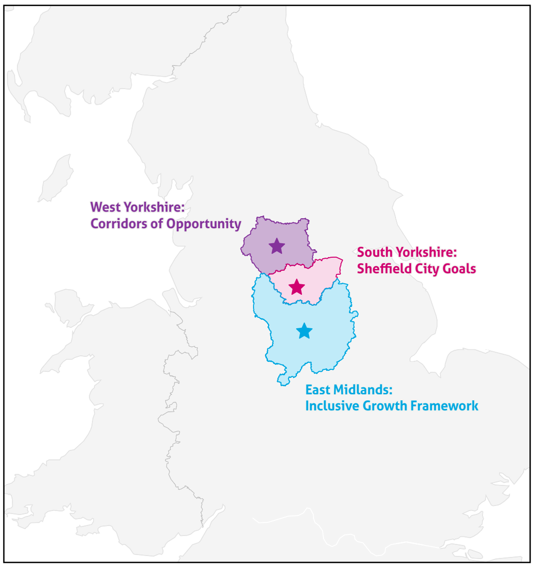
Learning from the DevoLab #5

How mayors and local leaders can create a shared vision for growth

Harriet Shaw | Megan Isaac | Akash Paun

Summary



Devolution will be central to delivering the government's ambition of "good growth in every postcode".[1] To support this, the government has committed to devolving further powers over important growth levers to mayors, including employment support and 16–19 education, alongside greater fiscal devolution.[2] As mayors take on new responsibilities, they will need a clear vision for growth to guide their policy development and investment decisions.

But mayors cannot deliver growth alone. Strategic leadership and co-ordination will be increasingly important. While mayoral strategic authorities (MSAs) hold important powers to influence growth, such as transport, skills and economic development, delivering growth requires developing shared priorities with the wider local system and aligning their own powers behind them. This means working with local authorities, businesses, universities, investors and central government to develop a shared vision for growth: one that reflects the region's challenges and opportunities, helps the MSA make effective policy and investment decisions, provides a framework for aligning action across partners and builds the support needed to deliver change.

So how can mayors and local leaders develop a shared vision to drive good growth in their region? How can they use their leadership and convening powers to build support among local partners? And what lessons can places learn from each other?

To answer these questions, this briefing presents three case studies of how mayors and local leaders have created a shared vision for regional growth, drawing on presentations delivered at a July 2026 DevoLab event, which the Institute for Government hosted, in partnership with L&G, as well as desk-based research.

The case studies discussed are:

- **the 'East Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework'** – a long-term strategy to drive inclusive growth in the East Midlands.*
- **corridors of opportunity in the 'West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan'** – three strategic corridors connecting the region's major urban centres to key economic assets to maximise growth.**
- **the 'Sheffield City Goals'** – 18 goals that set out the city's ambitions to 2035.***

Drawing on these case studies, we set out 10 lessons that highlight the importance of:

- keeping sight of how and where growth is felt by residents
- grounding a vision in a robust evidence base
- making clear choices and trade-offs
- providing investors with a clear role in turning ambitions into deliverable opportunities
- building regional partnerships and coalitions through the development of a shared vision.

This paper is informed by a previous Institute for Government report on local growth plans.[3]

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

* This case study builds on a presentation that Damien Dacey, executive director of strategy and inclusive growth at the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA), delivered at the event.

** This case study builds on a presentation that Tony Reeves, chief executive of Wakefield Council, delivered at the event.

*** This case study builds on a presentation that Kate Josephs CB, chief executive of Sheffield City Council, delivered at the event.

Context

Different places require different approaches to growth

Economic performance varies substantially across England. In 2023, productivity in London was over 27% higher than the average across the country and almost 52% higher than in the East Midlands – the region with the lowest productivity.[4] This gap has remained persistent over several decades.

The varying economic performance and characteristics of different places in England mean that there is no single model of growth that can be applied uniformly across the country. Local leaders therefore need to develop a clear understanding of the opportunities and barriers to growth in their local economies and make choices about the outcomes they want to deliver.

Mayors and local leaders are expected to provide a strategic direction for growth

Mayors are expected to provide strategic leadership for their region, including in convening partners around a shared vision for growth. Devolution has given mayoral strategic authorities (MSAs) responsibilities across a range of policy areas that shape local economic performance, including transport, skills, housing, planning, regeneration and business support. These policy areas are closely interconnected, meaning that economic growth and development depend not only on interventions in individual policy areas but on the ability to align different levers behind a common set of priorities. A vision for growth can also help MSAs identify and support the sectors and clusters where their region has a comparative advantage, helping them prioritise investment and policy interventions to maximise impact. MSAs can therefore use a vision for growth to set out how their powers and funding will be co-ordinated to deliver outcomes for residents.

In many devolved regions, particularly those with a longer history of joint working at the regional scale, mayors and other local leaders have voluntarily come together to develop long-term strategies. Examples include the Greater Manchester Strategy, which sets an ambition to create "a thriving city where everyone can live a good life",[5] and the West Yorkshire Plan, which sets five missions, including the goal to raise living standards above the national average.[6]

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 has now introduced a new statutory requirement for MSAs to develop a local growth plan.[7] These plans provide a 10-year framework for how the MSA will focus its devolved powers and funding to drive productivity and growth in their region.[8] Local growth plans are expected to inform other regional strategies such as spatial development strategies and local transport plans.[9]

Alongside their strategic role, mayors control a range of policy and funding levers that can directly support economic growth and regeneration. These include:

- powers over economic development and regeneration, including the ability to set up mayoral development corporations and assemble land[10]
- a role in housing, including funding to remediate brownfield land and support housing delivery, alongside strategic alignment of housing investment with regional growth priorities[11]

- control of 30-year investment funds to support infrastructure projects and unlock private investment[12]
- transport powers and funding, including the power to franchise buses, develop light rail networks and create integrated ticketing systems[13]
- a role in the skills system including control of the Adult Skills Fund and responsibility for regional skills planning.

Further devolution increases the importance of strategic co-ordination on growth

The government has now announced plans for further devolution to mayoral strategic authorities, including powers over 16–19 education, employment support and funding for affordable housing.[14] The government also aims to establish strategic authorities – with or without mayors – across the country by the end of 2028.[15]

As mayors and strategic authorities take on more powers and gain greater funding flexibility, strategic co-ordination of their powers and funding levers will become increasingly important if they are to successfully address barriers to growth that cut across local administrative boundaries and join up policy at the local level. A clear vision for growth can help MSAs identify the sectors and clusters where their region has a comparative advantage, understand the key constraints holding back growth, and align devolved powers, funding and policy interventions behind a shared set of priorities.[16]

How then can mayors and local leaders develop a vision for growth that provides a common direction and shared narrative for the MSA, local authorities and the wider set of organisations whose decisions shape the area's economic future?

Below, we set out how three places have approached this task and then highlight 10 key lessons for local leaders and policy makers across the country.

The 'East Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework'

This case study focuses on the East Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework, a long-term vision to drive sustainable and inclusive growth in the East Midlands.

The idea

The East Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework sets out a shared vision for inclusive growth across the East Midlands. While growth focuses on increasing economic output, inclusive growth adds a focus on who contributes to that output and how widely its benefits are shared. The East Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework defines inclusive growth as "a model of growth that values everyone's contributions whilst also sharing out the benefits".[17] Developed by East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA), the framework provides a common vision to guide investment, programme delivery and partnership working across the region over the next 15 years.[18]

The framework emerged from a recognition that, despite the East Midlands' significant economic strengths, many residents and communities are not fully benefiting from growth opportunities.[19] For example, the framework highlights that the region is home to strong industrial assets and has the potential to benefit from growth in priority sectors identified by the UK Industrial Strategy. However, it continues to face long-standing challenges including low productivity, lower-than-average qualification levels and inequalities in access to opportunity.[20]

As a newly established strategic authority – having elected its first mayor in 2024 – developing a shared vision for inclusive growth provided an opportunity for EMCCA to not only address economic challenges but also to build a common sense of purpose and an agreed set of priorities across a large and diverse region.

The approach

The framework was developed through an extensive period of research and engagement led by the East Midlands Inclusive Growth Commission. In 2024, Claire Ward, the inaugural mayor of the East Midlands, and council leaders from across the East Midlands convened the independent Inclusive Growth Commission to assess the region's strengths, challenges and opportunities and provide a strong evidence base to guide investment and strategic decisions.[21] Chaired by Andy Haldane, former chief economist at the Bank of England, the commission undertook a 12-month programme of research and engagement that informed recommendations for delivering inclusive growth in the East Midlands.[22] Engagement included interviews and focus groups with more than 500 stakeholders including local businesses, communities and institutions, a survey of 2,000 local residents, a workshop with young people and three place-based workshops in urban, rural and post-industrial communities.[23]

The commission's work highlighted the economic opportunities in the region and the barriers preventing residents from benefiting from them. For example, the commission identified opportunities for growth in the eight priority sectors identified in the UK Industrial Strategy. However, around 85% of people working in the East Midlands are employed outside of these sectors and many of the new jobs in these sectors are likely to be graduate-level jobs that are not accessible for much of the workforce.[24]

To address these challenges and opportunities, the commission developed an 'Opportunity Escalator' toolkit, focused on helping residents access and progress in good-quality employment. This includes tackling barriers to work such as poor transport, limited childcare provision and health challenges, while also helping people moving into better-paid, more secure work through training and upskilling.[25]

Building directly on the commission's recommendations, EMCCA published the inclusive growth framework in October 2025. The framework is built around a long-term mission for the region:

> **"By 2040, every resident will be proud to call the East Midlands home. All young people will have a fair start and a clear path to progress. A thriving, green and inclusive economy will improve health and wellbeing, widen opportunity regardless of postcode, and empower all residents to shape their places and future."**[26]

This core mission is supported by six targeted ambitions:

- growth and opportunity
- green growth and a better environment
- skills for good work
- connected communities
- homes and places that enable a good life
- health, wellbeing and belonging.

The framework sets out what each of these long-term ambitions will look like in practice and how it can be achieved. For example, the 'growth and opportunity' ambition sets out that the East Midlands should become a prime location for business growth and investment, raising the average annual productivity growth rate to 2% and generating an additional £13 billion per year for the regional economy. To achieve this, the framework identifies several practical steps, including strengthening university–industry research and development partnerships, providing a new business support offer to small and medium-sized companies and using the East Midlands Investment Zone, which is supported by £160 million of government investment to attract inward investment.[27] The framework also sets out how EMCCA will work with local authorities and partners such as the NHS, businesses and universities to tackle interconnected challenges that hold back growth.[28]

The framework is designed to set the strategic direction for EMCCA, and the core mission and ambitions are embedded across other EMCCA strategies, including the East Midlands Growth Plan, the transport plan, the spatial development strategy and the Get East Midlands Working Plan. In addition, the priorities set in the framework are expected to shape decision making for investment portfolios and programme design.

EMCCA has also developed an outcomes framework to measure progress towards each ambition. The outcomes framework outlines metrics for each outcome. For example, the growth and opportunity ambition has 21 metrics to measure progress, including regional gross value added (GVA) and business density.[29] To embed these outcomes across EMCCA decision making, individual programmes explicitly set out how they support the outcomes in the framework.[30] For example, a programme on retrofit may include an expected number of homes retrofitted that will be linked to an outcome such as "everyone has access to a decent, secure and affordable home".[31] The outcomes framework also provides a shared reference point for EMCCA and partners to work towards.[32]

The results

As the framework was published in 2025, it is too early to assess its impact on long-term outcomes such as productivity growth, employment, health outcomes and educational attainment. Over time, progress against the six ambitions and their outcomes will be measured through the metrics set out in the East Midlands Outcomes Framework.[33]

However, an important early achievement has been its role in creating a shared purpose and vision for the region that extends beyond individual places, institutions and sectors. Recognising that the barriers to growth cannot be addressed by any single organisation or sector acting alone, the framework aims to ensure that "all parts of the system are pulling in the same direction, guided by clear regional priorities and outcomes for residents".[34]

At our DevoLab event, Damien Dacey, executive director of strategy and inclusive growth at EMCCA, highlighted that the process of creating the framework was a "vehicle for bringing people together around a shared vision, building relationships, building trust, creating consensus around priorities and developing collective ownership".[35] In addition, the process of developing the framework and the evidence base it drew on helped to build the strategic capacity of the region that it will require to deliver on its ambitions.

This role is particularly significant in the context of the East Midlands. EMCCA spans a large and polycentric geography with a relatively limited history of strategic collaboration across the region. Unlike some earlier city–region strategic authorities such as GMCA, which built on years of prior collaboration between constituent councils and other public sector bodies, the East Midlands needed to develop a shared vision for growth across its geographical footprint for the first time. The framework therefore acted as a mechanism to build relationships and align partners around a shared agenda.

As Dacey noted at our event, establishing a shared vision is only the first step, and translating this ambition into measurable improvements will require sustained political leadership, effective co-ordination between partners and the ability to align investment and resources behind the priorities set out in the framework.[36]

Watch the full presentation of this case study

‘Corridors of opportunity’ in the West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan

This case study examines the West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan, the region’s 10-year plan for growth, with a particular focus on its ‘corridors of opportunity’ approach – strategic corridors identified as key to unlocking West Yorkshire’s largest economic opportunities.

The idea

The West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan sets out a 10-year vision for growth up to 2035, providing a framework for how the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA), local councils, businesses and universities will work together to improve the region’s economic performance.[37] Its core ambition is to close West Yorkshire’s productivity gap, which is 12% lower than the national average.[38] It makes the case that delivering UK-wide growth depends on improving the economic performance of places like West Yorkshire, which is the country’s fourth-largest urban area. The plan argues that closing the productivity gap could support 18,000 new businesses, 53,000 more people qualified to level 4 or above, 40,000 new jobs and £3.2bn in additional annual investment.[39]

Within the West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan, WYCA identifies three ‘corridors of opportunity’ that connect the region’s major urban centres.[40] These corridors provide a spatial framework for the plan’s priorities, helping to identify key areas of opportunity, target investment, strengthen connections between places and, ultimately, support growth across the wider region.[41]

This approach reflects West Yorkshire’s polycentric geography and seeks to maximise agglomeration benefits.[42] The plan recognises Leeds as the region’s core city, while also acknowledging the distinct roles played by its surrounding towns and cities. As Tony Reeves, chief executive of Wakefield Council, argued at our DevoLab event, surrounding areas should see Leeds not as a threat but as “a huge opportunity” to help catalyse growth in their own economies.[43]

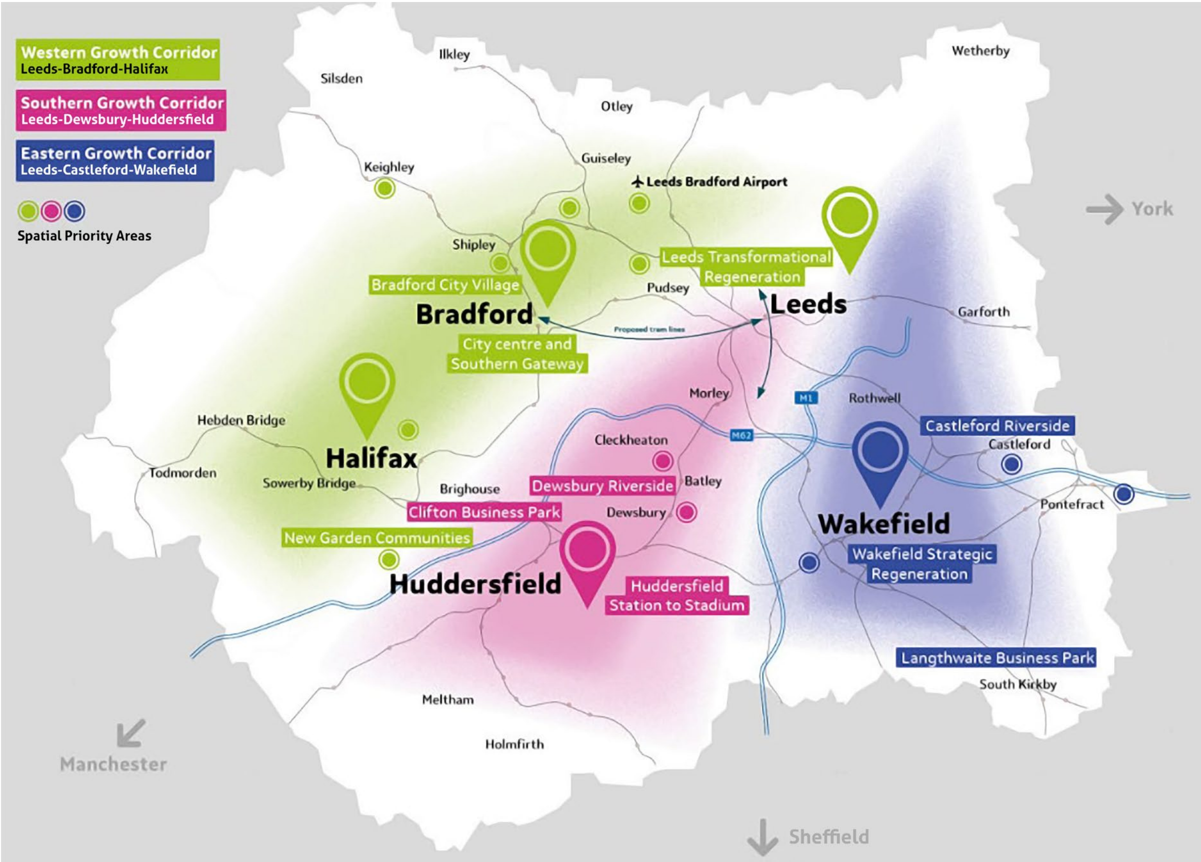
The approach

The corridors are based on major transport links, existing patterns of economic activity and the region’s most significant growth opportunities. The three corridors of opportunity are:[44]

- **The Western corridor:** connecting Leeds, Bradford and Halifax and on to Greater Manchester. The plan identifies this corridor as having the strongest growth opportunities. Leeds and Bradford have the biggest commuter flows between any two UK cities, and both hold significant growth potential.

- **The Southern corridor:** connecting Leeds, Dewsbury and Huddersfield and on to Greater Manchester and South Yorkshire. This corridor is anchored by major regeneration projects at Dewsbury Riverside and Leeds Southbank, which will be connected by the planned West Yorkshire Mass Transit tram network.

- **The Eastern corridor:** connecting Leeds to Wakefield and on to South Yorkshire. This corridor will support high-growth sectors in Leeds, through the Aire Valley and into Wakefield.



Source: West Yorkshire Combined Authority, West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan 2025–2035, 12 December 2024.

The plan identifies the key economic opportunities within each corridor and sets out the projects and investments needed to unlock them.[45] The corridors of opportunity approach provides a practical framework for linking growth opportunities to specific places and investment priorities across West Yorkshire, giving stakeholders across the region a clear picture of where growth opportunities are concentrated, while also identifying what is needed from WYCA and others to realise them. Major opportunities identified across the corridors, and the investments needed to realise them, include the regeneration of Bradford in the Western corridor through projects such as Bradford City Village and the Southern Gateway, and the growth of the cultural and creative industries in the Eastern corridor through the expansion of Production Park's creative industries cluster.[46]

The results

As previously discussed, the West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan sits beneath the region's overarching strategic framework, the West Yorkshire Plan. WYCA will ultimately assess the local growth plan's success against the outcomes and indicators set within that wider strategy.[47] However, the local growth plan was only launched in late 2024 and sets out longer-term goals for economic growth for the region. The plan has therefore delivered limited measurable outcomes at this stage, including on the effectiveness of the corridors of opportunity approach.

While delivery remains at an early stage, there is evidence that the corridors framework has helped to align stakeholders in the region around a shared vision for growth. Developed through extensive engagement with regional partners, the approach provides a common basis for co-ordinating investment and economic development activity across local authorities, businesses, universities and other institutions. For example, the Leeds Innovation Arc, identified as a key opportunity within the Western corridor, has helped align three universities, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, Leeds City Council and a range of private sector partners around a shared growth agenda.[48] In this sense, one of the framework's early achievements has been to establish a common narrative that supports collaboration around agreed growth opportunities and investment priorities.

Many of the key opportunities the plan identifies depend on the successful delivery of complex, long-term projects.[49] Major regeneration schemes, transport infrastructure programmes and large-scale development projects are often subject to cost pressures, planning constraints and delivery delays. For example, the West Yorkshire Mass Transit scheme, which the plan identifies as key to unlocking several growth opportunities, has already faced delays.[50] WYCA must therefore maintain stakeholder support, attract sufficient investment and deliver key projects if it is to translate its vision into tangible growth across its three corridors.

Watch the full presentation of this case study

The 'Sheffield City Goals'

This case study looks at the 'Sheffield City Goals', a set of 18 goals developed by stakeholders from across the city, which set shared ambitions for the city through to 2035.

The idea

As Sheffield emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders from across the city concluded that a new approach was needed to tackle the persistent inequalities that the pandemic had exposed and, in many cases, exacerbated.[51] The Sheffield City Partnership Board (SCPB) commissioned the goals. This partnership brought together senior leaders from the city council, universities, the civil service and the voluntary, community and faith sectors – recognising the need for a new economic vision that could deliver more inclusive and sustainable growth for the city.[52]

In 2022, the SCPB established a working group to consider how the city could create a shared set of goals that would act as the city's long-term "north star".[53] The working group identified three principles that should underpin the City Goals: tackling the city's challenges collectively, ensuring engagement translated into action, and giving all residents a meaningful voice in shaping Sheffield's future.[54]

The aim was to create a set of goals that the whole city endorsed, rather than something that was imposed by the council. As noted by Kate Josephs, chief executive of Sheffield City Council, at our DevoLab event, the SCPB wanted goals that had been "co-developed and co-created across communities".[55] By bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, the process sought to build a strong consensus around the goals that would in turn support their long-term delivery.

The approach

To understand the varied needs and priorities of people across Sheffield and ensure these were reflected in the City Goals, in 2023 the SCPB working group undertook an extensive programme of engagement:[56]

- an online survey, which received more than 1,500 responses
- 28 deep listening workshops, which were attended by varied city stakeholders
- 18 collaborative conversation sessions with communities and community organisations.

The insights generated by this process were then considered by more than 70 stakeholders, convened by the SCPB, to determine how they should shape the emerging goals.[57] After several rounds of testing and amendments, the City Goals were formally endorsed by the SCPB in January 2024.[58]

The Sheffield City Goals set out a vision for the city in 2035. The 18 goals sit within six overarching stories, describing a city that is: creative and entrepreneurial, green and resilient, made up of thriving communities, connected, caring and safe and for all generations.[59] Each story is supported by three goals that outline what is needed to make that story a reality. Goals include building a fair and inclusive economy that attracts and retains talent, having a diverse and accountable leadership, and investing in children, young people and families to give them the best start in life.[60]

To support the delivery of the City Goals, the SCPB has established five civic infrastructures to support implementation.[61] These include a shared metrics framework to track progress, mechanisms to engage residents and young people in shaping priorities, and funds to join up investment from public, private and charitable sources. The Sheffield Stronger Together leadership group was also established in November 2024 to replace the SCPB. The group brings together stakeholders from across the city including Sheffield City Council, the NHS and universities, as well as regional stakeholders such as the South Yorkshire Combined Authority.

While the City Goals have a focus on Sheffield, at our DevoLab event, Kate Josephs recognised that "the issues that shape growth don't stop at council boundaries", and it is therefore important the city works in close partnership with the combined authority to deliver on its growth ambitions.[62] This will help ensure that the City Goals align with South Yorkshire's broader strategic priorities, particularly in areas such as transport, skills, housing and economic development, where many of the key policy levers sit at the regional level.

The results

The City Goals are long term, ambitious and widely defined. As a result, it is too early to assess progress against the goals themselves. The civic infrastructures designed to support delivery are also at an early stage.[63]

Some stakeholders argue that the process of developing the City Goals has already generated benefits for the city. Bringing stakeholders together around a shared set of ambitions has enabled conversations and collaboration that may not otherwise have taken place.[64] Speaking at our DevoLab event, Kate Josephs described the most recent Sheffield Stronger Together leadership group meeting, which was held in a community where serious and organised crime is a particular issue, noting that "we couldn't have that conversation if we didn't have this shared agenda".[65]

The City Goals laid the foundations for a range of strategies and plans to deliver Sheffield's long-term ambitions. For example, the goals were used to support the creation of the Sheffield Growth Plan 2025–35, a 10-year economic strategy for the city. The plan's focus on the cultural and creative economy reflected a shift in approach that can be in part attributed to the City Goals. In turn, the growth plan has helped shape Sheffield's contribution to the larger regional South Yorkshire Growth Plan, including the designation of Sheffield City Centre and the Innovation Spine, and the Don Valley Corridor between Sheffield and Rotherham, as two of four growth areas.

Looking ahead, one of the key challenges for Sheffield will be defining what meaningful progress towards the City Goals looks like in practice. While some goals lend themselves to more straightforward indicators, others are much harder to translate into clear, measurable outcomes. For example, Goal 14 envisions a Sheffield where residents are "honest with each other about the challenges we face in our communities, and are brave enough to find common ground, heal divides and try new things out together".[66] Critics have argued that such goals are too broad and subjective to be measured effectively, making it difficult to determine both how progress should be measured and what practical interventions are required to achieve them.[67]

The identification of 21 key metrics to measure progress against is therefore a positive step.[68] However, the necessary data infrastructure, governance arrangements and reporting processes to collect consistent information, track change over time and demonstrate whether the city's actions are moving it closer to its long-term ambitions will also need to be established. Without this, there is a risk that the goals remain aspirational statements rather than a practical tool for guiding decision making and assessing progress.

Watch the full presentation of this case study

10 lessons for mayors and local leaders on building a shared vision for growth

Drawing on our three case studies and insights from our July 2026 DevoLab event, these 10 lessons identify the practical steps mayors and local leaders should take to develop successful shared visions for regional growth.

1. Focus on where growth is felt as well as where it is generated.
When developing a vision for growth, mayors and local leaders should focus not only on generating growth, but also on ensuring that its benefits are felt by residents, communities and businesses across the region. This is a priority for the prime minister, who has committed to delivering "good growth in every postcode" and emphasised that "economic progress goes hand in hand with social progress".[69,70]

Strategic authorities and local councils can build this into their vision and other strategies by including broader social outcomes such as wages, job quality, public service outcomes and economic opportunity alongside standard economic indicators such as productivity, growth and employment. For example, EMCCA's East Midlands outcomes framework includes a broad range of metrics to measure progress towards inclusive growth, including metrics on community cohesion, the social value of investment and healthy life expectancy.[71] At the same time, growth can only be felt if it is generated in the first place. For most regions, their challenge is first and foremost to increase the scale of economic growth and productivity. A focus on where growth is felt should therefore complement, rather than replace, efforts to grow the regional economy.

Mayors and local leaders should also ensure that the benefits of growth are spread across their region, even if economic activity itself is concentrated in particular places. As Kate Josephs highlighted at our DevoLab event: "Growth can reinforce spatial inequality if it only reaches the places that are already best placed to benefit."[72] Greater Manchester illustrates this challenge, with much of the region's economic growth being concentrated in Manchester city centre.[73] Concentration of economic activity is not necessarily a problem in itself. City centres are often the engines of regional economies and are likely to see a bigger increase in business activity and high-value jobs than other places within the region. Evidence from Greater Manchester suggests that while increases in GVA and wages have been concentrated in the city centre, increases in household incomes have been more widely distributed across the city region, as residents commute into Manchester city centre for better-paid jobs.[74] The challenge for mayors is therefore to ensure that residents across the region can benefit from the jobs and investment that city centres generate – for example, through improving transport connectivity between residential and commercial areas.

In response to this challenge, GMCA also launched a 'good growth fund' in 2025, which aims to "deliver a new decade of good growth, where no one and no place is left behind".[75] The good growth fund aims to align investment with the objectives of the Greater Manchester Strategy and seeks to maximise the social value of GMCA's investment, including through promoting fair work practices and creating pathways for apprenticeships.[76]

2. Recognise the value of action at different levels of government to help deliver growth.

Growth is delivered through action at multiple levels of government, not by any single institution acting alone. A shared vision for growth should therefore identify where each level of government adds value and establish mechanisms to align action across institutions.

MSAs are well placed to co-ordinate activity at a scale that individual local authorities cannot achieve alone. Strategic functions such as transport, skills, housing, planning and investment often require action across functional economic areas rather than within individual local authority boundaries. An effective vision for growth should identify where intervention at the regional level creates additional value while also recognising the important role that local authorities play in driving regional growth. This includes responsibility for most planning applications, preparing local plans, managing regeneration schemes and public realm improvements, supporting local businesses and delivering many of the public services that influence the attractiveness and productivity of places. Local authorities are also an important source of local knowledge, and can support mayors to identify local needs, opportunities and high-potential projects.

Growth therefore requires effective collaboration between mayors and constituent councils. The Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District (AMID) in South Yorkshire provides an example of how local authorities and MSAs can collaborate on growth-generating projects. AMID spans Sheffield and Rotherham local council areas, with the two councils leading on local planning and regeneration while the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) provides strategic oversight and is responsible for regional economic strategy and the co-ordination of skills, transport and investment.[77,78] At our DevoLab event, Kate Josephs, chief executive of Sheffield City Council, emphasised that an important role for local government is recognising "where we're best placed to lead, where we need to step forward and where we need to step back". She noted that in some cases "we need to let go, because the scale it needs to happen at is regional".[79]

To achieve effective collaboration between local authorities and strategic authorities, it is important for councils to see neighbouring towns and cities not as competitors but as assets within a shared economy. As Tony Reeves, chief executive of Wakefield Council, argued in relation to West Yorkshire, the presence of Leeds as a core city in the region should be viewed as "a huge opportunity", with local leaders developing strategies that "get the best out of the whole".[80]

Mayors and local leaders should also work with central government to support alignment between local growth and central government priorities. Central government can also support MSAs and local authorities to reach their strategic goals. For example, the government is supporting the East Midlands Investment Zone with £160m of investment and has designated three specific tax sites that offer incentives to businesses located within their area including grants, business rates retention and tax incentives.[81,82]

3. Invest in a strong evidence base to create a vision that remains credible, deliverable and resilient.

Effective visions for growth are grounded in a robust understanding of the region's economy, assets, challenges and opportunities – often drawing on detailed research and engagement.

Developing a strong evidence base ensures that a vision for growth reflects the realities of a region, rather than simply setting out aspirations. The West Midlands Growth Plan, for example, was developed through more than 18 months of engagement and research and the largest evidence review ever undertaken on the West Midlands economy.[83] At our DevoLab event, Tony Reeves, chief executive of Wakefield Council, highlighted that analysis of travel-to-work patterns across the West Yorkshire region had informed the development of the corridors of opportunity model that the West Yorkshire Plan is centred on.[84] The three corridors of opportunity identified by the region are based on major transport flows and existing infrastructure that links urban centres within the region and with important economic hubs in neighbouring regions such as Manchester and Sheffield. This approach aims to maximise the benefits of agglomeration and return on investment to drive productivity and growth.[85]

An evidence-led approach founded on a robust assessment of the state of the regional economy also makes growth strategies more credible in the eyes of investors, government and other partners. As Damien Dacey noted, EMCCA's inclusive growth framework was shaped by extensive research and engagement, including the work of the Inclusive Growth Commission over a 12-month period.[86] This detailed understanding of the assets and challenges of the East Midlands has been important for agreeing realistic priorities and building confidence in the deliverability of the vision.[87] In addition, grounding a vision for growth in a strong evidence base means that the strategies that draw on the vision are more resilient to political change and are better able to guide long-term decision making.

4. Use the leadership and convening powers of a mayor to build regional coalitions for growth.

Mayors can provide the leadership and convening power needed to create a shared vision for growth and mobilise partners behind it. As directly elected figures with a mandate that extends beyond local authority boundaries, they can set high-level strategic objectives for the region and convene partners to build consensus around key priorities to achieve this vision. For example, Greater Manchester's decision to franchise its bus network demonstrates the role mayors can play in making strategic decisions and building support among partners. Building on the case for bus reform made by local leaders before the mayoralty was even established, Andy Burnham championed franchising as part of the region's long-term growth vision, working with councils, Transport for Greater Manchester, operators and central government to deliver a major reform despite legal challenges from operators and significant public investment.[88,89]

Mayors also act as a single, recognisable voice for their region and can articulate the shared vision to central government, investors and external partners. For example, the mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, has played a key role in the Birmingham Sports Quarter project, working with Birmingham City Council and investors to make the case to government for improved transport connections needed to unlock the development.[90] By acting as a visible advocate for the region and co-ordinating support around a strategic investment opportunity, Parker has secured a metro extension that expected to leverage up to £3bn of private investment into the project.[91] This ability to champion a place and lead its strategic direction is increasingly important as mayors take on wider responsibilities and the government has set out its plans for "places to be able to set their own ambitions".[92]

Just as importantly, mayors and local leaders can use their convening power to bring together the partners needed to deliver their shared vision. As Pete Gladwell, group managing director of public investment at L&G, highlighted at our DevoLab event, the power of devolution to drive growth happens when "cities, towns, combined authorities, Homes England and others all play their respective roles… it doesn't work when organisations aren't talking to each other".[93] Strategic authorities have an important role in getting this system to pull in the same direction to address complex and long-term economic challenges. The government is also promoting formalised partnership working between MSAs and public bodies, including through strategic partnerships with Homes England, Great British Railways and Great British Energy.

5. Use the strategy development process to build partnerships, not just produce a document.

Developing a vision for growth is a vehicle for building a coalition and creating consensus around shared priorities. Growth cannot be created by any single institution working alone, so it is important that partners across the region are working towards the same goals and agree on high-level priorities.

This is particularly important for newer MSAs, where institutions and partners may have limited experience of working together at a regional scale and there may not be a clear consensus around the region's strategic direction. This was the case for EMCCA, which elected its first mayor in 2024, and published its inclusive growth framework in 2025. At our DevoLab event, Damien Dacey emphasised that strategy development is a fundamentally relational process and that EMCCA's challenge was not simply developing a vision for growth or clarifying priorities; it was "creating the conditions for agreement, co-production and collective regional action".[94]

The process of developing a growth strategy is therefore an opportunity to develop relationships, leaving partners better placed to work together to turn the vision into reality. At our event, Kate Josephs, chief executive of Sheffield City Council, highlighted that the relationships and consensus developed through the Sheffield City Goals allowed her to have a discussion with the leaders of all major institutions in a particular Sheffield community about tackling organised crime. Josephs emphasised that "we couldn't have that conversation if we didn't have this shared agenda" and the relationships that had been developed as a result.[95]

6. Make genuine choices and trade-offs to develop a strategy with clear priorities.

A vision for growth should not be a catalogue of everything a place would like to achieve. To be useful, it must provide a clear sense of direction and make genuine choices between competing priorities, as recommended by a previous Institute for Government report on local growth plans, which argued local growth plans will be of most use to places if "there is clarity about what they are intended to achieve".[96]

Decisions about where to focus effort and investment are shaped by practical constraints such as funding availability, the powers held by MSAs or local authorities, their institutional capacity and the priorities of leaders and other key stakeholders. Leaders must decide not only what they want to achieve, but also where an intervention is most likely to make a difference. They must also consider how different places contribute to the wider regional economy, by balancing investment in areas with the greatest growth potential against the need to ensure growth is felt across the whole region.

When developing a vision for regional growth, mayors and local leaders must recognise these trade-offs and focus on a manageable number of priorities that reflect a place's distinctive strengths and needs. Damien Dacey, executive director of strategy and inclusive growth at EMCCA, emphasised the importance of prioritisation during the development of the East Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework. Reflecting on the process, he noted that "we didn't want a plan that didn't have serious deliberation about… priorities… We wanted one that made proper choices."[97] For example, achieving green growth is prioritised within the plan, supported by ambitions to develop the East Midlands' clean energy, green technologies and low-carbon industries by building on its existing energy and manufacturing strengths.[98]

While many growth strategies share common objectives around productivity, inclusion and sustainability, devolution allows places to identify for themselves the sectors and opportunities that matter most to their own economies. At an IfG event in December 2025, the mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward, pointed to the East Midlands' decision to include the visitor economy as a priority sector within its local growth plan, despite initial objections from the government because it was not a priority sector as defined in the UK Industrial Strategy.[99]

7. Develop place-based delivery plans that reflect local strengths and opportunities. The value of a strategy ultimately depends on whether it can be delivered. To turn strategic ambitions into practical results, MSAs need delivery plans that connect regional priorities to specific places and projects. While different regional growth strategies may often appear similar at a headline level, speakers at our DevoLab event argued that in good growth plans real differences emerge in the delivery mechanisms beneath them.

Damien Dacey noted that publishing EMCCA's growth plan was only the start, with further work needed to "develop investment pipelines, strengthen delivery mechanisms and continue building institutional capability".[100] The plan identifies seven priority growth areas, including the Trent Arc, the Peaks and Dales and Derwent Valley Mills.[101] These areas provide a spatial framework for concentrating investment, co-ordinating partners and developing a pipeline of projects that support the region's wider ambitions. Similarly, the North East's £14bn investment prospectus sets out opportunities across four priorities: urban core and mixed use, science and innovation, strategic housing and employment, and net zero.[102] The prospectus links these priorities to specific projects, such as the Durham innovation district, outlining delivery partners, planning status and investment needs. It helps translate the region's growth ambitions into a clear pipeline of investment opportunities.

At our DevoLab event, Tony Reeves, chief executive of Wakefield Council, emphasised the importance of grounding visions for growth in the specific characteristics and opportunities of a region, so they can support effective delivery.[103] For example, while many regional strategies identify sectors such as health and life sciences as growth priorities, the specific specialisms that drive growth within those sectors often differ markedly between places.

Reeves pointed to Liverpool's strengths in infectious disease control, Manchester's expertise in cancer therapeutics and West Yorkshire's focus on health technology and precision equipment. Rather than pursuing generic sector strategies, regions need to understand where their comparative advantages lie and develop delivery plans that build on those strengths.

8. Move quickly from vision to delivery to attract investment and build the capacity to do so.
Developing a compelling vision for regional growth is important, but it must lead quickly to visible action to help build credibility with investors and demonstrate institutional capacity. At our DevoLab event, Pete Gladwell argued that attracting investment is often a "race more than a boxing match", meaning that regions are often competing against time rather than each other, with those able to most rapidly bring forward investable propositions best placed to secure funding.[104] Investors have finite capital to allocate and typically prioritise places that can demonstrate readiness, momentum and the capacity to get things done.

Reflecting on the development of the East Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework, Damien Dacey emphasised the importance of testing assumptions and grounding ambitions in evidence during the development process to ensure you "understand constraints and build confidence… about what [you're] proposing" and ultimately create ambitions that are deliverable.[105] Successful delivery also helps regions to build a track record of success. This creates momentum for future projects and strengthens a region's reputation with investors. Similarly, Tony Reeves noted that attracting investment depends on "building that credibility of delivery".[106]

Moving from vision to delivery, particularly at pace, requires regions to have sufficient capacity, including the people, skills, governance arrangements and funding required to translate ambitions into tangible outcomes. For example, delivering the transport projects that are central to the West Yorkshire Local Growth Plan will require significant delivery and strategic capacity. Delivering major transport programmes requires specialised expertise in areas such as procurement, project delivery, commercial negotiation and the implementation of franchising models. While transport is a particularly technical policy area, the challenge of building delivery capacity extends across the full range of devolved responsibilities, and the issue of capacity will become increasingly important as MSAs assume greater powers.[107]

9. Set out a clear role for investors to turn ambitions into investable opportunities.
Private and institutional investors are critical partners in delivering many of the projects that underpin regional growth ambitions. While growth strategies can help set priorities for a region, they will not attract investment based on vision alone. Investors need clarity about their role in supporting delivery and where opportunities for investment exist. At our DevoLab event, Pete Gladwell emphasised the importance of this clarity: "My immediate question as investor is what role do you want [us] to play?"

MSAs must move beyond simply declaring themselves as 'open for business' and instead use the shared vision for growth to set the strategic direction and then identify the sectors, projects and places where investment is needed within that framework. Clear priorities and delivery plans that explicitly set out a role for investors can help turn a vision from an aspirational document to a set of investable and deliverable opportunities.

The West Midlands has taken an active approach to attracting investment for their priorities. Alongside the region's growth strategy, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has developed an investment prospectus that translates its strategic ambitions into a portfolio of specific investment opportunities. The prospectus sets out:

- why the West Midlands is an attractive place to invest
- the region's track record of delivery
- priority sectors, projects and opportunities for investment.

By creating a clearer link between long-term objectives and investment opportunities, the region has provided investors with a clearer understanding of how they can contribute to its growth ambitions.

The Greater Manchester integrated pipeline also provides a strong example of an MSA developing a clear set of projects for investors.[108] The pipeline aims to create a list of 'shovel-ready' projects that require a level of subsidy or risk share from the public sector to unlock. Greater Manchester's Good Growth Fund is the combined authority's primary investment vehicle for delivering its integrated pipeline.[109] Projects are prioritised based on their alignment with strategic goals and their ability to leverage further investment, with a total of £1bn being spent annually on projects in the pipeline. The prime minister, Andy Burnham, has recently announced that good growth funds will be established across the country, enabling other MSAs to align investment decisions more closely with their long-term growth priorities.[110]

To develop effective propositions, mayors and local leaders should also engage investors early in the process of developing regional strategies. This ensures proposals are realistic, while also building confidence that projects can attract the capital needed to succeed.

10. Treat the publication of a growth strategy as the beginning of the process, not the end.

While publishing a vision for growth is an important milestone, it is only the first step in achieving long-term regional growth ambitions.[111] The greater challenge begins with implementation – embedding the vision across institutions, influencing investment and policy decisions and maintaining momentum over time.

Damien Dacey described the publication of the East Midlands Inclusive Growth Framework as "just the starting point", emphasising that the difficult work began once the framework was launched.[112] For EMCCA, success will depend on whether its inclusive growth framework can become more than a statement of intent and instead shape the decisions of partners across the region. EMCCA has therefore put significant thought into how progress will be measured and embedded across the organisation. It has developed a detailed outcomes framework, which sets out metrics for each ambition.[113] For example, the skills for good work ambition is supported by 23 indicators, including measures such as the number of 16–24-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEETs) and the health-related economic inactivity rate.[114] Individual programmes are also required to demonstrate how they contribute to the framework's outcomes, helping to integrate the ambitions into day-to-day decision making and providing a shared reference point for EMCCA and its partners.

To support implementation, the Sheffield City Goals have developed civic infrastructures, including progress metrics, engagement programmes, investment mechanisms and leadership arrangements designed to maintain momentum and accountability over time.[115] This approach recognises that delivering long-term growth requires more than agreeing a common vision. Without clear ownership, monitoring arrangements and mechanisms for collaboration across stakeholders, local leaders and their delivery partners can struggle to turn even widely supported visions into regional growth.

Mayors and local leaders must also ensure that their visions remain living documents rather than plans that stay on a shelf. Economic conditions, the political priorities of regional and national leaders and institutional arrangements can change significantly over the lifespan of a strategy, creating new opportunities and risks that were not anticipated when it was first developed. As a result, places need mechanisms for regularly reviewing progress against objectives and adapting their delivery mechanisms. Detailed outcomes frameworks can support this process. For example, as previously set out, the outcomes framework developed by the East Midlands to monitor progress against the inclusive growth framework enabled the region to understand where programmes or investment priorities may need to be changed to keep delivery on track.[116] Maintaining a clear long-term direction is important, but so too is the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Without this, local leaders may stop using the vision to guide their decisions, limiting its impact on regional growth.

About the authors

Harriet Shaw

Harriet is a researcher working in the Institute for Government's devolution team. Before joining the Institute in July 2025, she worked as a research consultant at SQW, where she contributed to projects across economic development, health and employment, primarily for clients in local government and strategic authorities.

Megan Isaac

Megan is a researcher working in the Institute for Government's devolution team. Before joining the Institute in September 2025, she worked for an education start-up and a charity campaigning for economic, social and cultural rights, where she worked with local authorities on the socio-economic duty.

Akash Paun

Akash is programme director for devolution at the Institute for Government, overseeing research on the union, devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and to England's cities, counties and regions. Akash joined the Institute in 2008 and has also worked at the UCL Constitution Unit, the British Academy and as an adviser to the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to L&G for supporting this work, in particular to Julia Goldsworthy, investment director for impact and place partnerships, for her support and advice throughout the project and Pete Gladwell, group managing director, public investment, for speaking at our DevoLab event.

We would also like to thank Damien Dacey, Tony Reeves and Kate Josephs CB for presenting at our DevoLab event and providing valuable comments on drafts of this publication.

We would also like to thank colleagues at the Institute for Government, including Tom Pope, for providing comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and Will Driscoll, Melissa Ittoo, Sam Macrory and Mhairi Evans, for help in publishing and publicising the report. Finally, we would like to thank Zuzanna Juszkiewicz for her support in organising the DevoLab event.

The conclusions reached are the authors' alone.

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instituteforgovernment.org.uk
enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk
+44 (0) 20 7747 0400
@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA, United Kingdom

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