



Greater Manchester Metro Mayor

Three Policy Priorities for 2021

In May, Greater Manchester voters will elect a metro mayor for the second time. The Greater Manchester mayor is a particularly well known position. In recent Savanta ComRes polling for Centre for Cities, 87 per cent of respondents were aware that Greater Manchester has a mayor, and 63 per cent knew that the incumbent was Andy Burnham.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority covers the 10 local authorities in Figure 1. Data on the Greater Manchester economy and how it ranks compared to other mayoral areas can be found in the [factsheet](#), and for Manchester and Wigan primary urban areas in [City Monitor](#), [High Street Tracker](#), and the [UK Unemployment Tracker](#).

Figure 1: Greater Manchester Combined Authority



The city region entered the Covid-19 pandemic with above average levels of unemployment, and the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits has increased by a further 70,000 since March 2020. While Centre for Cities expects the bounce back from Covid-19 to be swift, the city region's challenges pre-pandemic will continue to be an issue post-pandemic.

The headline challenge for Greater Manchester is to improve the performance of its economy. Unlike similar large urban areas in Western Europe and the US, Greater Manchester lags behind the national average in terms of productivity, a key determinant of prosperity and jobs. Conservative estimates by Centre for Cities estimate that the city region is £16 billion per year smaller than it should be.¹

¹ Swinney P and Enenkel K (2020), Why big cities are crucial for levelling up, Centre for Cities

The overriding economic goal for the next mayor should be to put policies in place that **aim to reduce this gap by one third over the next decade**. This briefing sets out the three priorities that the mayor should implement to help achieve this goal. They are: a **continued focus on improving Manchester city centre; improving public transport and reducing local congestion**; and **improving the provision of skills and education** in the city region. In addition, the Government should look to advance devolution in Greater Manchester still further.

Policy priority 1: Continue the turnaround of Manchester city centre to improve job opportunities for all Greater Manchester residents

- **Use the convening power of the mayor to help Manchester city centre get back on its feet.** The mayor should launch a ‘Manchester is open’-style campaign and work with city centre employers to encourage workers back to the city centre when appropriate.
- **Continue to support new city centre office space.** Greater Manchester’s most productive businesses and jobs need a strong city centre to continue to grow.
- **Make sure housebuilding keeps pace with demand, and is built where it is needed.** The only way for Greater Manchester to avoid repeating London’s mistakes on housing is to tackle green belt reform and push for building more homes in the suburbs and green belt.

Manchester city centre has boomed in the last three decades from its late 1980s nadir, becoming home to many thousands of high-skilled, high-paid jobs. City centres are likely to continue to play an increasing role in the national economy, and Greater Manchester’s continued turnaround will depend on the further growth of its largest city centre.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a particularly damaging economic impact on city centres, especially the largest ones such as Manchester’s. Centre for Cities research for Core Cities UK has shown that the dynamism of many of the jobs in Manchester city centre facilitated homeworking, but this same strength meant that the city centre’s local services jobs, which depend on commuter spending, were hard hit by restrictions. This has had implications for the people they employ.²

The mayor should launch a campaign with the Government’s Urban Centre Recovery task force to encourage a return to city centre working once it is safe to do so. In the style of the ‘London is open’ campaign, which was introduced after the Brexit referendum, the mayor should bring together the city centre’s largest employers to set out a plan for encouraging and supporting workers to return to their offices where appropriate. And they should run an ad campaign to encourage people back onto public transport when safe to do so, equal in weight to the one launched last spring to discourage its use. Crucially, these two steps should be co-ordinated with one another – returning to the office will be undermined if public transport is not operating at the required capacity to carry these workers.

² Breach, A (2021), Core Cities: the impact of the first wave of Covid-19, London: Centre for Cities

Central to the mayor’s economic growth plans should be the increase of office space in Manchester city centre to accommodate future growth. Future joint plans should have the city centre as a priority for increased office space, supported by the expansion of the public transport network to connect workers to these jobs. This city centre focus should not come at the cost of investing in other parts of Greater Manchester, but the continued investment in the centre is crucial to improving both the productivity of Greater Manchester and the job opportunities it offers to residents across the city region.

The mayor should support this with a housebuilding programme. In order not to repeat the mistakes that London has made, the city region’s growth should be matched with a proportionate increase in new homes.

Manchester’s city centre has provided a disproportionate share of new housing supply, with its housing stock growing by 25 per cent between 2011 and 2019. In contrast, Greater Manchester’s suburbs saw the number of homes grow by only 4 per cent, which is the reason why Greater Manchester as a whole built fewer homes than the average city over this period.³ This is particularly concerning given the requirement for more office space in the city centre.

This will require a renewed focus from the mayor to create a joint spatial plan that includes green belt reform and prioritising development in the city region’s suburbs. Centre for Cities has calculated that between 400,000-500,000 homes could be built at suburban densities with accessible green space around railway stations going into Manchester city centre, which allow for climate-friendly commuting by rail and already have excellent infrastructure.⁴ These sites should be allocated in any future plan. This should be complemented with plans to increasing the amount of housing built in existing suburbs too, increasing the density of housing within them.

Policy priority 2: Better connect people to jobs and improve air quality by improving public transport and tackling congestion

- **Introduce a congestion charge for Manchester city centre.** In normal times the city centre is congested, and a charge will lead to more reliable journeys, reduced carbon emissions, increased turnover of car parking land for development, and support public transport investment.
- **Add a higher charge for all diesels and other high-polluting vehicles.** Encouraging the reduction in the use of these vehicles will improve air quality and reduce avoidable deaths from pollution.
- **Invest these revenues into the new franchised bus service.** Greater Manchester should use both these resources and those provided through the National Bus Strategy to build a bus network that works for the entire city region’s residents and economy.

Congestion and capacity constraints on journeys into Manchester city centre pre-pandemic were at risk of choking off growth of the centre.⁵ Without further investment this will become an ever-greater problem as the city centre economy grows.

3 Breach, A and Magrini, E (2020) *Sleepy Suburbs*, London: Centre for Cities

4 Cheshire and P Buyuklieva, B (2019) *Homes on the right tracks*, London: Centre for Cities

5 Jeffrey S & Enenkel K (2020) *‘Get moving’*, London: Centre for Cities

The mayor must tackle the immediate problem of road congestion by introducing a congestion charge. Pre-Covid-19, congestion was clogging the urban core, reducing the city's growth and limiting people's job prospects. Centre for Cities expects these problems, caused by the economic strength of Manchester's city centre and demand from workers and firms to locate there, to arise again as the city region recovers from the pandemic.

A congestion charge is a proven method to reduce traffic, boost bus speeds and patronage, and raise money for public transport.⁶ A city centre congestion charge could raise £49 million a year for other transport investment.⁷ The improvements to Greater Manchester's public transport network from the introduction of the bus franchising system will lay the foundations for such a congestion charge by making it possible for commuters to comfortably switch from cars to other options (a reason given as to why such a charge was rejected in the past).

Alongside a congestion charge, the mayor should also go further than the current Clean Air Zone. Although it is being proposed to address Greater Manchester's illegally high air pollution, it does not include private cars belonging to residents. The Clean Air Zone should instead be similar to the one due to be introduced in Birmingham city centre or London's Ultra Low Emission Zone, both of which charge residents who own more-polluting vehicles.

The mayor should use the revenue from these charges to fund the new franchised bus system. The mayor has announced that buses will be brought under local control from 2023, which will ensure the transport network can be run by the mayor for the benefit of the residents and economy of Greater Manchester. However, while this will chime with the Government's National Bus Strategy and the funding it provides, national funding should not be used as a replacement for raising local revenues to fund local services.

Congestion charging will bring the mayor extra revenue to invest in an especially affordable, reliable and frequent bus service across the city region. The business case presented for bus franchising by Transport for Greater Manchester is clear that schemes such as a congestion charge to bring down bus delays and fares and drive investment in the network could significantly increase ridership.⁸

⁶ <https://whatworksgrowth.org/policy-reviews/transport/congestion-charging/>

⁷ If an average of 15,000 vehicles per day pay £9 for a seven-day charging scheme, this would raise £49m.

⁸ <https://www.gmconsult.org/strategy-team/gmbusconsultation/>

Policy priority 3: Ensure young people have the skills and support to fully benefit from Greater Manchester’s growth

- **Offer pre-apprenticeship training and apprenticeship mentoring.** This would build on the progress made from the mayor’s new UCAS-style apprenticeship portal.
- **Undertake an audit of adult education spend in Greater Manchester.** Calculating how much is spent on adult education and by which bodies is the crucial first step to identifying how it can be better targeted.
- **Use the convening role of the mayor to tackle the underperformance of Greater Manchester schools.** The success of the mayor’s focus on homelessness and early years’ challenges should be applied to the city region’s schools.

For economic growth to be felt by existing residents of Greater Manchester, the mayor will need to build on the city region’s progress made on skills and education for adults, with additional support for young people’s learning. Ensuring that today’s young people are able to benefit from tomorrow’s prosperity is worth continued support and investment, and there are number of things that can be done by the mayor to achieve this.

Greater Manchester’s progress on apprenticeships policy should be matched by improving pre-apprenticeship policy. The Greater Manchester Apprenticeships and Careers System launched at the start of last year offers information and guidance to young people on the options available to them. The mayor should build on this to add mentoring and pre-apprenticeship support for young people as this has been shown to have a positive impact on the completion rates of apprenticeships.⁹

The mayor should also use their office to do an audit on how much is spent on skills and by which institutions. A great deal of money is spent on skills policy each year, but there is little coordination between the various bodies of how this is spent. While this issue affects all parts of the country, mayors in areas that have them are well placed to tackle this problem. Mapping this spend would be the first step for the mayor to make better use of this significant budget to better tackle the city region’s skills challenges.

Schools should be a new focus of the mayor. The performance of schools in Greater Manchester is slightly below the national average. Some 61.8 per cent of students get five good GCSEs in Greater Manchester, compared to 64.9 per cent nationally.¹⁰ Following the progress made in improving school readiness in early years and tackling homelessness, both issues outside of the mayor’s formal powers, the mayor should use their soft power and position to convene and campaign for higher standards in Greater Manchester schools to surpass the national average.

⁹ <https://whatworksgrowth.org/resources/apprenticeships-toolkit/>

¹⁰ <https://www.centreforcities.org/city-monitor/?path=city/manchester&themes=skills>

Priority for the government: Level up the mayor's planning powers

Planning policy affects the scale and distribution of new housing, interacting with transport and skills policy. It is a strategic economic power that should be held at the scale of the city region, as in Greater London through the London Plan, not at the local level as in the rest of the Mayoral Combined Authorities.

Local authorities in Greater Manchester remain the lead on local planning and can ignore city region plans, which require unanimous consent from each authority. The Greater Manchester Spatial Framework was rejected at the eleventh-hour last year by Stockport, forcing the Greater Manchester local authorities to create a new joint plan for all the local authorities minus Stockport.

This undermines the purpose of city-region mayors and devolution, as the overlap of powers between mayor and borough generates significant friction between them, duplicating functions and activities and making it harder for the mayoralty to absorb political risk and show leadership on planning.

The mayor should work with the Government and aim to consolidate Greater Manchester planning responsibilities – in terms of plan making and decision making on planning applications – at the city-region level. While the Planning White Paper intentions for the role of the mayors are not yet clear, there is a case for them to solve their 'duty to cooperate' problems by allowing the mayor's office to take the lead on planning. Smaller and more local planning designations, such as design codes, could continue to be made at the local authority level. But the failure of local authorities to agree a joint-framework shows that the mayor should be handed responsibility for tough choices on planning and take the lead on housing and planning policy in Greater Manchester.

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About Centre for Cities

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We are a charity that works with cities, business and Whitehall to develop and implement policy that supports the performance of urban economies. We do this through impartial research and knowledge exchange.

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