

# Making England's 'devolution revolution' a reality

How the government can support better decision making in mayoral combined authorities



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## About this report

Decision making in MCAs is often constrained by voting rules requiring unanimous agreement among members. This report examines the government's proposed shift to majority voting and highlights the support that is needed to enhance capacity and accountability in MCAs that will enable better decision making on key strategic plans.

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## Summary

In December, the government outlined its vision for the future of English devolution in the *English Devolution White Paper*.<sup>1</sup> The white paper outlines a vision for how local leaders can drive economic growth, with mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) – the regional bodies that have powers and responsibility in policy areas such as housing, transport and skills – and the directly elected mayors who lead them being central to this mission.

By May, over half of England's population will live in an area covered by a metro mayor. There are further plans to extend devolution to more places and to devolve further powers and responsibilities – for example, over strategic development planning – to all existing MCAs.

MCAs have already shown their capacity to take on responsibility for key local economic levers. However, one constraint they face in taking decisions is that voting requirements often demand unanimous or near-unanimous agreement among constituent councils. This has slowed or even stopped progress on housing and transport plans, impeding mayors' plans for economic development. Recognising these challenges, the government has proposed a move to simple majority voting – a recent Institute for Government recommendation<sup>2</sup> – with the aim to streamline decision making and unblock development.

This change should enhance the efficiency of decision making, enabling faster progress on key regional policies and projects, and removing the veto power of an individual authority. It is also likely to strengthen the role of the mayor, ensuring that in more cases the vision they help set for the region is backed by action. But faster decision making doesn't automatically mean better decision making. If the full intended benefits of this move are to be felt then the government needs to ensure it is made in combination with wider reform of, and support for, decision making in MCAs.

This paper makes a series of recommendations towards that broader package of reforms.

## Recommendations in brief

- **Simple majority decision making** should be the default for decisions relating to spatial plans, transport and skills strategies, MCA budgets and investment plans, mayoral development corporations and local growth plans.

However, this will need to coincide with a package of reforms that relate to capacity and capability building and robust accountability structures.

- **The government should commit to at least doubling the mayoral capacity fund** to support the building of in-house capacity. The current annual allocation of £1million per MCA supports capacity and resource in the mayor's office.
- **Combined authorities should conduct a strategic review of staffing** and explore ways to share staff between the local authority and combined authority for specific short-term projects such as developing local growth plans.
- **The government should support two-way secondments** in order to take full advantage of the benefits of the proposed secondment scheme. Secondments should be part of a formal interchange scheme with clear pathways in to and back out of each institution.
- **The government should bring forward plans to establish devolved public accounts committees (DPACs)** for all existing mayoral combined authorities (starting with those being given 'integrated settlement' funding) to ensure the accountability gap does not widen. We also recommend that the chief executive of a combined authority should become the accounting officer for fully devolved budgets.
- **All mayors should commit to holding monthly 'question time' sessions** in which they are open to questions from members of the public as part of a longer term strategy to embed democratic engagement and infrastructure into their work. In addition, **MCAs should look at utilising digital tools for community engagement** such as online discussion tools like vTaiwan, which are used regularly in cities around the world to engage local people and inform and open up decision making processes.
- **MCAs should also look to embed participatory processes including peer research projects** such as MH:2K to inform and support their policy making.
- There is a role for the **UK Mayors Group** to convene experts from Whitehall, combined authorities and independent practitioners to collate and disseminate guidance for building participatory methods of public engagement into decision making.



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# Introduction

In December, the government outlined its vision for the future of English devolution in a new white paper. The reforms proposed are designed to support the government's growth mission, for which devolution is regarded as fundamental. The government's position is that "devolution enables more decisions to be made by those who know their areas best, leading to better outcomes and more efficient use of resources".<sup>3</sup> The government wants places to go further and faster, to drive regional growth.

Key to its plans are mayoral combined authorities (MCAs)\* – each formed of a group of local authorities in a region and headed by an elected metro mayor. As of May 2025, a little over half of England's population will live in areas with metro mayors (comprising 11 MCA areas and Greater London, with its distinct model of devolution). The government's intention is to extend mayoral devolution to all parts of England over the coming years.

MCAs have been tasked by the government to develop spatial development strategies (SDSs – a form of regional plan that sets out where new housing and infrastructure should be built) and local growth plans, establish mayoral development corporations (MDCs) and, with their constituent authorities, to deliver on the government's ambitious housebuilding targets. MCAs also lead on the development of other regional economic strategies; for instance, relating to transport and adult skills.

MCAs have already delivered some concrete benefits, such as a better integrated transport system in Greater Manchester and the regeneration of brownfield land in the West Midlands.<sup>4</sup> However, not all MCAs made progress with these types of big strategic reforms. They have faced challenges – particularly in areas such as planning and transport – due in part to legal requirements to have unanimous agreement to approve plans among combined authority members. The costs of not having strategic plans in place for things like housing and transport are clear – poorly distributed housing, infrastructure that does not meet the national objectives, and poor alignment with need and other policy areas, which together can contribute to local economic growth.<sup>5,6</sup>

Restrictive voting requirements have been most acutely a problem in relation to some key strategic decisions, such as the adoption of SDSs, which some MCAs are empowered to create, though none has yet succeeded. In the *English Devolution White Paper* the government addressed this challenge by proposing a move to simple majority voting requirements (including the mayor), extending this to a broad range of decisions "wherever possible". This change is intended to enable MCAs to act more effectively as a strategic tier of governance, and to take collective decisions more efficiently.

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\* For brevity, this paper uses the term MCA to encompass both 'mayoral combined authorities' and 'mayoral county combined authorities', which are established using a slightly different legal process. Our analysis and recommendations do not apply to the Greater London Authority or to non-mayoral combined authorities.

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This reform is directly in line with proposals made by the Institute for Government in May 2024, at which point we argued that current voting rules “hampers [MCAs’] ability to make progress with big strategic reforms, and makes it more likely that specific local concerns override the interests of the region as a whole”.<sup>7</sup> As such, we welcome the government’s proposals to move towards a default simple majority decision making rule for all MCA strategies and plans in most instances. The government will need to think through whether and which exceptions there are to this; for example, whether votes to change the combined authority membership should in principle have a higher threshold.

However, in order to meet the government’s stated aim of both efficient decision making and better policy outcomes, the success of devolved institutions depends on two additional key factors: having sufficient institutional capacity to take decisions and carry out their growing responsibilities effectively, and developing robust mechanisms for accountability and scrutiny of mayors and MCAs and the decisions they take.<sup>8</sup>

This paper, drawing on interviews with officials inside combined authorities and in central government, makes a series of recommendations that should be viewed as a broader package of reforms designed to ensure that the government achieves its desired effect of more effective decision making in MCAs and ensure the government can make progress towards its housebuilding, infrastructure and growth targets.

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# The government is right to identify MCAs as key to the growth mission

Sitting across multiple local authority boundaries, while being small enough to retain a connection to local communities and local knowledge, MCAs operate at a more suitable scale than individual authorities to take decisions over key growth levers, from housing to skills.<sup>9</sup>

Each MCA is led by a directly elected metro mayor, who provides clear leadership, helps build partnerships with businesses, attracts investment and provides a clear line of accountability between the MCA and the local population. In the government's devolution framework, the most extensive powers are reserved for those places that take on a mayor – they are responsible for setting out strategies for the area, and have powers over policy areas such as housing, transport and skills.

Given the model's role in supporting regional growth, the government has set out ambitious plans to implement mayoral devolution in many more places over the next few years, starting with six areas on the new 'devolution priority programme' launched in February 2025.<sup>\*10</sup> The white paper also set out plans to devolve more powers and funding to these places to ensure they have the right tools to deliver on economic growth. These include new powers to create SDSs for places that don't already have them to create a

**"universal system of strategic planning across England, and ambitious plans for local authorities which include mandatory housing targets to be achieved in this Parliament...to deliver on the manifesto commitment to plan for growth on a larger than local scale".<sup>11</sup>**

Mayors have also been tasked with drawing up local growth plans for their areas.<sup>12</sup>

With these new powers and responsibilities, mayors and MCAs will develop policy in new areas and, working with council leaders, will be expected to take more difficult decisions, including where and which housing to build and prioritising investment in some places over others.

## **Constrained mayors are a feature – not an accident – of the model**

While mayoral leadership has been favoured by both the current and previous governments at Westminster, this model was not initially warmly welcomed at the local government level.<sup>13</sup> MCAs were initially seen by many local authorities as primarily a legal vehicle for distributing government grants, with less consideration over the added value that devolution and regional mayors might bring.<sup>14</sup> After initial attempts at regional devolution were stifled – due in part to government inflexibility over the mayoral model<sup>15</sup> – later attempts made limited concessions to allow flexibility in not having a mayor, although these deals came with fewer powers.

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\* Cumbria, Cheshire and Warrington, Norfolk and Suffolk, Greater Essex, Sussex and Brighton, and Hampshire and Solent.



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However, the mayoral model was preferred by central government and, to get a deal with local authorities, some of the governance arrangements were negotiated to restrain mayoral power and reduce the uncertainty of the model for local authorities.

MCAs are therefore set up based on collective decision making, with most key decisions taken jointly by the mayor and other local leaders. While many decisions are taken on a majority basis, for others – often key strategic decisions such as on spatial planning – unanimous agreement is required. For example, in three of the five MCAs that currently have statutory powers to develop an SDS – Greater Manchester (GMCA), West of England (WECA) and Liverpool City Region (LCRCA) – adopting the strategy requires a unanimous vote of the respective combined authority members.<sup>16,17,18</sup>

This effectively gives a veto power to a single voting member, which has been the case in Greater Manchester (see Case study 1). For the newer North East Combined Authority (NECA), while the decision to confer a duty on the mayor to produce an SDS requires unanimous agreement of all constituent council voting members and the mayor, the decision to amend or adopt the strategy has a lower threshold, requiring a simple majority of at least four of the seven constituent councils to vote in favour.






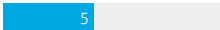

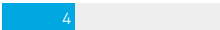


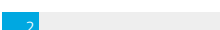
Other decisions that require unanimous agreement include substantive changes to combined authority constitutions\* – for example, amending membership – and standing orders, which set out other governance arrangements. In some cases particular decisions have been carved out to ensure they cannot be taken without unanimous approval. These are often decisions over plans that are more contentious, in particular regions. For example, in GMCA, decisions relating to road user charging require unanimous approval of all 11 members. This was carved out as a highly politically salient issue, due to a 2008 referendum in which the public overwhelmingly rejected a proposed congestion charge. The legacy of this vote, and other concerns including the impact on low-income families, has made this a politically sensitive issue. In Tees Valley a similar decision was made to require unanimous approval for decisions to adopt, approve, amend or withdraw the Tees Valley Investment Plan and the strategic economic plan.

For some decisions there are specific voting arrangements that require the approval of the authority, which will be directly impacted. For example, to establish an MDC, rather than requiring unanimous approval of the combined authority board, as is the case with an SDS, the mayor requires the consent of the local authority leaders representing each council governing an area that falls within the MDC. In a recent report we highlighted that this requirement has been a barrier to a mayor pursuing an MDC. One observer suggested that an MDC could have helped to deliver faster regeneration in Bristol Temple Quarter, but it was ruled out due to a poor relationship between the mayor and the local council leader.<sup>19</sup> In NECA there are also provisions for decisions related to specific statutory provisions (covering highways, transport and housing) that require the consent of the council impacted to be included in the vote.<sup>20</sup>

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\* This is the case for all cases where we could find explicit mention of voting requirements for substantive changes to the combined authority constitutions.

Table 1 **Voting membership and quorums of combined authority boards**

Combined Authority board	Number of constituent councils ▼	Board voting members	Quorum
GMCA		Mayor and 1 voting member from each of the 10 constituent councils	8 members
NECA		Mayor and 1 voting member from each of the 7 constituent councils	Mayor/Deputy and 5 constituent council members
CPCA		Mayor, 1 voting member from each of the 7 constituent councils, and a business board representative	Mayor/Deputy and 4 constituent council members
WMCA		Mayor and 2 voting members from each of the 7 constituent councils, 1 member from each of the 10 non constituent councils who can vote on certain matters	Mayor/Deputy and 5 constituent council members
LCRCA		Mayor and 1 voting member from each of the 6 constituent councils	4 constituent council members
WYCA		Mayor and 1 voting member from each of the 5 constituent councils	Mayor/Deputy and 3 constituent council members
TVCA		Mayor and 1 voting member from each of the 5 constituent councils	Mayor/Deputy and 3 constituent council members
EMCCA		Mayor and 2 voting members from each of the 4 constituent councils	Mayor/Deputy and 3 voting members
SYMCA		Mayor and 1 voting member from each of the 4 constituent councils	3 members
WECA		Mayor and 1 voting member from each of the 3 constituent councils	Mayor/Deputy and 2 constituent council members
YNYCA		Mayor and 2 voting members from each of the 2 constituent councils	3 members, including at least one member from each constituent council

Source: Institute for Government analysis. Notes: Where unanimous decisions are required TVCA clarifies that all five members will be required to vote. Members refers to voting members, and has been read as including the mayor and constituent councils.

Table 1 shows the varied voting membership of MCAs, with GMCA being the largest, at 10 constituent councils, and York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority (YNYCA) the smallest, with two; here, the quorum (number of people needed to take a binding decision) is set at three, including one person from each council. MCA boards (made up of leaders of constituent authorities\* and other relevant local leaders, for example the police and crime commissioner for an area) alongside the mayor, act as the decision makers subject to varied voting requirements and quorums.<sup>21</sup>

This is a complex thing to navigate: while local authority leaders are there to contribute to the strategic role of the MCA, they also have their own considerations of their local authority constituency base, authority politics and relationships, and even different electoral cycles to consider.\*\*

\* In combined authorities with fewer constituent councils each constituent council sends two voting members to sit on the board, with one designated as the lead member. This is currently the case in EMCCA and YNYCA.

\*\* Local authority electoral cycles differ across the country, where there are whole council elections, elections by halves and elections by thirds. One interviewee told us that where constituent councils are elected by thirds (a third of councillors elected each election for a four-year term) that political action was heavily constrained, as the pre-election period would start in January, from which point there would be little appetite for risk.

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Additionally mayors, who while leading the combined authority act as one vote on the board, have their own incentives through their mandate as a directly elected mayor. Work at the combined authority level can sometimes sit in tension with that at the local authority level.

Despite this, the decision making model can work well. Having unanimous backing across all members with their different perspectives and interests who are all moving in the same direction can be very useful. Some key levers including planning are still held at the local authority level, so having all constituent councils on board can be really useful for ensuring smooth implementation. Additionally local authority leaders and mayors are elected on different timelines so having everyone on board can give the plan durability beyond one mayoral or local authority political cycle.

However, the rules are excessively restrictive and have blocked MCAs from using their powers, and are also overly complex and inconsistent, often leading to confusion. Additionally, mayors, as directly elected local leaders, are supposed to be able to be held accountable by the voting public,<sup>22</sup> and cannot reasonably be held to account for policy outcomes and targets if they are not able, because of the existing governance arrangements, to develop or implement the policy that will achieve the outcomes.

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## Restrictive voting requirements have been a barrier to the development and adoption of strategic plans

The problems that current voting requirements have caused are most clear when we look at the roll-out, or lack of, of spatial development strategies (SDSs). These are statutory regional plans, produced by some MCAs or the mayor of London (different to local plans produced by councils). These plans set out, at a higher level than local plans, the strategic direction for regeneration in the area, including how land will be used and developed to create opportunities for housing, infrastructure, employment and environment.

There has so far been very little progress on adopting SDSs among MCAs. Only four combined authorities (WECA, LCRCA, GMCA and NECA) hold the powers to develop an SDS. In all four cases, there is a requirement for a unanimous decision to “confer a duty on the mayor to produce a spatial development strategy”.<sup>23</sup> WECA, LCRCA and GMCA also require unanimous agreement to adopt the mayor’s proposed spatial development strategy, while NECA – a newer combined authority – instead requires a majority vote of four of the seven constituent councils.<sup>24</sup> Some MCAs have instead taken on powers to develop non-statutory spatial planning frameworks for which there is a lower voting threshold for adoption, including Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA). Interviewees told us that some combined authorities have been wary about taking on the responsibility of an SDS given the difficulties that those with this power have faced in getting them over the line.

No combined authority has yet approved an SDS. After years of developing one, GMCA instead progressed with a joint local plan across nine of 10 local areas (see the case study below) as the combined authority was unable to reach unanimous agreement to adopt the mayor’s proposed plan. LCRCA initiated work on a SDS in 2019, and is currently still in the process of preparing it. The LCRCA constitution requires that there is a unanimous vote in favour in respect of every element of the SDS development process (initiating public participation, withdrawal, publication and alteration or replacement of the strategy).<sup>25</sup> A report by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) highlighted that these rules have delayed progress.<sup>26</sup>

Work on a SDS in WECA halted in 2022 after disagreements between the metro mayor and South Gloucestershire Council over the proposed figure of 37,000 new homes in their area. The council leader, Toby Savage, criticised the mayor for developing the plan without input from the council, and criticised the combined authority for what he felt was a lack of evidence to justify the housing figures, or evidence on an assessment on the feasibility of plan.<sup>27,28</sup> Having only had its first mayoral election in May 2024, NECA has not yet moved to use its SDS powers.

## Case study 1: Greater Manchester spatial framework

- Spatial development strategy (SDS)
- 2016–2021
- Unanimous agreement required
- Delayed then cancelled, a joint local plan has gone ahead as 'plan of the nine'.

The Greater Manchester spatial development strategy (GMSDS), also known as the 'spatial framework', was intended as an overarching development plan across the 10 local authority areas of Greater Manchester, providing a strategic approach to land use for housing, economic growth and infrastructure development. In 2022, after several years of iterations and development the spatial framework was ultimately blocked, and then abandoned, when it failed to gain approval of all 10 authorities.

The development of the GMSDS exposes the difficulties in setting strategic priorities at this level when unanimous agreement is required – in this case because of disagreements about where the trade-offs should be about where to build the housing supply and what type of housing to build. The first iteration of the plan in 2016 was developed before the metro mayor was in place. It aimed to build 227,000 new homes by 2035 and proposed releasing 8.2% of the green belt for this purpose.<sup>29</sup> Concerns were raised with this version about the amount of green belt land due to be released.

On election as mayor, Andy Burnham took on the mandate for implementing the spatial framework and sent it back to be redrafted. The second iteration in 2019 required less greenbelt land and planned for fewer homes.<sup>30</sup> There remained, however, disagreements over the distribution of developments due to competing demands across the different authorities relating to urban regeneration, housing need and green belt preservation.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the development of the plan was disrupted as the combined authority pivoted to focus on pandemic response.

Later in 2020, the framework was eventually blocked when Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors on Stockport Council voted against the plan in a council meeting due to concerns over green-belt development (voting 35–26).<sup>32</sup> Instead, local authorities have prepared and agreed on a joint local plan, which is not voted on by the combined authority board, in which each constituent council has to approve the plan for it to proceed. The 'Places for Everyone' revised plan excludes Stockport and only included nine of the constituent councils in Greater Manchester. While the joint plan achieves "substantially the same effect", it does not provide strategic direction for regeneration across the entire region.<sup>33</sup>

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It took effect and became part of the statutory development plan for the nine authorities on 21 March 2024 after examination of the spatial framework was concluded.<sup>34</sup>

In February Oldham Council, which since the May 2024 elections is no longer under Labour control, narrowly voted (31–29) to withdraw from the plan. As an example of the confusing voting processes, it was also revealed that opposition groups believed they had already voted to withdraw from the plan in November, but had not.<sup>35</sup>

MCAs also have powers to develop non-statutory plans for spatial planning and for policies such as skills and transport. The benefit of these – for example, an overarching transport plan – at this level is that they can align policies with powers and policies for economic development, skills, spatial planning, energy and so on. This is an important role for the combined authority in improving the availability and co-ordination of different policies across the constituent authorities.

Voting requirements for these plans vary across the different combined authorities or MCAs, as do the quorum (see Table 1). In some instances, where there is a function specifically conferred on the mayor, there is still a veto option for constituent councils. For example, in WECA, where preparing a local transport plan is a mayoral function, the decision to adopt the plan requires the unanimous agreement of the combined authority. In comparison, in YNYCA, the vote to adopt the plan requires a majority agreement in favour to include three of the four constituent councils and in GMCA it requires a supermajority of eight of the 11 members.

The case study below of the CPCA transport plan highlights the difficulties of getting plans through with difficult regional and personal politics. Even though the decision only required a majority vote in favour, the plan was delayed by six months because the majority was required to include a vote in favour by Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire City Council, the two upper-tier councils that are part of CPCA. Reducing the voting threshold should speed up some decisions, but this needs to be viewed as part of the wider decision making landscape within MCAs.



## Case study 2: Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority transport plan

- Local transport plan
- May–November 2023
- 2/3 vote in favour including Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council<sup>36</sup>
- Delayed by at least six months.

The local transport and connectivity plan (LTCP) is the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA)'s long-term strategy to improve transport across the combined authority area. It updated the previous local transport plan, which was approved in January 2020.<sup>37</sup>

In May 2023, an attempt to agree the LTCP in a combined authority board meeting collapsed after the Conservative leaders of Peterborough and Fenland objected to not having been consulted on the plan.<sup>38</sup> When the LTCP was brought before the combined authority board meeting again in September 2023, it was vetoed by Wayne Fitzgerald from Peterborough City Council. In the meeting he did not expand on why he was vetoing the plan,<sup>39</sup> though elsewhere Fitzgerald claimed that the LTCP would lead to congestion-style charging for Peterborough (a claim denied by the mayor, who wrote a letter clarifying that the combined authority did not hold powers to introduce congestion charging to Peterborough).<sup>40</sup>

Before exercising his veto he had apparently expressed that he would approve the LTCP, until a meeting of opposition councillors made him rethink: "I thought to myself, why am I approving a policy that's so unpopular when there are people looking to remove me in the administration with council."<sup>41</sup>

After the veto, the mayor removed £200,000 funding for a study into a new bus depot for Peterborough, as it was linked to the LTCP, although Fitzgerald argued that this was punitive and that the money was being held 'ransom'.<sup>42</sup> Fitzgerald lost a vote of no confidence on 1 November 2023.<sup>43</sup> He was replaced as the Peterborough City Council representative by Councillor Mohammed Farooq, from party Peterborough First. Key changes were made to the plan, and the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan was voted on again in November 2023, at which point it was approved.<sup>44</sup>

Voting requirements can also affect whether a combined authority takes on further powers and functions. For example, as part of the West Midlands Combined Authority 'deeper devolution' deal in 2023 it was offered two new statutory functions, a bus service operators grant (BSOG) and a health improvement duty, of which the combined authority rejected the health duty and took on the BSOG (see Case study 3).

### **Case study 3: West Midlands Combined Authority – health improvement duty**

- Adopting a new health improvement duty
- March–June 2023
- Unanimous agreement to adopt the function
- Not introduced.

As part of the 'trailblazer' deeper devolution deal published in March 2023, it was proposed that WMCA could take on a new formal duty for public health – the 'health improvement duty'. This is in the context of a WMCA 2020 'Health of the Region' report, which showed a disproportionate number of people in the region with worse health outcomes than the national average, due to preventable causes. While public health is a local authority responsibility, WMCA developed a 'health in all policies' (HiAP) approach to support public health in the region.

The health duty as proposed by the government was designed to support WMCA to tackle health inequalities by enabling greater joining up between local authorities and other local health partners, including the integrated care boards. Schemes mentioned in the proposed devolution deal included a regional tobacco alliance, and the development of a regional disability strategy. As a concurrent duty, any funding WMCA received would need to be new and additional.\* However, under the integrated settlement this duty could also have meant future funding relating to population health improvement and prevention could have been apportioned to the combined authority.

The devolution of this function required multiple statutory processes, with an initial publication of a draft scheme, a governance review, a public consultation, consent from each constituent local authority, followed by a vote of the WMCA board. Because the duty would be a new statutory function, adopting it as part of the deal required unanimous agreement at each stage.

\* See WMCA's June 2023 board report for more, <https://governance.wmca.org.uk/documents/s10585/Report.pdf>

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Three leaders of constituent councils set out their opposition to the plan in a mayor and portfolios leads meeting on 19 May 2023.<sup>\*</sup> Before the combined authority got to the stage of taking a final vote on adopting the function, on 9 June, at a WMCA board meeting, the members decided not to progress with a public consultation on the health duty. This decision blocked the process of adopting the duty, and instead WMCA continues to work on the HiAP without a duty. In a December 2023 meeting of the wellbeing board it was stated that the objection to the duty had more to do with not wanting to replicate the work of other partners than objection on principle to the duty.

The WMCA case study also reflects some of the tension that can arise between the functions and powers of MCAs and their constituent councils. However, there is an important strategic role for MCAs in bringing together local partners to ensure wider regional benefits. If local authorities choose not to adopt additional powers at the MCA, they risk missing key opportunities for economic growth and regional development. A lack of strategic oversight can also weaken regional coordination in crucial areas like public health, but also transport, housing, and skills development. Many of these issues require region-wide planning, and without stronger powers, policies may remain fragmented and ineffective.

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<sup>\*</sup> See WMCA's June 2023 board report for more, <https://governance.wmca.org.uk/documents/s10585/Report.pdf>

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## Simplified decision making could also lead to more transparency and better engagement

Restrictive voting requirements are not the only problem with the current decision making process. They are also inconsistent and complex, which makes it difficult for the public, or even voting members, to understand the specific arrangements for different decisions such as different thresholds to vote to develop, amend or adopt a plan. There are additional complications as while most of the voting requirements are set out in the MCAs' constitutions, some primary legislation including the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 supersedes these, and others exist in secondary legislation. The devolution deals were negotiated and developed individually with central government and each set of local authorities, the result being that there are different powers and governance arrangements across MCAs.

For some decisions MCAs have chosen to diverge from each other. For example, approving the combined authority budget requires a unanimous vote in WECA, while in West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) the same decision requires only a majority of three of the five constituent council members to vote in favour to approve. In Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA), for parts of the budget that cover the combined authority's functions, approval requires a majority to include the mayor, but medium- and long-term spending plans require unanimous agreement. In East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA), where there are two voting members from each of the constituent councils, the same decisions require a majority, to include all lead members designated by the constituent councils. If the mayor were to propose a levy, this is a charge imposed by a combined authority on its constituent councils to fund certain services, it would require unanimous approval in WECA and in TVCA but only a simple majority in WYCA and EMCCA.

Interviewees in several CAs that we spoke to said that even combined authority voting members sometimes struggle to understand the voting requirements,\* with one describing them as "a nightmare". The complexity can also make it difficult for the public to know who is accountable for what decision. For some combined authorities the institutional legal knowledge of the voting requirements resides with one or two individuals. In practice this means they can be hard to decipher and, in some cases, open to interpretation, with MCA officials having to work out which voting requirements apply to which decisions in a particular policy area (see Box 1).

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\* One interviewee told us the members often relied on the in-house legal counsel to write a cover note outlining the voting requirements and quorum needed for each vote at the meeting.

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### Box 1: Conflicting legal advice

In 2021, legal advice confirmed that the West of England mayor (Dan Norris) could veto alternative proposals of the WECA joint committee.<sup>\*</sup> The monitoring officers of all four councils involved challenged this in a joint letter, highlighting sections of WECA's constitution that seemed to state that the mayor did not in fact have a veto on the joint committee.<sup>45</sup> By November, Norris confirmed that after receiving "new conflicting legal advice from previously" he would no longer exercise a veto at joint committee meetings.<sup>46</sup>

The lack of clarity around voting requirements and decision making in combined authorities has wider ramifications. Devolution is supposed to bring decisions closer to the communities that those decisions affect, giving local people a stronger voice. But the current situation is so complex that it adds to the perception that local politics is opaque to those outside and engaging with decision making can be hugely challenging for constituents. Furthermore, voters should know who is ultimately accountable for which policy areas. If a mayor stands on a platform but does not have a deciding vote on that policy, or on raising the finances to implement it, that should be clear to voters.

The government's proposal to shift voting requirements for almost all decisions to a simple majority (including the mayor) will reduce the barriers to CAs collectively developing and adopting important strategic plans, without giving the mayor the unilateral ability to impose decisions that have little or no local support. Bringing decisions in line across all MCAs will also address the inconsistencies and improve transparency around combined authority decision making, which is in keeping with the general government agenda of bringing greater uniformity to the English devolution landscape.

However, there may be some instances where there is a reasonable case for why majority decision making is not appropriate. One example might be on changes to the combined authority constitution, which includes changes to membership, for which it might be sensible to retain a high threshold for change. **The government will need to review which if any decisions should be excluded from the default majority decision making rule.**

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<sup>\*</sup> The joint committee includes the mayor, all three constituent councils, neighbouring North Somerset Council and the West of England local enterprise partnership board.

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However, for most key strategic decisions, the voting requirements **should be reformed to require a simple majority including decisions relating to spatial plans, transport and skills strategies, MCA budgets and investment plans, mayoral development corporations and local growth plans.** For most of these decisions this would reduce the threshold for approving plans. However, for MDCs, this is a different type of change as the current requirement is only for consent from any constituent authority that falls within the MDC. However, as we've pointed to previously, this arrangement has been cited as a barrier to moving forward with MDCs, in part due to difficult working relationships between the mayor and constituent authority leader.<sup>47</sup>

A move to majority voting could enable mayors to make better use of these powers by removing the veto of the constituent authority. A more radical option would be to empower all mayors to unilaterally establish MDCs. However, this is not in line with the collective decision making that the MCA model is built on. Principally, the decision to establish an MDC is not wholly different from decisions relating to other strategic plans including SDSs. As such, reforms to the voting requirements for MDCs are best treated in line with the wider set of MCA functions.

In proposing the change to voting arrangements for MCAs, the government has diagnosed one of the key problems. But the decision making process is much broader than the vote itself. Mayors will still need, and want, to work collectively with other members of the combined authority, and build consensus to develop the plans. Working collectively will support the development of plans by ensuring there is a rigorous evidence base, drawing on local authority knowledge and data, and proper testing and consultation.



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## Reforming decision making will require greater capacity within MCAs

Interviewees were keen to highlight that, alongside voting arrangements, difficult working relationships between the constituent councils and mayors, fractured politics within the councils, resource constraints and relatively weak accountability arrangements were also having a negative impact on how policy was being developed and decisions made. The change to voting requirements is not an end in itself: without building capacity to develop, and then deliver on projects, it's unlikely that the reform will have the intended impact.

The lack of sufficient capacity has been shown to be a constraint on the ability of MCAs to make progress with the development of spatial plans.<sup>48</sup> The need for adequate capability and capacity in local and combined authorities to develop and deliver plans was also highlighted to us several times in interviews.

Resourcing concerns were both technical and administrative. Technical expertise falls across several areas. Local authorities in England have faced a significant shortage of planning experts: with around a quarter of planners leaving the public sector between 2013 and 2020,<sup>49</sup> there is now a shortfall of around 2,200 planners.<sup>50</sup> Years of budgets cuts dented the ability of councils to retain planners, who have moved into the private sector. The skills gap specifically puts reaching the government's housing targets at risk. In lieu of in-house expertise, many councils are relying on private consultants, which can be expensive and lead to inconsistencies in planning policy implementation.<sup>51</sup>

A deficit of planning experts is both a problem for the development of spatial development plans, as well as for implementation, as a shortage of staff can lead to delays in the system, creating bottlenecks in councils as they struggle to assess planning applications efficiently.<sup>52</sup>

The last government announced some funding, in the form of a planning skills development fund, to ease the shortfall.<sup>53</sup> This amounted to £14.3m allocated across 180 local planning authorities at the end of 2023, but there has been little impact. There are also shortfalls in other expertise. Interviewees told us they had particular concern with the lack of economists and policy experts in the key areas of transport and skills. Some we spoke to said that they were often able to bring in extra support from staff in the constituent councils with relevant expertise, but this relies on good working relationships between local authorities, which varies between CAs and depends on capacity within local authorities.

While changing voting requirements may make it easier to get plans through with fewer delays, fundamentally if the goal is for this to lead to better policy outcomes, then there needs to be an equal focus on making *good* decisions. To do this, MCAs will need adequate resource to ensure that the plans they are voting on are well designed.

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Access to data and analytical capacity are linked to this as good quality subnational data and robust use of it are integral to understanding the characteristics of the local area, trends and identifying the key challenges and opportunities. There has been a lot of work in recent years to fill the data gap: ONS Local, for example, has hugely improved the data on offer and ability for local government to access it.<sup>54</sup> A key challenge now is less about collecting the data, and more about having the right people with the right skills to interpret and analyse it.

The white paper has made promising commitments in terms of improving the data that local authorities can access. For example, the government has committed to continuing support for ONS Local, proposes establishing a mayoral data council to bring together data leads from across central and local government, and says it will look into how data sharing can be implemented between combined authorities.

A lack of capacity in technical skills across local government presents a dual problem for MCAs. First, there are disparities in capacity across different MCAs, with some areas better equipped or able to attract skilled staff than others, which inevitably impacts the ability to evidence and develop comprehensive strategies. Second, where there is a shortfall in analytical and technical expertise, this could undermine the credibility of some strategies. A well developed plan, based on robust evidence and analysis, is crucial for engaging external stakeholders and attracting investment. The Institute for Government has highlighted this as a concern in particular for local growth plans in the past.<sup>55</sup> There are large disparities between the capability in more established MCAs compared to newer MCAs. Those with better existing capabilities have benefited more from the government's devolution agenda.<sup>56</sup>

Administrative support is also an essential tool. Sufficient administrative capacity allows decision makers to focus on strategic priorities rather than operational hurdles and supports efficient logistical co-ordination. Separate from policy and analytical staff, this can include staff who help streamline the process by managing records, scheduling meetings, facilitating communication between members, and ensuring compliance with legal and procedural requirements.

The government has proposed enhancing *strategic leadership* capacity, proposing to legislate for mayors to be able to employ commissioners to support the delivery of key functions – for example, a transport commissioner to lead on transport projects. This is welcome, but commissioners will find it difficult to deliver on these functions if the combined authority remains limited in key areas of technical and administrative capacity.

As we have previously recommended, the **mayoral capacity fund – an annual £1m allocation per MCA to bolster resources in the mayor's office – should be at least doubled and secured as a long-term government commitment** to ensure sustained investment in local decision making.

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**Combined authorities should also undertake a strategic review of staffing** and look at ways in which they can share staff between the local authority and combined authority for specific projects; for example, in preparation of the local growth plan or SDS.

The *English Devolution White Paper* included a proposal for a secondment scheme, in line with our previous proposals last year, between local and central government. The scheme would provide a way to improve relationships and the flow of information, by placing civil servants in officer roles in combined authorities. We welcome this but also highlight that the benefit of a secondment scheme can both help MCAs build capacity, skills and knowledge as well as, the other way, bring knowledge of how combined authorities work into Whitehall.

**To take full advantage of the benefits, the government should support two-way secondments** that also place combined authority officers in departments that are closely involved in devolution, including the Treasury, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and teams within other relevant departments.

**The secondments should be part of a formal interchange scheme with clear pathways in to and back out of each institution.** A structured programme will help to embed the interchange, making it a part of a career pathway and help ensure that on both sides, staff are placed in the best positions as part of their learning objectives. Reintegration will be an important part of the process, a structured programme should ensure that there are opportunities for feedback and knowledge sharing so that the benefits are experienced more widely.

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## Reducing voting thresholds must be balanced with more robust and visible accountability structures

Changes to voting requirements from unanimity to majority voting thresholds will need to be balanced with greater accountability measures. Bringing voting requirements in line with each other across MCAs will support greater transparency in decision making, alongside which more robust accountability mechanisms will support more effective decision making, ensuring decisions are based on evidence and subject to public scrutiny.

The erosion of local accountability structures since the closure of the Audit Commission in 2015 has left an accountability gap in MCAs.<sup>57</sup> Current MCA audit and scrutiny committees are commonly recognised as lacking the resources, authority and visibility to effectively oversee the growing powers of metro mayors.<sup>58,59</sup> Though voters can hold mayors to account at the ballot box every four years, genuine democratic accountability requires more than periodic elections. It demands robust institutional checks and balances to scrutinise decision making and spending effectively. Without these structures, the system risks inefficiency and a breakdown of trust among MCA members as well as damaging local confidence in the devolution agenda.

**We repeat our call for the government to establish devolved public accounts committees (DPACs) for all existing mayoral combined authorities** (starting with those being given ‘integrated settlement’ funding),<sup>60</sup> so that mayors and MCAs are properly scrutinised for the expanding set of decisions they take over the allocation of public money. In the white paper the government said this was one model that it would work with the sector to explore where it “will review how the audit system supports and provides external assurance”.

Most recently Jim McMahon, the minister for devolution, told a parliamentary committee that the government was “consulting and open to hearing ideas on local public accounts committees”.<sup>61</sup> We welcome the positive noises here, but given the increased importance of effective accountability in light of changes to voting requirements, these plans should be brought forward and implemented simultaneously to ensure the accountability gap does not widen.

**We also recommend that the chief executive of a combined authority should become the accounting officer for fully devolved budgets.** Taking a steer from how accountability is modelled in Whitehall, they should also be able to request a mayoral direction if there are concerns that a given project does not meet agreed criteria (we suggest regularity, propriety, feasibility or value for money), making the mayor themselves directly accountable for the decision.<sup>62</sup>

Public accountability of mayors and MCAs is important for public trust and democratic engagement:<sup>63</sup> the engagement between mayors and the public needs further development. As MCAs evolve and new ones are established there have been

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developments in approaches to public engagement; for example, climate citizens' assemblies in South Yorkshire and North of Tyne, initiated by Oliver Coppard and Jamie Driscoll respectively.<sup>64,65</sup> Due to the costs in capacity and financing, these larger scale activities are most useful when part of a longer term strategy and a deeper commitment to enhancing democratic infrastructure in the region, rather than a one-off event.

**We also repeat our call for all mayors to commit to holding monthly 'question time' sessions in which they are open to questions from members of the public.**<sup>66</sup> But there is still much more scope for involving other participatory methods. In instances where development of plans is particularly contentious or there are critical gaps in the policy development – in particular, if there are certain demographics that are less likely to be engaged – then MCAs could benefit from building participatory activities into the policy making process.<sup>67</sup> Deliberative processes have been used previously to engage the public in tricky planning policy discussions, including onshore wind farms in Scotland.<sup>68</sup>

**MCAs should look at ways of building participatory processes into their policy making for local plans.** Other options include peer research in which a group of local people, or those with relevant expertise, come together to conduct some research to support MCA policy making. For example, MH:2K was a youth-led mental health research project in which young people in Oldham, Birmingham and Newcastle designed workshops for schools and youth clubs to gather information on what they wanted from local mental health services. These recommendations were developed by the young people and fed back to local authorities and clinical commissioning groups in a report.<sup>69</sup>

**MCAs should utilise digital tools for community engagement,** which are used regularly in cities around the world to engage local people and inform and open up decision making processes. Digital tools can help overcome some of the barriers to participation, which may see public meetings attended by 'usual suspects' and they also allow the mayors and MCA to hear from a wider range of people. There are many different models, app or website based, from which to draw. For example, vTaiwan, an online discussion platform where the public and politicians discuss policy, ran a consultation on the regulation of Uber a few years ago.<sup>70</sup> Something similar could be applied to local discussions around bus franchising or the introduction of a tourist levy.

However, building up expertise in designing and running these processes can be costly and resource-intensive. A lot of guidance and best practice already exists and has been well developed in the UK by practitioners and advocacy organisations as well as in government.<sup>71,72</sup>

**There is a role for the UK Mayors Group to convene guidance on participatory processes from across experts from Whitehall, combined authorities and independent practitioners** to support MCAs in building participatory methods of public engagement into their decision making processes.

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## Conclusion

The December 2024 *English Devolution White Paper* launched the government's detailed plan for what it describes as a "devolution revolution". The intention is that devolution will put decision making for key policy areas in the right hands, at the right level, to ensure better social and economic outcomes.

Success will rest in part on whether the governance structures in place are capable of allowing MCAs to make the required difficult decisions effectively. As such we welcome the proposal to change voting arrangements in most cases to majority including the mayor. However, the government will want to support good decision making, not just fast decision making. This will require a holistic view of the entire system and a recognition that capacity and accountability in combined authorities both need to be enhanced if the change to voting arrangements is to have the intended impact.

Taken together, these measures should enable MCAs to navigate the complex dynamics of MCA governance and streamline the approval of critical plans for areas such as skills, transport, housing and the environment and, we hope, help kick-start the devolution revolution.



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## About the authors

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Rebecca is a senior researcher at the Institute for Government working across local growth and parliament research areas. Prior to joining the Institute she spent almost a decade in Manchester where she gained a PhD in politics before moving to London to work at the Constitution Unit as a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow, where she ran a research project on MPs' staffing arrangements. Rebecca has also worked for Involve project managing various deliberative processes including the Citizens' Assembly on Health and Social Care and Climate Assembly UK.

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Briony was a research assistant, working on the Institute's devolution team. Prior to joining the Institute in September 2023, she worked as an operations assistant for a manufacturing company and volunteered for the British Red Cross. Briony has a BA in history, and graduated with an MA in human rights law in 2022.

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