

Learning from the DevoLab #3

How devolution can improve transport connectivity

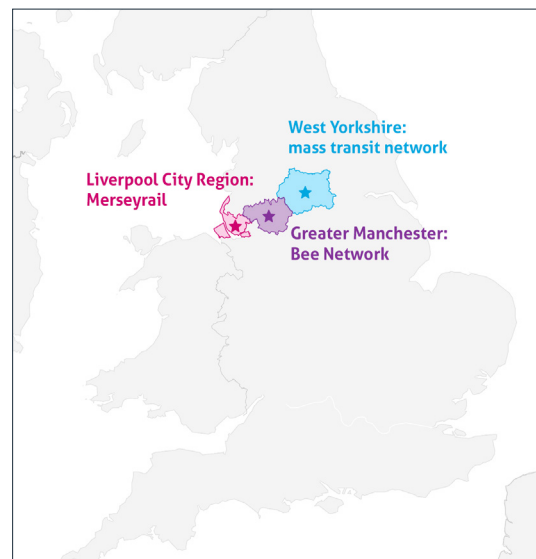
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Summary

Improving transport connectivity is one of the central policy objectives of mayoral strategic authorities (MSAs) across England. It is, in fact, the highest-profile responsibility of regional mayors, so their ability to deliver visible improvements in connectivity is central to the success or otherwise of the whole devolution agenda.

All MSAs are the local transport authority for their region, with responsibility for producing local transport plans and managing large, devolved transport budgets that central government provides. MSAs have powers to regulate bus services and invest in mass transit schemes, roads and active travel networks across their region. As part of its devolution agenda, the government plans to devolve further transport functions, including by increasing the influence of MSAs over the rail network.

Given the importance of regional transport networks for driving growth and opportunity, and the high level of public recognition of transport as a devolved function, there is growing interest in how mayors can use their powers and budgets to improve transport connectivity across and between their regions.



To answer this question, we first look at the context surrounding transport and devolution. We then present three short case studies on how devolved powers have been used to improve transport connectivity. For this we drew on presentations delivered at a November 2025 DevoLab event, which the Institute for Government hosted, in partnership with **Arup**, as well as desk-based research.

The case studies discussed are:

- **'A mass transit network' in West Yorkshire** – a flagship transport project designed to deliver a large-scale tram system that connects the region's five core urban centres*
- **'Connecting Liverpool City Region through Merseyrail'** – a commuter rail network serving Merseyside and adjacent areas since 1977**
- **'Integrating transport through the "Bee Network"' in Greater Manchester** – an integrated transport network in Greater Manchester, including a fully franchised bus system.

Following the case studies, we set out 10 lessons that can be learnt about how to improve transport connectivity through devolution.

Insights from a [presentation on mayoral partnerships with Great British Railways](#), which Richard Crabtree, head of mayoral partnerships at Shadow Great British Railways, delivered, are also discussed throughout this briefing paper.

This publication forms part of the [IfG DevoLab](#), a platform dedicated to exploring and learning from the policy and governance innovations that devolution enables.

Context

Transport connectivity in England lags behind that in its European counterparts and constrains economic growth and productivity

Improving transport connectivity is a key responsibility for all mayors and MSAs.¹ Transport connectivity plays a crucial role in determining access to employment, health care, education and social networks, with implications for individual opportunity as well as economic and social inclusion.^{2,3}

Centre for Cities' research suggests that one reason many of England's large cities underperform relative to London and international peers is that poor intra-city connectivity effectively makes English cities smaller and suppresses 'agglomeration' benefits, by limiting labour market matching, knowledge spillovers and shared supply chains.⁴ Improved transport networks between suburban areas and major city centres can therefore improve regional productivity and growth. These effects extend beyond economic output – enhanced connectivity can also unlock private and public investment by increasing land value and supporting regeneration, while also having positive effects on employment, health and the environment.

* This case study builds on a presentation that councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, leader of Bradford City Council and chair of the West Yorkshire Transport Committee, delivered.

** This case study builds on a presentation that Huw Jenkins, lead officer for transport policy at Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, delivered.

Improving transport connectivity in cities is fundamental to economic performance. England's largest urban areas underperform in productivity, growth and transport connectivity relative to many of their European counterparts.^{5,6,7} Across the eight largest cities in England, approximately 39% of people can get into the centre of the city on public transport within 30 minutes, compared to 67% of people in comparably sized European cities.⁸ As discussed, this poor connectivity restricts the optimal matching of workers with jobs, limits opportunities for specialisation and ultimately constrains economic growth and productivity.^{9,10}

Mayors have three main levers to improve transport connectivity:

- expanding transport networks
- increasing residential density such as by building more mid-rise or high-density developments across the urban core
- integrating transport networks.^{11,12}

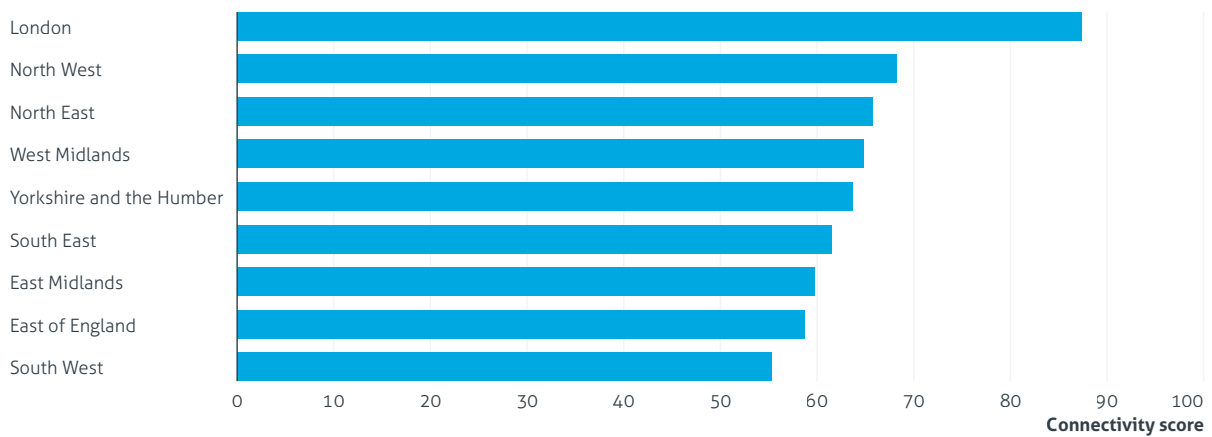
In England, poor transport connectivity is partly due to comparatively low population density, meaning existing networks serve fewer people.¹³ Mayors can therefore play an important role in improving connectivity beyond investing in new transport networks; for instance, through improving integration between different modes of transport and developing spatial strategies that integrate transport planning with housing and regeneration schemes.¹⁴

Mayors will receive strengthened strategic planning powers through new legislation, including the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, which requires mayors to prepare a spatial development strategy for their area, and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, which makes it easier for mayors to set up a mayoral development corporation to drive regeneration projects in their region.^{15,16}

Transport connectivity in England is highly unequal

There are significant regional disparities in transport connectivity in England. The Department for Transport's public transport connectivity metric measures an individual's ability to reach employment, services and social engagement opportunities using the combined infrastructure of buses, trains, light rail, trams, ferries and underground services, combined with the walking network. This indicates that public transport connectivity in London is significantly higher than in any other region in England, with the worst public transport connectivity in the South West.¹⁷ Several cities in England lack the transport networks required to fulfil their potential to drive productivity growth – including Leeds, which is the largest city in Europe without a mass transit system.¹⁸ The mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, has committed herself to changing this through the development of a mass transit system in West Yorkshire.

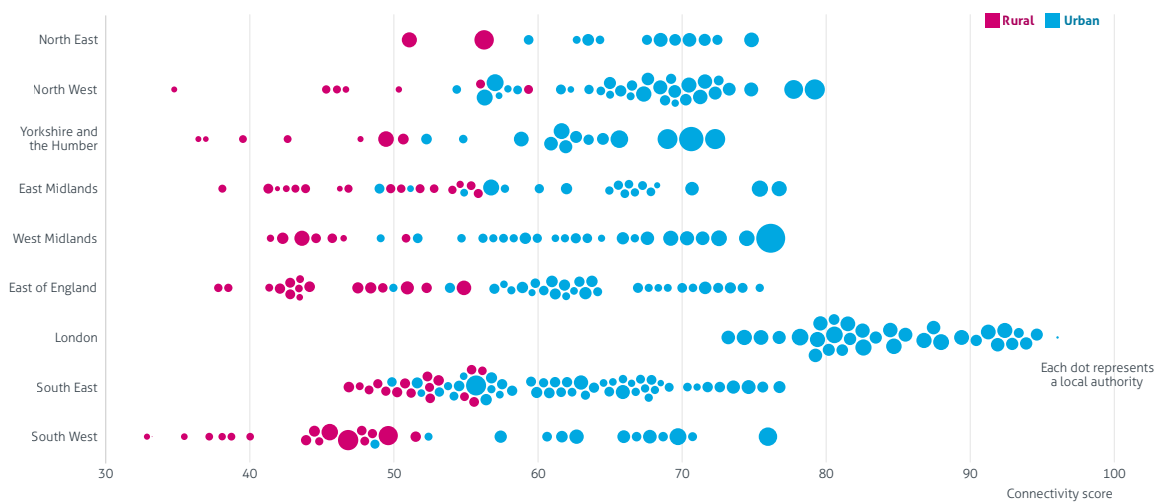
Figure 1 **Public transport connectivity in England, by region, 2025**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Transport, 'Connectivity metrics 2025', 2025. Notes: DfT's public transport connectivity metric measures an individual's ability to reach employment, services and social engagements using the combined infrastructure of all buses, trains, trams, light rail, ferries and underground services, combined with the walking network. Scores range from 0 to 100 where 100 represents the most connected area.

Regional disparities in connectivity extend beyond public transport. Analysis of the Department for Transport's headline transport connectivity metric, which includes walking, cycling and driving as well as public transport, indicates that transport connectivity in most of London's boroughs exceeds that of other local authorities in England. It also reveals a significant – albeit predictable – disparity in connectivity between urban and rural areas, with particularly poor connectivity in parts of Devon, Cumbria and North Yorkshire.^{19,20}

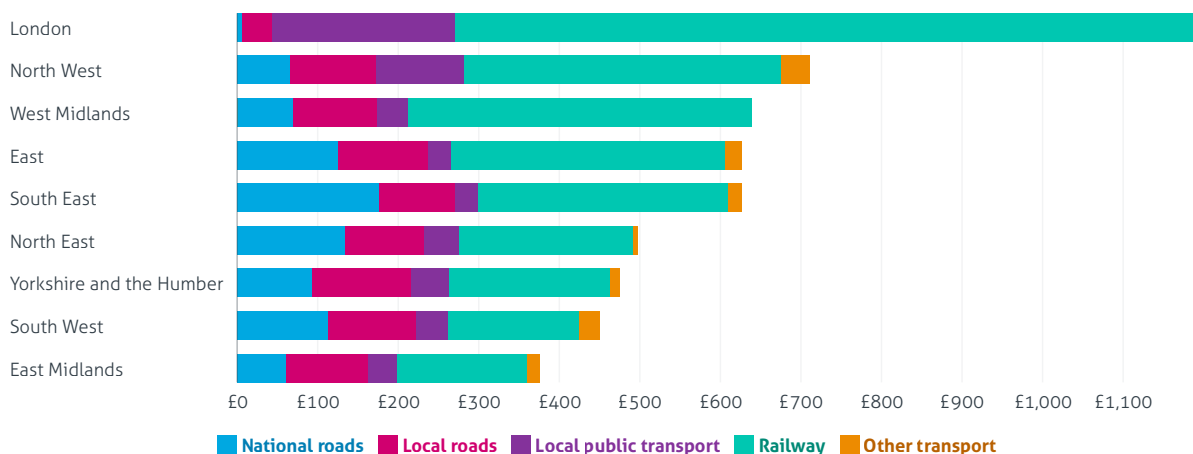
Figure 2 **Transport connectivity by region in England, 2025**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Transport, 'Connectivity metrics 2025', 2025; Office for National Statistics, 'LAD DEC (2021) EW BUC to Rural Urban Classification', 2025; Office for National Statistics, 'Mid-2022: 2021 local authority boundaries estimates of the population for England and Wales', 2025. Notes: Dot size indicates local authority population in mid-2022. DfT's connectivity metric measures an individual's ability to reach employment, services and social engagements using various modes of transport including walking, cycling, driving and public transport.

There are also substantial inter-regional disparities in public spending on transport infrastructure. In 2024/25, total public spending on transport across central, regional and local government was highest in London at £1,195 per person and lowest in the East Midlands at £376 per person.²¹

Figure 3 **Public spending on transport per head, by region and type, 2024/25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HM Treasury, 'Country and regional analysis 2025', November 2025. Notes: Includes total identifiable expenditure, defined as spending that can be identified as having been for the benefit of a particular area of the UK. Includes spending by national, regional and local government.

Transport is a core component of mayoral devolution

Transport is a core component of all English devolution settlements and transport policies have the highest public recognition of all mayoral functions.²² MSAs have a range of roles in improving transport, including operational, strategic, investment and advocacy responsibilities.

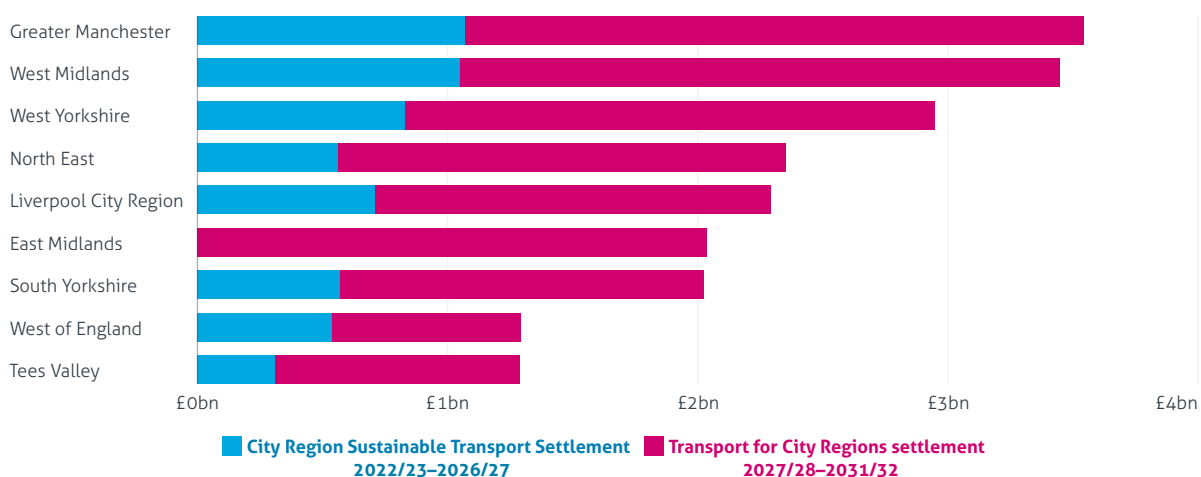
MSAs are the local transport authority for their region.²³ This may include managing light-rail systems or key road networks. Mayors can also franchise buses and apply fare caps, as in Greater Manchester.²⁴ In South Yorkshire, the mayor, Oliver Coppard, has taken the local supertram service under public control²⁵ and in Liverpool, the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority has local control over rail through its ownership of Merseyrail.²⁶ Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority runs a "demand-responsive transport service" to improve rural connectivity in areas where fixed bus routes are not viable.²⁷ Some mayors seek to improve their region's transport connectivity by introducing integrated ticketing or, where powers allow, developing cross-modal transport networks such as the 'Bee Network' in Greater Manchester.²⁸

Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and the North East MSAs also have passenger transport executives – Transport for Greater Manchester, Merseytravel and Nexus, respectively – which oversee public transport as an executive agency of the combined authority.²⁹ Passenger transport executives pre-date combined authorities, having been introduced under the Transport Act 1968 in England's six largest metropolitan areas, and provide key institutional foundations on which the current combined authorities were later set up. In South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and the West Midlands, passenger transport executive powers are now exercised directly by the respective combined authority.

As local transport authorities, MSAs are required to produce a local transport plan that systematically outlines the transport problems that each area faces and how the authority plans to address them.³⁰ This gives MSAs a significant strategic role in improving transport connectivity, particularly since local transport plans are often integrated with other strategic responsibilities, such as economic growth and skills.

MSAs control a range of local transport funds. Eight eligible MSAs also receive long-term capital funding through the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS), which can be used for projects such as the development of mass transit systems.³¹ The CRSTS is a significant source of funds – for example, in 2025/26, it provided capital funding of £211 million in the West Midlands and £227m in Greater Manchester.^{32,33} From 2027/28, Transport for City Regions settlements will replace the CRSTS, with funding for some areas brought forward to 2025/26. The inclusion of the East Midlands means nine MSAs will receive this funding.³⁴

Figure 4 City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements and Transport for City Regions settlements, 2022/23–2031/32



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Transport, 'City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements: confirmed delivery plans and funding allocations', 2022 and Department for Transport, 'Transport for City Regions funding allocations', 2025. Notes: City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements and Transport for City Regions settlements provide multi-year, consolidated transport funding, with the five-year allocations paid annually. Over £500m of the Transport for City Regions funding has been brought forward to 2025/26 and 2026/27 to enable earlier delivery of programmes. £58.4 million has been deducted from the North East Combined Authority's nominal Transport for City Regions allocation to take account of Metropolitan Rail Grant capital payments in 2025/26 and 2026/27.

Furthermore, as regional leaders, mayors often advocate to central government for greater investment in transport connectivity within and between their regions. For example, the mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, has successfully lobbied government ministers for funding to extend the Metro tram network to the Sports Quarter, a major regeneration project in East Birmingham.³⁵ In West Yorkshire, the mayor, Tracy Brabin, has worked with the government to secure funding to deliver her manifesto commitment of a mass transit system for West Yorkshire.³⁶ And in the North West, mayors Steve Rotherham and Andy Burnham have lobbied ministers and published proposals for enhanced rail links between Liverpool and Manchester.³⁷

Devolution of transport functions is likely to go further

Transport is one of the most established and long-standing mayoral functions and, given its central role in driving economic growth, the government is now seeking further devolution of transport powers.

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, published in July 2025, includes provisions for MSAs to become the sole local transport authority for their region, removing these powers from constituent councils if they previously held them.³⁸ It also gives mayors powers over emerging transport solutions, with provisions for MSAs to license micro-mobility providers, such as e-scooter schemes. The English devolution white paper also identifies 'London-style' multi-modal ticketing as a priority for government support for established MSAs – those that have shown a strong track record of delivery and are eligible for further devolved powers.³⁹ Beyond these powers, the bill includes a 'right to request' process through which mayors can bid for new powers or funding, including over 'transport and local infrastructure'.

MSAs can also use spatial development strategies to integrate transport planning with broader regional plans. Spatial development strategies set out a long-term framework for regeneration, housing, transport and the environment, improving integration across policy areas and increasing the social and economic returns from transport projects.⁴⁰ But not all MSAs have the requisite powers to create a spatial development strategy, and for those that do, the process of setting one up can be politically challenging.⁴¹ The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 reforms this process, making it easier for spatial development strategies to be adopted and placing a duty on all MSAs to create one for their region.⁴² The Act also strengthens mayors' ability to improve transport connectivity by streamlining approval processes for major transport and regeneration projects.⁴³

The government's rail reforms will expand mayoral influence over the railway system

In November 2025, the government introduced the Railways Bill, a landmark piece of legislation to set up Great British Railways (GBR) as the publicly owned national body responsible for rail infrastructure and service planning. GBR aims to reduce fragmentation by consolidating functions currently spread across at least 17 industry bodies into a single "directing mind" for the railways. The bill also increases the influence that MSAs have over rail by embedding a statutory role for MSAs to ensure that local strategies are factored into GBR's decision making.⁴⁴

As Richard Crabtree, head of mayoral partnerships at Shadow Great British Railways, highlighted at our DevoLab event in November 2025, the creation of GBR complements the government's broader English devolution agenda, with partnership between GBR and mayors forming a core part of the Railways Bill.⁴⁵ The bill requires GBR to have regard for local transport plans, consult MSAs on decisions that will significantly affect the interests of the economy or people in an area, and share relevant information.⁴⁶ It also includes an explicit provision for established MSAs to request further rail devolution.

By consolidating several railway functions within a single body, the reforms aim to give mayors a clear point of accountability, enabling closer joint planning on rail-related projects. At our DevoLab event, Crabtree explained that GBR is being positioned as a

delivery partner for local transport plans, supporting MSAs to integrate rail into their wider multi-modal transport strategies.⁴⁷ MSAs may also work with GBR to align investment in bus and tram services with rail outcomes, including through co-investment to deliver these outcomes. Partnership with GBR therefore offers MSAs greater scope to shape rail services in ways that support local transport priorities, economic growth and decarbonisation.

The GBR model offers a consistent set of levers for MSAs to collaborate with GBR, while also leaving space for local areas to be responsive to different circumstances, such as varying institutional maturity and transport needs.⁴⁸ The strength of partnerships between MSAs and GBR will therefore depend on several factors, including:

- how fully rail is embedded within an MSA's local transport plan
- the MSA's capacity to manage rail-related responsibilities
- the depth of collaborative relationships that the MSA establishes with GBR.

Taken together, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 and the Railways Bill signal a clear direction of travel from the government. As set out in the English devolution white paper, the government recognises that "high quality transport infrastructure supports growth and opportunity".⁴⁹ It increasingly views transport connectivity as fundamental to driving economic growth and reducing regional inequality, and sees devolution as the key mechanism to deliver this more effectively, stating that the introduction of strategic authorities will make it easier for areas "to drive through big, pro-growth projects such as integrated transport networks and housing".⁵⁰

The following three case studies highlight three cases where devolved powers have been used to improve transport connectivity.

A mass transit network in West Yorkshire

This case study focuses on the West Yorkshire Mass Transit Network, a flagship project designed to deliver a large-scale tram system that connects the region's five core urban centres.



The idea

West Yorkshire is Europe's largest metropolitan area without a large-scale public transport system of trams, 'light' rail or metro.⁵¹ Instead, to a large extent the region relies on its 'heavy' rail network,^{*} which is a key mode of travel for commuters.⁵² Poor connectivity between the region's main urban centres is a long-standing barrier to economic growth, limiting labour market access and constraining agglomeration benefits.⁵³

In January 2021 – before the election of the region's first mayor – West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) published its *Mass Transit Vision 2040*, setting out plans for building a mass transit network.⁵⁴ This built on WYCA's pre-existing *Connectivity Infrastructure Plan*, published in 2021, which set out a goal to create an integrated transport system across journey types.⁵⁵ This has now developed into plans for such a system, called the 'Weaver Network'.

The mass transit system, which will use modern high-capacity buses, trams or tram-train vehicles, aims to support the region's core priorities of:

- increasing productivity
- enabling inclusive growth
- reducing carbon emissions.⁵⁶

As part of the first phase of the project, Leeds – the region's largest economy – will be connected with Bradford, and this will unlock opportunities for both areas and help drive economic growth across West Yorkshire.⁵⁷



The approach

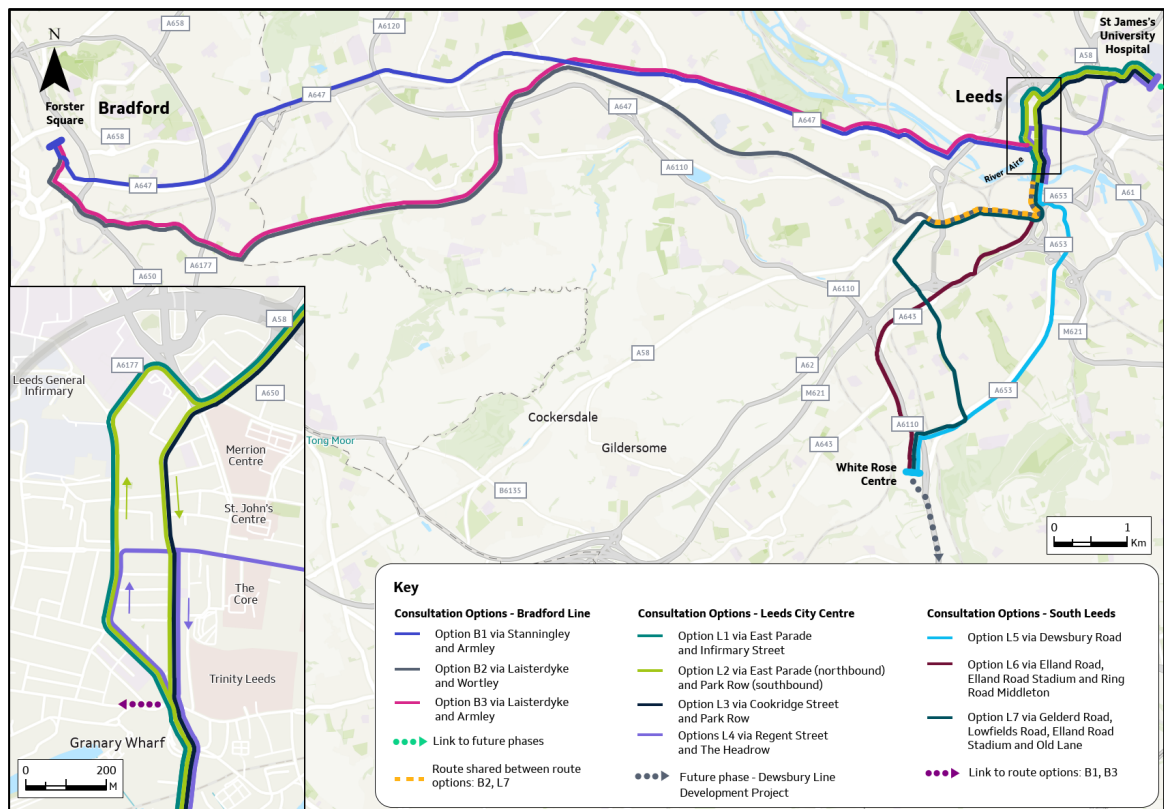
As alluded to above, the West Yorkshire Mass Transit System will be delivered in phases, with phase one focused on creating two tramlines.⁵⁸ WYCA has led extensive public and stakeholder consultation while developing its plans, running two consultations to inform and update the vision.⁵⁹ A further consultation in summer 2024 considered proposals for the two initial tram routes.⁶⁰ There is strong public backing for mass transit in West Yorkshire, with 80% of respondents to the 2021 consultation supporting WYCA's vision.⁶¹

* Heavy rail uses larger, heavier trains that run on segregated tracks at higher speeds and capacities, whereas light rail uses smaller, lighter vehicles that operate at lower speeds and often share road space for shorter urban trips.

The two initial lines proposed are:⁶²

- the Leeds line, which would run across the city, from St James’s University Hospital and White Rose via Leeds city centre and Elland Road
- the Bradford line, connecting Leeds and Bradford city centres, running from St James’s University Hospital to Bradford Forster Square via Leeds city centre, and connect several neighbourhoods and regeneration areas in West Leeds and East Bradford.

Figure 5 **West Yorkshire Mass Transit Network, phase one route options**



Source: West Yorkshire Combined Authority, West Yorkshire Mass Transit: Phase one route options consultation, 15 July 2025.

These first routes would form the backbone of a wider, multi-vehicle system, designed to link communities across the region and complement existing rail and bus services.⁶³ The system seeks to bring West Yorkshire’s towns and cities into a single, high-capacity network that supports regeneration and contributes to the region’s net-zero ambitions.

Once completed, the project is expected to:⁶⁴

- improve transport for up to 675,000 people within the top 20% most deprived communities in West Yorkshire
- connect up to 35 housing developments, 17 key employment areas and five hospitals
- reduce emissions and improve air quality through low-emission transport that offers an attractive alternative to car travel
- reduce transport barriers that limit travel horizons, enabling better access to key services such as employment, education and health care
- provide accessible transport for all users
- support redevelopment and regeneration through unlocking investment.

As mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin has made mass transit one of her top priorities, describing it as essential to achieving the region’s economic, social and environmental goals.⁶⁵ She has publicly championed the scheme, and engaged with government ministers and local leaders to secure the funding and political support needed to progress the project.^{66,67} Beyond political advocacy, WYCA is also embedding mass transit into its wider strategies. The West Yorkshire local growth plan recognises mass transit as a key lever for inclusive growth. Mass transit’s Leeds–Bradford link is specifically highlighted within the Western Corridor as a priority for investment, to maximise agglomeration benefits and unlock sites for housing and employment.

WYCA has begun work on a West Yorkshire Spatial Development Strategy so that region-wide, cross-boundary policies for housing, employment, land, climate resilience and strategic infrastructure are set at the combined authority scale. In parallel, WYCA is preparing a Mass Transit Spatial Development Framework, which will set out an agreed planning framework to support the mass transit business cases needed to submit the phase one Transport and Works Act Order by the target of spring 2027.⁶⁸

The project will require significant capital investment, with the first phase estimated to cost between £2 billion and £2.5bn.⁶⁹ Unlike many other transport infrastructure projects, such as phase two of HS2 and the Leeds supertram,^{70,71} West Yorkshire mass transit has received consistent support from government. WYCA has received an initial £200m from the government for the design, consultation, consent and enabling works until 2027.⁷² In June 2025, it was announced that WYCA would receive £2.1bn from the Transport for City Regions funding to progress phase one of the West Yorkshire Mass Transit System.⁷³



The results

As of early 2026, WYCA is deciding on the preferred routes for phase one of the project, with plans for a further consultation on this, again in early 2026.⁷⁴ Construction of phase one was originally expected to begin in 2028 and be operational by the mid-2030s.⁷⁵ However, the project is now experiencing significant delays.⁷⁶ An independent review pushed its completion date back by several years, from the mid to the late 2030s. Reviewers recommended increasing timelines to allow for a sequential delivery approach so that work is not carried out on business cases and route planning simultaneously.⁷⁷ Brabin continues to state her intention to begin construction by 2028, and the government has reaffirmed its support for the scheme. But opposition politicians and campaigners have raised concerns that delays will drive up costs.⁷⁸

The government’s commitment of £2.1bn through the Transport for City Regions programme has been seen as a crucial milestone, providing the project with greater certainty and momentum. But further funding is not guaranteed. There have been several attempts at new transport projects in West Yorkshire before, including the Leeds supertram system, which was cancelled in 2005 due to a lack of funding.^{79,80} Rises in construction costs also pose a risk as the project moves from planning to delivery – a problem that large transport projects more widely face. Public support may weaken if costs escalate or timelines slip, increasing pressure on decision makers and potentially undermining the long-term case for the scheme.

[Watch the full presentation of this case study](#)



The approach

Devolution has enabled local leaders to improve and invest in Merseyrail.⁸⁸ In 2003, Merseyrail became the first UK rail network to operate under a devolved concession model, through which the Merseyside Passenger Transport Authority (MPTA), not central government, manages certain transport concessions and services.⁸⁹ This model gives the MPTA, under the operating name Merseytravel, the ability to set fares, service levels and investment priorities, while the contracted private operator manages the network's day-to-day running.⁹⁰ Before LCRCA was set up, Merseytravel provided political oversight and was accountable for the Merseyrail concession agreement. Before this, Merseyrail operated under the traditional national franchise system, where central government bodies specified services and controlled fares, leaving local authorities with limited influence.⁹¹

In 2014, LCRCA was set up, and incorporated Merseytravel as its transport executive.⁹² Merseytravel's 25-year concession arrangement, set to expire in 2028, has provided long-term certainty, enabling it to make sustained investment in necessary infrastructure, including new stations, accessibility improvements and a new fleet of Class 777 trains, which it owns outright.^{93,94} Strategic oversight from the mayor, Steve Rotheram, and LCRCA has integrated transport planning with wider economic and regeneration strategies. For example, this has allowed the service to support regeneration projects such as improved rail access to Everton Football Club's new stadium at Bramley-Moore Dock and surrounding high-growth areas,⁹⁵ and to respond to major events, such as putting on additional services during the Eurovision Song Contest in 2023.⁹⁶ It is also significant that the mayor serves as LCRCA's transport portfolio lead, signalling that transport is a top mayoral priority.⁹⁷

Looking ahead, LCRCA has ambitious plans to expand Merseyrail east of Liverpool, to eliminate what Huw Jenkins, lead officer for transport policy at LCRCA, has described as "the current two-tier rail system" that operates within the region.⁹⁸ He highlighted that Merseyrail does not serve all of the city region, with services east of Lime Street operated by Northern, TransPennine Express and others. Work is progressing on a revised memorandum of understanding between LCRCA and the Department for Transport, which will explore options for transferring stations and infrastructure to LCRCA so it can influence future rail investment.⁹⁹

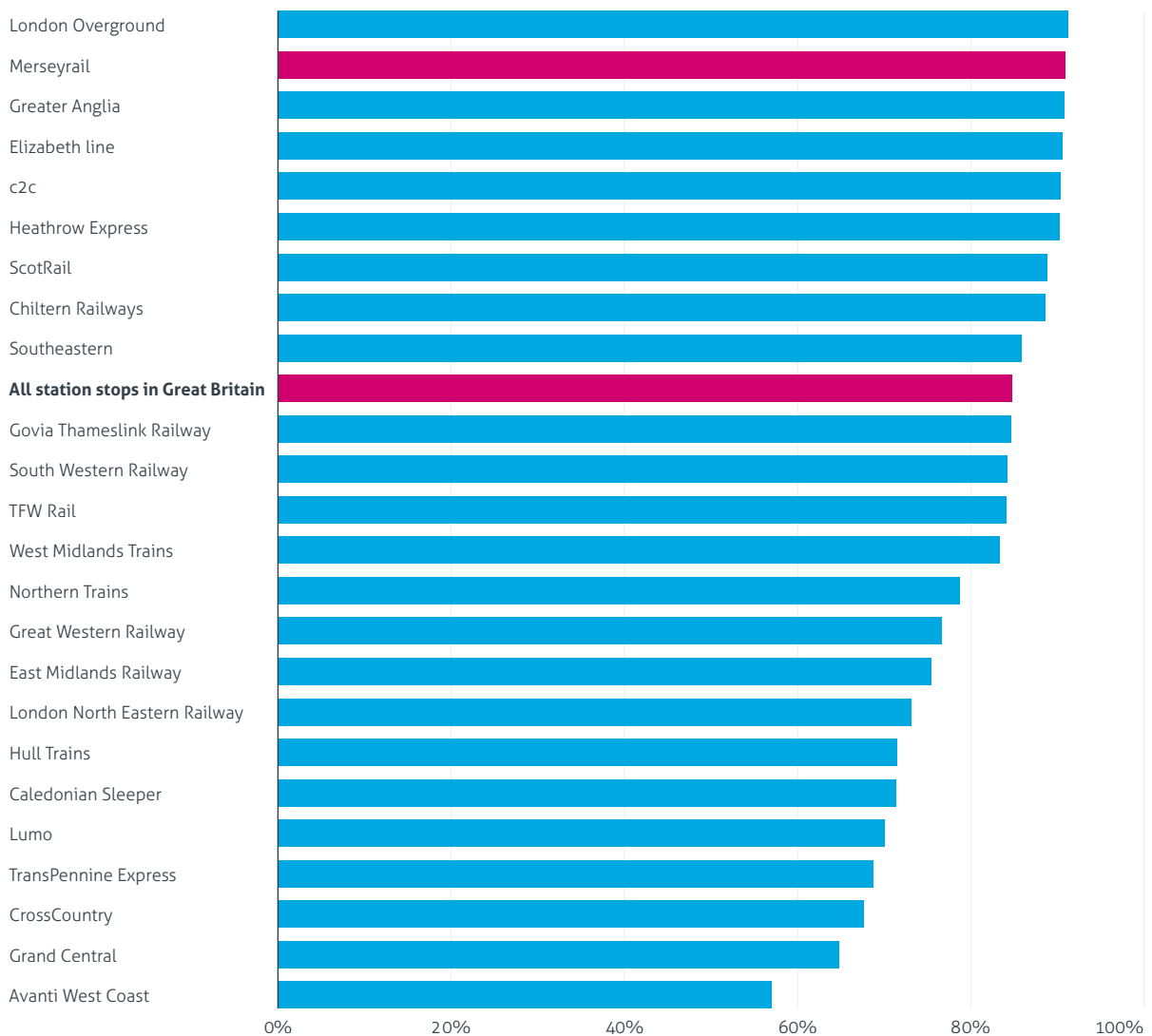
LCRCA is also working towards a more integrated transport system. In October 2023, Rotheram made the decision to move to a bus franchising model, after a public consultation earlier that year.¹⁰⁰ The combined authority approved the first phase of the franchised network in March 2025, including plans for St Helens and Wirral, a phased roll-out schedule and preparations for new bus depots. Franchising will begin in September 2026, with full implementation across the region expected by the end of 2027.¹⁰¹ LCRCA argues that this will improve the connections between bus and rail, by supporting the bus network to connect with the rail network and growing patronage, and improving connectivity for both.¹⁰²



The results

Merseyrail consistently ranks as a high-performing rail service, being awarded best-performing regional railway for seven consecutive years.¹⁰³ Between July and September 2025, 90% of Merseyrail station stops were arrived at early or less than three minutes after the scheduled time, compared to 84% nationally.¹⁰⁴ The service also achieved 93% satisfaction in its latest customer surveys, compared to 88% nationally.^{105,106} At our Devolab event, Jenkins argued that it is devolution that has, in part, enabled the network to go “from ‘Miseryrail’ to the best-performing operator in the UK”.¹⁰⁷

Figure 7 **On-time station arrivals, by operator, July to September 2025**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Office of Rail and Road, 'Passenger rail performance July to September 2025', December 2025. Notes: On-time is defined as recorded station stops that were arrived at early or less than three minutes after the scheduled time.

However, problems for the services do remain. The roll-out of the new LCRC-owned Class 777 fleet of trains has faced persistent operational issues, including software faults, cancellations and winter resilience problems caused by ice on the third rail,^{*} leading to old trains being reintroduced on some routes.¹⁰⁸ Further expansion of Merseyrail – for example, to Deeside and Wrexham – will require significant infrastructure investment and agreement with national rail operators, which will take time.¹⁰⁹

[Watch the full presentation of this case study](#)

^{*} The third rail is the live rail that provides election power to a train through a conductor placed alongside the rails.

Integrating transport through the 'Bee Network' in Greater Manchester

This case study focuses on the 'Bee Network', an integrated transport network in Greater Manchester that includes franchised buses, trams, and walking and cycling routes. The mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, has stated that the vision for the Bee Network is "a fully integrated, London-style public transport system" that will include eight rail lines by 2030.^{110,111,112}



The idea

An integrated transport system with franchised buses has long been an ambition for Greater Manchester – its first devolution deal in 2014 identified franchised bus services as a key opportunity,¹¹³ and an integrated transport system featured in both the 2013 Greater Manchester Strategy and Burnham's inaugural mayoral manifesto in 2017.^{114,115}

In 2017, Chris Boardman – Greater Manchester's cycling and walking commissioner – published plans for the 'Beeline Network', a system of walking and cycling routes, including 75 miles of segregated cycle lanes.¹¹⁶ The initiative aimed to address poor health, air pollution, congestion and social inequality across the region, and these aims played an important role in the development of the Bee Network.¹¹⁷ In his 2021 mayoral manifesto, Burnham stated that: "The Bee Network will be based on the idea of making active travel the first choice for the first and last mile of people's journeys."¹¹⁸

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) also sought to franchise buses to integrate them into the Bee Network and tackle the long-standing challenges that the bus network faced. The size of the bus network in Greater Manchester had fallen by 38% between 1977 and 2022,¹¹⁹ and the network had uneven coverage, poor service reliability and high fares.¹²⁰ Burnham argued that "this was not just a transport issue, it was also an issue of inclusion, accessibility and opportunity", particularly given that "the people who rely on [buses] most are often those with the fewest alternatives".¹²¹

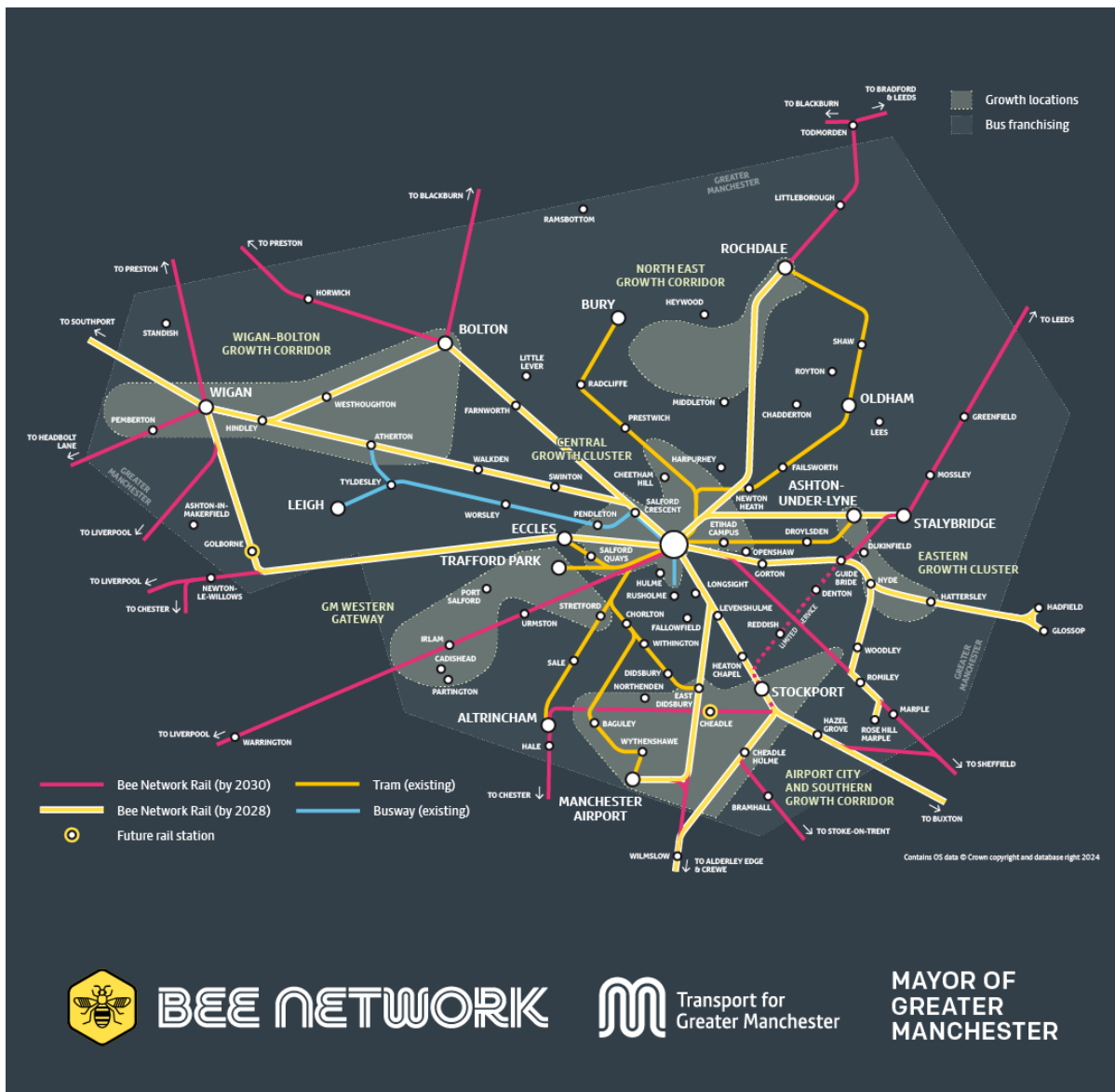
After advocacy by GMCA and passenger transport executives in other areas, the Bus Services Act 2017 granted mayors the power to introduce bus franchising.¹²² Using this legislation, in 2021, Greater Manchester became the first city region outside London to bring buses back under public control in almost 40 years.¹²³ This fulfilled Burnham's 2021 mayoral manifesto pledge and marked a key milestone in the development of Greater Manchester's integrated transport network.¹²⁴



The approach

The Bee Network is being delivered in several phases. Phase one focused on securing local control over buses, with a final decision to implement franchising confirmed in March 2021, after legal challenges from bus operators.^{125,126} Between September 2023 and January 2025, all buses were brought under public control through a three-stage transition.¹²⁷ This phase also introduced:^{128,129}

- the Bee Network app, with real-time bus, tram and train information
- a fleet of 50 new zero-emission, Bee Network-branded buses offering a range of accessibility improvements
- more TravelSafe support and enforcement officers on the network
- capped fares at £2 per single journey and £5 per day, introduced in 2022, which were guaranteed until at least the end of 2026
- integrated ticketing across bus and tram services.



Source: Transport for Greater Manchester, 'Mayor Andy Burnham reveals plans for Bee Network rail to boost passenger numbers and drive Greater Manchester's growth', 21 January 2025.

While the bus service and wider Bee Network offer will continue to evolve, phase two will focus on extending integration to rail. Eight commuter lines will join the Bee Network by 2028 – the first two lines will join the network in December 2026, followed by a further two in December 2027 and the remaining four by the end of 2028.¹³⁰ The improvements to the network also include building the first new stations in more than 20 years and accessibility upgrades to existing ones.¹³¹ By 2030, GMCA aims for all local rail services to be part of the Bee Network, delivering a fully integrated 'London-style' transport system, with integrated ticketing between buses, trams and rail.

The Bee Network has benefited from long-term joint commitment across Greater Manchester's 10 local authorities.¹³² *The Greater Manchester Transport Strategy*, published by Transport for Greater Manchester in 2017, set an integrated transport system as a key objective and recognised bus franchising as beneficial to achieving this.¹³³ Since becoming mayor in 2017, Burnham has played an important role in driving the transition to the Bee Network, with integrated transport featuring in all three of his mayoral manifestos, and bus franchising forming a key part of his 2021 campaign.¹³⁴ Burnham is also portfolio lead for transport in GMCA and has championed the Bee Network brand across the region through local events and announcements. The network has been funded through a mix of devolved allocations, central government investment including through the Transforming Cities Fund and City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (and, from 2027, Transport for City Regions funding), and locally raised funding including from local authorities, the mayor's precept, and revenue from tram and bus ticket sales.^{135,136}



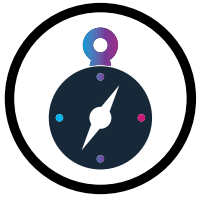
The results

The Bee Network has begun to materially change Greater Manchester's transport landscape, with a unified regional brand, integrated ticketing on buses and trams, improved patronage and lower fares. According to Transport for Greater Manchester data, early successes for the network include the following:

- Journeys on buses brought under local control in September 2023 have increased 12% year-on-year, with a 14% year-on-year increase on services that joined the Bee Network in March 2024.¹³⁷
- Bus passengers are saving approximately 20% on fares due to the introduction of fare caps, and there is increased customer satisfaction with fares.¹³⁸
- Communities are better connected, with around 84% of residents within a five-minute walk of a half-hourly bus or tram service in the daytime compared to 78% in 2022.¹³⁹
- Bus services are more reliable than pre-franchising – between June and August 2024, the punctuality of phase one bus services was 86.5% compared to 70.5% for the equivalent pre-franchising period.¹⁴⁰
- Around 1.2 million rides have been made on the Starling Bank cycle hire scheme.¹⁴¹
- A record-breaking 46 million tram journeys were made in 2024.¹⁴²

Between September 2023 and March 2024, revenue from buses in the first phase of the Bee Network exceeded £20m – £3m higher than budgeted.¹⁴³ But the franchised bus network, like other networks around the country, still requires significant public funding, accounting for £226m of Greater Manchester’s proposed transport budget in 2025/26.¹⁴⁴ This is consistent with the experience of delivering public transport services across the UK and Europe, where significant and sustained public investment is required to provide an attractive and affordable customer offer, and ensure services provide a public good to communities who rely upon them.

In the longer term, the Bee Network aims to reduce congestion and emissions, expand access to jobs and education, improve health outcomes and improve inclusion for communities that were previously poorly served by public transport.¹⁴⁵ While the full vision of the network will take time to materialise, it has shown early successes and Greater Manchester is setting increasingly ambitious transport goals, integrated with broader growth and inclusion strategies.



Lessons from the case studies

In this section we set out the lessons that can be learnt from our case studies and wider research about how to improve transport connectivity through devolution.

1. Visible leadership from mayors is often crucial to secure investment and build support for major transport projects

Mayors play an important role in advocating for transport projects and provide a clear point of accountability for the public, central government and delivery partners. As noted in the previous section, Andy Burnham has made the Bee Network a clear personal priority, and polling confirms that public transport is the policy area most frequently cited as a mayoral responsibility in Greater Manchester and elsewhere.¹⁴⁶

Mayors can also promote their region's flagship transport projects to government ministers and lobby for funding. For example, the mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, lobbied the government to receive funding for a tram extension to east Birmingham, which is set to unlock up to £3bn of private investment in the Sports Quarter project. As Huw Jenkins, lead officer for transport policy at the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA), emphasised at our DevoLab event, the leadership and shared vision that mayors bring over planning, economic development and transport mean they are well positioned to make a joined-up case to government that emphasises the broader economic and social benefits for improved transport connectivity to their regions.¹⁴⁷

Mayors can also collaborate across regional boundaries to strengthen their case to the government and other investors. For example, the mayor of Liverpool, Steve Rotheram, and Andy Burnham have lobbied ministers to gain support for the Northern Arc rail project, which will cut travel times between Liverpool and Manchester.¹⁴⁸

2. Long-term funding certainty, with clear devolved responsibility for transport delivery, is essential for strategic authorities to drive progress

Long-term funding certainty and responsibility is crucial for delivering successful regional transport projects. For example, at our DevoLab event, Jenkins emphasised that Merseyrail's 25-year control over the local rail network provided the long-term certainty and confidence required to invest in new stations, trains and accessibility upgrades.¹⁴⁹ Merseyrail has also benefited from sustained funding certainty through the long-term Special Rail Grant settlement provided by the Department for Transport, which has enabled Merseytravel and LCRCA to progress local procurement of new trains.¹⁵⁰

Similarly, Burnham has highlighted the importance of long-term funding to deliver the first phase of the Bee Network,¹⁵¹ funded by the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS)¹⁵² and Transport for City Regions (TCR) settlement.¹⁵³ Both funds are provided in five-year allocations, which helps MSAs to develop long-term transport plans rather than making ad hoc bids for funding. As Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, chair of the West Yorkshire Transport Committee, emphasised at our DevoLab event, long-term funding allows MSAs to move from lobbying to delivery.¹⁵⁴

3. Improving transport connectivity can enable MSAs to support the achievement of a broad set of policy objectives

MSAs recognise that improving transport connectivity is a broader economic, social and environmental investment, and they are embedding transport plans within broader strategies that complement wider goals, including regeneration, inclusive growth and decarbonisation. At our DevoLab event, Hinchcliffe emphasised that improved transport connectivity and skills are key to addressing West Yorkshire’s “productivity gap” and “employment gap” compared to the UK average, which, if closed, would deliver £9bn and £2bn in additional output in the West Yorkshire economy respectively.^{155,156} The mass transit scheme is designed to contribute to this objective, by enabling better access to employment and training, and with a particular focus on linking Bradford more effectively to the labour market in Leeds.¹⁵⁷ As Tom Bridges, director and UK government business leader at Arup, highlighted at our DevoLab event: “Transport is critical in terms of connecting people to jobs, connecting them to opportunities and connecting employers to a workforce across a broader area.”¹⁵⁸

MSAs also use transport investment to further health and environmental goals. Burnham has stated that the Bee Network aims to be “the UK’s first fully integrated, zero-emission public transport system by 2030”, with a fleet of electric buses and trams powered by renewable energy.¹⁵⁹ One in five buses in the region are now electric – a 10-fold increase since the network’s launch – illustrating how transport investment can complement decarbonisation goals.¹⁶⁰ The Bee Network is also central to Greater Manchester’s Clean Air Plan, which outlines an investment-led approach to reducing air pollution, contributing to an increase in areas meeting the legal levels of nitrogen dioxide between 2019 and 2024.¹⁶¹ Greater Manchester’s local transport plan also emphasises the health benefits of investment in active travel networks.¹⁶²

MSAs are also taking specific action to further the economic and social benefits from transport connectivity. For example, in Liverpool City Region, Rotherham has worked with Merseyrail to fulfil his manifesto commitment to introduce a care-leaver ticket to provide free travel to young people who have left the care system at age 18. The scheme, which is funded by bus and rail companies as part of their social value commitments, has provided free tickets to 1,500 care leavers across Liverpool City Region.¹⁶³

4. It is vital for MSAs to integrate their transport objectives into spatial development strategies

A key strength of MSAs is their power to join up policy areas through spatial development strategies, which provide a single framework for guiding regeneration and infrastructure development across a region by bringing together economic, environmental and social priorities.¹⁶⁴ The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 empowers all strategic authorities to develop spatial development strategies at the regional scale, with mayors leading the process, and streamlines the process of agreeing these strategies, by removing the veto power that each local council has previously held.

Jenkins spelt out the benefits of the spatial development strategies at our DevoLab event: before 2014, Merseytravel was a transport body with no relation to the planning process, whereas “now we’re producing a spatial development strategy for our city region in tandem with our local transport plan, with our economic strategy, with our low carbon plan, with our air quality plan. They all talk the same language.”¹⁶⁵

However, as Bridges from Arup noted at our DevoLab event, to be effective, spatial development strategies must avoid “everythingism” and concentrate on a small number of regional priorities that will deliver the most benefits for the economy and communities.¹⁶⁶ Without clear prioritisation, there is a risk of overstretch, and spatial development strategies may become diffuse and underpowered, rather than leveraging the ability of MSAs to co-ordinate strategy across policy areas.

5. A key prize of devolution is the ability to integrate all forms of local public transport within a single system – although not all the levers are yet devolved

Building integrated transport systems, not just expanding networks, will be essential to maximising the benefits of devolved transport funding and powers.

At our DevoLab event, Jenkins highlighted the importance of integrating Merseyrail within Liverpool City Region’s wider transport network and noted that “Merseyrail... needs to be a much closer part of a fully integrated transport network for the city region”, as passengers themselves do not use the rail network in isolation, but as part of a longer journey.¹⁶⁷ With LCRC running franchised bus services from autumn 2026, new opportunities for rail and bus integration will emerge through measures such as cross-subsidisation and co-ordinated ticketing. For other MSAs, the statutory duties in the Railways Bill, combined with bus franchising powers, will provide similar integration opportunities.

The West Yorkshire mass transit vision explicitly sets out the importance of the new tram system being integrated with other journey types through the Weaver Network.¹⁶⁸ As Hinchcliffe emphasised at our DevoLab event, “all the transport schemes we’re talking about should be integrated”, because it not only makes it easier for passengers to get around, but can also increase patronage, make the network more accessible and help MSAs reduce fares through cross-subsidisation.^{169,170}

6. Mayors and strategic authorities are well placed to engage communities in transport planning to design inclusive, people-centred networks

While transport projects often involve large-scale infrastructure considerations, success in improving connectivity also requires a focus on individual journeys and users. MSAs are well placed to achieve this by engaging communities early in the design process, to ensure transport networks are safe, accessible and convenient. As Bridges of Arup noted: “If we get this right, it makes a real difference to people’s experience of how they use the transport network... how they get from A to B and how they can access opportunities.”¹⁷¹

Burnham has highlighted safety as the number one priority for the Bee Network in Greater Manchester, underlining the importance of designing systems that meet user needs.¹⁷² For instance, Transport for Greater Manchester is working towards ensuring women and girls feel safe while travelling on the Bee Network, including by increasing the number of TravelSafe support and enforcement officers operating on the network.¹⁷³

There is a clear opportunity to draw on local knowledge to improve services. For example, Merseyrail has used focus groups to inform train design, ensuring that infrastructure reflects the needs and preferences of passengers.¹⁷⁴ The Liverpool City Region has also invested in making the trains on its network fully accessible, through sliding steps on trains, raised platforms and new lifts and ramps at stations. Locally driven projects may also be better placed to build support and prevent opposition through effective consultation. As Hinchcliffe emphasised at our DevoLab event, it is important that transport infrastructure is “done with people, not to people”.¹⁷⁵ A collaborative approach helps to build trust and legitimacy and ensures the commercial viability of transport projects – ultimately people need to use the services.

7. Bus franchising can bring benefits such as improved service quality, increased network integration and reduced fares

Bus franchising requires significant investment by MSAs and ongoing subsidies to operate, but offers the potential for delivering a range of benefits, including:

- improved reliability
- the simplification of ticketing
- cross-subsidisation of routes
- the integration of buses with other modes of transport.

Franchising may also lead to wider economic benefits, including job creation, higher productivity and agglomeration, which can offset subsidies.¹⁷⁶

The Bee Network illustrates the potential benefits of franchising. Before franchising, the bus network in Greater Manchester was highly fragmented and experiencing declining patronage.¹⁷⁷ By bringing buses under local control from 2023, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) introduced capped fares (£2 per single journey), integrated ticketing across buses and trams, and new zero-emission vehicles.¹⁷⁸ The data suggests that these changes have led to benefits including increased usage and improved punctuality on franchised services.^{179,180,181}

Bus franchising is now a priority for many MSAs. As Jenkins stated at our DevoLab event, LCRCA “will become the second MSA in the country to run franchised bus services from next autumn [2026]”, with bus franchising regarded as a key step towards a fully integrated transport system.¹⁸² Other regions, including West Yorkshire, are also moving towards bus franchising, with WYCA starting to roll out franchised bus services in spring 2027.¹⁸³

8. Rail reform offers new opportunities for mayors to shape public transport and promote integration across transport modes

The government's programme of rail reform provides new opportunities for mayors to integrate rail with other forms of local transport and broader spatial strategies.

MSAs already engage with Network Rail and a range of operators on local rail plans, but at our DevoLab event, Richard Crabtree, head of mayoral partnerships at Shadow Great British Railways (GBR), emphasised that GBR improves the opportunity for place-based partnerships by providing MSAs with a "single point of accountability".¹⁸⁴ Through the Railways Bill, mayors are being positioned as natural partners to railway delivery partners, with GBR discharging its expertise as a "directing mind" of the railways, and mayors bringing place-based expertise and knowledge of other local transport priorities such as bus and tram routes, as well as broader spatial priorities such as investment and regeneration projects.

The Railways Bill outlines several statutory roles for MSAs, but as Crabtree highlighted, these statutory roles should underpin partnerships rather than actively driving them – there are opportunities to develop deeper place-based partnerships that go beyond statutory roles.¹⁸⁵ One way for MSAs to achieve this is through early consultation with the rail industry on local transport plans, which provides an opportunity for the railway industry to gain a stronger understanding of local growth and development priorities, and how the industry can contribute to them.

9. MSAs will require expanded transport delivery capacity to match their growing array of devolved powers and budgets

Another important lesson is that as the devolution process moves forward, MSAs will need to shift their focus from lobbying for funding to showing that they can deliver. While established MSAs have had years of transport experience, newer MSAs will need support to develop equivalent capacity.

As Hinchcliffe emphasised at our DevoLab event, strategic authorities "must now move into a delivery phase like we have never seen before".¹⁸⁶ This shift will require not only expanded powers, but also the organisational capabilities to use them effectively.

Developing skilled teams in areas such as project and programme management, commercial negotiation and the design and implementation of franchising models will be critical. These capabilities are in short supply across the sector, and even well-established authorities face ongoing problems in recruiting and retaining specialist talent. Bus franchising, which a growing number of regions are now pursuing, can function as an important training ground for the deeper technical and commercial expertise required for more complex rail partnerships and large-scale infrastructure delivery.

10. Government and MSAs should use place-based business cases to go beyond narrow appraisals of transport projects

Traditional appraisal methods, such as cost–benefit ratios, often disadvantage low-income areas and fail to capture the wider benefits of projects, such as improvements in health or social inclusion. Moving beyond these methods – for example, through ‘place-based business cases’ – could allow MSAs to unlock projects of strategic value, even if they do not score well under standard economic appraisal methodologies.

Rail projects in Bradford illustrate this point. Looking beyond the cost–benefit ratio for projects, local leaders argue that new rail projects in the city would deliver major connectivity and regeneration benefits. At our DevoLab event, Hinchcliffe reflected that she “spent a lot of time when I first became a leader lobbying on *The Green Book* [central government guidance on appraisal and evaluation] because I thought it made decisions... that have been wrong for so many years to places like Bradford”, with *Green Book* appraisals not recognising the benefits that transport connectivity could bring to Bradford enough.¹⁸⁷

Place-based business cases provide a way to overcome these limitations by considering local context and long-term outcomes. They enable MSAs to focus on projects that deliver strategic benefits, rather than being constrained by narrow economic returns. This shift is already under way. For example, Liverpool Central Station has been chosen for a *Green Book* pilot to test a place-based approach to appraisal, signalling a move towards valuing strategic importance over traditional metrics.¹⁸⁸ Bradford Council is also working with government to develop a place-based business case for the new Bradford Southern Gateway railway station and station-focused regeneration.¹⁸⁹

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Arup for supporting this work, in particular to Tom Bridges, UK government business leader, and Emily Richards, public affairs lead, for their support and advice throughout the project.

We would also like to thank Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, Huw Jenkins and Richard Crabtree for presenting at our DevoLab #3 event, and Ben Blackburn and Anoush Darabi from GMCA, who also provided comments on drafts of this publication.

We would also like to thank colleagues at the Institute for Government, in particular Jill Rutter for chairing our DevoLab #3 event; and Will Driscoll, Catherine Haddon, Melissa Ittoo and Sam Macrory for help in publishing and publicising the report. Finally, we would like to thank Zuzanna Juskiewicz for her support in organising the event.

The conclusions reached are the authors' alone.

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