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The art of the devolution deal

How England's counties and cities can make
a success of devolution



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About this report

This report sets out practical advice and evidence-based insight for those involved in negotiating and implementing devolution deals, and for anyone wanting to understand England's evolving devolution map. There is a science to devolution – systems, processes and capacity that have to be put in place. But there is an art of the devolution deal too: success will ultimately depend on quality of leadership, strength of relationships and clarity of purpose.

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List of acronyms

AGMA	Association of Greater Manchester Authorities
CPCA	Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority
LCRCA	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
LEP	Local enterprise partnership
MCA	Mayoral combined authority
MCCA	Mayoral combined county authority
NTCA	North of Tyne Combined Authority
SYMCA	South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority
TVCA	Tees Valley Combined Authority
WECA	West of England Combined Authority
WMCA	West Midlands Combined Authority
WYCA	West Yorkshire Combined Authority

Summary

England has long been one of the most centralised large countries in Europe. But this is changing.

A growing consensus has emerged that a radical transfer of power from Whitehall to local leaders is needed to improve the weak economic performance of many cities and regions and to narrow England's high levels of regional inequality.

The main mechanism through which power is transferred away from central government is the 'devolution deal', a negotiated agreement between Whitehall and local leaders that devolves a set of specified powers in return for agreed governance and structural reforms at the local level.

In most cases, these deals involve the creation of a mayoral combined authority (MCA), formed of a group of local authorities and headed by a directly elected metro mayor. Nine MCAs have been established since 2014, holding powers over transport, skills, housing, infrastructure and more.

The devolution process is continuing as the government seeks to make progress towards its objective of "full devolution" across England by 2030.¹ Three new MCAs are due to be established by 2024 and many other areas are seeking to conclude devolution deals with Whitehall.

There is cross-party support too. The Labour Party has committed to further decentralisation should it gain power. Like the Conservatives, Labour regards stronger local leadership as a crucial part of the solution to the problem of regional inequality.

The decentralisation of power can therefore be expected to continue whatever the result of the expected 2024 general election.

The Institute for Government welcomes this trend. Our past research has concluded that devolution holds the potential to improve social and economic outcomes if empowered and resourced appropriately,² and that MCAs operate at broadly the right scale to lead the economic revival of underperforming areas.³

But too little attention has been paid to practical questions relating to the negotiation and implementation of devolution deals and the establishment of combined authorities, and the role of Whitehall in supporting places to make a success of devolution.

In the absence of a clear view of how to deliver devolution effectively, performance has varied across the country. Devolution has worked well in some places, struggled in others, and failed to get off the ground at all elsewhere.

Devolution has led to improved decision making in many places – but is no silver bullet

Devolution deals have enabled local leaders to allocate resources, regenerate their economies and reshape public services in light of local needs and preferences.

Greater Manchester is addressing health inequality through a partnership with the NHS.⁴ The West Midlands is redesigning its skills system to tackle low levels of advanced qualifications in the workforce.⁵ Liverpool City Region is bringing buses under public control as part of its plan for a more integrated and sustainable transport system.⁶ Tees Valley is supporting the growth of green industry and clean energy as a core part of its economic strategy.⁷ South Yorkshire is investing in a region-wide active travel network.⁸

But devolution is not a silver bullet. If a deal is based on incoherent geography, lacks sufficient local support or is poorly implemented, the effectiveness of the devolved institutions will suffer.

Disputes among local leaders and governance weaknesses have undermined the effectiveness of combined authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough⁹ and the West of England.¹⁰ An independent review has been established following allegations of mismanagement and weak scrutiny in Tees Valley.¹¹ Devolution to both South and West Yorkshire was delayed for several years by disagreement over the appropriate geography for the proposed deals.¹²

We conclude that those involved in concluding devolution deals – both at the local level and in Whitehall – should focus much more on the *how* of devolution, to ensure that deals do actually make a positive difference to the communities they cover. The purpose of this paper, produced by the Institute for Government in partnership with the University of Nottingham's Institute for Policy and Engagement, is to contribute to this objective.

Informed by interviews with officials and politicians, desk research and a private roundtable held in May 2023, we unpack the challenges faced at each stage of the devolution process and set out practical lessons for how to overcome them.

We show that there is an art as well as a science of devolution deals, and that success depends in large part on intangible factors such as the quality of leadership, the strength of relationships, the clarity of the proposition and the depth of local support.

There are four phases in the life cycle of a devolution deal

The report is divided into four chapters, reflecting the four key phases of a devolution deal.

In **Chapter 1**, we consider the *conception* phase, during which local leaders and other stakeholders come together informally to develop a proposition for devolution.

Places need to develop a shared vision for devolution showing how a deal will help the area. Collective leadership of the process is vital, and in places with a weak history of collaboration substantial effort may be needed to build trust and relationships. Local leaders need to demonstrate to government that a place is ready to enter negotiations as a team not a collection of councils.

In **Chapter 2**, we examine the *negotiation* of the terms of devolution between local leaders and central government, leading to the conclusion of a deal.

Places have to be realistic: Whitehall can choose which potential deals to prioritise. So local leaders must ensure their bid aligns with the government's principles for devolution and wider objectives. In particular, the government will prioritise places that are willing to adopt a mayoral model.

Negotiations are resource-intensive and conducted at both political and official levels. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is the main gateway into Whitehall, but many other departments are involved. So places negotiating with the centre should invest in developing strong relationships across central government.

In **Chapter 3**, we look at the formal *implementation* process by which a devolution deal becomes a legal reality.

Successful negotiations culminate in a published deal signed by ministers and local leaders. This is a big milestone but is not the end of the journey. For a deal to be implemented, it must navigate a four-stage implementation process: a governance review, public consultation, ratification by local councils, and approval by ministers and parliament.

Several past devolution deals have collapsed during implementation, due to local political opposition or judicial challenges. Leaders must work to maintain a wide coalition of support throughout the process.

In **Chapter 4**, we discuss the *operation* of devolution and how to establish a combined authority with the necessary strategy, policy and operational capacity to deliver devolved functions effectively.

It is helpful to run the new combined authority in 'shadow form' for some time – ideally at least a year – during which capacity and structure can be built.

New combined authorities often integrate existing organisations – such as local enterprise partnerships and transport bodies – but they must develop their own institutional identity and culture. It is helpful to recruit staff from a range of sectors including local government, the civil service and business.

Combined authorities need an effective strategic centre to set direction and co-ordinate across the organisation. The mayor will need a core team to support them, but the mayoral office has to be well integrated with the rest of the authority.

Mayors have to lead by consensus, working with other local leaders on the MCA board. Combined authorities must also develop a strong culture of scrutiny and transparency to ensure powers are well used and voters are informed.

In the **conclusion**, we show that devolution is not a linear process. Once an initial deal has been successfully concluded, most places look ahead to the next step in the devolution journey, and the cycle recommences. So an initial limited deal can pave the way for deeper devolution later on.

Central government should also improve its approach to devolution

We also set out a number of specific recommendations for central government, including that:

- The government should respond publicly to 'expressions of interest' in devolution and explain why – if that is the case – it will not enter into negotiations in any given case.
- The government should be open to negotiating a few non-mayoral devolution deals if that would help to strengthen collaboration across boundaries, with the potential that this might lead on to a subsequent mayoral deal.
- The government should refine and extend its three-level devolution framework to make transparent the full range of powers on offer, and what conditions places have to meet. A new 'level four' should be added to reflect the 'trailblazer' deals in the West Midlands and Greater Manchester.
- The government should bear in mind the resource imbalance in negotiations and offer informal support to places working through the negotiation process.
- The government should offer a small amount of capacity support to places implementing an agreed deal. This could be a small grant or support in-kind, by seconding officials from Whitehall to help navigate the process.
- The government should invest in a formal interchange scheme of staff between combined authorities and Whitehall departments that are closely involved in devolution, including both short-term placements and longer-term secondments.
- The government should revisit the question of the electoral system for mayoral elections and consider a return to the supplementary vote, which can incentivise candidates to appeal to a wider range of voters including supporters of other parties.

Introduction: what is a devolution deal?

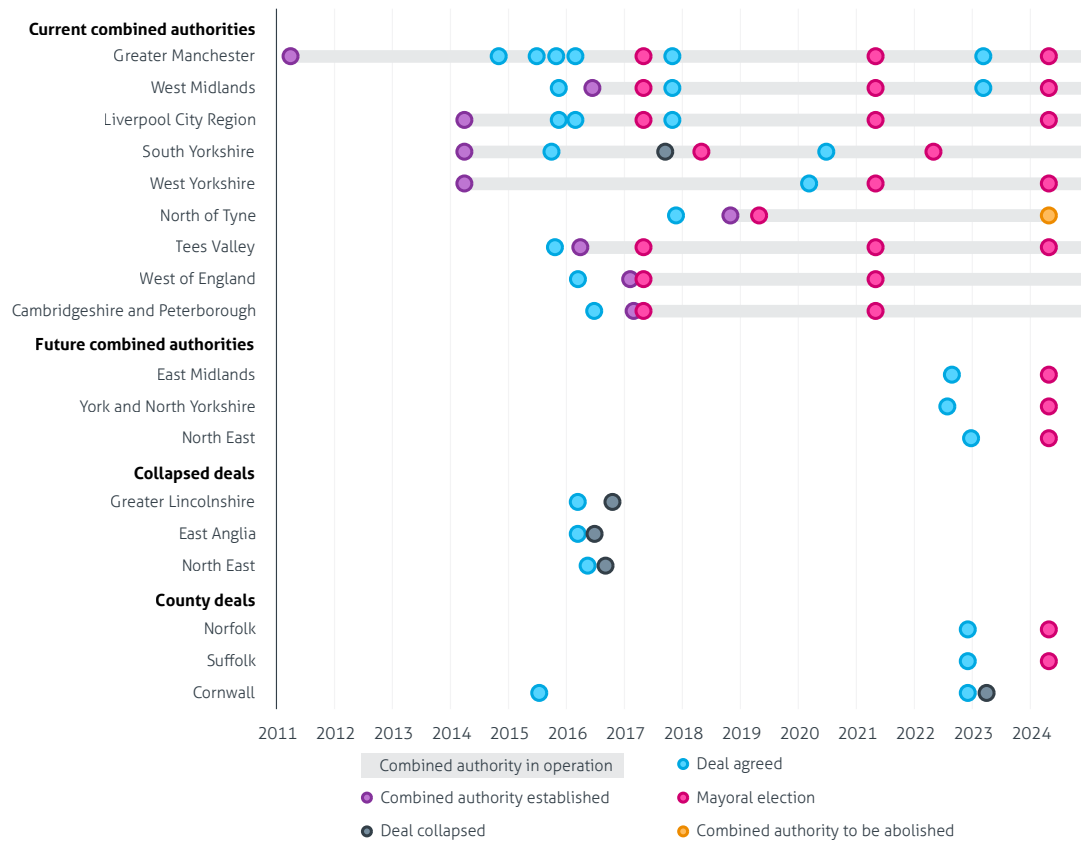
Over the past decade, ministers and local leaders have concluded and implemented a series of devolution deals, transferring control of various budgets and functions to combined authorities led by metro mayors across England, mostly in city regions centred on urban hubs such as Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham.

Devolution deals are agreed and implemented through bilateral negotiations between Whitehall and local leaders. George Osborne, as chancellor, established this model as part of the wider Northern Powerhouse agenda. Osborne and the Treasury saw mayoral leadership as essential to providing strong accountability and a single point of contact for the centre. Devolution during this era was explicitly conditional on areas adopting the mayoral model.¹ Specifically, powers were conferred upon mayoral combined authorities, formed of a group of local councils and headed by a directly elected mayor.

Greater Manchester was the first area to do a deal under this model in 2014 (see Figure 1), building on decades of collaboration between the region's 10 councils through the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA). Five similar deals were implemented over the next three years, in each of which a group of councils formed a combined authority, headed by an elected metro mayor, to which powers in areas such as transport, housing and skills would be devolved.

These six areas held their first mayoral elections in May 2017: Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, West of England, and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Three further MCAs have been formed since 2017: in South Yorkshire, the North of Tyne and West Yorkshire. A number of the nine MCAs have negotiated follow-up deals to deepen their powers, most recently including the 'trailblazer deals' concluded in early 2023 in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands.² Some attempts have failed along the way: including three MCA deals concluded in 2016 but withdrawn before implementation due to local political disagreements.

Figure 1 **Timeline of devolution deals in England**



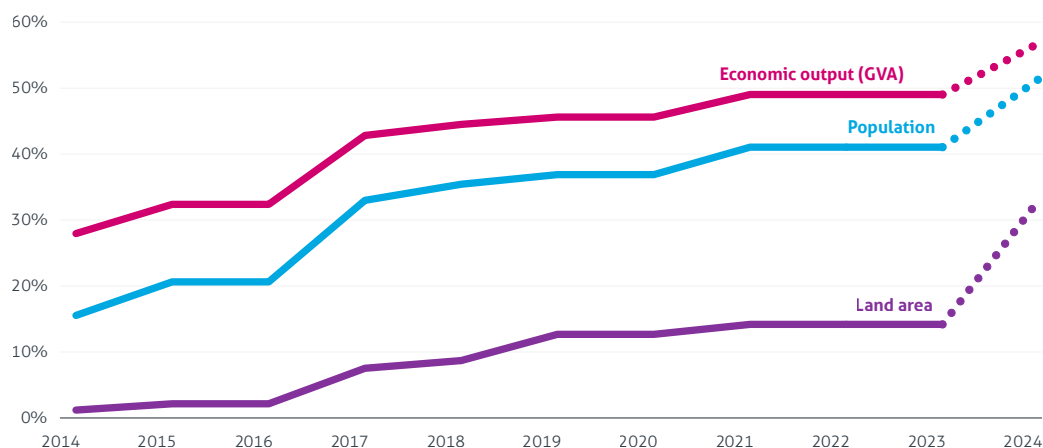
Source: Institute for Government analysis of UK government announcements, combined authority announcements, statutory instruments and news articles. Notes: South Yorkshire’s initial deal was never implemented due to disagreements on its geography; the combined authority first received powers after a deal agreed in 2020. Cornwall’s first devolution deal was a non-mayoral deal and a second agreed mayoral deal collapsed in 2023.

The government has made a renewed push towards devolution as part of its levelling up agenda, publishing a three-level devolution framework in February 2022 that details the powers on offer (see Annex B).³ Level three deals require the adoption of a directly elected mayor, and offer the widest set of devolved powers and funding from across several Whitehall departments, including control of devolved transport, housing, investment and skills budgets, and the power to create mayoral development corporations and impose a council tax precept. Level two deals do not require a mayor and offer a narrower set of powers – including skills funding and the ability to impose bus franchising. Level one deals are far more limited and offer few powers, instead focusing on supporting informal co-operation between local authorities; for instance, in reducing carbon emissions.

Level three is the stated preference of government, and all deals concluded since 2022 have taken this form. These deals can be concluded either with groups of councils coming together to form an MCA, or with individual county councils. Five such deals are due to come into effect in 2024. New MCAs will be created in the North East (superseding the existing North of Tyne Combined Authority) and in York and North Yorkshire. A new form of authority being created by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill – a mayoral combined county authority (MCCA) – will be established in the East

Midlands, comprised solely of the four upper-tier authorities, excluding the district councils from full membership. In Norfolk and Suffolk, power will be conferred directly on the existing county councils, which will move to a directly elected leadership model. If all these deals are implemented, over half the population of England (including Greater London, which has a different model of mayoral devolution) will be covered by devolution for the first time (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 **Proportion of England covered by mayoral devolution deals**

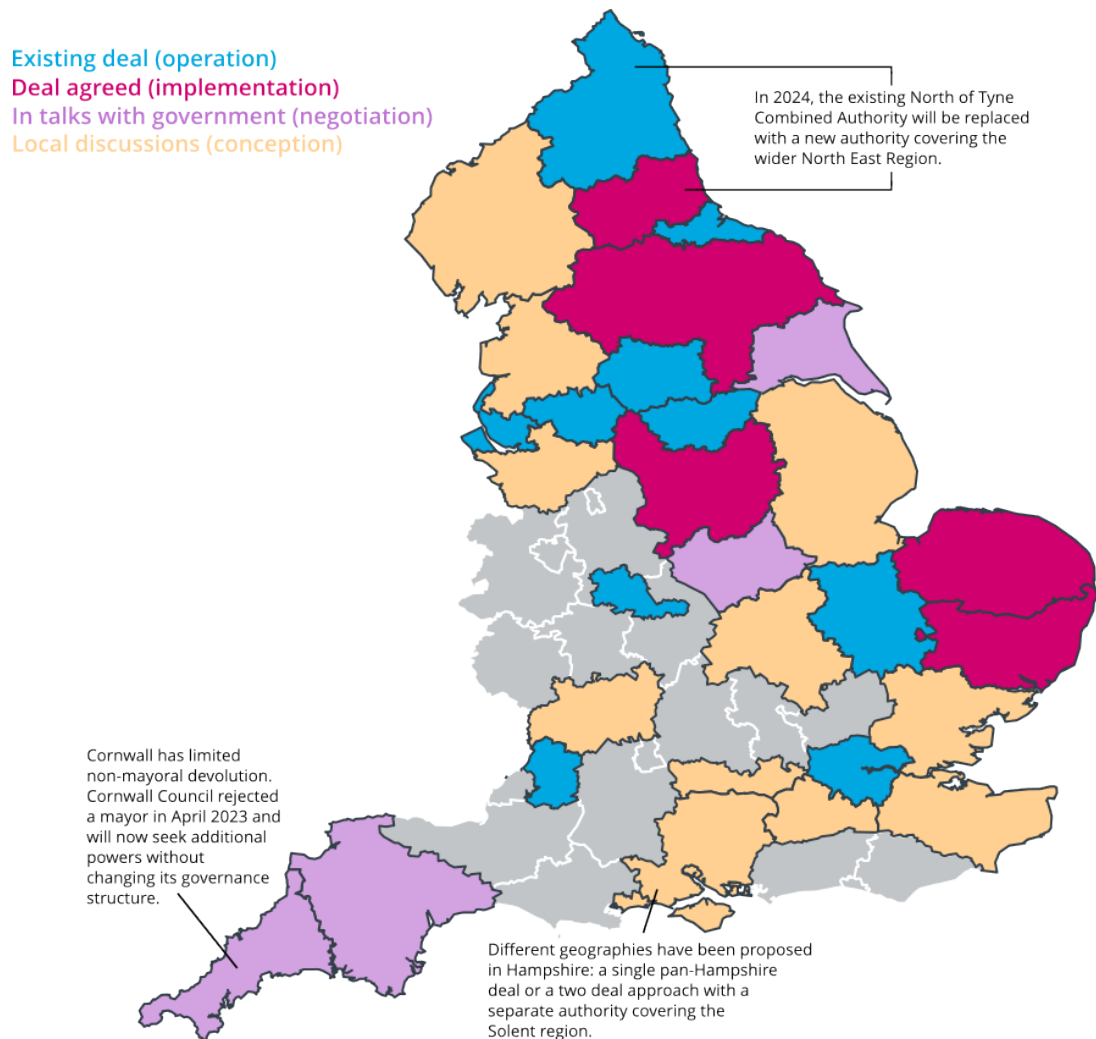


Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Regional gross value added (balanced) by industry: local authorities by ITL1 region, 2022; ONS, Estimates of the population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, 2021 and ONS, Standard Area Measurements for Administrative Areas in the United Kingdom, 2021. Notes: All data includes Greater London. Future deals are the East Midlands, York and North Yorkshire, Suffolk, Norfolk and the North East.

A further wave of deals is expected. In early 2023, Michael Gove, the levelling up secretary, highlighted Cumbria, Lancashire, Cheshire and Warrington, and Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire as prime candidates in northern England,⁴ although only the last of these is understood to have begun formal negotiations.⁵ Talks also continue over a potential deal in Devon and are due to restart in Cornwall after the council decided to pursue non-mayoral devolution instead of the level three deal signed in 2022.⁶ Negotiations have stalled in Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, although it is not clear whether the process has been formally abandoned.⁷ In addition, local authorities in other counties including Essex,⁸ Lincolnshire⁹ and Hampshire¹⁰ have publicly set out devolution aspirations, and in many other places exploratory conversations between local leaders continue.

Meanwhile, following the conclusion of the Greater Manchester and West Midlands trailblazer deals, existing MCAs in places such as Liverpool City Region, West and South Yorkshire are seeking to negotiate similar deals. There are, in other words, parts of England currently progressing through each and every point of the devolution deal life cycle (see Figure 3, with full detail in Annex C).

Figure 3 Existing and proposed devolution deals in England as of July 2023



Source: Institute for Government analysis of UK government announcements, local government announcements and news articles. Notes: Areas deemed to be in talks with the government are those listed in the levelling up white paper that have not yet agreed a deal, while 'local discussions' refers to other areas where proposals are understood to be being developed among local leaders.

Labour has promised further devolution if it enters power. Claiming that “power and control are hoarded by a few people in Whitehall and Westminster”, the Brown commission established by the Labour leadership recommended that further powers over skills, employment, transport and housing be devolved to mayors and combined authorities, including devolved control of job centres, careers advice and landlord licensing.¹¹ These proposals may not all find their way into the manifesto, but Sir Keir Starmer has specifically committed to introduce a “Take Back Control” bill that will give local areas the right to request new powers from Whitehall.¹²

So whichever party wins the next general election, progress on devolution in England looks set to continue. And as local leaders across the country develop their proposition for devolution, enter negotiations, implement a deal, establish a combined authority, or seek further powers, we hope they will find useful the guidance and insight we set out in the chapters that follow.

1. Conception: how to develop a shared vision for devolution

A devolution deal must be conceived before it is born. During the conception phase, which takes place before formal negotiations with Whitehall can begin, local leaders develop and articulate a shared expression of *why* they wish to pursue a devolution deal, *what* benefits devolution will deliver, *which* powers they wish to see devolved, *where* the proposed deal will apply in terms of its geographical contours, and *how* the leaders plan to work together to make a success of devolution.

This must be a collective process, especially where the plan is for power to be conferred upon a combined authority, formed of a group of neighbouring councils. The success of such deals once implemented rests upon the ability of places to reach consensus on investment priorities, transport plans, skills strategies and the like. More fundamentally, success requires the frame of reference for policy and spending decisions to shift from the individual local area to the larger regional scale.

The foundations for effective joint working should therefore be laid during the initial conception stage, when local political leaders and other stakeholders first come together to develop their shared proposition for devolution. Getting this phase right is crucial.

Places seeking a deal should build a deep and wide coalition in support of devolution

Devolution succeeds where it is built on a broad foundation of local political and stakeholder support. In some cases, a single local leader may play a disproportionate role in building this coalition of support, but **a combined authority cannot be formed without the agreement of all the constituent councils, so collective leadership of the process is essential.** One senior figure put it simply: “The clue is in the title – combined authority. This only works if people are willing to coalesce around a strategy.” That means not only building a consensus with other local council leaders, but also engaging with councillors at large, all of whom will get to vote on whether to ratify any devolution deal. As Aileen Murphie, a former director at the National Audit Office, said: “Leaders must be able to communicate the purpose and benefits of joint working to all the members of constituent councils to agree a deal.”¹

In two-tier local government areas, the government has made clear that it will now conclude devolution deals only with county councils, not their constituent districts. This is the case whether the model is for devolution to a single county council – as in Norfolk and Suffolk – or to a new combined county authority, as in the East Midlands. The agreement of district councils will therefore not be required for these deals to be implemented, but they nonetheless hold important policy levers – for instance, relating to housing and planning – that interact with devolved responsibility for improving transport systems and driving urban regeneration. So **even if they are not**

formal signatories to a deal, district council leaders should be engaged at an early stage and treated as partners in developing and promoting the case for devolution.

In exchange they are likely to want reassurance about how devolution will protect their status and engage them in decision making.

Depending on the precise powers being sought, there will also be a longer cast list of local institutions whose involvement will be important to the successful delivery of devolved functions. This may include large local businesses, colleges and training providers, transport authorities, NHS bodies, police and fire services, universities and more. **Engagement with this wider set of private and public sector stakeholders should not be treated as a tick-box exercise, but as a way to build a wider coalition of support and to strengthen the devolution proposition.** Drawing on external expertise and developing lasting relationships will support the successful implementation of a future deal.

In addition, **local MPs (especially those of the governing party) can be influential players in determining whether any proposed deal makes progress, both as advocates and potential opponents.** Opposition of local MPs to the mayoral leadership model was reportedly one reason why the Cornwall devolution deal signed in 2022 was abandoned by the county council in early 2023. Opposition to the mayoral model is a common reason for MPs to oppose devolution deals. For instance, the Cornwall MP George Eustice argued that the mayoral model “goes against our sensibilities”.² Similarly, the Newcastle MP Nick Brown opposed the 2015 North East deal for reasons including “the imposition of a Mayor on the region”. He also criticised the government for devolving responsibility for certain problems without providing sufficient capacity and resources to enable places to solve them.³

The local authorities driving the process should therefore map out the landscape of important stakeholders, and invest time and effort to engage them in developing the proposition for devolution from the outset. Where this is treated as an afterthought, deals are more likely to run into difficulties down the line.

There have been cases of devolution deals being pushed through despite local commitment that was lukewarm at best. According to several interviewees this is what happened in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, where ministers persuaded reluctant local leaders to sign up for a mayoral deal in 2017. The outcome was a combined authority riven by conflict and mistrust, leading to limited progress being made on core priorities such as transport and housing, according to several interviewees. In 2022, the government established an independent ‘improvement board’ to provide external challenge and advice to the combined authority and to report back on progress to DLUHC.⁴ The lesson one observer drew was that: “Leadership is more than just ‘we are doing this because we have been asked to do it’. There needs to be a commitment among all the parties to making it work.”

The geography of devolution has to be coherent – but messy boundaries need not prevent progress

Deciding upon the proposed geography for a potential devolution deal is a key decision local leaders need to make before substantive progress is possible. The government's preference is to devolve power to institutions operating at the scale of 'functional economic areas' (FEAs) centred on major urban hubs. The logic of this approach is to align economic decision making powers at the scale at which economic activity actually operates. There is no single method for defining FEAs, but indicators used to determine their contours include travel-to-work flows, travel-to-learn flows, housing market areas, business sectoral clusters and existing transport networks.⁵

The government is also willing to conclude deals across a 'whole county geography', where individual county councils bid to take on devolved powers rather than forming combined authorities with their neighbours. This was the case for the 2022 Suffolk and Norfolk county deals, which were concluded separately despite the potential alternative of a two-county combined authority deal as was negotiated (then abandoned) in 2016.⁶

In addition, the government has specific requirements to bear in mind such as that devolution areas must cover at least half a million people and that the spreading patchwork of deals does not leave isolated areas without any potential to secure a deal of their own. These requirements stymied a proposed deal with Leicestershire County Council in 2022, due to the refusal of the directly elected leader of Leicester City Council to join forces.⁷

Within these constraints, there is some flexibility for places to define their own preferred devolution geography. In some parts of England, there is a natural scale for devolution, based on: (a) strong economic linkages – including an evidence base supporting the idea of the region as a clear FEA; (b) an established culture and institutional machinery of partnership working across the region; and (c) spatial alignment with other parts of the public sector (such as integrated care boards, police and local enterprise partnership boundaries). Greater Manchester is commonly cited as the place where these three preconditions were most firmly established prior to the conclusion of the area's first devolution deal in 2014.

However, few other deals tick all these boxes. For one thing, there is often no simple way to delineate the borders of an FEA, especially in rural or polycentric areas – economic geography is not a pure science. But in addition, local and national political complications have led to deals being concluded on a scale smaller than an economic analysis might suggest is optimal. For instance, Clive Betts MP, chair of the levelling up committee and MP for Sheffield South East, told us that the South Yorkshire devolution deal was on too small a geography and did not cover the full travel-to-work area centred on Sheffield as originally intended.

In many areas, it is also impossible to align a devolution deal with other boundaries. England's subnational governance map is notoriously messy, with different parts of the public sector operating on their own bespoke geographies. A recent report produced

by the Institute for Government and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy identified no fewer than 10 different service geographies across England, none of which map perfectly on to each other or with local government boundaries.⁸

Devolution deals have been implemented in spite of geographical complexities, but this has sometimes limited their ability to co-ordinate across different functions and required further reform to bring boundaries into alignment. In the West Midlands, the combined authority (WMCA) previously overlapped with three LEP areas, making it harder to develop a single regional economic strategy. This is now changing as part of the government's wider reform of LEPs, which will see their functions integrated into MCAs and local councils.⁹ In the North of Tyne, meanwhile, the combined authority (NTCA) is not coterminous with the transport authority and metro system, which has meant that transport powers have not been devolved. This too will change in 2024 as NTCA is superseded by a larger North East Mayoral Combined Authority that will take on transport powers.

In an ideal world, there would be greater alignment of different administrative geographies – both with each other and with underlying patterns of economic activity. However, structural reorganisation carries costs and takes time, so a big bang reform is unlikely to be a government priority. Indeed, as one former official put it, “you are never going to get a perfect geography”. In particular, “any non-urban devolution deal is going to have to deal with a more complex economic challenge. I would not say that is necessarily a deal breaker.” **While geographical coherence is important, many places will have to work with a degree of messiness, and the absence of neat borders should not be taken as a reason not to proceed.**

Successful devolution requires a shared narrative that offers benefits to all local areas within the region

There is no single template for how to build a vision for devolution, and each region will start in a different place in terms of the strength of existing relationships and the prior history of partnership-working across local boundaries. In general, **the case for devolution should focus on the added value devolution can deliver at the city region or county level** – for instance, through improved co-ordination of different economic policy levers – **rather than a narrow focus on securing funding for a shopping list of projects in each local area.**

Where possible, a Whitehall figure advised, **places should look beyond their immediate investment priorities or public service pressures and think about the long game.** According to this official, “where deals have been really successful, areas have come forward and thought about where they want to be in 10 years’ time rather than one year’s time”.

As noted above, Greater Manchester is consistently cited as first among equals in having a long history and entrenched culture of working in partnership across the city region, and a regularly refreshed strategy that sets out common priorities for the region. In its first iteration, published in 2009, the Greater Manchester Strategy articulated a medium-term vision to transform Greater Manchester into “a more

connected, talented and greener city region where the prosperity secured is enjoyed by the many and not the few”, and detailed 11 priority areas for action ranging from transport connectivity to early years intervention.¹⁰ A senior GMCA official told us that **the value of the economic strategy has been to provide a focal point for conversations and decisions about policy choices and spending priorities**. “Even if they have not read it, everybody knows there is one.”

Some of the other early deals were also built on solid foundations. Devolution to the Tees Valley, for instance, was preceded by years of joint working between the five constituent authorities, in particular through the LEP (Tees Valley Unlimited), focused on a clear shared interest in economic regeneration of the region as its industrial base declined. In recent years, this has evolved into an economic strategy founded on the vision of Tees Valley as a leader in low-carbon energy and industry.¹¹ According to one local figure, the region also “benefits from the neatness of the geography too – it operates as a clear economic geography with clear boundaries and priorities within that boundary”.

Other places enjoyed a less smooth transition. In West Yorkshire, devolution was delayed for several years by arguments about the appropriate geographical basis for devolution. A proposition for a deal encompassing parts of North Yorkshire with close economic links to Leeds was not progressed by government after opposition from North Yorkshire County Council.¹² A subsequent attempt to create a Yorkshire-wide devolution deal was also rejected by ministers, on the grounds that this was not a coherent economic area.¹³ The deal eventually concluded encompassed Leeds and four nearby areas, rather than the wider Leeds City Region that was then the footprint of the local enterprise partnership and transport strategy.¹⁴ The five West Yorkshire authorities have therefore had to work to create a new shared vision to unite around, which one interviewee described as “going from our industrial heritage, to where we are now, to where we want to go”. This has now been set out in a ‘West Yorkshire Plan’ that emphasises the region’s strengths in manufacturing, technology and innovation, and sets out five ‘2040 missions’ for improving economic and social wellbeing.¹⁵

In the West of England Combined Authority (WECA), formed of Bristol and two smaller neighbouring authorities, the development of a shared narrative has also been a work in progress, due to local political rivalries and a need to tackle perceptions of dominance of the region by Bristol. A recent independent review found that there was a lack of agreement about the purpose of the institution and that the authority was “currently unable to fully amplify its great regional achievements and those of its partners due to local arguments”.¹⁶ The challenge, according to one local figure, was “to ensure that people across the region – wherever they are – understand the benefits of devolution and see that investment across the region has benefits beyond the narrow boundaries of that investment”.

We heard similar stories in other places. In Liverpool City Region, for instance, the six authorities that came together to form a non-mayoral combined authority in 2014 had less experience of effective joint working than places like Greater Manchester. The initial devolution deal concluded in 2015 was agreed primarily as a way to secure

additional funding for each local area, in a region whose public services had been hard hit by post-2010 austerity. One interviewee recalled that the combined authority was initially conceived of as little more than a legal vehicle through which government grants could be routed and distributed to the constituent councils.

More recently, in the East Midlands, those seeking to broker the deal were working at pace to conclude it over the spring and summer of 2022. It was recognised that “the vision was going to be emergent” and that **in the short term the focus had to be on setting aside political differences and focusing the case for devolution on high-level objectives that were shared across the region**. These included a clear consensus around “catching up and getting a ‘fair share’”. That narrative succeeded in bringing partners together, “even if the ten-year vision was not crisp and clear”.

Several interviewees also pointed out that **any strategy developed in the formative period of a devolution deal will in any case need to be flexible enough to adapt to the arrival of a mayor**, who will come in to office with specific manifesto commitments. We return to this point in Chapter 4.

Developing a vision for devolution requires institutional resource and a shared evidence base

Developing a proposition for devolution and building a coalition of support for the process is a task that has to be resourced appropriately, so local leaders have to set aside sufficient staff capacity. This can be hard to justify given the delivery pressures most local authorities are under after years of austerity. But one way or another, **it is necessary to build a small team of people with a blend of management, policy, analytical and negotiation capabilities** to run what is effectively the first phase of a substantial organisational change project.

The staff for this team will often come from the constituent authorities, which helps ensure that the emergent case for devolution reflects the interests and concerns of each local area as well as being trusted by the political leaders. One local government figure noted how important it was to “make it clear to the local authorities that they have people in the room that are theirs”. But senior officials may only be able to work on devolution on a part-time basis, so additional capacity may be required if budgets allow. In one place, a senior civil servant was recruited on secondment to help pave the way for a deal, bringing valuable knowledge of and connections in Whitehall. In others, private sector consultants have been commissioned to support the process.

Another lesson is that in most places, **there will be existing building blocks of partnership working, but leadership and direction is required to put the pieces together**. Asked for advice for places setting out on the devolution journey for the first time, one former council leader who had been through the process recommended that **areas should “do an analysis of how they already work together – they likely already work together more than they realise”**. This might be through formal structures such as transport authorities and LEPs, which have provided vital support and expertise to many embryonic devolution deals. It can also be through less formal alliances of local authorities and other bodies, such as the Partnership for South Hampshire, which

has pushed the idea of a devolution deal along the Solent, including Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight.¹⁷ Places may also be able to draw upon academic expertise in local universities to help shape their strategy.

One building block that is worth investing in is a shared economic evidence base.

In several places where devolution deals have been implemented, an independent economic review has been commissioned – either before or shortly after a combined authority has been established. The first such exercise was in Greater Manchester, where an influential review concluded that the Manchester city region was “a highly coherent economic geography, with substantial travel across local authority boundaries for work, education, and recreation”.¹⁸ Similar exercises have since been carried out in regions including Sheffield City Region,¹⁹ Liverpool City Region²⁰ and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.²¹ In other places such as Tees Valley²² and the West Midlands,²³ the development of a shared strategic economic plan for the region played a similar function.

Such evidence-based reviews can serve several distinct functions. First, they can map the extent of existing economic flows to support a proposition for devolution. Second, they can identify specific ways in which devolution could help strengthen economic connectivity; for instance, through strategic transport planning that better connects residential and commercial centres in different local areas. And third, the very process of producing a shared evidence base can help to build a sense of shared purpose and identity across the region.

Building trust and relationships takes time and effort

Local political considerations often create incentives to focus on the particular – perhaps short-term – interests of a given local area rather than the broader long-term wellbeing of the region at large, so it is vital to invest effort and time into building relationships and a culture of joint working across local boundaries. One close observer of devolution argued: “You can have the business cases, the analysis, in many places it is very self-evident, but it is the softer stuff that matters.”

Building trust and relationships matters at both political and official levels; in particular at the top of organisations, given the ability of leaders to define an organisational culture by their example. Consequently, according to the Local Government Association: “The most important and potentially challenging task is maintaining relationships and good collaborative behaviours at leader and chief executive level.”²⁴ In one area seeking a devolution deal, we heard how discussions on devolution at monthly meetings of the county’s chief executives and leaders’ forums were a key factor in keeping the momentum going.

Another lesson is that **where relationships are comparatively underdeveloped at the outset, a more formal approach will be required**. As one official noted, in comparing the approach of different combined authorities: “When you do not have that natural relationship, you make up for it with process.” If trust and collaboration are not the established default then more attention has to be paid to ensure all parties are kept informed and given regular opportunities to put their concerns and priorities

on the table. A former council leader highlighted the challenge: “It is hard work and persistence, regular meetings, sharing of information, being very clear on how decisions are made – particularly around money – and building up trust.”

Particular difficulties can arise in places with a weak sense of shared regional identity and/or concern about the disproportionate influence of one particular local authority. An observer of the formation of the West Midlands Combined Authority recalled that both of these issues applied in that particular case, and highlighted the important role the leader of Birmingham City Council played in assuaging fears that the eventual devolution deal would benefit his city at the expense of other parts of the region. This concern also led to the decision to drop the name ‘Greater Birmingham’ in favour of West Midlands. Similar rationales led to the devolution deals centred on Sheffield and Leeds being branded ‘South Yorkshire’ and ‘West Yorkshire’ respectively.

A useful piece of advice we heard was that **it can be helpful to create the space for senior leaders to have broader conversations about shared challenges, on matters unrelated to the devolution question, to build rapport and a sense of common endeavour.** Examples given included discussions of the local response to Covid and to the management of the influx of Ukrainian refugees. This was described by a former combined authority insider as the “scaffolding that helps you build trust” beyond the narrower scope of the devolution deal an area may be seeking.

One former leader described how **collaboration between local authorities became a lot easier as soon as there was a specific quantum of money allocated to the region to provide a focal point for collective decision making.** Speaking of pre-devolution local growth deals, this person told us: “If there were a very positive defined resource coming in, you realise very quickly the step change in progress and that is very empowering.” In another region, the devolution of skills funding was described as a game-changer in bringing leaders together: “The devolution of AEB [the adult education budget] was one of the first times the local authorities and the leaders could see what they were getting out of it.”

Another interviewee argued that **it can be helpful to base a wider agreement on one or more specific projects from which all parts of the region will benefit,** such as the potential prize of a better-resourced and locally controlled bus system. Another such example was the commitment in and around Birmingham to develop an economic strategy centred on the construction of HS2, which was regarded as “an unprecedented opportunity to establish the West Midlands as a world-class business location”.²⁵ In another region, we were told simply: **“Do not waste a crisis.”** An urgent need to bring more resource to a struggling area or to invest in a creaking public transport system can be the catalyst to bring otherwise wary partners to the table, despite their concerns.

Another common-sense point is that **it is sensible to leave more contentious issues to the end of the process, so long as those are not critical to the core of the deal.** As one person put it: “Once you had people working together, the difficult issues were easier

to resolve as they already had a bond.” A recent example of this comes from Essex, whose devolution bid to government in 2023 left open the question of whether the deal should include a metro mayor, due to a lack of consensus.²⁶

Local leaders should aim to produce a clear ‘expression of interest’ that demonstrates their readiness to enter negotiations

Places that manage the above tests successfully will end up with a clear vision for devolution to submit to central government. Having seen many past deals collapse, Whitehall naturally prioritises deals that have visible local political support. As one interviewee told us: “Ministers are interested in a sense of real strong political consensus.” Another source made clear that “what we want would be some alignment of priorities with an ability to come together and present a single voice into government and the outside world”. If that is lacking, then places will find themselves at the back of the queue.

There are no specific requirements for how this consensus should be articulated. But many places will produce a written output that sets out a realistic set of ‘asks’ and demonstrates to Whitehall that they are ready to commence negotiations. In 2022, it appears that places identified by government as lead candidates for devolution were provided with a template in which to set out which powers they were seeking and why, what their governance model would be, and practical information such as who would lead the negotiations. One such submission – by Devon, Torbay and Plymouth councils – has been published, providing a useful insight into what is often a closed process.²⁷

Other places have opted to produce and publish a bespoke ‘expression of interest’ document to seek to get the process started. For instance, in 2022 Hampshire County Council published a glossy bid for an ambitious pan-Hampshire deal that the council described as a “Level three plus” proposition, as it would go beyond the level three offer set out in the devolution framework.²⁸ More recently, in March 2023, the councils of ‘Greater Essex’ produced an expression of interest consisting of eight strategic priorities that devolution would help deliver and detail of the powers being sought, while keeping open the question of whether or not this would be a level two or three deal.²⁹ A government source told us that producing such a document “is not a formal gate for negotiations, but it does no harm”.

Whatever precise form it takes, **the production and publication of a detailed expression of interest in devolution bearing the signatures of all the relevant local leaders sends a powerful signal to Whitehall that a place is ready to enter negotiations.** There is a good case for putting such documents into the public domain, both for reasons of democratic accountability and because this can act as a public commitment device that makes it harder for any partners to pull out of the process later on.

The above discussion has sought to pull together a range of insights for how places can produce a compelling proposition for devolution. This is just the first phase of the process. In the next chapter we discuss the challenges faced in negotiating the terms of devolution with central government, if ministers and officials are persuaded by the case that a given area puts to them.

2. Negotiation: how to reach agreement with Whitehall on the terms of devolution

Entering into formal negotiations with the government over the terms of devolution represents an important milestone in the devolution process. The start of the negotiation phase may be signalled by a government announcement – the levelling up white paper explicitly invited 11 areas to enter into negotiations over a devolution deal. At other times, there may be a lower-profile start to the process, but ministers need to take an explicit decision to open talks with a given area over a potential devolution deal, allowing their officials to engage in talks with local counterparts.

Not all negotiations are successful. Our research has identified a number of factors that can affect the likelihood of a positive outcome. One is that local leaders manage to maintain a united front and to keep other important stakeholders involved and onside during the process. Negotiations can also be resource-intensive, so require a certain amount of staff time and a shared evidence base to inform the talks. Places also have to show a degree of realism about the government’s requirements and expectations, so it can be valuable to invest in relationships across Whitehall and knowledge of how the centre works.

In addition, places often have to take a flexible approach that banks smaller wins in an initial devolution package and awaits a future opportunity to expand upon devolution in future negotiations, once the first deal has bedded in successfully.

Government holds most of the cards in negotiations – places must keep their requirements and concerns at front of mind

The current model of devolution gives ministers the power to decide which devolution proposals to prioritise, so places have to be aware of and realistic about government expectations if they even want to get their foot in the door. Demand for devolution has historically outstripped supply. The record shows that the government has rarely been able to negotiate more than a few deals at any one time, due to the limited nature of both institutional capacity and political capital.

In July 2021, the government invited local leaders across England to come forward to signal their interest in a deal, and to show how devolution would lead to “demonstrable improvements in governance, efficiency and local service join-up as part of the deal that support the delivery of levelling up”.¹ The government received 18 formal expressions of interest in response to this call, committed in February 2022 to opening negotiations with nine of these areas, and concluded deals with six by the end of 2022.² The 2015 government call for devolution proposals generated an even longer list of 38 bids,³ including four from Scotland and Wales, leading eventually to the formation of nine MCAs by 2021.

The government has set out four principles to guide the negotiation of future devolution deals: effective leadership, sensible geography, flexibility and appropriate accountability.⁴ These principles underpin the three-level devolution framework that lists the specific powers and funding on offer. **The publication of a clear framework and principles for devolution is welcome** – and in line with past Institute for Government recommendations⁵ – but the reality is they leave government a substantial amount of freedom to interpret these requirements as they see fit. One former insider admitted: “The criteria are quite subjective and ministers may want to prioritise a place for noble or less noble reasons.”

It is the prerogative of ministers to decide whether to proceed with devolution in any given case, but we believe there should be greater transparency about decision making. At the least, **when it has invited bids for devolution, the government should respond publicly to expressions of interest and explain why – if that is its decision – it has decided not to enter into negotiations in any given case.** As it stands, it is not even on public record which are the nine places whose 2021 expressions of interest were ‘left on read’.

The government prioritises deals that align with its four principles – although ministers have substantial discretion in how these are applied

While there is certainly scope for improved transparency, the four principles published in the levelling up white paper provide some useful insight into the government’s decision making criteria about which potential deals to prioritise. Places seeking devolution are well advised to keep these criteria at the forefront of their mind.

Satisfying the *effective leadership* principle requires places to make a clear and decisive choice as to whether an area is willing to adopt mayoral leadership in exchange for deeper devolution. As noted above, the devolution framework in theory offers a choice between three levels of devolution, with the widest set of powers and budgets on offer only for level three mayoral deals, reflecting the firm government view that directly elected leaders provide stronger local leadership. Mayoral deals have been ushered to the front of the queue – no level one or two deals have been concluded since the framework was published, leading to frustration among some local leaders who have put forward proposals for level two deals.⁶ Nonetheless, there now appears to be a realistic prospect that a small number of non-mayoral deals will be concluded in 2023 or 2024, in county areas such as Lancashire, Devon and Cornwall.

We agree that some powers should be devolved only to mayor-led areas, given the need for a strong single locus of accountability, but Michael Gove has himself acknowledged that there are “some places where it [a directly elected mayor] won’t work”.⁷ So it is better to conclude a weaker deal than to push so hard for mayoral deals that negotiations collapse – as has happened in several past cases, such as the original North East devolution deal signed in 2015 and abandoned a year later.⁸ According to Jack Shaw, a local government researcher, in several areas “there is appetite for

building on more informal structures to promote partnership working, such as a central area growth board across Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire, and a leaders' board with a rotating chair across Cheshire".⁹

We encourage the government to conclude some non-mayoral devolution deals as a way to strengthen collaboration across local boundaries, with the aspiration that this might lead to deeper mayoral devolution deals in future. This was effectively the path that Greater Manchester took, building on many years of increasingly formalised collaboration before adopting mayoral leadership in 2017. It was also the stated promise of the white paper, which described the devolution framework as "designed to enable areas to deepen devolution over time recognising that, as institutions mature, they can gain additional powers".¹⁰

Successfully negotiated devolution deals also have to comply with the government's somewhat imprecise definition of 'sensible geography'. We note above how this concept is defined. The government's preference is to conclude deals that align with economic geography, but it is open to deals with individual or sets of counties, subject to the minimum population requirement of 500,000. Negotiations cannot get under way until there is local agreement on the proposed geography. However, history shows that Whitehall may put places under pressure to reopen their plans – as occurred in 2022, when Durham was persuaded to join the deal for a wider North East combined authority rather than secure its own county deal. Again **the lesson is that local leaders have to be adaptable in light of – sometimes shifting – government requirements.**

The third stated principle commits the government to *flexibility*. As stated in the devolution framework, "there will also be scope to negotiate further powers, on a case-by-case basis, and an opportunity to adopt innovative local proposals to address specific challenges", while it was also noted that "some powers may only be available to certain authorities or geographies". For instance, policing powers can be devolved to mayors only if the police force area aligns precisely with the geography of the wider deal. In practice, the government tends to be flexible to suit its own interests rather than in response to requests for special treatment from places. One person involved in a recent deal told us there was little real negotiation as "government actually holds all the cards". Another observer commented that "there is a lot of cut and paste text in the prospective deals".

While this can be a source of frustration at the local level, there is a sound logic in this approach: negotiating entirely bespoke deals on each occasion would be both resource-intensive and a source of unhelpful complexity and confusion across the country. Our view is that the devolution framework offers the potential for a sensible middle ground, whereby deals can vary but within the confines of a clear set of options and principles. Given the recent conclusion of the GMCA and WMCA trailblazer deals, **we recommend that the existing devolution framework be refined and extended to reflect what are de facto 'level four' deals, so that other places keen to secure similar powers have clarity about what may be on the table.**

The final principle emphasises the need for *appropriate accountability*. Local leaders should therefore be prepared to convince government that scrutiny is a core part of their plans. Exact mechanisms do not need to be finalised at this stage, but leaders should have a high-level view of how the mayor and the authority will be held to account. In addition to the statutory requirements to establish scrutiny and audit committees, the government expects combined authorities to promote an internal “sustained culture of scrutiny”. **Places negotiating with the centre should develop a convincing narrative for how this culture of scrutiny will be created**, reflecting the three pillars of scrutiny outlined in the government’s new accountability framework: local checks and balances; accountability to the public; and accountability to the UK government.¹¹

Beyond these technical considerations, it is important to keep in mind that devolution is part of broader government strategy: ministers do not negotiate devolution deals in a vacuum or for their own sake. Prioritisation of particular deals will be informed by wider policy and political considerations, so **local leaders should frame their proposals to align with the wider objectives and strategy of the government of the day**.

Devolution deals concluded under George Osborne, in city regions such as Greater Manchester and Liverpool, were aligned with the aim of boosting economic growth outside London and the government’s view that stronger cities in the north and Midlands was the key to success.¹² More recent deals are centred around the levelling up objectives of reducing regional disparities and boosting pride in place. **Successful deals enable ministers to present devolution as a visible sign of progress towards their wider objectives**, so local sensitivity to ministerial concerns and incentives will increase the chances of success.

Negotiations proceed on a ‘twin track’ basis at both political and official levels

Successful negotiations require engagement at both political and official levels, each serving different functions. Politicians will give officials a negotiating mandate and resolve contentious issues, while officials on both sides will work through the details. As one former combined authority official put it: “You had to weigh how much progress can be made at an official level and what needed political engagement to be resolved.”

The composition of local negotiating teams is an important decision for places to take at the outset of the process. Areas may take different approaches depending on the strength of local relationships and the number of councils involved, but one approach is to nominate one individual council leader and one chief executive (from a different council) to head up negotiations on the political and official levels, working closely in partnership with their counterparts from the other local authorities involved. In Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, for instance, the lead negotiators named in 2022 were the leader of Devon County Council and the chief executive of Plymouth City Council. A senior official from the county council was also appointed as programme manager, and it was also agreed that the area’s eight district councils would be represented by Mid Devon District Council.¹³

Negotiations are resource-intensive, particularly for a group of local authorities seeking to negotiate their first devolution deal. A former official told us: “Do not underestimate how much capacity you are going to need to sustain those negotiations. Once they get going they can move really quickly.” But strategic and policy capacity is in short supply in local government, creating a practical challenge for places negotiating deals. Local officials may be asked to support the process on a part-time basis, in what one senior local leader described as a suboptimal “make do and mend approach”. Existing combined authorities negotiating deals may have more resource to devote directly to the process, including strategy and government relations staff, but here too leaders might need to bring in additional capacity, if budgets allow. One combined authority official said: “We had to bring in an external project manager for document control and tracking different versions, managing the meetings, and we really needed it.” **The government should itself bear in mind the resource imbalance in negotiations and offer informal support wherever possible to places working through the negotiation process.**

While detailed day-to-day engagement takes place between local and central government officials, the success of the negotiations depends on maintaining local political support for the process. It is therefore vital to **establish frequent meetings and a regular flow of information between officials involved in negotiations and local leaders across the area.** In regions where a group of local authorities come together for the first time, we heard how local leaders were “very sensitive about anything that looks anything like moving power from local authorities to the combined authority” so it is essential to “make sure there are no surprises” that might undermine local commitment.

Political leaders need to be involved at crucial points of the negotiations to resolve disputes that officials cannot settle. Places also need to consider who they should be lobbying at any given point, depending on which Whitehall departments are delaying progress in negotiations. Personal relationships can hold great value in this context. We heard that direct discussions between Andy Street and Theresa May were important in advancing the second West Midlands devolution deal. **Involving local leaders directly in talks also helps maintain political ownership of the process,** with a senior local official telling us: “A political moment is really important, because our politicians need to feel they are doing something with ministers.” Another interviewee agreed that direct communication between local leaders and ministers can be invaluable in accelerating negotiations, noting that “in some cases there is a formal process, in some cases it is come and knock on the minister’s door”.

Engagement with local politicians should extend beyond engagement with council leaders. It is council leaders who are the ultimate local signatories to devolution deals, but ratification requires the agreement of a majority of councillors in each council in the region. So even if this slows down the process, it is important to engage councillors at large during the process. Commenting on the 2016 wave of devolution negotiations, the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny highlighted that while “a tightly defined negotiation cast list can work through and refine proposals rapidly... there is more political capital to be lost by keeping the process private”.¹⁴ Recounting negotiations

on the expanded North East deal, Jamie Driscoll, the North of Tyne mayor, credits the local authority leaders in the area for “bringing their councillor colleagues’ concerns to the table and getting agreement”.¹⁵

Negotiations take place at several levels – success requires the agility to operate across these different domains

Participants at our roundtable emphasised the distinction between parallel sets of negotiations that take place as a deal is hammered out. As one put it: “There are three strands to this: negotiation in Whitehall, negotiation in local government, and negotiations between central and local.”

At the local level, **places have to prioritise and focus their efforts on a subset of particular important items, given the resource imbalance they face in negotiating with Whitehall.** Even well-established combined authorities find this challenging. One person involved in recent trailblazer negotiations in Greater Manchester said they had identified “a small number of things we wanted to land – single settlement, skills devolution, rail partnership, and housing” and focused the bulk of their negotiating capital into these areas.

Another lesson is that **it can be helpful to involve other local stakeholders, such as universities and businesses, in the internal negotiations.** A senior official told us: “Bringing private sector colleagues in to talk about the importance of skills devolution to HM Treasury and Number 10 was really important in moving forward the negotiations.” A representative of a large business told us his company had not been engaged, but that bringing them on board might have “shifted the balance of power” in the negotiations, due to their ability to speak authoritatively about investment opportunities that devolution could unlock.

The size and complexity of Whitehall can make the negotiation process a daunting experience for places seeking to conclude a devolution deal. DLUHC is the main contact point, but the agreement of many other departments is required before deals can be concluded. An official confirmed that “anything with funding implications is discussed with the Treasury”, with other relevant departments including transport, education, work and pensions, and the successor departments to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). DLUHC therefore plays a key role not just in representing the government in negotiations with local areas, but also in helping local officials to understand government policy and navigate Whitehall. One combined authority official said it could be difficult for people with no central government experience even to grasp how Whitehall operates as a collection of semi-autonomous departments, rather than a unitary entity with a single voice.

Participants at our roundtable praised DLUHC as a partner, describing its officials as “some of the most communicative in Whitehall” and feeling that DLUHC and a prospective combined authority were “part of one team working to make the case to the rest of government”. Other departments earned more mixed reviews. One former MCA official said: “Education negotiations were always difficult; DWP were OK to do pilot stuff with, but nothing structural; and BEIS was an archipelago of different

agendas that could be quite difficult to stitch together". We also heard how the Treasury "blew hot and cold" on devolution, but that the current chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, was regarded as supportive. What is clear is that **DLUHC is the main gateway into Whitehall, but places negotiating with the centre also benefit from developing strong relationships across different departments, as well as from recruiting people with experience of how government works.**

A further challenge local areas face derives from the high level of staff turnover in Whitehall. It is common for officials to change roles every 18 months, often moving on to teams and policy areas unconnected to their previous work. The Institute for Government's annual *Whitehall Monitor* report found that 13.6% of civil servants moved departments or left the civil service entirely between March 2021 and March 2022. Turnover was higher in policy-focused departments such as DLUHC, HM Treasury and BEIS, and this figure does not include intra-departmental turnover, such as an official moving to a new team on promotion.¹⁶ **Local areas negotiating devolution deals should therefore seek to build deep connections with whole teams, rather than just individuals**, to mitigate the risks that one person moving will set them back to square one. **Government departments should also alert local stakeholders when officials they have been dealing with move on** and provide contact details for the new postholder or another member of the relevant team.

The government also negotiates internally to decide upon the powers it is collectively willing to offer in devolution deals. DLUHC plays a central role, with its ministers and officials making the case for devolution to other departments, not all of which are so convinced of the merits of devolution. The House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee found in 2021 that "different government departments displayed starkly differing levels of commitment to devolution, resulting in uneven rates of devolution in different policy areas, and causing negotiations to be siloed and inflexible".¹⁷ Local leaders and officials can do little to influence these inter-departmental negotiations directly, but their chances of success will be enhanced if they have laid the ground by building strong relationships across Whitehall and putting forward a strong proposition for devolution that meets the government's objectives in the first place.

Devolution is typically a long-term process – an initial, limited deal can pave the way for deeper devolution in future

Devolution is not set in stone after a first deal is agreed. In line with the government's declared principle of flexibility, the levelling up white paper stated: "The framework is designed to enable areas to deepen devolution over time, recognising that, as institutions mature, they can gain additional powers."

Experience shows this to be a viable option. Including the recent trailblazer deals, Greater Manchester has agreed six devolution deals with government – gradually expanding its powers and functions.¹⁸ Similarly, the West Midlands has negotiated two further deals since its establishment: in 2017 as well as the trailblazer deal announced earlier this year. It is also possible for an initial deal to include an explicit commitment to return to the negotiating table for a deeper deal. The 2022 North East deal includes

a commitment to commence trailblazer negotiations to “deepen and enhance” the future North East Mayoral Combined Authority’s powers.¹⁹ So even if places find their options constrained by Whitehall during negotiations, **a largely cut-and-paste initial deal can create a pathway towards more expansive devolution in future, once they have shown their ability to make a success of devolution.**

A related point is that **devolution is best viewed as a spectrum rather than a binary choice.** Past devolution deals provide for varying degrees of local control. These range from weak commitments that Whitehall will consult areas, to the right to co-design programmes (as for the role of some MCAs in employment support programmes), to local spending autonomy within a ring-fence (as for the adult education budget), to full local control and flexibility to reallocate resources (as in the trailblazer deals). Over time, places may be able to move along this spectrum of control. Greater Manchester’s trailblazer deal, for example, includes an agreement to set up a “partnership with Great British Railways”.²⁰ Although this does not give the combined authority full control of suburban stations or routes, it represents a step towards the mayor’s ambition of a fully integrated London-style transport network.

One combined authority officer viewed these kinds of partnership and consultation commitments as representing a “collective failure to persuade government departments to devolve those things”. However, this person also acknowledged that the trailblazers had “dragged government departments to a table they maybe did not want to be at”. So again the lesson is that **devolution is an incremental process – a small win in an initial deal can be expanded in future.**

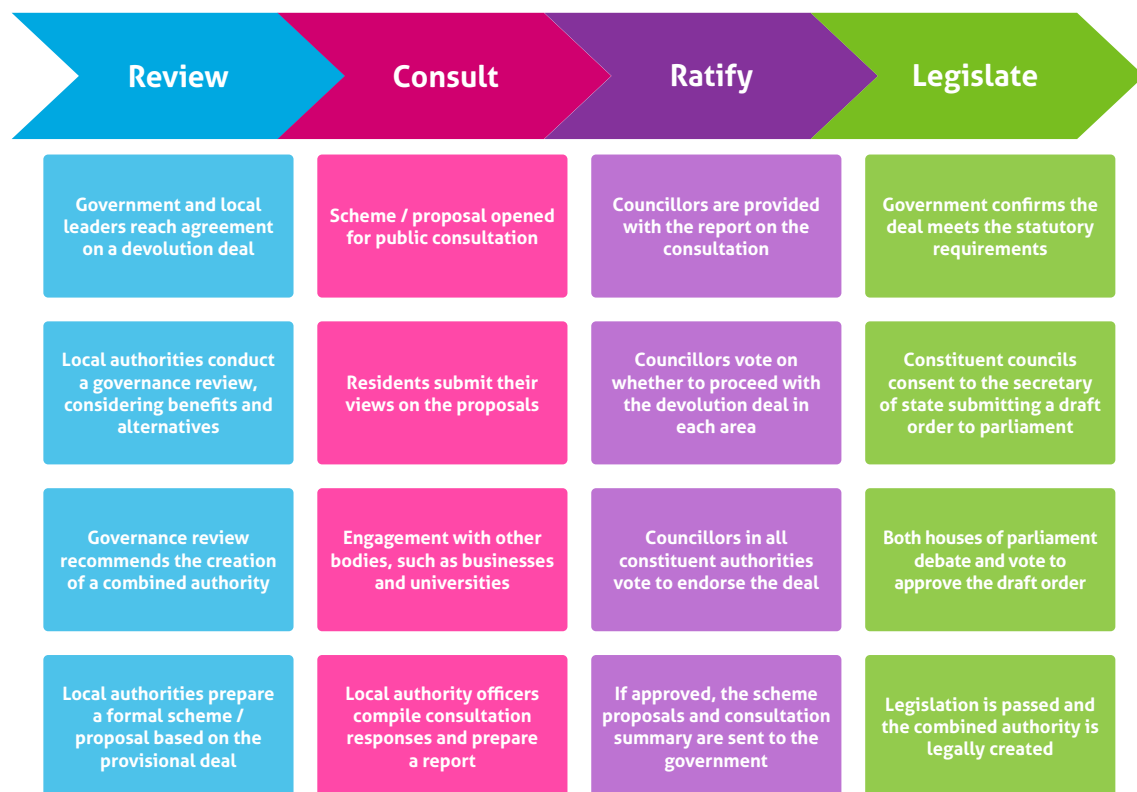
Based on insights from insiders on both sides of the table, this chapter has offered advice to areas engaging in devolution negotiations with Whitehall. When negotiations are successful, they conclude with an agreed and published devolution deal text that is signed by ministers and local leaders. Reaching this point is understandably a cause for satisfaction among those involved in the negotiations – both centrally and locally. But as we discuss below, this media-friendly moment is not the end of the process.

3. Implementation: how to steer a devolution deal from signature to ratification

Agreeing a devolution deal is an important moment, but the job does not end once leaders have signed the deal. Guiding a deal through the ratification and implementation stage is critical. Success at this stage means local leaders and officials can plan for the formal transfer of powers to realise their shared vision for devolution. Failure, however, leaves the area without devolution and requires large parts of the earlier process to be revisited.

This is not an abstract possibility: we have identified several deals that have failed during implementation, including in the North East, East Anglia and Lincolnshire in 2016 (see Figure 1). Local leaders must keep key partners onside and build on earlier engagement work, while ensuring officer teams are adequately resourced. Government will require local areas to demonstrate how the deal meets statutory tests, while both houses of parliament must consider and approve the secondary legislation that implements the deal. Implementing the deal is a complicated and active process, with four main sub-stages: review, consultation, ratification and legislation (see Figure 4). We discuss each of these elements in detail below.

Figure 4 **How a devolution deal is ratified and implemented**



Source: Institute for Government research.

Several deals have failed during implementation – do not take your eye off the ball

Signing the devolution deal is a key milestone to be celebrated, but the process does not conclude there. **It is not uncommon for deals to collapse after agreement – local leaders must ensure they keep their eye on the ball and continue to manage the process at this stage.** Opposition to the mayoral model has often been a contributing factor, but other local concerns have also led to deals being rejected. Sunderland, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Durham withdrew from the original North East deal in 2016 after the agreement was negotiated and signed due to a lack of assurances over post-Brexit replacements for EU funding in the area.¹ East Anglia's signed devolution deal collapsed after rejections from Cambridge City and Cambridgeshire due to concerns over the affordable housing plans in the deal.² Deals with simpler geography have also collapsed, such as Cornwall Council's decision to withdraw from its single county deal prior to implementation following negative responses to the public consultation.³

Deals are opened to public scrutiny for the first time during the ratification and implementation process – this will test the shared vision and buy-in from all partners. Signing the deal is a powerful opportunity to emphasise the benefits, but it also opens the deal to greater scrutiny and organised opposition, since this is usually the first time that the detailed plans enter the public domain. A senior local authority official told us that this stage requires leaders “to be wholehearted” and willing to withstand criticism to get the deal done: “If you want to join the team, you need to play for it on its bad days when it is losing.”

Implementation is a time-consuming process: local authorities must ensure there is sufficient officer capacity available. Politicians will lead on promoting the deal and retaining relationships, but the legal implementation of the deal requires prospective combined authorities to prepare several documents and run consultations – requiring significant officer time before the embryonic combined authority will have a large capacity of its own to dedicate to the process.

Given local authority resource constraints, **government should make a small amount of capacity funding available at this stage.** This could be paid to one of the constituent authorities, if a combined authority does not yet exist as a legal entity, and would enable the recruitment of a few people to help run the overall implementation process. **Alternatively, government could offer support in-kind by sending a lead official or two on secondment from DLUHC to help navigate the deal through to completion.**

Governance reviews are a chance to reiterate the benefits of the combined authority and lay important groundwork

Review processes are the first step in the implementation process, justifying the choice of a combined authority and informing the later consultation and legislation processes. Review processes are set out in legislation and will be used to satisfy the statutory tests required to make the legal orders establishing the combined authority.

Current legislation allows local areas to “undertake a review of statutory functions” and use this to “prepare and publish a scheme for the establishment of a combined authority in that area”.⁴ The secretary of state “must have regard to that scheme” when establishing the combined authority. If passed by parliament, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will replace this with a different, but substantially similar, process allowing areas to “prepare a proposal for the establishment of a combined authority”, which must “specify the purposes to be achieved by the establishment of the combined authority”. The secretary of state will be empowered to provide further detail about what proposals must include.⁵

Completing a governance review is the first required step in the implementation process. **The purpose of the required governance review is to assess the status quo and determine whether a combined authority will improve the “exercise of statutory functions”** – the same test the secretary of state will assess the deal against at the legislation stage. Governance reviews analyse the proposed devolution deal, the current position of the local economy and governance arrangements, and recommend whether a combined authority represents the best option available.

In the North East, for example, the governance review considered the existing shape of subnational governance; the local economy, including the presence of a “functional economic market area”; the benefits that a combined authority would bring; and other options that may be pursued instead, namely no change to existing arrangements or attempting to “strengthen existing arrangements”. Considering these options, the review concluded that the deal represented a “coherent geography” and recommended the creation of a new combined authority.⁶ Similarly, the governance review in West Yorkshire identified eight economic challenges that meant West Yorkshire “is not punching at its weight” – including below-average growth, relatively low levels of investment in infrastructure, and high levels of deprivation – and concluded that the establishment of an MCA would enable the region to address these weaknesses more effectively.⁷

Local areas then prepare and submit a formal proposal for the establishment of a combined authority to government, known as a ‘scheme’ in the legislation. These schemes set out the proposed structure, governance and functions of the combined authority. In practice, these are heavily informed by the content of a devolution deal, but are an important tool to demonstrate that an area meets statutory requirements and make initial arrangements for how the combined authority will function. The North East scheme published in early 2023, for example, defines the voting membership of NEMCA as the mayor and seven members appointed by the constituent councils. In addition, two non-voting members will be included: the chair of the business board and a representative of the community and voluntary sector.⁸

The consultation process should not be treated as a formality

Legislation requires that a consultation is run for any proposed devolution deal, giving local stakeholders an opportunity to input into the decision. Politicians will decide what weight to give to the consultation responses, but a summary must be provided to the secretary of state.

In designing and running the required consultation, **places should refer to the high-level principles for public consultations published by the Cabinet Office.**⁹ Some insight into how the government assesses consultations can be gleaned from supplementary material published alongside devolution orders. For instance, the West of England consultation was deemed satisfactory because it ran for six weeks, offered digital and paper copies of the relevant documents and accepted digital and paper submissions, and included promotional activity such as posters, social media promotion and local drop-in sessions for residents.¹⁰ Substantially similar approaches have since been taken in the East Midlands¹¹ and the North East.¹²

Consultations – and the decisions they inform – are subject to judicial review if not conducted properly. This is not a hypothetical prospect: previous devolution deals have been delayed due to claimants seeking, and winning, judicial review. Derbyshire County Council won a judicial review against the inclusion of Chesterfield Borough Council in what was then Sheffield City Region Combined Authority because its consultation process failed to directly consult residents on whether Chesterfield should be part of the combined authority.¹³ While this was partly driven by a wider dispute with Derbyshire County Council over the proposed geography, it nonetheless illustrates the potential consequences of a poorly executed consultation. Local officials should resist viewing it as a formality and ensure sufficient capacity is invested in planning and running the consultation.

Consultation results inform whether local politicians decide to proceed with the deal, but leaders should keep in mind that consultation respondees are self-selecting and may be unrepresentative of the wider population. In Cornwall, for example, 69% of consultation respondents expressed opposition to the mayoral model – leading the council leader who negotiated the deal to reject it with “the greatest regret”. However, the consultation also included a representative survey which found that approximately 65% of Cornwall residents would support accepting a mayor as part of the deal, with only 16% stating opposition.¹⁴ Local councillors are entitled to base their voting decisions on any information they believe is relevant, including consultation responses, but local leaders should as a matter of course commission a representative survey alongside the consultation to gauge the public mood more accurately.

The legislation requires a “public consultation”, but this should be interpreted in broad terms to include a wide range of local private and public sector partners, as well as local residents. For instance, the local authorities involved in negotiating the East Midlands deal in 2022 listed the local Chambers of Commerce, LEP and three universities as their key partners, along with 15 district and borough councils.¹⁵ As the Institute for Government has previously argued, places “should seek to engage widely and deeply” for two key reasons: to test and improve upon the proposed approach to devolution, and to secure the buy-in of actors “whose behaviour is critical to the success of the proposals”, such as major local employers and service providers.¹⁶

Consultation results must be submitted to the secretary of state and may inform his or her judgment as to whether to proceed. Both the 2009 Act and Levelling-up Bill place a requirement on local areas to provide the secretary of state with a summary of the consultation responses. It is up to the secretary of state what weight should be given to this submission, and we are not aware of any cases of the government deciding not to proceed because of a negative consultation, but it is not unforeseeable that may happen in the future. If the secretary of state does not consider the local consultation to be sufficient, for example due to procedural deficiencies, they must undertake a separate consultation prior to deciding whether to proceed with the deal.

Every council is a veto player for ratification – local leaders need to stay united

Ratification comes in two stages. Each constituent council must decide to ratify the deal following the consultation and proceed to submit the proposed scheme to government. Once government decides to proceed with the deal, each constituent council must then consent to the making of the order establishing the combined authority.

Complicated local political dynamics can scupper deals at these decision points, especially if a strong consensus has not been built for the deal during the earlier phases of the process detailed above. **Local leaders should work hard to keep key stakeholders, including MPs, on board and to persuade particularly influential local figures to champion the deal.** Ben Bradley, who is both an MP and local authority leader, was described to us as having “put his political reputation on this” and provided vocal public support for the East Midlands deal in public and private. As noted above, opposition from MPs has contributed to the collapse of deals in other regions.

Local elections and turnover of local leaders can change the dynamics, particularly where devolution does not command strong cross-party support or where backbench councillors have been insufficiently involved in the process. Changes in party control bring a new leader and cabinet into the process who are not likely to have been involved in developing the proposition for devolution, and who may take differing views on the governance arrangements in the deal. Even where party control does not change, elections are often the moment that council leaders choose to stand down or the balance of power within the council leadership shifts. If support for a deal is shallow, then such changes can disrupt the process. In Norfolk, for instance, the new council leader elected in May 2023 has announced her intention to renegotiate the deal concluded in 2022, declaring: “At the end of it, if the deal is not good enough, this council will, no doubt, decide it’s not worth the risk.”¹⁷

The ultimate decision as to whether to proceed is taken in Westminster

The fate of devolution deals is ultimately in the hands of politicians at Westminster. Ministers must be convinced that the deal should go ahead. Their officials will review the proposed deal against the statutory tests that must be met before the combined authority can legally be established.

As of June 2023, the tests applied are that establishing a combined authority will “improve the exercise of statutory functions”, “reflect the interests and identities of local communities” and “secure effective and convenient local government”. If passed, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will change the primary test to “likely to improve the economic, social, and environmental well-being of some or all of the people who live or work in the area”, with the two other tests substantively unchanged.

These are broad and subjective judgments, and only in unusual circumstances would a minister reject a deal that they or government colleagues had just spent months negotiating. Nonetheless, ministers need to be convinced – and there is a plausible risk that a minister could decline to proceed; for instance, due to unexpected local political opposition. A government reshuffle could also complicate matters, if a champion of a deal were to be replaced by a less pro-devolution minister.

Approval by parliament is the final step of the implementation process, and an opportunity for members to express concerns and (in principle) to block deals.

Legally establishing the combined authority requires consent from both houses of parliament, which can debate and scrutinise – but not amend – devolution deals. When proposing the order establishing the combined authority, the secretary of state must also produce a report setting out the rationale for the order – drawing upon the governance review and consultation.

No deals have been blocked by parliament, but this process offers a visible opportunity for opponents to articulate their concerns. In January 2017, for example, the MP for Bristol West spoke against the proposed West of England deal on the basis that the public neither identified with the geography nor supported the creation of a mayor for the region,¹⁸ while peers criticised a perception that long-term investment funding was being used to “sweeten” the deal.¹⁹ The deal was passed by parliament regardless, but advocates of a deal should nonetheless keep in mind that MPs or peers do have the formal ability to block a deal at this late stage.

The completion of this stage is a milestone of similar significance to the inaugural mayoral election – it is when the combined authority becomes a legal entity. In the next chapter, we look at the steps that need to be taken to set up and run a combined authority.

4. Operation: how to set up and run an effective combined authority

For devolution to be a success, the institutions taking on responsibility for big transport, skills and infrastructure budgets must have the right capacity, staff, structure and leadership. So in this final chapter, we turn to the question of how best to establish and operate a combined authority, which is the governance model for almost all the devolution deals concluded over the past decade.

A common refrain through this report has been that there is no single story to be told about the devolution process across England. This point applies strongly to the question of how combined authorities work as organisations. Each has emerged in a specific political and institutional context, and has faced distinct challenges in taking on and delivering devolved functions.

As a general rule, form follows function: the organisational structure of a combined authority reflects the package of powers contained in the devolution deal with government. But there are common features found in all cases and a number of transferable lessons that can help point the way to success.

Running the authority in 'shadow' mode before the mayor is elected helps ensure the elected leader can hit the ground running

Once a devolution deal has been ratified and the legislation enacting the deal passed by parliament, the clock starts ticking towards the formal transfer of power from Whitehall, which typically coincides with the election of a mayor. In this interim period, there is an important opportunity for the new combined authority to be established in 'shadow' form, allowing initial recruitment to take place and internal processes to be developed before devolution goes live.

Several people involved in implementing devolution deals agreed that making the most of the shadow period was crucial to success. A wide range of decisions have to be taken about how the new organisation will be structured and managed as it emerges out of its constituent authorities and other local institutions. In addition, **the period should be used to strengthen collaboration and relationships between senior leaders, at both political and official levels, before the devolution deal goes live.**

One former combined authority official told us: "You have to think carefully about your shadow arrangements. As well as ensuring you have the political leadership spending enough time together, not underestimating the senior officer time is important."

The length of this period of shadow operation of the combined authority has varied significantly between places. Many of the first wave of devolution deals saw combined authorities operating without elected mayoral leadership for several years, including in Greater Manchester (six years), Liverpool City Region (three years), South Yorkshire

(four years) and West Yorkshire (seven years). These were places where much of the groundwork of building a shared local vision and culture of collaboration could be laid long before the arrival of a directly elected mayor.

In other places, the process was more rushed. The West Midlands Combined Authority, for instance, was established less than a year before the election of a mayor, which some insiders felt had contributed to a weaker sense of shared leadership. Even more extreme was Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, whose combined authority (CPCA) was established just two months before the mayoral election of May 2017, and is seen by many as the least effective of the nine existing MCAs. One observer told us that the problems in CPCA were caused by “a mix of structural, personal, and political issues” but that having had “very little running time before it had a mayor” had exacerbated the problems. A senior leader from the CPCA region felt that “a two-year period” before a deal goes live would help ensure there is enough time “to work out how you are going to bring everybody together”. The lesson is that **places negotiating and implementing future devolution deals should factor in at least a year of ‘shadow running’ before powers are formally devolved.**

We heard that this lesson had been learnt in both central and local government, and that in both the East Midlands and York and North Yorkshire the plan was to move into ‘shadow’ mode as early as summer 2023. But the clock is ticking towards the planned May 2024 elections so there is little time to lose. Therefore, **it is incumbent upon the government to swiftly pass the necessary orders to implement devolution deals and then work closely with local authorities so that the new combined authorities are ready to hit the ground running.** Also, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill needs to be passed by parliament before new combined county authorities, such as in the East Midlands, can be legally established.

In the shadow phase, interim leaders of the combined authority have to be put in place. The most important appointment is naturally the chief executive. One senior figure with experience of establishing new public bodies advised that **the chief executive should be a leader with experience of managing change**, which requires a different skillset to that needed for running an organisation in steady state.

Close attention needs to be paid as to what decisions the combined authority should take while existing in shadow form, and what should be left until the arrival of the mayor. A risk is that a group of local leaders will – for understandable political reasons – focus on local priorities rather than the interests of the wider region. In one MCA, we heard, early access to investment funds meant that “effectively you had the shadow body making really important decisions before the election”, with leaders carving up the pie to fund “projects that local authorities felt were important but were not strategically important to the city region”.

The shadow body should make provisional plans for how the incoming mayor will be supported to lead, while keeping in mind that **mayors can come into office with very different kinds of professional experience that will influence their leadership style and expectations.** As one adviser emphasised: “There are different routes in

– I do not think they have to come from one particular background.” Another said: “They come in with a democratic mandate and they stand on the offer and skills that they have.” The current cohort of nine metro mayors includes one ex-cabinet minister, three additional ex-MPs, three former local councillors, a senior business leader and one professional campaigner.

Officials should also undertake analysis of leading mayoral candidates’ manifesto pledges during the election campaign, and develop provisional plans for their implementation. As part of this, **shadow authorities should hold private consultative meetings with leading mayoral candidates** – analogous to the pre-election contact that takes place between Whitehall departments and the shadow cabinet¹ – during which the candidates can clarify their plans and preferences. Similar processes should be carried out by established combined authorities prior to subsequent elections. However, as one former local leader reflected, **mayors may only work out how they want to lead once they are in post**: “It is difficult. I remember when I first got elected as a councillor, all your energy goes into being elected and you wake up and think ‘now what?’”

Most combined authorities start small and scale up over time as devolved powers come on stream

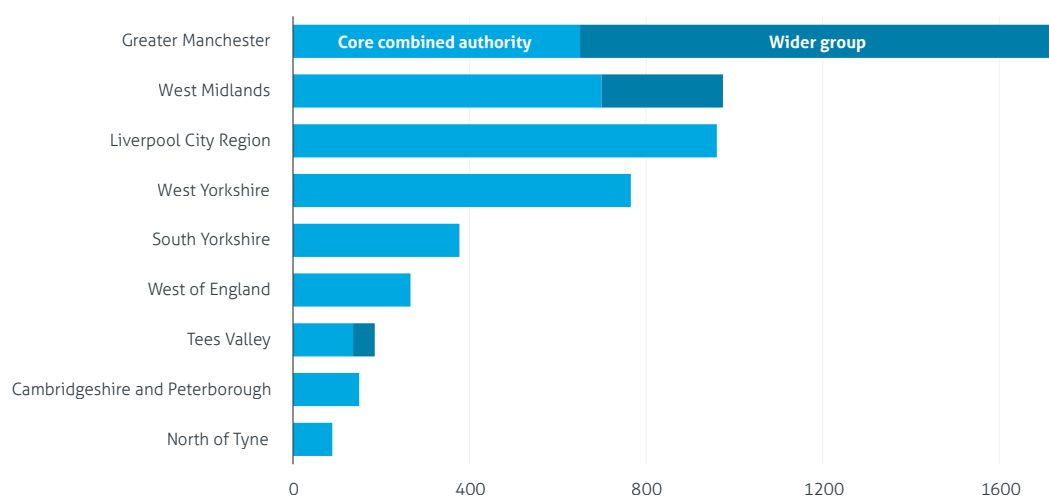
Combined authorities grow as organisations over time, employing greater numbers of staff as devolution beds in. Initial recruitment is likely to focus on establishing core corporate functions. One senior official described how the local combined authority “built up resources in the finance and legal team, but there was not a policy unit or an investment team” in its early days. Another emphasised that some core delivery capacity also needs to be in place from day one – for instance, a team to oversee the delivery of adult education functions – but that it takes time to work out the appropriate number and type of staff required. “It is only once you’ve had a breath and a pause, you can start to think about what it will look like in the long-term,” they said. **Rushing through the capacity-building process can be a mistake.** One interviewee felt that their local MCA had moved too quickly and “probably built too much capacity in some areas and not enough in others”. This then took time to unpick.

Combined authorities do not routinely publish headcount figures, but data collected by the Institute for Government for this report illustrates significant differences in the size and structure of combined authorities (see Figure 5). Greater Manchester is the largest, although more than two thirds of its staff are employed by the fire and rescue service, which is a separate entity in other regions. Similarly, the status of transport bodies varies from place to place. Transport for West Midlands is an integral part of WMCA, whereas Transport for Greater Manchester is legally separate from GMCA, though accountable to its board. The WMCA group also includes staff of the tram company West Midlands Metro and the digital connectivity company WM5G. TVCA is also structured as a group, consisting of the core combined authority alongside the publicly owned airport and the mayoral development corporation. NTCA is the smallest, with just 89 staff, but this reflects the fact that it does not hold transport functions, which are managed by a joint committee with neighbouring areas.

Comparing this data with figures on staffing data published by the *Local Government Chronicle* in 2019 indicates significant growth across most combined authorities over recent years, as MCAs have gradually appointed key staff, absorbed existing capacity and taken on new functions.² For example, Tees Valley has grown from 94 staff to 185, South Yorkshire from 75 to 342, and the West of England from 71 to 255, although in the latter case much of this growth is accounted for by local transport authority staff moving over to the combined authority alongside transport functions.* Structural changes account for much of the rise in headcount in some other MCAs too. For instance, the South Yorkshire devolution deal was only implemented in full in 2020, after years of local political wrangling.³ LCRCA appears to have grown substantially over the period too, from just 107 to approximately 980. WMCA has grown too but less rapidly (from 466 to 699). GMCA, on the other hand, appears not to have grown, suggesting that it was up to speed before any of its counterparts.

However, due to differences in structure, functions and how data is reported across the nine MCAs, the data discussed here is not directly comparable. In our view, **all MCAs should be required to routinely publish detailed data on their workforce, in a format that allows comparisons between them and over time**, in line with the data published on the civil service.⁴

Figure 5 **Headcount of combined authorities, 2023**



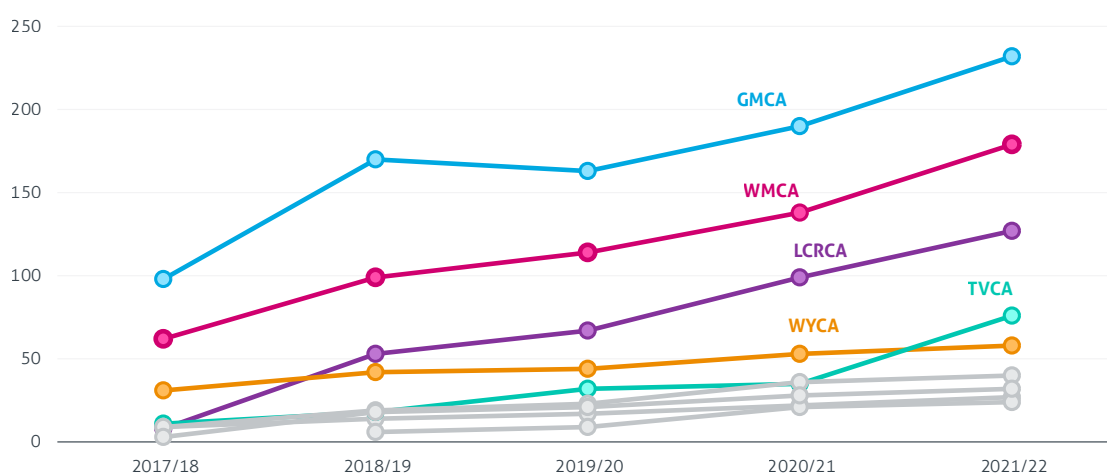
Source: Institute for Government analysis of combined authority sources (including private correspondence). Notes: 'Wider group' includes Transport for Greater Manchester, West Midlands Metro and WM5G in the West Midlands and the South Teesside Development Corporation and the South Tees Site Company in Tees Valley. Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service staff are employed by the combined authority but not shown in this chart to maintain comparability. Some figures are estimates: for full detail see Annex A.

A further window into the growth of MCAs is provided by the data on senior leaders and other staff earning over £50,000, which is published in annual accounts (see Figure 6). Some of the upward trend can be explained by wage inflation, with nominal average public sector earnings rising 16% over the same period – taking posts paying £43,500 at the start of the period over the £50,000 disclosure threshold by the end.

* The full set of headcount figures reported in the *Local Government Chronicle* in 2019 were as follows: GMCA – 2,013, WMCA – 466, LCRCA – 107, TVCA – 94, SYMCA – 75, WECA – 71, CPCA – 51.

All combined authorities have expanded at senior levels since coming into existence, but the data again reveals substantial differences between them. In 2021/22, GMCA reported 232 senior staff (including fire service managers), compared with just 32 at Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Liverpool City Region has expanded the most since devolution came into effect: there were just eight senior staff in 2017/18, rising to 127 by 2021/22, confirming what interviewees told us about LCRCA initially being set up as a lean organisation that did little but pass on grants to local authorities. Tees Valley grew the most in the latest year of data, going from 35 to 76 staff earning above the £50,000 threshold, with the authority's accounts attributing this to the full integration into the TVCA Group of the South Tees Site Company, which was previously part owned by the UK government.⁵

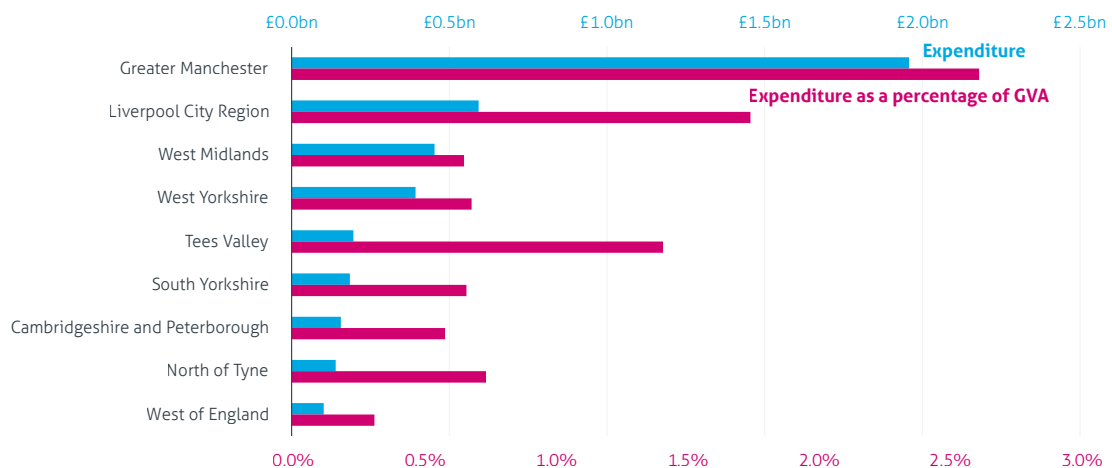
Figure 6 **Senior combined authority staff, 2017/18 to 2021/22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of combined authority annual accounts, 2017/18 to 2021/22. Notes: Senior staff are those who earn over £50,000 or those otherwise listed as part of the senior leadership team. This threshold is set in legislation and does not account for wage growth over the period.

Combined authorities have significant financial resources at their disposal, although they are relatively small in proportion to the large service-delivery-oriented budgets of their constituent councils. According to data compiled by Mark Sandford for the House of Commons Library, the total expenditure of the nine MCAs in 2021/22 ranged from almost £2bn in Greater Manchester to just £100m in the West of England, reflecting both the different scale of devolved responsibilities and the different size of the nine areas.⁶ GMCA is also the most important of the MCAs in comparison to the size of the regional economy: its expenditure accounts for nearly 3% of gross value added (GVA), substantially ahead of second-placed LCRCA (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 **Expenditure of mayoral combined authorities, 2021/22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of House of Commons Library, Devolution to local government in England, 2023 and ONS, Regional gross value added (balanced) by industry: local authorities by ITL1 region, 2020.

Combined authorities are constructed from existing institutional building blocks – but must become more than the sum of their parts

Places taking on devolved powers do not start from an institutional greenfield in which everything must be developed from scratch. Many of the things a new combined authority needs – experienced staff, office accommodation, an economic evidence base and strategy, a set of investable projects, partnerships that span the private and public sectors – are likely to exist to some extent, but may be fragmented across different institutions and geographies. **The task facing local leaders is to repurpose and integrate these assets into an effective new institution that adds value at the regional scale.** But this challenge varies from place to place. As one experienced figure told us: “The difference among combined authorities depends, in part, on what they were before. The history of the combined authorities and how they emerge is different in all cases.”

At its essence, a combined authority is a collaboration between its constituent councils, which typically bear much of the responsibility for setting up, staffing and resourcing a new combined authority. Many interviewees agreed that **it makes sense to build a new combined authority out of its constituent authorities, due to the experience, knowledge and connections that senior local government figures can bring to the table.** As one told us: “If you do not have people that know about the place, you become seen as distinct from the local authorities and this becomes really challenging to manage.”

Furthermore, and especially in the early period, **it is vital to ensure that the new institution is – and is seen to be – a balanced partnership between the councils involved.** This is particularly true in places with a weak history of collaboration and/or existing concerns about dominance by one or other local area. So early appointments should be made with an eye to balance across the region, to ensure that the emergent leadership team can represent the interests of all local areas, and so that the political leaders feel comfortable that they have ‘their’ people in the room as big decisions are made.

But **it is rarely possible – or desirable – for a new combined authority to be formed solely out of its constituent local authorities.** One reason is that years of austerity have left local government drained of capacity; in particular, in terms of the kind of experienced policy and strategy professionals new combined authorities require. As one interviewee put it: “Strategic capacity feels like a luxury in the local government space.” And if a combined authority recruits all its staff locally there is a risk of – as another experienced figure warned – “cannibalising your local authorities”.

Many combined authorities absorb other subnational institutions, most commonly transport authorities and local enterprise partnerships, which bring important capacity, sectoral expertise and established relationships into the new bodies. In Liverpool City Region, the former transport authority was even used as the initial accountable body for devolved funds. West Midlands Combined Authority was also built around its transport authority, Transport for the West Midlands. In other places, the local enterprise partnership was the core building block, as in Tees Valley, which became the first to fully absorb its LEP into the combined authority itself.⁷

So existing institutions can provide the core structure and staffing of new devolved institutions. But for devolution to be successful, **a combined authority has to develop its own distinct identity and institutional culture that makes it more than the sum of its parts.** One interviewee highlighted the risks of ‘path dependence’ and observed that “some combined authorities come across as LEPs with a bit of extra money, or a transport body with a few extra functions”. This was perceived to limit the impact of devolution beyond a narrow set of economic considerations. Some MCAs have taken deliberate steps to draw a line under their predecessor institutions: in Liverpool City Region, we heard that the transport directorate had been rebranded as a “place” directorate to encourage a broader focus among staff who had moved over from the old regional transport authority.

Combined authorities should recruit from a range of sectors – including the private sector and civil service

To build an institution with its own corporate identity and the skills and expertise needed to deliver devolved functions, **combined authorities should recruit staff with experience of business and central government, as well as local government.**

The content of devolution deals makes it valuable for combined authorities to recruit from the private sector; for instance, including people with experience in the management and delivery of large infrastructure and regeneration projects. One interviewee recounted how a combined authority had initially relied upon local authority secondees, but over time had constructed a healthy balance of staff with public and private sector backgrounds. An official in another region similarly emphasised the blend of skills the combined authority relied upon: “Private sector colleagues brought the pace of delivery into the authority, while local authority people brought the concern for accountability.”

Employees with knowledge of Whitehall are also a valuable resource as combined authorities have to engage regularly with government departments. In some parts of the country it is harder to attract such recruits, given the low number of senior policy and delivery professionals present in local labour markets. Civil service relocation – for instance, to the Darlington Economic Campus⁸ – could make this easier. Hybrid working practices also enable combined authorities to recruit from a wider pool even if there is not a civil service hub in their immediate vicinity. If a future Labour government were to implement the Gordon Brown commission’s proposal to relocate 50,000 civil servants outside London then these opportunities would rise further.⁹

But – as the Institute for Government has previously recommended – civil service hubs should be designed to “promote a two-way interchange between itself and other public sector organisations”.¹⁰ As combined authorities are relatively small organisations, internal career progression is limited. So civil service relocation can enable public sector professionals to follow what one official called a “zigzag career path” moving between different public bodies without having to go to London to reach senior levels.

Interchange between combined authorities and central government has wider benefits: helping devolved bodies build capacity and skills, as well as bringing knowledge of how combined authorities work into Whitehall. As one interviewee put it: “We work hard in local government to understand central government – the same needs to be true vice versa.” For these reasons, as we have previously recommended, **the government should invest in a formal interchange scheme for staff between combined authorities and Whitehall departments that are closely involved in devolution**, including both short-term placements and longer-term secondments.¹¹ A six-month spell in a combined authority or devolved administration could also be made a standard part of most civil service fast stream programmes.

There is also a good case for targeted training to be provided to senior figures in combined authorities, to help them learn what makes this tier of governance distinct from either central or local government. This might be organised in conjunction with the M10 group of combined authorities, to enable sharing of best practice across different MCAs.

A well-functioning board is critical to the success of the combined authority

At the top of each combined authority is a board chaired by the mayor and made up of representatives of the constituent local authorities, and sometimes other local stakeholders. Most power is invested in the combined authority itself with the board as decision maker, rather than the mayor personally, and major decisions such as on budgets and transport plans typically require two-thirds support among local leaders. Consequently, **incoming mayors must learn to lead by consensus and compromise**. The constitutional structure of combined authorities requires this, since most powers are formally vested in the MCA cabinet as a whole, and mayors can make progress with their priorities only with the support of other local leaders.

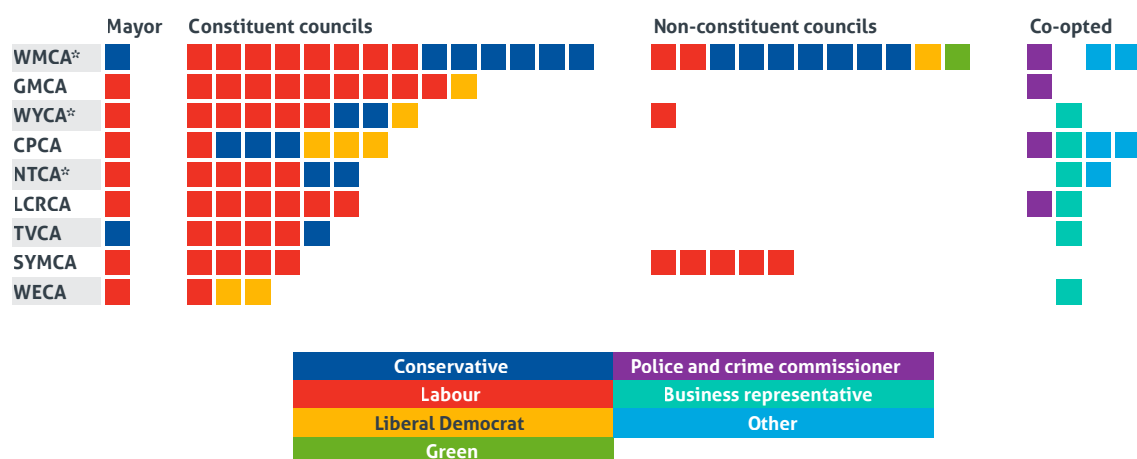
Mayors who come in determined to force through personal pet projects that lack local support are doomed to failure and frustration. A former Whitehall official emphasised how this was central to the model: “We are not creating mega mayors. There are a lot of checks and balances in the system.” Therefore, a senior mayoral adviser emphasised, “you need somebody who is capable of doing what used to be seen as smoke-filled room discussions. So much of combined authority work is about brokerage. It is about making deals and building relationships.”

Combined authority boards often co-opt non-voting members such as the leaders of neighbouring non-constituent councils, the police and fire commissioner and LEP chairs. This is a sensible use of the structures provided by combined authorities: better co-ordination of service delivery at a strategic level means bringing together leaders across the public sector.

In some places, local areas may wish to be involved in some form in more than one deal. For example, City of York Council will be a constituent member of the new York and North Yorkshire CA but has observer status on West Yorkshire CA. Combined authorities need to be mindful of how they manage relations with non-constituent members. In the West Midlands, non-constituent members pay a fee of £25,000 a year and so need to know they are getting value for that investment.¹² This will be particularly important for future devolution negotiations in two-tier local government areas, where only county councils are full signatories to devolution deals and district councils have observer status, as is the case in the new East Midlands MCCA.

As shown in Figure 8, combined authority boards vary extensively in size: the board of WMCA is 29 strong, including two representatives from each constituent council and five non-constituent councils. At the other end of the spectrum, the board of WECA consists of only five people: the mayor, three council leaders and the chair of the LEP.

Figure 8 **Membership of combined authority boards, July 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of publications by mayoral combined authorities, 2023. Notes: PCC role represented by deputy mayor for policing, crime, criminal justice and fire in GMCA. Other co-opted members: West Midlands Fire and Rescue Authority and Midlands Trades Union Congress (WMCA); the mayoral ambassador for the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (NTCA); and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority (CPCA). WYCA and NTCA have two representatives from constituent councils and WMCA has two representatives from constituent and non-constituent councils.

Combined authorities are also required by government to maintain an independent business voice within their governance arrangements. This is sensible given the focus of MCAs on increasing economic productivity through investment in infrastructure and labour force skills, for which the private sector is a key partner. For the past decade, local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) have been the main forum through which business voices influence the allocation of local growth funding. However, the government has announced that LEPs will now be integrated into MCAs in all areas, including in the three new authorities being established at present. This is sensible as it will bring into a single co-ordinated decision making structure a set of closely related functions relating to local economic development. However, **combined authorities have to ensure that the business voice is not lost in the new integrated structures**. Tees Valley CA was the first to fully integrate its LEP and turn it into a business board within the MCA. A senior figure involved told us that this had been designed to be “integrated with, but independent from, the authority” and that its role was to be “an informed critical friend”. This is a model that other places can learn from.

A combined authority needs a well-resourced strategic centre to join up effectively across the organisation

Supporting the political leadership is the paid staff of the combined authority. At the top of the organisation is the chief executive or managing director, who holds the statutory position of “head of paid service”, and has overall management and operational responsibility for the day-to-day activities of the combined authority.¹³ Alongside the chief executive or managing director, combined authorities have a senior leadership team of between four and eight executive directors overseeing portfolios such as the economy, transport and housing as well as internal corporate functions bringing together finance and audit, HR and IT.

One of the main opportunities afforded to local areas by devolution is the ability to more effectively join up policy across regions and break down Whitehall siloes.¹⁴ To capitalise on this opportunity, **combined authorities have to create an effective strategic centre to provide co-ordination across the combined authority**. The centre has to work closely with both political and official leadership of the institution, and needs sufficient resource and smart leadership to set a strategic direction, join up across directorates and communicate on behalf of the authority to the outside world.

The strategic centre will need to ensure that the economic strategy of the devolution deal aligns with the combined authority’s spending priorities. Previous Institute for Government research has demonstrated how different policies to support regional development are complementary, especially across skills, transport and innovation policy.¹⁵ So the role of the strategic centre is to co-ordinate budgets and priority outcomes across different policy areas in line with the combined authority’s economic vision as set by the mayor and board. This requires the creation of a finance team able to operate at a different level than finance officers in local authorities may be used to. One former official told us: “You need finance officers that are capable of thinking strategically and not just a budget balancing mindset – that is quite a shift.”

Managing relations with Whitehall is another important cross-cutting function that the strategic centre of the combined authority must fulfil. Combined authorities engage constantly with Whitehall departments, whether bidding for funding, accounting for performance, or seeking to expand on the devolution deal. We heard how combined authorities benefit from having a government relations function embedded into the organisational centre, with one official describing how this had been part of a concerted attempt to “build good relations with the centre over the last couple of years”. Others reported having worked to systematically build relations with each relevant department – something that would be more challenging without co-ordination from the authority’s centre.

Another core central function relates to data capability. Combined authorities face challenges in using data for effective decision making to date, with a parliamentary committee highlighting poor city-region-level data on “GDP, inflation, the balance of trade, investment, and business growth”.¹⁶ The government recognises that subnational data collection and analysis needs to be improved, and is establishing a new Office for Local Government to rectify this issue.¹⁷ But MCAs should themselves recognise the benefits of improved data capability. Some of the larger combined authorities – including GMCA and WMCA – have established a dedicated Office for Data Analytics. These are designed to “join up, analyse, and act upon data sourced from multiple public sector bodies”.¹⁸ Others work with local universities to support data analysis – for instance, SYMCA ran a pilot Office for Data Analytics with the University of Sheffield,¹⁹ while CPCA part funds a project with the University of Cambridge modelling business growth in the area.²⁰ **Combined authorities should learn from these examples and build a dedicated data team at the heart of the institution,** to inform decision makers and to report publicly on performance and outcomes.

The mayor will need a small but high-powered office to support them and manage the interface with the rest of the combined authority

A well-resourced strategic centre of a combined authority is therefore needed to provide direction to the organisation as a whole. A specific element of that centre that must be considered in its own right is the mayoral office.

Interviewees highlighted that **the support mayors require varies according to their past experience and personal leadership styles.** For instance, one recalled that the West Midlands mayor, Andy Street, “wanted to manage the relationships with the delivery directors directly”, in line with his experience as a corporate leader. Other mayors are less detail-oriented and have a greater focus on communication and campaigning. In one case, we heard that officials had to help a mayor with limited local political experience to navigate a complex set of political relationships across the region.

Most metro mayors are supported by a small core team of around five staff, with some variation that does not wholly correlate with the overall size of the authority. In the West Midlands, publicly reported data reveals that the mayoral office is a larger-than-normal 10 staff,²¹ whereas data provided to us by SYMCA indicates that Oliver

Coppard, the South Yorkshire mayor, has a core office of only two officials, although additional support with diary management and communications is provided by other parts of the authority. Based on interviews, **a typical structure for a mayoral office includes one political appointee, a chief of staff and a small number of policy, communications, administrative and diary management staff.** In some cases there may be a policy specialist reflecting particular local priorities or circumstances: for instance, we heard that the Greater Manchester mayor, Andy Burnham, had a transport expert in his core team. **The chief of staff is a key appointment, requiring a blend of policy expertise, political nous and management skills.** One such official described their role: “The closest equivalent will be a private secretary to a minister, but it is also a senior adviser.”

So mayoral offices need not be large – indeed like ministerial private offices **it is important that the mayoral office does not develop into a separate entity** that isolates the political leader from the rest of the authority.²² **But this insight should not be used as an excuse by the constituent authorities to starve the mayor of the support he or she needs.** One interviewee recalled that “the political pressures were to have as lean a mayoral office as possible”. Another told us of an incoming mayor bemoaning that their support consisted of “a PA and a telephone”. In yet another case, a shadow authority had initially budgeted for a mayoral office of just two staff, but quickly realised this was insufficient for the scale of the job. As one observer of metro mayors put it: “People did not elect them to answer their own email and phones.”

An effective mayoral office must support their political head with both the reactive and proactive aspects of their role. On the former, more than one interviewee recalled the unexpected scale of correspondence, invitations and press enquiries that mayors began to receive after their election, reflecting the high profile that came with their region-wide personal mandate. As one put it: “The volume of invites was on a scale they were not fully prepared for.” An efficient diary and correspondence management function is therefore a core function that must be resourced.

But beyond this reactive role, **the role of the mayoral office is to support the mayor to be an effective leader of the combined authority as a whole.** Where local political relationships are poor, constituent authorities may seek to starve the mayor of resources to prevent what they perceive as a local rival from gaining too much sway. But where things are working well, the mayor will be perceived as an asset due to their ability to champion the interests of the whole region in public debate, and in negotiations with ministers and private sector leaders considering whether to invest. One adviser emphasised that mayors require a proper strategic communications function – not just a press office – for them to be successful in their “role of representing a large region, engaging a large number of citizens and stakeholders”.

Getting the relationship between the mayor’s office and the rest of the combined authority is also important. The core team of advisers has to act as a bridge with the rest of the organisation, commissioning analysis and information on behalf of the mayor from the relevant directorates and policy teams, and then producing political

advice on the back of it to support the mayor's activities. In one comparatively harmonious combined authority, a senior official described the relationship as "really quite integrated. He is in the next room to the exec leadership team. If he wants anything, needs a bit of research, a speech writing, it will be people in the combined authority that do that. He does not have enough capacity to do that himself."

Several senior officials emphasised **the importance of maintaining a separation between official and political advice**. In one case, we heard that there were healthy relationships between mayoral advisers and thematic teams, combined with "a recognition that some things are political and it is important to maintain that distinction, hence why they need to be separate". Just as in Whitehall, the mayor themselves will benefit from this separation, so that they are given free and frank advice. As another former insider put it: "You only get the best out of it if you have a fairly free thinking, challenging, well resourced, unfettered officer team."

As indicated above, the relationship between mayor and the rest of the combined authority operates in some respects like that between a secretary of state and government department. But taking this analogy too literally is a mistake since a mayor is not an executive leader in his or her own right. As one senior official emphasised: "The combined authority is not the mayor. It is the mayor and the cabinet and the board." Consequently, **combined authorities have to learn to 'triangulate' between the priorities of the mayor, the other members of the cabinet, and requirements imposed by government**. We were told of officials setting up a literal whiteboard on which they listed mayoral and cabinet priorities and then ensured that enough items from each list were ticked off.

Limited flexible funding can undermine the effectiveness of combined authorities

It can be difficult for local leaders to set aside sufficient financial resource to build up the strategic capacity of the combined authority. As noted above, local government has been hit hard by austerity leaving little spare resource. In addition, the standard funding model for combined authorities – ring-fenced grants for particular functions or projects, competitive bidding cycles and short-term settlements – limit the ability of local leaders to devote resources to cross-cutting functions.

This can have a negative impact on how combined authorities function. One interviewee described the authority as "an organisation run like a Ponzi scheme" – with leaders incentivised to bid for as many grants as possible to get revenue, but funding put into largely autonomous directorates, replicating Whitehall siloes rather than providing effective co-ordination. Other interviewees flagged difficulties caused by the government providing substantial capital spending – for instance, for transport or regeneration projects – without enough resource budget to pay for the administration and delivery of projects.

This means **local leaders have to be innovative in finding sufficient revenue to build their organisation.** Levies from constituent authorities are a common way to do this, although this may require a regular cycle of tricky negotiations. Some portion of retained business rates can be used for combined authority functions. And it may be possible to top-slice some part of government grants, subject to agreement with the Treasury.

Most of the MCAs can also set a mayoral precept: a surcharge on council tax bills that can be used to fund mayoral functions. Only Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have introduced precepts, of £32, £19 and £12 respectively for Band D properties.²³ This provides the combined authority with additional flexible spending power, although political pressures can make it difficult to allocate this to anything other than front-line services. In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, for instance, the recently imposed precept is being earmarked for bus services.²⁴ Nonetheless, **one interviewee strongly advised that new mayors and combined authorities should use the precepting power to bring in extra money, but ideally right at the start:** “If you do not have one right at the beginning you’ll probably never be able to put one in politically.”

Accountability and scrutiny functions are too often under-resourced and sidelined

Internal accountability within the combined authority is one of three pillars of the government’s English Devolution Accountability Framework, alongside accountability to government and accountability to the public.²⁵ Legislation requires that all combined authorities will have core scrutiny bodies, such as an Overview and Scrutiny Committee comprised of backbench local councillors, but our evidence suggests significant disparities in how effective these processes are.

Mayoral willingness to engage with scrutiny shapes how effective it is. This will partly be driven by the personality of individual mayors and their openness to challenge, and partly by the quality of the scrutiny process and whether it is delivering clear benefits to the decision making process. Mayoral engagement with scrutiny has varied across combined authorities, with the Greater Manchester mayor, Andy Burnham, praised by a local scrutiny official, who said “he’s happy to appear and be challenged and spend some time with members” and noted an agreement around how often he would attend the committee. In contrast, we were told that the Tees Valley mayor did not attend any overview and scrutiny committee meetings at all during the 2020/21 and 2021/22 reporting years.²⁶

Previous Institute for Government research highlighted that scrutiny committees currently have a low status, with councillors having little time or incentive to engage. Committees have been regularly limited by a combination of poor attendance and high quoracy requirements, compared with other comparable bodies, with 35% and 64% of meetings cancelled in GMCA and WMCA respectively in the three financial years to 2021/22.²⁷ Scrutiny committee positions should be seen as a valuable role and taken seriously by local councillors. **Mayoral engagement will be insufficient to deliver scrutiny, and it is likely to be seen as a poor use of their time if meetings are cancelled or are low-quality due to poor engagement from members.**

Government has recognised this issue and is taking positive steps to address it, including allowing combined authorities to remunerate committee members and an ambition that “membership on committees should be prized and competed for”. Additionally, the trailblazer deals for Greater Manchester and the West Midlands include a commitment to further actions to “enhance the committees’ resources and prestige”, including support for publicising committee reports and a promise of meetings between committee chairs and DLUHC ministers.²⁸ The government has also shown an increased willingness to intervene directly where there are perceived scrutiny failings; for instance, by instituting an independent review to assess various governance issues in Tees Valley, including “the adequacy of transparency and accountability underpinning key decisions”.²⁹

Scrutiny committees require sufficient officer support to be effective, so it is also sensible that the trailblazer deals include a commitment to “provide reasonable resources... to enable committees to be able to ask for ambitious research and analysis”.³⁰ Scrutiny must also be seen as an attractive career prospect for local government officers. We heard that combined authority scrutiny roles are not seen as “prestigious or valuable” in contrast to the status of parliamentary committee clerks. Concerns were also raised about whether close working relationships may inhibit scrutiny, with an external academic highlighting this risk: “Officers are wary about being too critical with colleagues they work with on a daily basis.”

Combined authorities should monitor and assess the efficacy of their scrutiny processes, including tracking committee attendance, mayoral engagement, and the impact of committee reports. In addition to ensuring that the combined authority and local residents benefit from scrutiny, a strong scrutiny system will be advantageous in future negotiations with government. Trailblazer deals for Greater Manchester and the West Midlands are explicitly conditional on “building a culture of greater scrutiny and accountability”, with the text stating that “implementation of the commitments from government... will be conditional upon best and full efforts to delivering these improved accountability arrangements”.³¹

The effectiveness of mayors and combined authorities also depends on their perceived legitimacy among voters

Another core element of combined authority accountability relates to the relationship with voters. Indeed, the government states in its accountability framework that “the most important form of accountability in devolved institution is to the residents who elect its leaders”, and that it is therefore “crucial that the public can easily understand what functions institutions are responsible for”.³² However, as a recent parliamentary report concluded, “there is clearly a problem of the public understanding what level powers and responsibilities for particular policies or actions rest”.³³ Government has taken steps to increase public awareness, such as committing to publishing plain English guidance on the functions and funds combined authorities are responsible for,³⁴ but steps such as these require residents to actively seek out the information – which only a small proportion will do.

Interviewees agreed that both public understanding of what combined authorities do – as well as public affiliation with the geography of some devolution deals – was weak. This is particularly challenging in areas designed to align with economic geography rather than historic local government boundaries. As Clive Betts MP told us, it is “difficult to convince people of a concept like travel-to-work areas and how it will benefit them”. **MCA should therefore take seriously the responsibility to improve public understanding of their role**; for instance, through improved transparency about combined authority functions, decisions and performance. In addition, public understanding could be improved by places introducing common branding of services delivered by the combined authority, as Greater Manchester has done through its Bee Network brand for public transport.

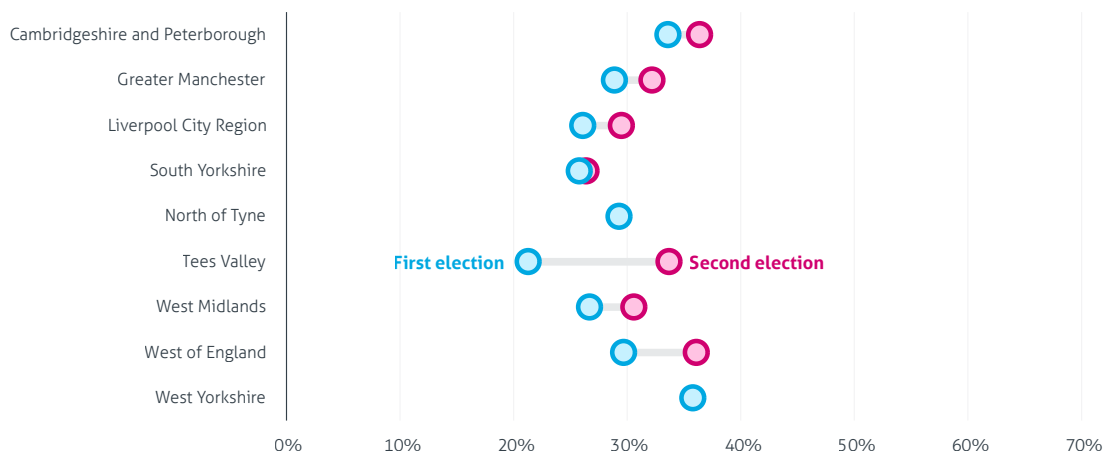
The most powerful advocate for the legitimacy and importance of a combined authority is the elected mayor, whose profile and mandate gives them an unrivalled ability to communicate directly with voters. **Mayors should therefore commit to regular public engagement activities**, such as the Mayor’s Question Time sessions that Andy Burnham undertakes across Greater Manchester.

Elections are the highest profile form of public engagement. **Low turnout, however, may inhibit a mayor’s effectiveness as an advocate for their region and for the devolution deal itself.** Average turnout in 2021 mayoral elections was 33.7%, with a low of 29.5% in the Liverpool City Region.³⁵ This is lower than the usual turnout for the UK parliament and the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and London, although on the positive side turnout rose in all areas between the first and second elections (see Figure 9).

A final point is that the government’s recent decision to change the electoral system for mayoral elections to first-past-the-post raises the prospect of mayors coming into office with the support of far less than half of voters. Under the previous supplementary vote system, voters were able to select first and second preference candidates, with the second preference votes of unsuccessful candidates reallocated to the top two. The result was that candidates were incentivised to appeal to opposition voters for second preferences and therefore to build a wider coalition of support from across the region.

Under first-past-the-post, it is plausible that future mayors could take office with the support of only a third of voters, comprising votes from their core support base. It is our view that mayors taking election in such circumstances would be less able to deliver effective leadership, given that the MCA devolution model requires consensus and coalition building. For these reasons, **we recommend that this or a future government revisit the question of the electoral system for mayoral elections and consider a return to the supplementary vote**, or even the alternative vote, which allows voters to express multiple preferences.

Figure 9 **Voter turnout in metro mayor elections from 2017 onwards**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of BBC England Local Elections, 2017–2022, and House of Commons Library, Combined authority mayoral elections in May 2021, 2021.

Conclusion

This report has shown how devolution deals pass through a four-phase life cycle that starts with local areas informally working together to develop a proposition for a deal, proceeds through negotiations with central government, the conclusion and legal implementation of a deal, and concludes with the establishment and building of a combined authority.

This is best viewed as a cycle rather than a one-way process for the simple reason that in almost no case has a single devolution deal been the end of the story. Rather, places that successfully implement and operationalise an initial deal almost always return to the table for broader and deeper powers, or other reforms to funding and governance. As one experienced figure told us: "Do not think of this as 'You get the plan, you get the people, you deliver the plan'. It is not a linear process." Instead, there is a "constant resealing of the plan".

What this means is that, having put into practice an initial deal, local leaders should continue to work to refine their shared vision for their area, to identify new priorities and challenges, and to make the case to government for how further devolution could help improve social and economic performance. Likewise, there will be a continuing need to build a coalition of support among local stakeholders, to develop strong relationships across Whitehall, to build a shared evidence base, to establish a strong strategic centre for the institution, and to engage the public and make the case for why devolution matters.

Many of the lessons set out in all four chapters of this report should be of relevance to places with a functioning devolution settlement as much as to areas coming together to do a deal for the first time. We hope that the insights and examples shared here do prove of practical value to all those involved in making a success of devolution across the cities and counties of England.

Annex A: England's nine mayoral combined authorities

Combined authority	Date formed	First mayoral election	Current mayor	Next mayoral election	Population covered (2021)	% England's GVA covered (2020)	Expenditure (2020/21)
Greater Manchester (GMCA)	1 April 2011	4 May 2017	Andy Burnham (Labour)	6 May 2024	2,868,000	4.5%	£1,958m
West Midlands (WMCA)	16 June 2016	4 May 2017	Andy Street (Conservative)	6 May 2024	2,916,000	4.1%	£453m
Liverpool City Region (LCRCA)	1 April 2014	4 May 2017	Steve Rotheram (Labour)	6 May 2024	1,551,000	2.0%	£593m
South Yorkshire (SYMCA)	1 April 2014	3 May 2018	Oliver Coppard (Labour)	7 May 2026	1,374,000	1.7%	£185m
West Yorkshire (WYCA)	1 April 2014	6 May 2021	Tracy Brabin (Labour)	2 May 2024	2,349,000	3.4%	£393m
North of Tyne (NTCA)	2 November 2018	2 May 2019	Jamie Driscoll (Labour)	N/A	828,000	1.1%	£140m
Tees Valley (TVCA)	1 April 2016	4 May 2017	Ben Houchen (Conservative)	6 May 2024	678,000	0.8%	£196m
West of England (WECA)	9 February 2017	4 May 2017	Dan Norris (Labour)	1 May 2025	954,000	1.9%	£102m
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (CPCA)	3 March 2017	4 May 2017	Nik Johnson (Labour)	1 May 2025	896,000	1.6%	£156m

Combined authority	Staff	Senior staff (£50k+)	LEPs covered	NHS integrated care boards covered	Police services covered
Greater Manchester (GMCA)	650 (core authority), 1,696 (fire and rescue service), 1,081 (TfGM) ¹	232	Greater Manchester LEP (whole)	NHS Greater Manchester (whole)	Greater Manchester Police (whole)
West Midlands (WMCA)	699 (core authority), 275 (wider group) ²	179	Business Growth West Midlands (whole), Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP (part)	NHS Black Country (whole), NHS Birmingham and Solihull (whole), NHS Coventry and Warwickshire (part)	West Midlands Police (whole)
Liverpool City Region (LCRCA)	960 ³	127	Liverpool City Region LEP (whole)	NHS Cheshire and Merseyside (part)	Merseyside Police (whole), Cheshire Constabulary (part)
South Yorkshire (SYMCA)	337	27	South Yorkshire LEP (whole)	NHS South Yorkshire (whole)	South Yorkshire Police (whole)
West Yorkshire (WYCA)	765	58	Leeds City Region LEP (whole)	NHS West Yorkshire (part)	West Yorkshire Police (whole)
North of Tyne (NTCA)	89	24	North East LEP (part)	NHS North East and Cumbria (part)	Northumbria Police (part)
Tees Valley (TVCA)	136 (core authority), 49 (wider group)	76	Tees Valley (whole)	NHS North East and Cumbria (part)	Cleveland Police (whole), Durham Constabulary (part)

West of England (WECA)	266	40	West of England (part)	NHS Bristol, North Somerset, and South Gloucestershire (part), NHS Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon, and Wiltshire (part)	Avon and Somerset Police (part)
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (CPCA)	c. 150	32	Greater Cambridgeshire and Greater Peterborough (whole)	NHS Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (part)	Cambridgeshire Constabulary (whole)

Annex B: The government's devolution framework

Function	Detail	L1	L2	L3	Lead dept(s)
Strategic role in delivery services	Host for government functions best delivered at strategic level involving more than one local authority, e.g. local nature recovery strategies	✓	✓	✓	DLUHC / DEFRA
	Opportunity to pool services at a strategic level	✓	✓	✓	DLUHC
	Opportunity to adopt innovative local proposals to deliver action on climate change and UK's net zero targets	✓	✓	✓	DLUHC / DESNZ
Supporting local businesses	LEP functions including hosting strategic business voice		✓	✓	DLUHC / DBT
Local control of sustainable transport	Control of appropriate local transport functions, e.g. local transport plans*		✓	✓	DfT
	Defined key route network*			✓	DfT
	Priority for new rail partnerships with Great British Railways – influencing local rail offer, e.g. services and stations			✓	DfT
	Ability to introduce bus franchising		✓	✓	DfT
	Consolidation of existing core local transport funding for local road maintenance and smaller upgrades into a multi-year integrated settlement			✓	DfT
Investment spending	UKSPF planning and delivery at a strategic level		✓	✓	DLUHC
	Long-term investment fund, with an agreed annual allocation			✓	DLUHC
Giving adults the skills for the labour market	Devolution of adult education functions and the cored adult education budget		✓	✓	DfE
	Providing input in local skills improvement plans		✓	✓	DfE
	Role in designing and delivering future contracted employment programmes			✓	DWP

Local control of infrastructure decisions	Ability to establish mayoral development corporations (with consent to host local planning authority)			✓	DLUHC
	Devolution of locally led brownfield funding			✓	DLUHC
	Strategic partnerships with Homes England across the affordable housing programme and brownfield funding			✓	DLUHC
	Homes England compulsory purchase powers (held concurrently)		✓	✓	DLUHC
Keeping the public safe and healthy	Mayoral control of police and crime commissioner (PCC) functions where boundaries align**			✓	Home Office
	Clear defined role in local resilience*		✓	✓	Cabinet Office
	Where desired offer MCAs a duty for improving the public's health (concurrently with local authorities)			✓	DHSC
Financing local incentives for residents and business	Ability to introduce mayoral precepting on council tax*			✓	DLUHC / HMT
	Ability to introduce supplement on business rates (increased subject to ballot)			✓	DLUHC / HMT
* refers to functions which are only applicable to combined authorities					
** refers to functions which are currently only applicable to mayoral combined authorities					

Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Levelling Up the United Kingdom, 2023 and government departmental responsibilities.

Annex C: Status of devolution across England

Local discussions (conception)	In talks with government (negotiation) ⁱ	Deal agreed (implementation)	Existing deal (operation)
Berkshire ²	Cornwall ⁱ	East Midlands ³	Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
Cheshire and Warrington ⁴	Devon, Plymouth, and Torbay ⁱⁱ	Norfolk ⁵	Greater Manchester
Cumbria ⁶	Hull and East Yorkshire ⁱⁱⁱ	North East	Liverpool City Region
Gloucestershire ⁷	Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland ^{iv}	Suffolk ⁸	London ^v
Greater Essex ⁹		York and North Yorkshire ¹⁰	North of Tyne ^{vi}
Greater Lincolnshire ¹¹			South Yorkshire
Hampshire ^{vii}			Tees Valley
Kent and Medway ¹²			West Midlands
Lancashire ¹³			West of England
Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire ¹⁴			West Yorkshire
Surrey ¹⁵			

ⁱ Limited non-mayoral devolution is already in place in Cornwall. It rejected an agreed level three (mayoral) deal in April 2023 and is now understood to be seeking a level two deal. See Owen B, 'Devolution deal with elected mayor dropped by Cornwall Council', BBC, 4 April 2023, retrieved 28 June 2023, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-65173108

ⁱⁱ Devon, Plymouth and Torbay are reported to be preparing a "final business case" for a proposed level two deal. See Devon County Council, 'Devolution Deal for Devon, Plymouth and Torbay moves a step closer', Devon County Council, 17 March 2023, retrieved 28 June 2023, www.devon.gov.uk/news/devolution-deal-for-devon-plymouth-and-torbay-moves-a-step-closer

ⁱⁱⁱ Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire are understood to be considering whether to pursue a level three deal, with local leaders agreeing to hold talks with the government to explore the option. See BBC News, 'Hull and East Riding leaders agree to talks on mayoral devolution deal', BBC, 21 June 2023, retrieved 28 June 2023, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-humber-65973842

^{iv} The Mayor of Leicester City Council is understood to have blocked a proposed level three deal for Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland. Talks are reported to continue over possible ways forward and the minister for devolution and county deals has reportedly encouraged the area to "be ambitious in pursuing a level three deal." See Sinnott J, 'Position Statement from the Leader of the Council', Leicestershire County Council, 17 May 2023, retrieved 28 June 2023, <https://politics.leics.gov.uk/documents/s176363/Leaders%20Position%20Statement%2017052023.pdf>

^v London's devolution arrangements were created in 2000 and exist separately from the devolution process covering other areas.

vi Following the 2022 North East devolution deal, the North of Tyne Combined Authority will be abolished and replaced with a larger authority for the North East region in May 2024. See Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities, North East Devolution Deal, 28 December 2022, retrieved 28 June 2023, www.gov.uk/government/publications/north-east-devolution-deal--2

vii There is not yet an agreed geography for a Hampshire deal. The County Council is understood to favour a 'pan-Hampshire' deal, while unitary authorities in the Solent area want a two deal approach, one covering the Solent area and a second for the rest of the county. See Knott J, 'Exclusive: Unitaries push for 'two-deal' Hampshire devo solution', *Local Government Chronicle*, 12 June 2023, www.lgcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/exclusive-unitaries-push-for-two-deal-hampshire-devo-solution-12-06-2023/

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