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Local growth plans

How government should support a place-based approach to its national growth mission

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Introduction

One of the Labour government's five missions is to increase growth across the country. It has explicitly recognised that mayors and the combined authorities they lead across England have a big role to play in realising this goal. In their first meeting after the election, the prime minister and deputy prime minister tasked all 12 current mayors with developing 'local growth plans' for their areas to show how each would contribute to the national mission.

The government is right to recognise the role combined authorities can play to drive growth. They (generally) cover coherent economic geographies and, with the expansion of devolution under the previous government including the expanded 'trailblazer' deals, increasingly have control over policy levers that are key to growth. Local growth plans have the potential to further support these powers, enabling places to take on a greater role shaping their local economies, improving the performance of lagging regions and contributing to national growth.

It is also right to recognise the need for different levels of government to work together for growth to be spread across the country. But the Starmer government is not the first to realise this, or to attempt to act on it: over the past three decades, the centre has tasked local areas to develop 'opportunity area' plans,[1] local industrial strategies,[2] strategic economic plans[3] and, most recently, productivity plans.[4] None has lasted – indeed some were never started – and none has made a sustained difference to policy or growth.

English devolution is shifting. New places are getting new devolution deals, and places that already have mayors are anticipating new powers. At the national level, the government is developing an industrial strategy, expected in 2025, that seeks to augment 'priority sectors' while initiating broader interventions to drive growth. Local growth plans are, then, just one part of the government's strategy for growth and will need to be developed as a part of it. This will require careful sequencing.

Insights from local places should be fed into national strategy – but detailed local plans cannot be developed until mayors and others have more clarity about the government's broader approach. Authorities also need to know what powers and funding they will have at their disposal, which we expect the government to set out in the new English devolution white paper and revised devolution framework.

This process has already started. Mayors have been asked to provide initial growth plans, including some priority interventions for their region. But combined authorities and other local authorities are not yet clear on what plans are supposed to achieve and how they will be developed and used. This autumn, through the budget and other economic announcements, the government has a good opportunity to clarify the purpose of plans and explain how they will fit, and be sequenced with, other policy developments. It should take it.

This insight paper, based on conversations with external experts, those in central and local government, and those with experience of previous local plans, lays out the steps the government should take to make local growth plans as effective as possible.

Recommendations in brief

- **The purpose of local growth plans should be to focus on how local levers will drive growth.** These plans are also an opportunity to develop a robust evidence base on the strengths and weaknesses of the local economy and set out a long-term vision for how to make the region more productive. However, to ensure plans can be locally owned and developed relatively quickly, the plans should not include firm commitments about central government policy.
- **The timelines for local growth plans should be aligned with timelines for the devolution framework and the national industrial strategy.** The government should set out the powers and funding available to different areas, and the industrial strategy, before local growth plans are written and finalised to ensure that plans are informed by the levers and funding that local places will have, and that sectors align with the national agenda.
- **There should be a different timetable for places that do not yet have deals.** Growth in these places is still important, and they should have plans, but they should reflect the different institutional arrangements. In areas where deals are not yet agreed, plans should focus on the evidence base and long-term vision rather than how to use local policy levers to drive growth.
- **The devolution framework should include additional powers and funding flexibility for more places.** If local growth plans are to be a useful guide to policy, areas need to know what powers and funding they will have and central government's approach to different sectors. And if those plans are to drive growth, the government should be willing to provide more extensive powers and financial freedom to the most developed combined authorities.
- **Local growth plans should be owned by local leaders. Whitehall's role is to ensure they have a robust evidence base and that plans add up to a coherent national plan for growth.** Learning from the lesson of local industrial strategies, which got stuck in the Whitehall machine, local growth plans should not require detailed Whitehall sign-off. However, through independent light-touch peer review, central government should ensure plans are based on a robust evidence base. As plans are being developed, central government should also identify areas where local plans in different parts of the country overlap and could complement one another, such as in specific sectors.
- **Central government must ensure places have the necessary capacity to develop good plans and implement them**, especially outside the most developed MCAs that have a good understanding of their local economies and more strategic capacity. The government should take a two-pronged approach: providing capacity funding, doubling the mayoral capacity fund, and providing a central pool of resource and expertise that combined authorities can access.

Local growth plans should set out how local policy will drive growth

The most important decision the government needs to make about local growth plans is their purpose. Most places, and certainly most combined authorities, already have various local strategies for growth and the relevant policy levers to achieve it, such as transport and skills.

Some combined authorities already have broader plans designed to promote growth – such as the West Midlands Combined Authority's 2022 'Plan for Growth', and this year's 'Plan for Good Growth' from the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. Local enterprise partnerships in other places also developed economic plans while, more narrowly, local skills improvement plans were developed by Chambers of Commerce at coherent economic geographies (including combined authorities) in the last year.[5]

These are just some examples of local plans that the new local growth plans must augment, not interfere with.

In its local elections manifesto, published in March 2024, the Labour Party explained the rationale for growth plans. It said it would:

> "create a statutory obligation on all combined authorities and counties with devolution deals to develop a Local Growth Plan based on those functional economic geographies which identifies economic clusters and sets out their plans to build on their local advantages, the key binding constraints of their local economies and how they will use the powers devolved from central government to support local growth".[6]

In one sense the party – and now the government – has been clear about the purpose of the plans: growth, specifically to boost productivity and wider economic growth across the country. This means that the plans will concern what will drive national productivity growth rather than focusing primarily on 'inclusive growth' or within-area inequality. Beyond this, however, it has provided relatively little guidance to local areas when asking them to develop plans.

There are several different forms that local growth plans could take:

1. A **robust evidence base** about the local economy, its strengths and weaknesses, to inform central and local policy, including the industrial strategy.
2. A **long-term vision for the local economy**, including the industries it should focus on and the key investments needed to achieve higher growth.
3. A **'wish list' of central government policies** that the local area would like to see delivered, including major investments such as transport projects.
4. An explanation of how the area will contribute to the **national industrial strategy**.
5. A plan laying out how **locally controlled policy levers and funding** will be deployed to achieve growth in the area.

Doing all of these things well would be a tall order. So there is the risk that, if different places interpret the brief differently, the government will end up with an incoherent set of plans that does little to help co-ordinate its approach to the growth mission.

We recommend that local growth plans should primarily focus on option five above: **setting out how local levers will be used to drive growth**. Devolution in England has progressed substantially in the last few years, and many places now have, or are on the way to having, more control over the levers that drive local growth. And it is crucial that combined authorities take a strategic approach to using the funding and policies they control to support growth, especially as they make more decisions about how funding should be allocated, and which projects should be prioritised. Local growth plans would provide a useful mechanism to ensure these decisions are driven by a coherent economic approach.

To ensure the plans are integrated into wider combined authority decision making, **the growth plans should inform the outcomes frameworks that will be agreed between the Treasury and combined authorities** as part of the devolution of integrated single settlements at the next spending review.

Alongside this primary goal, plans can and should fulfil option one above: **laying out a robust evidence base on the strength and weaknesses of the local economy**. Local policy should be informed by a good understanding of which broad drivers of growth, like skills and transport, might be holding the economy back or helping it to thrive. Places also need a good understanding of which industries are strongest and have the most growth potential locally, and should therefore be prioritised through local policy. This evidence base would also be useful to central government when making decisions like which new transport infrastructure to prioritise across the country.

One key decision is whether the document will include central government policy commitments, or at least 'asks of' central government (option three above), or whether it will focus only on local policy.

We recommend that local growth plans should be locally owned documents that are not expected to include central government policy commitments. This is for two reasons:

- First, the government wants to make progress on its growth mission, and so it makes sense for local growth plans to be published relatively quickly – subject to other government-related plans being confirmed. The local industrial strategies included commitments for funding of specific projects by central government. However, this meant each required a negotiation and central capacity meant that they were agreed very slowly and only seven of 38 had been published when the 2018 industrial strategy was abolished.[7]
- Second, if growth plans are locally owned, they are more likely to have a bigger impact on local policy decisions and reflect local strategy rather than be seen as a hoop that central government is making places jump through. Even since local

industrial strategies were developed, devolution has advanced in England. In 2018, a plan for local growth would have meant little without central government involvement. But if this government builds on the powers and funding devolved over the past few years, many combined authorities will have the ability to make a meaningful difference to their local economies through their own policy decisions.

Nonetheless, the plans can and should recognise that central government policies will be an important contributor to local growth. There are some policy decisions, such as on major transport infrastructure, that will still rely on central government rather than being deliverable locally. As a result, **the plans should set out a long-term vision for how to make the region more productive** (option two above), which might include desired action from central government over the long term but which would not require central government commitment to those policies now.

Local growth plans will be of most use both locally and nationally if there is clarity about what they are intended to achieve. By setting out the three aims of growth plans we recommend here, the plans can be locally led while ensuring local policy is underpinned by a strategic view and central government has the information it needs to make good economic decisions to drive growth in specific places.

The government needs to get the sequencing right

The government needs to set out the powers and funding available and the broader growth strategy before MCAs can finalise a growth plan. If the primary purpose of plans is to inform local policy, places need to know what levers they have available and how they will be funded. This will not be the same for all areas (Box 1).

Each devolution deal is negotiated separately, with the most extensive powers reserved for combined authorities with a directly elected mayor. In its manifesto, Labour suggested that all areas will eventually receive more extensive powers than they currently have. It also committed to simplifying the funding landscape for combined and local authorities, which currently comprises many small funding pots with tight spending criteria, many only awarded after bidding for specific projects to central government.[8]

Box 1 **The current devolution framework: powers and funding**

Devolution in England is a process. Places with deals at the lower levels are expected to move up the ladder in future as they build institutional capacity and capability.

The 'trailblazer' combined authorities of Greater Manchester and the West Midlands are the most advanced: both have powers over transport, skills and housing and from the next spending review period, starting in April 2025, will have a simplified 'single settlement' funding model whereby multiple funding streams are consolidated into a flexible, department-style settlement.

Several other MCAs have level 4 devolution deals, which were posited as a stepping-stone to a single settlement funding model and offer extra powers that other MCAs do not have around skills, careers and transport functions as well as energy planning. They also have access to two consolidated pots of funding covering local growth and place, and housing and regeneration.

Outside of these there are level 3 devolution deals (requiring a mayor), which have powers over skills, transport, local roads, urban regeneration and 30-year investment funds.

All other deals sit at level 2, which include county councils and combined authorities not led by an elected mayor. These include the adult education budget and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. This is the lowest level as no 'level 1' devolution deals have ever been agreed.

London has a different devolution settlement. The Greater London Authority (GLA) consists of the mayor (executive of the GLA) with responsibility for transport, policing and economic development, and the elected London Assembly to which they are accountable.

The government has set out its vision that local plans will ensure "the hard decisions necessary to deliver growth, unblock constraints and attract inward investment are confronted".[9] But while they can certainly identify problems, unblocking them and attracting investment will require some local areas to have more devolved powers, and all places to have far more certainty over their powers and funding than currently exists.

This is largely a problem of sequencing. MCAs are being asked to set out priorities for their local growth plans now, because they are intended to feed into the national industrial strategy, which is due to be published next spring. Full local growth plans are then intended to be finalised after the national industrial strategy has been published. However, also due in the coming months is the English Devolution Bill, which is expected to set out a new framework for devolution, including which powers and funding flexibility will be available to different authorities.

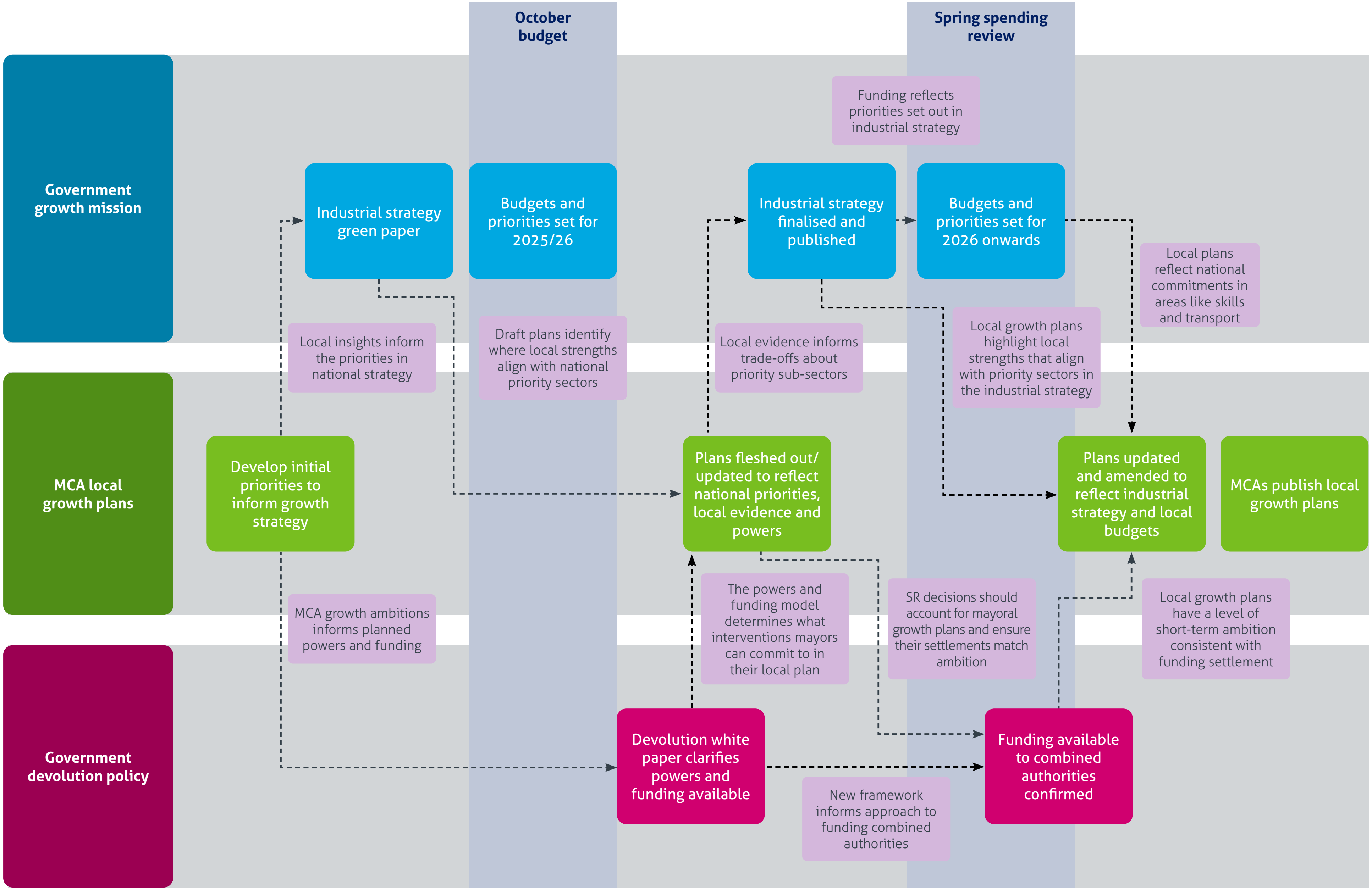
Places will need clarity on this before they can finalise their plans. We are also yet to hear about the government's plans for funding simplification for those areas outside of single settlement deals, which the previous government had started but not finished. Some interviewees from combined authorities expressed a frustration with the apparent lack of recognition from central government of the interdependencies of these policies.

These timelines for local growth plans, powers and funding should be brought together. And while the sectors chosen as part of the national industrial strategy should be informed by local insights, local growth plans should ultimately look to reflect decisions made in the national industrial strategy about which sectors to prioritise. A coherent industrial policy requires central government to unblock barriers to growth in specific sectors; for example, through its approach to regulation, as well as specific local interventions. Trying to do the latter without the former would be much less effective.

The lack of funding certainty was a significant barrier for local industrial strategies (LISs) – the previous government's attempt at similar local plans. A report from the Industrial Strategy Council determined that a lack of direct funding, coupled with uncertainty over future funding,[*] meant local areas faced difficulties committing to future projects and attracting additional private sector investment.[10] This uncertainty often led to delays or scaling back of initiatives, as the risk of financial gaps hindered confidence in the ability to deliver.

[*] LEP budgets were only confirmed up to March 2021 at the same time that growth deals and EU structural funds were due to end and details on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund distribution had not yet been released.

Figure 1 **Proposed sequencing of Local Growth Plans**



Source: Institute for Government analysis.

For local growth plans to be as useful as possible, therefore, there are several things central government needs to set out before they are finalised.

- **First, the government should confirm its devolution framework** so combined authorities know what powers they will have and how funding will be structured.

  If the government wants local growth plans to be as effective as possible, the devolution framework should include additional powers and funding flexibility for more places.[11] As we have argued elsewhere, the powers devolved to single settlement trailblazer MCAs should be expanded to include employment support, additional responsibilities for other skills initiatives, translational R&D spend and planning. It should also lay out how and when the existing level 4 MCAs will be able to step up to a single settlement deal.

- **Second, for areas without single settlements** and in policy areas not covered by the single pot, the government should confirm its plans for funding simplification.

  Both this and the approach to single pots will need to be confirmed in advance of the multi-year spending review, which will conclude in the spring, to ensure different departments take a consistent approach to funding local growth.[12]

- Third, local growth plans should reflect – and so be published after – the **new industrial strategy**.

  The government has, reasonably, recognised that local insights can feed into the industrial strategy, but the final local growth plans should be consistent with the nationally agreed approach. Where the government is developing other growth strategies, such as over transport or skills, these should also be set out first so local plans can reflect them.

Plans for non-MCA areas should be phased in and designed to match the capacity that institutions have to deliver

MCAs are well positioned to develop local growth plans because they operate at a scale that allows them to address regional economic challenges while maintaining a connection to local communities and local knowledge. With the right devolved powers, and the leadership of directly elected mayors, MCAs can tailor local growth plans to the specific needs and strengths of the region. However, there are only 12 regions in England led by metro mayors and the map is far from complete. Around half the population, including most of the south outside London and some large urban areas, are not covered by this devolution model.[13]

However, the government has implied that all places, not just those places with mayors, will be asked to develop local growth plans. Those areas, whether at the local government or future combined authority level, will necessarily have fewer local levers available to them to drive growth locally, so plans here must necessarily look different.

The government has made a commitment to extend devolution to new areas and has already announced mayoral deals in Greater Lincolnshire and in Hull and East Yorkshire. In other places, while deals have not been agreed, the likely geography of such a deal is broadly agreed. There are then a few places where the geography is not yet settled; for example, Sussex.[14] In each of these types of place, the timing, role and scope of local growth plans will be different.

The government should not rush into finalising full local growth plans outside MCAs. The government's desire to enhance growth everywhere is well publicised but, in policy terms, full local growth plans in non-MCA areas are less urgent. Above, we argued that the primary role for local growth plans should be to inform local policy to drive growth. As those levers are not yet devolved to those places, the plans do not need to be developed as quickly. In addition, the capacity issues (discussed below), which will be acute for some combined authorities, will be even more acute in areas where new institutions have not yet been established. Developing good plans quickly is unlikely to be feasible. This also means additional resource and support will be needed when plans are developed.

Local growth plans outside MCAs should be based on the geography of future devolution deals. Given the government's ambition to extend devolution across England, any plan developed on a different geography would quickly become out of date. Plans at a smaller geography (such as at local authority level) would not be coherent because local authorities are generally too small to include a complete local labour market. This means that the development of plans in a given area should only take place once the geography of a deal has been agreed, even if the deal itself has not.

In places where deals are agreed and institutions are being established, local growth plans should be developed before powers are fully devolved. In places like Greater Lincolnshire, the process of developing the evidence base about the economic strengths and weaknesses of the local economy and identifying opportunities for new local levers to make a difference will be useful preparation for those places taking on powers. One of the key elements that makes new combined authorities successful is the ability to think about strategic priorities across the area, rather than local authorities focusing too much on their narrower interests.[15] Developing a local growth plan would help to do this and begin to develop the strategic capacity needed for taking on further powers in the future.

In areas where deals are not yet agreed, plans should have a more limited purpose, but can be a useful tool for focusing on priorities early on. Developing a strong evidence base on the local economy and identifying a long-term path to prosperity would still be useful in areas that do not yet have the levers to make this happen themselves. In particular, it is important that the government and local leaders have a shared understanding of the role different places play in the different sectors that will be prioritised in the national industrial strategy.

Places without deals, with substantial resource support from central government, should focus on identifying key economic strengths and weaknesses, with a particular focus on sectors. These plans could then be superseded by a full growth plan once a devolution deal is agreed.

Central government should oversee the development of plans, but they should be locally owned

The process for approving plans must balance oversight with flexibility to ensure that plans are locally owned as well as strategically aligned. We recommend above that local growth plans produced by MCAs and others should primarily concern how local institutions will use their devolved powers and funding to promote growth. If this is their purpose, and they do not make firm commitments about central government policy, Whitehall should not be a co-owner of plans and should not run what are often detailed (and lengthy) processes of sign-off.

This would be different to the approach taken with local industrial strategies, where interviewees told us that central government approval was a major bottleneck to agreeing the plans because the central team only had bandwidth for a few areas at a time at most. Excessive central oversight would also lead combined authorities to write plans in a way that ticks the right Whitehall boxes, increasing the risk that local growth plans will be seen as a bureaucratic hurdle rather than a useful document to guide policy.

This does not mean that central government should play no role in developing and overseeing plans, however. As we highlight above, the plans will help to ensure local areas take a strategic approach to economic development, while also providing evidence that will inform central government decisions. It is right that the government ensures the plans are of high quality and together contribute to achieving national growth.

Most importantly, **central government should ensure that growth plans are credible and the policy conclusions reached are supported by a robust evidence base**. If a primary goal of the plans is to help local places make good policy decisions to drive growth, they must be underpinned by a strong evidence base, and reach conclusions based on that. If another is to identify local industrial strengths, the plan must provide evidence for the industries they have chosen. Interviewees told us that many of the LISs submitted in 2018 looked similar and claimed that the place in question was a leader in similar industries; for example, in advanced manufacturing.

We therefore recommend that **the quality of plans should be assured through light-touch independent 'peer review' of plans** by academic experts based on a specific set of criteria. Relevant criteria would include whether the evidence base is well presented, and whether key priorities identified are supported by that evidence base. Review timelines should be short, and the expectation should be that the plans are subject to minor revisions, rather than rewritten after this stage.

As well as ensuring growth plans fit the brief and the analysis is robust, **central government should review the full set of local growth plans while they are in development to ensure they add up to a co-ordinated plan for national growth.** There should be two dimensions to this.

- First, do the sectors identified align well with the priority sectors in the national industrial strategy?
- Second, are there opportunities for co-ordination across places to better meet shared growth objectives? While combined authorities generally cover a coherent economic geography, economic clusters will not always be confined to administrative boundaries. Where there are clusters that span large areas – for example, offshore wind along the east coast – central government should encourage places to co-ordinate (or continue to co-ordinate) their policies where appropriate.

Authorities have already submitted initial priorities they want to reflect in their growth plans to central government, and more back-and-forth is likely before the plans are finalised. Central government should look to identify these crossovers and potential inconsistencies early in the process rather than requiring that plans change at a later date.

The government should ensure places have the capacity to develop good plans

Problems with capacity will require targeted investment and support from government to ensure quality consistency across plans and combined authorities. The variation seen among authorities is rooted to an extent in the differences in funding and expertise; it also more simply reflects that some are newer than others, as smaller or newer ones often have to rely on costly external consultants for bids and plan writing, where longer established ones like Greater Manchester have developed these skills in-house. Some combined authorities (generally the most advanced) will already have a good understanding of their economies and even their own economic strategies, meaning it will be easier for them to develop a growth plan. But this is not the case for many.[16] These problems will be even more acute when it comes to developing plans in areas that do not currently have combined authorities.

Capacity problems in combined authorities present two key problems for the development of local growth plans. The first is that the variation in capacity will inevitably affect the quality of plans developed in each place. Capacity problems were also highlighted as a challenge for the LEPs tasked with developing LISs. Smaller LEPs had limited capacity to bid for extra funding and less resource to engage with central government, other LEPs and local businesses on their plans.[17] The second is that the evidence base developed may not be of a consistent quality across areas, which will make it more difficult for central government to rely on the plans to make national economic decisions.

One-off capacity funding can be a useful tool to support local areas to address the first problem. The previous government, for example, reserved £14 million of the UK Community Renewal Fund to support some places with developing their proposals for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.[18] For the LISs, almost all LEPs were offered £200,000 of capacity funding to support the development of their plans.[19] But there is a risk that if in-house capacity isn't built up over time, in many cases this money will be used to employ consultants to plug gaps in in-house capacity.

This is an expensive approach. One calculation put the total amount spent by the 10 Greater Manchester authorities on consultants to support bids for the Levelling Up Fund at £1.1m.[20] While good consultants can do an excellent job and are well set up to do some of the work, using them does nothing to build expertise in-house. There is also a risk that, given the amount of activity in the sector, consultants are incentivised to take a template approach. One interviewee who had been involved with LISs from the government side told us that many of the documents produced by consultants for the LEPs were nearly identical, which made many of them "a complete waste of time".

From this starting point, where only some institutions have the in-house knowledge and expertise to develop these plans, the government should look to support local areas with **both short-term and longer term investment in capacity**. As we have recommended before, the mayoral capacity fund, an annual allocation of £1m that directly supports capacity and resource in the mayor's office, should be doubled and committed to by the government long term.[21]

In addition, the **requirement for local growth plans should come with a dedicated one-off 'capacity fund' for combined authorities to help them develop the plans**. Once combined authorities turn to delivery, there will be a useful opportunity for places to share evidence on what has worked for them and any implementation challenges they have faced. The UK Mayors group, a collective of mayors and chief executives of combined authorities set up to promote collaboration among mayors on shared challenges and opportunities, would be a useful forum for this.

To help address the second problem and ensure the evidence base underlying local growth plans is strong across the country, the government should provide centrally co-ordinated support to find and analyse the evidence on local economies.

One possibility is **to bolster the support already provided through ONS Local**.[22] This was set up in 2023 as an advisory service for local leaders to help devolved administrations navigate often complex government-held datasets. They also offer a flexible pool of analysts that can be utilised to support cross-cutting projects. This resource could be deployed to support the development of evidence in less developed authorities.

For new combined authorities, we have warned before that rushing through the capacity-building process can be a mistake.[23] An option could be to utilise existing resource and have an analyst from ONS Local sit within the combined authority at its genesis. Having someone with the expertise and knowledge of what government data there is on local growth and how to bring it together would help these new institutions get up to speed more quickly. As more new combined authorities are created, the government would need to commit to long-term funding for ONS Local to enable this to continue.

In addition, some places will need support and guidance on activities such as how to draw in investment and how to do strategic financing. **The government should explore whether it can provide a pool of resource for combined authorities to access on these topics**, possibly based in the UK Infrastructure Bank, following the model of the European Investment Bank.[24]

Conclusion

The new government made an impact quickly by starting the process of developing local growth plans within its first few days in office in a meeting with the mayors and establishing its intention to involve MCAs squarely within its national plans for growth. These plans present an opportunity for local places to take on a greater role shaping their local economies, improving the performance of lagging regions and contributing to national growth.

However, in the following months it has become clear that some fundamental information – needed for combined authorities to develop these plans – has not been set out. Much of this is a sequencing problem, with different bits of government working on separate policies relating to these plans, powers and funding for local places, and the national industrial strategy.

For local growth plans to be genuinely useful the government will need to make clear what their purpose is, the powers and funding available to combined authorities, the approval process, the support available centrally, and what these plans will look like for non-MCA areas. This is needed before local growth plans are finalised and will need to be communicated across Whitehall as well as to local authorities.

Not doing so risks damaging relationships with devolved leaders, wasting capacity and resource in local places, and missing an opportunity for place-based policies to make a genuine impact on the economic growth of the country.

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