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INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

Devolution and urban regeneration

How can metro mayors transform England's towns and cities?

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About this report

Urban regeneration will be pivotal to sustained economic growth in England's cities and towns. This report draws on six case studies to explore the powers that metro mayors have to drive such regeneration. This project was supported by Balfour Beatty, but the views expressed are the author's alone.

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The cover image shows Stockport Interchange, which was delivered by the Stockport Mayoral Development Corporation.

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Summary

The regeneration of disused, deprived and deindustrialised urban areas across England will be crucial to the government's ability to achieve its economic growth targets. It will also bring other benefits, like reducing regional inequality and improving social outcomes, and helping the UK meet its climate objectives.

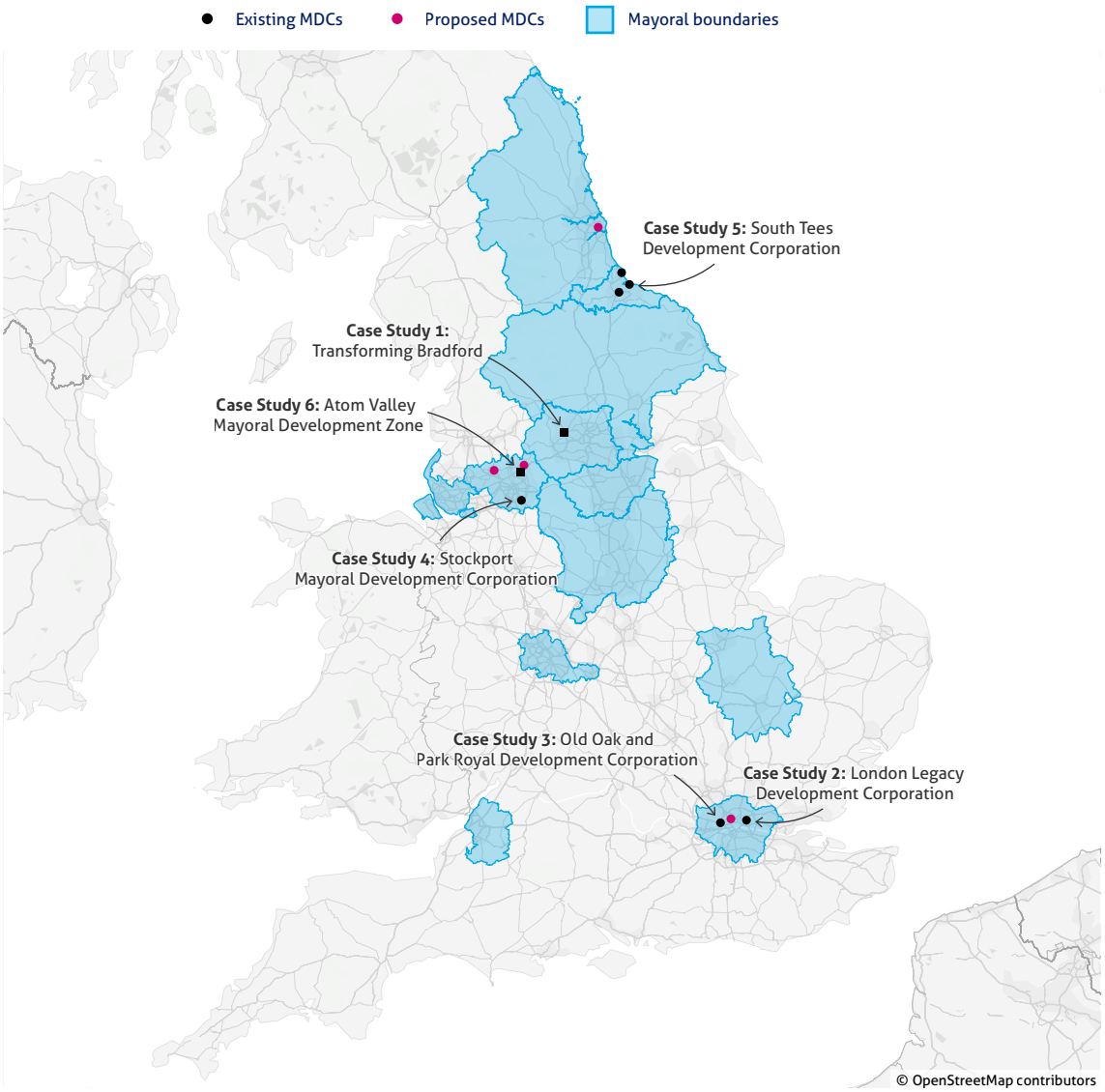
Urban regeneration can take many forms – from the renewal of declining town centres such as Stockport, Bradford and Hartlepool, to the transformation of disused industrial land in the West Midlands, South Tees and the North East regions, to the creation of hubs for advanced manufacturing and research in Rotherham and Greater Manchester's Atom Valley.

The government is clear both in its determination to 'get Britain building' and that it expects metro mayors to play a central role in driving urban regeneration. England's 12 mayors already hold a suite of relevant powers ranging from allocating funds to unlock projects led by local partners to setting the strategic direction for their regions as a whole. They can also be directly involved in delivery, including by creating vehicles such as mayoral development corporations (MDCs) and establishing joint ventures with the private sector.

Further devolution to mayors is now promised, as is the establishment of new mayoralties across other parts of the country. So the role of mayors in leading regeneration initiatives is here to stay and set to expand further. This paper – produced by the Institute for Government with the support of Balfour Beatty – outlines what powers are available to metro mayors to drive regeneration and what lessons mayors can learn from the application of these powers in different parts of the country. We also set out lessons for how central government could better support mayors to lead in this area.

This paper is based on research and interviews, focusing on six case studies (shown in Figure 1) and a roundtable hosted by the Institute for Government in October 2024, involving representatives from central government, combined authorities, the private sector and other experts.

Figure 1 **Urban regeneration case studies**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of publicly available data sources.

Key lessons in brief

To drive urban regeneration within their regions, metro mayors should:

- **Design interventions to meet the needs of a place, considering the full array of powers available.** Selecting policy levers that can address site-specific challenges is key to the success of an urban regeneration scheme and in ensuring public value for money.

- **Develop a clear and persuasive vision for future development.** Having a strong grasp of the opportunities that regeneration will bring to an area can be vital for bringing local stakeholders and investors on board.

- **Use their political capital to promote major regeneration schemes.** As locally elected leaders, mayors are well placed to make the case for investment, both to central government and the private sector. They can also take bold decisions in driving an area's transformation.

- **Engage with businesses and contractors early on when carrying out direct delivery.** This can help identify potential risks early on and develop collaborative relationships to unlock wider benefits from investment, such as high-skilled jobs for local residents.

- **Align devolved powers over transport, skills and the environment to make the most of urban regeneration.** The full benefits of urban regeneration will only be realised when supported by key place-based strategies that mayors are responsible for such as transport, skills and environment.

Mayoral development corporations (MDCs) can be a particularly powerful method for driving urban regeneration in the appropriate circumstances. To make best use of MDCs, mayors should:

- **Focus on MDCs' specific benefits.** MDCs are especially useful for driving regeneration over multiple sites, particularly those with complex land ownership or that sit over multiple local authority boundaries. Being able to tell a compelling story about why an MDC is the right vehicle will help build local support.

- **Give each MDC the appropriate levers to tackle specific local challenges.** This may include conferring full or partial planning powers, granting discretionary business rates relief or consenting to the use of compulsory purchase powers.

- **Appoint MDC boards with expertise from the public and private sectors.** Cross-party representation from local authorities in the region will also help insulate long-term schemes from the destabilising effects of the political cycle.

- **Establish strong systems of oversight and accountability.** This could include regular reporting to combined authority cabinets and meaningful community engagement from an early stage.

To further support mayors in their regeneration efforts, the Westminster government should also:

- **Legislate to enable mayors to make better use of the powers they have.** This could include strengthening the power of mayors to establish regional spatial plans and mayoral development corporations, as well as reviewing the legislation for mayoral development corporations; for instance, to clarify that MDCs can be established on greenfield as well as brownfield land.

- **Provide long-term, flexible funding to MCAs and the GLA.** This should include making a reality of commitments to expand 'integrated settlements' to new areas, so that mayors and other local leaders can develop long-term regeneration plans with the certainty that they will have the necessary funds to deliver.

- **Support mayoral authorities to build up capacity to develop long-term regeneration plans, including through the involvement of Homes England.** Central government should also facilitate evaluation of different approaches and lesson-sharing between regions, such as through working in partnership with the UK Mayors' Group (formerly the M10 group).

The role of metro mayors

Urban regeneration will be pivotal to sustained economic growth in England's cities and towns

The Starmer government has set economic growth as its central mission, pledging to 'get Britain building' as part of its plans to achieve this.[1] While there is a renewed emphasis on greenfield development – with plans to build on 'grey belt' sites and a New Towns Taskforce – the government is still committed to a brownfield-first approach to new development.[2] It is clear that Labour sees urban regeneration as pivotal to delivering growth.

The regeneration of England's cities and towns can take many forms, from smaller-scale 'place-making' schemes that revive public spaces to the wholesale transformation of underutilised and derelict land into new homes, transport hubs, offices and sites for education, industry and culture.

Done right, urban regeneration can be economically transformative and can catalyse future investment into a region. As well as driving growth, urban regeneration can help to rebalance regional inequalities, boost social outcomes and help deliver on climate objectives. These impacts can reach far beyond the site of regeneration itself, with quantitative research from Homes England finding that those living and working in wider communities also feel the benefits of housing-led regeneration.[3]

Delivering urban regeneration often requires up-front public sector intervention before private investment follows. In some cases, this is due to the nature of the regeneration opportunity – for example, many brownfield sites can have complex land ownership patterns that the private sector can struggle to assemble. Other challenges include high costs of land remediation and infrastructure delivery, which can present viability gaps that put off the private sector.

Moreover, public intervention can be vital for ensuring that investment in the urban environment delivers broader social and environmental benefits. In sum, government action may be necessary to address market failures that would otherwise lead to sub-optimal outcomes for areas in need of regeneration.

People at all levels in the public sector have a role to play but metro mayors, elected to lead English city regions by the people that live in them, are particularly well equipped to set the vision for, and drive forward, this agenda.

Metro mayors have the power to lead urban regeneration from the front

The government has positioned metro mayors as key partners in delivering their growth mission. Angela Rayner, communities secretary and deputy prime minister, is a long-standing champion of mayors, emphasising the need to "work hand-in-hand with our mayors to harness the potential of our towns and cities".[4] Across the country, there are currently 12 metro mayors, who collectively account for 54% of England's economic output and 48% of the population. However, they cover only 26% of England's land area, reflecting that until now, devolution has been concentrated in predominantly urban areas. Over the past decade, devolution has been extended to most of England's largest cities, including in parts of the North and Midlands where deindustrialisation and long-term underinvestment have left their scars on the urban fabric and the local economy. This pattern means metro mayors lead regions with enormous potential for regeneration.

The government's ambition is to expand English devolution further – a new English devolution white paper is expected before the end of 2024 – and new metro mayors will be elected in May 2025 in Hull and East Yorkshire, and in Greater Lincolnshire. The powers of metro mayors are also set to be deepened, with the government keen for mayors to take the lead on regional planning and housebuilding, as well as related economic functions such as local transport, skills and employment support policy.

Metro mayors are well equipped to drive urban regeneration because they have access to a number of key powers, including the abilities to:

- **Allocate devolved funds** to unlock and steer projects
- **Set the strategic direction for their region** through spatial planning frameworks and other closely related strategies such as transport plans and new local growth plans
- **Use their convening powers** to build local stakeholder support for key projects
- **Directly deliver regeneration**, including by setting up dedicated delivery vehicles such as joint ventures and mayoral development corporations (MDCs).

Metro mayors have also been devolved powers over closely connected policy areas – such as transport, skills and the environment – making them again well-placed to cut across silos and join up regeneration with other strategies at the subnational tier. There will not be a one-size-fits-all approach to urban regeneration: as locally elected leaders, metro mayors will be able to tailor regeneration strategies to local conditions and needs.

Mayors can unlock regeneration projects through the allocation of devolved funds

Mayors are collectively responsible for allocating an estimated £30 billion of public spending across their functions, including funding that can be used to unlock and deliver urban regeneration schemes.[5] A core source of devolved funding is the provision by the Treasury of long-term investment funds that mayoral combined authorities are free to allocate in line with local priorities, subject to successful completion of five-yearly 'gateway reviews'.

In a large combined authority area such as the West Midlands, this funding amounts to around £1bn over 30 years. These funds have been used for a range of purposes in combination with other devolved funds. In Tees Valley, for instance, an estimated £46million of the investment fund has been allocated to decontaminate and remediate polluted land in the former steelworks site in South Tees (see Case Study 5).[6] In Liverpool City Region, £6m was allocated in 2018 to a new Town Centre Fund championed by the mayor, Steve Rotheram, which has supported the regeneration of places including Southport and St Helens.[7]

Most mayoral authorities also have dedicated funding for driving regeneration on brownfield sites.[8] For example, mayoral authorities across the North and the Midlands have received Brownfield Housing Funds (BHF) from the government – a capital grant scheme for sites on which viability gaps have prevented the market or local authorities from bringing the regeneration forward quickly enough, or at all. The scale and terms of this grant vary between combined authorities. In January 2023, the newly formed York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority was allocated £12.7m to spend over a two-year period.[9] By comparison, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority received £150m for a three-year programme in its 2023 trailblazer deal.[10]

Brownfield housing funds have proven an effective lever for unlocking regeneration. For example, the West Works scheme in Longbridge was unlocked by £6m of West Midlands Combined Authority funding in 2023. This is a regeneration project located on part of the former MG Rover car factory site that closed in 2005, and the new scheme is set to deliver 350 homes and 5,000 jobs.[11]

All metro mayors are also able to allocate funds for investment in housing and transport – both key pillars of urban regeneration. For example, the Transforming Cities Fund (TCF) launched by the previous government in 2017 included £1.08bn of capital grant funding for six of the combined authorities to invest in public and sustainable transport schemes to be completed by 2025.[12] These kinds of transport projects can lead to significant transformation of the public realm, which in turn can lead to further inward investment in a place. For example, the Transforming Bradford schemes (see Case Study 1) were unlocked by more than £80m of TCF from West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA).

The way allocated funds are deployed can affect the scale of their impact. In interviews, we heard that in some circumstances a phased investment programme can offer benefits by enabling sections of a project to be completed early.

For example, WYCA also used the TCF to connect existing cycle lanes in Leeds city centre to create a comprehensive network.[13] As this involved work on multiple locations, we heard that a phased approach allowed sections of the network to be completed incrementally, offering benefits for network users sooner.

We also heard that a "programmatic" approach, in which multiple projects are delivered cohesively by the same contractors, has the potential to compound the benefits of investment in urban regeneration schemes. This approach was adopted in the Transforming Bradford scheme, where we were told that it led to efficiency savings, enabled a 'single voice' approach to stakeholder engagement and helped address public sector capacity issues. New procurement frameworks can offer alternative models for managing projects delivered through this approach, which may lead to further efficiencies when compared to traditional construction contracts.[14]

Long-term partnerships can also increase the scope for achieving social impact, as partners are better positioned to provide apprenticeships and other skills-based initiatives alongside regeneration projects.

Case Study 1: Transforming Bradford

In 2020, West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) received £317m from the Transforming Cities Fund. To make the proposed investments more ambitious, WYCA decided to combine its TCF allocation with £140m of local match funding.[15]

Bradford City Council successfully put forward an £82m bid for four projects to be funded by this investment, which included: upgrades to cycling and walking infrastructure to enable the rerouting of general traffic from the centre; a new 'cycle superhighway' connecting with the west of the city; a new entrance to the Bradford Interchange rail station; and the provision of a 'park and ride' facility in the south of the city.[16] These proposals aimed to significantly reduce air pollution, enhance active travel and prepare Bradford for its role as City of Culture in 2025.

In interviews, we heard that the council faced resourcing and capability challenges in delivering these schemes through traditional design-and-build routes. This led the council to change approach, engaging with the contractors chosen for the project* at an early stage in a bid to identify opportunities to save time and cost across the four schemes from the outset.

Moreover, a programmatic approach was adopted in which, instead of delivering each project independently, the funding has been deployed as one programme of work. We heard that this resulted in efficiencies across the programme, including economies of scale in supply chain procurement, and simplified communication channels between the contractors, Bradford council and WYCA.

* Balfour Beatty, the sponsors of this report.

The scheme has not been without its challenges, running into delays in delivering parking for the 'park and ride', and with the train station improvements stalled by major structural issues. However, significant improvements have already been delivered in pedestrianising the city centre, with further work coming to an end in the coming months.[17] Interviewees told us that without the early engagement and co-ordinated approach that the council adopted, it is unlikely that the council would have had the capacity to deliver transformation on this time frame.

Both Greater Manchester and the West Midlands are due to receive an 'integrated settlement' funding model from April 2025, with four more mayoral combined authorities on track to receive a similar settlement from 2026/27. This funding will consist of a single pot granted by the Treasury to fund five policy areas – local growth and place, local transport, housing and regeneration, adult skills, and building retrofit – with the combined authorities able to shift funding between these themes rather than being constrained by centrally imposed departmental ring-fences.[18]

This offers a significant opportunity for these combined authorities to construct a joined-up approach to regeneration, by aligning transport, housing and local growth funds to support a single vision for the transformation of urban centres.

Metro mayors can set the strategic direction for regeneration

Spatial development strategies (SDSs) are a kind of regional statutory planning document that sits between local plans (produced by councils) and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, produced by central government).

An SDS can be a powerful tool for setting the strategic direction for regeneration at a regional scale. These plans can provide high-level guidance on how opportunities for housing, infrastructure, employment and environment should be brought forward for development across a region. The ability to consider how these opportunities should be distributed across multiple local authorities is one of the key advantages of planning at this scale. Since taking office, the Labour government has set out ambitions to deliver universal coverage of regional spatial plans, stating that it will work "in concert with Mayoral Combined Authorities to explore extending existing powers to develop an SDS".[19]

As it stands, however, just five of the 12 mayors have statutory powers to develop SDSs and the process for adopting them varies between them. In Greater London, the mayor is under a legal obligation to produce an SDS, and the mayoral plan is subject to a vote from the London Assembly, which would require a two-thirds majority to amend or vote-down the plan – something which to date has never happened.[20]

In Greater Manchester, the West of England and the Liverpool City Region, adopting an SDS requires a unanimous vote of the respective combined authority cabinets, effectively granting each local authority a veto over the plan.[21] In the North East, the

newest of the four combined authorities with these powers, establishing an SDS only requires a simple majority vote of four of the seven constituent councils, although unanimous support is required to confer the power on the mayor to prepare an SDS at the outset.[22]

But none of these MCAs has completed the process, meaning London remains the only one to have an active SDS in place. Liverpool City Region Combined Authority is in the process of developing its plan, having closed a public consultation in February 2024. This strategy sets a vision for the city region for 2040, setting out policies for development across four broad spatial areas across the constituent authorities: Liverpool city centre, the inner urban area, the wider urban area and the rural city region.[23]

Greater Manchester has come close too, having produced multiple drafts over a four-year period. But the strategy was delayed and eventually cancelled when Stockport Council rejected the plans in 2020.[24] Despite this, nine of the ten constituent councils were able to proceed in adopting a joint local plan in 2024, titled 'Places for Everyone'.[25] While this plan is legally considered to achieve "substantially the same affect" on the remaining authorities, it falls short of being able to provide strategic direction across the whole region.[26]

Meanwhile, in the West of England Combined Authority, work on a spatial development strategy halted in 2022 due to disagreements between the mayor and South Gloucestershire.[27]

Broad local consensus is something to be aspired towards. But the Institute for Government has previously advocated that **if the government is serious about more areas adopting SDSs then it should strengthen mayoral powers to create them**. This would mean that SDSs can be passed in all combined authorities by a simple majority vote on combined authority boards.[28]

Even without using formal planning powers, mayors can use their mandate and authority to convene key stakeholders in support of urban regeneration across their regions. For example, six of the mayors have entered into strategic place partnerships with Homes England, the government housebuilding agency. The strength of these partnerships is that they enable Homes England and the combined authorities to adopt a "co-ordinated approach to the regeneration and transformation" of a region.[29] This means they can enter into discussion with local authorities and private sector partners together and identify opportunities to align resources and investment.

Mayors can also secure other forms of support for important regional regeneration initiatives, both from central government and the private sector. For example, the mayor of South Yorkshire, Oliver Coppard, worked with the government to establish the first investment zone in his region, supporting the growth of the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre that operates on the site of the former Orgreave coal mine.[30] The Tees Valley mayor, Ben Houchen, has helped to secure major green energy investments into the region; for instance, from wind turbine manufacturer SeAH.[31]

Mayoral development corporations

MDCs can be a powerful tool

One of the most powerful interventions that mayors can make to drive urban regeneration is to establish a mayoral development corporation. MDCs are publicly owned statutory bodies for delivering regeneration over a defined geography.

The powers to create an MDC were first granted to the mayor of London in 2011 to enable the creation of the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) – a delivery vehicle to oversee the regeneration of the 2012 Olympic Games site (see Case Study 2). Officials involved in setting up the LLDC told us that the MDC was initially intended to be a one-off. However, because developing specific hybrid legislation for a delivery body would have been a lengthy and complex procedure, the decision was taken to incorporate the powers into the Localism Act (2011), resulting in the general powers for the mayor of London to establish MDCs.

These powers have been extended to the mayors of combined authorities in subsequent devolution deals, drawing upon the 2011 Act. Notably, this law was drafted with London's unique accountability model in mind and so the translation to the combined authority model is legislatively complex. Given there are now 10 mayoral authorities with these powers outside of London, interviewees suggested to us that the government should review this legislation to more accurately reflect the current state of English devolution and the combined authority model.

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority is the only mayoral authority without the power to establish an MDC. In principle, we see no reason why all mayors shouldn't have this power and so government should take steps to standardise this in existing and future devolution settlements.

Moreover, the term 'regeneration' – which is the core purpose of MDCs – is poorly defined in law. Interviewees relayed that this has led to uncertainty within mayoral authorities about whether the model can be used to bring forward regeneration projects on greenfield land, or whether this lever can only be pulled to redevelop brownfield areas.

Case Study 2: London Legacy Development Corporation

The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) was the first MDC created. It was set up in 2011 to deliver the regeneration of the Olympic Park in Stratford and its surrounding areas after the 2012 Games, by the then mayor of London, Boris Johnson. The LLDC was established at a point when significant land assembly and remediation had already been achieved at the site by the former delivery vehicle, the London Development Agency, which had made use of compulsory purchase powers.

The LLDC site is located across four local authorities – Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest. While joint working between the boroughs had been achieved to support the original Olympic bid, we were told by someone involved in the establishment of the MDC that "planning was the big issue" for regenerating the wider site. As such, the ability of the LLDC to act as the single planning authority has been one of the levers at the heart of the organisation's success.

The context of Olympic legacy has meant that the LLDC was established with a specific remit. In interviews, we heard it described as "a vehicle that wasn't allowed to fail". It received significant amounts of political backing, with alignment across local, regional and national government, which allowed the organisation the freedom to take risks and make bold decisions in order to drive forward delivery.

Between 2012 and 2024, more than 13,000 new homes have been constructed within the LLDC planning area, with a further 11,000 in the delivery pipeline, of which a third will be classed as 'affordable' (34%).[32] Further successes include the 10-hectare East Bank programme which has delivered a new cultural and educational district for the V&A, BBC Studios, Sadler's Wells, UCL and University of the Arts, London, that will support 2,500 new jobs.[33] The LLDC has also made use of its planning policy and guidance as well as soft influencing powers to create a significant programme of work sharing best practice in design, inclusive growth and sustainability and improving the safety of women and girls through development and planning.[34]

In 2024, LLDC has taken steps to hand back planning powers to the local authorities, and will be scaling back its operations to focus on the MDC area within the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.[35]

MDCs are accountable to the mayor of London, or in other regions to the combined authority cabinet, who appoints the MDC board – which is typically composed of a combination of public and private sector representatives. In some instances, mayors have chaired the MDC board themselves: for example, Ben Houchen chairs the three MDCs in Tees Valley and Boris Johnson chaired the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC), while in other MDCs an independent chair has been appointed. The MDC board is responsible for setting and overseeing the delivery of the MDC's strategy. Even if a mayor doesn't sit on the board, they retain the power to give general guidance or specific directions for the exercise of the MDC functions.

As set out in the Localism Act 2011, an MDC has general powers to do "anything it considers appropriate for the purposes of its object", which is defined as "to secure the regeneration of the area". MDCs can then take on a series of specific powers to:

- **Adopt planning responsibilities** from the local authority or authorities, including plan making powers and powers to determine planning applications

- **Acquire land, either by agreement or by compulsory purchase order (CPO)** if necessary. The secretary of state for housing, communities and local government and the mayor can also transfer MDCs publicly owned assets

- **Regenerate, develop and bring about the more effective use of land,** including by carrying out building works

- **Provide – or to facilitate the provision of – infrastructure** such as water, electricity,telecommunications, and other facilities for transport, health, educational, or social purposes.*

- **Give financial assistance,** this might be in the form of grants, loans or investments

- **Grant discretionary relief** from business rates.

While this suite of powers is on offer, a mayor does not have to grant an MDC access to all of them. There are currently six MDCs in operation across England and there has been significant variation between how these powers have been taken up and applied (as set out in Table 1).

* Note this is not an exhaustive list. Full definitions of infrastructure are provided in S.205 of the Localism Act 2011.

Table 1 **Mayoral development corporations in England**

Mayoral development corporation	Mayoralty	Year established	Regeneration ambitions	Planning or CPO used to date?	Local authority coverage	Scale
London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC)	Mayor of London	2011	To deliver the regeneration of the Olympic Park and its surrounding area after the 2012 Games.	Planning – plan making and consent.	4	480 hectares from 2011, reduced to 226 hectares in 2024.
Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC)	Mayor of London	2015	To deliver 25,500 new homes and 56,000 jobs to the opportunity area around the station where HS2 is due to intersect with the Elizabeth Line.[36]	Planning – plan making and consent.	3	655 hectares.
South Tees Development Corporation (STDC) – known as 'Teesworks'	Mayor of Tees Valley	2017	To reindustrialise the site of a major steelworks and create 20,000 new jobs.[37]	CPO used in 2020. No planning powers.	1	1,800 hectares.
Stockport Mayoral Development Corporation	Mayor of Greater Manchester	2019	To regenerate Stockport town centre, including the delivery of 4,000 new homes on brownfield sites.[38]	None.	1	Originally 50 hectares, due to expand to 165 hectares.[39]
Hartlepool Development Corporation	Mayor of Tees Valley	2023	To regenerate several sites across Hartlepool town centre to create 2,000 new jobs and 1,300 new homes.[40]	Planning consent powers.	1	Approx 190 hectares.[41]
Middlesbrough Development Corporation	Mayor of Tees Valley	2023	To regenerate a single site in Middlesbrough town centre to create 4,000 new jobs and 1,500 new homes.[42]	Planning consent powers.	1	Approx 180 hectares.[43]

Interest in the MDC model is growing. In the last year alone, plans for a further four MDCs have been announced. The mayor of the North East, Kim McGuinness, ran for election in 2024 on a manifesto promising to introduce an MDC for the "rivers and ports of Blythe, Tyneside, Sunderland and Seaham".[44] While the specific location and nature of this delivery vehicle is yet to be determined, we heard in interviews that steps are being taken explore how an MDC might be able to support the mayor's wider ambitions to tackle child poverty and drive inclusive growth.

Meanwhile, in Greater Manchester plans are progressing for two new MDCs – one in Bolton following a similar model to the Stockport MDC, and the other on the Northern Gateway site of the Atom Valley mayoral development zone (see Case Study 6). In September 2024, the mayor of London announced his plans to set up a third MDC to deliver on his plans to pedestrianise Oxford Street. We also heard from stakeholders at other mayoral combined authorities that the MDC model has been considered privately, though steps have not yet been taken to set them up.

Establishing an MDC requires a strong vision and political will

To date, only three of the 11 mayoral authorities that have powers to create MDCs have done so – Greater London, Tees Valley and Greater Manchester. But all three either already have more than one MDC or plan to establish more, suggesting that once a mayoral authority has seen the benefits of the model, they are more inclined to use the policy intervention again. This was the case in Tees Valley, where the mayor, Ben Houchen, told us that the decision to set up MDCs in Hartlepool and Middlesbrough "came because of the success of the first".

Building local support can be key to the success of a scheme. Developing a clear and persuasive vision for the regeneration potential of an area, and why an MDC is the appropriate vehicle for delivering it, is crucial for gaining local buy-in. Without this, there is a risk that MDCs are met with opposition – particularly from local authorities who can see the move as a power or land 'grab' by the mayor.

Before submitting a request to the secretary of state for housing, communities and local government to establish an MDC, mayors have a duty to consult on MDC proposals with a number of stakeholders, including local authorities whose areas the MDC will operate in, MPs whose constituency is covered and members of the public. In London, the mayor must consult with the London Assembly but does not need the consent of affected local authorities to move forward with the scheme.

The powers of mayors outside of London are comparatively weaker, as they must seek the consent of local authority leaders representing each council that governs any part of an area to fall under the MDC – which we were told has been a barrier to establishing MDCs. In some instances, mayors have opted not to pursue an MDC due to the perceived political risk of disrupting relationships with other local leaders and/or the likelihood that local consent would not be forthcoming. One observer suggested that an MDC could have helped to deliver faster regeneration in Bristol Temple Quarter, but a poor relationship between the metro mayor and local council leader ruled this option off the table.

A key decision for central government as it seeks to make progress towards its ambitious economic and housebuilding objectives is whether to reform the process by which a metro mayor can establish an MDC. As set out above, one of the key advantages of an MDC is that the vehicle is insulated from local political cycles and able to steer development in a way that brings strategic benefits for a whole region. The support of local authorities for an MDC is certainly beneficial for the success of a scheme, but there is a case for enabling combined authorities to establish MDCs by majority decision, whether or not the local authority where the MDC will operate agrees.

A more radical reform would be to empower all mayors to establish MDCs unilaterally, though this would run counter to the spirit of collective decision making upon which the combined authority model is founded.

Planning powers can be a significant advantage of MDCs

The mayor can choose to transfer planning powers from local authorities to an MDC within their boundaries. This can include both powers to make plans and to determine planning applications.

Having legal plan making powers enables an MDC to steer the direction of development within its area. This includes a statutory duty to produce a local plan, which can identify priority areas for housing, industry and mixed-use development and provide guidance for what standards of development the MDC will look for in approving planning applications.

MDCs can also develop supplementary planning documents (SPDs) to direct development more closely in specific areas. For example, the LLDC adopted an SPD in Bromley by Bow in 2017 to give landowners clear guidance on how policies in the local plan would be applied on the SPD site, including guidance on building height and heritage context of the site.[45]

Planning control powers enable an MDC to determine whether planning applications should be approved, in accordance with local planning policy. Unlike in councils, where significant planning decisions are made by committees of local politicians, an MDC's planning committee can be formed of representatives from across the public and private sectors. We were told by advocates of this model that this makes MDCs less motivated by local 'not-in-my-backyard' concerns and more able to take a long-term strategic approach to determining applications, discussed further below.[46]

Planning powers are particularly advantageous for MDCs that operate on sites that cross multiple local authority boundaries – where they can in effect act as a singular planning authority and so provide greater certainty for developers. For example, this has enabled the OPDC to take planning decisions across three local authorities in west London (see Case Study 3).

But while the ability to take on planning powers is seen as a key advantage for developers, we heard in interviews that this is one of the main concerns about MDCs raised by local authorities. As such, best practice is for an MDC to ensure that local authorities are represented on planning committees and communities are

meaningfully engaged in the planning process. For example, in January 2023 the LLDC established a 'community review panel' of local residents to feed into the MDC's response to development proposals.[47]

In principle, it would be possible to have an MDC's planning committee formed entirely of local council representatives. This might be advantageous on a site where local authorities are aligned in favour of development and so an MDC would provide a simpler governance model than other forms of joint planning. However, there are trade-offs to this approach as there is a balance to strike between maintaining local trust and confidence and still offering the ability for an MDC to operate at arm's length from day-to-day political pressures (discussed more below).

While planning powers can be a good reason to create an MDC to regenerate a site, mayors can choose to establish an MDC without them. For example, in Stockport MDC and South Tees DC the local authorities have retained full planning powers. In interviews, we heard that for both MDCs taking on planning powers wouldn't have been advantageous as the local authorities and the metro mayors had a shared vision for how to regenerate the area. Meanwhile, in Hartlepool and Middlesbrough the development corporations hold planning consent powers but not plan making powers.

MDCs are well equipped to tackle sites with complex land ownership

Planning powers can enable MDCs to steer the kinds of schemes that come forward from the private market for development. However, land ownership is key for an MDC looking to control the pace and exact nature of regeneration by directly delivering schemes themselves.

Post-industrial sites and densely populated urban areas often have land that has been divided and sold multiple times, resulting in fragmented patterns of land ownership. This can pose significant challenges for regeneration, as negotiations with a multitude of different stakeholders can readily go awry. This represents significant risk for investors and can often prevent the private sector from bringing schemes forward.

While private sector developers can, and do, carry out land assembly through negotiations, one of the key benefits of MDCs is their ability to carry out compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) where agreement cannot be reached.

For example, these powers were successfully used by the South Tees Development Corporation (STDC) in 2020 to acquire more than 350 hectares of land after negotiations with the international banks owning large swathes of the land broke down (see Case Study 5). During our roundtable, this was described as the "crucial first step" in regenerating the site. Moreover, the compulsory purchase of land by the London Delivery Agency in 2005, subsequently transferred to the LLDC in 2011, enabled the MDC to accelerate development.

In interviews, we heard that in other cases the credible threat of compulsory purchase has been successful in driving land purchase agreements, even where the CPO powers haven't been used. The reforms introduced in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act

2023 strengthen this position because MDCs and other authorities with CPO powers can now take steps to compulsorily purchase land at current use value, as opposed to potential development value. One interviewee told us this reform offered "huge potential" to unlock sites for development.

But CPOs are not a silver bullet. They can only be used in specific scenarios in which the costs and impacts of the land purchase are outweighed by the public benefit, and it is deemed that that public benefit could not be achieved through alternative schemes. The OPDC in west London encountered significant land assembly issues when negotiations with a major landowner fell through due to changes in land value, and the site was financially unviable to obtain through compulsory purchase (see Case Study 3). This case demonstrates that without a clear and viable strategy towards land assembly from the outset, an MDC's ability to drive regeneration can be stalled.

MDCs are not the only authorities with compulsory purchase powers: Homes England (the government housebuilding agency) and local councils can also use these powers. Because using CPOs can present political risk, particularly if the land being purchased belongs to operating businesses or residents, we heard that in some cases mayors can be reticent to make use of these powers. To circumvent the political risk, it is possible for an MDC to work in collaboration with these partners to carry out the CPO on their behalf if necessary.

Purchasing sites, either by agreement or compulsorily, is not the only way for MDCs to acquire land. Existing publicly owned assets can also be transferred to MDCs, as has occurred in the case of the OPDC, making them a useful vehicle for consolidating land owned by local authorities, public bodies such as Network Rail, government departments and others.

Case Study 3: Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation

Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation (OPDC) was the second MDC to be established. It was created in 2015 to deliver regeneration over a 655-hectare site in west London located around a new station where High Speed 2 (HS2) is due to meet with the Elizabeth Line and Great Western main line services, connecting Old Oak across London, the regions and to Heathrow.

The Old Oak and Park Royal Opportunity Area stretches across three local authorities – Hammersmith and Fulham, Brent, and Ealing – and is home to London's largest business park, large swathes of industrial land, several underground stations and a small residential community.

The OPDC has long-term targets to deliver 25,500 new homes and 56,000 jobs.[48] But plans brought forward in the early years to deliver this encountered significant challenges. Some came from outside the MDC's scope of influence – such as delays to the delivery of HS2 itself – but other challenges also emerged due to not having the land or funding in place when the vehicle was originally set up.

Between 2015 and 2019, the OPDC's operations were largely focused on developing the local plan and obtaining the resources to deliver a first phase of development around a site in Old Oak North. While it successfully gained £250m of Housing Infrastructure Fund in the March 2019 budget, the principal landowner Cargiant withdrew support for the scheme due to changes in land value. Although the OPDC does hold compulsory purchase powers, the cost of relocating the business would have been too high to enable the appropriate levels of affordable housing to be delivered on the site – rendering the plans unviable.

At our roundtable, we heard that the OPDC is a "good example of getting it wrongand then getting a second chance". After the initial land assembly approach failed, the OPDC pivoted its strategy and we heard that it is now in aphase of major delivery with 6,000 homes already built, and a further 3,400 with planning permission.[49]

A new local plan was published in 2022, identifying Old Oak as the priority area for regeneration. The principal scheme around the station will create a new canal-side district with 9,000 homes, and 2.5m sq ft of workspace.[50] This regeneration predominantly involves the development of land already in public sector ownership alongside parcels obtained from private landowners using £240m of capital funding from the government and the GLA. An outline business case with DfT and MHCLG has been agreed to pool the larger publicly owned landholdings, which combined with the OPDC's own estate will create a 28-hectare brownfield development site. In interviews we heard that the OPDC has been progressing a masterplan for the area and in 2025 will be going out to the market to secure a development and investment partner.

Other successes include the OPDC being awarded £36m by DESNZ to deliver a district heat network that will use heat from data centres to provide low-cost, low-carbon power to 10,000 homes as well as businesses and major hospitals, due to start operations as early as 2027.[51]

MDCs can attract talent from across public and private sectors

One of the key benefits of MDCs is their ability to attract highly skilled people from across the public and private sectors, which can allow them to create the high-performing, delivery-focused teams needed for large-scale urban transformation. In part, this is because MDCs combine focused regeneration objectives with legal powers, giving them significant potential for impact. Moreover, the opportunity to work in the public interest, but in an organisation that can be more agile than traditional public sector bodies, can be a key selling factor.

Having a team with a diverse set of skills can be vital for the success of an MDC. When led by individuals with public and private sector backgrounds, MDCs are well equipped to build meaningful relationships with key stakeholders such as local councils, community groups and residents, as well as private investors, landowners and contractors. Furthermore, this can result in a team with a blend of commercial and public service values, which can help ensure that an MDC achieves commercial success within a broader strategy of improving social outcomes.

But as regeneration efforts across the country are scaled up, and with the number of MDCs set to increase in the coming years, there is a question as to how deep this pool of talent is. Local authorities notoriously struggle with recruiting and retaining planning professionals, increasingly relying on private agencies to deliver their services.[52] One combined authority told us that capacity for supporting regeneration can already be a challenge, where there is a shortage of people with the right skills locally.

There are several ways that government can support metro mayors and MDCs with these challenges. This could be by providing investment into capacity-building programmes. Furthermore, when directly delivering schemes, engaging contractors early can help make best use of expertise in the private sector.

Government can also support places to make the best use of their devolved powers by facilitating collaboration and knowledge-sharing among mayoral authorities. This could involve expanding the scope of Homes England's Local Government Capacity Centre to have a greater focus on devolved powers, including tailored resources about MDCs on the agency's Housing Information Hub.[53] Government could also work with the UK Mayors group (formerly known as the M10) to facilitate learning between mayoral authorities.

Lastly, mayoral authorities can align their devolved skills budgets to support the widerkinds of employment needed to achieve their regeneration aims. This could include allocating the adult education budgets into training schemes for local residentsto develop skills in construction, green energy and infrastructure. An existingexample is the 'gateway to construction' programmes funded by the Tees ValleyCombined Authority.[54]

MDCs can be insulated from political cycles

The delivery of urban regeneration schemes can be heavily affected by local and national politics – affecting both day-to-day operations and overarching regeneration strategies.

Local politics can have a particularly strong influence throughout the planning process. This is because most major planning applications are determined by committees of (elected) local councillors, who can be incentivised to take an anti-development stance if their local residents are likely to oppose the scheme. Reasons for local opposition might include concerns about whether the local economy will feel the benefits of investment, whether it will come with investment in local infrastructure or simply 'not-in-my-back-yard' stances on development.[55]

While there are mechanisms to override decisions taken on the latter concern – such as by appealing a planning decision or by the secretary of state for housing, communities and local government or mayor of London using their 'call in' powers to determine strategic applications – local opposition can still often lead to regeneration schemes being held up, or even abandoned. In many districts, councillors are elected by thirds meaning that leadership can change often, which in turn can have implications for the strategic direction set for development in an area.

Many sites with potential for urban regeneration are also governed by business improvement districts. BIDs are bodies set up to invest in commercial environments using a levy on eligible businesses within their boundaries.[56] There are more than 300 across the country, many of which engage in regeneration activities such as funding place-making schemes and encouraging inward investment. But BIDs are also subject to electoral cycles, with businesses voting in a ballot on a BID business plan up to every five years.

Changing political priorities in national government can also have significant impacts on urban regeneration schemes. For example, delays to the delivery of key infrastructure can have major knock-on effects on regeneration schemes around it. This has been seen in the case of HS2, where uncertainty about the connection of the line to Euston has resulted in redevelopment of the area being stalled.[57] Moreover, changing approaches from national government to providing funding for growth can have significant effects. For example, in September 2024 local leaders reported that uncertainty about whether they were still set to receive 'levelling up' funds announced under the previous government were delaying "plans for growth and the acceleration of private sector investment".[58]

Throughout this research, we heard from a number of stakeholders that the ability of an MDC to operate at a distance from political cycles at all levels is one of the model's key advantages. This political insulation not only makes it easier for MDCs to deliver on their objectives, but it can also help reduce the financial risk of a project – making them more attractive to investors.

In part, this is because MDCs are focused on the delivery of large-scale transformation that can only be delivered over the long term. **During our roundtable, we heard that "intent beyond an electoral cycle" gives an MDC stability of vision, enabling it to make decisions that might bear more political risk.**

An MDC's strategy can in theory be affected by a change of mayor, as when Sadiq Khan replaced Boris Johnson as mayor of London in 2016. However, while this resulted in some changes – for example, Khan appointed an independent chair of the OPDC,[59] instead of chairing it himself, as Johnson did – both the OPDC and the LLDC continued their operations with their overarching ambitions largely unaffected.

MDCs are further safeguarded against changes in mayoral priorities because they are relatively difficult to close down as their assets and liabilities can only be transferred to another organisation with consent. This does not mean it cannot be done, and it should be noted that mayors have a legal duty to regularly assess the case for the existence of an MDC, but it does mean that a new mayor would have to have a strong rationale for and clear route towards dismantling an MDC.

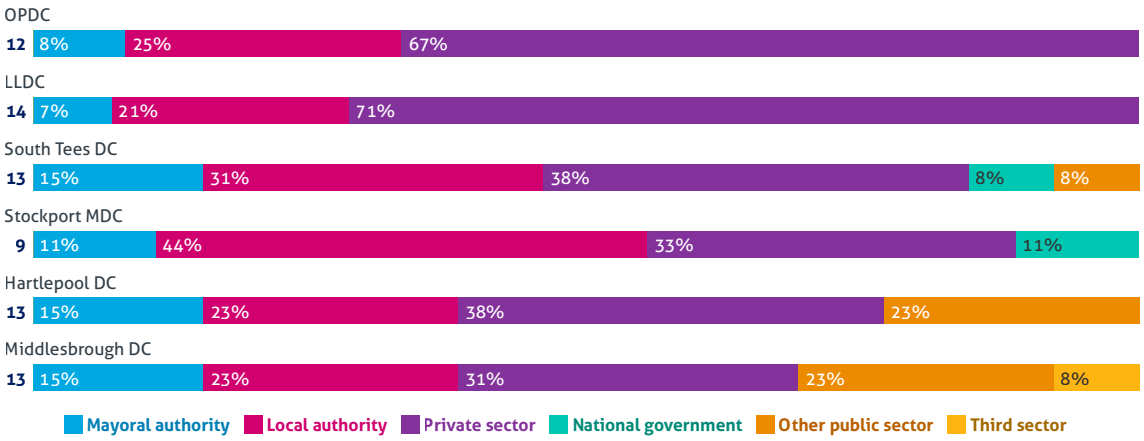
Finally, it is not just an MDC's overarching strategy that is insulated from political cycles – but its day-to-day operations too. This is particularly a benefit of MDCs with the powers to decide the outcome of planning applications where the insulation of MDC planning committees from local councillors offers greater certainty for developers and investors.

MDC boards can combine private and public sector expertise to provide a long-term vision

MDC boards are responsible for setting the strategy and long-term vision for the regeneration vehicle, as well as taking key financial decisions. The board members are appointed by mayors and their combined authority cabinets and usually include representatives from local authorities, mayoral authorities and the private sector. The right balance between public and private sector voices can ensure an MDC takes commercial decisions that are aligned with public sector ambitions.

On average, around half of the existing MDC board members are private sector representatives. But this varies significantly – with private sector representatives making up 71% of the LLDC compared to just 31% of Middlesbrough DC (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 **Composition of MDC boards**



Source: IfG analysis of MDC boards as of 19 November 2024.

In Stockport MDC – which operates within a single local authority area – political stability has been achieved by having the leaders of all main political groups on the council represented on the board (see Case Study 4). This has meant that even though the council has changed leadership a number of times since the MDC was set up, the vehicle has had stable governance and direction throughout.

Case Study 4: Stockport Mayoral Development Corporation

Created in 2019 by Andy Burnham, mayor of Greater Manchester, Stockport MDC was established to regenerate a 53-hectare area to the west of the town centre. Like many towns across the country, Stockport faced declining retail activity, ageing infrastructure and a lack of housing in a greenbelt constrained borough.

The initial MDC proposal was driven by the local authority in partnership with Greater Manchester Combined Authority. As such, in practice the MDC works closely with Stockport Council. The MDC does not have planning powers and does not hold assets, as both these powers remain with the council.

Furthermore, in interviews we heard that the MDC shares professional infrastructure with the council, which also covers the MDC's core operating costs.

Despite this tight connection to the council, the MDC still benefits from political stability due to the composition of the board. The MDC's board is formed of representatives from the combined authority, Homes England, the private sector, as well as the leaders of each major party on the council. This means that while political control of the council has changed twice in the 2019–24 period the leadership and ambitions of the MDC have remained stable. During our roundtable, we were told that "the governance has been crucial, particularly for the property industry who can see a long-term board which is politically balanced".

This political stability, combined with the backing of the mayor, has proven effective at driving investor confidence in the scheme – with £600m of private investment secured in the first five years.[60] To date, the MDC has led to the delivery of 1,200 new homes, a new bus interchange, a two-acre park and 170,000 square feet of office space.[61]

As a result of the Stockport MDC's success, in November 2024 plans were announced to expand the coverage of the MDC to the east of the town centre – tripling the organisation's geographical footprint.[62]

Metro mayors should establish strong systems of oversight and accountability of MDCs

Insulation from politics and elections can raise questions about democratic accountability. While MDCs are accountable to combined authority cabinets (or the mayor of London in the capital), it is the board of the MDC that holds most of the decision making power. Concerns about this were raised during the consultation for establishing the OPDC, with Hammersmith and Fulham Council writing that it objected "to the proposals that unelected business, education and transport representatives would sit on the board, which would be both undemocratic andalsorisk board decisions not adequately reflecting the needs of local residents and businesses".[63]

Concerns about accountability have also been raised in the independent review into the South Tees Development Corporation (see Case Study 5).[64] While the review concluded that there was no evidence of illegal activity, it did identify issues of governance and accountability that needed be addressed.[65]

It is important, therefore, that for any MDC there are sufficient mechanisms for oversight and accountability to balance against the political insulation that the organisations can benefit from. MDCs can control significant amounts of public investment along with the exercise of legal powers, so robust governance is key to ensure that these are deployed in a way that is transparent, efficient and in line with the public interest. Moreover, these mechanisms are important for building public trust and confidence in the outcomes of a regeneration scheme.

In practice, this looks like regular reporting on financial performance, project progress and decision making processes to combined authority cabinets or the London Assembly and to the public. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities of executive staff in MDCs are also important for accountability, as are well defined relationships between a combined authority's overview and scrutiny committee and an MDC. Lastly, building in meaningful community engagement from the outset can help both build public support for an MDC and improve the quality and sustainability of the regeneration outcomes.[66]

Case Study 5: South Tees Development Corporation

The idea for a development corporation in South Tees was first proposed by Lord Heseltine in his 2016 report *Tees Valley: Opportunity Unlimited*.[67] The development corporation was proposed to regenerate the site of a major steelworks that went into liquidation in 2015, leading to the loss of 4,000 jobs (including contractors and indirect employment) in the region.[68]

Ben Houchen, the mayor of Tees Valley, established the South Tees Development Corporation in 2017 and told us that the "whole purpose of the STDC was reindustrialisation and getting new investment back into the area". The corporation covers a 1,800-hectare site and has plans to create up to 20,000 new jobs across the Tees Valley.[69]

Planning powers over the site have remained with Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, which developed a supplementary planning document for the site in partnership with STDC. This acts as material planning considerations alongside the local plan and sets out development principles for the site to give "developers, stakeholders and local communities a degree of certainty as to the potential opportunities and acceptable forms of development" within the area.[70] The STDC then developed a non-statutory masterplan to sit alongside these policies, to set out the vision and strategy for the site.

The STDC faced complex land assembly challenges. While significant efforts were undertaken to acquire land on the site by agreement, the STDC eventually took steps to compulsorily purchase 709 hectares of the site in 2019. The independent inspector responsible for determining the CPO described the site as showing "a varying array of individual, irregular, interspersed parcels of land ownership".[71] Moreover, the inspector's report identified that much of the site had contaminated land and legacy industrial structures – all of which was amounting to significant amounts of government expenditure to keep safe. The CPO was granted in 2020, with the inspector's report writing that "it is hard to envisage an area more in need of regeneration" and determining that there were no suitable alternative proposals for regenerating the site.[72]

The STDC entered a 50/50 joint venture with the private sector to facilitate the CPO and subsequent remediation of the site. This joint venture was renegotiated to a 90/10 split in favour of the partners following the government's announcement that sites in STDC would benefit from 'freeport' status in the March 2021 budget.[73] The designation of the site as a freeport offered significant tax incentives over a time limited period, which led the mayor to take steps to accelerate development through the injection of further private sector capital.

To date, investment into the site has led to a new 450-metre quay, 180 hectares of land having been remediated or in remediation, and 940 construction jobs, with a further 1,950 announced.[74] Moreover, the Teesworks Skills Academy has been set up to serve as a 'one-stop-shop' for workers, businesses and skills providers to support the regeneration.[75]

In 2023, STDC made headlines following allegations about the STDC's joint venture.[76] This led Michael Gove, the secretary of state for levelling up, housing and communities from 2022–24, to announce an independent review into the combined authority's oversight of STDC and the joint venture.[77]

The review was published in January 2024, finding "no evidence to support allegations of corruption or illegality". However, it did set out 28 recommendations to address issues of governance and transparency within the STDC and the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA). In September 2024, Ben Houchen wrote to the deputy prime minister to set out TVCA's formal response to the review.[78] Steps that TVCA is taking to address the issues identified include reviewing the TVCA and STDC constitutions and increasing the reporting requirements of the MDCs to the TVCA cabinet to quarterly on top of annual requirements.[79]

Alternative models

Alternative models can offer some of the same benefits where an MDC is deemed unsuitable or not viable

While MDCs offer several notable benefits for urban regeneration schemes, they may not always be appropriate for a number of reasons. In some cases, this may be because the scale of the regeneration potential is not large enough to justify the cost and time it takes to set one up. In other cases, it may be too politically difficult for a mayor to gain the local consensus needed to introduce an MDC under current voting requirements – so lighter touch models, or those that don't require a local authority's permission, may be more deliverable. Alternatively, if a mayor and local authority are in alignment in their regeneration objectives and strategy, they may be able to co-ordinate their interventions through less formal mechanisms – though such an approach may be more vulnerable to changes of political leadership at the local level.

Timing can also play a role in whether a mayor should establish an MDC. The regeneration potential of an area might be dependent on the delivery of major infrastructure schemes, in which case it may be best to hold off on establishing an MDC until the delivery of said infrastructure is sufficiently under way. Or the vision for an area may not be developed enough for an MDC to be able to make a meaningful impact, but an alternative model could be used to do the groundwork of establishing such a vision in the meantime.

Alongside the mayoral powers outlined at the start of this report, there are a number of alternative models that can offer some of the same benefits as an MDC.

One such model to consider is the mayoral development zone (MDZ) – a governance arrangement for guiding regeneration over a specific geography. Unlike an MDC, an MDZ is not a legal entity and holds no legal powers. This model was pioneered locally in Greater Manchester, where the mayor, Andy Burnham, has set up two zones: the Atom Valley MDZ (see Case Study 6) and the Ashton Moss MDZ.

MDZs can offer some of the same advantages as MDCs, in signalling mayoral priority and bringing together stakeholders around a shared regeneration vision. In our expert roundtable, we heard that MDZs can achieve "a lot without the expense and time of the formal MDC legal process". A senior figure from another combined authority also told us that they would consider a similar model, given their concerns about potential lack of local support for going down the MDC path. However, without the legal powers of an MDC there are some limitations of what an MDZ can deliver.

Case Study 6: Atom Valley Mayoral Development Zone

Established in 2022, Atom Valley was the first mayoral development zone created by Greater Manchester Combined Authority. The MDZ covers three sites – the Northern Gateway, Kingsway Business Park and Stakehill – over which there is potential to deliver more than 20,000 jobs, 7,000 new homes and 1.6million square metres of employment space. The vision of the MDZ is to create a "dynamic, interconnected mega-cluster" for advanced manufacturing and materials, building on existing sector strengths in the region.[80]

The MDZ acts as a long-term governance structure responsible for developing and implementing a business plan that can align public and private sector investment across the sites. It is led by a board of representatives from local government, the combined authority, businesses and higher education.

So far successes of the scheme have included the granting of planning permission by Rochdale Borough Council for the construction of a 42,700 square foot sustainable materials and manufacturing centre on the Kingsway Business Park site.

Further plans are now under way to explore whether the Northern Gateway site would benefit from an MDC to further accelerate delivery.

Another model that has been developed in London is the designation of opportunity areas via the SDS. Opportunity areas are defined as sites on which there is significant potential for "new homes, commercial development and infrastructure (of all types), linked to existing or potential improvements in public transport connectivity and capacity".[81] There are 47 across London, several of which cross borough boundaries.[82] Opportunity areas are a 'plan-led' method of driving urban regeneration that can take various forms, with the mayor providing support in the development of detailed plans and in championing the areas as key locations for investment.[83]

MDCs also aren't the only form of development corporation available. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 introduced powers for local authorities to create locally led urban development corporations (LLUDCs). These bodies have many of the same powers as MDCs but are accountable to an individual local authority or partnerships of local authorities.

The fact that oversight of an LLUDC is held locally can be more attractive to councillors, meaning they may be able to overcome some of the challenges that mayors face in gaining local support. However, this comes with the trade-off that LLUDCs would not necessarily benefit from the advantages of being a mayoral body – namely the scale of political priority and opportunity to align the scheme with other mayoral initiatives. They may also be more susceptible to changes of leadership at the council level. As such, the decision to adopt an LLUDC should be taken in instances

where there is a clear consensus at the local authority level about the need for regeneration and strong working relationships with the combined authority (where there is one).

To date, no LLUDCs have been created, which we heard was due to parts of the legislation not yet being in place. But steps are being taken to establish the first LLUDC in Liverpool city centre, following the report of the Liverpool Strategic Futures Advisory Panel.[84] The LLUDC will sit alongside a regeneration partnership to be chaired by an "experienced private sector figure with demonstrable experience of holistic regeneration". The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority is due to work closely with Liverpool City Council on both the partnership and the development corporation to deliver on these regeneration ambitions.[85]

Conclusion

The role of metro mayors within England is set to grow – both in the depth of their powers and in the breadth of devolution coverage. This offers enormous potential for the regeneration of cities and towns across the country to create vibrant, sustainable communities and catalyse economic growth.

Those mayors have an array of powers for driving regeneration in their regions. To make best use of these powers, it is vital they consider the unique characteristics of their region and use the right lever for the right challenge.

Learning from what has been successful – and less successful – in cities and towns where mayors have used these powers so far will be key to unlocking the full potential of future regeneration schemes. We hope this paper offers valuable evidence and insights to help mayors and combined authorities to do this, along with suggestions for how central government can better support local leaders to succeed in this important task.

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