

REFORM

METROMENTUM

Taking Strategic Authorities from patchwork to powerhouse

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ABOUT REIMAGINING THE LOCAL STATE

This paper is part of the *Reimagining the Local State* work stream. English local and regional government stands at a turning point. There are signal opportunities for local innovation, close community engagement, and ambitious devolution of powers and responsibilities from the centre. There are also unprecedented challenges, driven by years of fiscal retrenchment and rocketing service demand. This programme will develop policy ideas for the future of devolution, the role of communities, and the structures, practices, and leadership of local government itself. This paper is the second part in a sequence of papers exploring the future of regional governance in England. It sets out ideas for ensuring that the emerging tier of Strategic Authorities can operate effectively, with improved decision-making, improved capabilities, and enhanced accountability.

Reimagining the Local State Advisory Group

Reform is grateful to the expert members of the *Reimagining the Local State Advisory Group* who provide invaluable insight and advise on the programme. Their involvement does not imply endorsement of every argument or recommendation put forward.

Rt. Hon. Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester

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The arguments and any errors that remain are the authors' and the authors' alone.

Interviewees

We would like to thank all 17 interviewees for giving their time and candid insights to support this research paper.

The list of interviewees is as follows:

- Clive Betts MP, former Chair, Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee
- Rob Bridge, Chief Executive, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority
- Philip Clifford, Senior Advisor, Local Government Association
- James Farrar, Chief Executive, York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority
- Tim Jago, Senior Policy Lead, Place and Net Zero, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
- Katherine Lyonette, Head of Devolution Strategy, Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- Kath Marriot, Chief Executive, North Kesteven District Council
- Adrian Nolan, Senior Policy Lead, Economy, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
- Stephen O'Leary, Head of Programmes, Local London
- Mark Rogers, Chief Executive, Leadership Centre and former Chief Executive, East Midlands Combined County Authority
- Caroline Simpson, Chief Executive, Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- Ben Still, Chief Executive, West Yorkshire Combined Authority
- Liz Watts, Chief Executive, South Cambridgeshire District Council

and four other interviewees who wished to remain anonymous.

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Statutory Devolution Framework should establish the default norm that Mayoral Strategic Authority board decisions are passed by a simple majority vote. Mayoral Budget votes should only be rejected by a two-thirds supermajority vote.

Recommendation 2: Mayoral Strategic Authority boards should pass proposals that are elements of a Mayoral Programme and part of a winning election manifesto. If rejected, the mayor should be able to appeal to a special panel to determine whether the proposal is a fair reflection of a clear manifesto commitment. If so, the board may then only reject or amend the mayor's proposal with a two-thirds supermajority.

Recommendation 3: Revenue spending decisions should only require Mayoral Strategic Authority board approval if they exceed £2 million.

Recommendation 4: In situations where a Mayoral Strategic Authority board vote is tied the mayor should have the casting vote.

Recommendation 5: Mayors should be able to appoint commissioners as portfolio leads in their cabinet. These cabinet roles should be appropriately remunerated. Constituent council leaders should continue to sit on the Mayoral Strategic Authority board. 'Double hatting' as a member of the board and portfolio lead in the cabinet should be phased out.

Recommendation 6: Strategic Authorities should be held accountable via a single outcomes-based accountability framework.

Recommendation 7: Established Mayoral Strategic Authority chief executives should become the accounting officers (AOs) for their organisation. In addition to the formal mechanisms outlined in *Managing Public Money* these AOs should also be answerable to their Local Public Accounts Committee and, if necessary, the Public Accounts Committee.

Recommendation 8: Strategic Authorities should be required to properly remunerate overview and scrutiny committee members and provide them with sufficient resources to effectively perform their role.

Recommendation 9: Strategic Authority overview and scrutiny committees should be permitted to meet remotely, utilise proxy voting and decrease their quoracy to fifty per cent.

Recommendation 10: Local Public Accounts Committees should be established in all Strategic Authority regions and be supported by the new Local Audit Office to become the first and primary accountability body for each regional system, with the ability to refer matters 'up' to the national Public Accounts Committee.

Recommendation 11: The local government workforce development group should develop specific proposals for the workforces of Mayoral Strategic Authorities, particularly their data and digital teams and mayoral support teams.

Recommendation 12: The local government workforce development group should establish a formalised knowledge-sharing network for the Strategic Authority workforce.

Recommendation 13: The secondment scheme announced in the English Devolution White Paper should include both the placement of central government civil servants in Strategic Authorities and Strategic Authority civil servants in central government.

1. Introduction

England is at a turning point in its approach to regional governance. A broad consensus has emerged that devolution is a crucial policy response to the challenges now facing the UK.

The 2024 English Devolution White Paper (EDWP) has taken an important step towards establishing a universal regional tier, promising “nothing less than a completely new way of governing – a generational project of determined devolution”.¹

In practice, these important plans set out a model of evolution, rather than revolution, with the signature ambition to ensure that all areas of the country have a ‘Strategic Authority’ (SA) to coordinate policy and investment at a larger scale than is often possible within the existing framework of local authorities. This development builds upon the past decade’s expansion of Combined Authorities and ‘metro mayor’ models, setting the stage for a deeper shift in how England is governed.

Yet, as argued in the *Reform* essay that launched this series on regionalism, realising the full advantages of regional governance will require that the evolution from Combined Authorities to SAs is just the beginning of a bigger process.² Many of the SAs emerging under current plans will be too small and underpowered for the strategic expectations placed upon them. They will be constrained by governance structures that prevent them from acting decisively and lack the accountability systems that would make more ambitious devolution possible.

Without meaningful executive power, financial autonomy, and strategic scale these authorities will struggle to meet the challenges they were created to address. Their failure to deliver significant change will ultimately deepen, rather than begin to bridge, the deficits of public trust and democratic engagement that afflict our institutions.

This paper builds upon part of the vision for a more meaningful English regionalism outlined in the essay. It focuses on Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) and Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities (EMSAs) and examines how their governance, decision-making, and financial structures can be strengthened beyond the plans set out in the EDWP. Unless specified otherwise, current Combined Authorities will be referred to as MSAs.

While the essay sets out the long-term need for a true regional tier, including larger Provinces for polycentric regions, this paper considers what can be done now to make our regional bodies more decisive, accountable, and capable of taking on greater powers. There are many SAs which should ultimately become parts of a larger, coordinating whole over considerably larger geographies and population sizes.³ This longer-term vision for true regions in England’s ‘polycentric’ places will be explored in the third and final paper in this series.

A strong regional tier is essential to delivering economic growth, fundamentally reforming public services and shifting power away from Whitehall. It can carry out strategic policymaking in a way smaller local authorities are unable to do — for example integrating transport systems or coordinating an entire functional economic area — and tackle strategic issues that central government will always find challenging, for example coordinating skills and employment support policies in a way that responds to a region’s unique context.

¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*, 2024.

² Simon Kaye, *Rebooting Regionalism: An Essay* (Reform, 2024).

³ Kaye.

1.1 Decisive, accountable and capable

The reforms set out in this paper — on governance structures, executive authority, and financial oversight — are critical to unlocking the full potential of devolution.

For MSAs that essentially govern the economic geography surrounding a single major urban hub, the challenge is significant. How can the governance in such places be strengthened beyond the provisions laid out in the EDWP? Without a strong tier of government at the regional tier the benefits of devolution are less likely to emerge. Three key questions are particularly pertinent.

First, how can MSAs ensure decisive and responsive governance which is able to make strategic decisions that transcend special interests, seize opportunities for their region and avoid governance gridlock? Collaboration is integral to the way that MSAs function and can lead to more permanent policy solutions. And yet, as recognised in the EDWP, the power balance between SAs and local authorities must be tipped more towards the former. Moving towards a simple majority vote system and allowing mayors to appoint ‘commissioners’, both mooted in the EDWP, are positive steps but may not be adequate.⁴ This is doubly true in the context of metropolitan areas where mayors will often require the executive authority to nimbly take advantage of economic opportunities or override local interest groups to pursue wider strategic aims.⁵

Secondly, how can accountability be improved? Part of the current answer to this question lies in the establishment of directly-elected leadership. But this is not an answer which will remain sufficient if further powers and greater autonomy are extended to England’s emerging regional tier. Currently, Combined Authorities have their ‘homework’ marked more often than not by central government. This reflects the needs of a system unused to devolution and turning attention away from the citizens for whom these more local institutions actually work.

Again, the EDWP recognises this problem and proposes ways of tackling it, for example by removing gateway reviews and introducing a single accountability framework.⁶ But other actions, for example reforming overview and scrutiny committees (OSCs) are only gestured at, thus leaving the foundations of the accountability system unchanged.

Thirdly, how can the capacity and capability of MSAs be enhanced? At present, most Combined Authorities are significantly smaller, and can deploy markedly fewer resources, than any one of their constituent councils. This will be difficult to sustain as every MSA moves toward maturity. Multiple interviewees categorically stated that many MSAs currently lack the ability to take on additional powers, even if they wanted to. The EDWP set out a secondment scheme and a local government workforce development group, but more can and should be done.⁷

Improvements to the decisiveness, accountability, and capacity of MSAs will be essential to realise the full promise of devolution. If MSAs are not effective institutions in this way, then any fiscal or policy devolution which does happen may fail.

⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

⁵ Richard Schragger, ‘Can Strong Mayors Empower Weak Cities? On the Power of Local Executives in a Federal System’, *The Yale Law Journal* 115, no. 9 (n.d.).

⁶ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

2. Decisive

MSAs must deliver for their constituents, improve public services, encourage economic growth and demonstrate the benefits of devolution. To do this they must be able to take decisions at pace, with broad support and informed by expert opinion. The ability of MSAs to do this is limited by how they are governed.

Mayors currently have few powers they can exercise without board approval — sometimes in the form of a supermajority or unanimous support.

In certain policy areas this means that action is delayed or potentially limited in impact because of the difficulties with reaching agreement. Many interviewees for this paper expressed frustration with the slow pace of MSA decision-making, and a 2024 Best Value Notice issued to the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) identified concerns about “the poor state of professional relationships between the [WECA] Mayor and the representatives of the constituent members of the authority which is impacting partnership working and potentially limiting the authority’s ability to optimise strategic opportunities”.⁸

In other policy areas this means that action simply does not happen. Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)⁹ and WECA¹⁰ abandoned their Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) in 2020 and 2022 respectively because they could not reach an agreement.

The practice of appointing leaders of constituent councils to portfolio leadership positions further limits their decisiveness. This ‘double-hatting’ leads to excessive workloads for local authority leaders — preventing either their local authority or MSA receiving their full attention — and restricts the talent pool from which mayors can appoint portfolio leads.

The EDWP sought to address these problems. MSAs will only require a simple majority vote including the mayor to take decisions in most policy areas, and mayors will be empowered to appoint and remunerate commissioners to support delivery in key policy areas.¹¹

Nevertheless, the EDWP does not go far enough. This chapter sets out how to enhance the consensus-building and expertise-utilising aspects of MSAs.

2.1 Consensus-building

2.1.1 Boards and decisions

On the most important issues mayors cannot act without board approval. They have been described as “first among equals” and this realisation can take mayors by surprise: one

⁸ Max Soule, *West of England Combined Authority Best Value Notice* (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2024).

⁹ BBC News, ‘Greater Manchester Spatial Framework New Homes Plan Scrapped’, 11 December 2020.

¹⁰ Adam Postans, ‘Bristol Region Housing Masterplan Collapses Amid Huge Row - What It Means for City’s Future’, *Bristol Live*, 12 May 2022.

¹¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

interviewee commented that it had been “interesting watching the mayor learn how little power they really have”.¹²

All MSAs have a board. Chaired by the mayor and composed of representatives (typically the leader) of the constituent councils and sometimes other stakeholders, these boards serve as the MSA’s main decision-making forum. As seen in Figure 1, there is no typical MSA board. The largest MSA board is more than four times larger than the smallest and while some — such as GMCA — are composed solely of the mayor and constituent council representatives others include an array of characters: business representatives, Police and Crime Commissioners, non-constituent council representatives or, in the (admirable) case of the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NECA), a community and voluntary sector representative.

In addition to variations in size and composition, MSA boards also vary significantly in voting arrangements. All take most decisions subject to majority voting including the mayor and none have a casting vote arrangement to break any deadlocks. Some MSAs have different, more stringent voting requirements for different functions, typically those related to the Mayoral Budget, housing and transport. Variations from the simple majority include the requirement for a two-thirds majority to reject or amend (typically required for the Mayoral Budget) and the requirement for unanimous approval, as is the case for GMCA’s SDS and some aspects of transport and housing policy in East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCA).

This means that mayors often find they cannot act unilaterally but must instead work through compromise, negotiation and consensus-building. Interviewees for this paper commented that mayors must “go through multiple stakeholders before even being able to suggest an action” and that “to get anything done you need to get your constituent councils in the same place”.

¹² Akash Paun, Alex Nice, and Lucy Rycroft, *How Metro Mayors Can Help Level Up England* (Institute for Government, 2022).

Figure 1: Mayoral Strategic Authority board sizes and compositions

Mayoral Strategic Authority	Board size	Voting members	Non-voting members
CPCA	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 1 representative from each of the 7 Constituent Councils • 1 representative from the Business Board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police & Crime Commissioner • 1 representative from Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Fire Authority • 1 representative from Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group
EMCA	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 2 representatives from each of the 4 Constituent Councils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 representatives from the Non-Constituent Councils • 1 Associate Member for Business • 1 Associate Member for Higher Education and Further Education • 1 Associate Member for the Trade Union Movement
GMCA	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 1 representative from each of the 10 Constituent Councils 	
LCR	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 1 representative from each of the 6 Constituent councils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police and Crime Commissioner • Chair of the Business and Enterprise Board
NECA	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 1 representative from each of the 7 constituent councils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 representative from the Business Board • 1 representative from the Community and Voluntary Sector
SYCA	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 1 representative from each of the 4 Constituent Councils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 representative from each of the 5 Non-Constituent Councils
TVCA	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 1 representative from each of the 5 Constituent Councils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair of the Tees Valley Business Board
WECA	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 1 representative from each of the 3 Constituent Councils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair of the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership
WMCA	29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 2 representatives from each of the 7 Constituent Councils • 1 representative from each of the 10 Non-Constituent Councils (only entitled to vote on certain matters) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 representative from Warwick District Council • Police and Crime Commissioner • 1 representative from West Midlands Fire Authority • 1 representative from Midlands Trade Union Congress
WYCA	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 1 representative from each of the 5 Constituent Councils • 3 additional representatives from the Constituent Councils to represent political balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 representative from York Council • 1 representative from the West Yorkshire Business Board
YNYCA	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor • 2 representatives from each of the 2 Constituent Councils 	

2.1.2 Benefits

Interviewees argued that needing to reach board approval can improve decision-making and outcomes. They believed that, while it may mean decisions are taken at a slower pace, this is a worthwhile trade-off if it means that decisions are better informed and have a greater chance of being fully implemented over a long time period because constituent councils fully support the decision.

London's governance model serves as an example of how decision-making can sometimes be impeded and outcomes blunted when consensus-building is not the norm.

Since 2000 the Greater London Authority (GLA), comprising the Mayor of London and the London Assembly, has governed London. The London Assembly cannot constrain the Mayor of London in the same way that MSA boards can constrain their mayors. The London Assembly requires a two-thirds majority to amend or vote down the mayor's budget or strategies — something which has never happened to date — meaning the mayor has more freedom to act without building consensus.

And London local authorities lack the formalised role in decision-making that their counterparts in MSAs have through their position on the MSA board. The London Assembly is directly-elected with no positions for local authority representatives and, beyond having to appoint a London Assembly member as the statutory deputy mayor, the mayor is free to appoint anyone to their cabinet as a deputy mayor.¹³ As a result, it is harder for London local authorities to feed into GLA decision-making.

This situation — whereby the mayor can act with limited regard to consensus-building and local authorities have limited formalised routes to feed into policy and build consensus with the mayor — can result in decisions which lack broad support and therefore result in fraught relations with different tiers of government. Examples of such decisions include the expansion of the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ), which five outer-London councils spent £730,000 challenging,¹⁴ and the proposed Oxford Street Mayoral Development Corporation (MDC), which has created a dispute with Westminster City Council.¹⁵

2.1.3 Challenges

There is no doubt that for regional policy, as for national policy, pursuit of common ground in the pursuit of shared objectives can be enormously valuable. There is also little doubt that certain strategic actions — for example managing transport systems, deciding on major infrastructure projects and setting a coordinated economic strategy — are inappropriate for either local or central government.¹⁶ Instead, they should be taken at the regional level through SAs. If the pursuit of consensus and approval means that these strategic and regional decisions cannot be taken, it is a sign that SAs must be redesigned to allow for more decisive leadership.

¹³ Mark Sandford, *The Greater London Authority* (House of Commons Library, 2024).

¹⁴ Yasmin Rufo, 'ULEZ: Five Councils Spent £730k on Failed Legal Challenge', *BBC News*, 6 November 2023.

¹⁵ Jess Warren, 'Oxford St Traffic Ban Will Be Challenging - Council', *BBC News*, 19 September 2024.

¹⁶ Simon Kaye, India Woodward, and Giorgia Vittorino, *What Powers Where? Achieving the 'Devolution Revolution'* (Reform, 2024).

Because mayors are directly elected, a lack of efficacy risks contributing to the ‘democratic deficit’ phenomenon that their role is intended, at least in part, to address. Local voters who believe they are selecting someone to occupy a powerful role and fulfil their promise may be nonplussed to discover that in many cases their mayor is unable to get signature decisions past their board.

Notably, a consensus-seeking approach can also mean that decisions are taken at a slower pace because it can take a long time to iron out any disagreements among MSA board members. Some interviewees argued that this slowness was a worthwhile trade-off if it ultimately leads to improved decisions and outcomes. But there is no guarantee that this is the case. It may instead simply be a symptom of constituent councils, in the words of interviewees for this paper, “dragging their feet” and attempting to prevent the MSA taking decisions they disagree with. This can lead to decisions not being taken and outcomes not being realised. At the most extreme end, it can result in outright institutional paralysis.

This ties into a fundamental challenge with the consensus-building approach. It is hard and it can take a long time for MSA board members to build up the experience and relationships required to do it effectively. One interviewee for this paper described the “brutal difficulty” of reaching agreements during the first several months after establishment. Such difficulties appear common — both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA)¹⁷ and WECA¹⁸ have reached the stage of being subject to Best Value Notices which comment on the strained relationship between constituent councils — and can extend for a significant period after the MSA has been established.

The success of MSAs such as GMCA can be partially attributed to the fact that the constituent councils had 25 years’ experience collaborating, from the 1986 abolition of the Greater Manchester County Council through to the 2011 creation of the GMCA. This enabled them, in the words of one interviewee, to “hit the ground running” in a way that other regions, with less history of collaboration and consensus-building, are unable to do.

Finally, having to devote time, energy and resources towards consensus-building restricts the ability of MSA mayors and constituent council leaders to focus on delivering their agendas. As an interviewee for this paper remarked, a “big chunk of the mayor’s job is devoted towards relationship management”. Consensus-building may be beneficial, but this should be in the service of, rather than at the expense of, delivery and improving outcomes.

2.1.4 Going beyond the English Devolution White Paper

Striking a balance between a board system that enables decisive leadership and one that ensures sufficient deliberation and consensus-building is highly challenging. This is recognised in the EDWP, which states that while mayors will always be expected to work in partnership, “a desire for perfect consensus must not get in the way of tough decisions”.¹⁹

The Government’s proposed solution in the new Statutory Devolution Framework, which will override all existing governance arrangements in MSAs, is to only require MSAs to have a simple majority vote (including the mayor) to approve decisions on the use of most functions.²⁰

¹⁷ Max Soule, *Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Best Value Notice* (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2024).

¹⁸ Soule, *West of England Combined Authority Best Value Notice*.

¹⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

²⁰ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Certain specific functions will be exercisable only by the mayor and in Foundation Strategic Authorities (FSAs) certain key strategic decisions will still require unanimity.²¹

Mayoral Strategic Authority board power

These proposed steps are positive, particularly the intention to remove supermajorities and the requirement for unanimous decisions in many areas. Numerous interviewees criticised the existence of these features, describing them as vetoes which can empower a single council to block action. As recognised in the EDWP, “when residents elect a mayor, they need to know that key decisions cannot be blocked by a single council”.²²

But this does not go far enough. These barriers to effective decision-making do not exist at other tiers of local government or, largely, in central government. Furthermore, in most areas MSA decisions already only require a simple majority to pass.

In addition to establishing a majority-rule decision making baseline for boards, there should be new mechanisms that recognise that mayors are directly elected with a public mandate to deliver on their manifesto commitments. The current system, which requires mayors to negotiate board approval for nearly all decisions, can make it difficult for them to implement the programmes they were elected on, or constrain their ideas and ambitions inappropriately. While checks and balances are essential, the system must evolve to ensure that the democratic legitimacy of mayoral mandates is properly reflected in decision-making.

After an election, mayors should publicly present a Mayoral Programme. This should set out more developed thinking across all the policy areas where they have competence, supported by policy discussions with MSA officers, about how their manifesto commitments should be put into action and integrated with existing regional strategies (such as the plans that would emerge from the process set out in previous *Reform* research).²³ This, like the King’s Speech of a new Westminster Government, would set the strategic agenda for the region and allow for debate and integration of these plans across the whole jurisdiction.

Elements of this Mayoral Programme, when brought to the board for approval and reflective of specific commitments in a winning election manifesto, should expect smooth approval from the board as recognition of the mayor’s direct electoral mandate. This convention is similar to the Parliamentary ‘Salisbury Convention’, where the House of Lords does not ordinarily seek to block manifesto commitments. Observation of this convention would, under most circumstances, be achievable through the usual tools of collaborative governance. If, however, a board majority believes a proposal does not genuinely reflect a manifesto pledge or that the pledge in question was too vague to create an obligation to pass the measure, they may reject it or move for an amendment.

A dispute of this sort would lead to a new procedure. The mayor could appeal this rejection to a new panel to assess whether the original proposal aligns with the mayor’s stated election commitments. This panel would only convene for this purpose and its membership would be decided and approved by the MSA board at the start of a mayor’s term. It should be comprised of independent individuals with no political affiliation, for example the MSA’s chief executive, OSC chair and the relevant election returning officer. To avoid politicisation, the deliberations and individual votes within this committee should be secret.

²¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

²² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

²³ Kaye, Woodward, and Vittorino, *What Powers Where? Achieving the ‘Devolution Revolution’*.

If this panel rules in the mayor's favour, the mayor may then submit the unamended proposal for consideration by the board. At this point, the board may only reject or amend the proposal with a two-thirds supermajority vote: the same arrangement as typically exists for MSA budget-setting.

This modest expansion of mayoral authority will ensure that mayors cannot be unduly obstructed from delivering on clear, specific electoral commitments. At the same time, it will strengthen democratic accountability and firmly incentivise mayoral candidates to put forward well-defined and detailed pledges as part of their electoral 'pitch' to voters.

The advantages of requiring a supermajority to reject or amend can be seen in the London model. The Mayor of London has been able to produce an SDS — to date the only mayor to do so — and launch two MDCs. MSAs have struggled to do the same with their current voting arrangements. GMCA²⁴ and WECA²⁵ abandoned their SDSs in 2020 and 2022 respectively because of disagreements between constituent authorities, and in certain areas where an MDC could have helped accelerate regeneration — for example Bristol Temple Quarter — the approach was ruled out arguably because of the poor relationship between the MSA mayor and the relevant constituent authority leader.²⁶

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Recommendation 2: Mayoral Strategic Authority boards should pass proposals that are elements of a Mayoral Programme and part of a winning election manifesto. If rejected, the mayor should be able to appeal to a special panel to determine whether the proposal is a fair reflection of a clear manifesto commitment. If so, the board may then only reject or amend the mayor's proposal with a two-thirds supermajority.

Enhanced mayoral authority in decision-making

As touched on above and commented on by interviewees for this paper, MSA mayors are not all-powerful executive figures. Almost all their decisions require MCA board approval. This is positive. It ensures that decisions are well-informed and have a broad support base.

However, while a collaborative approach is important, an over-reliance on negotiated consensus risks weakening delivery and ultimately reduces the electorate's ability to hold the mayor to account.

Furthermore, examples exist whereby mayors have acted relatively unilaterally and achieved positive change. Andy Burnham's actions during Covid contributed to GMCA being granted a £60 million support package.²⁷ Ben Houchen's direct negotiation with companies has seen FDI in Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) double between 2016 and 2019 from almost £5 billion to almost £10 billion.²⁸ Tracy Brabin's work tackling violence against women has

²⁴ BBC News, 'Greater Manchester Spatial Framework New Homes Plan Scrapped'.

²⁵ Postans, 'Bristol Region Housing Masterplan Collapses Amid Huge Row - What It Means for City's Future'.

²⁶ Millie Mitchell, *Devolution and Urban Regeneration: How Can Metro Mayors Transform England's Towns and Cities?* (Institute for Government, 2024).

²⁷ BBC News, 'Covid: Greater Manchester Given £60m Support Package', 21 October 2020.

²⁸ Adam Hawksbee, *Give Back Control: Realising the Potential of England's Mayors* (Onward, 2022).

seen reoffending rates of some domestic abusers halved.²⁹ These examples show that, given the chance, mayors can achieve positive change in ways which may not have been possible if the actions had to be first agreed through the MCA board.

Two significant shifts in mayors' power to act should therefore be implemented.

First, there should be an increase in discretionary spending capability. As things currently stand, a (revenue) spending decision does not typically become subject to board approval unless it exceeds a value of £500,000. This should be quadrupled to £2,000,000. This would give mayors greater flexibility to respond to strategic opportunities when spending their own budgets, while ensuring that grander financial commitments remain subject to board scrutiny. Individual MSAs may also set the threshold for a key decision higher than this level, and/or have different thresholds for capital/revenue expenditure.

Second, mayors should have the casting vote in board decisions. In all MSA board decisions the votes of constituent councils outweigh the single vote of a mayor. As a partial counterweight to this fact, when board votes are tied the mayor should have a casting vote rather than the vote automatically failing. This will help to prevent decision-making paralysis while ensuring board involvement in all key decisions.

Recommendation 3: Revenue spending decisions should only require Mayoral Strategic Authority board approval if they exceed £2 million.

Recommendation 4: In situations where a Mayoral Strategic Authority board vote is tied the mayor should have the casting vote.

2.2 Expertise-utilising

MSAs typically see the leaders of their constituent councils assuming portfolio leadership positions as part of their cabinet.

This system has positive features. Undertaking 'portfolio lead' roles means that constituent council leaders become more accustomed to working together and working through the MSA. And exposure to issues through their portfolio is likely to increase awareness of interdependencies between constituent councils and thus further decrease the propensity for disagreements. For example, a constituent council leader appointed to lead the MSA's transport portfolio may become more aware of interconnections and how increased capacity in certain areas can improve capacity across the transport network.

This system also, as the EDWP recognises, helps to take the strain off mayors who cannot do everything alone. Having portfolio lead members increases the capacity at the centre of MSAs.

Interviewees frequently commented on the need for extra capacity at the centre. They argued that this was the biggest constraint on their ability to deliver and that this was particularly an issue for new MSAs who are often "playing catch up to GMCA and West Midlands Combined Authority [WMCA]".

However, while this approach may increase the capacity of MSAs in certain respects, it can arguably decrease their capacity in other respects. If constituent council leaders are

²⁹ Aisha Iqbal, 'Some Domestic Abusers' Reoffending Halved - Mayor', *BBC News*, 3 December 2024.

simultaneously leading on a certain portfolio in the mayor's cabinet, scrutinising mayoral proposals through their position on the MSA board, and setting the direction of their own local authority, there is the potential for individuals to be overworked.

There is also the risk that mayoral actions are receiving insufficient scrutiny from the MSA board — tasked with agreeing on actions — because members of the board are also responsible, through their portfolio lead positions in the cabinet, for devising actions. They may therefore “not see their primary role as to hold the mayor to account” but as simply to help the mayor act.³⁰

Therefore, while this approach may increase the capacity of MSAs, this could be achieved more effectively if the mayor could appoint portfolio leads from a broader talent pool who are not simultaneously members of the MSA board and local authority leaders.

One such approach is adopted by the GLA. Aside from a requirement to appoint a London Assembly member as their statutory deputy mayor, the Mayor of London is free to appoint anyone to their cabinet as a deputy mayor. They do not need to be from the London Assembly nor from a London local authority.³¹ This allows the mayor to appoint individuals who are arguably more experienced within a particular specialism than would be available if they were restricted to appointing London Assembly members. For example, Jules Pipe — deputy mayor for planning, regeneration and the fire service — was Hackney's directly-elected mayor for fourteen years, during which time Hackney improved across a range of indicators³² and Justine Simons — deputy mayor for culture and the creative industries — is the founder and chair of the World Cities Culture Forum.

Furthermore, because these individuals are not also having to run a local authority, they can devote themselves entirely to the GLA. This model allows the Mayor of London to increase their capacity to a far greater extent than MSA mayors, with access to a vastly broader and more experienced pool of individuals, who can then work full-time on their portfolios.

2.2.1 A cabinet of appointees

The challenge of how to support mayors and preserve the successful consensus-building approach — whilst also expanding the available talent pool and not detracting from broader MSA and constituent council capacity — is grappled within the EDWP. It announces that the Government will legislate so that mayors can appoint and remunerate commissioners who would be able to support the delivery of key functions determined by the mayor: and in certain circumstances the Government envisages mayors would delegate functions to the commissioner. They would not be MSA members and are intended to complement with “additional capacity or specialisms”, rather than replace, the approach of appointing portfolio leads from the MSA board.³³

Whilst this is a positive step, it still does not go far enough in challenging the current portfolio lead model.

³⁰ Paun, Nice, and Rycroft, *How Metro Mayors Can Help Level Up England*.

³¹ Sandford, *The Greater London Authority*.

³² Office for National Statistics, ‘How Life Has Changed in Hackney: Census 2021’, Web Page, 19 January 2023.

³³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

It would be incorrect to fully replace MSA boards with commissioners appointed by the mayor. Interviewees for this paper were clear that this would dramatically undermine both the consensus-building approach and mayoral scrutiny, because those tasked with approving mayoral decisions would owe their job to the will of the mayor.

More appropriate would be to go a step further than the EDWP and grant MSA mayors the same freedom as the Mayor of London to appoint anyone to their cabinet as a portfolio lead. This would dramatically increase capacity, with mayors able to appoint genuine experts, working full-time on their portfolio. As more powers continue to be devolved to MSAs and, in turn, portfolio leads become bigger roles, this ability for their holders to focus fully on the role will be crucial.

A clearer demarcation between the MSA cabinet — mainly responsible for devising actions — and the MSA board — mainly responsible for agreeing actions — would also be achieved through this approach. Again, as MSAs continue to grow in power the need to avoid a situation whereby MSA boards are ‘marking their own homework’ will be increasingly important. The board must properly scrutinise decisions and hold the mayor to account. Not doing so increases the risk of weaker outcomes from under-scrutinised actions and places undue pressure on OSCs.

And, unlike the Mayor of London model, this system would preserve aspects of the consensus-building approach because the MSA board would still need to be consulted and sign-off on decisions, under the modified processes described in the previous section.

Recommendation 5: Mayors should be able to appoint commissioners as portfolio leads in their cabinet. These cabinet roles should be appropriately remunerated. Constituent council leaders should continue to sit on the Mayoral Strategic Authority board. ‘Double hatting’ as a member of the board and portfolio lead in the cabinet should be phased out.

3. Accountable

As MSAs grow in importance — taking on more policy responsibility and, in the case of the six EMSAs, financial responsibility through integrated settlements — there is a parallel growth in the need for accountability and scrutiny.

Accountability underpins two of the most important relationships MSAs have. ‘Upwards’ towards central government and ‘downwards’ towards their constituent councils and citizens. It ensures that MSAs are achieving value for money. It allows policy failures to be learned from and policy successes rewarded. It increases the trustworthiness of government institutions.

The current accountability system for MSAs is set out in the English Devolution Accountability Framework³⁴ and the Scrutiny Protocol³⁵ with additional guidance also provided, for example on overview and scrutiny.³⁶

This system is flawed. Upwards accountability towards central government is overbearing. Several interviewees commented on the excessive amount of time spent proving to central government that they were acting appropriately, thus reducing their ability to deliver and improve outcomes. And MSAs are not ultimately responsible for their spending. Even in the most devolved agreements reached to date — the integrated settlements which will be implemented for GMCA and WMCA from 2025-26 — the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s (MHCLG) Permanent Secretary is the designated Accounting Officer (AO).³⁷

At the same time, downwards accountability towards constituent councils and citizens is weak. MSAs are legally required to have an audit committee and an OSC.³⁸ But such committees lack the necessary power and the scope to properly hold mayors to account.

The EDWP argued, correctly, that “it is right that, alongside our plans for a permanent shift of power from Westminster, there should also be a new system of accountability”.³⁹ Proposed features of this new system of accountability include a single streamlined, outcomes-based accountability framework and the removal of ongoing gateway reviews for EMSAs.⁴⁰

Whilst welcome, again these proposals are insufficient. This chapter examines how both the upwards accountability towards central government and the downwards accountability towards constituent councils and citizens can be improved.

³⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution Accountability Framework*, 2023.

³⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Scrutiny Protocol*, 2023.

³⁶ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Overview and Scrutiny: Statutory Guidance for Councils, Combined Authorities and Combined County Authorities*, 2024.

³⁷ HM Treasury, *Memorandum of Understanding for the Single Settlements with Greater Manchester and West Midlands Combined Authorities*, 2023.

³⁸ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution Accountability Framework*.

³⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

3.1 Upwards

Currently, the upwards accountability of MSAs towards central government is excessively overbearing. This largely stems from the way in which MSAs are funded.

The majority of MSA funding comes from central government grants. These come from different departments, for example the Active Travel Fund from the Department for Transport, the Warm Homes: Local Grant from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund from MHCLG.

These grants all have different and extensive reporting requirements. This places a significant burden on MSAs. As interviewees often told us, a significant amount of capacity must be deployed satisfying Whitehall departments that funds are being spent properly. This is capacity which could be better used delivering and improving outcomes.

Furthermore, these grants are typically short-term — most are for a one-year period — and some are based on competitive bidding. Not only does this restrict the ability of MSAs to plan for the long term because they do not know how much money they will have in the future. It also means that even more capacity must be devoted upwards towards Whitehall, satisfying criteria simply to access funding.

As part of their devolution deal all MSAs have access to an investment fund from the Treasury, paid annually over a thirty-year period. MSAs have relative freedom to spend or borrow against this fund in pursuit of their own priorities. But there remains an extensive reporting burden, with the funding currently dependent on passing gateway reviews every five years. Furthermore, the amount of funding provided is not tied to performance. This means that accountability is not only directed upwards towards central government but that this accountability is narrow in scope, with the focus more on the process of good financial management rather than the outcomes of what good financial management can achieve.

Figure 2: Mayoral Strategic Authority investment funds

Mayoral Strategic Authority	Investment fund (per year)
CPCA	£20 million (40% revenue, 60% capital)
EMCA	£38 million (50% revenue, 50% capital)
GMCA	£30 million (66% revenue, 33% capital)
LCR	£30 million (25% revenue, 75% capital)
NECA	£48 million (29% revenue, 71% capital)
SYCA	£30 million (40% revenue, 60% capital)
TVCA	£15 million (100% revenue, 0% capital)
WECA	£30 million (50% revenue, 50% capital)
WMCA	£36.5 million (100% revenue, 0% capital)
WYCA	£38 million (75% revenue, 25% capital)
YNYCA	£18 million (65% revenue, 35% capital)

Some form of accountability is required for the funding Whitehall provides to MSAs. However, the current volume of requirements which MSAs must satisfy and the capacity they must deploy to do so means that attention and energy is excessively focused upon satisfying Whitehall criteria rather than delivering for their residents. Many interviewees expressed exasperation with this situation. One commented that “local authorities already do lots of effective accountability stuff, much more than central government realises, and I do not think that, given recent history, central government can point fingers about financial mismanagement”.

3.2 Accountability frameworks

The burdensome nature of this bureaucratic accountability is recognised in the EDWP. It stresses that the system should measure progress on key priorities and outcomes without being micro-managerial and distracting MSAs from the needs of their residents.⁴¹ To this end, it confirms that EMSAs will receive integrated settlements — a single funding allocation for the duration of a spending review period — supported by a single streamlined, outcomes-based accountability framework, replacing the existing multiple frameworks administered by different

⁴¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

departments.⁴² Additionally, EMSAs which have passed their first gateway review will not have to conduct any further reviews.

MSAs will not be eligible for integrated settlements but they will receive consolidated funding pots covering local growth, place and regeneration; non-apprenticeship adult skills; and transport. FSAs will be provided with dedicated local growth allocations “decided by formulae and with lighter-touch investment sign off”.⁴³

This does not constitute a “new system of accountability”.⁴⁴ The previous Government also intended to introduce integrated settlements and consolidated funding pots for SAs not yet eligible for these.⁴⁵ And MSAs and FSAs will still be required to devote significant capacity towards demonstrating to central government their proficiency at financial management. It is important that SAs are following appropriate processes. But it is the role of their audit committees and OSCs, not central government, to hold them to account on this. A more radical and effective approach would be to extend the single outcomes-based framework to all SAs. This would lower the administrative burden placed on SAs while simultaneously increasing the effectiveness of accountability, with central government assessing SAs on what they do and leaving audit committees and OSCs to assess how they do it.

Recommendation 6: Strategic Authorities should be held accountable via a single outcomes-based accountability framework.

3.3 Accounting officers

Beyond the proposals detailed above, the EDWP committed to exploring other options, including “models such as Local Accounting Officers to enhance the accountability of Strategic Authorities”.⁴⁶

Accounting officers (AOs) hold overall responsibility for ensuring that public funds are used appropriately.⁴⁷ They sign off annual reports and can be called in front of parliamentary committees to explain spending decisions. All central government bodies which manage public funds must have an AO. This person is typically the most senior official, for example in central government departments they are the permanent secretary and in non-ministerial departments and arm’s length bodies (ALBs) they are the chief executive.⁴⁸

But this situation is different for MSAs. These organisations are legally required to put in place arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs — typically achieved by appointing a chief financial officer.⁴⁹ But neither the chief financial officer nor chief executive of a MSA are the AO for the funds they use. Instead, central government department permanent secretaries remain the AO for any funds they devolve to MSAs. Many interviewees

⁴² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

⁴³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

⁴⁵ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, *Technical Paper on Level 4 Devolution Framework*, 2024.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

⁴⁷ HM Treasury, *Managing Public Money*, 2023.

⁴⁸ HM Treasury, ‘List of Accounting Officers Appointed by HM Treasury’, Web Page, 30 January 2025.

⁴⁹ Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, *The Role of Chief Financial Officers in Combined Authorities*, 2024.

critiqued this situation as producing a dislocation between local decision-making and the core of how accountability works in England.

The centralisation of financial responsibility in Whitehall runs against the Government's devolution agenda. Devolving power but not responsibility can simultaneously restrict MSAs — for example, if Whitehall-based AOs urge them to exercise undue caution — and increase the risk that financial mismanagement takes place because AOs are too far removed to properly fulfil their responsibilities.

Indeed, the centralisation of financial responsibility in Whitehall runs against the broader governance system. Most central government bodies have an AO based within their own organisation. This should also be the case for local government systems.

Designating MSA chief executives as AOs would increase both the quantity and the quality of scrutiny which their spending receives. Formal mechanisms outlined in *Managing Public Money* would apply and they would be eligible for National Audit Office (NAO) audits and parliamentary committee appearances.⁵⁰ Information obtained through this scrutiny would likely be of a higher calibre because the MSA chief executive will know more about spending than a Whitehall-based civil servant. Thus, 'devolving' responsibility alongside power would strengthen scrutiny rather than weaken it, which interviewees told us is a fear of Whitehall's.

Furthermore, the current system whereby different department permanent secretaries are responsible for different devolved funds is particularly inappropriate for EMSAs in receipt of integrated settlements. It increases the risk of confusion and financial mismanagement taking place because accountability lines are less clear. To this end, establishing EMSA chief executives as AOs for their organisation should be a priority.

As will be discussed below, the EDWP also commits to exploring "a Local Public Accounts Committee model".⁵¹ If established, MSA AOs should be answerable to these Local Public Accounts Committees alongside the formal mechanisms outlined in *Managing Public Money*.⁵² The long-term expectation should be that ultimately the MSA chief executive will become the default AO for all the public authorities within their geographic jurisdiction. This would not replace the financial responsibilities of key officers in local authorities but would ensure that ultimate AO accountability rests at a regional rather than national level (as is currently the case).

Recommendation 7: Established Mayoral Strategic Authority chief executives should become the accounting officers (AOs) for their organisation. In addition to the formal mechanisms outlined in *Managing Public Money* these AOs should also be answerable to their Local Public Accounts Committee and, if necessary, the Public Accounts Committee.

⁵⁰ HM Treasury, *Managing Public Money*.

⁵¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

⁵² HM Treasury, *Managing Public Money*.

3.4 Overview and scrutiny committees

All MSAs are required to have an OSC.⁵³ Tasked with reviewing decisions and policies, these committees can request documents and evidence, summon witnesses, make recommendations and, in certain circumstances, exercise a call-in power. These committees have a quoracy of two-thirds⁵⁴ and membership must be politically and geographically balanced in line with the MSA as far as reasonably possible.⁵⁵ Beyond these requirements the Scrutiny Protocol lists a range of non-statutory key principles, to ensure that these committees are effective and a “sustained culture of scrutiny” is created.⁵⁶

The power of OSCs and the extensive guidance provided on how to be effective have helped to hold mayors and MSA boards to account. For example, the previous Government presented GMCA, WMCA and West Yorkshire Combined Authority’s (WYCA) OSCs as case studies of successful committees and one interviewee for this paper commented on the growing effectiveness of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority’s (LCR) OSC.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, concerns remain about their effectiveness. Scrutiny failures have been uncovered, for example in TVCA,⁵⁸ and interviewees were clear that improvements were possible. Three key issues stand out.

3.4.1 Low status and limited resources

Firstly, OSCs have a low status. The Scrutiny Protocol and central government’s overview and scrutiny statutory guidance both emphasise that these committees should be highly regarded. The Scrutiny Protocol states that “membership on committees should be prized and competed for. Retention of members for several years should be common. Members must be able to devote the time to the role. Committees should have the profile and cachet to ensure that their findings are brought to the attention of the public wherever necessary through strong communications”.⁵⁹

In practice this is not the case. OSC members are neither consistently nor sufficiently paid. Consequently, councillors have limited incentive to join, remain on, or devote significant time to the committee. This lowers the status of the committee compared to executive positions which do receive an allowance.

It has been argued that this low status in turn lowers the quality of scrutiny because mayors do not feel compelled to engage with them.⁶⁰ GMCA’s Mayor Andy Burnham has been

⁵³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution Accountability Framework*.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Scrutiny Protocol*.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

⁵⁸ Angie Ridgwell, Quentin Baker, and Richard Paver, *Tees Valley Review* (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2024).

⁵⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Scrutiny Protocol*.

⁶⁰ Paun, Nice, and Rycroft, *How Metro Mayors Can Help Level Up England*.

criticised for missing OSC meetings⁶¹ and TVCA's Mayor Ben Houchen did not attend any OSC meetings from May 2020 to April 2021.⁶²

Limited resources further curtail the effectiveness of OSCs. Again, the Scrutiny Protocol and central government guidance both call for them to be properly resourced, for example by having dedicated scrutiny officers or drawing officers from specific policy and/or service areas.⁶³

But it is ultimately up to MSAs how much resource to allocate and, given the limited finances MSAs have access to, there are currently limited incentives to devote resources away from delivery. Both the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee⁶⁴ and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CFGs) have raised concerns that this is undermining the ability to provide adequate scrutiny.⁶⁵

Requiring SAs to properly remunerate OSC members would increase the status and effectiveness of these committees. This would, in turn, increase the effectiveness of SAs which would be being guided by improved scrutiny and feedback on their actions.

Recommendation 8: Strategic Authorities should be required to properly remunerate overview and scrutiny committee members and provide them with sufficient resources to effectively perform their role.

3.4.2 Quoracy

Finally, the quoracy requirement of two-thirds — compared to local authority OSCs which have a quoracy of one-third — is too high.

High quoracy for MSA OSCs is understandable. Local authority OSCs are primarily focused on day-to-day services within their contained geographical area. Strategic Authority OSCs cover major strategic investments and plans across a much greater geographical area. Having a higher quoracy is therefore intended as a way of increasing scrutiny by increasing the representativeness of attendees.

But the trade-off is that it is harder to reach quoracy. This has been a challenge since the establishment of Combined Authorities, for example in 2019-20 all WMCA's OSC meetings were inquorate and 47 per cent of GMCA's were cancelled.⁶⁶ According to several

⁶¹ Nick Statham, 'Andy Burnham Under Pressure Over "Untold Scandal" of Scrutiny Failings', *Manchester Evening News*, 13 October 2021.

⁶² Tees Valley Combined Authority, 'Overview & Scrutiny Committee Agenda', Web Page, 14 July 2022.

⁶³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *Overview and Scrutiny: Statutory Guidance for Councils, Combined Authorities and Combined County Authorities*.

⁶⁴ Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, *Effectiveness of Local Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committees*, 2017.

⁶⁵ Ed Hammond, *Overview and Scrutiny in Combined Authorities: A Plain English Guide* (Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, 2021).

⁶⁶ Paun, Nice, and Rycroft, *How Metro Mayors Can Help Level Up England*.

interviewees quoracy continues to be a problem now, with one LCR constituent council raising the issue in their 2024-25 work programme.⁶⁷

If committees are not quorate they cannot exercise scrutiny — as happened in 2018 when CPCA's OSC was unable to call in the mayor's transport plans because they were inquorate.⁶⁸ And having to take active measures to achieve quoracy — for example active management of substitute members, as recommended by the CFGS — is resource intensive and drains capacity away from actual delivery functions.⁶⁹

The large geographical area which MSAs now cover and the fact that remote meetings are not permitted compounds this quoracy challenge. For example, York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority's (YNYCA) OSC hold their meetings in Northallerton. For committee members living in York, attending a meeting requires a two-hour, 60-plus mile trip.

The Government have consulted on enabling remote attendance and proxy voting at local authority meetings.⁷⁰ These would be positive steps but it must also reduce quoracy to fifty per cent as a more appropriate trade-off between the need for higher quoracy to increase representativeness versus the need to ensure that quoracy is regularly met.

Recommendation 9: Strategic Authority overview and scrutiny committees should be permitted to meet remotely, utilise proxy voting and decrease their quoracy to fifty per cent.

3.5 Local Public Accounts Committees

As noted above, MSAs must have an OSCs and an audit committee: the former to review and scrutinise decisions, the latter to review and scrutinise financial affairs and assess whether value for money is being achieved.⁷¹

These committees can be effective. However, there is a case for establishing Local Public Accounts Committees (LPAC) — which the EDWP commits to exploring — to further improve scrutiny and fill the gap between performance scrutiny and financial oversight.⁷²

Audit committees and OSCs are limited in their scope. They focus primarily on ensuring that decisions are being made and money is being spent appropriately within their MSA. While important, this fails to provide adequate accountability for the broader public service system and leaves important cultural and outcomes-related questions unanswered.

This public service system consists of organisations across the public, private and voluntary sector: local authorities, private care homes, academy schools, NHS trusts, housing associations and more. It is funded through a range of channels, contains many elements

⁶⁷ Sefton Council, 'Work Programme 2024/25, Scrutiny Review Topics and Key Decisions Forward Plan', Web Page, 14 January 2025.

⁶⁸ Josh Thomas, 'Tory Councillors Called in to Scrutinise Mayor on Major Transport Plans Snub Meeting', *Cambridge Independent*, 15 June 2018.

⁶⁹ Hammond, *Overview and Scrutiny in Combined Authorities: A Plain English Guide*.

⁷⁰ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'Enabling Remote Attendance and Proxy Voting at Local Authority Meetings', Web Page, 24 October 2024.

⁷¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution Accountability Framework*.

⁷² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

which receive minimal public scrutiny, and takes decisions often in an informal or unpredictable manner.⁷³ Modelled off the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), LPACs would be empowered to ‘follow the taxpayer pound’ across the system and thus be better placed to guarantee value for money than existing committees and accountability bodies which typically only focus on a single component.

Part of this must involve close collaboration with the to-be-established Local Audit Office (LAO) in a similar manner to how PAC collaborates with the National Audit Office. For example, LPACs may further investigate LAO reports and ensure that any recommendations made in these reports are implemented. This would also imply that a deeply integrated regional presence or office for the LAO would be highly desirable.

Recommendation 10: Local Public Accounts Committees should be established in all Strategic Authority regions and be supported by the new Local Audit Office to become the first and primary accountability body for each regional system, with the ability to refer matters ‘up’ to the national Public Accounts Committee.

⁷³ Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, *Local Public Accounts Committees*, 2023.

4. Capable

If MSAs are to become an established governance tier, they need sufficient capacity to meet the demands being placed on them. As argued in *Devolve by default*, capacity can be understood as the ability to “design, implement, and manage policies effectively”.⁷⁴

To do this, MSAs need a sufficiently skilled and appropriately sized workforce. Without this, a ceiling is placed on what they can achieve. Artificial Intelligence (AI) opportunities will not be realised if there is no coding or software management expertise. SDSs will not be developed, nor other strategic planning powers announced utilised, if there are not enough planning officers. Currently, MSAs appear to lack a sufficiently skilled and appropriately sized workforce. They employ far fewer people than comparable city and regional governments.

The EDWP seeks to address these challenges and “build capacity in the sector”.⁷⁵ It announces plans for a secondment scheme between central government and SAs, a “capacity building offer to better support strategic leadership, peer-to-peer support and sharing best practice on innovation” and ongoing funding support through channels such as Mayoral Capacity Funding.⁷⁶

This chapter will spell out in greater detail how capacity — specifically, access to enough skilled people — should be developed. Other elements of capacity will not be focused on here. They are either ‘downstream’ of having appropriate access to skilled people — for example specific data-analytical and project management capacities. Or they are discussed elsewhere, for example leadership and governance capacities are features of Chapter 2 and financial capacity is considered in previous *Reform* work.⁷⁷

4.1 People

As previous *Reform* research has argued, people are hugely important to the success of an organisation.⁷⁸ A shortage of highly skilled and talented workers limits what can be achieved. Inefficiencies in current ways of working will not be identified nor addressed, while new innovative approaches will not be considered nor attempted. And an overall shortage of workers limits what is achieved: pace will be slower and the scope narrower.

The local government workforce crisis is therefore of serious concern. Over the last ten years headcount has fallen by 19 per cent, 94 per cent of councils have experienced recruitment and retention difficulties, 90 per cent have at least one capability skills gap and 93 per cent have at least one capacity skills gap.⁷⁹ To begin addressing this crisis, the EDWP proposes establishing a local government workforce development group, which will “identify practical

⁷⁴ Simon Kaye and Rachael Powell, *Devolve by Default: Decentralisation and a Redefined Whitehall* (Reform, 2024).

⁷⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

⁷⁶ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

⁷⁷ Simon Kaye et al., *Back from the Brink: Radical Ideas for Sustainable Local Finances* (Reform, 2024).

⁷⁸ Joe Hill, Charlotte Pickles, and Sean Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall* (Reform, 2024).

⁷⁹ Local Government Association, *Local Government Workforce Data: Overview and Summary*, 2025.

solutions to help resolve and improve workforce issues and promote the sector as a great place to work, while ensuring the workforce is set-up for the future”.⁸⁰

MSAs must be a particular focus of this workforce development group. Interviewees for this paper were clear that MSAs — particularly more recently-established ones — face acute workforce issues. Recent research shows that MSAs currently employ between 150 and 650 staff.⁸¹ This is significantly fewer than comparable city and regional governments abroad. Toronto and Frankfurt employ over 15 people per 1,000 population: GMCA and WMCA employ roughly only one person per 1,000.⁸² Indeed, these figures are even lower than some local authorities, for example Kent County Council employs roughly five people per 1,000 population.

The smaller size of MSA workforces partially reflects current differences in responsibilities. MSAs are typically focused on strategic planning rather than day-to-day service delivery and therefore do not need as large a workforce.

Nevertheless, the disparity in staff numbers between current MSAs and other city, regional and local governments is still significant and, crucially, MSAs are not always going to have less responsibility. To realise this power MSAs will need to significantly expand their workforces and thus expand their capacity. Multiple interviewees for this paper were deeply sceptical about the ability of MSAs to carry out additional responsibilities without doing so.

Expanding workforce capacity in MSA data and digital teams and mayoral support teams should be a particular focus. The capacity of both areas appears particularly weak. An interviewee for a previous *Reform* paper commented that “decades long outsourcing has hollowed out any local technology capacity”,⁸³ and even where more advanced capabilities may exist — for example in London due to the work of the London Office of Technology and Innovation — poor data literacy restricts the impact they can have.⁸⁴ Similarly so with mayoral support teams. Previous research suggests that a core team of only around five people support most mayors and noted that one incoming mayor bemoaned that their support consisted of “a PA and a telephone”.⁸⁵

Sufficient data and digital expertise combined with efforts to improve data literacy could unlock the significant productivity gains promised by AI. The EDWP recognises the importance of data with a range of proposed actions geared towards improving data use announced, for example a Mayoral Data Council to involve MSA senior data leaders in relevant central decision-making, and continued support for ONS Local to understand data gaps and provide support for local data leaders.⁸⁶ Ensuring that MSAs have sufficient data and digital expertise would complement and maximise the impact of these proposed actions.

⁸⁰ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

⁸¹ Akash Paun, Duncan Henderson, and Peter Hourston, *The Art of the Devolution Deal: How England's Counties and Cities Can Make a Success of Devolution* (Institute for Government, 2023).

⁸² Hawksbee, *Give Back Control: Realising the Potential of England's Mayors*.

⁸³ Joe Hill and Sean Eke, *Getting the Machine Learning: Scaling AI in Public Services* (Reform, 2024).

⁸⁴ Bonnie Buyuklieva et al., *Delivering Data-Led Local Policy: How to Build Data Capacity and Culture in Local Government* (International Public Policy Observatory, 2024).

⁸⁵ Paun, Henderson, and Hourston, *The Art of the Devolution Deal: How England's Counties and Cities Can Make a Success of Devolution*.

⁸⁶ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

Ensuring mayors have enough support will ensure that they are effective leaders and, as MSAs take on more responsibility, prevent them becoming as disconnected and overburdened as central government ministers.⁸⁷

Recommendation 11: The local government workforce development group should develop specific proposals for the workforces of Mayoral Strategic Authorities, particularly their data and digital teams and mayoral support teams.

4.2 Recruitment and development

To achieve a sufficiently skilled and appropriately sized workforce MSAs will need to recruit and develop people more effectively than they currently are.

Recruitment and retention have proven a challenge for the local government sector in recent years. 94 per cent of councils have experienced recruitment and retention difficulties.⁸⁸ These difficulties can be particularly acute in new MSAs — LCR and WECA had still not appointed a chief executive three months after they were established⁸⁹ — and it has been suggested that certain MSAs experience high staff turnover rates.⁹⁰ If MSAs struggle to recruit, they will struggle to increase their capacity.

Part of the problem is the brand of local government. Areas of local government have succeeded at cultivating a brand, for example Impact: The Local Government Graduate Programme (previously the National Graduate Development Programme) has been ranked as one of the best graduate employers in *The Times*' annual report, has had more than 20 times the number of applicants than places available, and 60 per cent of previous participants reported that they were still working for a local authority, including 62 per cent in managerial roles.⁹¹

However local government as a whole struggles, with interviewees for previous *Reform* papers commenting on the difficulty of convincing people of the value of local government careers.⁹²

The perception is typically of slow-paced and unexciting work constrained by bureaucracy and with limited career progression options. The EDWP rightly makes explicit the link between this and capacity, commenting that “previous Whitehall rules and years of underfunding have harmed councils’ capacity to do their job and deliver for their residents, by diminishing the appeal of the sector as a workplace”.⁹³ Given financial constraints, curating an attractive brand will be crucial if MSAs are to effectively compete with the private sector and attract the workforce they need.

⁸⁷ Patrick King and Charlotte Pickles, *Grown up Government: Towards a Comprehensive Model of Political Support* (Reform, 2024).

⁸⁸ Local Government Association, *Local Government Workforce Data: Overview and Summary*.

⁸⁹ Jon Bunn, ‘Disparity in Combined Authority Recruitment Progress Revealed’, *Local Government Chronicle*, 17 August 2017.

⁹⁰ Geoff Bates, Charles Larkin, and Laura Smyth, ‘Policy “R&D”, Capacity and Advocacy in English Combined Authorities’, *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit* 38, no. 3 (2023).

⁹¹ Local Government Association, *National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP)*, 2021.

⁹² Sean Eke and Simon Kaye, *Accounting for Failure: Rebuilding the Local Audit System* (Reform, 2024).

⁹³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

This problem is not unique to local government. Previous *Reform* work has found that central government suffers from a similar brand problem, with “not enough made of how exciting these [central government] jobs are” and the central government civil service offering “the opposite equilibrium of risk and reward to what is needed to attract talent”.⁹⁴ But the problem is uniquely threatening to local government because of the workforce issues they are already experiencing.

The EDWP’s intention for the local government workforce development group to “promote the sector as a great place to work” is therefore welcome.⁹⁵ However it is not enough for MSAs to recruit more people: they also need to develop these people into appropriately skilled and effective local government leaders.

Because of the beforementioned small size of MSA workforces, such development typically requires MSAs working together and with the broader local government ecosystem. Different places taking different approaches and sharing what works will provide MSA workforces with more experience and knowledge than if they were working on their own.

A range of networks currently exist through which knowledge sharing and development could take place. But all these groups face overlapping challenges preventing them from functioning effectively as workforce development forums.

Some are only open to mayors, for example UK Mayors Network and the newly launched Mayoral Council. Some are too ad hoc and informal, for example some interviewees for this paper described certain networks as “talking shops” and recounted the litany of previous bodies — Northern Powerhouse, Northern Way, Midlands Engine — which they have seen come and go. And some are focused on pan-regional collaboration rather than workforce development, for example the upcoming ‘Great North’ Partnership.

The absence of a single formalised group through which SA workers can share knowledge places a ceiling on how far they can develop. In turn, this places a ceiling on their capacity. The EDWP recognises the importance of developing the local government workforce, with one intended function of the planned local government workforce development group being to ensure that “the [local government] workforce is set-up for the future”. This should involve establishing a formalised group for SA workers to share knowledge and develop skills and effectiveness.

Recommendation 12: The local government workforce development group should establish a formalised knowledge-sharing network for the Strategic Authority workforce.

4.3 Secondments

Secondments are an effective tool for bolstering MSA capacity. They have an immediate impact — increasing the skillset and number of civil servants increases what a MSA can accomplish — and a longer-term impact. Expanding civil servants’ awareness of different governance tiers and fostering relationships between these different tiers increases understanding of and coordination between central and local government. Previous *Reform*

⁹⁴ Hill, Pickles, and Eke, *Making the Grade: Prioritising Performance in Whitehall*.

⁹⁵ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

research has argued for secondments solely for this relationship-enabling reason⁹⁶ and cases exist of civil servants being recruited on a secondment specifically to help work on a devolution deal.⁹⁷

Interviewees were enthusiastic about secondments, seeing them as a way of “understanding what it is like being in someone else’s shoes”. But they were less enthusiastic about the ad hoc way secondments with MSA are currently arranged. They described a system where the opportunity for a secondment to a MSA is rarely advertised. Instead, civil servants must instigate the process themselves. This process is informal — sometimes simply consisting of their line manager putting them in touch with people they know — and it is almost a matter of luck whether there are any vacancies in MSAs in the desired policy area at that time. If there are vacancies the application process is incredibly informal with the main barrier being obtaining sign off from their own central government department. Once returned, the department may make little effort to disseminate or understand the knowledge and skills the civil servant has obtained. They contrasted this system to the more formalised manner secondments take place with other public sector — for example the devolved administrations during interchange week — and private sector organisations.⁹⁸

Managing secondments in this inconsistent and informal manner is ineffective. It places numerous barriers in the way of civil servants wanting to do a secondment and thus makes it harder for SAs to grow their capacity. The EDWP’s proposal to introduce a secondment scheme between central government and SAs is therefore incredibly welcome.⁹⁹

But interviewees were clear that, alongside “facilitating the placement of civil servants in strategic authority officer roles, including senior positions”, this scheme must also involve placing civil servants from SAs into central government roles.¹⁰⁰ This would further expand awareness of and relationships between the different governance tiers, increase the likelihood that SAs are considered during policy formulation, allow Whitehall best practice to be understood, build skills, and advance professional development. All these benefits would work to develop SA capacity.

Recommendation 13: The secondment scheme announced in the English Devolution White Paper should include both the placement of central government civil servants in Strategic Authorities and Strategic Authority civil servants in central government.

⁹⁶ Kaye, Woodward, and Vittorino, *What Powers Where? Achieving the ‘Devolution Revolution’*.

⁹⁷ Paun, Henderson, and Hourston, *The Art of the Devolution Deal: How England’s Counties and Cities Can Make a Success of Devolution*.

⁹⁸ Colin Cluney, ‘UK Government Interchange Scheme’, Web Page, Civil Service Blog, 30 November 2020.

⁹⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *English Devolution White Paper*.

¹⁰⁰ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

5. Conclusion

For England's regional tier to succeed, MSAs must become decisive institutions, with the power to act strategically and deliver on the promises made to local electorates. England is still unused to the distinctive mandates produced by direct election of leaders to office, and, as plans currently stand, MSAs will continue to struggle to provide a vehicle for satisfying these mayoral mandates in most places.

The reforms proposed in this paper on governance structures, accountability systems, and capacity-building are critical steps in making that happen. They will be particularly important in contexts where the next real advancement in strategic regional power will mean opening some of the remaining locked doors within central government. Winning arguments with the Department for Work and Pensions about more ambitious employment support devolution, with the Treasury about the importance of fiscal devolution, and with the Department for Health and Social Care about the need to fundamentally shift where money sits in our health system.

Without institutional maturity, the risk is that none of these arguments can be won, and that English devolution remains a half-measure, where regional bodies exist in name but lack the ability to enact change or properly deliver on the mandates or ambitions of their directly-elected leaders.

In some places, the strengthened MSAs explored in this report will become the foundation for genuine regional power in England: an innovation as important in this country as the arrival of directly-elected leadership itself. Elsewhere, this strategic regional tier can only begin with the institution of SAs.

As *Reform's* essay *Rebooting Regionalism* argues, England will still lack a fully-fledged regional tier.¹⁰¹ While metro-based MSAs can be strengthened to play an effective strategic role through the measures set out here, the same cannot be said for England's larger and less population-dense regions, which require larger jurisdictions and new models of governance.

The longer-term task in such places will be to evolve the coming tier of SAs into a system that reflects the diversity of England's geography, with powerful metro mayors in hub-and-spoke regions and directly elected governors for much larger, polycentric Provinces. The latter idea, and the policy process for achieving it, will be the subject of the next paper in this series.

¹⁰¹ Kaye, *Rebooting Regionalism: An Essay*.

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