

NORTHERN MAYORS

100 days of a new term

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SUMMARY

6th May 2021 marked the beginning of a new era for the north of England's metro mayors. It saw some of the inaugural cohort (first elected in 2017) re-elected, and a new Mayor of West Yorkshire—the first woman metro mayor. Mayoral combined authorities in the North now cover 9.7 million people and over 60 per cent of our region's economy.

These mayors wield significant powers and resources: northern mayoral combined authorities collectively plan to spend nearly £4.4 billion in 2021/22 according to IPPR North analysis of 2021/22 approved budgets.

Northern mayors increasingly reach beyond formal powers to improve the lives of the people that they represent. A review of recent mayoral manifestos and announcements shows that mayors are seeking to deliver on ambitious local visions, breaking free of the constraints of the original conception of the mayoral role. However, their powers remain vulnerable to the whims of a centralising government that, despite rhetoric, appears to blow hot and cold on devolution.

Now, as we enter this new era, government must recommit to devolution as the means to deliver levelling up. It is time to give mayors and the places they represent the backing they need to level up for themselves.

MAYORS ARE MORE POWERFUL THAN PEOPLE THINK

100 days ago, the UK held one of the largest sets of local and devolved elections in its history. In the North, this included the second metro mayoral elections in Greater Manchester (GMCA), Liverpool City Region (LCRCA), and Tees Valley (TVCA), where incumbent mayors secured increased majorities; and the first mayoral election for the new West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA). Mayors now govern over three in five people in the North (ONS 2020) with economies worth £227 billion GVA annually, 61 per cent of the northern economy, and larger than the combined economies of Scotland and Wales (ONS 2021).

The national focus on the Hartlepool by-election at the time distracted commentators from the more important election of metro mayors (hereafter mayors), who are growing more powerful than central government intended.

WHAT ARE MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITIES?

Mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) are new a new subnational tier of governance in England. They evolved from combined authorities (CAs), which are made up of a group of neighbouring councils, but are not necessarily led by a mayor, and were created to enable local authorities to collaborate on areas such as transport and economic policy, as well as to pool resources under a common legal entity. Generally, CAs cover urban areas, with Greater Manchester CA (GMCA) the first to be established in 2011. From bilateral negotiation between local and central government, further powers were devolved through devolution deals.

In the mid-2010s, devolution advanced in step with the Northern Powerhouse agenda. The then government’s conception of the Northern Powerhouse focussed on converting northern cities into one agglomerated economy where growth trickled down and out (Raikes & Johns 2019) with minimal commitment to democratic inclusion and regressive economic assumptions underpinning it (Tomaney 2016). Further devolution deals introduced more powers in areas like transport, housing, and skills, and—for most of deals—government created the post of elected mayors (and thus MCAs).

In the north of England, these metro mayors were first elected in 2017 in GMCA, Liverpool City Region (LCRCA) and Tees Valley (TVCA)—followed by South Yorkshire (SYMCA) in 2018, North of Tyne (NoTCA) in 2019, and WYCA in 2021.

Table 1 Who are the mayors in the North?

MCA	Mayor	Political Party	Most recent vote share (%)	Current term	Total 2021/22 budget (£m)
Greater Manchester	Andy Burnham	Labour	67.3%	2021-2024	£1,827
Liverpool City Region	Steve Rotheram	Labour	58.3%	2021-2024	£498
North of Tyne	Jamie Driscoll	Labour	33.9% (first round); 56.1% (second round)	2019-2022	£228
South Yorkshire	Dan Jarvis MP	Labour	47.1% (first round); 74% (second round)	2018-2022	£358
Tees Valley	Ben Houchen	Conservative	72.8%	2021-2024	£353
West Yorkshire	Tracy Brabin	Labour	59.8%	2021-2024	£1,117

The advancement of devolution in England has been chaotic and incoherent (Raikes 2019) and each MCA has a unique devolution deal with specific devolved powers, areas of delegation, and budgets¹. Further complications have arisen throughout the process, some with local causes and others with national causes. For instance, Dan Jarvis was elected mayor of SYMCA two years before the SYMCA devolution deal took effect.

It also created a patchwork of different powers, shown in Table 2. Some MCAs like GMCA and WYCA have additional powers and budgets: both have taken over policing while GMCA also controls the fire authority and has powers over health and social care integration. Health and social care funding was devolved and delegated to the GM level via partnership bodies on which GMCA and constituent authorities are represented along the principle of: “all decisions taken about GM health and social care will be taken with GM and by GM as soon as possible” (AGMA, NHSE & GMACCG 2016). This has not yet been replicated elsewhere.

TABLE 2: POWERS DEVOLVED BY DEVOLUTION DEALS

		Greater Manchester	Liverpool	North of Tyne	South Yorkshire	Tees Valley	West Yorkshire
Transport	Devolved, consolidated transport budget	X	x		x	x	x
	Bus franchising	X	x		x	x	x
	Joint working with Highways England and Department for Transport on rail	X	x		x		x
	Local roads network	X	x		x		x
Skills & employment	Joint working with Department for International Trade	X	x	x	x	x	x
	Business support services	X	x	x	x	x	x
	Adult Education Budget	X	x	x	x	x	x
	Work and Health	X	x	x	x	x	
Land & housing	Public land commission/joint assets board	X	x	x	x	x	
	Housing Loan Fund	X					

¹ We define powers as areas where Mayors or MCAs have been afforded control and/or responsibility over specific policy areas or functions by way of a devolution deal and subsequent legislation. Delegation refers to areas where MCAs have been given an authority to carry out specific activities but with limited authority to shape this according to local priorities.

		Greater Manchester	Liverpool	North of Tyne	South Yorkshire	Tees Valley	West Yorkshire
	Compulsory purchase orders	X	x	x			x
	Mayoral Development Corporations	X	x	x	x	x	x
	Planning call-in powers		x	x	x		
	Consultation on strategic planning applications		x				
	Housing grant fund	X					x
	Spatial strategy	X	x		x		x
Public services	Health & social care integration	X					
	Children's services	X					
	Offender management, probation, prison estate	X					
	Troubled Families/Working Well	X					
	Police and Crime Commissioner	X					x
	Fire Authority	X					
Finance	Mayoral precept	X	x	x	x	x	x
	Investment fund (per year)	£30m	£30m	£20m	£30m	£15m	£38m
	Pilot retention of 100% business rates revenue	X	x				
	Business rates supplement	X	x				x
	Community Infrastructure Levy/Strategic Infrastructure Levy	X					x

Source: Sandford (2020)

MCAs' formal powers are constrained by their devolution deals over which central government retains ultimate control because there is very limited constitutional protection over locally held powers (Raikes 2019). MCAs remain under resourced following austerity, which undermined devolution (Raikes & Johns 2019) and eroded resilience in the North (Johns 2020). Hence, ahead of their first terms, some viewed MCAs as "set up to fail" (Giovannini 2021).

Nonetheless, their resources do allow them to make a start and are, importantly, locally controlled. Soft powers such as the power to convene local partners have been essential for MCAs in making the most of these limited resources and expanding their ability to effect change locally.

LESSONS FROM NORTHERN MAYORS SO FAR

At the conclusion of the first term of the inaugural northern mayors, it is useful to take stock of how they govern, and how the role has evolved. Below are key observations, with examples from across the northern MCAs.

Mayors are using their formal powers and spending ability to make change happen:

- Ben Houchen brought Teesside Airport into public ownership and established the first Mayoral Development Corporation
- Andy Burnham announced plans to franchise buses, shepherding GMCA through the difficult process of being the first MCA to re-regulate buses. Tracy Brabin recently announced her intention to follow suit and is set to invest £1 million in advancing the process in West Yorkshire
- Dan Jarvis has funded the first ownership hub to help businesses become worker owned or co-operatives, seeking to grow the number of co-operatives in the local economy.
- NoTCA is establishing a ground-breaking £18m new investment fund to tackle carbon emissions, which is simultaneously designed to deliver inclusive economic growth.

Mayors combine their hard powers with their soft powers as convenors and influencers in their city regions:

- LCRCA, NoTCA, and GMCA developed local employment charters collaborating with trade unions and businesses. They are extending their charters' influence by embedding them in public procurement and business support provision (Johns, Raikes & Hunter 2019). Meanwhile, Tracy Brabin is investing £200,000 annually for three years to deliver a similar 'Fair Work Charter'
- Andy Burnham's first term focused extensively on an issue beyond the remit of the GMCA's devolution deal: homelessness. This has required extensive cooperation between constituent councils and the third sector to supplement his limited formal homelessness powers and investment.

Mayoral collaboration is a common theme. Many of the MCAs share challenges and goals:

- The 2019 Convention of the North gathered mayors and northern voices to demand funding and powers for 'levelling up'. In response, Boris Johnson promised to "do devolution properly" (PMO & Johnson 2019)

- The so-called M62 Mayors (GMCA, LCRCA, and WYCA) recently met to discuss collaborating on employment charters which could develop into IPPR North’s previously recommended Northern Employment Charter (Johns, Raikes & Hunter 2019)
- Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and Steve Rotheram pre-empted central government in collectively calling for face masks to be worn in public early in the pandemic (Rotheram 2021)
- Joint responses by mayors Steve Rotheram and Andy Burnham to the 2018 Northern Rail timetable fiasco resulted in Northern Rail being stripped of their franchise.

Mayoralties challenge and negotiate with central government:

Devolution deals are contractual by nature and devolve tightly defined parts of broader policy areas (for instance adult education is devolved to all MCAs, but not 16-19 provision) and leave retention of ultimate control over both funding and powers to the centre, with limited constitutional protection for devolution in England. This stifles local policy choices and is detrimental to the devolution settlement within England. For example, Whitehall stripped a £68 million housing fund from GMCA after they altered local housing targets (Sandford 2019). It is not surprising therefore that Mayors regularly call for further devolution both to their own MCAs and more broadly within England, alongside wider advocacy for their places:

- Ben Houchen used his influence in the Conservative Party and consensual negotiations to win national policy focus on TVCA, including securing freeport status and the Treasury North Campus in Darlington—though some suggest this demonstrates a blurred line between mayoral soft power and ‘pork barrel’ politics (Giovannini 2021)
- Andy Burnham’s 2020 standoff with the prime minister, over Covid-19 restrictions and insufficient financial support for Greater Manchester, also exemplifies how mayors can wield other forms of power, namely confrontational bargaining, to influence central government. Andy Burnham had no direct levers to change national policy in this instance other than using his platform as mayor and authority as the city region’s leader to challenge central government.

Mayors are also experimenting with new forms of inclusive democracy to empower citizens:

- NoTCA’s Poverty Truth Commission, and planned Climate Assembly, promote direct citizen engagement in local government over core policy areas
- GMCA, LCRCA, and SYMCA either have established or are creating youth combined authorities
- Tracy Brabin’s Creative New Deal involves extensively consulting with local creative and cultural industries—an example of crucial partnerships

with local private and third sectors to develop policy, also seen in other areas including decarbonisation.

The 2021 mayoral elections across England increased the majorities of those incumbent mayors who exercised visible power and adeptly wielded soft powers (ibid), which often drew more attention than use of formal MCA powers. This was markedly the case for the mayors re-elected with the highest majorities — Ben Houchen and Andy Burnham — and notably absent for the two incumbent mayors who lost their elections in the West of England and Cambridge & Peterborough.

Increasingly acting as stewards of their places, northern mayors are clearly working beyond their devolution deals' constraints.

MAYORS HAVE PLANS TO GO EVEN FURTHER

As we have shown, mayors are punching above their weight and reaching beyond their limited formal powers to govern. However, they also have plans to go further.

SPENDING AND INVESTMENT

MCAs have complicated funding environments, with different streams depending on devolution deals and central government favour. Their income largely derives from:

- central government grants, many conditional or ringfenced
- transfers from constituent local authorities
- ringfenced mayoral precepts on council tax, and policing precepts where MCAs are responsible for policing
- some are pilot areas for 100% business rate retention, and some can levy additional supplements
- borrowing within debt limits negotiated with Treasury.

To compare northern MCAs' resources in a meaningful way, we analysed their 2021/22 budgets¹, and contacted MCAs to enquire about recent investments or programme delivery.

To date, only Steve Rotherham and Andy Burnham have chosen to implement a precept, an additional charge on local council tax bills, to spend on mayoral priorities. Tracy Brabin, as the first mayor of WYCA, will only be able to do so from the 2022/23 budget.

¹ Because of the complexity of devolution to the North, we have in some limited cases included additional bodies within which MCAs are key decisionmakers. For instance, the North of Tyne MCA and the North East CA established a unique, special joint committee that is a statutory committee responsible for public transport policy in those two areas. We have apportioned its total expenditure on a per capita basis to the North of Tyne MCA.

GMCA uses this in part, alongside charitable donations, to support the A Bed Every Night scheme, providing around 500 free bedspaces for rough sleepers. Another example is LCRCA part using theirs to develop and advance the Mersey Tidal Power Project, a renewable energy plan to power up to a million homes generating a supply of clean, green energy for generations to come.

TABLE 3: MAYORAL FUNCTION BUDGETS FOR 2021/22

MCA	Mayoral budget	PCC budget	Fire service budget	Total	Per person
	£m	£m	£m	£m	£
Greater Manchester	133.11	657.54	109.32	899.97	315.97
Liverpool City Region	9.13			9.13	5.84
West Yorkshire		501.289		501.29	213.75

Source: Author’s analysis of GMCA (2021a & 2021b), LCRCA (2021), WYCA (2021), and WYPCC (2021)

This apart, MCAs use several funding sources for annual revenue and capital budgets.

Revenue spending is mostly on services. This includes adult education, business support, local transport networks, and core costs like employing officials to develop policies.

Some investment is funded through revenue:

- The Good Business Festival is supported by revenue elements of LCRCA’s Strategic Investment Fund (SIF)
- WYCA are funding upskilling and employment initiatives for young people
- SYMCA are subsidising 80 pence single fares on local public transport for everyone aged 21 and under.

Longer term investments largely use capital. For instance:

- GMCA is investing in walking and cycling infrastructure—100 kilometres of new network are being laid in this year alone
- LCRCA’s SIF is supporting the creation of Shakespeare North, a new theatre at the centre of Knowsley’s ambitious regeneration plans
- NoTCA is investing £25 million up to 2028 in offshore wind and sub-sea infrastructure and innovation, aiming to create up to 3,250 additional jobs in the sector
- TCVA is funding improvements to Teesside International Airport train station.

Collectively, the northern MCAs have multi-year capital spending programmes worth around £4.48 billion over the next three to four years.

MCAs tend to blend revenue and capital funding over several years into large investment funds, which are designed and packaged differently in each area:

- LCRCA’s SIF draws both into a single pot for economic development and assesses projects through a renowned assurance framework
- NoTCA’s Investment Fund, including commitments of £68.44m, forecast by NoTCA to generate around 4,200 jobs and attract £246m of private sector leverage
- TVCA’s Investment Plan, scoping in all CA funding outside core functions, across both spending on services and investment in capital projects with £131 million projected for 2021/22
- SYMCA’s South Yorkshire Renewal Fund, announced in 2021 as a £860 million new deal for South Yorkshire to revitalise the region’s economy in response to the pandemic.

Whether revenue or capital, much of the spending in northern MCAs is investment in services or project delivery. For instance, 86 per cent of SYMCA’s 2021/22 planned expenditure is for investment; this stands at 96 per cent for TVCA.

TABLE 4: TOTAL PLANNED SPENDING BY NORTHERN MCAs FOR 2021/22

MCA	Total revenue 2021/22	Total capital 2021/22	Total resources 2021/22	Total per person
	£m (rounded)	£m (rounded)	£m (rounded)	£
Greater Manchester*	1,351	476	1,827	641.34
Liverpool City Region*	166	332	498	318.37
North of Tyne**	145	83	228	271.10
South Yorkshire	133	225	358	253.12
Tees Valley	138	215	353	521.60
West Yorkshire*	702	415	1,117	476.31
Total Northern MCAs	2,635	1,746	4,381	

* includes figures from table 3 above, PCC function revenue and capital budgets are also included. **includes revenue and capital budgets of the North East Joint Transport Committee apportioned to NoTCA on a per capita basis. Source: Author’s analysis of GMCA (2021a & 2021b), LCRCA (2021), NoTCA (2021), NEJTC (2021), SYMCA (2021), TVCA (2021), WYCA (2021), and WYPCC (2021).

In total, northern MCAs plan to spend nearly £4.4 billion in 2021/22. This is investment in important local areas—transport, economic renewal, skills and opportunities, building homes, responding to the climate emergency, and so

on—all shaped by local priorities. Mayors can use their proximity to communities, responsiveness to local demands, and insight around local need to improve the lives of local people considering their particular challenges (Raikes 2019). Their ability to shape priorities over these resources in this way runs counter to the way the UK's central government often fails to do so. This failure and the fact that the UK is one of the most centralised countries out of comparable countries exacerbates spatial inequalities, making the UK one of the most regionally unequal countries by level of development (ibid; Raikes, Giovannini & Getzel 2019). In the face of this centralised control, these locally controlled resources, though important, remain too limited to turn the tide.

A large proportion of planned spending comes from devolved funds available to MCAs only, or offered on better terms than to non-MCA areas, such as using per capita allocations rather than competitions. This includes the Intra City Transport Fund, which is a £4.2 billion fund for GMCA, LCRCA, WYCA, SCRCA, and TVCA—alongside West Midlands and West of England MCAs from 2022-23. Additional capacity funding worth £30.3 million for northern MCAs was announced at Budget 2021.

The exact additional local spend owing to devolution is hard to show definitively. This is due to the chaotic way devolution has unfolded and the various, inconsistent forms of funding made available to MCAs by central government. Nonetheless, northern MCAs now hold significant spending power that is under local democratic control and is being spent in accordance with visions set out by the mayors and approved by the electorate. Our previous research has extensively highlighted the benefits of said local control and devolution of powers, particularly in providing more equal investment decisions (Raikes, Giovannini & Getzel 2019) and policy outcomes (Raikes 2019).

Marshalling resources of around £4.4 billion this year to match local ambitions, in a way that is accountable to local people and their vision, *is* part of the devolution difference.

MAYORAL VISION

Mayors do not only have extensive investment plans, but ambitious visions for the places they represent. We have reviewed the manifestos on which all existing mayors were most recently elected to identify key themes from their visions. We also liaised with northern MCAs on their current working priorities.

These manifestos, their content, and overarching statements of vision echo the mayoral ambitions to work beyond their formal powers. With titles including 'Our place. Our time', 'No one left behind', 'A co-operative community' and 'Prosperity you can be part of', they set out ambitious ideas for their areas which reach beyond devolution's original focus on economic development (Raikes & Johns 2019). The manifestos also suggest that we are seeing a new style of political leadership that directly addresses local people and crafts narratives about place, local pride, and belonging. Delivering on these will require all of the mayors' current resources and forms of power.

There is strong synergy between the mayors' priorities, especially:

- job creation and post-covid economic recovery, with most seeking to link this to building inclusive and environmentally sustainable economies
- creating healthier environments and addressing the climate emergency through decarbonisation (except for Tees Valley)
- improving local transport networks to London-style levels of service and public control for those MCAs where transport is an MCA function.

Mayors require, and most are seeking, further powers to deliver on their priorities with the North leading the way on such calls. It is noteworthy that in his manifesto London mayor Sadiq Khan seemingly recognised this success and positioned himself among the metro mayors (when the Mayor of London is usually counted aside), pledging to work with “*other* metro mayors” to secure more devolution in delivering economic recoveries (emphasis added, Khan 2021).

Another point of significance is the relative lack of focus—despite the pandemic—on health. While Andy Burnham’s manifesto highlights reducing health inequalities, perhaps reflecting his additional health and social care powers, this theme is largely less stressed elsewhere. Though direct powers are limited for mayors, they have significant soft power over policy areas that impact health, including economic inclusion, work and skills, and housing. Indeed, Tracy Brabin’s manifesto referred to those areas where wider determinants of mental and physical health interact with areas of mayoral power or influence. This is one area where mayors could be more ambitious with levers currently at their disposal and consider further inter-mayoral collaboration too.

Mayors and MCAs are becoming increasingly important institutions within England, bringing politics and decisions closer to the people, and building comprehensive place-based agendas, as demonstrated by how they have governed to date and their ambitions for the future of their places.

LEVELLING UP FOR THEMSELVES

The six northern mayors are leading the North into a new era, within a complicated frame: the limits of their powers, the context of the pandemic, and an unwieldy levelling up agenda that government is yet to define (Johns 2021). Individually they are at different points, some are completing the first 100 days of their terms while others are preparing for elections in 2022. Collectively, they are moving into a phase in which high-profile mayors command public support, represent the North on national stages, and continue to grow their influence to govern in the interests of the places they represent.

Looking back at mayoral devolution thus far, we have found:

- Mayors have limited but significant powers; together northern MCAs will spend nearly £4.4 billion in 2021/22 and they can make, and are making, important differences to the people they represent
- Mayors are punching above their weight—using soft and hard powers together, their impact extends beyond that originally envisaged in

devolution deals across numerous policy areas, to deliver better lives for the people they represent

- Mayors' ambitions have grown far beyond what centrally shaped devolution deals originally conceived. They have developed holistic place-based visions that utilise their hard powers, soft powers, and abilities to bargain and advocate for their places. But they continue to be held back by central government, because Whitehall has reneged on promises over funding and 'doing devolution properly'.

The UK is the most regionally divided and centralised country of its size and level of development. These divides have recently deepened, making the opportunity for a good life increasingly unattainable for many people in regions like the North (Johns et al 2020). Levelling up can only be achieved by devolving power from the centre to local people and places, and northern mayors are already levelling up for themselves. To further level up, Whitehall must let go, devolving further power and larger resources.

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