Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

Power to communities? Realising the potential of Devolution to serve the most disadvantaged places in England

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ICON Policy Working Paper

About ICON

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) launched in September 2024. The Commission is reviewing the current state of neighbourhoods across England, examining the role of neighbourhoods in people's lives, quantifying and qualitatively exploring the case for neighbourhood focused regeneration as a contribution to achieving wider social and economic objectives. The Commission is also establishing 'what works' by drawing on both international and domestic evidence, with a particular focus on the most deprived and 'left behind' communities.

The Commission is chaired by Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top and supported by a small, cross-party group of experts, practitioners and others with a keen interest in neighbourhood issues. Funded by Local Trust, the Commission is run by an independent secretariat and commissioners are supported by an academic panel, a lived experience panel and a representative group of community sector organisations.

ICON Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

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Executive Summary

"The whole of Whitehall will now be required to get behind our places and work together with them to make quicker, more joined-up decisions. Ours will be a 10-year mission to raise living standards across the land."
– Andy Burnham[1]

English devolution's time has come. The new Prime Minister Andy Burnham has come into office pledging to fundamentally shake up how England is governed, shifting power, responsibility, and funding from Whitehall into the hands of local leaders across the country.

Devolution is the principal vehicle through which the Prime Minister hopes to spread prosperity across the country and deliver "good growth in every postcode". Its central thesis is that handing areas greater power from Whitehall to set their own direction will mean that the areas which have borne the greatest costs of deindustrialisation and austerity – exacerbated by neglect from the central state – are equipped with the tools, and agency, necessary to drive economic and social renewal.

But English devolution is not a brand new idea.

The majority of England is already covered by regional government, most of which are led by a Metro Mayor. This includes many of the places that have been most directly affected by deindustrialisation, centralisation, and austerity. The majority of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England are in places represented by a Metro Mayor. So too is much of our industrial heartland. Metro Mayors in every corner of the country are representatives of the former mill towns, coalfields, steel communities, and seaside towns, who were once the engine room of Britain's economic prosperity, but whose recent history is marked by decline.

This paper is an attempt at connecting the English devolution agenda with the Prime Minister's dual ambitions of delivering good growth in every postcode and genuine power to communities. The word genuine is used intentionally here. While we support both the expansion and deepening of the Strategic Authority model, we recognise that there are further steps that need to be taken in order to ensure that this model works explicitly in the interests of the most disadvantaged places.

We believe that the next stage of devolution should put these places front and centre, and its ultimate test should be whether it materially changes the prospects of the neighbourhoods, towns, and communities, that deindustrialisation left behind and centralisation made too easy to overlook.

This report consists of four parts.

Part 1 of this report draws on new polling commissioned by ICON exploring what the public, and in particular those living in 'doubly disadvantaged' areas (which have both high levels of deprivation and low levels of social capital and infrastructure) think about English devolution. We find that:

- Devolution starts from a position of broad public support, with a majority (52%) of the public being in favour of further powers and funding being transferred to elected Mayors.
- There is an expectation that devolution should deliver direct benefits to areas and this is highest in doubly disadvantaged areas, where a majority (51%) expect their own area to benefit a 'great deal or fair amount' from devolution.

1 Manchester Evening News (2026). 'Andy Burnham's speech in full as he promises to "finish the job"'. Available at: https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/andy-burnhams-speech-full-promises-34203926

- The public overwhelmingly want devolution to prioritise places that are highly deprived and our industrial heartlands, over other areas. In a number of trade-off exercises we ran we found this feeling held up incredibly robustly. For example:
    - When we asked respondents whether they would support a Mayor directing more funding to the most disadvantaged parts of the region if this meant less funding for other areas, 38% supported this versus 24% who opposed.
    - In the same exercise, 52% supported greater investment in places with weaker economies if this meant less growth for the region overall, compared with 33% who favoured investment in areas that would maximise overall growth.
- The public are sceptical of devolution's potential to reduce regional divides. We find that 53% of people nationally and 56% of people living in doubly disadvantaged areas think that devolution will either make no difference to inequality between rich and poor parts of the country or widen the gap. Nationally only 28% of people believe that devolution will reduce inequality between places, rising slightly to just 31% of people in doubly disadvantaged areas.
- The public are more motivated by devolution's potential to deliver tangible benefits to their areas for example through better public services and lower crime, than any principles of local power. When asked to select priorities for devolution from a mixed list of tangible benefits plus principles such as 'local people having more say', and 'decisions made by people who understand local needs', principles generally ranked at the lowest end of priorities.

Part 2 of this report explores how England's Strategic Authorities have tried to deliver for disadvantaged places. We reviewed the contents of 59 of their latest strategy documents across economic growth, transport, and skills, finding hundreds of live policies or interventions.

- In this we find many innovative models of public service delivery, examples of partnership working with communities, and cases where particular areas have clearly been prioritised for investment and support.
- But there are gaps, and we identify a particular disconnect between the direction of travel Strategic Authorities have set for their broader regional economies and what these places are expected to contribute to it.
- We find only a few examples of pathways connecting residents of disadvantaged places into priority sectors, for example, and limited planning on how investments may spill out into these places.

Part 3 sets out a new playbook for how Strategic Authorities can best use their existing powers to serve disadvantaged places, drawing on the many examples of good practice that we looked at for this report. We also set out how Strategic Authorities can engage with the government's Pride in Place Programme (PiPP) and support community capacity building in every corner of the regions, as well as principles for reforming Strategic Authorities over the longer term to make them better capable of delivering for these places.

Part 4 sets out our recommendations for national government on how the centre needs to reform, and what the next stage of English devolution should look like.

We believe the next stage of devolution should be characterised by a much clearer focus on the places with the weakest economic and social foundations, and set out what additional powers, resource and responsibility should be devolved from Whitehall to help Strategic Authorities deliver for them. The following recommendations are ones we believe are fundamentally pro-growth, that would help deliver on the Prime Minister's goals of good growth in every postcode and power to communities:

- Strengthen political capacity within Number 10 North by appointing a dedicated Chief Secretary of the Nations and Regions who attends Cabinet

- Introduce a Neighbourhood Spending Lock, creating a permanent stream of funding to support places with high levels of deprivation and weak social infrastructure
- Devolve targeted tax relief powers to Strategic Authorities, allowing them to reduce employer NICs or business rates for firms investing, locating or hiring in disadvantaged places.
- Devolve a share of income tax to Strategic Authorities through an equalised settlement that rewards local growth, while directing additional resource and capacity funding to disadvantaged places
- New Good Growth Funds should invest in social infrastructure as well as physical infrastructure, with flexible funding that avoids a hard capital-revenue split.
- Devolve network integration powers for community and flexible transport to Strategic Authorities, enabling them to bring community and demand-responsive transport into regional ticketing, journey planning, and network management systems
- Establish JobsPlus as a permanent national model of neighbourhood-based employment support, as part of the wider devolution of employment support, further education and adult skills

Introduction

The theory of English devolution runs roughly as follows.

England is one of the most geographically unequal economies in the developed world, and one of the most centralised. Talent and potential exist in every part of the country, yet the concentration of power in Whitehall has meant that opportunity is neither developed nor shared evenly. The experiment of micromanaging regional development from Westminster has failed. Devolution is a way we can push real power and responsibility out of Whitehall and into England's regions, cities, and towns so that local leaders can make their own decisions about the future direction of their areas. Armed with a deep knowledge of their places, their people, and their economies, it is they who are better placed to make those decisions than ministers and officials in Whitehall.[2]

Devolution therefore is a means by which we can rebalance our national economy, narrowing the inequalities that exist both between places *and* within them. This is a view held by Prime Minister Andy Burnham, most recently the Mayor of Greater Manchester, who has drawn a very clear line between his plans for devolution and his aspiration to spread growth and opportunity more evenly across the country, particularly in places that are still suffering from the effects of deindustrialisation and austerity.

For over a decade, England has been building the institutions to make that theory real. The modern devolution story began in 2014, when George Osborne signed the first bespoke deal with Greater Manchester promising a 'devolution revolution' that would rewire the way England is governed. Since then, more than a dozen Mayoral Combined Authorities – now Strategic Authorities (SAs) – have been established, covering more than 60 per cent of England's population.[3] The 2024 English Devolution White Paper set out an ambition for universal coverage of Strategic Authorities across England, while current SAs are taking on deeper powers, with growing responsibilities, for their areas.[4] Soon every part of the country will be governed by a Strategic Authority, most of which will be led by a *Metro Mayor*.

Metro Mayors are becoming some of the most important figures in our system of government. They direct billions in public investment – building the transport networks, housing, training centres, innovation districts, and energy and digital infrastructure, that will power the industries of the 21st century.

They are, in other words, leaders with both the powers and the political authority to shape who benefits from devolution. With deeper powers on their way, the opportunity to use devolution as a means of building a new political economy that pulls places more closely together, rather than pushing them apart, is one which is there to be taken.

To what extent are Strategic Authorities using their powers to support the most disadvantaged places that they represent?

Strategic Authorities and their Metro Mayors, with substantial economic and convening powers, are well placed to drive the higher growth and productivity improvements that England's regions urgently need.

2 Manchester Evening News (2026). 'Andy Burnham's speech in full as he promises to "finish the job"'. Available at: https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/andy-burnhams-speech-full-promises-34203926

3 Institute for Government (2026). 'Devolution to England'. Available at: https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/topics/devolution/england

4 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024). English Devolution White Paper: Power and Partnership—Foundations for Growth. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper

But devolution has always carried a second promise: that its leaders would govern for the whole of their regions. They would not focus solely on the headline rates of economic growth within their region, but how they close the gaps – in employment, health, and opportunity – within it. SAs would aspire to deliver higher growth, but they would also work to ensure the benefits of that growth are felt across their region. Such ambitions are plentiful across the speeches and forewords delivered by the Mayors, particularly around using their power to support places that deindustrialisation and austerity have left furthest behind.

The debate on English devolution so far has concerned itself, mostly, with two questions. The first is *who decides*. Who holds power, how is it deployed, and how are those who wield it held accountable? The second is *what* powers those leaders need to deliver better outcomes locally, while contributing to national prosperity. This second question has occupied much of the space in the policy debate on devolution, which is forever focussing on the detail of the next deal, the next tranche of powers, and the next settlement.

Far less attention however has been paid to a third, equally important question: *for whom* are the powers of the Mayoralties being exercised? Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, Liverpool City Region, the North East, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire – these are places where devolution has gone furthest, and they are also the places that have borne the longest legacy of deindustrialisation. They are also places that carry some of the deepest deprivation in the country and are where the effects of austerity have been felt most strongly. These are also the regions whose Mayors have most vocally committed to the political economy that they are trying to build being based on principles of *inclusive growth* – working to make sure the benefits of devolution reach every part of their city-region, not just the most productive.

Most of the neighbourhoods that we have identified as being the most disadvantaged sit within a Strategic Authority area; the same is true of those that have been selected as part of the government's Pride in Place Programme (PiPP). The former mill towns, the coalfields, the steel communities, and seaside towns – the places most isolated from today's modern economy – are overwhelmingly concentrated within the boundaries of devolved England.[5] So too are the most deprived inner-city estates that sit within easy reach of thriving urban centres yet are disconnected from the prosperity that they generate. These places are not at the margins of devolution's geography; they are at its centre.

To what extent are the powers that Strategic Authorities hold being used to improve the most disadvantaged places they represent? That is the core question that this paper hopes to answer, through a rigorous analysis of the content of the core strategy documents in the policy areas where SAs have the most power – local economic growth, transport, and skills.

This analysis has provided us with a deeply rich understanding of the many ways in which SAs have sought to use their powers to improve disadvantaged areas. We draw upon this, outlining our learnings from the best practice we have identified, and setting out how SAs can best leverage their powers to do more for the most disadvantaged places they represent.

Finally, we conclude with several policy recommendations for national government. These recommendations consider how a new government could use the next stage of English devolution to build a state that is more capable of serving the places that have been left behind, as well as what additional tools central government could devolve to Strategic Authorities to make it easier for them to deliver for these places.

5 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2026). No Short Cuts: Towards a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Recovery. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/no-shorts-cuts-towards-a-national-strategy-for-neighbourhood-recovery/

Part 1: What do the public, and those living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, think about Devolution?

Politicians and policymakers tend to accept that excessive centralisation has undermined the potential of many parts of the country. The new government has therefore made English devolution central to its plans to deliver good growth in every postcode and genuine power for communities.

Machinery of government reforms rarely command broad public interest, but the weight devolution is now carrying means that, if it is to succeed, people will need to understand what it is for and believe it will make a difference to their lives. We have therefore sought to understand what the public wants from devolution, with a particular focus on which areas people believe should benefit.

ICON has worked with FocalData to explore public attitudes towards English devolution. We commissioned two polls – a nationally representative poll that covers all corners of England, and a second poll which samples those who live in 'doubly disadvantaged' areas, defined as areas suffering from having both high levels of deprivation and low levels of social capital and infrastructure.

A full paper on our public opinion research on devolution will be published separately to this one, by the end of this year.

This section of the report instead summarises some of our findings as they relate to the public's expectations and priorities for English devolution.

We find overall that English devolution begins from a position of broad public support. Yet we also find that in many ways the jury is still out, and it is evident in our findings that the public will judge devolution by the results that it is able to deliver and, specifically, *who* it delivers for.

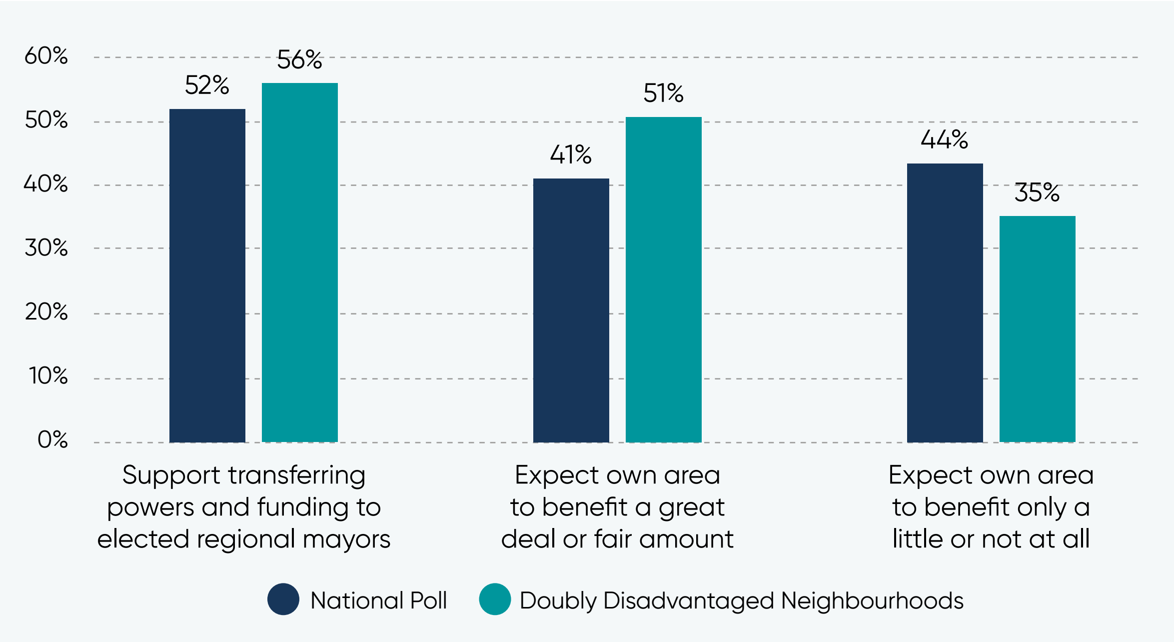
These findings underpin our belief that further scrutiny of the actions and priorities set by individual Mayors and Strategic Authorities is not only warranted but necessary for devolution to succeed as both a policy and a political project. We inspect these actions in greater detail in Part 2 of this report.

A majority of residents of doubly disadvantaged areas expect Devolution to deliver for their area, and people typically want Devolution to deliver real tangible benefits to their areas, rather than any notion of power being held and exercised locally

Devolution starts from a position of broad public support. As Figure 1 shows, we find that a majority (52%) of the public support in principle the idea of transferring powers and funding from Whitehall to elected regional mayors, rising to 56% for those living in doubly disadvantaged areas. We find that strong opposition to devolution is relatively limited, with only 16% of respondents from the national poll and 13% from the doubly disadvantaged poll strongly opposing the further transfer of power and funding.

But while popular support is there, this is somewhat conditional on people expecting that devolution should deliver for their area. Interestingly we find that this expectation is strongest in doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods with a majority (51%) of respondents expecting that their area will benefit a 'great deal or fair amount' from devolution, compared to 41% nationally.

Figure 1: A majority of the public support devolution in principle, while a majority of residents of doubly disadvantaged areas expect that their area will benefit a great deal or fair amount



Source: FocalData polling for ICON, September 2026

There is no single priority that dominates for what people want devolution to deliver on. But we do find that respondents are significantly more interested in devolution delivering better local outcomes, than they are over specific principles of power.

In the national poll, better access to health and other local public services received the highest net priority score (+42), followed by keeping council tax and other local charges down (+30), reducing crime and anti-social behaviour (+20), and ensuring areas receive sufficient funding and investment (+17). In doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, crime and anti-social behaviour ranked first (+40), followed by health and public services (+38). By comparison, giving local people more say and making responsibility and accountability clearer received negative scores in both polls. Better local transport also ranked poorly, which is of particular note given that transport tends to take up a particularly large share of MSAs' total capacity and is virtually always a top priority among Mayors. Taken together, however, these results show that services, safety, household costs and adequate funding take precedence when placed directly against questions about *how* power should be exercised.

Figure 2: Public services, safety and household costs take priority over how local decisions are made

Priority	National Poll Net Priority Score	Doubly Disadvantaged Poll Net Priority Score
Better health and other local public services	+42	+38
Keeping council tax and local charges down	+30	+30
Lower crime and anti-social behaviour	+20	+40
Enough funding and investment to meet local needs	+17	+16
More good jobs and opportunities	+1	−2
Decisions made by people who understand local needs	−8	−11
Local people having more say	−20	−17
Clear responsibility and accountability	−31	−35
Better local transport	−41	−48

Source: FocalData polling for ICON, September 2026. Net priority score is calculated by subtracting the percentage selecting each item as least important from the percentage selecting it as most important. Positive scores indicate higher relative priority and negative scores indicate lower relative priority.

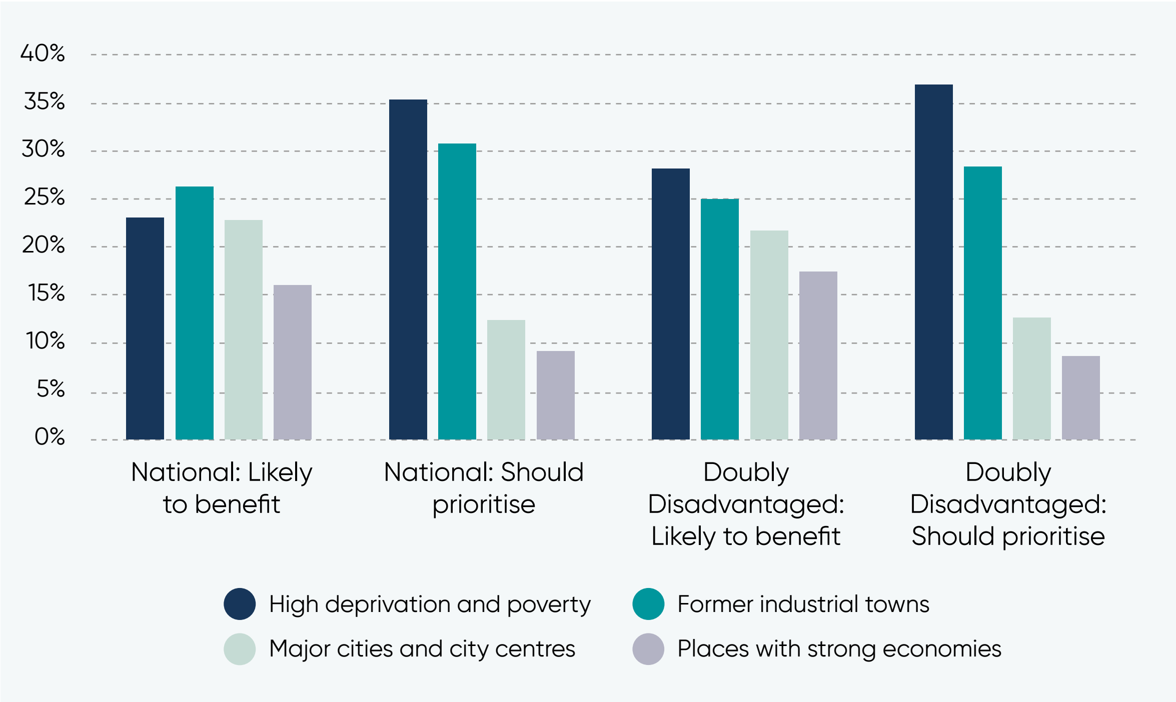
These findings suggest that people are warm to the idea of devolution overall, but above all what they want it to deliver is results. This is a consistent theme across our polling results which we will reflect on in more detail in a later publication. But it is worth flagging how many of the areas respondents selected as top priorities are areas over which MSAs currently have few powers. The recent Cabinet Statement "Rewiring The State" suggested that local areas will receive greater control over public services including health and policing, where some progress has already been made in recent years.[6] Nonetheless, if devolution continues to be presented as the key to better outcomes while the state struggles to deliver them, public support may decline and the initial warmth towards the idea may cool quickly.

People consistently want Devolution to prioritise poorer places and our industrial heartlands, although they are less optimistic that it will reduce the gap between rich and poor parts of the country

We find that, generally, the public wants the focus of devolution to tilt towards areas that are highly deprived with high concentrations of poverty, and former industrial towns and communities that have lost major industries or employers. This is consistent across two questions we asked about which types of area the public believe are likely to benefit from devolution, and the types of area that they believe *should* benefit from devolution. As Figure 3 shows, over half of the total respondents from both our national and doubly disadvantaged polls selected either places with high deprivation and poverty, or former industrial towns, as the places they believed that Mayors should prioritise.

6 Cabinet Office (2026). Rewiring the State – Cabinet Statement. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rewiring-the-state-cabinet-statement/rewiring-the-state-cabinet-statement-html

Figure 3: Breakdown of highest responses for the types of area that respondents believed were most likely to benefit from Devolution, and which areas should be prioritised by Mayors themselves



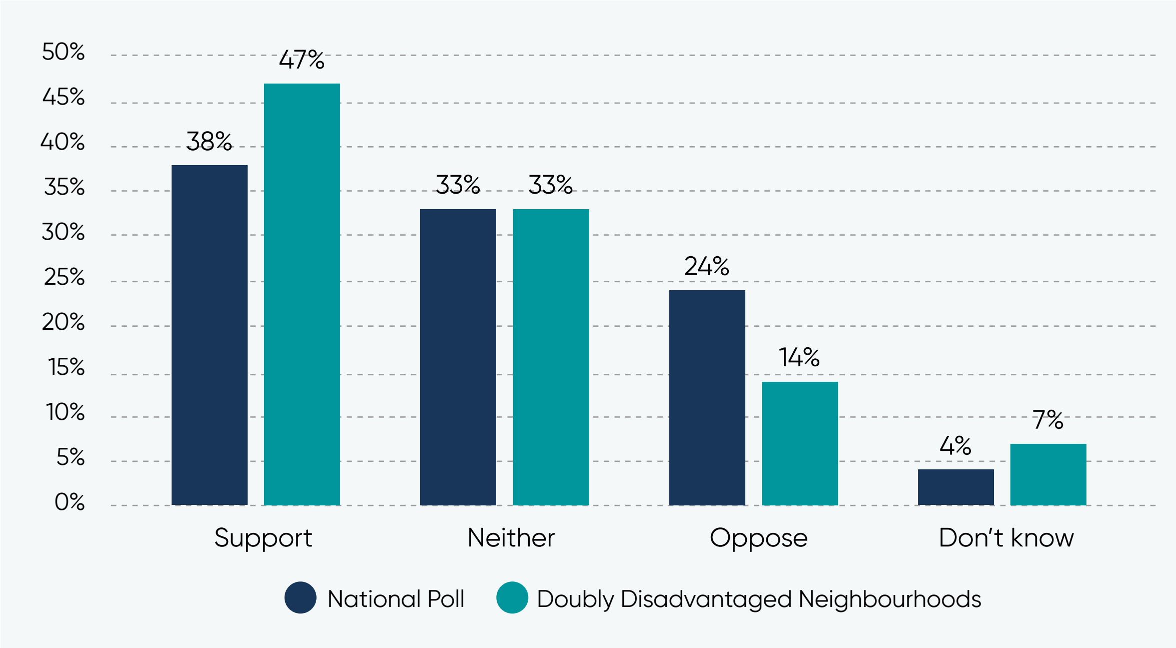
Source: FocalData polling for ICON, September 2026. Q27 asked which types of places were most likely to benefit from devolution; Q28 asked which should be prioritised. Respondents could select up to two. Four selected responses are shown. Chart omits the following response options: "Prosperous commuter towns and suburbs"; "Coastal towns and communities"; "Rural and more isolated areas"; "All types of places equally"; "No types of places would really benefit – Q27 only"; "Don't know"

We found that the public's preference for devolution to focus specifically on delivering for disadvantaged places was surprisingly robust across several questions.

For example, for one exercise we asked respondents to work through a series of trade-offs which are reflected in the national policy debate on devolution. One of these asked respondents whether they would support a Mayor directing more funding to the most disadvantaged parts of the region if this meant less funding for other areas.

As Figure 4 shows, we found that 38% of respondents from the national poll supported the approach versus 24% who opposed it. Among people in doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, support reached 47%, while only 14% opposed. This suggests there is more support than opposition for devolution being a means of redistributing funding towards disadvantaged places, with particularly strong backing among people living in those places.

Figure 4: Responses to question "Suppose powers and funding were transferred to an elected regional Mayor for your area. Suppose that Mayor then directed more funding to the most disadvantaged parts of the region, but this meant less funding was available for other areas. Would you support or oppose this?"



Source: FocalData polling for ICON, September 2026.

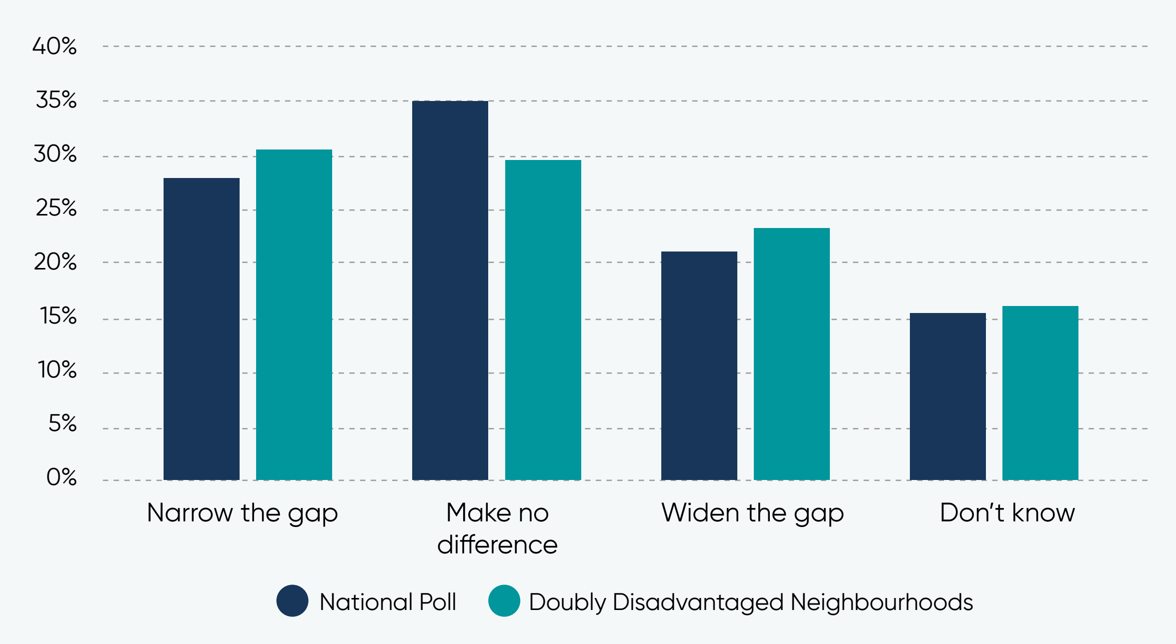
In the same exercise we asked if people would support or oppose a Mayor concentrating investment in the region's largest city or town because it would create the most jobs overall, even if this meant less investment for other places. We found that more respondents opposed this than supported it across both of our polls, with our national poll showing opposition of 38% versus support for 32%, and opposition of 40% versus support of 25% from those living in doubly disadvantaged areas.

In another exercise, we asked people to choose between concentrating investment where it would generate the most economic growth overall, even if this meant less investment in places with weaker economies, or investing more in weaker economies to spread growth more evenly, even if this meant less economic growth overall.

Nationally, 52% preferred investment in places with weaker economies, compared with 33% who favoured maximising overall growth. The preference was stronger among people in doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where the figures were 56% and 26% respectively. This question was put to everyone taking part in the polling and shows that how growth is distributed matters to the public, even where a more even distribution comes at the cost of lower growth overall.

Despite all of this, however, we found there to be a degree of scepticism over the extent that devolution might make any difference to inequality between rich and poor places. As Figure 5 shows, we find that 53% of people nationally and 56% of people living in doubly disadvantaged areas think that devolution will either make no difference to inequality between rich and poor parts of the country or widen the gap. Nationally only 28% of people believe that devolution will reduce inequality between places, rising slightly to just 31% of people in doubly disadvantaged areas.

Figure 5: Responses to question "Overall, do you think giving more powers and funding to elected regional Mayors would narrow or widen the economic gap between richer and poorer parts of England?"



Source: FocalData polling for ICON, September 2026.

Public attitudes towards Devolution

From the sample of our polling work that we have included in this paper, there are two things which seem to stand out.

The first is that the public are warm to the idea of devolution in principle and strong opposition to it is very limited. Yet they do expect it to deliver results, and in this there are potentially some risks in the short-term. The main risk is that the areas in which results are most wanted and potentially expected are those which, currently, MSAs have relatively limited control over, including for example health and crime. People are fundamentally less interested in who holds power over decision-making if that comes at the cost of their area getting better. The challenge this presents for devolution both in public policy terms but also as a political project is that it must seek, in a very active way, to ensure that such visible results are delivered, and that ownership for the delivery of those results can be claimed both by local leaders for delivering them, and also from national figures for being the ones who relinquished their own powers to enable others to make the changes their areas need. This is fundamentally what is necessary for devolution to succeed.

The second is that the public seem to associate devolution with places that have been 'left behind' and they overwhelmingly want it to deliver for them. In every trade-off exercise that we ran we found that support for interventions that focussed on places suffering from high levels of deprivation and poverty, and post-industrial places, in particular, always won out. The idea that devolution has the potential to mostly favour places that are already better off, or that the gap between them and poorer places in their region may widen, is fundamentally unpopular. The public also do not seem to buy the idea of job creation being focussed on only a small number of places within a region and then 'trickling out' everywhere else. They are also generally willing to forego additional economic growth if achieved via this strategy if that means that it comes at the expense of places that have experienced significant economic decline receiving less direct investment.

For these reasons, we feel it is justified to inspect many of the actions and interventions taken by MSAs themselves, as we do in the next Section. As the analysis and later discussion show, substantial good work is already being delivered locally, much of which could be scaled nationally.

Part 2a: A new methodology for exploring the relationship between Strategic Authorities and disadvantaged places

The introduction sets out a question: to what extent are the powers that Strategic Authorities hold being used to improve the most disadvantaged places they represent? To answer it, we need a way of reading what Mayors themselves say about how they intend to use those powers – systematically, and at scale.

To do this, we collected the core published strategies of all Strategic Authorities in England, across three domains of power: local economic growth and industrial strategy; transport; and skills. We extracted the text from each document, breaking it into sections of around 200–800 words at natural heading breaks. Each section was then screened against a keyword schema covering ten themes, as set out in Figure 6. In total we collected 59 strategy documents, which broke down into 2,139 sections of text.

Figure 6: Keyword schema for analysing Strategic Authority strategy documents

Theme	Keywords
Deprivation / **disadvantage**	deprivation, deprived, disadvantaged, poverty, low-income
Place / **neighbourhood targeting**	neighbourhood, community, communities, ward, parish, local area, place-based, area-based, hyper-local, hyperlocal, locality, localities
Administrative / **statistical geographies**	LSOA, MSOA, lower super output area, middle super output area, output area, small area, data zone
Left behind / **forgotten places**	left behind, forgotten, overlooked, underserved, underinvested, underinvestment, neglected, marginalised, excluded, social exclusion
Post-industrial / **structural decline**	post-industrial, deindustrialisation, deindustrialised, former industrial, coalfield, coal community, pit village, former steel, steelworks, mill town, manufacturing decline, economic decline, declining area, regeneration, renewal, just transition
Index / **measurement references**	IMD, Index of Multiple Deprivation, indices of deprivation, most deprived, decile, percentile, quintile, bottom 10%, bottom 20%, priority area, CNI, community needs index

Theme	Keywords
Social infrastructure / capital	social capital, social infrastructure, social cohesion, community asset, community hub, community space, civic infrastructure
Targeted intervention framing	targeted, priority, prioritising, spreading benefit, inclusive growth, concentrate, levelling up
Health deprivation indicators	health inequality, health inequalities, life expectancy, premature death, excess mortality, fuel poverty, food poverty
Coastal / energy transition places	coastal, coastline, seaside, fishing communit, energy communit

Sections containing relevant keywords were then sent to a large language model (LLM), GPT-5.4-Mini, which read each section and used a Chain-of-Thought (CoT) coding protocol, which assesses how, and how meaningfully, each authority engages with disadvantaged places, and the core issues affecting them, when exercising the powers it holds.

With each section the model is asked to reason through a sequence of tests, and with each test it returns a judgement based on the content of the text. The protocol asks first whether the section describes the actual exercise of power or simply provides background context. For sections that do describe power, it then assesses what kind of commitment is being made, at what geographic scale, and whether area-based disadvantage is explicitly driving any specific policy commitment or targeting.

The four tests are set out below, and in Appendix A there is more detailed information about how we quantify the data that the LLM returns to us:

- Does this section describe action being taken, or is it purely background or context?
- What type of commitment does this section make in relation to disadvantaged places?
- At what geographic scale is any targeting or delivery operating?
- Is place-based disadvantage the explicit, named reason for the geographic targeting?

The model then returns, for each section of text, an interpretation of what the text describes. Figure 7 shows an illustrative way of understanding how the protocol works, and what it is trying to capture.

"The passage describes the Integrated Pipeline as a delivery mechanism targeting "six Growth Locations" oriented around economic clusters in sectors like Life Sciences, Advanced Manufacturing, and Digital. While it mentions "spreading the benefits across Greater Manchester," this is aspirational diffusion language rather than targeting of deprived neighbourhoods. Deprivation is not named as a criterion, and no mechanism connects the Growth Locations to areas of concentrated disadvantage." – Summary of extract taken from Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Local Growth Plan, 2025-2035.

Figure 7: Illustration of how our Chain-of-Thought protocol assesses text

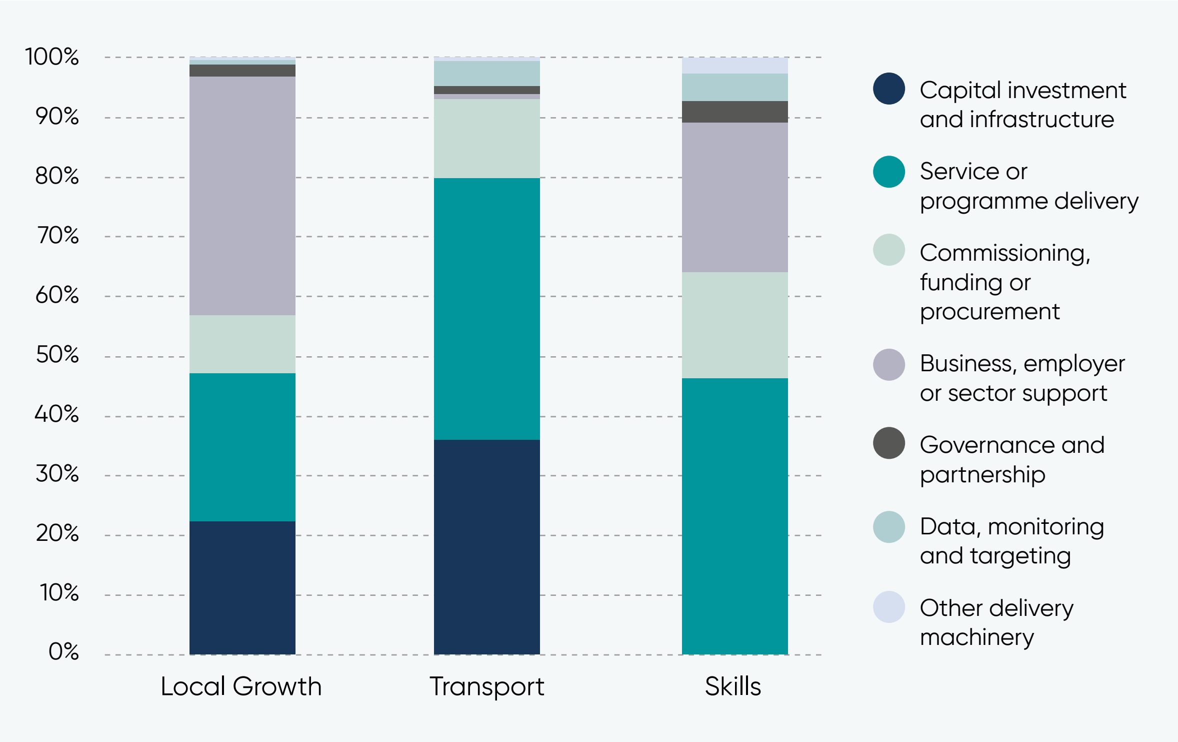
Type of statement	Example	What this text does
Acknowledgement of problem	*"Our region contains some of the most deprived communities in England, with deep-rooted challenges in health, employment, and educational attainment."*	Recognises the problem exists. Says nothing about what the authority intends to do about it.
Diagnosis of problem	*"Persistent deprivation in our coastal towns reflects decades of economic restructuring, poor transport connectivity, and the loss of anchor employers."*	Identifies causes and contributing factors. Still describes the problem rather than responding to it.
Aspiration to fix problem	*"We will prioritise investment in areas of greatest need, ensuring that the benefits of growth are shared across the city-region."*	States an intention without specifying how it will be delivered. No auditable commitment.
Mechanism to deliver improvements on problem	*"50% of Adult Skills Fund provision will be allocated to providers operating in the 30% most deprived LSOAs, with a 1.5x funding uplift for delivery in those areas."*	Sets out a rule that would produce a different outcome for deprived places, and could be checked against delivery.

Part 2b: How are Strategic Authorities trying to deliver for disadvantaged places?

Strategic Authorities hold significant powers over the systems that shape opportunity across the regions they represent, and that is reflected in how delivery and action-oriented their strategy documents tend to be.

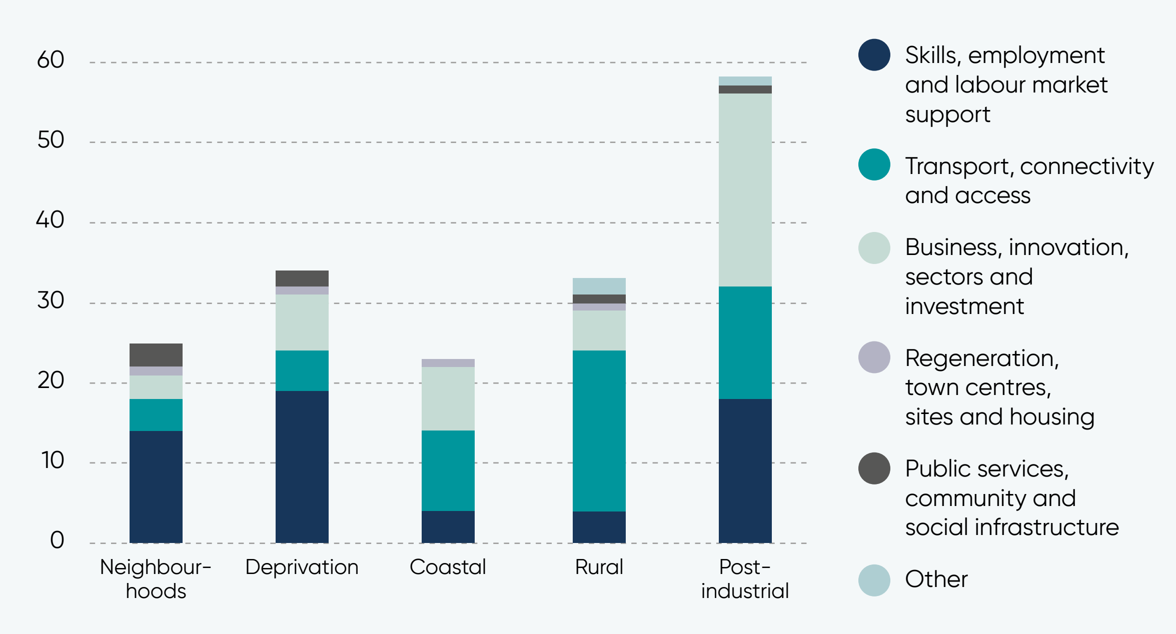
Figure 8 shows a breakdown of the types of interventions that we identified across the themes of economic growth, transport, and skills. Local growth strategies are weighted most heavily towards business, employer and sector support, which accounts for around 40% of the interventions MSAs are making, alongside capital investment and infrastructure at just under a quarter (23%). Transport strategies are mostly focussed on service or programme delivery and capital investment, at 44% and 36% respectively, reflecting the very practical work of reshaping bus, rail and road networks, and supporting active travel. Skills strategies are, by their nature, more "people-focused", which is reflected in just under half (46%) of the interventions we identified being centred around service or programme delivery. Interestingly, a further 25% contained a substantial employer and sector-facing element, reflecting the many partnerships that have been developed between MSAs and employers, the education sector, and the community sector.

Figure 8: Breakdown of interventions being delivered by Mayoral Strategic Authorities across their core strategy documents, by policy theme



How much do the interventions supported by SAs differ by geography? The examples are varied across the different SAs, but there are some clear trends. Of the 33 interventions focused on rural areas, the majority (20) focus on transport, and other forms of connectivity, particularly broadband. Skills and employability programmes are the most common forms of intervention targeted towards areas with high levels of deprivation, as well as most of the neighbourhood interventions we found – making up 56% and 55.8%, respectively. Interestingly, 41.4% of the interventions we found that referenced post-industrial areas were some of the larger regional policy interventions in the strategy documents – referencing specific sectors, sites, clusters, or pipelines. This is most often the case for brownfield redevelopment, or when there is a clear connection between a geography type and a sectoral opportunity, for example, Liverpool City Region's aspirations to become the country's "Renewable Energy Coast" leant heavily on a narrative of revitalising places affected heavily by deindustrialisation.

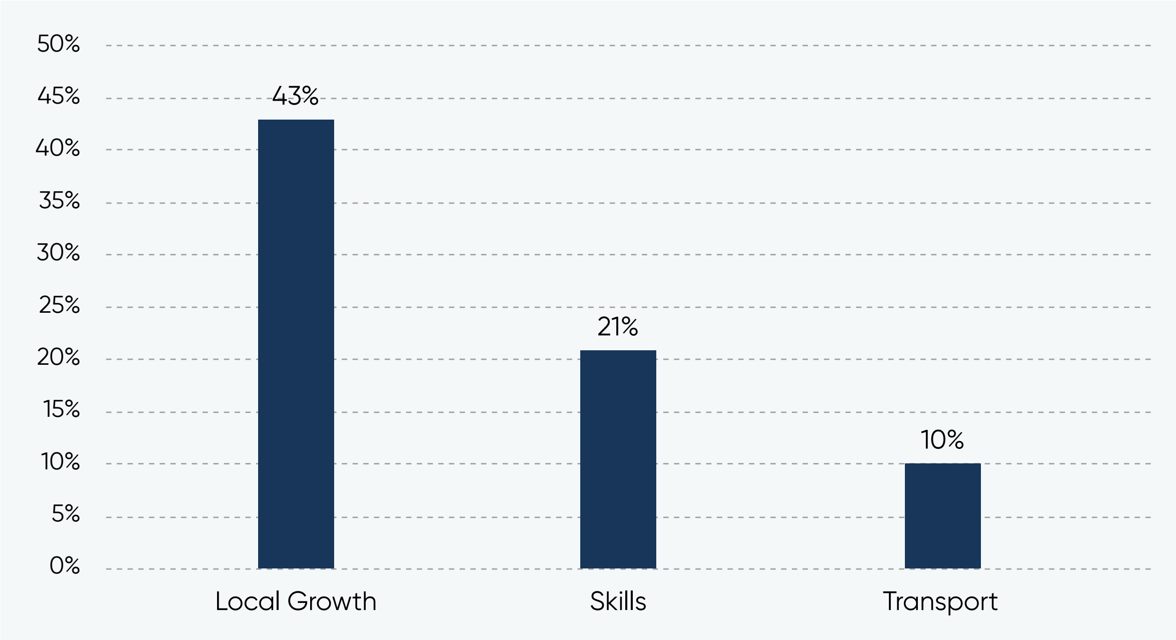
Figure 9: Breakdown of hyperlocal and area-based interventions featured across MSA local growth and industrial strategy documents



The vast majority of the interventions focussed either on neighbourhoods or which seek to address deprivation are more 'people-facing'. As mentioned, the majority are focussed on skills or employability. Some interesting examples include Liverpool City Region's Cradle to Career model, South Yorkshire's Pathways to Work programme, and the West Midlands' Connecting Communities employment support pilot. There are other examples of SAs ringfencing their budgets to target support towards disadvantaged places, with perhaps the best example being Greater Manchester, which targets 50% of their adult education spending towards the 30% most deprived neighbourhoods in the city-region.

SAs also clearly recognise the role that strong public services can play in widening access to economic opportunity in disadvantaged areas. Nearly half (43%) of the neighbourhood interventions we identified in the local growth documents were either community or public service interventions, compared with 21% and 10% for skills and transport, respectively. Perhaps the most prominent example we found was the Greater Manchester Live Well service, which features prominently in Greater Manchester's local growth documents. Many MSAs made reference to the contribution that family hubs or early years provision can make in giving greater flexibility to parents to re-enter the workforce, take on more hours, or enrol in a training course.

Figure 10: Proportion of neighbourhood interventions delivered through public services, by broad policy area



On the flip side, we identify only a small number of neighbourhood or deprivation-based interventions that connect directly into the harder machinery of regional economic growth. There are, however, some stronger examples of this "neighbourhood to regional" connection being built explicitly. One is the West Midlands' Inclusive Growth Corridors, which sought to deepen the impact of major infrastructure investments by connecting them to local social programmes, community-based organisations and progression pathways into employment. The strategy describes the corridors as a way to "bring together investment in targeted and locally agreed Inclusive Growth Corridors", embedding "inclusive growth goals and a 'social baselining'" so that returns on investment "deliberately target" environmental, social and economic outcomes. It also says the model should "use the growth potential of the area to reimagine an underlying social infrastructure that can turn changes in the built and natural environment into changes in life chances that are tangible and measurable."

Other examples point in a similar direction, though usually less fully. Greater Manchester's Local Industrial Strategy set out a "healthy ageing" agenda that would seek to spill out local innovation in life sciences to trial new neighbourhood-scale approaches to ageing, testing new goods and services in areas experiencing significant health inequalities, including Rochdale, Oldham, Tameside, north Manchester and Wigan. South Yorkshire describes active travel investment as a way of connecting "disadvantaged neighbourhoods to opportunities to work and learn." Many SAs are directly supporting or commissioning employment support programmes at the neighbourhood level, working hand in hand with local employers. Such examples go beyond simply saying that growth should be "more inclusive" and are more specifically trying to better connect economically isolated places or residents to their wider regional economies.

Many SAs appear to have built strong relationships with local community institutions, and the broader VCSE sector, in the regions they represent. Community spaces and organisations are often central to how support is delivered in disadvantaged places, and we found many examples of SAs working with local groups, particularly on employment, health, early years, and family support.

In many of the strongest examples, the community layer is the mechanism that connects a regional system to residents who might otherwise struggle to reach it. Greater Manchester's Live Well model is one example, offering everyday support in deprived neighbourhoods in GM through local hubs that host voluntary, community and public-service routes. Lancashire's Growth Plan does something similar through WorkWell, Connect to Work and Youth Hub outreach, linking employment, health and skills support in named high-need places across Blackpool, Blackburn, Burnley, Pendle, Preston, Fleetwood and Accrington.

Figure 11 shows the different forms this takes across the three domains. The important point is that "community delivery" does not mean the same thing in each policy area. In local growth, the strongest pattern is the use of VCSE and voluntary sector organisations as delivery partners, particularly for employment support, health, family support, as well as some mentions of community wealth building. In skills, it is mostly about community-based learning, using local and trusted routes into adult education for residents who may be least likely to engage with mainstream provision.

Figure 11: Breakdown of community-facing programme delivery routes across SA strategy documents

Domain	VCSE and voluntary sector	Community hubs and local venues	Outreach and engagement	Community learning	Community transport and flexible local access
Local Growth	37	8	6	2	1
Transport	10	8	4	0	59
Skills	11	2	1	9	0

Transport looks different again, because it is one of the largest and most practical areas of SA power. Mayors have direct influence over rail and bus networks, fares, service standards, franchising, active travel, and can introduce community or demand-responsive services. Mayors have significant scope to influence how well-connected different places are. That includes the ability to improve access where residents face barriers, whether those barriers are affordability, disability, rural isolation, weak links to employment sites, poor service frequency or distance from everyday services.

Figure 12 shows that SAs are using transport powers to tackle access barriers in several different ways. The largest category is fares and concessions, which appeared in 87 sections. A substantial share of these were around capping fares for particular low-income groups, or for example subsidising travel passes for people where transport costs are a practical barrier to accessing jobs or services. Flexible and accessible transport is the second largest category, appearing in 69 sections. The examples included here are broad and include community transport schemes such as Ring and Ride, demand-responsive transport schemes that connected geographically isolated estates to large employment sites, and efforts to better integrate geographically isolated places with regional bus networks.

Figure 12: Breakdown of transport interventions by type, barrier and place focus

Intervention type	Total sections	Deprivation or transport poverty	Rural or isolation	Neighbour-hood or community	Coastal or post-industrial	Access to jobs or services
Fares and concessions	87	17	6	26	4	33
Flexible and accessible transport	69	12	16	47	0	38
Walking, cycling and streets	54	9	11	33	9	32

Intervention type	Total sections	Deprivation or transport poverty	Rural or isolation	Neighbour-hood or community	Coastal or post-industrial	Access to jobs or services
Network and service improvement	21	2	4	8	3	9
Fleet and air quality	11	1	1	3	0	2
Place shaping and stations	9	3	1	6	1	6
Other transport action	6	0	0	1	0	1

Growth in every postcode?

Across the economic growth documents we analysed there is a recognition, and often quite a strong narrative, around wanting to deliver for certain areas that are seen to have been left behind. Yet there is arguably something of a 'rhetoric versus reality gap' in these documents. There are regular references to deprivation, inequality, low employment, "barriers to opportunity", and the challenges facing certain types of place including post-industrial, coastal, and rural communities.

In this report we have identified several different interventions which seek to address these challenges. But it is hard to conclude that improving such areas is a major driving force of economic decision-making within SAs. The main economic focus is overwhelmingly regional and on frontier sectors of the economy, often with quite specific details around investment pipelines, strategic sites, sector plans, and public-private partnerships. This is particularly true of Local Growth Plans. In them, we could only identify a very limited number of examples of programmes that were seeking to connect residents of disadvantaged places with opportunities in these sections of their local economy. The most common theory of change articulated in these strategy documents is that a stronger regional economy, better connected and more productive, will reach all parts of the region. We find this is stated regularly across these plans. However, we find limited evidence that SAs have developed many pathways for residents of 'left-behind' places to access opportunities in the sections of the local economy that SAs have the greatest interest in growing.

ICON's own analysis highlights this, showing that growth neither trickles down to the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods nor trickles out to them from nearby cities, with only 124 neighbourhoods nationally (0.38%) classed as "shared uplift" and job access in the most disadvantaged decile roughly half that elsewhere (47.5 versus 84.5 jobs per 100 people). Had Mission Critical Neighbourhoods grown at the national average through the 2010s they would generate an additional £9.8bn a year.[7]

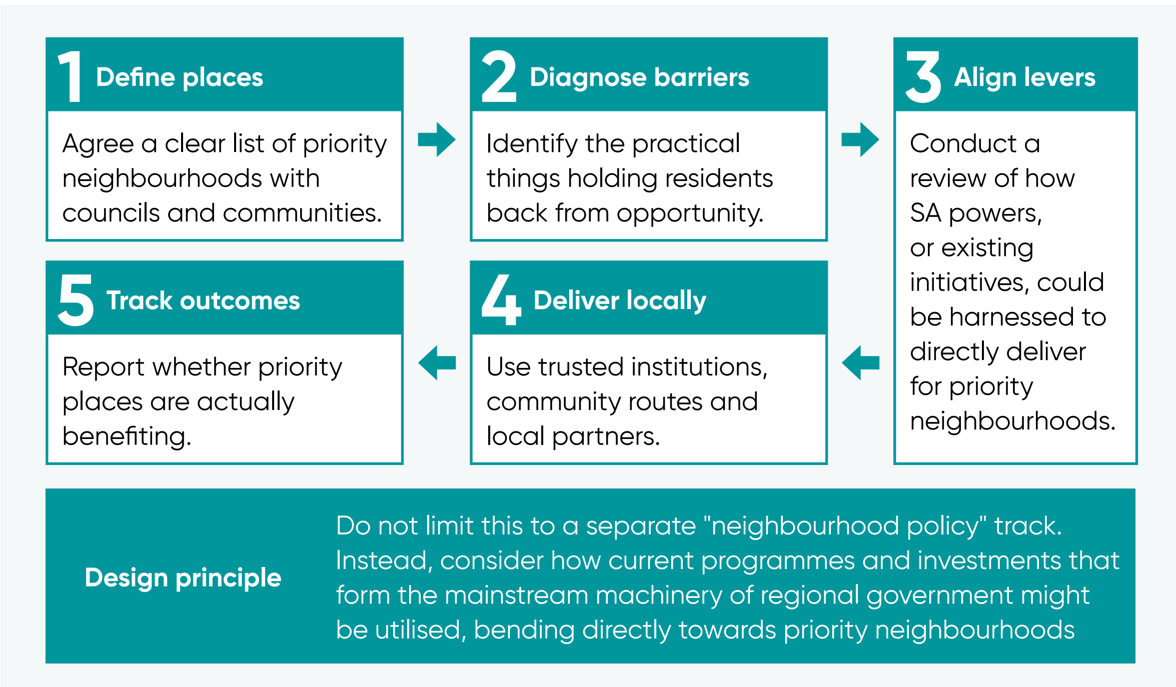
7 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2025). The Missing Links: Connecting Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods to New Economic Opportunities. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/the-missing-links-connecting-disadvantaged-neighbourhoods-to-new-economic-opportunities/

Part 3: A playbook for Strategic Authorities to deliver for disadvantaged places

The evidence in this paper shows that SAs are already using their powers to address the challenges facing disadvantaged places. Across growth, transport and skills, we found practical examples of targeted investment, community delivery, flexible transport, outreach, and skills provision designed to reach people and places that can be missed by mainstream systems. The opportunity now is to turn that practice from a set of promising examples into a clearer operating model for driving change in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, towns and communities.

How can SAs use the powers they already hold to deliver more deliberately for the places that need them most? Figure 13 sets out a five-stage model for doing this. It offers a simple theory of change for turning regional powers into practical improvements in disadvantaged places. This reflects within the context of SA powers, the same logic as ICON's Staircase Model: social infrastructure, then social capital, then public service engagement, then economic development, within which social foundations are a precondition for growth rather than a reward that follows it.[8]

Figure 13: A Five-Stage model to support disadvantaged places



8 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2026). No Short Cuts: Towards a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Recovery. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/no-shorts-cuts-towards-a-national-strategy-for-neighbourhood-recovery/

This model is deliberately practical in that it does not require SAs to wait for new powers before acting. Instead, it asks the question of how the powers that they already hold can be organised more deliberately to improve priority places. Table 1 below sets out an illustrative example of how this might look in practice, considering the three different policy areas that we reviewed for this paper.

Table 1: Illustrative examples of how SAs might apply the five-stage model within the policy areas where they have the largest powers

Stage of Model	Local Growth	Transport	Skills
Define places	Define which neighbourhoods sit within commutable distance of major growth sites, town centre programmes, sector clusters or regeneration zones	Define priority places where poor connectivity, low car ownership, transport poverty or rural isolation are limiting opportunity	Define priority neighbourhoods where low skills, low pay, worklessness or economic inactivity are concentrated
Diagnose barriers	Diagnose what stops residents and local firms benefiting, such as skills, transport, weak business networks, poor health, childcare, or lack of local workspace.	Diagnose the specific access problem, such as cost, journey time, route availability, disability access	Diagnose why residents are not entering or progressing through training, such as confidence, health, childcare, digital exclusion, transport, or weak links to employers.
Align levers	Align approaches to investment, procurement, employment support, business support, transport, childcare and community services around those barriers	Align regional approaches to fares and concessions, bus and rail network planning, and active travel, with an assessment of need in priority areas, and respond with regional integration, or community approaches e.g. demand-responsive transport	Align AEB, employment support, community learning, provider commissioning and LSIP priorities around those barriers
Deliver locally	Deliver through trusted neighbourhood groups and institutions, local councils, VCSE partners, colleges, other anchors	Deliver with regional providers, or community transport providers and local partners where the core network cannot easily serve residents	Deliver through trusted local venues, community learning routes, colleges, outreach teams and employers
Track outcomes	Track whether residents and businesses in priority places are actually gaining jobs, training, and progression	Track whether access to jobs, services and training improves in priority places	Track participation, completion, progression and job outcomes for residents in priority places

What might implementation of this model look like? Drawing from previous ICON research, as well as the vast body of policy and practice that we have looked at for this paper, the following ideas align with different stages of this model and are already things that SAs can introduce without the need for any additional powers:[9]

Local Economic Growth

- **Earmarking additional investment for priority neighbourhoods.** MSAs could use funds such as UKSPF, Integrated Settlements, or local investment funds to allocate a proportion of total MSA investment into priority neighbourhoods. Greater Manchester's Local Growth Plan shows the kind of machinery that could be used for this, with a single Integrated Pipeline and an initial £1bn Good Growth Fund to sequence housing, transport, innovation and employment sites. The next step would be to build a clear priority-neighbourhood test into that kind of pipeline.
- **Integrating employment support across public and community services.** There are many good examples to follow of integrating employment support through health in particular, where advice is offered through GP surgeries, social prescribing, WorkWell-style services, youth hubs and community settings, rather than only through mainstream Jobcentres. This would build on practice already visible in Lancashire's Growth Plan, Greater Manchester's Live Well model, West Yorkshire's Work and Health Plan, and the West Midlands' work to align employment, skills and health support through Connect to Work and WorkWell. JobsPlus is a good national example of such a programme.
- **Neighbourhood Growth Strategies.** Developing distinct growth strategies – either for priority neighbourhoods as a whole or for particular individual neighbourhoods – would require MSAs to consider how they can ensure that particular developments or investments directly contribute towards supporting their priority neighbourhoods.[10]
- **Using social value procurement to support priority neighbourhoods.** MSAs could adjust procurement frameworks so that major contracts create clearer benefits for residents, businesses and community organisations in priority neighbourhoods. Liverpool City Region is a good model to follow, making explicit links in their Local Growth Plan about integrating fair employment standards with procurement that opens up supply chains to smaller local firms and socially trading organisations, delivering this through Kindred, a social value partnership.
- **Working with anchor institutions to develop pathways into work.** MSAs could work with councils, colleges, universities, NHS bodies, housing providers and major employers to create entry-level jobs, apprenticeships and progression routes for residents of priority neighbourhoods. Liverpool City Region's work on anchor institutions, public land and social trading organisations through Kindred is a strong example of good practice in this area.
- **Promoting good employment through local charters.** MSAs could use good employment charters to ask major employers to commit to recruitment, apprenticeships and progression routes for residents of priority neighbourhoods. Greater Manchester's Good Employment Charter, Liverpool City Region's Fair Employment Charter and the West Midlands Good Work Charter all provide existing models. The opportunity is to connect these charters more directly to priority places, so that good employment becomes part of the neighbourhood growth offer.

9 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2025). The Missing Links: Connecting Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods to New Economic Opportunities. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/the-missing-links-connecting-disadvantaged-neighbourhoods-to-new-economic-opportunities/

10 Future Governance Forum (2025). Mission Critical 04: Building a New Relationship Between People and the State. Available at: https://www.futuregovernanceforum.co.uk/resource/mission-critical-04-building-a-new-relationship-between-people-and-the-state/

Transport

- **Using deprivation and transport poverty in service planning.** SAs could build deprivation, low car ownership, public transport reliance and journey time into the way they decide which bus services to improve. South Yorkshire provides the clearest model. Its BSIP develops place typologies that flag communities in the top decile of deprivation, communities affected by transport poverty, and places more than 15 minutes by public transport from a regional hub. It also identifies "isolated communities", 66% of which are either deprived or experiencing transport poverty, as targets for improved public transport.
- **Prioritising future bus routes by who they serve.** MSAs could create a published pipeline of bus improvements based on which routes would make the biggest difference to residents with the weakest access. West Yorkshire's BSIP, for example, ranks services by whether they stop near people and jobs, pass people without access to a car, serve the most deprived areas according to IMD, and run through rural communities. As funding becomes available, the highest-ranking services are then brought forward for improvement.
- **Reducing travel costs for people moving into work or training.** SAs could use fares and travel support to remove one of the practical barriers to employment. Greater Manchester's BSIP provides a good model, proposing 28 days of free bus or Metrolink travel for apprentices and people returning to employment, alongside bike loans, travel planning and advice. GM's free bus travel scheme (Our Pass) for 16-18 year olds also found higher uptake and usage in more deprived areas. West Yorkshire's mobility credits point in the same direction, with free or discounted travel distributed through organisations working with unemployed people. Such initiatives can be introduced, particularly as areas move towards franchised and integrated transport services, with a focus on the most disadvantaged areas.
- **Using flexible transport where normal bus routes do not work.** SAs should explore how flexible, demand-responsive or community transport options might be introduced and integrated as part of their regional transport system. There are several examples across existing SAs such as Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire, the North East, and Tees Valley, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, using different modes of hyper-local and community transport options that reflect different service gaps that affect different types of geography (e.g. rural areas)

Skills

- **Ringfencing skills and training budgets for priority neighbourhoods.** Where possible, SAs should consider how they might be able to target additional funding into areas with particular problems around skills and worklessness. Greater Manchester, for example, ringfences 50% of its adult education spending for the 30% most deprived Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) in the city-region.
- **Developing outreach provision with local authorities, colleges and employers.** SAs could work with councils, FE colleges and employers to take skills provision into places and groups that are currently under-served. West Yorkshire's Adult Skills Plan gives a strong example through targeted pilots in geographic "cold spots", including Kirklees and wards across Bradford, where low engagement in adult skills was addressed through targeted provision and early findings showed improved progression and more sustained outcomes. West Midlands offers a complementary model through its Place-Based Adult Skills Fund, using local authority place strategies, FE and local authority delivery plans, and employer co-design to align skills provision with unmet local need. MSAs could use this approach to create outreach plans for priority neighbourhoods, with councils, colleges and employers jointly responsible for identifying gaps, recruiting learners and building routes into work.
- **Measuring progression.** SAs could track whether learners move into better work, further learning, higher earnings or stronger confidence. West Yorkshire is strengthening destination data, learner intent, employment quality measures and a shared impact framework. West Midlands' Works Outcomes Dashboard is also a strong model, with plans to track employment, inactivity, pay gaps, youth participation, hubs, integrated interventions and disaggregated targets for places with high economic inactivity.

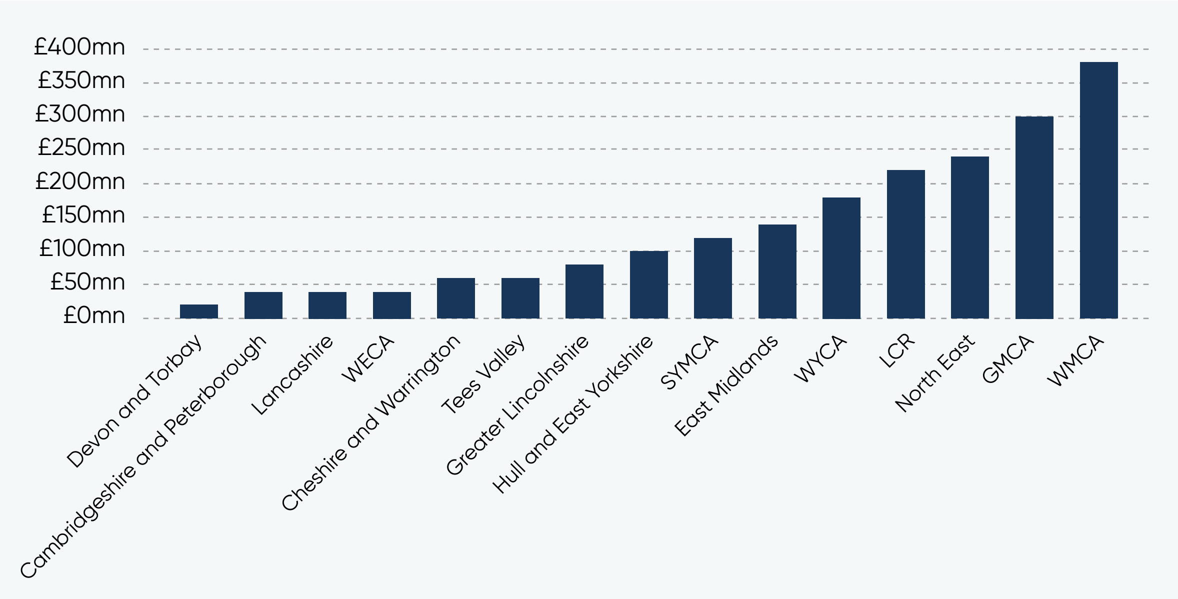
- **Leveraging community assets to deliver training within neighbourhoods.** SAs should explore options to expand their community learning offer, working with VCSE organisations and trusted local venues as routes into adult skills for residents who may not engage with mainstream provision. The West Midlands Community Learning Framework is one example that is aligned with local council plans, covering digital inclusion, family learning, health and wellbeing, youth-focused provision and green skills. It also uses a £1m Community Fund to support organisations with strong local connections that may not usually deliver through standard AEB routes. West Yorkshire's Tailored Learning is another example of flexible provision that has been successful in targeting people from poorer areas, where 66% of learners were from the most deprived wards.

Pride in Place and Community Capacity Building

In addition to these policy areas, there is a broader and more strategic role that SAs can play in supporting disadvantaged neighbourhoods and building community capacity in places experiencing economic and social isolation.

The government's Pride in Place Programme (PiPP) is a significant, immediate opportunity. Of the 186 neighbourhoods in England that are receiving £20m over 10 years as part of Phase 2 of the programme, just over half (101, or 54%) are located inside an SA. This represents £2.02bn of investment into the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods over the next decade, with £1.14bn of this in just four authorities: £380m for the West Midlands, £300m for Greater Manchester, £240m for the North East, and £220m in Liverpool City Region.

Figure 14: Breakdown of total Pride in Place allocations by Strategic Authority



The design of PiPP is deliberately neighbourhood-focused, operating at an average scale of around 10,000 residents per place. It is also intentionally community-led. Responsibility for local priorities and investment planning sits with Neighbourhood Boards made up of residents and local stakeholders, including the local Member of Parliament, with local authorities providing capacity and delivery support.

PiPP guidance suggests that Neighbourhood Boards should consult SAs on their plans where relevant, but in practice there is a stronger role for SAs to play. Many of the issues that PiPP areas will want to address are shaped by systems that sit above the neighbourhood level – most notably around transport links, skills provision, and public land use and asset acquisition, while there are further opportunities to leverage procurement and wider investment planning to boost the local impact of PiPP.

There are several ways that SAs could engage meaningfully with Pride in Place including, for example:

- **Establish Regional Neighbourhood Board Networks.** This is the simplest and most immediately useful thing SAs can do. A regional network would give PiPP boards a forum to share learning, compare delivery challenges, and raise common issues with SAs, councils, colleges, housing providers, transport bodies, NHS partners, employers and other regional anchors. It would also help weaker boards learn from places with stronger civic infrastructure.
- **Mayors should chair a Pride in Place Council.** Each PiPP area in an SA should be represented by the Chair of its Neighbourhood Board. The Council would meet a few times a year and focus on larger strategic issues that individual boards cannot solve alone, such as transport access, public land, skills provision, community ownership and links to major investment. Mayors and their teams should also commit to visiting every PiPP area on a regular basis, meeting boards, residents and local organisations.
- **Use Pride in Place as a weight in social value procurement.** SAs could add Pride in Place areas into their social value frameworks, so that major contracts are scored partly on the benefits they create for residents, businesses and community organisations in those neighbourhoods. This could include commitments on local recruitment, apprenticeships, work placements, supplier spend with local SMEs and social enterprises, use of community venues, volunteering, public realm improvements, or support for community assets.
- **Match fund Pride in Place areas, potentially ringfencing a proportion of local growth funding to provide additional resource.** SAs could set aside a small proportion of local growth, regeneration or Integrated Settlement funding to match strong PiPP proposals. This would help neighbourhood boards scale up projects that have a clear economic or social purpose, and would also give SAs a practical way to align regional investment with neighbourhood priorities, while leaving the original PiPP funding under local control.
- **Build a regional Pride in Place support offer.** Much like business support, SAs could provide PiPP boards with data, technical advice, project development support, funding advice, procurement support and links into transport, skills, housing and regeneration programmes. This would give neighbourhood boards access to regional capacity while leaving local decision-making with the board.
- **Require Pride in Place Plans to be considered in regional decision-making.** SAs should request sight of every Pride in Place Plan in their region and formally assess how their own programmes can support it. Each SA should publish a response to every Plan, setting out where existing transport, skills, employment, housing, regeneration, business support or public service programmes could be aligned.
- **Map Pride in Place areas against the SA investment pipeline.** SAs should map every Pride in Place area against current and planned investment in transport, skills, housing, regeneration and public realm improvements, employment support, and public service reform. This would show whether PiPP areas are benefiting from regional investments and where they are being missed.

More generally, SAs should think beyond Pride in Place and consider how they might be able to contribute towards building community capacity across their areas, be it within Pride in Place areas or other disadvantaged places overall. There are several parts of the existing regional toolkit that may prove useful for doing this, and a number of different initiatives and models that SAs could support the expansion of, including:

- **Community Land Trusts (CLTs).** SAs could support the development of new CLTs by identifying prospective areas and supporting access to public land, development funding, technical advice and links to housing and regeneration programmes.

- **Neighbourhood Planning.** Research by the University of Reading has found there are just four neighbourhood plans in Local Trust's list of "left behind neighbourhoods".[11] More could be done by SAs, working with councils and communities, to use neighbourhood plans, design codes, or lighter neighbourhood investment plans to support improvements to local housing stock and supply, and the public realm.
- **Participatory Budgeting.** SAs could test small participatory budgets in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, promoting existing best practice, as well as considering how to carry over learning from the Place-Based Budget pilots announced in the Budget 2025.
- **Neighbourhood boards outside PiPP areas.** SAs could support similar style Neighbourhood Boards in other disadvantaged places.
- **Community Improvement Districts (CIDs).** SAs could run their own versions of Community Improvement Districts, first led by Power to Change.[12] SAs could also use their Right to Request Powers to request powers to develop "Super Community Improvement Districts" with different planning rules, rate relief structures, and other incentives, as developed by Popular on behalf of ICON.[13]

Reforming Strategic Authorities over the medium-long term

SAs, and Metro Mayors in particular, often place support for disadvantaged or "left behind" places at the centre of their public mission. The evidence in this paper shows that this is more than rhetoric and there are many examples of practical delivery already taking place.

Soon enough, every corner of England will be represented by a regional tier of government, most of which will be led by a Mayor. If devolution is meant to be about rebalancing the economy, then it is only right that SAs and Mayors themselves take steps to ensure that the institutions they lead develop a culture of thinking and working that treats disadvantaged neighbourhoods, towns, and communities, as places with a central role in building their future economy, rather than places that receive support after the 'big' economic choices have been made.

The five-stage model we set out above is useful for thinking through how SAs can support particular places in the here and now, linking priority places in with existing project cycles and with the proper pipeline of the region. But over time as SAs mature, and take on deeper powers and build stronger delivery capacity, the contribution they can make to rebalancing access to opportunity *within* the places they represent, will grow larger, and the scale of the contribution they can make will grow to be more meaningful. To this end, SAs should consider how they themselves might reform and evolve as organisations over the medium-long term.

The recent NHS 10 Year Health Plan offers a useful parallel. It is built around three shifts that describe the direction in which the service itself needs to move: from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention.[14] SAs could adopt the same kind of thinking for how they mature, and reform, as institutions. The aim would be to put rebalancing within regions on the same footing as growing the regional economy as a whole.

11 University of Reading (2026). 'Just Neighbourhoods'. Available at: https://research.reading.ac.uk/justclp/just-neighbourhoods/

12 Power to Change (2023). Community Improvement Districts Pilot Programme: Final Report. Available at: https://www.powertochange.org.uk/evidence-and-ideas/research-and-reports/community-improvement-districts-pilot-programme-final-report/

13 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2026). Pride in Parades II: Strategies for Renewing Neighbourhood Social Infrastructure. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/pride-in-parades-ii-strategies-for-renewing-neighbourhood-social-infrastructure/

14 Department of Health and Social Care (2025). 10 Year Health Plan for England: Fit for the Future. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/10-year-health-plan-for-england-fit-for-the-future

The table below sets out four shifts, which set out what this might look like in practice.

Figure 15: Four shifts to reform and evolve Strategic Authorities

Shift	Description
From trickle out to 'pulling in'	'Pulling in' reflects an approach to economic development where the most disadvantaged and isolated areas are actively pulled towards areas with economic opportunity. It rejects the idea that growth will spill out to areas that are nearby centres of production if they face practical or social barriers to participating in the economy. This approach would relentlessly focus on outreach and very deep, long-term collaborations with local employers and community institutions, the broader public sector, and other anchors, doing all that they collectively can to be as visible, and present, in the communities they view to be most in need of support. A long-term view would focus on how each partner can contribute towards developing the social and economic foundations of disadvantaged places over time, following the Staircase Model that has previously been developed by ICON[15]
From exclusion to inclusion	SAs must reject the idea that areas that they represent should be allowed to remain socially, geographically, or economically excluded. This would require a zero-tolerance approach to accepting that areas are hard to reach, shifting towards a mindset that says that instead, they have been easy to ignore. Progress on reducing social, geographic, and economic exclusion should be reported on a regular basis and decisions taken by SAs should always consider how they can contribute towards reducing them. As SAs mature and acquire deeper powers, plans should be developed to identify the opportunities that new powers would bring to reduce them.
From state-led to community-led	SAs have an important role to play in coordinating, supporting and enabling activity across the regions they represent. But they also need to know when to pass power down, step back, and let communities lead. A community-led approach does not mean consulting communities, and then hiring programme managers to run a programme on their behalf. It is a permanent institutional commitment to building community capacity and trust, backing local institutions, and sharing best practice across the region so that successful local models can be strengthened and adapted elsewhere.
From outputs to foundations	SAs already support work that is focused on outcomes. They will all recognise that better transport can help people reach training, and that training can help people move into better work. But the harder question is knowing what level of improvement is needed in the core social and economic foundations of a place before those barriers to opportunity have fully eroded. At what specific point would we say that an area no longer suffers from poor transport, low skills, poor health, weak local networks or limited childcare? How far does each intervention move an area closer towards that point? This shift is about moving beyond the individual outputs of programmes and interventions, towards a shared view of the long-term conditions that need to change in a place. It asks SAs and their partners to be clearer about the end goal, how different interventions contribute to it, and whether the foundations of opportunity are actually getting stronger over time.

15 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2026). No Short Cuts: Towards a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Recovery. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/no-shorts-cuts-towards-a-national-strategy-for-neighbourhood-recovery/

Part 4: The next stage of English Devolution

The government has committed to "completing the map" of English devolution, as well as strengthening Strategic Authorities through further decentralisation of power, resource, and responsibility, from Whitehall. This holds enormous potential to make a difference to the most disadvantaged places, and we should take the opportunity to see the next stage of English devolution as one in which we think more fundamentally about who devolution is *for*.

We believe that this next stage should be characterised by a much clearer focus on the places that have the weakest economic and social foundations, particularly those still living with the long effects of deindustrialisation.

This section of the report sets out a number of recommendations that central government could take, that we believe would begin to rewire the functions of government to best serve the interests of these places, considering what additional powers, resources and responsibilities should be devolved from Whitehall to Strategic Authorities.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen political capacity within Number 10 North by appointing a dedicated Chief Secretary of the Nations and Regions who attends Cabinet

There are more than a dozen different national neighbourhood-level programmes currently being delivered by central government.[16] This includes the Pride in Place Programme (PiPP) as the flagship neighbourhood regeneration programme being delivered by MHCLG, but also other programmes such as Neighbourhood Health, and Neighbourhood Policing, which are being delivered by different Whitehall departments.

ICON has previously called for a Neighbourhoods Unit to be placed at the heart of central government, ideally within Number 10 or the Cabinet Office, to coordinate cross-governmental work to improve disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The government have since established a Place Unit, based within MHCLG, which is leading these efforts.

The Place Unit, which was originally overseeing this work from MHCLG, has seen some of its functions and staff already transferred to Number 10 North. This will mean that neighbourhood working can become more embedded across the mainstream work of government and offers a real promise to coordinate the several ongoing neighbourhood programmes within places. Yet the real opportunity to deliver lasting change to many of the most disadvantaged places is in coordinating this neighbourhoods agenda with the other work of Number 10 North, specifically on reindustrialisation and wider economic policy.[17,18]

16 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2026). No Short Cuts: Towards a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Recovery. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/no-shorts-cuts-towards-a-national-strategy-for-neighbourhood-recovery/

17 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2026). 'Neighbourhoods and Public Services', Written Statement HCWS117, 16 June. Available at: https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-06-16/hcws117

18 ICON is carrying out further research on the opportunities that reindustrialisation presents for disadvantaged places, to be published later in 2026.

It therefore makes sense for Number 10 North to take strategic leadership for all place-based work across government. This does not necessarily mean placing delivery functions for individual neighbourhood programmes in Number 10 North. Instead, it would mean giving one part of the centre of government clear responsibility for setting the overall direction, coordinating departments, tracking delivery, and ensuring that national programmes are working together in the same places.

Number 10 North should hold the national map of neighbourhood and place-based programmes, identify where different departmental interventions overlap, and advise the Prime Minister, Cabinet and Strategic Authorities on how those interventions can be better aligned. Its role should be to make sure that national programmes such as Pride in Place are being coordinated with local efforts to reform local programmes to deliver economic growth and reform public services. It would foster a place-first approach across government that would ensure that these programmes and devolved efforts are not operating as separate initiatives but are contributing to a shared plan for improving disadvantaged places.

While it is sensible to boost the capacity of officials within Number 10 North to deliver this, there is also a case for expanding its political capacity. There is a strong political case for focussing more intently on improving disadvantaged places, yet in our engagement with officials we have often observed there to be a hesitancy or resistance to this way of working. It therefore makes sense that in order to deliver this agenda it will need a more expanded, and permanently located, political capacity to drive this agenda across government.

We therefore believe Number 10 North should be overseen by a dedicated Chief Secretary of the Nations and Regions, who attends Cabinet. The current Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister role is a natural model to look to for clarifying its specific role, duties, and responsibilities. This role would be important for asserting the political authority that will be necessary to convene departments, Mayors and devolved administrations, and other actors to ensure "place-first" is a guiding principle for the whole of government, and that the next stage of devolution is one that puts the interests of the most disadvantaged places first.

Recommendation 2: Introduce a Neighbourhood Spending Lock, creating a permanent stream of funding to support places with high levels of deprivation and weak social infrastructure

Neighbourhood regeneration programmes can have real benefits, as we have seen programmes such as the New Deal for Communities (NDC) and, more recently, Big Local. However much these programmes may deliver improvements to areas they are, fundamentally, *programmes*, which are allocated a budget and given a start and end date. As ICON has shown before, one of the drawbacks of taking a programmatic approach to delivering neighbourhood renewal is that, naturally, it can be very stop-start, often leaving many communities in the dark about what may come next.[19]

Nevertheless, the evidence that sustained, un-ringfenced investment at a hyperlocal level works is strong: the 2000s neighbourhood programmes measurably improved the worst-off areas before a third of those gains were lost when funding stopped in the 2010s, while Big Local – long-term, unrestricted and free of competitive bidding – returned £3.16 for every £1, with crime falling 49% faster than in matched areas.[20] Competitive bidding, by contrast, systematically favours higher-capacity places over those in greatest need.[21]

19 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2025). Mapping the Landscape of Place-Based Initiatives in England, 2019–2025. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/mapping-the-landscape-of-place-based-initiatives-in-england-2019-2025/

20 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2025). Progress and Pressure: Understanding Economic and Social Change in England's Neighbourhoods. Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods.

21 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2025). Mapping the Landscape of Place-Based Initiatives in England, 2019–2025. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/mapping-the-landscape-of-place-based-initiatives-in-england-2019-2025/

ICON has long argued that if we are to support the recovery of the many neighbourhoods across the country who face deep social and economic challenges, to support them to become thriving again, then a more dedicated, permanent, stream of funding will be required.

An idea for a 'Neighbourhood Spending Lock' was recently proposed by a group of MPs, which would provide a route to deliver this. They put it like this:[22]

"Each Budget, the Chancellor would allocate a certain proportion of day-to-day spending to a Neighbourhood Investment Fund. The Fund would invest in the types of places that Pride in Place is targeting, using a robust and widely accepted methodology: neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation and low levels of social infrastructure. These places are sometimes called 'doubly disadvantaged' and tend to be found in seats like ours: post-industrial towns and villages, estates in cities particularly in the North and Midlands, and coastal communities across the country.

The Fund could be spent on three things in eligible neighbourhoods. First, economic support to bring 'good jobs' back to these places. Second, public service improvements – targeted support for the NHS and schools, for example. Third, investment in social infrastructure; the parks, playgrounds, community centres and crucially the volunteers and organisations to run them, building on Pride in Place."

The idea has two main benefits. First, it moves beyond time-limited regeneration programmes and would give areas clarity and certainty over investment, allowing them to adjust priorities as circumstances change. Second, it would support a broader set of areas than current programmes allow. Crucially, this could include places that sit just above existing programme thresholds and enable innovation in public service reform and economic growth, following ICON's Staircase Model of neighbourhood recovery.[23]

Recommendation 3: Devolve targeted tax relief powers to Strategic Authorities, allowing them to reduce employer NICs or business rates for firms investing, locating or hiring in disadvantaged places.

The government has made a commitment to pursuing fiscal devolution, with HM Treasury expected to produce a roadmap over the coming months, with announcements expected for this year's Budget. In this paper, we make two recommendations on how fiscal devolution can directly support disadvantaged places.

The first of these recommendations is to provide Strategic Authorities with powers to offer time-limited relief on employer National Insurance contributions or business rates for firms that create jobs, apprenticeships or new premises in disadvantaged places. The cost of the relief should be reimbursed annually by HM Treasury, within an agreed budget for each participating SA given in advance, possibly on a three-year rolling basis to match current Spending Review and Local Government Finance Settlement cycles. This would give Mayors a direct fiscal lever to attract investment into places with weak local labour markets, rather than relying only on grants or general business support.

Previous work by ICON has set out how this can be designed to ensure that it contributes towards achieving the priorities of both Strategic Authorities but also national government. First, it would require flexibility[24] in the design to ensure take-up and avoid deadweight. Evaluations of the veterans' NIC relief found that while employers welcomed the savings, the relief rarely influenced hiring, as employers were unaware. Similarly, previous attempts to use business rates reliefs to raise employment – most notably in the Coalition government's Enterprise Zones

22 Beavers, L., Brackenridge, S., McKenna, K. and Rushworth, S. (2026). 'A neighbourhood spending lock: an idea Labour can unite behind', LabourList, 15 June. Available at: https://labourlist.org/2026/06/a-neighbourhood-spending-lock/

23 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2026). No Short Cuts: Towards a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Recovery. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/no-shorts-cuts-towards-a-national-strategy-for-neighbourhood-recovery/

24 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2025). The Missing Links: Connecting Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods to New Economic Opportunities. Available at: https://www.neighbourhoodscommission.org.uk/report/the-missing-links-connecting-disadvantaged-neighbourhoods-to-new-economic-opportunities/

scheme – have fallen short of expectations on job creation. Furthermore, many of the jobs created have often been low-paying, in low-productivity sectors.[25]

Neighbourhood Investment Relief would not be universal. Instead, it should target priority sectors that align with the long-term economic priorities of the wider local economy, as well as being conditional on job quality. For sectors, this may mean offering relief to IS-8 sectors or in other sectors in the productive economy that would support reindustrialisation of the local economy. On job quality, reliefs could be made available only to firms offering "good jobs" – paying at least the Real Living Wage, offering secure contracts with minimum hours, and providing a clear skills development plan for workers.

This approach would support better alignment of relief funding with both local and national economic priorities. It would also help ensure a higher uptake of the relief, given the conditionality requires an element of proactiveness from both local government and firms.

Recommendation 4: Devolve a share of income tax to Strategic Authorities through an equalised settlement that rewards local growth, while directing additional resource and capacity funding to disadvantaged places

One of the reasons why HM Treasury has been reluctant to allow areas to retain a proportion of the taxes they produce has been the idea that it could widen inequalities between places, not reduce them. The logic here is that if you allow areas to retain some of their tax base and reinvest locally, then areas that are already wealthy will have more to invest than poorer areas with lower tax bases. Following this logic through you would see richer areas, capable of doing more, get richer, while poorer places fall further behind.

There is therefore a very strong case for ensuring that there is some form of equalisation between places, if the government is to allow areas to retain a proportion of income tax generated locally, as is currently the intention. The challenge, however, is ensuring that this doesn't become a catch-22 – if poorer areas are compensated for that, then in theory that could create a fiscal incentive to *stay poorer*.

One approach might be to allow areas to retain a proportion of income taxes, but with a balance between local retention and national redistribution, which would provide an additional and permanent revenue stream into poorer places.

A model developed by the Centre for Progressive Policy (CPP) proposed devolving 2% of income tax receipts to local government.[26] Under this model, half of the revenue would be retained locally, giving areas a direct incentive to grow their tax base. A further share would be redistributed towards places with weaker economies and higher levels of deprivation. A final share would be ringfenced for rebuilding local government capacity in areas where weak institutional capacity is itself a barrier to growth.

The benefit of this approach is that it avoids treating growth and redistribution as opposing objectives. Local areas would still gain from growing their economy, and poorer places would also be provided a revenue stream that reflects the scale of disadvantage they face. But by tilting the balance towards retention over redistribution, this would provide poorer places with the same "pro-growth" incentive as other places, given they would not be penalised in losing out on their redistributed income.

The illustrative modelling attached to the CPP proposal suggests this would provide significant annual funding for Strategic Authorities. The West Midlands would receive around £462m a

25 Centre for Cities (2019). In the Zone: Have Enterprise Zones Delivered the Jobs They Promised? Available at: https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/in-the-zone-have-enterprise-zones-delivered-the-jobs-they-promised/
26 Centre for Progressive Policy (2023). Funding Fair Growth. Available at: https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/funding-fair-growth

year, Greater Manchester around £369m, West Yorkshire around £259m. But the redistributive element would be especially important for places with weaker local economies. In the illustrative modelling, Blackpool would receive around £34m a year, with 82% of that coming through redistribution. Kingston upon Hull would receive around £62m. The West Midlands, Tees Valley, Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire and the North East would also receive most of their revenue through redistribution, reflecting the scale of spatial inequality within and between Strategic Authority areas.

This is not the only option that may resolve the inherent tension between retaining incentives for growth and preserving redistribution. For example, recent work published by the Centre for Cities has demonstrated how a model that redistributes between MSAs themselves while maintaining a funding floor on a per capita basis could work.[27]

Recommendation 5: New Good Growth Funds should invest in social infrastructure as well as physical infrastructure, with flexible funding that avoids a hard capital-revenue split.

The Greater Manchester Good Growth Fund is a locally controlled investment fund designed to back a pipeline of housing, employment and regeneration projects across the city-region. It combines local control with long-term capital and aims to spread growth beyond the city centre, making it a model that could be scaled across England. Doing so is something that Burnham has stated he wants to do, saying in a speech that he will "help all areas establish Good Growth Funds".[28]

Good Growth Funds should aim to support a wide range of different investments to improve disadvantaged places. The GM Good Growth Fund will support a very wide range of interesting, worthy, and innovative projects, with several housing and transport projects, as well as investments to develop infrastructure for key economic clusters.

For some places, particularly those with the deepest levels of deprivation, the starting point towards delivering good growth would be to invest in social infrastructure. Previous research has shown how areas with high deprivation, as well as low levels of social infrastructure and social capital, are least likely to experience the spillover effects of economic growth that is generated in their surrounding areas.[29] Much research has established the link between the physical and community facilities which bring people together to build meaningful relationships, and economic growth, and therefore for many places this would be a sensible place to begin. The returns are well evidenced: social infrastructure has been valued at around £3.50 for every £1 invested, with 71% of the 2011 riots occurring in areas ranked worst for social cohesion, and it is roughly three times more cost-effective than physical infrastructure.[30]

Practically, this would mean investing in local assets and organisations that build networks, trust and capacity in disadvantaged places, while connecting residents more directly to regional programmes on skills, employment, business support, transport and public services. Doing so would require revenue funding so that people and programmes can be funded as well as the buildings they would be working in, so we recommend avoiding rigid capital-revenue splits and having flexibility in funding.

27 Centre for Cities (2026). Adding Up: How to Deliver Fiscal Devolution. Available at: https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/adding-up-how-to-deliver-fiscal-devolution/

28 Manchester Evening News (2026). 'Andy Burnham's speech in full as he promises to "finish the job"'. Available at: https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/andy-burnhams-speech-full-promises-34203926

29 Centre for Progressive Policy (2024). Breaking the Cycle. Available at: https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/breaking-the-cycle

30 Coutts, A. P. and Díaz Velásquez, D. M. (2025). Social Infrastructure and Social Capital—the Active Elements of Community Resilience.

Recommendation 6: Devolve network integration powers for community and flexible transport to Strategic Authorities, enabling them to bring community and demand-responsive transport into regional ticketing, journey planning, and network management systems

Strategic Authorities are gradually moving towards taking public control of their local transport systems. Many aspire to run "London-style" integrated transport networks, with the Greater Manchester Bee Network being the first example of such a system in a Strategic Authority area.

There are many benefits to an integrated system, including integrated ticketing and easier cross-subsidisation of different services. This is particularly important for restoring many of the socially necessary services that connect more geographically isolated and rural places. Many of these were lost during austerity, with research by IPPR North finding that cuts to bus provision have been ten times higher in the most deprived parts of England than the least deprived.[31] The Bus Services Act 2025 requires transport authorities to identify socially necessary local services and consider how those routes can be protected, which will provide an initial pipeline of routes that could be restored quickly.

Much of the evidence collected for this paper shows SAs already experimenting with flexible, community and demand-responsive transport. These services can be vital for residents who cannot rely on the core bus network, particularly in rural areas, isolated estates, and places with poor access to employment opportunities and public services. But they are often treated as supplementary provision: pilots, volunteer-led services, or bespoke transport for particular groups. These transport options should be incorporated within integrated transport systems so that they are planned alongside buses, rail, active travel and fares, rather than sitting at the edge of the network.

Practically, central government would need to give SAs a legal power to designate publicly supported community transport and demand-responsive services as part of their integrated transport network. This would allow Section 22 community bus services that are open to the public to be registered with the SA in franchising or integrated network areas. It would also allow publicly supported DRT services to be included in network maps, journey planners, local fare caps and multimodal ticketing, regardless of whether they are delivered as flexible bus services, community buses, shuttles, or otherwise.

Incorporating these modes of transport into integrated networks would have several benefits. The first is that it would increase awareness among residents who may benefit from them, but do not know they exist. It would also make cross-subsidisation across different parts of the network easier, increasing financial sustainability of routes while potentially opening up options for further expansion over time. Finally, it would help reduce transport costs for passengers whose journeys involve both a community transport or DRT service and a mainstream bus, tram or rail service, by allowing those journeys to be covered by integrated fares, fare caps or through-ticketing.

Recommendation 7: Establish JobsPlus as a permanent national model of neighbourhood-based employment support, as part of the wider devolution of employment support, further education and adult skills

The analysis in this paper shows that labour market interventions are the most common area of focus for Strategic Authorities seeking to increase economic opportunities for disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They are also one of the areas where links between SAs and community-based organisations and assets are strongest. Yet many of these programmes, and the organisations

31 IPPR North (2025). 'Change You Can Board'. Available at: https://www.ippr.org/articles/change-you-can-board

that deliver them, are held back by fragmentation across the skills system, particularly funding streams. Many of the programmes, for example, were supported by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which is ending.

Supply-side support of this kind only works where there are jobs to move into: around 70% of the 6.3 million economically inactive live in areas of low labour demand, so employment programmes such as JobsPlus need to be paired with measures – including the tax reliefs and Good Growth investment set out above – that generate good jobs in the same places.[32]

The new government has signalled that they are looking to devolve further powers and resources over employment support, further education, and adult skills. This should not be seen as the centre 'stepping back'. Rather, it is about providing areas with the budget certainty and discretion to move beyond short-term programmes, to build lasting local infrastructure that helps people train, retrain and move into work as their local economies change. National government should still play an active, supportive role in identifying models that work and working in partnership with SAs, employers, colleges, and community institutions, to adapt and scale them across the country.

One such model is JobsPlus. JobsPlus is a community-led model of employment support, originally developed in the United States, which has just finished a ten-site pilot programme in the UK. JobsPlus is unique for several reasons – it is delivered *within* people's neighbourhoods, it uses 'community champions' to engage with hard-to-reach residents and offers intensive one-to-one support, and it uses financial incentives for participants who stay in work. The final evaluation showed JobsPlus typically engaged residents furthest from the workforce, and was generally effective at supporting them into employment.[33]

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has, in light of JobsPlus' promising signs of effectiveness, extended the pilot for a further year. Yet the evaluation of the pilot concludes that JobsPlus has strong potential for scaling. Rather than continue with a pilot of just ten places, the government should look to make JobsPlus a permanent national model of delivering employment support in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. JobsPlus is a programme but it could also be viewed as a philosophy and a way of doing, in the same way that Prime Minister Andy Burnham has called for a "national Housing First philosophy" to address homelessness.[34]

JobsPlus is also low-cost – the pilot sites ran on a budget of around £250,000 each during the course of the pilot. There are other national skills programmes with low take-up and high levels of underspend that could be repurposed to support an expansion of JobsPlus. Metro Mayors handed back £64m in the first three years of the government's Free Courses for Jobs (FCFJ) programme, for example, which would be enough to support the expansion of JobsPlus to a further 250 sites alone. Repurposing part of the Adult Skills Fund, or devolving a share of the Growth and Skills Levy, may be other fiscally neutral routes for expanding JobsPlus nationwide.

32 Beatty, C., Tyler, P., Warnock, C. and White, G. (2026). Good Jobs Needed in the Right Places. Bennett School of Public Policy. Available at: https://www.bennettschool.cam.ac.uk/blog/good-jobs-needed-in-the-right-places/

33 Learning and Work Institute (2026). JobsPlus: Main Report. Available at: https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/JobsPlus-Main-report__628-2.pdf

34 Manchester Evening News (2026). 'Andy Burnham's speech in full as he promises to "finish the job"'. Available at: https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/andy-burnhams-speech-full-promises-34203926

Appendix A: Step processes of ICON's Chain-of-Thought Model

Test	Prompt	Possible returns
Test 0: Context or Action	*Does this section describe action being taken, or is it purely background or context?*	**Action** – Programmes being delivered, services rolled out, investments made, sites developed, partnerships formed, interventions planned, commitments stated, delivery structures described. **Context** – Descriptions of the economy, demographic evidence, national policy landscape, historical narrative, statistical snapshots, or vision statements disconnected from specific delivery.
Test 1: Commitment Type	*What type of commitment does this section make in relation to disadvantaged places?*	**Mechanistic** – Specifies a criterion, rule, threshold, or operational requirement that would produce a differential outcome for disadvantaged places. **Directional** – States an intention to reach disadvantaged places, but does not specify how it will be operationalised. **Rhetorical** – Expresses general commitment to inclusion or fairness, without reference to specific geographic targeting. **None** – No reference to disadvantaged places or spatial targeting in relation to the action being described.
Test 2: Geographic Scale	*At what geographic scale is any targeting or delivery operating?*	**Neighbourhood** – Ward, LSOA, MSOA, named community, or deprivation index used as an allocation criterion at sub-local-authority geography. **Intermediate** – Local authority, borough, ICB, or other large sub-city-region geography. **Generic** – No meaningful spatial targeting below city-region level. Universal or undifferentiated.
Test 3: Explicit Driver	*Is place-based disadvantage the explicit, named reason for the geographic targeting?*	**Explicit** – Disadvantage is directly named as the criterion. References IMD, deprivation deciles, or "most deprived areas" without ambiguity. **Implicit** – Targets places that are likely disadvantaged (e.g. former industrial areas, named communities) but does not name disadvantage as the criterion. **Absent** – Geographic targeting is present, but disadvantage is not referenced as a driver at all.