leads, must grapple[95]. Here, the question of coterminosity once again rears its head.

The overall picture of strategic policy in England is one that is evidently defined by a dearth of coherency, structurally and geographically. Consequently, it remains unclear where the onus lies to both create and implement strategy, particularly in the context of the fragmented delivery boundaries of regional and sub-regional service organisations. The devolution framework in England is less defined and more fragmented than that of its European counterparts, simultaneously dealing with larger councils and less clarity on what needs to be managed at strategic and local levels[96]. For devolution to be a success in terms of generating regional growth, national policy needs to turn the tide on this fragmentation (which, arguably, its roll-out of widespread devolution and complete council unitarisation with LGR are intended to achieve) and, above all, ensure that there is full transparency concerning anticipated outcomes and how these are going to be achieved.

94 Iglesias (2015) — Making strategic planning work in local government: An empirical study of success and failure

95 MHCLG (2025) — Factsheet: Strategic planning

96 Morphet & Denham (2025) — Falling short? English Devolution Policy, OECD evidence and constitutional change

2.3 The impacts of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

The raison d'être of LGR is the simplification of governance and the integration of local levers for more effective service delivery, and as a process LGR will consequently lead to the reduction of the number of councils constituent to strategic authorities. Not only, as highlighted in Section 1, will LGR have significant impact in terms of how local and strategic authorities function as organisations, but the fact that LGR and devolution are to coincide means that there will be significant repercussions felt by strategic authorities as they build maturity. Only as of March 2026 has the government settled on what LGR will look like for four of the six brand-new DPP areas[97].

Concerns appeal to the opportunity gain of LGR as opposed to leaving the local government landscape as unequal as it currently is. However, again, a seemingly arbitrary focus on scaling up local government boundaries (particularly when strategic authorities are also meant to provide strategic scale themselves) bears a challenge to the promised benefits of efficiency. The upheaval inherent to the LGR process brings with it significant apprehension among place leaders, not least surrounding the difficulty of maintaining contact throughout a complex transformation with a larger number of constituents and the ability to effectively communicate a larger, unitary authority's plans and decision-making to their respective residents and communities. There are also worries that the expansion of ward sizes and the scale of the strategic authority could undermine local democracy, making it harder for councillors to represent and be accountable to such communities. Furthermore, there is a need for a clearer alignment between the desired outcomes from LGR and those from devolution; a coherent approach that avoids focusing solely on structural changes or cost savings and takes on a broader view to include long-term economic, social, and health benefits. Devolution and LGR are inherently interconnected, and as such require an integrated approach.

Moreover, while the government has pushed devolution, rhetorically, as its primary goal and efforts are being concentrated on completing LGR and establishing unitary councils, attention may be diverted away from more substantive devolution discussions. Effective leadership, both political and professional and both local and strategic, is crucial in guiding organisations through LGR while ensuring that the needs of those places taking on greater powers under devolution remain satisfied. Thus, there is a need to ensure that the focus of local government actors remains on their organisational purposes, values and the benefits of cross-system collaboration,

97 MHCLG (2026) — House of Commons: Written Statement — Local Government Reorganisation

rather than being waylaid by the distractions of structural or positional negotiations. However, the urgency of the reforms and the need to set up new structures, such as deciding committee compositions, can damage the relational and cultural foundations that are necessary for effective public services. In terms of organisational culture, it will be necessary for local authority leaders to create the conditions for new, transformative cultures to emerge that accommodate the diversity of backgrounds and approaches from merging organisations under the pressures of LGR and, as such, this concept also very much applies to emerging strategic authorities.

There is no single silver bullet for the creation of such positive conditions for change, although existing precedent for large-scale organisations and the creation of new authorities demonstrates that the clarification of organisational values and objectives is central to success, as well as the process of creating a new vision, for place or strategy, provides the distinct opportunity for the addition of inclusive metrics for success. New, changed, and growing organisations can build inclusion and prevention into policy from day one.

> *"This is not just shared services 2.0. This is a whole new organisation that will have to form new organisational values, new ways of working, new priorities based upon the new place that it's serving."*
>
> — RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

The latent opportunities arising from the changes engendered by LGR are not limited to metrics. Already, LGR has, in some cases, prompted place leaders to hold more frequent meetings (by the necessity of handling the complexities of LGR), which has served to foster collaborative relationships and, when these meetings occur between local leaders at the strategic level, to improve how constructive board interactions are with the strategic authority. The strategic authority model is sure to be tested by its ability to counteract existing inequalities and the new asymmetries that will develop between their constituent authorities, and, as such, means that soft power, relationship building, and relative impartiality will be the necessary qualities of effective leadership to ensure that the strategic authority model works long-term.

CHAPTER THREE

Building a future of success

Given existing regional asymmetries, the need to devolve powers to a trusted, established strategic tier, and the national policy agenda for economic growth, strategic authorities require a robust foundation to deliver their objectives. The success of Spatial Development Strategies and partnerships with sub-regional anchor institutions, drawing investment into place through effective place-based leadership, depends on several key adjuvants for change. Sharing best practice as institutions mature, capacity-building support, and, crucially, stronger accountability and scrutiny will be vital in ensuring that strategic authorities deliver their intended outcomes.

3.1 Institutional maturity

Building institutional maturity is a foundational challenge for strategic authorities as they seek to implement national and regional policies effectively. Given the relative infancy of the combined authority structure, the precedent of institutions for service delivery as strategic-level units can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of regional policy interventions in the present day. The challenge of building institutional maturity — and having institutions that mature to work in the most productive manner — is one that is key to establishing the operational processes and relationships needed for strategic authorities to implement national and regional policy[98].

However, that challenge is made significantly more difficult by the range of barriers limiting the capacity of combined authorities. Workforce capacity within combined authorities is limited in terms of research, economic, and analytical capacity to implement strategic policies for growth[99]: the capacity gap can significantly constrain combined authorities in developing spatial plans[100]. Furthermore, and especially in comparison to some of England's international peers and their treatment of the devolution of power and funding to regional-level authorities, English strategic authorities have traditionally had very limited flexibility over even the use of devolved funds[101]. This can restrict the number of successfully delivered programmes if authorities cannot deliver projects to centrally enforced timeframes[102].

Even with the introduction of Integrated Settlements, the placement of the relevant accountability frameworks within the remit of the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and ultimately reported to the Treasury, continues to maintain a level of top-down control over regional governance[103]. Given the vital importance of organisational innovation for improving the performance of strategic authorities as these new structures grow and develop a level of maturity, embedded rigidity of the kind that such top-down strictures engender can be a significant constraint

98 Localis (2025) — Ride the Wave: Balancing investment risk and opportunity to guide urban renewal

99 The Productivity Institute (2025) — What capacity and resources do mayors and strategic authorities need to deliver the industrial strategy?

100 Institute for Government (2025) — Making England's 'devolution revolution' a reality: How the government can support better decision making in mayoral combined authorities

101 Demazière (2021) — Exploring the creation of the metropolitan city-region government: the cases of England, France and Italy

102 Bates, Larkin & Smyth (2023) — Policy 'R&D', capacity and advocacy in English Combined Authorities

103 Morphet & Denham (2025) — Falling short? English Devolution policy, OECD evidence and constitutional change

to performance. A culture of risk aversion, bureaucracy, departmental siloes and enforced hierarchy can all impede organisational innovation[104].

Ongoing capacity issues, furthermore, have a compounding effect for strategic authorities, and it is often the case that funding, expenditure and staffing levels are directly proportional to the scale of the strategic authority. While larger authorities, such as Greater Manchester, can benefit from economies of scale to bolster internal operations, smaller authorities may suffer from insufficient capacity and a comparatively less dominant standing when it comes to representing their area needs to central government[105]. With the push for English devolution extending strategic authority structures to more, and smaller, areas — for instance, the brand new Devon Torbay Combined County Authority will have a population of fewer than one million residents, while Hull and East Yorkshire fails to break 700,000 — the issue of scalability in terms of staffing, resourcing, and capacity comes to the fore[106,107].

When the boundaries of strategic authorities fail to line up with other regional public service providers, such as NHS Integrated Care Boards and fire services, the resulting jurisdictional overlap can impede service delivery. The Total Place initiative, launched by the Brown government in 2009 but swiftly terminated by the coalition government in 2010, offered an approach to coordinating services at "place" level with the aim of identifying duplication in delivery and ensuring a user-first approach to service design[108]. Total Place was reported to have improved outcomes across various programmes, opened the opportunity for long-term savings, and resulted in falling demand for acute services in the brief time within which it functioned prior to its dissolution in 2010.

More recently, there have been renewed calls for 'Total Place' approaches[109], instigated by a substantial report from the Institute for Government in favour of renewing the initiative[110]. The 2025 Budget, furthermore, saw the inclusion of place-based budget pilots, with which selected MSAs might pool public service budgets

104 Windiharto, Amie & Toto (2021) — The role of organisation innovations in improving local government performance

105 Shaw (2024) — Devolution: the importance of scale and coterminosity

106 Devon Association of Local Councils (2025) — A new Combined County Authority for Devon and Torbay

107 See ONS (2022) — How the population changed in East Riding of Yorkshire: Census 2021 & ONS (2025) — How the population changed in Kingston upon Hull: Censure 2021

108 Institute for Government (2025) — The case for Total Place 2.0

109 See New Local (2025) — Five reasons the Government should launch Total Place 2.0 & CLES (2025) — Anchor networks — the delivery engine of Total Place 2.0

110 Institute for Government (2025) — The case for Total Place 2.0

in chosen local areas — mirroring the original Total Place policy[111]. Similarly, Greater Manchester will be trialling a 'Prevention Demonstrator' with much the same commitment to a locally pooled budget. Such efforts if successful would, in theory, dissolve the issues of embedded complexity that poorly aligned service provision currently induces. That the responsibility for choosing the areas for these place-based budgets belongs to MSAs may present a positive opportunity for strategic authorities as they work to build institutional maturity for effective service provision.

Leadership and organisational culture

Understanding that the character of strategic authorities will be uniquely defined by the individuals that lead them, it is therefore important to highlight the role of leadership in organisational performance, and particularly that of newly formed organisations. When implementing organisational transformation, research has found that unity among senior leadership can be key, particularly in terms of reinforcing a specific vision for change, cross-organisational buy-in, and political certainty[112]. However, across local government, a 2024 survey by the Social Market Foundation found that only 67 percent of senior leaders and managers thought that the senior leadership in their organisation was "effective at ensuring the organisation succeeds,"[113], implying that in the local government sector at large there may still be significant room for improvement in terms of managerial efficacy.

MSAs are organisations set up using a model that deliberately emphasises strong leadership[114]. Mayors have significant soft power to advocate for new policy agendas in a way that leverages the place identity of their sub-regions to external networks and influence liaisons with central government[115]. Literature suggests that leaders can have an influencing role over organisational cultures — that is, leaders can embed their values within an organisation and, therefore, the mechanisms for how leaders influence behaviours can be integral to the ways in which an organisation becomes more mature[116]. This means that mayors, committees, and senior officers, as leaders within their respective organisations and as a potential antidote to the rigidity of otherwise centralised governance systems, have a duty to encourage desired

111 Local Government Chronicle (2025) — Budget: Place-based pilots hint at return to Total Place
112 NLGN (2019) — Transforming organisational culture: insights report
113 Hyde & O'Regan (2024) — Local heroes? Assessing leadership and management in local government
114 Roberts (2020) — The leadership of place and people in the new English combined authorities
115 Bates, Larkin & Smyth (2023) — Policy 'R&D', capacity and advocacy in English Combined Authorities
116 Schein (2010) — Organisational culture and leadership

behaviours across strategic authorities: namely, as outlined above, the embedding of organisational innovation. Political tensions may, therefore, build a natural obstacle into the functions of an MSA, depending on the alignment of the mayor and the MSA's constituent political members. Despite the interference of LGR across the board, the ability for sub-regional structures to achieve their desired outcomes in terms of strategic governance will absolutely depend on as little disruption as possible, and the importance of the leader in ensuring a productive environment cannot be understated.

For FSAs, being as they are without a single political leader, there is an implication in the policy that the combined authority model can provide enough of a convening power to simulate that provided by the mayor for MSAs — for instance, all constituent councils of a Combined FSA (rather than an FSA made up of a single local authority) must agree on a budget for it to pass[117]. However, this places a great onus on those constituent representatives to collaborate effectively for the economic narrative of an FSA area to progress and raises concerns about how existing political diversity might impact the desired outcomes of an area becoming a non-mayoral strategic authority. Regardless of the presence of a mayor, it will doubtless still be the role of senior officers and political leaders to ensure that progress does happen, to set the values of the new organisation, and to enable the desired collaborative environment.

3.2 Place-based accountability

The government's hurry to enact the English devolution agenda in concert and often prior to the initiation of LGR places local leadership in a tough spot. Nominally, the government has tied the devolution of funding and autonomy into the maturation of the strategic authority model — i.e., those authorities that are more established, and that have mayors, receive more resourcing and decision-making capabilities — but the narrative of the political superiority of 'established' authorities brings with it a bit of a Catch-22. For new strategic authorities to reach the success of their peers, they often require greater support because of the pace at which they are having to build as new institutions and to provide services over newly and sometimes arbitrarily decided boundaries in a way that their predecessors did not. Trust cannot be built overnight, but the realities of place and the significant rate of change across the country necessitate that support be provided regardless of the level of government trust in the authority.

The habits inherited from the post-2008 austerity period mean that trust in local government has been consistently related to local processes of audit and

117 MHCLG (2025) — English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: Guidance

accountability that themselves have been considerably dampened in effectiveness by the very funding cuts that led to a withdrawal of centralised scrutiny in the first place[118]. The concept of place-based accountability arose in think-tank space in the 2010s to describe the new (obligatory) model of service accountability aligned with the democratic accountability of local government spaces. More than a decade of local accountability practices has evidenced that despite the ostensible move towards a place-based model and dissolution of formal centralised scrutiny processes, the institutional structures of accountability in England have remained overwhelmingly top-down in anatomy[119,120].

For strategic authorities, the emphasis on negotiation to establish devolved powers means that the individual mayor becomes, fundamentally, the object of accountability. This situation raises the immediate concern that accountability processes at the strategic level are under-resourced to respond to the fragmented and inconsistent nature of the devolution programme and the case-by-case monitoring that is consequently required. As more areas are amalgamated within the devolution programme, the sheer quantity of negotiation that the earliest combined authorities enjoyed simply cannot be replicated. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to assume that every mayor enjoys the same level of public recognition, limiting the effectiveness of public scrutiny in some places. Providing a level of overview that is bespoke to place remains an absolute requisite no matter the model of power dispersal, for both government trust in strategic institutions to improve and for inward and democratic accountability — between the elected members of strategic and local authorities and their constituent communities respectively — to function effectively.

3.2.1 Decentralisation, capacity, and value for money

Accountability is a multitudinous concept: it raises the image of public servants acting with propriety and within the bounds of legality; it entertains ideas regarding how far elected officials remain in line with their manifestos and political commitments; and, finally, it asks about the value for money of spending decisions. When differentiated like this, it becomes clear how much the desired outcomes of accountability can change depending on *who* is enacting it — particularly when it comes to the spending of money derived from central government funding programmes. The

118 Ferry et al. (2022) — Auditing governable space — A study of place-based accountability in England
119 Newman et al. (2024) — Rebuilding local democracy: the accountability challenge in English devolution
120 Denham & Morphet (2024) — Centralised by design: Anglocentric constitutionalism, accountability and the failure of English devolution

necessity of strengthened bottom-up accountability and internal accountability becomes ever clearer. The former because the directive of voters must be followed by democratic institutions, and the latter because without a well-established foundation of accountability the functionality of the mayoral system diminishes. As outlined above in Section 3.1, the very essence of the combined authority structure is one of collaboration; the innovation of a successful strategic delivery model derives from functional working partnerships and strong leadership.

The Levelling Up agenda brought with it an English Devolution Accountability Framework that was structured around "3 key forms of accountability": local scrutiny and checks and balances, accountability to the public, and accountability to the UK government. In theory, with the new programme of English devolution, policy has progressed away from the necessity of UK government providing one of the supporting pillars of local scrutiny and has turned instead towards a future of highly accountable and powerful mayors leading on decisions that will produce the kind of regional growth across the country that Greater Manchester has enjoyed in recent years. In practice, the picture is less clear, particularly given that funding discretion remains almost wholly within the decision-making expertise of Whitehall-based civil servants. Genuine wealth creation is likely only to arrive with a more concerted effort in government to fiscally decentralise[121,122].

A lack of local capacity is, however, often used as a scapegoat to allow the centre to retain its grasp on fiscal power, and the UK has seen assessment of the revenue-raising capacities of local government historically falter in the face of reform[123]. Fundamentally, the devolution of functional powers to local government, as has constituted much of the devolution agenda in England, does not constitute, or make up for the lack of, decentralisation of expenditure and revenue[124]. The new visitor levy is, in theory, a start to a greater level of fiscal decentralisation in England, but, fundamentally, the success of its implementation relies on a largely new level of governance (i.e., the strategic-mayoral) that is otherwise still bound by central directives.

Furthermore, the ability for strategic authorities to direct economic progress — and the benefits of any new fiscal freedoms — towards localities remains in question,

121 Sima, Liang & Qingjie (2023) — The impact of fiscal decentralisation on economic growth: A comparative analysis of selected African and OECD countries

122 Europe Economics (2019) — Impacts of fiscal decentralisation on economic growth in England and its regions

123 Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024) — Reforming local government funding in England: the issues and options

124 Boex, Williamson & Yilmaz (2021) — Decentralisation, multilevel governance and intergovernmental relations: A primer

particularly in the context of LGR moving the needle of power away from the local. The consequent lack of stability in governance that LGR will bring, as the very shape of the councils that constitute England's strategic areas changes and the political representation of these areas likewise shifts, will require an even more tightly held grasp on the core values of these institutions.

> *"If the goal is always just cost-effective services, you miss the point of what you exist to do. Supporting communities will drive you longer term to better outcomes and, ultimately, to more cost-effective services."*
>
> — RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Often, the rationale for both LGR and devolution is framed in terms of value for money and the cost effectiveness of services. However, the limited nature of value-for-money metrics does not represent a constructive approach to ensuring organisational consistency and the rapid maturation of strategic governance. Rather, it behoves strategic authorities to entrench their statutory obligations — the power to convene, the duty to collaborate, local economic growth and key public service provision — within agreed-upon organisational values, mission, and desired outcomes.

In terms of financial accountability, the Integrated Settlements Outcomes Framework (ISOF) may become a vital component in helping strategic authorities identify and encapsulate their organisational values. The ISOF's tailored detailing for each EMCA implies an element of place sensitivity, although it should be noted that the Integrated Settlement does not necessarily extend more autonomy to strategic authority accountability — especially given that a good proportion of funding for strategic authorities comes from funding packages unrelated to the Integrated Settlement. Instead, it represents a continuation of the top-down environment of accountability in English local government and thus may not provide policy-level support for a more confident and self-supporting local government sector. Additionally, there is little in the way of measuring the genuine quality of growth among strategic authorities, as far as quality growth pertains to its social and spatial distribution, in current government metrics for policymaking. This lacuna, and the continued looming spectre of top-down accountability obligations, makes it even more necessary that neighbourhood and community-led outcomes are not overlooked by strategic authorities setting out their organisational values.

3.2.2 Total place and accounting responsibilities

The recently updated Green Book guidance for public sector spending decisions has provided something of a start in moving decision-making away from a value-for-money focus — specifically, away from benefit-cost ratio as primary metric for decisions — and towards a more holistic, place-based approach[125]. It also recognises the importance of developing expertise at the local and strategic level through necessitating training and accreditation in the form of the Better Business Cases programme[126] – but herein lies the primary issue, that the value of place-based approaches relies on capacity at place level. And the failure of the state to substantially decentralise power and provide resourcing for local authorities means that there is little place-level capacity to be found.

If strategic authorities are to entrench place-first values in their ongoing governance processes, they have recourse to some precedent for good practice. Five place-based pilots were announced in the 2025 Budget that seem reminiscent of the Total Place programme — although these pilots are significantly more hyperlocal than the mayoral bodies that are set to implement them. The precedent here is the holistic pooling of budgets to allow service delivery to target upstream and place-specific needs in a way that has seen significant success in the past[127]. Similarly, the Wigan Deal, which responded to austerity budget cuts by using an invest-to-save approach and a cash flow-over-savings focus[128], revolved around the statement of a key set of principles that placed communities at the forefront of reform and, significantly, a department-led funding process wherein the finance department worked with individual departments — effectively combining budgetary responsibilities[129]. What both the examples of Total Place and the Wigan Deal evidence is that there is a very important convening role for the finance or accounting officer within the strategic authority, whereby budgetary practice must be just as aligned with the strategic authority's statutory obligation to provide an environment of collaboration as the very governance structures that comprise the authority.

Fundamentally, there needs to exist a form of accountability for strategic authorities that ensures best practice in commissioning decisions on place-based public service spend that does not place the onus of non-mayoral spending, such as NHS commissioning, on the mayor as an individual. Simultaneously, there needs to be a way to ensure that the mayor's responsibilities over expenditure align with best

125 HM Treasury (2026) — The Green Book: UK government guidance on appraisal
126 HM Treasury (2025) — Access to training in accreditation in best practice business cases
127 Institute for Government (2025) — The case for Total Place 2.0
128 Local Government Association (2024) — Asset-based approaches in local authorities: the Wigan experience
129 The King's Fund (2019) — A citizen-led approach to health and care: Lessons from the Wigan Deal

practice in terms of directing resourcing towards necessary upstream services. The ISOF on its own may not be able to achieve this, despite its laudably holistic scope. Furthermore, as powers shift towards the strategic level and unitarisation dilutes local democratic accountability, it remains to be seen whether the community-empowerment force of the EDCE Act will ensure a genuinely bottom-up approach to scrutiny in a way that brings trust into the local government sector and maintains the democratic mandate that people and communities should have over how councils are run[130].

> *"There is a function around place-based accountability that needs to be performed... whether it's local Public Accounts Committees, whether it's a strengthening of an existing role, whether it's remitting powers of open scrutiny in MSAs, or whether it's something different, around coordinating the institutional oversight systems of those sorts of bodies."*
>
> — RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

To provide external accountability that does not merely re-emphasise the current centralised form of oversight, some commentators have suggested the creation of local Public Accounts Committees (LPACs). Initially raised by the Labour party in their 2015 manifesto following recommendation by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, and then again before Labour's election to the current Parliament, LPACs are intended to address the need for a whole-systems approach to strategic-level public spending[131]. They would do so by mirroring the role of the national PAC in providing value-for-money scrutiny for government projects and delivery of services, but for strategic authorities. To do so they would require significant powers to hold oversight for public spending and, necessarily, local audit processes, as well as resourcing to ensure full capacity to do so.

There are some potential drawbacks to the LPAC approach, not least the fact that their creation would require significant resourcing and an additional commitment of bureaucracy for strategic-level actors. It remains unclear on whom the onus would fall

130 Citizen Network (2025) — English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: Written evidence submitted by Citizen Network (EDCEB24)

131 Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (2024) — Local Public Accounts Committees: what are they?

for their implementation, maintenance, and success. Furthermore, fiscal responsibility at the national level is conceptually different to implementing local policy mandates, meaning that the national PAC may not provide sufficient precedent for the processes that LPACs would have to manage. The failure of local authorities to keep abreast of their audit requirements in the past — following the abolition of the Audit Commission in 2015 — does, however, imply that a reliance on transferring responsibility for (at the very least) financial accountability onto private organisations may not be a practical solution to providing external accountability for strategic authorities.

There are very few examples (if none at all) of regional public accounting mechanisms that are both well-established, standardised or uniform across a whole country, and at a similar scale to that with which commentators suggest LPACs would function in England[132]. For instance, Australia has individual audit offices for each of its states, but those states are more similar in size to the devolved governments of the UK and, similarly, each have their own Parliament, rendering the comparison moot when it comes to developing precedent for LPACs. The ultimate takeaway may be, therefore, that if the role of strategic government in the UK becomes established as something truly akin to what is internationally referred as 'regional governance' — as in the devolved nations — then there will indeed be a role for independent audit commissions for each authority, despite the additional layer of bureaucracy.

Since Labour's election to government, LPACs seem to have been consigned to the theoretical[133]. The introduction of an LAO by the EDCE Act intends to help clear the significant local audit backlog — a particularly key task if more opportunities for strategic authorities to pool their budgets arise — but also seems to uphold the traditional centralised nature of local accountability. At the present, the LPAC as both an externalised and bottom-up method for overseeing budgetary decision-making, rather than solely the audit of accounts, has been relegated to more academic, theoretical circles[134]. It may be that well-managed and well-resourced scrutiny at strategic authority level will provide sufficient performance management and regionally led accountability, while the new LAO, which will have among its responsibilities, significantly, the appointment of auditors to local authorities, is to ensure that financial reporting never again falls so far behind the needs of places and place leadership.

132 Ferry, Midgley & Ruggiero (2022) — Regulatory space in local government audit: An international comparative study of 20 countries

133 The Municipal Journal (2025) — EXCLUSIVE: Push for local PACs slows amid Whitehall scepticism

134 For example, see Morphet & Denham (2025) — Falling short? English devolution policy, OECD evidence and constitutional change

3.3 Local media and democratic accountability

It would be remiss to overlook the role of local media when considering the forms of accountability that together strengthen local democracy. Local media can act as a channel of information fundamental to ensuring the institutions working within a place and the people working within those institutions can be held accountable — particularly important when those institutions are new, rapidly maturing, and adopting accountability practices that might work at the local level but are relatively untested at the strategic level. The local media sector has, however, not been without its share of issues. Widely, news media itself has been increasingly in conflict with the spread of disinformation and misinformation amongst its audiences, which themselves are becoming consequently and increasingly polarised. At the same time, local news sources have been beset by financial ills driven by changing audience consumption habits. More than 200 local papers closed in the UK between 2005 and 2018[135]. Due to funding issues, local newspapers increasingly rely on a mix of longer-serving staff and inexperienced recent graduates who may not have sufficient local knowledge. Furthermore, major local media owners aim to maximise engagement and revenue, with such aims often influencing editorial decisions to gain social media traction.

The significant decline of physical print media has been matched by a decline in TV news consumption, and whilst online regional and local newspapers have continued to find readers, these readers are very unlikely to want to pay for their online news[136]. Research has also evidenced a turn away even from online news as certain demographics have seen declining interest in news, particularly in comparison to interest in other online content. This declining interest is reported to be mostly due to feelings of unfair representation in the news, especially among young people and working-class people, and a desire to disengage with negative news cycles[137]. The use of heuristics by individuals to estimate the trustworthiness of online news, particularly when news has become aggregated with social media sources and otherwise provides quantity-over-quality to drive engagement, suggests that the average person is struggling to achieve an active relationship with news — a troubling concept in terms of the mitigation of misinformation and in terms of retaining a modicum of democratic oversight[138].

135 The Municipal Journal (2018) — Local democracy reporters aid transparency
136 Ofcom (2024) — Review of local media in the UK — Part 2: Final report
137 Robertson (2025) — People are turning away from the news. Here's why it may be happening
138 Revealing Reality (2018) — Scrolling news: The changing face of online news consumption

> *"Journalists are under a lot of pressure to hit targets in terms of page views and number of articles written every day... [They're] going to take the easy stuff, like press releases. And that really does impact on not just the output, but subsequently peoples' impressions of local media."*
>
> — RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Local newspapers increasingly rely on press releases from the very organisations that they intend to scrutinise, and communications teams increasingly prioritise direct-to-public communications rather than traditional newspapers. The local reporter is an increasingly rare sight in council meetings. But at the same time, national media is trying to grapple with the wider fragmentation of the British party-political environment and its manifestation in how new, surging political parties (particularly Reform UK) are operating at the local level.

In the UK, some grassroots and subscription-based local media outlets have arisen to attempt to plug the local media gap in an admittedly smaller market than that enjoyed by legacy publishers, with those that utilise digital-first models enjoying lower costs than associated with traditional print media. And these grassroots organisations have at times had a clear role to play in local political scrutiny. Investigation from the Mill, in Manchester, instigated the resignation of GMCA Night Time Economy Adviser Sacha Lord[139]. Likewise, investigative journalism from the Yorkshire Post and the Private Eye brought to light serious accusations of corruption surrounding the Teesworks Freeport, with the North East Bylines and The Teeside Lead has continuing to provide oversight and reporting on the story[140,141]. However, local authorities are often able to push back against investigative journalism, leading to significant obstacles for this method of local government scrutiny and limitations on its effectiveness nationwide.

Additionally, such inherently local, and often urban, outlets may not be able to scale to provide investigative coverage in all regions. Although the BBC's Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), wherein journalists funded by the BBC join regional news

139 Manchester Mill (2025) — Breaking: Sacha Lord has resigned as an advisor to Andy Burnham
140 McDonald (2025) — Teesworks scandal: a dark tale of public wealth lost and private gain
141 Jones (2025) — Looking at the Teesworks review one year on

organisations to report on local authorities and other public service organisations, has provided valuable scrutiny and transparency functions for local government across England, its effectiveness has been questioned due to inconsistent pay rates for journalists and the potential for mission creep, when journalists are asked by local employers to report on wider political issues beyond the remit of their local democracy roles[142,143]. Although independent citizen journalism can have a role in accountability, there are also risks of such valuable work being overlooked, or for such unregulated content by untrained users without sufficient legal awareness to lead to issues of libel and the spread of misinformation.

In addition to the BBC's LDRS scheme, as an example of how government intervention can support media scrutiny, the Welsh Senedd has provided funding to the Caerphilly Observer for a reporter dedicated to reporting the Senedd's proceedings[144]. Although this level of support at the local authority level would be constrained by the limits of local authority capacity, it is worth noting the success of the programme in delivering independent scrutiny. A strongly established form of journalistic scrutiny may end up being invaluable as mayors become more common, more visible, and more powerful as individuals, and strategic authorities build their scope with necessary rapidity. It remains that internal scrutiny has a very important role to play within England's governance system, but completely independent and well-resourced media is nonetheless a vital constituent part of a functioning democracy.

The government announced in March 2026 the introduction of a Local Media Action Plan (LMAP), acknowledging the role that local media plays in ensuring accountability and trust, linking its strategy into the wider agenda for local growth[145]. The LMAP notes the decline in local media across the UK and outlines support in the form of funding for local news publishers, particularly to assist with the digital transition, adapting audience habits, and to incentivise high quality local news content. Its recognition of the part that local media plays in local authority scrutiny, as well has the resourcing required to achieve local public interest news reporting, is a welcome signal that there may, in the future, be a return for local media as a reputable source of public accountability for local government.

142 The Municipal Journal (2018) — Local democracy reporters aid transparency
143 National Union of Journalists (2024) — NUJ urges reform of BBC-funded Local Democracy Reporter scheme
144 Sargeant MS (2025) — Written Statement: Further support for broadcasting and media
145 DCMS (2026) — Amplify: The Local Media Action Plan

3.4 Linking scrutiny to good practice for strategic authorities

The Local Government Act 2000 introduced the role of overview and scrutiny committees as a way for the political members of local authorities to hold their leadership (executive) to account by reviewing their decisions and providing recommendations or reports on the execution of their responsibilities. The EDCE Act 2026 has rebranded the overview and scrutiny committees as 'Local Scrutiny Committees', but legislation has yet to make clear the details of any additional powers with which these will be vested[146].

Scrutiny committees have powers to require the executive of the authority to consider their report or recommendations and to require executive members or officers to answer its questions, but they do not have the power to require anyone to act on the findings of their reports or their recommendations[147]. The overview and scrutiny committees of strategic authorities have adopted the scrutiny mechanisms of local authorities, including the fact that the membership of overview and scrutiny committees must have a political balance proportional to that of the wider authority. However, where local authority committees can refer issues to a full council, the scrutiny committee of strategic authorities acts as the final level of oversight. As such, scrutiny committees should be central to developing institutional maturity and ensuring good practice within strategic authorities. The scrutiny committee itself provides trust in the strategic decisions of the authority, which works to highlight how this emerging tier of government can add democratic accountability to existing structures.

The scrutiny committee also reviews the plans and ambitions of the strategic authority and covers all areas of service responsibility. Consequently, they are vital in establishing working practices for new authorities. In terms of organisational culture, there exists the almost paradoxical need to move rapidly in the early stages of development with the recognition that doing so will create future risks. When it comes to setting out foundational policies such as hiring and risk management before advancing any major initiatives, the scrutiny committee is front and centre. The role of the chair is vital, but their political background and/or other experience very much influences the functioning of the committee, to the extent that the effectiveness of committees is dependent on the chair, the level of member engagement, and the willingness of members to collaborate with the senior officers of the authority.

146 House of Lords (2026) — English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: HL Bill174 Running list of amendments — 19 March 2026

147 Legislation.gov.uk (2000) — Local Government Act 2000

Strategic authority overview and scrutiny is not, however, without its issues, and in newer authorities, can have serious teething pains. The immaturity of strategic authorities is often reflected in their scrutiny arrangements; if many members are new councillors themselves, there is a risk that they have a limited understanding of their remit and functionality, particularly regarding the distinction between strategic and operational matters. Furthermore, under the mayoral model, it may be that the centralisation of authority intrudes upon the effectiveness of scrutiny, thus making it harder for decision-makers to communicate their reasoning to local communities if councillors are themselves unable to communicate well with the mayor in turn. A mayor may view a change of stance, influenced by their scrutiny members, to run counter with their political responsibilities or vision, damaging the effectiveness of the authority's accountability processes. Additionally, it may be difficult for members of established authorities to hold a high-profile mayor to account given the prevalence of disparities in experience and public profile. On the other hand, for new authorities, the challenges of building new forms of regional collaboration and the real necessity of cooperation with a new mayor may also exhibit themselves. When building such a foundation of collaboration, the reliance on informal modes of cooperation as well as the presence of vested interests at the place level can both be obstacles to accountability, and, ultimately, to achieving strategic objectives.

The practices of overview and scrutiny committees themselves should not always be assumed to be righteous or optimal. If evaluation cycles within the strategic authority are ineffective, decisions will be made without adequate monitoring of whether strategy is genuinely being delivered. Scrutiny committees must cover a wide range of policy areas, and so it may be challenging for members, who already have their own responsibilities concerning their own local authorities, to be fully prepared for committee meetings without additional support. The committees can face resourcing issues; members must be prepared to devote a significant amount of time to meetings, including sometimes long-distance travel (with strategic authorities covering much larger areas, by necessity, than local authorities) and the need to tackle large quantities of preparation material. Some committees across England consequently can struggle with reaching quoracy. Finally, metrics-driven approaches led by central government policy can, at times, be disconnected with the practical realities of regional delivery, which can further impede internal scrutiny processes as they try to balance national requisite with local nuance.

3.4.1 Suggested improvements to scrutiny practices

The meaningful importance of the scrutiny committee in strategic authorities has become conceptually divorced from the support and attention paid to their establishment thus far in national policy and practice. With the mayoral model becoming ever more ubiquitous, the dominance of the individual authority of the mayor within MSAs means that there needs to be a more empowered role for scrutiny and local audit. This empowerment might look like requirements for leaders to respond substantively to scrutiny input, stronger guidance and best practice models from central government, and scrutiny members receiving higher allowances and travel provisions.

While political conflict is an inherent part of governance, specific obstacles in terms of keeping scrutiny transparent and ensuring accountable governance are likely to be mitigated with the provision of sufficient education and training for scrutiny members. Regular briefings with sufficient information are crucial for members to familiarise themselves with topics in advance of meetings, reducing any reliance on in-meeting presentations that might introduce new information only briefly and without giving members the chance to grapple with details vital to strategic decision-making. Likewise, council officers themselves would likely benefit from training to support member-led scrutiny processes, where such expertise has yet to be established, particularly within a strategic authority context. Member-led scrutiny processes have proven effective thus far, wherein members can determine the work programme and scope of the committee, with officers providing support but not driving the agenda — a practice already in operation amongst established committees and at the local authority level. A strong, mutually assured relationship between political members and authority officers is at the heart of effective committee operations, and so strategic authority executives and constituent council members must become proactive in ensuring an environment of mutual respect and workability.

The issue of quoracy is neither one that is endemic to the strategic authority model (not every scrutiny committee struggles with reaching quorum) nor one that has a clear route to mitigation, beyond perhaps extensive additional resourcing directly aimed at getting committee members to meetings. If strategic authorities can set up more committees for different policy areas, this may reduce the burden on individual councillors and bring their resourcing more in-line with that of respective officers. However, the ongoing process of LGR may make it more challenging for (fewer) political members to fully represent their constituent communities if there is simultaneously an increase in the number of committees. Furthermore, quoracy is also a question of management: political leadership has an onus to ensure that their members provide sufficient scrutiny. Similarly, there needs to be a willingness on members' behalf to engage

with the necessarily detailed examination of policy and operational issues; each committee meeting, as they are few, needs to be impactful, resulting in actionable recommendations for the executive and balancing diverse priorities.

Also foundational to building effective scrutiny would be the assurance of constitutional safeguards for committees. The enforcement of collaboration with mayors needs to have genuine weight behind it, and it may be that, in the context of MSAs, scrutiny members should be able to prevent mayors from having unchecked veto powers — albeit, in a way that aligns with a system whose rationale is the relatively unimpeded progress of mayoral authority. Scrutiny committees also need structured processes to maintain a level of attentiveness and adaptability among their membership despite ongoing political turnover. Such structures should also be established in a way that promotes bottom-up accountability and the leveraging of a new trust between central government and strategic authorities. As such, scrutiny committees could feasibly take on an advisory role for their authorities in their communications with government when trying to secure benefits for their region.

CHAPTER FOUR

Recommendations

National policy for the successful development of strategic authorities

Building the right environment for devolution

- Government should provide a clearer framework for non-mayoral authorities and authorities that are not monocentric, urban areas to move away from the metro-mayor as the implicit norm. Such a framework needs to make sure that the policy, funding, and strategic responsibilities of strategic authorities are all better suited to their diverse geographies and contexts.
- In the advent of genuine fiscal devolution, government should also provide a fiscal devolution roadmap for all types of strategic authority, not just the Established Mayoral Strategic Authority.
    - Furthermore, government should continue to explore avenues for extended fiscal devolution and options for further reform, including greater devolution of revenue-raising powers, uniformity across fiscal reforms, and radical initiatives such as the distribution of income tax or VAT.
- National policy on place leadership should move away from incentives solely derived from agglomeration policies and focus on growth policies that emphasise network building across polycentric regions:
    - To capture benefits from growth across a network (rather than just at the centre);
    - To incentivise the building of transport connections between peripheries;
    - To build networks around regional opportunities;
    - To provide capacity funding for innovation in newer strategic authorities;
    - To encourage the use of public-private partnerships and collaboration with regional stakeholders;
    - And, for mayoral authorities, to ensure that the institution of mayoral leadership can support and advocate for even sparsely populated areas.
- Government needs to provide resourcing support for external, local accountability; although the Local Media Action Plan is very welcome, local media and wider public and civil society scrutiny must be embedded within the accountability system for devolution.
- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should co-design with strategic authority partners a peer-to-peer learning offer that supports learning across not just neighbouring boundaries but for authorities facing

comparative challenges such as major service delivery boundary misalignment, rural services provision, or the effects of LGR — not just following the examples of the long-established trailblazer authorities.

Strengthening the remit of strategic authority scrutiny

- Government should create a minimum national standard for strategic authority scrutiny to involve a stronger statutory baseline for scrutiny practices including timely access to briefings for members, guaranteed officer attendance, and mandatory executive responses — beyond simple acknowledgement — to committee recommendations.
- Scrutiny and governance capacity should both receive funding as part of the core devolution programme. Funding will cover support for scrutiny members, including transport provision and member training, as well as ensuring capacity for governance officers, analysis, and risk management.
- In addition to internal scrutiny, there needs to be effective, independent, external, and local accounting for strategic authority spending decisions. If the additional bureaucracy anticipated by the establishment of Local Public Accounts Committees should prove too burdensome, individual Local Accounting Officers might provide an appropriate level of external scrutiny — with the proviso that they must be embedded locally and not merely an extension of Whitehall's overview.

Strategic authority best practice

Building strong foundations

- Strategic authorities should have a written constitution defining:
    - From the earliest time possible, an identified institutional purpose to be publicised; mission(s); core values; priority outcomes; how the authority understands 'place' within its own context; what public value it intends to create; and how strategic action relates to local needs and local assets;
    - An internal framework setting out the roles, responsibilities, and boundaries of political and professional leadership. Furthermore, strong leadership would require a formal induction programme including training, as well as stronger due diligence for senior appointments;
    - The division of responsibilities between the strategic authority and all constituent authorities, with regard to the governance and delivery of strategic priorities for the area;

- Among core institutional values, organisational basics that must be invested in early to make later devolution credible. These include governance, financial and risk management, policymaking capabilities, analytical capacity, partnership management, and digital systems;
- How the authority intends to incentivise public legitimacy as an operational priority, such as through the publication of information about decision-making, scrutiny findings, or budgets. A framework for media and civil society engagement needs to be included in such planning.

Working across place

- Strategic authorities must build a small set of shared outcomes from which to anchor cross-system working. These will be shared with constituent councils, key service partners, and perhaps anchor organisations.
- Authorities without a single dominant urban core should organise strategy around networks of towns, anchor organisations, transport links, and local economic relationships, adopting the strengths of city-region governance but embedding it within network policy rather than agglomeration.
- Strategic authorities should use their convening power to support whole-place, prevention-first delivery in the use of strategic scale to align councils, ICBs, transport bodies, and other local partners.

Supporting effective scrutiny

- Within the strategic authority constitution there should be built codified safeguards for scrutiny arrangements so that scrutiny can enjoy continuity across mayoral terms and political turnover. Formal arrangements of scrutiny need to include the requirement for the executive to publish written responses to scrutiny findings within a defined timeframe, and a formal mechanism in the case of disagreement that requires executives to revisit, rather than just note, major concerns.
- Internal support for scrutiny members should also, as a point of statute, include:
  - Regular pre-meeting briefings, reaching quorum and therefore online, if necessary;
  - The early circulation of relevant material;
  - Induction and refresher training for members;
  - Practical reimbursement for the time and costs associated with membership.
- Scrutiny must be member-led by design, not by exception. Safeguards for scrutiny practices must include a strong role for elected members to shape scrutiny work, to select topics, and to define the scope of enquiries.

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