

THE FORWARD MARCH OF ENGLISH DEVOLUTION

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2024 marked ten years since the signing of the first devolution deal between the UK government and the Greater Manchester combined authority. Building on the agreement to transfer powers from Whitehall to the combined authority and the creation of the first city-region mayor outside of London, George Osborne, then chancellor of the exchequer, heralded a 'devolution revolution'.ⁱ

Almost one decade later, while talk of a revolution may have subsided, huge progress has been made. To date, 13 mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) are in operation across England, two of which elected their first mayor in May 2025 (Greater Lincolnshire, and Hull and East Yorkshire). A decade after the first devolution agreement, over 60 per cent of England's population is now covered by devolution deals.ⁱⁱ

The first metro-mayoral elections took place in 2017. They returned overwhelming victories for the Conservative party, which won 4 of the 6 mayoralities, while Labour gained 2.ⁱⁱⁱ Turnout averaged around 28 per cent. By 2021, the mayoral political landscape had significantly changed. In 2018 and 2019, Labour mayors were elected in the newly established North of Tyne and South Yorkshire combined authorities, and in the 2021 elections, Labour won 5 of the 7 metro-mayoral contests. Turnout at the 2021 election averaged just over 33 per cent, a modest but noteworthy increase on the 2017 elections.^{iv} Elections in 2024 saw the Conservatives reduced to just one mayor (Ben Houchen in Tees Valley). Labour mayors were re-elected in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire, while the party gained the West Midlands from the Conservatives (by a slim margin of just over 1,500 votes) and won the mayoral contests in the three new MCAs. In the latest elections in May 2025, Labour maintained control of West of England, but lost Cambridge and Peterborough to the Conservatives. Reform UK won both mayoral contests in the inaugural elections for the Greater Lincolnshire and Hull and East Yorkshire combined authorities. Turnout across elections in 2024 and 2025 averaged 30

per cent. Mayors have become an important part of the English political landscape, but low turnout underlines the importance for both mayors and political parties to raise the profile of subnational governance in England and encourage greater citizen engagement.

Visible Leadership and Getting Things Done

The UK is not unique in its constitutional makeup as a multi-level state. While not a federation with a codified constitution detailing a division of sovereignty – as the other countries in this publication are – the UK has multiple centres of power, ranging from the UK parliament in Westminster and the devolved governments and legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to the MCAs in England. With powers over important policy areas such as housing, economic development, planning, transport and skills, mayors across the MCAs have certainly made their mark. Examples include the Liverpool City Region’s £30m ‘LCR Connect’ scheme to provide ultrafast full-fibre broadband across the region and the Bee Network in Greater Manchester, which reestablished public control of buses and provides a London-style integrated public transport system across the region.

As well as exercising powers within their purview, mayors have also sought to use their soft powers to bring about change. This is notable in areas such as homelessness, an issue on which mayors have limited authority. Nonetheless, from Greater Manchester to the West Midlands, mayors have used their convening powers to bring together various organisations, stakeholders and resources to tackle rough-sleeping and homelessness. Across various policy areas, mayors provide visible leadership, giving a voice to local/regional issues on the national stage. Importantly, this is not a fact missed by voters. In a recent survey, an average of 74 per cent of people could name their mayor, while only 43 per cent could identify their MP and far fewer (20 per cent) could name their local authority leader.^v

Arguably, the Covid pandemic increased the visibility of mayors, both regionally and nationally. During the pandemic, the UK government pursued a largely top-down approach which sidelined the concerns, knowledge and expertise of local and regional authorities and exposed a rather dysfunctional relationship between the UK government and MCAs. In October 2020, this was laid bare in a showdown between the UK government and Greater Manchester mayor, Andy Burnham, over what the mayor perceived to be insufficient financial support for businesses forced to close due to a regional lockdown. Dominating news headlines, the mayor was vociferous in his critique of the centralising, London-centric strategy of the UK government and called for more input from subnational authorities in decision-making processes.^{vi} Giving evidence to the Covid Inquiry in November 2023, the consensus from the mayors of Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and London was that centralised decision-making hindered a more effective response to combatting the spread of the virus.^{vii}

As figureheads for their city-regions, the public profiles of mayors increased throughout the pandemic and beyond. Despite the top-down approach of the government, mayors were

instrumental in mustering local responses including coordinating with local authorities and other public bodies, convening stakeholder meetings and signposting businesses to government support. Collectively, the mayors worked together to share knowledge, lobby and influence the government's Covid strategy. They have continued to do so post-pandemic, most notably on issues such as transport. While this proved less successful when it came to the continuation of HS2, mayors played a leading role in challenging the government's plans to close hundreds of rail ticket offices in England, resulting in the policy being scrapped in October 2023.^{viii} The increased visibility of mayors illuminates not only the value of a leading figure standing up for their region but the wider significance of city-region devolution. Polls conducted prior to the 2021 and 2024 mayoral elections underlined increasing support for further devolution and a growing consensus that more powers in areas such as housing and transport should be held at the local/regional level.^{ix} With clear public appetite for greater devolution, the question remains: where next for subnational governance in England?

Towards Deeper Devolution

In the context of the 2024 general election, a noteworthy trend in the debate on English devolution was the cross-party recognition of the value and potential of MCAs and metro mayors, with both Labour and Conservative parties committed to widening and deepening devolution across England. Having been announced in the 2022 levelling up white paper, in 2023, the Greater Manchester and West Midlands combined authorities negotiated new 'trailblazer deals'. These secured the transfer of further powers to both city-regions and, perhaps most importantly, a move towards a single financial settlement, providing some much-needed financial flexibility for the MCAs.

The recommendations of the Labour party's 2022 Report of the Commission on the UK's Future, led by Gordon Brown, painted the image of a new era of devolution across the UK, with specific attention paid to English governance — including more powers for metro mayors, a call for financial flexibility and the establishment of 'a Council of England' to formalise relations between the UK government.^x In his 2023 speech to the Labour party conference, Keir Starmer reconfirmed the pledge for further devolution, proclaiming 'if we want to challenge the hoarding of potential in our economy'.^{xi} Following its victory in the 2024 general election, Labour has advanced the devolution agenda, culminating in the publication of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment bill in July 2025. As the debate on English devolution enters a new phase, there are two key areas that require further consideration.

The first area is fiscal devolution. The single settlement agreed in the recent trailblazer deals is a welcome step towards more meaningful devolution, moving away from the 'beauty pageant' and 'begging bowl' funding culture that has characterised English devolution

hitherto. The MCAs already have significant responsibilities, but require more funding and flexibility in order to exercise powers fully. Unlike Whitehall and its siloed approach to policy, MCAs are able to take a more holistic approach to tackling issues, putting in place a joined-up approach to governance, tailored to the particularities of the local area.^{xii} The Brown Commission championed fiscal devolution but much detail was missing.^{xiii} In her 2024 Mais lecture, the then-shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, said very little about devolution, but acknowledged the important role played by local and regional leaders in driving economic growth.^{xiv} In this context, Labour would do well to further embrace fiscal devolution as a guiding thread for government policy. Unfortunately, the white paper did not include commitments to significant fiscal devolution, though mayors continue to press their case. Without such a commitment, there is a risk of a Treasury-driven centralising mindset dominating future debate.

The second area relates to governance from the centre. The commitment to further devolution and strengthen MCA-government relations must amount to more than lip service. As well as necessitating a greater transfer of powers away from Whitehall, it requires central government to keep in check its centralising tendencies. Relations between the MCAs and UK government should be predicated upon the principles of mutual trust and respect, undergirded by a sense of partnership. This would embed mayors in UK government policy processes, creating intergovernmental machinery to facilitate more effective relations. Since coming to power, Labour has made significant advances in this area, including the establishment of the Council of the Nations and Regions and Mayoral Council for England. However, while mayors now have a formal seat at the table, the ability of these new forums to strengthen partnership and facilitate working across governments remains to be seen. To make devolution work, reform at the centre is just as crucial as devolving more powers.

Since the election of the first mayors in 2017, the city-region mayoral model has become a prominent feature in the institutional architecture of the UK state. With commitments by both main political parties to create more MCAs and deepen existing arrangements, English devolution is firmly back on the political agenda. In recent years, mayors have provided visible place-based leadership, delivering a raft of initiatives tailored to local circumstances and representing and promoting their city-regions on both national and international stages. Over the last decade, significant progress has been made to transform the landscape of subnational governance in England, but more remains to be done to strengthen existing institutions and develop a long-term strategy for devolution. The forward march of English devolution continues.

ⁱ HM Treasury, Chancellor unveils ‘devolution revolution’, 5 October 2015

ⁱⁱ MHCLG, English Devolution White Paper, 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Electoral Commission, Results and Turnout at the May 2017 Combined Authority Mayor Elections in England, 1 October, 2017

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- ^{iv} Giovannini, A, The 2021 Metro Mayors Elections: Localism Rebooted?, *The Political Quarterly*, 92:3, p.481-482, 2021
- ^v Centre for Cities, Metro Mayors are the Most Recognisable Local Political Figures in Their Area, *Polling Finds*, 25 March, 2024
- ^{vi} Stewart, H, Halliday, J and Walker, P, Chaos and Fury as Boris Johnson Forces Curbs on Greater Manchester, *The Guardian*, 20 October, 2020
- ^{vii} Evidence to the UK Covid Inquiry, 27 November 2023
- ^{viii} Anderson, P and Arnold, T, *The State of Intergovernmental Relations in England: Towards a New Era of Partnership?* Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place
- ^{ix} Centre for Cities, New polling finds the public overwhelmingly back more devolution to their cities, 9 April, 2021. Centre for Cities, *Place over politics: What polling tells us about how successful devolution has been to date*, 25 March, 2024
- ^x Labour Party, *A new Britain: Renewing our democracy and rebuilding our economy* report of the commission on the UK's future, 2022
- ^{xi} Starmer, K, Speech at Labour Conference, 10 October, 2023
- ^{xii} Personal interviews with MCA officials.
- ^{xiii} Labour Party, *A new Britain: Renewing our democracy and rebuilding our economy* report of the commission on the UK's future, 2022
- ^{xiv} Reeves, R, Mais Lecture, 19 March, 2024