



Centre for
Public Impact
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FROM POTENTIAL TO IMPACT

Realising the Promise of England's
Mayoral Combined Authorities



ACCELERATING PROGRESS



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For more than a decade, Bloomberg Philanthropies has helped municipalities strengthen their capacity to both innovate and implement, so we recognize the extraordinary opportunity that Mayoral Combined Authorities have to usher in a new era of progress across the UK – and our team at Bloomberg Philanthropies looks forward to providing more of the support that can accelerate their important work.”

Michael R. Bloomberg,
Founder of Bloomberg L.P. and Bloomberg
Philanthropies, 108th Mayor of New York City

FOREWORD



At Bloomberg Philanthropies, we believe the most powerful ideas don't come from the top down—they rise from the ground up.

They're born in cities and communities, championed by local leaders, and shaped through the daily work of public servants who are closest to the challenges—and the opportunities—people face.

Over the past decade, we've seen what happens when mayors and city leaders are given the tools to lead boldly. They cut through bureaucracy, break down silos, and deliver results. That same spirit animates this report.

Across England's Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs), we see one of the UK's most compelling opportunities to unlock inclusive growth and innovation through empowered local leadership. MCAs may still be young institutions, but they are growing in both authority and ambition. Today, their mayors are being asked to tackle complex issues—from housing and infrastructure to transport and skills—at scale and with urgency.

What they need isn't just more powers or funding. They need the capacity to lead with clarity and confidence, to build coalitions across sectors, and to drive progress in a way that's visible and lasting for the communities they serve.

This report is a timely and necessary contribution. It lifts the lid on what's working, where the friction lies, and how we can better support local leaders to succeed. Most importantly, it centers their voices—the mayors, chief executives, and teams working every day to turn the promise of devolution into reality.

We're proud to support this work at Bloomberg Philanthropies. Because when local leaders have what they need to succeed, their regions don't just grow—they thrive. The journey of devolution is still unfolding, but now is the time to double down on its future.

James Anderson

Government Innovation Lead, Bloomberg Philanthropies

METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report aims to provide a new perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) at a pivotal moment in their development.

As the devolution agenda accelerates, with new MCAs forming and existing ones expanding their scope, it is critical to understand how those working at the heart of these institutions experience the evolving landscape of regional governance. The scope of this report is the MCAs in England outside London.

The research underpinning this report was conducted between late 2024 and early 2025 and is grounded in a series of in-depth, semi structured interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders.

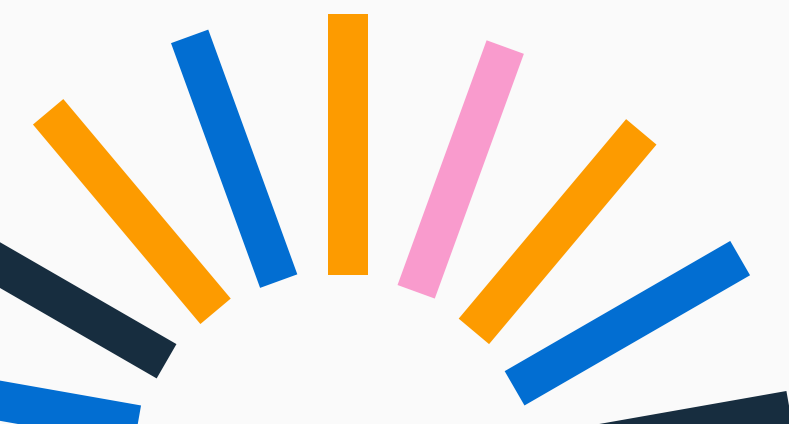
These included metro mayors, MCA chief executives, senior leadership team members, policy experts and practitioners with deep experience in public sector reform and place-based governance.

The interviews explored various themes, including leadership and talent, institutional capacity, power dynamics, intergovernmental relationships and the evolving role of MCAs as political and strategic actors.

Interviews were conducted on a non-attributable basis to encourage openness and candour. As such, while the report draws heavily on direct quotations to bring the perspectives of interviewees to life, all quotes have been anonymised and lightly edited for clarity. To strengthen the robustness of the findings, themes emerging from interviews were triangulated across multiple perspectives and supplemented with desk-based research, including relevant policy documents, independent reviews and academic literature.

This report was authored by Adrian Brown and commissioned by the Centre for Public Impact (CPI), with funding provided by Bloomberg Philanthropies. The research was undertaken by Adrian during his time as a Strategic Advisor at CPI between late 2024 and early 2025. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Bloomberg Philanthropies.

The author would like to sincerely thank all those who generously gave their time and insights to support this work, and to the partners who have supported the research that underpins its development.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

England's future prosperity may depend on a quiet revolution already underway in its regions.

As power shifts from Whitehall to local leaders, Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) are being asked to do more than just deliver – they must lead, reform, and innovate. But do they have the capabilities, relationships and resources to rise to this challenge?

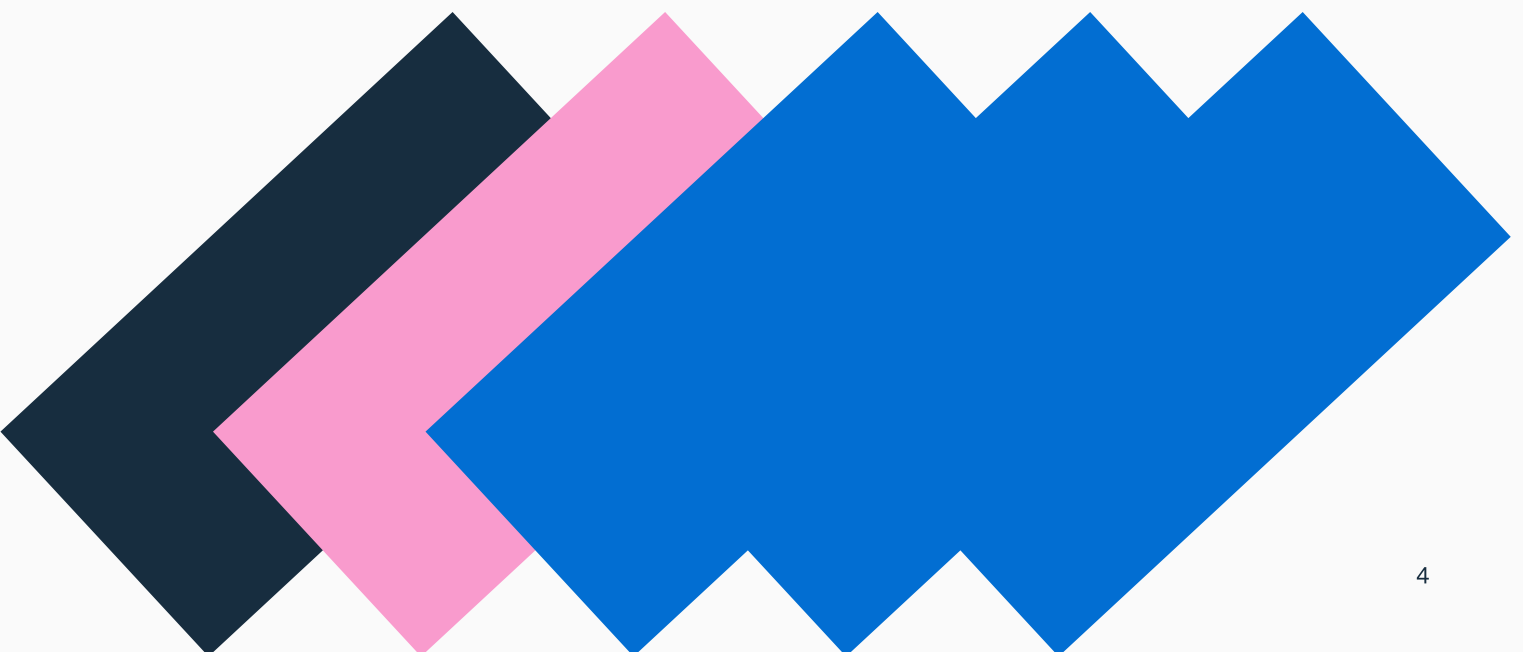
This report provides a leaders'-eye view of the evolving MCA model. Based on in-depth interviews with mayors, chief executives and national experts, alongside a review of relevant literature and field experience, it explores what it will take to make MCAs work as intended: not just as delivery vehicles, but as entrepreneurial engines of place-based progress.

MCAs now face a new kind of test. With the introduction of single funding settlements and a shift toward outcome-based devolution deals, they must make difficult trade-offs across portfolios, collaborate with complex local coalitions and demonstrate results at scale. This places unprecedented demands on leadership, capability and coordination.

Yet, the support systems surrounding MCAs have not kept pace. There is no induction for mayors who suddenly control billion-pound portfolios.

Executive teams are often lean, under-resourced and reliant on interim staff. Data systems are fragmented. Too many authorities still operate within a “parent-child” relationship with central government, expected to lead without being trusted to act.

Despite these constraints, MCAs remain one of the most promising platforms for innovation and reform in UK governance. They operate at a scale large enough to shape systems, yet close enough to communities to understand lived experience. At their best, they function as a public entrepreneurial ecosystem, surfacing promising approaches from one area and spreading them to others while tailoring national policy to local needs.



TO SUCCEED, MCAS NEED MORE THAN FORMAL POWERS. **THEY NEED:**



Effective leadership teams

with the credibility, confidence and strategic capability to align diverse actors and drive change across political and institutional boundaries.



The right conditions to act

including sufficient fiscal flexibility, clear accountability, and the legitimacy to convene and lead across complex systems.



A grounded understanding of local context

shaped by history, identity and lived experience, to inform strategies that are realistic, inclusive and place-specific.

Each of these elements is necessary, but none is sufficient alone. The most effective MCAs are those that combine all three, supported by partners – including central government departments, funders, civic organisations and expert delivery teams – who understand the complexity and transformative potential of the combined authority model.

This report aims to highlight the barriers that hold MCAs back and the levers that can help them move forward. It is a call to action for national policymakers, regional leaders and those in the public innovation ecosystem to work together in realising the promise of English devolution: a system where empowered places deliver better outcomes for people – in support of MCAs and the residents they serve.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAMS

The difference between a high-functioning Mayoral Combined Authority and one that struggles is rarely about formal powers – it's about people.

Leadership capability, institutional capacity, and organisational culture are the defining variables that determine whether an MCA can translate ambition into delivery.

These human factors are particularly critical at this moment, as MCAs transition from being primarily bidding organisations to becoming long-term strategic actors. As one expert noted:



The MCAs that are working best aren't just better resourced, they are more strategic, more focused and more trusted."

With integrated financial settlements and deeper devolution agreements now underway, MCAs are being asked to manage more funding, tackle more complex issues and make difficult trade-offs.

This reality places immense pressure on mayors and their teams. When MCA leadership is strong, they can navigate political tensions, communicate clear priorities and make credible asks of Whitehall.

When it's not, even basic coordination across a region can become a challenge.

The following four sections will delve deeper into four fundamental themes:

Mayoral Leadership

Talent and Capacity

Organisational Culture

Developing Future Leaders

Mayoral Leadership

The success or failure of an MCA arguably rests, first and foremost, on the shoulders of its mayor. As devolution deepens, the mayor is no longer just a regional figurehead.

They are increasingly expected to act as a strategic anchor for the region, a credible partner to Whitehall and a convener of complex local coalitions. This role requires not only vision, but a rare combination of political dexterity, managerial skill and cross-sector credibility.

Metro mayors embody a distinct leadership model, combining executive responsibility, strategic vision, consensus-building across diverse political landscapes and advocacy with central government (see table 1 showing MCA leadership traits below).

Yet mayors often find themselves navigating uncharted territory. As one experienced mayor described:



There's no handbook. You're suddenly responsible for billions in investment, managing complex Whitehall relationships and aligning competing local interests."

A key constraint identified by mayors and MCA executives is the absence of structured support to help leaders thrive in the role.

Mayors are often left to build their own leadership capacity while managing large-scale investment portfolios, navigating complex institutional relationships and responding to heightened public expectations.

Yet few have access to the kind of peer networks, strategic advice or leadership development infrastructure that would help them lead with clarity and confidence.

Building that infrastructure, grounded in the realities of English devolution, will be critical to enabling mayors to deliver ambitious, region-wide change.

MCAs should be supported to invest in their mayors as system leaders, equipping them with the tools, training and networks they need to thrive.

This includes the development of tailored executive programmes, grounded in the practical realities of regional governance in England, and focused on core leadership capabilities including strategic prioritisation, relationship management, public communication and cross-sector negotiation.



Talent and Capacity

Even the most visionary mayor will struggle without a team that can execute. MCAs today are expected to function as high-performing delivery organisations, coordinating regional investment, negotiating with central government and managing complex programmes across housing, skills, transport and climate. Yet in practice, many operate with strikingly lean teams and limited specialist capacity.

As Mike Bloomberg has said, “Being mayor is a team sport”. Without strong, skilled teams behind them, even the most capable leaders will struggle to meet the demands of modern regional governance.

This challenge is particularly acute in finance, data and strategy, all areas that are essential for unlocking the benefits of deeper devolution. As one expert noted:



We’re giving MCAs more money and more freedom, but they’re still not resourced like the institutions we expect them to be.”

The risk is clear. Underpowered authorities are slower to act, weaker in negotiations and more likely to fall back on consultants or firefighting.

Many MCAs face significant challenges recruiting and retaining experienced professionals, particularly in finance, infrastructure, public policy and strategic communications.

The hybrid nature of MCAs, balancing public-sector ethos, private-sector innovation and the complex national-local interface, requires specialised skillsets rarely found within traditional local government recruitment pools.

Senior MCA executives repeatedly highlighted the difficulty in recruiting talent with experience in financial management, complex negotiation and Whitehall processes. One MCA Chief Executive shared:



We urgently need people who’ve worked within central government to help us decode Whitehall and position ourselves effectively. Without this knowledge, we’re consistently at a disadvantage.”



Recruitment difficulties are exacerbated by uncompetitive remuneration, particularly for senior finance and infrastructure roles. Many MCAs rely heavily on interim staff and consultants, which can undermine continuity, institutional memory and strategic coherence. As one expert noted:



Temporary staffing plugs gaps quickly but ultimately weakens institutional capacity.”

Building MCA capabilities must start with a serious investment in recruitment, development and retention. MCAs should proactively seek to diversify their talent pipelines, recruiting from central government, the private sector and beyond local government, and put in place long-term plans for internal progression, institutional memory and staff resilience.

Broader systemic solutions gaining traction include structured secondments or rotation programmes between Whitehall, local authorities and MCAs. Such schemes would facilitate expertise transfer, mutual understanding and build a sustainable talent pipeline. One senior MCA official commented:



Well-designed secondments would dramatically increase our capacity. It's about getting the right expertise into the right roles at the right time.”



Organisational Culture

Culture is the invisible force that shapes whether an MCA becomes a credible regional leader or remains stuck in the shadow of Whitehall and local politics. As MCAs take on broader mandates and more integrated funding, their ability to move quickly, collaborate across silos and stay focused on long-term outcomes depends not just on individual skills, but on shared ways of working.

This matters now because the next phase of devolution is not just about money or powers, it's about mindset. As MCAs are asked to play a greater role in public service reform, economic strategy and innovation, those with a strong internal culture are proving far better equipped to navigate uncertainty, build trust and deliver at scale.

Each combined authority inherits or must create its own culture, shaped by local history and dynamics. MCAs emerging from longstanding inter-council collaboration, such as Greater Manchester, benefited from established cultures of trust and cooperation. Others, recently formed, must rapidly forge new organisational identities and ways of working.

The most effective MCAs exhibit a distinct culture: mission-driven, agile, outward-facing and comfortable with complexity. Others remain hamstrung by inherited behaviours from local government, risk-averse, hierarchical and reactive.

One MCA leader explained:



We need to stop thinking like a typical local authority and start operating as a dynamic, cross-sector partnership. Changing ingrained habits is hard work."

Establishing a strong "strategic centre", a core team aligning diverse portfolios around clear regional outcomes, is essential. This strategic core enables mayors to maintain a long-term vision rather than becoming mired in daily operational detail. Robust internal scrutiny, transparency, and performance management are equally critical for building credibility and maintaining public trust.

Organisational culture will define whether MCAs can meet the moment. Whitehall can reinforce this by recognising and backing authorities that adopt more integrated, outcome-focused ways of working.

Rather than assessing MCAs solely through a compliance lens, central government should engage with them as leaders in innovation, encouraging adaptive strategies, cross-sector collaboration and learning by doing.



Developing Future Leaders

The future of the MCA model depends not just on today's leaders, but on the strength and diversity of the pipeline behind them. As the demands on MCAs grow, both in scope and complexity, so too does the need for a new generation of regional leaders who can operate across boundaries, drive reform and lead with both legitimacy and skill. Yet few authorities have formal strategies in place to identify, develop, and retain such talent.

This is especially risky at a time when new MCAs are launching and established ones are facing leadership transitions. Without deliberate investment in internal progression, institutional memory and succession planning, authorities risk falling into cycles of churn, capacity loss and stalled momentum.

Building future leadership is not just about resilience, it is about embedding the kind of capability and culture that will allow MCAs to thrive far beyond the tenure of any single mayor or chief executive.

Established MCAs have begun investing in talent development through fellowship schemes and leadership programmes to ensure continuity of vision and expertise. The rapid expansion of MCAs, with six additional authorities planned by 2026, puts further pressure on the talent pipeline, making structured support for newly established MCAs particularly urgent.

New MCAs require targeted capacity-building programmes from their inception. Increasingly, MCA leaders advocate for clear maturity frameworks, mentoring and technical assistance programmes to guide new organisations efficiently from start-up to maturity.

Whitehall can support this by providing resources and frameworks to help authorities assess and grow their leadership capacity. It can also help create career pathways that allow civil servants and local leaders to move between tiers of government, strengthening the connective tissue of the public sector. As one sector expert concluded:



Our success depends on building capable, resilient institutions that talented people want to join, lead and shape into the future.”



TABLE 1: MCA LEADERSHIP TRAITS

	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Integrator	Skilled in aligning diverse agendas, coordinating complex systems and ensuring coherence across multiple sectors.	Andy Burnham (Greater Manchester) aligning transport, health, and social care into a coherent regional strategy.
Convener	Excel at building coalitions, facilitating dialogue and fostering consensus among stakeholders with competing interests.	Andy Street (West Midlands) successfully convened business leaders, local councils, and universities behind a shared regional growth vision.
Reformer	Willing to drive change, challenge entrenched systems and pursue innovative approaches to governance and service delivery.	Tracy Brabin (West Yorkshire) pushing innovative policies on bus franchising and creative industries to spur regional reform.
Advocate	Effective at championing regional interests on the national stage, influencing central government policies and elevating regional priorities.	Ben Houchen (Tees Valley) advocating successfully for substantial national investment in regional infrastructure projects such as Teesside Freeport.
Strategist	Capable of long-term vision-setting, strategic prioritisation and maintaining focus on overarching regional outcomes despite short-term pressures.	Steve Rotheram (Liverpool City Region) developing a comprehensive, multi-year strategy focused on inclusive growth and skills development.
Innovator	Actively promoting experimentation, data-driven decision-making and creative solutions to complex regional challenges.	Jamie Driscoll (North of Tyne) trialling progressive economic models and experimenting with community wealth-building approaches.
Diplomat	Skilled at navigating political sensitivities, managing relationships with central government, local authorities and partners to secure agreement and resources.	Dan Norris (West of England) carefully negotiating complex political dynamics between constituent councils to secure regional cooperation on transport planning.

THE RIGHT CONDITIONS TO ACT

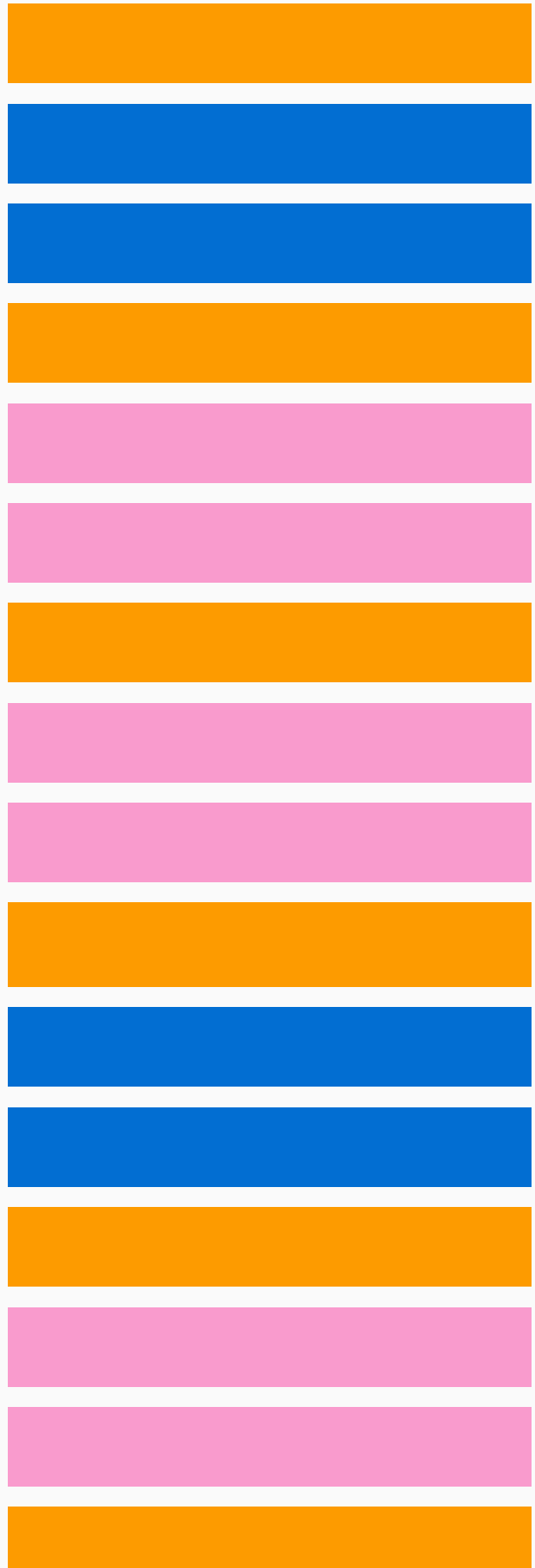
As the English devolution agenda gathers momentum, the key question is increasingly less about whether MCAs have the right powers, it is about whether they are able to use those powers to full effect.

At stake is the ability of regions to act with coherence, confidence and purpose: to marshal resources, prioritise effectively and hold systems to account.

This challenge has never been more pressing. With the introduction of single funding settlements and more integrated responsibilities, MCAs are expected to operate as strategic leaders, not just service coordinators or bid managers.

Yet in practice, many still lack the political capital, institutional clarity and decision-making autonomy to fulfil that role. They are asked to lead, but not always trusted to do so.

Unlocking real power for MCAs means more than rewriting devolution deals, it requires building the legitimacy, capacity and enabling conditions for true strategic authority. Only then can MCAs drive the kind of regional transformation they were created to deliver.



Central-Local Dynamics

The relationship between central government and MCAs remains one of the most defining, and contested, aspects of England's devolution journey. While MCAs were created to rebalance power and enable more locally responsive decision-making, the reality is that many still operate in a dynamic that feels more transactional than transformative.

As several stakeholders put it, the prevailing model resembles a “parent-child” relationship – where MCAs are expected to deliver, but not necessarily to shape, national strategy.

This tension is becoming more acute as MCAs take on multi-year funding and are held accountable for system-level outcomes without always having control over the levers that drive them. At the same time, central government departments increasingly rely on MCAs to coordinate regional delivery, creating both an opportunity for partnership and a risk of overload.

Navigating this central–local interface effectively is now essential: not just to secure resources, but to build trust, unlock flexibilities and create the space for real innovation in place-based governance.

Central government's culture of risk-aversion exacerbates this dependency, with rigid financial frameworks and accountability mechanisms reflecting low trust in local decision-making. Despite high-level political rhetoric supporting local empowerment, operational realities are slow to shift.

As one senior MCA official described:



We still have to run almost every decision past Whitehall, which fundamentally restricts our strategic agility.”

Another noted,



Whitehall talks a good game on devolution but struggles to genuinely let go of power.”

Improving this dynamic requires rethinking how Whitehall departments interact with MCAs, shifting from a transactional, compliance-based relationship toward genuine strategic partnerships. Structural reforms, such as consolidated funding streams and clearer accountability frameworks aligned with MCA responsibilities, would help embed genuine local autonomy.

Encouragingly, senior Whitehall officials increasingly acknowledge that realising devolution's promise requires changes in their own behaviour and culture, not merely in MCAs.



Fiscal Autonomy

One of the most significant limitations facing Mayoral Combined Authorities today is their lack of fiscal autonomy.

While devolution deals have expanded MCA responsibilities across areas like transport, housing and skills, they have not been accompanied by equivalent control over financial resources.

Most MCAs remain largely dependent on central government grants, with only narrow and often underutilised powers to raise local revenue.

Mechanisms do exist, such as a mayoral precept on council tax or a supplementary business rate, but these are rarely deployed. The administrative burden is high, the rules complex and the political risk considerable.

As a result, few MCAs have been willing or able to exercise these options, and most continue to operate within tight, centrally determined financial constraints. This leaves them exposed to changes in national policy, limits their ability to plan long term, and undermines their potential to lead bold, region-specific strategies.

Multiple stakeholders flagged this as a critical barrier. One Chief Executive explained:



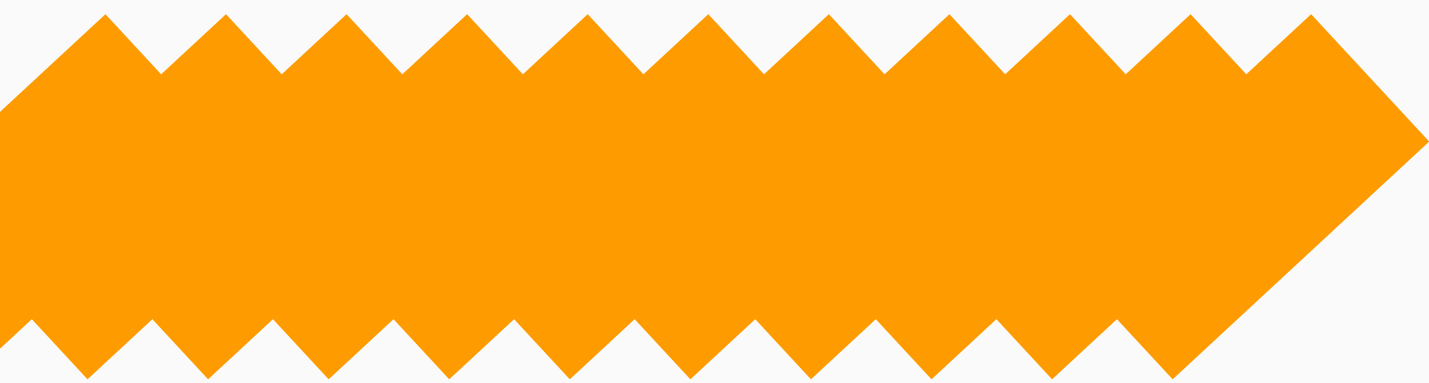
We are accountable for delivery, but we don't have real control of the purse strings."

Others described the difficulty of attracting private investment or forming local partnerships when core budgets are insecure or subject to annual bidding cycles. In the absence of meaningful fiscal devolution, MCAs risk being seen as intermediaries rather than fully empowered strategic leaders.

For MCAs to fulfil their potential as distinct and dynamic institutions, this must change. Grant-based funding will continue to play a role, but a more resilient and mature model of devolution depends on granting local leaders the means to shape and manage their own fiscal futures.

That could include expanded revenue-raising powers, more retention of locally generated taxes, or greater flexibility in how existing funds are pooled and deployed.

Without these reforms, MCAs may find themselves tasked with transformative ambitions but left without the tools to deliver.



Navigating Regional Power Relationships

Mayors do not lead in a vacuum. Their effectiveness depends on how well they manage the web of political, institutional and civic relationships within their regions. In most cases, mayors must forge consensus among local authority leaders who hold board seats and who may represent different parties, priorities and local loyalties. At the same time, they must coordinate with public service agencies, business leaders, universities, NHS bodies and voluntary organisations, many of whom are powerful actors in their own right.

When these relationships are grounded in trust and strategic alignment, MCAs can drive joined-up approaches to issues like skills, transport and health. When they fracture, delivery slows and credibility suffers. As one senior official remarked:



The most capable mayors aren't just good at policy, they're expert coalition builders."

In an increasingly complex and contested regional landscape, this relational capability is fundamental to success.

Local councils in particular, remain critical delivery partners and democratic anchors, yet relationships between MCAs and councils are frequently marked by tension, competition or mistrust.

One former mayor summarised:



You cannot achieve anything regionally without councils onside, but getting everyone aligned is often incredibly difficult."

Local councils may perceive MCAs as competitors for funding, talent or political attention, while MCAs can view local councils as parochial and resistant to strategic regional priorities. These dynamics undermine effective collaboration, slow decision-making and hinder strategic coherence.

Successful MCAs have overcome these challenges through deliberate, sustained efforts to build trust and shared regional identities over many years. Yet newer MCAs often lack the time or resources for such relationship-building.

A critical challenge is ensuring that regional governance models balance MCA leadership with genuine local authority influence, respecting their democratic legitimacy. But mayors are not merely conveners, they are powerful public figures with the potential to become the voice of the region. At their best, they provide a visible, accessible form of leadership that can elevate regional issues to the national stage, articulate a shared vision across local divides, and strengthen the sense of local democracy.

This is the unique promise of the mayoral model: a directly elected leader with both the formal authority and the public mandate to champion regional priorities.



Governance, Scrutiny and Accountability

The internal governance of MCAs also significantly shapes their power and legitimacy. Effective scrutiny and accountability mechanisms ensure transparency, build public trust and enhance decision-making quality.

However, current MCA governance arrangements vary significantly, with many scrutiny structures perceived as weak or ceremonial.

Successful elected mayors and local governments around the world use transparency to increase trust and confidence and the permissioning to do even more. Given that the birth of new combined authorities is met with lack of trust from both central government and the local councils, there may be strategic value in thoughtful scrutiny measures that invite skeptics in and enable the world to see how new ways of working take shape.

MCA governance structures must also evolve alongside expanded powers, particularly as their roles grow beyond economic development into complex areas such as health, skills and public service reform.

Building strong, credible governance requires investment in robust internal capabilities, clear frameworks for accountability and active public engagement.

Metro mayors are increasingly recognised as influential national political actors, leveraging their regional mandates to shape broader policy debates.

Prominent figures like Andy Burnham regularly influence national conversations on economic growth, transport and public services, amplifying the voices of their regions.

However, national prominence also brings political complexity. MCA mayors must balance local priorities, regional collaboration and central government relationships, while navigating partisan politics and the expectations of diverse local stakeholders.

As MCAs gain visibility, managing these competing pressures requires political astuteness, effective regional diplomacy and credible leadership teams able to handle increased public scrutiny.

Unlocking the Power of MCAs

Realising the power of MCAs thus requires addressing multiple, interconnected challenges.

Structural reforms and mindset shifts in Whitehall to empower local decision-making, fostering collaborative relationships with local authorities, investing in effective governance and scrutiny and supporting mayors as important political leaders capable of attracting resources and interest in their regions are all critical.

Ultimately, England's devolution experiment hinges on rebalancing power not just formally but in practice, building institutions capable of exercising genuine strategic autonomy, equipped with the legitimacy, trust and capacity to drive regional transformation. As one expert concluded:



MCAs must be empowered not just on paper, but in reality, to unlock the full promise of English devolution.”



A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF LOCAL CONTEXT

Mayoral Combined Authorities were created not just to manage programmes, but to transform places.

Their scale allows them to think and act at the level of real economies, bringing together fragmented geographies and institutional actors under a shared regional vision. As such, MCAs are uniquely positioned to serve as stewards of place-based change, aligning investment, shaping identity and confronting complex structural inequalities that no single borough or agency can tackle alone.

Yet fulfilling this role requires more than technical capacity. It demands a mindset shift: from delivery agent to system leader; from funding administrator to long-term convener. MCAs have the legitimacy and scope to hold the whole of a place in view. The extent to which they can rise to that responsibility will define the next chapter of English devolution.

Placemaking

One of the under-appreciated levers MCAs have is the ability to shape how a place understands itself, and how it is perceived by others. Mayors who define a compelling story about their region, what it stands for, where it's heading, and why it matters, are better able to unite stakeholders, build external partnerships and attract long-term investment.

This isn't about generic slogans, but grounded, authentic place narratives that reflect history, culture, ambition and potential. Successful mayors have used narrative to catalyse economic repositioning and build public support.

In this regard, MCAs don't operate on a blank canvas. Their ability to lead is deeply influenced by the strength of the civic infrastructure around them: trusted relationships between anchor institutions, local authorities, universities, civil society and business. The role of the MCA, therefore, is not just to lead but to weave, creating the "connective tissue" that enables institutions to work together in service of shared outcomes.

Some MCAs have made this relational work central to their strategy. Others have struggled to overcome legacy tensions or navigate multiple centres of gravity. The lesson is clear: without strong civic foundations, even the best strategy risks stalling in delivery.



Evidence-led Innovation

MCAs are uniquely positioned to drive innovation that is rooted in place and grounded in evidence. Their regional scale, democratic mandate and cross-sector reach make them ideal platforms for experimenting with new approaches to economic development, public service delivery and citizen engagement. In recent years, some have pioneered integrated employment systems, community wealth-building strategies and devolved models for transport and skills.

But innovation without evidence is unlikely to stick. As MCAs take on broader, more complex responsibilities, their ability to collect, interpret and act on data is becoming mission-critical. Robust insight is not just a technical asset, it is a strategic necessity. It enables leaders to set priorities, evaluate impact, justify investment and build credibility with central government and local partners alike.

Yet capability in this area is highly uneven. While a few MCAs have invested in advanced analytics and in-house research teams, others are making high-stakes decisions with limited infrastructure, scarce expertise and fragile pipelines for learning. This undermines both internal strategy and external legitimacy. As one official put it:



When you can't show where you're starting from, or what's changing, your credibility crumbles."

Addressing this gap requires more than hiring analysts. It demands deliberate investment in a culture of evidence use, where senior leaders routinely engage with data, champion learning and act transparently. It also calls for system-wide support: shared data hubs, secondment schemes, peer learning platforms and technical assistance networks to raise the floor across all MCAs.

Philanthropic partners and central government can play a catalytic role, supporting diagnostic assessments, building open-access tools and helping authorities scale promising innovations across the network.

With the right support, MCAs can act not just as delivery arms, but as part of England's public innovation infrastructure, surfacing what works, adapting it to context and driving improvement across systems and places.



Democracy, Representation, and Citizen Connection

At their best, Mayoral Combined Authorities offer a chance to reset the relationship between people and power. Directly elected mayors represent the most visible and accountable form of leadership outside Westminster, bringing clarity, focus, and a singular voice for their region. But democratic legitimacy cannot rest on elections alone, especially when voter turnout remains low and public understanding of MCAs is limited.

This creates an urgent opportunity for mayors and combined authorities to engage residents in more meaningful, people-centred ways. Co-design is one such approach by drawing on local insight to help shape policies and services that are grounded in real-world experience. Supported by good data and clear feedback loops, these methods can make policy more responsive, more trusted, and more effective.

Some MCAs are beginning to build these capabilities, but citizen voice too often remains peripheral - invited in late, or only when politically convenient. If MCAs are to lead with credibility and confidence, they must treat resident engagement not as an add-on, but as part of how priorities are set and decisions are made.

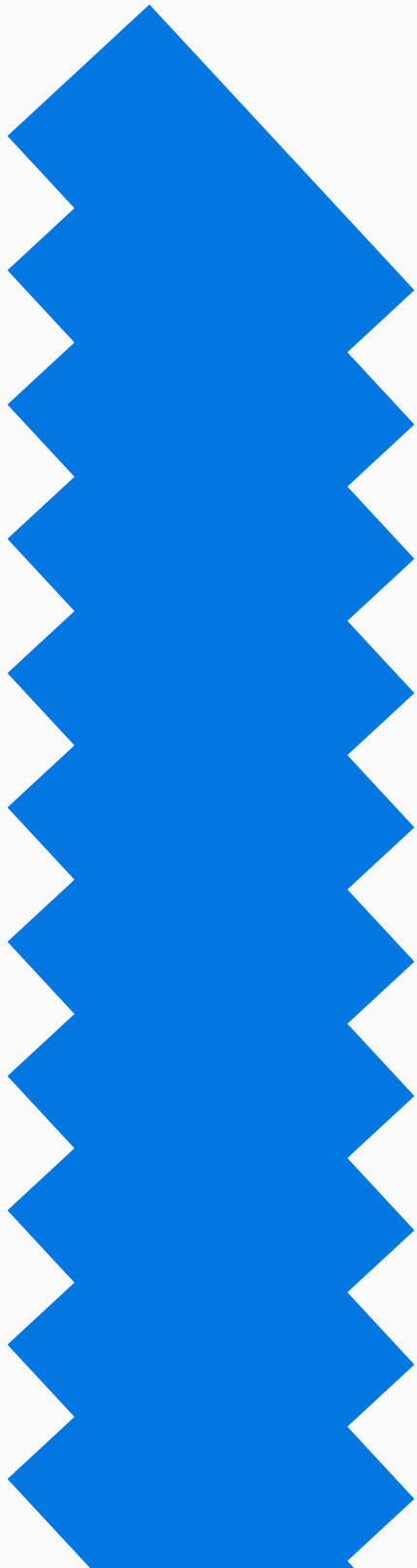
But this work cannot stop with residents alone. Solving the region's most complex challenges - whether economic renewal, public health, or public service reform - requires collaboration that cuts across institutions, sectors and communities.

MCAs are uniquely placed to bring together a wide mix of problem-solvers: civic leaders, businesses, anchor institutions and local voices. In doing so, they can create the conditions for fresh thinking, shared ownership, and faster progress on the issues that matter most.



CONCLUSION

Mayoral Combined Authorities are a young but increasingly important tier of government.



With new powers, more funding and a growing national profile, they are being asked to take on more responsibility for economic growth, public services and regional outcomes. But these expanded expectations have not always been matched with the capabilities, support or systems that enable success.

This report has highlighted three key enablers of effective MCA leadership: the ability to lead across boundaries, the authority and autonomy to act decisively, and a deep connection to the communities they serve. None of these are guaranteed by legislation alone. They depend on strong relationships, trusted institutions and a shared commitment to place-based progress.

Getting this right matters. MCAs can be a vital driver of better outcomes—from job creation to housing, from skills to transport—especially in regions that have long been underserved. They offer a way to join up fragmented systems, tailor solutions to local needs and deliver at scale. But that promise will only be realised if leaders have the capabilities they need, and if national and local partners work together to support them.

A new phase of devolution is underway. To succeed, it must be more than a transfer of powers. It must be an investment in leadership, collaboration and long-term impact.

That is the opportunity, and the imperative, that lies ahead.

