



THE STATE OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS IN ENGLAND

**TOWARDS A NEW ERA OF
PARTNERSHIP?**

Paul Anderson and Tom Arnold

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the James Madison Charitable Trust, whose financial support made this research possible. We are also grateful to the interviewees who generously gave up their time to share their insights for the project. We owe a special thanks to Dr Coree Brown Swan and Dr Johanna Schnabel who took the time to discuss various ideas and provide expert comments on the findings. We hugely appreciate the contribution of colleagues at Liverpool John Moores University and the Heseltine Institute in providing valuable feedback, suggestions and editing, with particular thanks to Professor Catherine Durose and Sue Jarvis for their support throughout the development of this report.

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Front cover: 09/07/2024. London, United Kingdom. Minister of State at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Jim McMahon joins the regional mayors, who had gathered at Downing Street for the first time, on a 100% electric bus on their way to a meeting at Transport for London.

*(Simon Walker/The official photo stream of the Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This information is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/ **OGL**)*

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Three Graces, Liverpool (Credit: Roger Sinek)

Executive Summary

- Over the last decade, **Mayoral Combined Authorities** (MCAs) have become the principal structures of sub-national governance in England, with an increasing array of policy powers and responsibilities. The 2024 English Devolution White Paper commits to rewiring the state to 'deliver in partnership' with local leaders, facilitating a new era of local power. Nevertheless, England remains a highly politically and fiscally centralised nation. This means **MCAs must work closely with UK government** to achieve their policy objectives and deliver on the goals of directly elected 'metro' mayors.
- **Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) are the 'plumbing' of government in a multi-level system** such as the UK, and crucial to effective policy development and implementation. Since devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the late 1990s, there has been extensive discussion on how to improve engagement between Westminster and devolved governments, with new IGR structures established following a 2022 government review. In England, however, no such formal structures existed until the establishment of the Council of the Nations and Regions and Mayoral Council in 2024.
- Despite the absence of formal IGR structures in England, **positive relationships between MCAs and UK government have developed**. There is regular informal engagement between MCA officials, civil servants and ministers, although this is largely reliant on individual relationships. The informal character of relations between MCAs and government means there are notable differences between MCAs in their level of engagement with government.
- **Opportunities for MCAs to shape and influence** national-level decisions and policy have increased over recent years. However, **structural barriers to further co-development of policy remain**. A lack of knowledge of regional geographies and devolution more broadly, and significant differences between government departments in their willingness to effectively engage with MCAs inhibit closer working between MCAs and government. Departmental siloes within government do not align with the more place-based, cross-sector approaches enabled by the MCA model and encouraged through developments such as the rollout of integrated, multi-year MCA settlements.
- MCAs are working with and learning from each other. Forums such as UK Mayors have emboldened directly elected mayors to work together and effectively lobby government on issues where there is shared interest. However, the growing number of MCAs, represented by an increasingly politically diverse group of mayors, represents a challenge. **Maintaining a space for shared learning and collaboration between MCAs** is essential if English devolution is to continue its development, and mayors will need to continue to put place – rather than party – first.
- While informal engagement between MCAs and government is inevitable, the introduction of more formal structures such as **the Council of the Nations and Regions and Mayoral Council provide a welcome opportunity for all MCAs to enjoy an equitable 'seat at the table'**. However, both forums currently lack a clear purpose. Further work is required to clarify the role of these forums and how they fit within the UK's existing IGR architecture. Without statutory status and a clear purpose, they risk becoming glorified talking shops.
- As English devolution continues apace, Whitehall needs to adopt a **devolution mindset**. A new era of partnership between MCAs and government requires not only new structures to facilitate and strengthen IGR, but to **challenge the 'Whitehall knows best' approach that has held back previous attempts to devolve genuine regional power** in England. Civil service recruitment and training can play a role in this, as will enhancing opportunities for collaboration and learning through initiatives such as civil service secondments to MCAs.
- While much rhetoric around English devolution emphasises the role of MCAs as partners, a central question remains – **to what extent are MCAs delivery vehicles for government policy, or governments in their own right?** Without serious fiscal devolution, and despite the welcome introduction of integrated settlements enabling more flexibility for MCAs to prioritise spending, MCAs will continue to be reliant on government funding and approval for projects. Government could more **effectively harness the benefits of devolution by enabling MCAs to experiment and innovate**, feeding ideas and evidence back into national policymaking processes. Engagement between MCAs and national government can be a two-way process, with opportunities for upwards learning as well as development of MCA policy.

Introduction

Since taking office in July 2024, the UK Labour government has emphasised its commitment to a “new era of local power” in England (MHCLG, 2024a), with a promise to “rewire national government so that our first instincts are to deliver in partnership with Mayors and council leaders, not sideline them until the last moment” (MHCLG, 2024b: 9). This bold rhetoric has been accompanied by the continued rollout of Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) in England, as the government seeks to ‘complete the map’ of devolution. Following the recent election of mayors representing Greater Lincolnshire and Hull and East Yorkshire, there are now 14 metro mayors (including the Mayor of London), with a further six to be elected in 2026. Over 60% of England’s population is now covered by devolution deals (MHCLG, 2024b: 24).

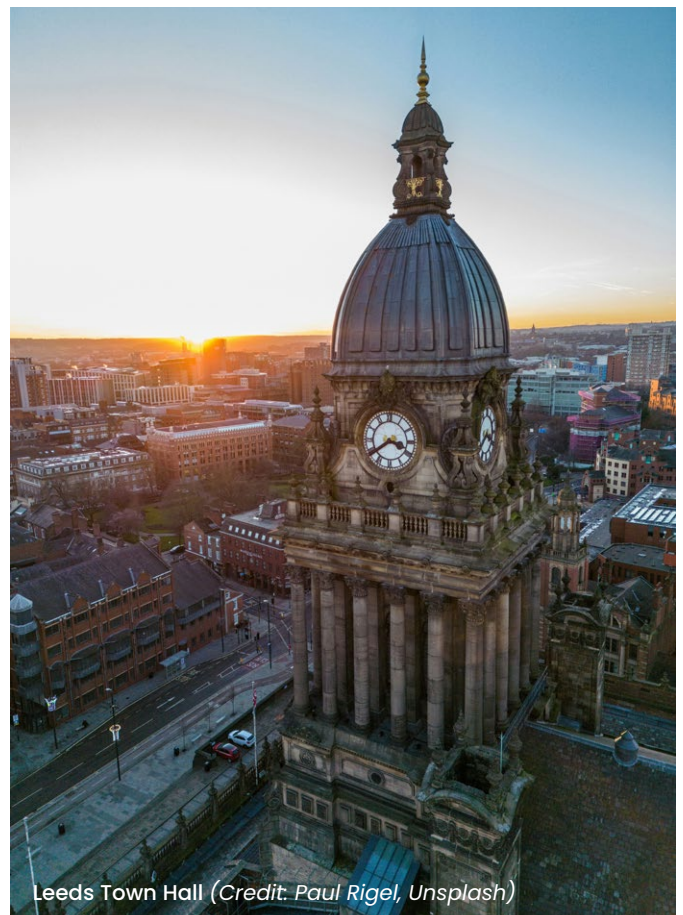
With partial responsibility for aspects of policy in areas such as transport, planning, housing, economic development and skills, MCAs are now established as the principal form of sub-national government in England. Negotiated through a series of devolution deals and created by secondary legislation, MCAs are “sui generis” in the UK’s territorial governance model with only limited transfers of power and no fiscal devolution (Kippin and Morphet, 2023: 247). As Sandford (2020a: 40) emphasises, devolution deals are largely focused on “joint working” between MCAs and central government with a primary objective “to solidify partnership working, allowing central government to draw on local knowledge and policy innovation but with the centre signalling its continued determination to lead on most policy initiatives”.

However, there has been little discussion of how relations between MCA and central government, as well as between MCAs, have developed to date. With the number of MCAs growing and their responsibilities increasing, this dynamic will impact policy outcomes affecting millions of people. As Labour embarks on its ambitions to strengthen local power and partner with MCAs on delivery, understanding how MCAs and government work together is crucial.

This report examines how intergovernmental relations (IGR) have developed since the establishment of MCAs. We identify and analyse the opportunities and challenges arising from these interactions and reflect on how they could be strengthened to ensure more effective intergovernmental cooperation and a stronger sense of partnership between MCAs and central government. We find evidence of constructive relationships between MCAs and government, with increasing opportunities for MCAs to influence national decision and policymaking processes. However, we also highlight wide differences in the levels of

government engagement between MCAs and identify structural issues within Whitehall preventing the development of more effective relations.

Since its election, the Labour government has prioritised enhancing working relationships between the UK government and MCAs. The 2024 English Devolution White Paper outlined a vision for a shift in the relationship between central, regional and local governments, emphasising the pivotal role of mayors in delivering mission-driven government and a commitment to strengthen partnership between central government and MCAs. The establishment of the Council of the Nations and Regions and Mayoral Council in October 2024 are notable signals of intent. But as the findings in this report make clear, beyond these structural changes, further reform is required to strengthen the English devolution settlement. We highlight the opportunities provided by new IGR structures to improve formal engagement between MCAs and government and emphasise the need to rewire Whitehall to embrace a devolution mindset and harness the power of place-based leadership.



Leeds Town Hall (Credit: Paul Rigel, Unsplash)

Contextualising Intergovernmental Relations

Intergovernmental relations (IGR) are essential in multi-level democracies where political authority is dispersed between different tiers of government. This section briefly defines IGR, explores the development of regional governance in England and discusses recent changes following the election of the Labour government in July 2024.

What are Intergovernmental Relations?

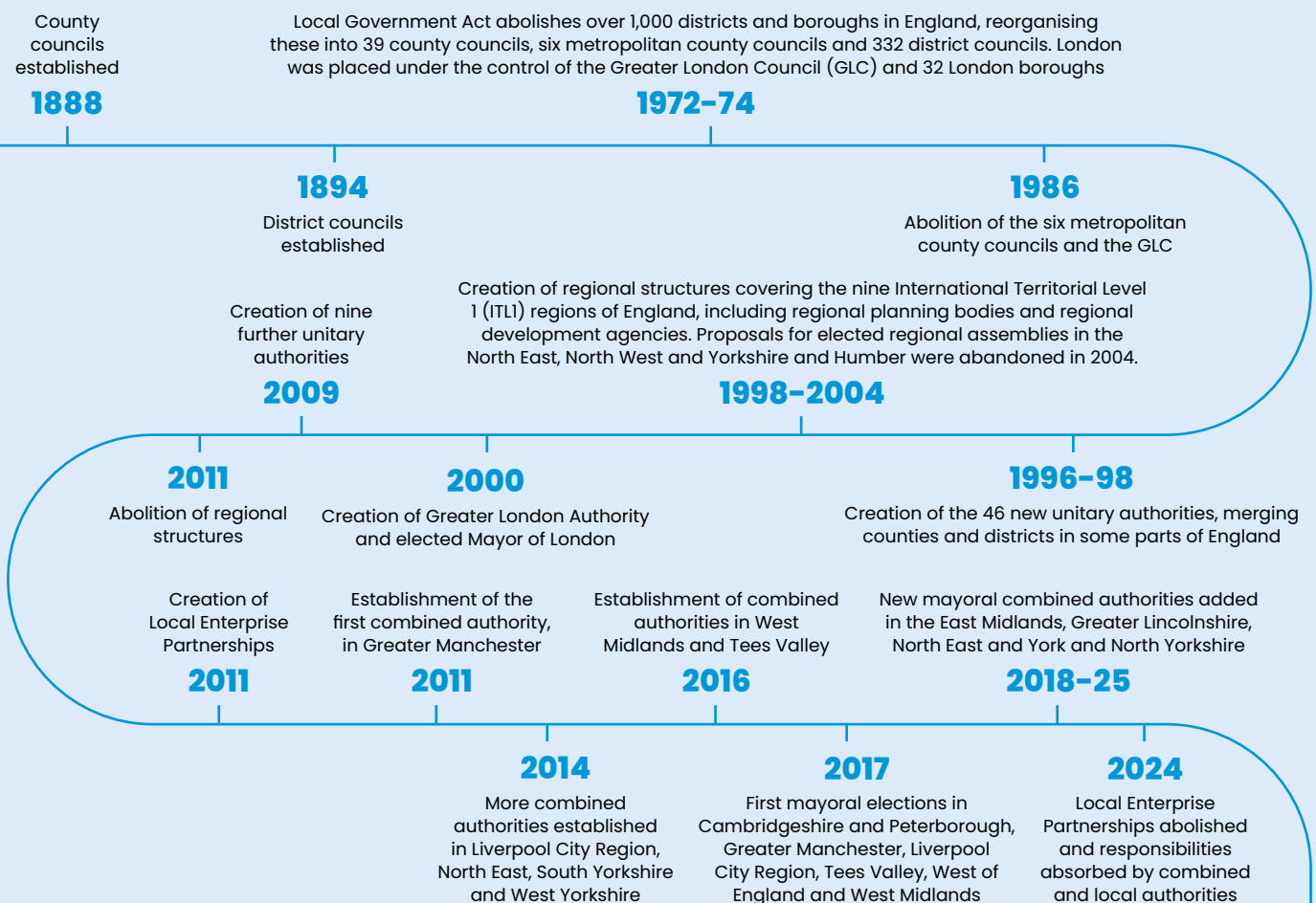
IGR refer to the “institutions, mechanisms, processes and power plays” through which interaction between governments occurs (Poirier, 2023: 79). These interactions can be vertical (between central and sub-national governments), horizontal (among governments at the same level), bilateral (between

two governments) and multilateral (among multiple governments). IGR may also be characterised as formal, typically involving structured meetings within institutional forums, or informal, comprising unofficial meetings, phone calls and text messages.

In federal and decentralised systems, cooperation vis-à-vis policy development and implementation is considered a key purpose for IGR, but more broadly IGR are considered valuable to share information, manage overlapping responsibilities and policy interdependencies, resolve disputes and, where appropriate, take joint actions and decisions (Phillimore 2013).

In many federal systems, such as Australia, Germany, India and South Africa, IGR are constitutionally mandated or explicitly defined and governed by legal statute (Poirier et al., 2015). By contrast, IGR in the UK

Figure 1: Timeline of English sub-national government



are non-statutory and largely informal (Anderson 2022).

Asymmetric devolution and IGR in England

The introduction of MCAs in England over the last decade is the latest attempt to fill the ‘missing middle’ of English governance, implementing a tier of government between local authorities and UK government in Westminster (Blakeley and Evans, 2023; Shaw and Greenhalgh, 2010). In the aftermath of the creation of MCAs, little attention was paid to how relations between these sub-national institutions and central government would develop.

Sandford (2020b) identifies two broad traditions of thought about the purpose of sub-national government. The first, and perhaps prevailing view, is that local government in England is primarily a delivery unit for public services defined by nationally set policy priorities. The second view, embraced rhetorically by consecutive recent governments in the rollout of regional devolution, is of local government and combined authorities as *governments* in their own right, able to diverge from central government priorities to deliver for the communities and places they represent. However, scholars have consistently highlighted that devolution in England is conditioned by an over-centralised model of asymmetric governance, where powers and responsibilities have been primarily delivered through a series of bilateral ‘deals’ resulting in differences between places in the powers and responsibilities available to them (Richards et al., 2024).

Over the last 50 years, England has witnessed various attempts to develop and reshape forms of regional government aimed at providing an intermediate level of strategic governance operating between local and national tiers (see Figure 1).

The high level of churn in regional governance structures has been identified as contributing to the continuing high level of political centralisation in England (Denham and Morphet 2025). Regional government boundaries and structures have been regularly changed over the last 50 years, limiting the ability of sub-national governments to build and

retain institutional expertise. This has been described as a ‘Catch-22’ – regional institutions in England lack capacity to deliver on government objectives, yet have rarely been provided with the resources and responsibilities to develop this capacity (Hoole et al., 2023).

Some have gone further, suggesting that the ‘deal-based’ and ad hoc nature of the rollout of MCAs is an intentional strategy adopted by UK government to strengthen the centre and ensure delivery of its spatial policy objectives (Haughton et al., 2016; Hoole and Hincks, 2020). Concerns have also been expressed about growing differences in institutional capacity between different parts of England, with areas such as Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and the West Midlands – each with Mayoral Combined Authorities since 2017 – diverging from places with newer combined authorities or without any devolved institutions in their ability to develop and deliver policy (Newman and Hoole, 2024; Warner et al., 2024).

The MCA model, however, appears more sustainable than previous attempts at developing sub-national structures. The Labour government elected in 2024 has opted to build on rather than abolish existing English regional structures. However, to date there has been relatively little attention paid to the development or functioning of IGR between MCAs and central government, or between MCAs. Analysis has largely focused on the negotiation of ‘devolution deals’ that established MCAs (Ayres et al., 2018; Gains 2015; Sandford 2017) or on specific policy areas (Blakeley and Evans 2023). While there is growing evidence of how local authorities are working with MCAs to develop policy and deliver services (see, for example: Bates et al., 2023; Shutt and Liddle, 2019), relations between MCAs and UK government are less explored.

The English Devolution White Paper

In December 2024, the English Devolution White Paper was published, in advance of an anticipated English Devolution Bill to be put before Parliament (MHCLG 2024b). Building on the devolution framework set out by the previous Conservative government, the White Paper sets out the powers and responsibilities available to different types of ‘strategic authorities’:

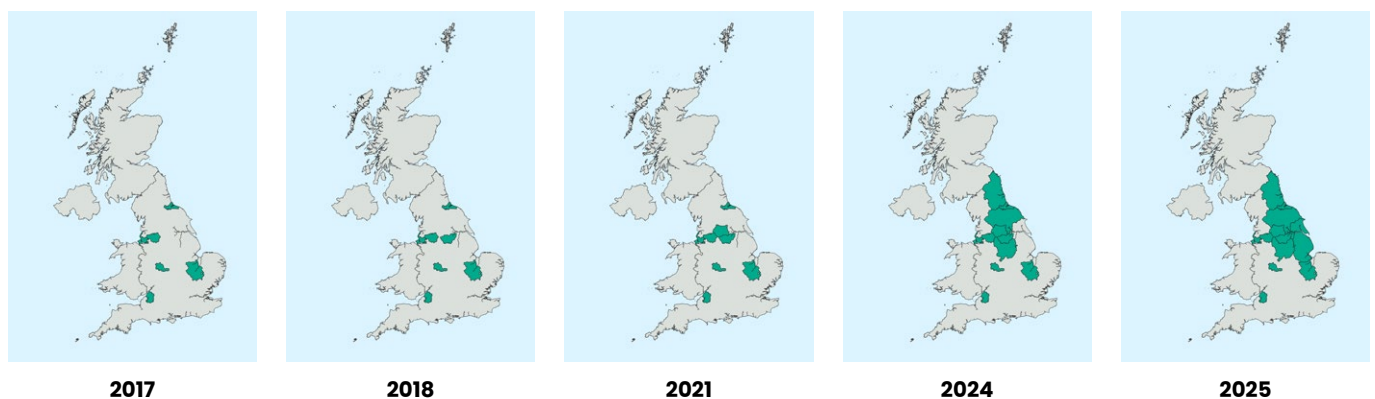


Figure 2: Rollout of Mayoral Combined Authorities in England

- Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities: MCAs established over the last decade, such as Liverpool City Region, Greater Manchester and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. These are being provided with long-term integrated funding settlements allowing more flexibility to prioritise spending, alongside additional powers in policy areas such as transport and employment support.
- Mayoral Strategic Authorities: New MCAs such as Greater Lincolnshire, and those to come in 2026. MCAs can move to 'established' status if they have existed for at least 18 months, have a local assurance framework and have not been the subject of any financial concerns or intervention. They will enjoy many of the responsibilities and powers available to Established MCAs but with fewer flexibilities over spending.
- Foundation Strategic Authorities: These may include combined authority areas that have not agreed to an elected mayor, and single unitary councils. They have significantly fewer powers and responsibilities than combined authorities with elected mayors.

The English Devolution White Paper also set out new structures to support IGR between combined authorities and UK government. As the White Paper states, the objective of these new forums is "hardwiring devolution into central government" (MHCLG, 2024b: 16) and to "provide unparalleled opportunities for Mayors, working hand in glove with other local leaders, to engage government at the highest levels on a systematic basis" (ibid: 25) The structures will, the White Paper states, enable mayors "to bring local insights to bear on shared national problems and ensure the interests of their local communities are represented in the development of government policy" (ibid).

Three new intergovernmental forums have been established to support these objectives:

- The Council of the Nations and Regions: Chaired by the Prime Minister, membership is comprised of the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, and all elected regional mayors in England.
- The Mayoral Council: Membership is comprised of all England's regional mayors and chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister.
- The Leaders Council: Meetings between a representative group of local authority leaders, the Deputy Prime Minister and other ministers.

These structures represent an attempt by the UK government to introduce formal elements of IGR into central-local relations in England. However, to date, there is little detail on how these new forums operate and how they fit into the existing architecture of UK IGR. While their introduction represents a welcome recognition of the need to improve engagement between national and sub-national government in England, there is a risk that without further detail on the objectives and practicalities of the councils they will become no more than talking shops.

Beyond these new vertical structures, metro mayors also meet as part of the UK Mayors forum. Established as the M7 by the first six metro mayors and the Mayor of London in 2017, the forum has gradually expanded with the election of new mayors. The forum typically meets monthly and is organised around various meetings among mayors, MCA chief executives and MCA policy leads.

This section has highlighted the challenges of intergovernmental relations in England and the potential for these challenges to be met by a new system of MCAs with increasing responsibilities and a UK government expressing enthusiasm to work in partnership with these sub-national institutions. Addressing these challenges is crucial if government and MCAs are to work effectively together to develop regional and national policy. To understand how to build more effective IGR in England, it is important to understand how MCAs and UK government have engaged with each other over recent years.

To support this objective, we identified four key research questions:

1. What are the key characteristics of relations between MCAs and UK government?
2. What benefits and opportunities have emerged from these relations?
3. What are the main challenges affecting relations between MCAs and UK government?
4. What changes are needed to improve IGR in England?



Big Ben, London. (Credit: James Newcombe, Unsplash)

Research Design and Method

To examine how IGR in England have evolved since the establishment of MCAs, we undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with 53 stakeholders from MCAs and central government. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to explore the perspectives of interviewees ensuring a more nuanced understanding of how IGR function and the factors that shape interaction. Interviews focused on interviewees’ first-hand experiences of vertical and horizontal IGR and explored how IGR operate, perspectives on the quality of interactions and the opportunities and challenges involved in intergovernmental engagement. Questions covered the core themes from the research questions but also allowed interviewees to lead the conversation into related areas and the topics they thought important.

Interviewee recruitment followed both a purposive and snowball sampling method. To fully capture the perspectives of as many stakeholders as possible, participants were recruited from all 9 MCAs which had elected at mayors at the time of commencing the research in July 2023 (see figure 3).

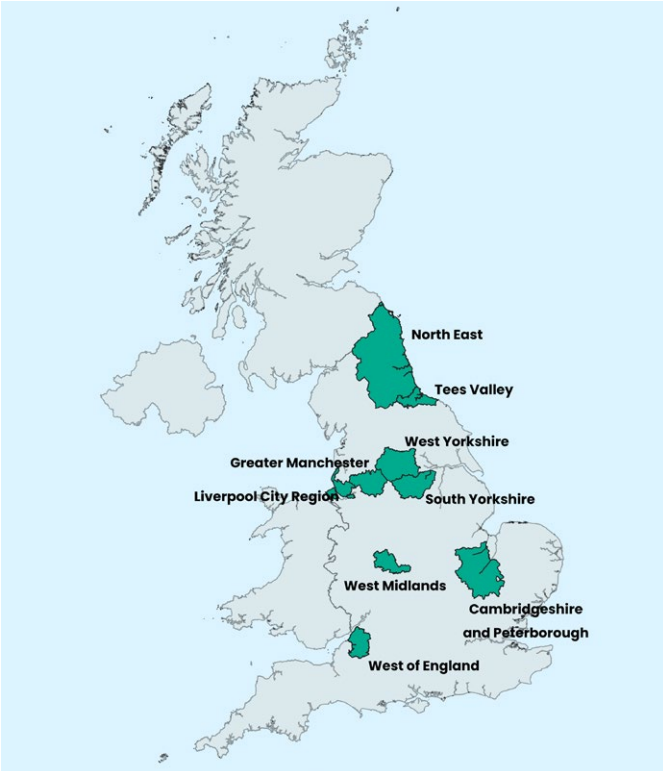


Figure 3: Map of MCAs involved in this research

A minimum of three participants was interviewed from each MCA (see table 1) and included Mayors, Chief Executives and other senior staff within the MCAs (see table 2). To obtain a central government perspective, interviews were conducted with former government ministers and civil servants from various departments, including the Department for Business and Trade (DBT), the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Treasury.¹ To ensure confidentiality, it was agreed with interviewees that their contributions would be anonymised and indicated with only a descriptor of the role (e.g. MCA official).

Interviews were conducted over a 10-month period (July 2023 to April 2024) within the context of the rollout of new devolved responsibilities following the Levelling Up White Paper, the introduction of trailblazer deals in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, and the runoff to the general election, which took place in July 2024.

MCA	Number of Interviewees
Cambridge and Peterborough (CAPCA)	5
Greater Manchester (GMCA)	7
Liverpool City Region (LCRCA)	5
North East (NECA) ²	5
South Yorkshire (SYCA)	4
Tees Valley (TVCA)	3
West of England (WECA)	5
West Midlands (WMCA)	7
West Yorkshire (WYCA)	4

Table 1: Number of Interviews

Participants	Number of Interviewees
Mayors	6
MCA Chief Executives	8
MCA officials	32
Government ministers	2
Civil servants	5

Table 2: Interview Participants

1 Between the completion of this project and the publication of this report, some of the terminology of government departments and institutions has changed. To ensure consistency with the interview data, we refer to the terms in use during the fieldwork phase.
2 Previously North of Tyne Combined Authority before May 2024.

Interviews took place in person and online and lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and later coded. Following a close reading of all transcripts, an inductive approach to coding was undertaken to identify the main themes across the various transcripts.



Pier Head, Liverpool (Credit: Roger Sinek)

Intergovernmental Relations in England: Developments and Dynamics

Divided into three key themes, this section sets out the main findings that emerged from the interviews. First, we highlight that positive, albeit broadly informal, working relationships have developed between MCAs and central government. There is, however, significant variation across MCAs in engagement with government, largely because of factors such as geographical size, institutional capacity and political leadership. Second, we show that as MCAs have matured and become more experienced in delivering policy, they have sought to work with and shape national government priorities and policymaking processes. However, while opportunities for influence and co-development of policy have certainly grown, these remain infrequent and hindered by the prevalence of a 'Whitehall knows best' attitude in many government departments. Third, we discuss the positive development of horizontal relations among MCAs. Working together, mayors and officials have created a platform to maintain dialogue, share instances of best practice and exert collective influence on national government. Agreeing collective positions, however, is at times precluded by differing priorities and perspectives and party-political allegiances.

Positive working relationships have emerged, but uneven capacity means there are significant differences in how MCAs engage with government

Overall, interviewees described relations between MCAs and central government in positive terms. Often describing them as "good", many interviewees believed that productive working relationships had been established at both official and political levels, evidenced in regular interaction between MCAs and (most) Whitehall departments. Much of this interaction, however, was largely informal and reliant on pre-existing relations between individuals. As a result, there were uneven opportunities for central government engagement across MCAs.

Regular but informal interaction

Across MCAs and Whitehall departments, interviewees reported varying but regular engagement, usually in the form of meetings between officials across different policy areas. There was general agreement among interviewees that in-person engagement – "carving out time to go to London", as one mayor put it – was crucial for maintaining regular and effective IGR. However, many interviewees acknowledged that, following the Covid-19 pandemic, these meetings had become less common, with more taking place online.

Some interviewees believed the shift to online meetings had improved the frequency and quality of intergovernmental interaction, while others felt online formats hindered the development of deeper relationships, with fewer opportunities for, as one MCA official reflected, "informal, off the cuff conversations before or after 'official' meetings". The latter, interviewees pointed out, meant building trust between officials was more difficult.

In addition to meetings, emails and letters were identified as common modes of interaction, while informal engagement via phone calls, texts and WhatsApp messages were also highlighted. Informal interaction was a common feature of MCA–central government relations. Mayors and chief executives, for instance, spoke of their ability to contact certain ministers and senior civil servants via private phone numbers. Informal interaction was broadly discussed in the context of exchanging information, sharing ideas and – most commonly – seeking a resolution for bureaucratic blockages in Whitehall.

Beyond calls and messages, some interviewees noted that informal engagement also occurred on the sidelines of other events, such as party conferences or ministerial visits to the region. Several Labour mayors, for example, discussed attending Conservative Party conferences as a crucial avenue for engagement with Conservative ministers.

While interviewees were quick to reject notions of "government by WhatsApp", as one mayor dubbed it, there was consensus that in the absence of regular, set-piece meetings between mayors and ministers, informal interaction was both necessary and constructive. However, informal interaction was uneven across MCAs. It was often dependent on the

development of close relations between individuals and thus placed mayors with little or no political experience of Westminster and Whitehall at a distinct disadvantage. One official, for example, recounted how a newly elected mayor who “didn’t have any of those existing relationships with the politicians ... camped outside of Tory party conference one year, literally grabbing ministers as they went in and out, which worked with a few and got some meetings set up”.

While for some, informal interaction appeared to “pay dividends”, as one mayor commented, many interviewees argued in favour of establishing mayoral-ministerial relations on a more formal footing. One mayor advocated for the creation of a “committee of the mayors to ensure there is regular dialogue with central government” while another championed the establishment of a “cabinet sub-committee” to facilitate meetings between MCA mayors, the prime minister and cabinet ministers. As this mayor continued, “the time has come to move beyond the ad hoc and towards more structure”. The recent establishment of the Council of the Nations and Regions and Mayoral Council are steps in this direction.

In assessing relations positively, most interviewees cited the ability of mayors and MCA officials to engage directly with government ministers and Whitehall officials as the key factor. Many evaluated this access as a significant improvement, contrasting with what they considered previous neglect of English regions in national policymaking processes. Mayors were considered by many interviewees to have enhanced the visibility and influence of regional voices in Westminster and Whitehall, particularly compared to the opportunities available to local authority leaders. As one MCA official put it, “mayors get access to government ministers and high-level senior officials in a way that a traditional council leader wouldn’t”.

Variation in MCA capacity and profile

The largely informal nature of intergovernmental interaction meant there was significant variation in how different MCAs engaged with government. Interviewees frequently highlighted variation in the capacity of MCAs to engage, with GMCA and WMCA (the two ‘trailblazer’ MCAs) often cited as having the most regular and established interactions with government, while other MCAs, notably CAPCA and WECA, often perceived themselves as less well connected and engaged.

Several reasons were cited for this disparity, including population size (GMCA and WMCA representing the largest populations, CAPCA the smallest), longevity (with some of the more established MCAs perceived to be favoured by government) and political leadership (particularly the perceived ability of mayors to present a united front for the region they represent). Indeed, in this context, interviewees reiterated their support for creating more formal infrastructure to enhance regular engagement to overcome perceptions that some MCAs were favoured by government over others. As one mayor put it, “why should one combined authority,

for its political make up or its size, get a level of access over another one that doesn’t? It should be more structured”.

Interviewees also highlighted the varied ability of MCAs to engage with government, with MCAs with fewer staff less able to engage on a regular basis. An official from GMCA noted:

We have more staff to do that stuff [IGR] than a lot of the other MCAs. My general rule of thumb is I assume that for every person here, there’s a team in the GLA [Greater London Authority] and for every team here, there’s one person in the other MCAs, apart from maybe the West Midlands.

Institutional expertise was also highlighted as a contributory factor for GMCA’s perceived favoured status, with the long history of regional cooperation since the mid-1980s allowing local authorities, then the MCA, to demonstrate their competence to central government. One interviewee from GMCA spoke of what he considered “the GM/West Midlands test to policy development” applied by senior civil servants. An official from another MCA expressed frustration at this, explaining:

One of the things that the civil service sometimes do is they look at Manchester and think ‘oh well, that’s a blueprint for the north’, when in fact Manchester is in a point of its development where it’s got more in common with London than it does with the vast majority of the north of England.

The profile of individual mayors was also cited as a factor influencing how MCAs were perceived by government. Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, was frequently mentioned by interviewees as a mayor with a strong national profile, but the political experience of other leaders such as Liverpool City Region Mayor Steve Rotherham and West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin – both former MPs – was also viewed as an asset, particularly in understanding how government and Whitehall operates. This experience was seen as a distinct advantage in building and maintaining constructive MCA-central relations.

Whitehall was consistently described as a complex entity, where understanding how the system works is essential. As a result, there was a concerted effort in most MCAs to recruit senior officers with civil service backgrounds, who brought with them not only an ability to “speak the language of Whitehall”, but also pre-existing relationships and contacts in government departments. As one MCA chief executive put it, “you have to be pragmatic and find a way through and some of our best hires, if I can be that blunt about it, are people who have civil service backgrounds”.

Similar emphasis was placed on facilitating civil service secondments within MCAs to strengthen IGR and get an insight into Whitehall, but again there was significant variation across MCAs, with secondments most common in GMCA and WMCA.

Opportunities for MCAs to influence national policy have increased, but a ‘Whitehall knows best’ attitude hinders closer engagement

Across MCAs, there was increasing appetite for further powers as well as enhanced opportunities to exert regional influence on national policymaking processes. Some interviewees believed that in recent years MCAs had successfully influenced central government thinking on devolution and shaped national policymaking by using regional knowledge and MCA policies as evidence. However, there was consensus that opportunities for influence were too infrequent and inhibited by persistent challenges from Whitehall, including a limited knowledge of devolution, high staff turnover and the siloed structure of government departments.

Seeking influence

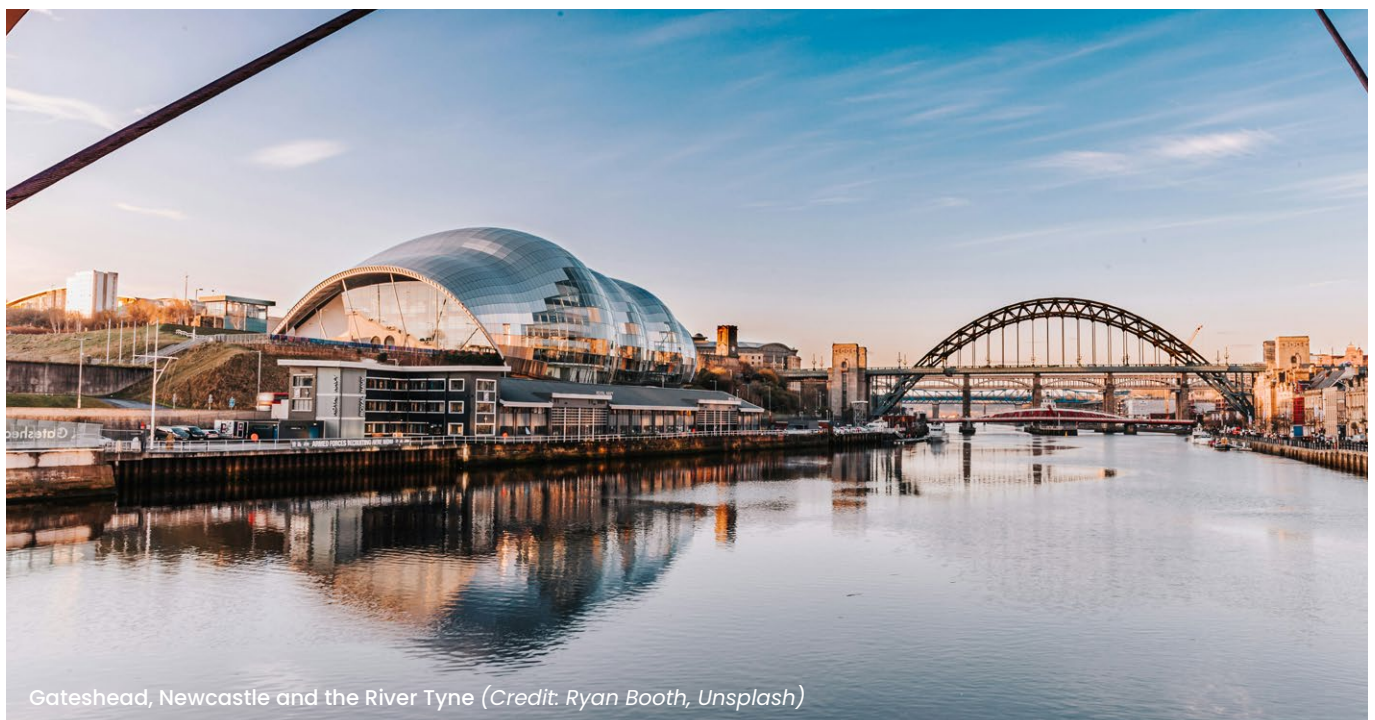
From the perspective of MCA officials and mayors, engagement with Whitehall was crucial to lobby government, notably in advocating for further powers as well as seeking to shape Whitehall thinking on devolution and central government policymaking processes. Government departments were also perceived to have become more open to engaging with MCAs, actively seeking feedback from MCA officials on certain policy issues, hinting at a growing recognition within some parts of Whitehall of the value of local knowledge.

Interviewees – from MCAs and Whitehall – suggested that MCAs can act as drivers of policy innovation, using regional successes to influence national policy. In the

words of one mayor, “we have achieved things that you could say in some instances Whitehall hasn’t. I think then we can play back to the Whitehall system how we can get better results”. A frequently cited example was the introduction of the £2 bus fare cap by several mayors in late 2022. This was later adopted and rolled out across England by central government in January 2023. The cap was raised to £3 in the October 2024 Budget, but the £2 limit was retained by several MCAs, illustrating the increasing ability of mayors to diverge from national policy.

Across various MCAs, officials identified areas in which they felt they had influenced central government. In SYCA, one interviewee cited *Working Win*, a flagship regional initiative to support people with health conditions to find and stay in work, as a key example of the MCA influencing central government thinking and policy. Through the scheme, the MCA was able to support more than 6,000 people, and in working with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the initiative was, as the SYCA official recounted, “mainstreamed into the national DWP scheme ... because we were able to demonstrate the efficacy of delivering it”.

In several interviews, discussions on shaping national policy involved the use of terms such as “co-develop”, “co-design” and “co-deliver”. In the Liverpool City Region, one interviewee discussed working with the DWP “to co-design employment support to help people get back into work”, while in Greater Manchester instances of “co-developing an investment plan with the DBT” were championed as an effective example of MCA–central collaboration. It is worth noting, however, that not all interviewees agreed with these terms. For one Chief Executive, the government’s definition of co-development “is we talk about it until we agree with what they want and then we do what they originally decided”.



Gateshead, Newcastle and the River Tyne (Credit: Ryan Booth, Unsplash)

Two relatively recent policies – freeports and investment zones – were cited by MCA officials as examples of genuine consultation and collaboration with central government. Many MCA interviewees felt they had been meaningfully engaged in the development of these initiatives, and civil service interviewees reflected that incorporating local knowledge had strengthened the design of policy in these areas. In this context, MCA input was considered by one DLUHC official as “a trusted voice”, facilitating “delivery co-ordination between us and the local area and strengthening partnership with the combined authority and beyond”. This viewpoint was shared by other MCA officials. As one Chief Executive stated, “our investment zone is being co-developed with the team at DLUHC and the Treasury. It’s been a real collaboration in terms of how the regional and central government work together to realise a particular set of policy goals”.

However, opportunities to work with Whitehall and shape national policy were uneven, often reliant on close, and in many cases pre-existing relations, between individuals in Whitehall departments and MCAs. As one MCA official noted:

We don’t always get what we want, but in those departments where we have built good relations, such as DfT, and especially where we have contacts, we can seize those windows of opportunity and influence government to our way of thinking.

Across most MCAs, interviewees reported involvement in national policy discussions but pointed out that this engagement was typically limited to sharing perspectives and minor adjustments rather than, as one MCA official put it, “sitting in the room and creating policy”. Strikingly, there were notable differences across MCAs in their optimism about opportunities to shape national policy. Interviewees from GMCA and WMCA emphasised the influence of trailblazer deals in enhancing their ability to shape policy. A DLUHC official echoed this view, citing employment support and tourism as two areas within the agreements that would deliver “joint working between government and the combined authorities”. From this perspective, enhanced cooperation between MCAs and central government was seen to encourage mutual learning, improve policy effectiveness and strengthen intergovernmental collaboration.

Mayors and officials representing other MCAs reported different experiences. Some interviewees felt that certain mayors and MCAs were taken more seriously than others and thus had more opportunities for government engagement and influence. Acknowledging this point, one mayor conceded “I get told things ... I don’t get asked things”, continuing “some mayors carry more weight than others. We’re not all equal”.

Entrenched attitudes and structural barriers in Whitehall

Interviewees – from MCAs and central government – identified Whitehall as the biggest barrier for MCAs

to shape national policymaking debates. To the frustration of MCA interviewees, some ministers and civil servants appeared reticent to embrace devolution. Numerous explanations were offered by interviewees to account for this reticence, including concerns about ‘losing power’, a preference for centralised control, and a London-centric approach towards governance.

MCA interviewees repeatedly noted that constructive relations and policy influence were inhibited by the perceived subordinate status of MCAs compared to government departments. These comments often referred to the relationship between MCAs and government as “one-sided”, “unequal” and “top-down”, a consequence of – as one MCA official put it – “Whitehall holding all the cards”. Emphasising the power imbalance, several interviewees used a ‘parent-child’ analogy to describe MCA–Whitehall relations.

For others, there was a fundamental lack of trust in MCAs’ ability to deliver. This scepticism was oft-described as “elitist” and “snobbish”. As one MCA interviewee remarked, “they don’t trust local government because they think its inefficient, incompetent”, suggesting sardonically that civil servants believed MCAs don’t “have the calibre of terrific top chaps and chapesses that the civil service has”.

Beyond the civil service, devolution-sceptic ministers were also perceived to be a significant barrier to more constructive IGR. Interviewees claimed that the extent of engagement between MCAs and Whitehall departments was often dictated by the attitude of the individual minister, with, as one MCA official attested,



Manchester Town Hall arches (Credit: Chris Curry, Unsplash)

“whole policy areas in or out of our devolved scope at a ministerial whim”.

Another recurring explanation for limited MCA influence on national policy was a lack of knowledge among civil servants about regional geographies and devolution in general. This issue was raised not only by MCA officials, but by ministers and civil servants themselves. A DLUHC official noted that “most civil servants know very little about the MCA model”. It was pointed out that in recent years, there had been increased training on devolution within the civil service, but this largely focused on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with little emphasis on English MCAs. As one DLUHC official noted, as a result, “a lot of my job is actually describing the MCAs as a model to departments and [other] civil servants”.

This lack of institutional knowledge was further exacerbated by the high turnover of staff within Whitehall which disrupted relationships and continuity. MCA officials consistently complained that they spent a lot of time not just explaining how MCAs work but bringing newly appointed civil servants up to speed on the progress of projects or ongoing negotiations. Beyond frustrations about repeated conversations, churn had significant consequences for the development of trust between MCA officials and civil servants. As one MCA Chief Executive said, “you get to the point where you’ve got a good relationship with somebody and then they’re off and somebody else has taken over”. As this Chief Executive continued, this made “building long-term relationships” much more difficult.

The same challenge extended to the frequency of change at the ministerial level. One mayor explained that while building relationships with government ministers was essential – to advocate for regional perspectives, champion the devolution agenda and to try and shape national decision and policymaking processes – it was made difficult by “constant reshuffles”. To exemplify this point, he pointed out that between the election of the first mayors in 2017 and the July 2024 General Election there had been 11 housing ministers and eight Secretaries of State for Education.

A final challenge repeatedly raised by interviewees was Whitehall’s siloed working culture. MCA officials frequently criticised the lack of communication between government departments, with a prevailing view that this presented a major barrier to effective cross-government working on devolution. Indeed, many interviewees contrasted Whitehall’s functional siloes with the integrated approach to policymaking and governance adopted by MCAs. One MCA official described the situation bluntly: “we’re often in the strange position of being asked by civil servants in one department what their counterparts in another think about a particular issue”. As one mayor noted, “we [MCAs] have got away from the compartmentalised approach of Whitehall and instead work holistically across things. Working collaboratively with a joined-up approach achieves so much more. If only they [Whitehall] could see that!”.

MCAs are working together and learning from each other, but agreeing collective positions is not always easy

A strong sense of horizontal cooperation and collaboration has been established between mayors and officials across MCAs. Interviewees believed that through working together MCAs had strengthened the visibility of mayors as well as enhanced the collective influence of MCAs on government decisions. Leveraging collective influence, however, was no mean feat. Geographical divides, competing priorities and political differences complicated the agreement of collective positions.

Policy learning and knowledge exchange

Interviewees discussed strong levels of cooperation between MCAs in the form of both bilateral and multilateral engagement. Bilateral interaction was often the result of shared geographical borders, whereas multilateral engagement was largely facilitated through the UK Mayors forum (previously the M10). Beyond regular meetings of the forum, interviewees highlighted frequent informal interactions by phone and WhatsApp between political leaders (mayor-to-mayor) and MCA officials.

The rationale for the establishment of a horizontal forum appeared to have evolved over time. Mayors elected in 2017 viewed it as a crucial space “to find our way together” and “learn from each other” as they developed the MCA model. Over time, this has become particularly important for new and smaller MCAs. As the forum has expanded following the election of more mayors over the years, it has become increasingly viewed as a platform to facilitate engagement with and try to influence central government. Despite geographical differences, there was a shared sense that all MCAs faced similar challenges, thus having a forum to share experiences was seen as useful. As one Mayor put it:

We’re all in this together. It is the responsibility of all mayors to work together and develop English devolution. Through the M10 we not only share learning that helps improve policy outcomes, but we can also further shape the direction of travel of English devolution.

More specific examples of shared learning discussed by interviewees included the development of bus franchising proposals, and the adoption of good employment charters by various MCAs. Several interviewees noted that GMCA often led the way, allowing other MCAs to benefit from what one GMCA official called “second mover advantage”. He continued:

GMCA has genuinely blazed a trail and others are now following ... first mover advantage is a good thing in some respects, but letting others make the mistakes

and learning from them, has opened a number of doors for other combined authorities.

The trailblazer deals further exemplified this commitment to shared learning. Although GMCA and WMCA were the only two MCAs selected for trailblazer status in the 2023 Spring Budget, officials involved in negotiations maintained an “open-book approach” in sharing their progress and learning with other MCAs. As one GMCA official explained:

We regularly updated the M10 during the process and we said at the start it would be an open book process ... from our perspective we've been negotiating the trailblazers for everybody in effect because obviously the precedent was being set by us and therefore everyone needed to feel comfortable with it.

Beyond this, interviewees emphasised the importance of collective working to further shape the future of English devolution and influence government decision-making processes. A frequently cited example to illustrate the strength of collaboration was the collective opposition by mayors to the Conservative Government's 2023 plan to close hundreds of railway station ticket offices. While not all mayors backed the opposition campaign, five Labour mayors worked together to present a united front and threatened the government with legal action. In October 2023, the government scrapped the closures, with one mayor reflecting “we took a real stand, and I think we were quite instrumental in pushing back that proposal”.

Sticking with the transport theme, another commonly referenced example was horizontal collaboration between five mayors from Northern England to force the government to act over the unsatisfactory performance of rail operator, TransPennine Express. In mid-2023, the government announced it would not renew TransPennine's contract, with this described by one mayor as “victory for northern mayors and the work we all put in together to force the government into acting”. These examples demonstrated that mayoral collaboration, while symbolically important, could also yield real, tangible outcomes, influencing government decisions and delivering meaningful change for local communities.

Mayors believed that presenting a united front was a powerful tactic to capture government attention, improving the chances of, at a minimum, receiving a timely response, and at best, achieving tangible policy changes. At the same time, collective working was also seen as a strategic necessity to prevent, as one mayor described it, individual MCAs being “picked off” by ministers or civil servants. He continued: “if you are not aligned on the core pieces, it just gives government civil servants and politicians the very easy answer to brush it off the table”. Reinforcing our previous findings, these dynamics highlight a persistent lack of trust between MCAs and Whitehall.

For interviewees in the smaller MCAs, namely CAPCA and WECA, UK Mayors was seen as their best – if not only – means of influencing central government. Interviewees from these MCAs repeatedly mentioned their geographical isolation in the south, whereas

most other MCAs were in Northern England, resulting in a tendency towards, as one CAPCA official put it, “pan-northern rather than all MCA cooperation”. In the words of a WECA official, “it often feels like its north versus us and Cambridge and Peterborough”. Several interviewees in northern MCAs likewise made reference to “pan-northern” collaboration, citing frequent cooperation outside UK Mayors. Close cooperation was attributed to geographical proximity, shared labour markets and transport networks, but political affiliations, notably among Labour mayors, also played a role.

The UK Mayors forum was also valued as a platform for collective engagement with government. Interviewees frequently noted that the Covid-19 pandemic increased government interactions with the forum, making it an essential channel of communication between mayors and ministers. It was noted that although ministerial engagement with UK Mayors had become more ad hoc in the post-pandemic period, it remained a key platform for collective interaction with government officials, particularly civil servants.

Beyond its practical benefits, such as enabling ministers and civil servants to deliver a single briefing to all MCAs rather than multiple individual ones, for civil servants UK Mayors, was seen as a valuable mechanism for gathering feedback. The forum's secretariat, based in the West of England Combined Authority, played an important role in this process. As one DLUHC official commented:

We benefit from the fact that they have organised themselves because that means I can ask [the secretariat] to go and find out what all of the mayors think about something rather than have to do it myself. So, I benefit massively from them having organised themselves.

Overall, horizontal interaction was recognised as a valuable endeavour to maintain dialogue, coordinate collective positions and exert influence on central government. It also provided a crucial vehicle to engage with ministers, senior civil servants and other organisations. Championing the work of the forum, one mayor posited: “the irony is that it is one of our own structures that has delivered more than anything that the centre has put in place”.

The limited reach of collective working

While many interviewees believed UK Mayors had strengthened the political influence of mayors and increased their visibility, others were more sceptical. One MCA official suggested that mayors “needed to do more as a collective to make more of a mark on the political consciousness of voters”. He continued, “working together in the M10 is great, but it needs more visibility. Currently, if you google the M10 you get a motorway rather than the forum”.

Indeed, beyond visibility, numerous interviewees pointed out that despite some of the transport successes noted above, the cancellation of the Birmingham to Manchester HS2 line in the face of

vociferous opposition of several mayors was clear proof of the limited influence of mayors on government strategy and policy. As one WMCA official said:

That decision was made without any significant consultation and despite the very heavy lobbying by us and the mayor to keep it, the government went ahead and cancelled. It is hard in these instances not to question the value of collective lobbying.

The diversity of the voices within UK Mayors was seen as an asset when promoting a shared position, but interviewees acknowledged that reaching such a stance was rare. One MCA official noted that reaching collective agreements often required “playing to the lowest common denominator and that’s not always in our individual interests”. While mayors could “create headlines” and “influence political debate”, as some officials claimed, others felt collective lobbying had limited tangible outcomes.

Other MCA officials were more sceptical about the necessity of horizontal influence. One official described collective lobbying as “counterproductive”, continuing that “the whole point about devolution is you’re there to serve your own area, not to gang up with other people”.

In discussing the challenges of horizontal collaboration, many MCA officials noted that party politics – both internal and external – played a role in conditioning how mayors approached collective working. Interestingly, mayors played down the impact of party politics, with the emphasis, as one mayor argued, on a “place-first not party-first” approach. He continued, however, that at times, “the wider political environment has to be taken into consideration”, hinting at the need to find a balance between working with other mayors, advocating local priorities and supporting wider party policies and leadership. As one MCA official put it, “mayors have to carefully choose when to spend their political capital”.



Middlesbrough Town Hall (Credit: Cristobel Martinez, Unsplash)

What next for Intergovernmental Relations in England?

The findings detailed in this report illustrate the rapid evolution of IGR in England. MCAs are now established parts of England's institutional furniture, with many mayors now household names with national profiles. Over the last decade, English devolution has developed through a series of bilateral deals between central government and MCAs, meaning engagement between these different levels of government has been largely informal, ad hoc and contingent on both the capacity of MCAs and the willingness of individual government departments to work with them. With over 60% of England's population now covered by a devolution deal, and as MCAs gain more responsibilities, how these relations operate and shape policy will have a material impact on the lives of millions of people. Building on our findings, this section details key considerations for government and MCAs in working towards more effective and constructive relations.

Informal IGR between MCAs and central government are inevitable – but government should be conscious of the perils of informality

Informal communications are an inevitable element of modern democratic government. Meetings, conversations and written communication outside of formal channels are common in all forms of IGR, with particular importance in the UK where the various forms of engagement – such as the 'three-tier' structures established through the 2022 review of IGR machinery – are non-statutory and generally meet infrequently. The UK's unwritten constitution reinforces the importance of informal relationships in this dynamic. The benefits of this informality are demonstrated in the characterisation by most MCA interviewees of their relationships with government as broadly positive. Having gained what many saw as unprecedented access to key figures in Whitehall, mayors and senior MCA officials reflected on their ability to contact ministers and civil servants directly via their private phone numbers. These interactions were perceived to be particularly important in unlocking blockages on particular policy issues or funding streams.

However, the findings also highlight the risks of informal communications dominating IGR. There were significant differences in the levels of engagement enjoyed by different MCAs, with larger and more established MCAs such as GMCA and WMCA having more access to government than newer or smaller institutions. The story, recounted by an MCA official, of their mayor being "camped outside of Tory party conference one year, literally grabbing ministers as they went in and out", illustrates a somewhat dysfunctional relationship not conducive to the development of positive engagement. In multi-level systems, central governments will – to an extent – always identify preferential regions or localities for investment, and different MCAs may receive more governmental focus than others at different times. However, to ensure these spatial preferences are not self-reinforcing, as those with the most capacity to engage benefitting from ever greater funding settlements and responsibilities, government must be conscious of the need to ensure formal IGR structures can provide all MCAs with an equitable 'seat at the table'.

The new formal IGR structures established by Labour are welcome developments, but must become more than talking shops

The introduction of the Council of the Nations and Regions, and the Mayoral Council, suggests the Labour government recognises the need for formal structures of IGR to bring forward a new era of partnership between national and sub-national government in England. The introduction of these mechanisms for engaging with democratically elected local leaders are welcome in the context of promises to strengthen partnership, facilitate dialogue and determine actions to tackle cross-cutting challenges across different government levels. At the time of writing, the Council of the Nations and Regions has met twice (October 2024 and May 2025), while the Mayoral Council has convened three times (October 2024, January 2025 and May 2025).

Recent research has highlighted the potential for the Council of the Nations and Regions to enhance working relationships between the UK government and English mayors (Walker et al., 2025). The role

of the Mayoral Council and where it fits within the UK's existing intergovernmental architecture is less clear. Lacking in statutory authority, these forums run the risk of becoming glorified talking shops. If the government is serious about resetting relations and embedding genuine partnership in working with MCAs, underpinning these new forums in statute would be a welcome advance.

Indeed, there is much to be gained. The findings detailed in this report highlight several potential benefits in improving engagement between MCAs and UK government. One is in the development of new policies or interventions where the knowledge and insight of MCAs could be harnessed by central government to foster innovation and learning. More regular formal engagement through the Mayoral Council could help reduce differences between government departments in their willingness and effectiveness to engage with MCAs, but the extent to which regional voices will influence national priorities and policies remains to be seen.

Embedding a devolution mindset throughout Whitehall

Reluctance within certain government departments to engage with devolved policy in England was highlighted as a barrier to effective IGR by many interviewees. Numerous explanations were offered for this reticence, ranging from a lack of confidence from Whitehall in the competence of MCAs, to a concern for retaining control of policy within departments. Levels of engagement differed significantly between departments, with attitudes towards devolution often shaped by the position of senior civil servants or individual ministers. The English Devolution White Paper recognised this problem, with a pledge to make devolution the default setting throughout government.

The achievement of the Government's 'devolution by default' commitment will require substantial reform across Whitehall. This relates both to tangible action, as well as a significant cultural shift in how civil servants and government ministers view devolution. As this report has underlined, the prevalence of a 'Whitehall knows best' mindset has held back the development of genuine partnership between MCAs and central government. Civil service training should be further developed to enhance knowledge and understanding about MCAs and ensure more holistic coverage of the UK's territorial governance structures.

Increasing the number of civil service roles located outside London may also offer the opportunity to build a more geographically representative and locally knowledgeable civil service. In MCA regions, as has been the case in Darlington in the Tees Valley (Drees and Sommer, 2024), this could further enhance engagement and collaboration between MCAs, government departments and other local stakeholders. The Government's recent announcement to relocate thousands of civil service jobs outside of Whitehall is, therefore, a welcome development (Cabinet Office 2025).

Alongside this, and as committed to in the White Paper, there should be more opportunities and greater incentives to facilitate secondments between officials in Whitehall and MCAs. Embedding more civil servants in MCAs will allow them to experience devolution in action and thus gain a broader and more in-depth understanding of devolved governance. Further, seconded civil servants are able to bring back this learning to Whitehall, facilitating opportunities for sharing best practice. There should also be more opportunities across all MCAs for MCA officials to take up placements in Whitehall.

Finally, there is an urgent need to tackle the siloed nature of Whitehall. Cross-government working will be crucial to the success of Labour's 'mission-led government' and is also essential to further develop and strengthen the devolution model. Research has identified the important role mayors can play in delivering mission-oriented policies, particularly when adopting a 'place-based approach' (Ayres et al., 2025). Government should look to MCAs for lessons in taking a more holistic and place-based approach to public policy.

MCAs should be encouraged to innovate

While much of the rhetoric around English devolution emphasises MCAs as 'partners' of central government, a key question of central-MCA relations remains: to what extent can MCAs diverge from nationally set policy? Notwithstanding mayors' electoral mandates and the increasing responsibilities of MCAs, there are uncertainties about the degree to which these responsibilities could be used to develop policies that are not directly aligned with government priorities.

Without serious fiscal devolution, MCAs will continue to be reliant on securing government approval and funding for projects and policy initiatives. However, government should see MCAs as ideal spaces for policy experimentation, with lessons derived from the development and implementation of new ideas fed back into national policymaking processes. This aligns with the 'test, learn, grow' approach set out through the recently announced Innovation Fund and currently being operationalised in Manchester, Sheffield, Essex and Liverpool. MCAs are already engaged in new creative approaches to tackling policy challenges, but too often the lessons from these interventions are not absorbed by national-level politicians and policymakers. IGR should seek to enable upwards learning, as well as further develop and nurture working partnerships between national and sub-national governments.

Political change is a challenge to horizontal relations

Constructive and productive horizontal relations between MCAs have developed over recent years, as MCAs have provided support to each other on policy

development and in collaborative engagement with government. The UK Mayors forum has emerged as an important space for shared learning and collective influence, particularly for smaller and newer MCAs. While Labour has dominated most mayoralities since their establishment, party politics appears to have played only a small part in conditioning MCA cooperation.

However, following the 2025 metro mayoral elections, this picture looks more complex. Labour retained the West of England mayoralty, but lost Cambridge and Peterborough to the Conservatives (taking Labour's number of mayors to ten and the Conservatives to two), while Reform UK won both mayoral contests in the inaugural elections for the Greater Lincolnshire and Hull and East Yorkshire combined authorities. With new mayors expected in the likes of Cumbria and Greater Essex in 2026, the composition of UK Mayors, and the government-led Council of the Nations and Regions and Mayoral Council, looks set to become more heterogeneous over coming years.

Party politics need not preclude productive horizontal relations, but as the findings in this report show, diversity among MCAs is a significant challenge in reaching collective positions. Mayors will, to an extent, always engage more with their political allies, but the strong success of horizontal cooperation between MCAs hitherto demonstrates that embracing a place-first rather than party-first approach to leadership can produce worthwhile returns.

A space for shared learning between MCAs is essential if English devolution is to continue its development over the coming years. Mayors should continue to work together as part of UK Mayors, but as this forum grows in number, it is likely to require some re-thinking about its organisation and purpose.

This report highlights the growing breadth and depth of intergovernmental engagement between MCAs and central government in recent years. Both vertical and horizontal interaction have engendered the development of constructive relationships between mayors, ministers and officials, strengthening the role and visibility of regional governance in England. Despite this progress, our analysis reveals ongoing challenges and tensions that emphasise the need for further reform to support more effective intergovernmental working.

We have offered an initial outline of how such reforms might be taken forward. The UK Labour Government has kick-started a long overdue and much-needed conversation on how English devolution fits within the UK's system of territorial governance. The forthcoming English devolution bill offers an unprecedented opportunity to further realise the full potential of devolved government and establish a new era of genuine partnership between MCAs and central government. We hope this report provides a meaningful contribution to this ongoing debate and stimulates future discussion to deliver enduring reform.



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To reference this report, please use:

Anderson, P. and Arnold, T. 2025. *The State of Intergovernmental Relations in England: Towards a new era of partnership?* Liverpool: Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place.

DOI: 10.17638/03192977

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