

Devolution and democracy, a study of  
narratives and networks in Greater  
Manchester

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study demonstrates the centrality of a political narrative of difference in the new urban governance structure led by a directly elected Mayor in Greater Manchester Mayor, and examines the specific context of its wider role in the co-production of policy initiatives. By deploying an interpretivist approach it focuses on the formation of the Greater Manchester narrative throughout Andy Burnham's frequent media interviews and set piece speeches, and examines the mobilisation of policy networks. Through interviews with key actors, it then examines the ways in which the leadership convene networks through unlegislated structures to mobilise consensus around economic and social policy objectives and adopting responsibility for social action policies independent of central government diktat, or limited democratic forums, and building consent for further powers. It addresses the forms of power, the blends of structures and networks, a distinction between place and party, and the limits and risks of failure from these networks. The study addresses an urgent need within the field of political science to analyse the formation of these new political networks through interpretive methodologies and in the context of cross currents of political turmoil, gain better insights into how devolution in England's regions will be shaped in the future.

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## Abbreviations used in this study

GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
MIDAS	Manchester's Inward Investment Agency
MIER	Manchester Independent Economic Review
MIPIM	International property and exhibition event held in Cannes, France
NWDA	Northwest Regional Development Agency
RDAs	Regional Development Agencies
RSA	Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce)
TEDx	Technology Entertainment Design – global network of talks

## Introduction

A directly elected Mayor for Greater Manchester promised a new model for regional governance in the United Kingdom. A single point of accountability and an initial promise of opportunities to bring local people closer to control over decisions affecting their lives. This work will seek to examine how the evolving institutions of devolution and localism in Greater Manchester were driven by a strong Greater Manchester narrative as part of attempts to build consent, and as a base for further powers.

On his election to be the Labour Party's candidate as Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham pledged to "do politics differently" and "open up the system" (quoted in the Manchester Evening News, November 2016). Since that point he crowdsourced his manifesto, involving groups of interested parties and stakeholders on key issues. Principally, these focused on how this new structure could shape the kind of city region Greater Manchester could be – fairer, inclusive, modern - rather than relying on applying a national party policy framework into a local context. Central to that was a strong modern economy, a serious attempt to address visible street homelessness, driven by a mobilised elite who shared the priorities and vision.

The theoretical approach to this study takes these governance stories and narratives and applies an interpretivist method to analyse what is said and done (Rhodes and Bevir, 2004). These are operationalised by in depth interviews with players in the processes and the networks in the area of study. In so doing it seeks to convey the special set of circumstances particular to Greater Manchester, and the driving motivations and beliefs of those studied. It is designed to add insight to how devolved city regions beyond Greater Manchester might build political capacity and governance networks. Greater depth of understanding of how these work arises from the empirical analysis and interpretations of the meanings and actions, through textual analysis of the speeches, interviews and comments of the principal actor, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, and those of participants in the networks he convened.

## **Key Aims**

This project is ultra-contemporary history, utilising close proximity to the key political actors in Greater Manchester and testing the bold ambitions of Greater Manchester's new political leadership against the implementation of some key economic policies and the building of a shared Greater Manchester narrative. The research will provide a body of evidence for the methods of policy development and evaluation, and serve to understand these attempts to broaden public engagement by that strong regional narrative. Not least in how Greater Manchester addresses tensions derived from how the new devolution arrangements required a different form of power in order to create meaningful change. Also, how the blend of formal and informal structures and policy priorities carries risks that by mobilising coalitions of elites in policy networks, managing the risks that sometimes the wrong people may dominate, or that the structures don't do what the narrative wishes them to. In turn, it shows how the narrative evolves and negotiates with national and regional party politics.

It will address the broader issues of regional and local governance in an English urban setting, especially in Greater Manchester, using a review of academic literature and media commentary to draw together historical background to the contemporary governance structures and the tensions involved in devolving even a small amount of power. It will demonstrate how decades of centralisation and Whitehall 'command and control' have held back repeated attempts to address deficits in regional power; such as the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) formed under Labour from 1998, until their abolition by the Coalition Government in 2010. The research will also contextualise contemporary political theory and urban policy writings (Katz and Bradley, 2014), and how the centrality of Mayors and local leaders in these global discussions has informed the shaping of place-based leadership in Greater Manchester (Katz, 2018; Barber, 2014).

There has been an emerging scheme of research and publications both in academic political science literature and also in political media commentary (Jenkins, 2015; Finkelstein, 2019; Derbyshire, 2014). This literature sets out to re-interpret urban governance since the creation of Combined Authorities, City Deals and the creation of the offices of directly elected Mayors. Notable critiques (Sandford, 2020; Hodson, Froud and Mcmeekin, 2019; Shutt and Liddle, 2019; Berry and Giovannini, 2018; Gains, 2015; and Prosser et al., 2017) appraise these emerging structures even at an early stage in their formation and operation.

Added to this has been the work of the think tanks and policy bodies such as The RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), the Centre for Cities, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) North and the 2070 Commission into regional inequality, chaired by Lord Kerslake, a former head of the civil service (Kerslake, 2020).

However, by setting the scope of the research into the contemporary context and by addressing the role of private sector participants in different streams of collaborative activity, this work adds something new and different to that body of useful literature, campaigning evidence and academic research. The core themes explored throughout the textual analyses of speeches, and running through the interviews cover five themes: Firstly, that devolution required a different form of power and a different network; Secondly, that a governance system featured a blend of formal and informal structures and in turn that required agility when the wrong people were involved. Thirdly, that response needed to be locally driven and required a commitment to the primacy of place (Greater Manchester) over party (Labour). Fourthly, that the participants sought meaning in their membership of these convened networks, because without power they carry the risk that they don't bring about change, or action, or a sense of purpose in the political project. Fifthly, that the devolution project itself also requires continual wins and a narrative of ambition to inspire confidence in the future and the next phase.

### **Focus of the work**

By exploring the link between democratic participation, collective policy making and popular outcomes, and thus attempts to build consent for further powers, the work will assess the ongoing devolution project in Greater Manchester as a new and open way of conducting politics. Mayors may have limited formal powers, but as Sandford (2020) outlines, they have established a role through using their convening power; raising funds for their city region; and addressing 'orphan policies' local and national government have failed at, homelessness is a clear example. Doing any of that is impossible, the study will demonstrate, without a strong narrative that mobilises policy and governance networks.

The key questions centre on how this has been executed and the extent to which Andy Burnham, since he was elected in May 2017, has formed an administration consistent with his vision for the kind of city region he wants Greater Manchester to be: fair, modern and



more prosperous. Within that is an appreciation of elements of the existing governmental architecture of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

- Do the powers negotiated by the Combined Authority and Whitehall require a mixture of soft power and firm levers and new networks to make additional change?
- Does the utilisation of the Mayor's convening and "soft" power provide insights into how power can be distributed, and services commissioned?
- Has devolution been advanced by the mobilising narrative and a Greater Manchester civic personality, through these networks?

### **Approach and Methods**

An interpretivist account of the Greater Manchester governance story provides the foundation of the study. The literature review quite deliberately places the ambition to be open to new voices in a historical context of British regional policy and other political commentary. The preliminary and preparatory research involved attendance at speeches by leading politicians past and present – including Lord Heseltine, Gordon Brown and Lord Adonis – to understand their view of present day devolution through their perspective and previous attempts to mould its development, and attendance at the Mayor's Digital Summit and other business events.

The work is structured by a review of the literature around urban governance, capturing critical thinking as well and theoretical approaches to political science. In doing so it places that review into the context of wider political trends and the foundational argument in Andy Burnham's speeches; that politics needs something new to connect with the public and create better outcomes as a result of being closer to where policy is implemented. From there, the work explores the bridge between the interpretive school of political science and its direct links to methodological approaches of immersive study and elite interviewing. The field work and analysis captures a series of analyses of political speeches, policy documents and specially conducted interviews with five key players in the wider governance structures of the emerging and evolving institutions of devolution and their accompanying narratives.

However, central to the work is how the shared narrative of recent history has also consistently informed present day actors, notably Andy Burnham. Firstly, scrutiny of public speeches and formal evidence given by the Mayor to parliamentary committees (Burnham,

2018b) and media set piece appearances by the Mayor detected his own consistent golden thread. Burnham claimed to be creating a “bottom up” locally driven policy making initiative to tackle policy challenges that contributed to a vision of the kind of city region Greater Manchester could be, and that this was consistent to existing political and cultural traditions.

Secondly, the first person interviews with key participants in the Greater Manchester civic structures seek to interrogate this narrative. Access to these networks have enabled this study to build upon a strong, trusting and yet critical relationship that can contribute to an original and important study of something significant in contemporary British society and politics. Access to these key actors in an unfolding political story provides the analytical core of this study, providing insights and descriptions of the workings of the formal and informal governance networks. Especially important to the Mayoral project has been the recruitment of key personnel and the formation of specially appointed working.

## **Literature Review**

Scholarship of contemporary British politics tends to focus on seismic changes in government, such as the General Election years of 1979, 1997 and 2010 when a new party is elected and their alternative programme of policy priorities can be reset (Butler and Stokes, 1969; Crewe, 1983). However, an arc of analysis that seeks to understand the changes to the governance of cities doesn't fit comfortably into those junction points, which focus almost entirely on debates around national level priorities.

This study, and in particular this section, aims to place the literature directly into the wider context of regional politics and governance, public policy and the attempts in large metropolitan areas to introduce a new layer of public administration with a directly elected Mayor. It examines the historical and economic factors that led up to the current phase of devolution. This has taken place during a time profound realignment in British politics. Firstly, with devolution extended to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; then secondly with the issue of identity at the heart of debates around the 2016 referendum which saw a majority vote for the United Kingdom to Leave the European Union.

The work seeks to add to bodies of work in the field of contemporary history, urban studies and political science. Inevitably, it cross cuts historical events and legislative developments, but it also exists with a consistent backdrop of economic change and social upheaval. The primary question much of the relevant academic literature seeks to examine is why key decisions are taken, be that through the prism of analysing the management of economic change, or governmental efficiency, or to address wider issues of democratic consent. Principally this is by central government, occasionally seeking to find capable networks of power actors to deliver policy objectives. By examining the implementation of this new governance in the period from 2010 to the present day it is possible to understand how the structures evolved. How they started from the basic premise of fixing high crime and social breakdown in inner cities in the 1980s, to the structure of a wholly different set of tools imagined in the Localism Act of 2011 and the Devolution Agreement of 2014.

But this study also seeks to do something different. It draws a direct link from the formation of the structures that emerged in the legislation of 2014 and describes how they have informed a narrative unique to Greater Manchester that has placed the city region in a

mature political and administrative culture and willing elite prepared to engage in policy formation. Notably, this review has a bias towards the contribution of parts of the business community. This elite group has been chosen because of the centrality of economic renewal to the devolution story, but also could apply to attempts to mobilise leaders in housing, public services and the voluntary sector.

Doing so draws takes us to the next question, that of the theoretical framework of network governance developed by Bevir and Rhodes (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006), which centres on the key actors in the formal structures of governance and the looser networks that are formed in order to drive the wider policy objectives. This becomes especially relevant when the policy priorities shift and alter the composition of the associated networks amidst their wider context. A third element of the literature review will look at the intellectual base for the critical phase of Greater Manchester's specific devolution deal and in particular the input from influential contributors to the intellectual case for city devolution. These include US thinkers, (Glaeser, 2012; Jacobs, 2016; Florida, 2002; Florida, 2014; Katz and Bradley, 2014). They also feature contributions from UK based policy thinkers including Ed Cox of the think tank IPPR North (Cox et al, 2014), Charles Leadbeater from NESTA (Leadbeater, 2009) and the former Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill (City Growth Commission, 2014).

### **Key decisions in English devolution**

Regional governance, local government reform, and devolution are rarely, if ever, a cornerstone project of an incoming national government. They also represent a forward motion, an attempt to build trust with central government, and consent with the public, to make a case for further powers. Therefore the legislation to enact change takes years rather than months, and finds itself down a long list of more immediate priorities. For the purposes of understanding the historical roots of the devolution deals of the 2010s under the coalition government, it's necessary to not just look to the previous administration, but to the forces and structures that emerged decades before that.

Firstly, the abolition of the Metropolitan County Councils in 1986 saw the removal of a tier of government, partially reversing the local government re-organisations of 1974. Prior to that, local government in England and Wales had lost much of its power and decision making over many key aspects of people's everyday lives, such as electricity (1947), water

utilities (1973) and the formation of the National Health Service. But as Emmerich outlines, regional policy in the 1970s was driven by concern over the economic underperformance and deeper social problems in urban areas, identified by Peter Shore's White Paper on the inner cities (Emmerich, 2017). Motivation at the time wasn't to contest the need to address democratic deficits, or to bring people closer to the decisions that affected their lives, but as other accounts also acknowledge, to address inefficiency in decision making (Deas and Ward, 2002). Councils also lost control over polytechnics, their one element of higher education, and of further education and public transport (Emmerich, 2017). Further, what was left is often described as a messy series of bodies focused on local tasks and lacking co-ordination (Peck and Ward, 2002). What momentum there was in the following two decades was a movement of stealth to work around these structures, not with the aim of reinstating metropolitan governance, but to practically seek solutions to immediate and real economic disruption and poverty. There was also a sense that the governance architecture and the local elites were stripped of power and purpose, or later, in the teeth of austerity, had become 'depoliticised' (Etherington and Jones, 2016). The local public sector had become mere agents of 'regressive redistribution' of services that unfairly impacted on the poor (Hastings et al., 2017). While the elites looked inward at their own survival and short term networks. In his earlier analysis of Britain's Power Elites, Hywel Williams looked back on this as a longer term trend of the centralizing tendency of the British state and the profound consequences for cities and regions: "As Britain's manufacturing economy went into long term decline so did the political importance of the localized elites by the metropolis." (Williams, 2006: 56). Manchester would seek to confound that charge.

As Robson argues (in Peck and Ward et al, 2002) the benefit of hindsight lends an air of inevitability, but the reality was a shift of attitude from the leaders of civic socialism in the early 1980s, moving from opposition to co-operation, and typified by public private working from 1984 to 1987. Several attempts under Conservative governments sought pragmatic partnerships to address the intractable problems of unemployment, deprivation, high crime and poor attainment. The tension between national and local government actually lessened, potentially accelerated by the Conservative victory in the 1987 election serving as a reminder that help was not coming from a Labour government in Westminster. The civic responses under the Labour leader of Manchester City Council, Graham Stringer, then saw

the beginning of the years of extensive public/private partnership under the civic leadership of Howard Bernstein as chief executive and Richard Leese as the leader.

In the city of Manchester, through the 1990s, tough challenges mounted. The priorities of the post-Thatcher Conservative government under John Major were to desperately hold on to power with a slim majority and mitigate a damaging recession following the exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism in late 1992. Like many UK cities Manchester was left to pick up what tools they had and make the best of it without a clear strategic focus. The Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund paid for the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester city centre, a Health Action Zone, an Education Action Zone and 17 pilot bodies for the New Deal for Communities.

There were fragments of civic co-operation, such as the municipal ownership of the Airport, the willingness to invest across the transport system, though bus deregulation of 1986 has been a running sore ever since. But attempts to work collectively between the local elite and civic leadership were successful. These built up towards an audacious Olympic bid in 1992 and the building of the first phase of the Metrolink tram system. A collective response to the adversity of the IRA bombing of the Arndale Centre in Manchester city centre in June 1996, saw a flurry of agencies formed, such as City Pride, INWARD and Marketing Manchester (from Peck and Ward et al, 2002). Their brief was to consolidate international marketing activity at a metropolitan level, to leverage the popularity of Manchester as a leisure and lifestyle brand and a destination, and to reflect the modern Manchester that embraced its musical underground with the 'Madchester' music phenomena that enchanted the world in the early 1990s (Kidd and Tyke, 2016; Haslam, 1999). It also coupled this reimagining of the modern city as the home of a burgeoning new knowledge-based economy attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) through the efforts of the Greater Manchester wide agency MIDAS, which also consolidated a more powerful civic identity for a wider metropolitan area. Deas argues that these initiatives, and the formation of the inward investment agencies MIDAS and Marketing Manchester, created a wider Mancunian consciousness (Deas, 2002). The composition of the boards of these organisations lends itself well to an analysis of network governance and of the forces and personalities at work. The sectors required to deliver the vision were in property development, professional services and a network of privately owned service businesses. They consolidated in these

networks around a number of civic initiatives (Kidd and Wyke, 2016). These included the 1992 Olympic bid and the work to rebuild the city centre damaged by the bomb attack of 1996, as well as other building and regeneration projects. These public sector led projects required private sector support, forming vehicles such as the Trafford Park Development Corporation and Hulme Regeneration and the delivery team of the Commonwealth Games of 2002. The flourishing relationships in these initiatives also extended to the 2008 campaign in favour of a congestion charge inside the M60 to fund public transport improvements. Collectively they formed what was often called ‘the Manchester family’ notably by one of its most prominent patriarchs, the late Michael Oglesby (1939-2019), chairman of the family owned property development business Bruntwood, as well as a board member of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), and a patron of the arts amongst other senior civic roles. He told regional business magazine North West Business Insider (Taylor, 2011: August edition, 8-9):

“I know some people don’t like the phrase ‘Manchester family’, but I do. Manchester has the strongest public-private relationship anywhere in the country. There is that understanding that the local authorities get the importance of the private sector, and that businesses recognise they have a council they can cooperate with.”

This was not a construct of a central government edict, a formation of statutory bodies, rather it was formed out of necessity and the very absence of structure and resources within the public sector; indeed the morphing of a city establishment wasn’t without its rumbles. One indignant collective group irked at a late 1990s marketing campaign suggested their own. Many participants of that insurgency, in turn, became leading figures in the new Manchester establishment.

### **The New Labour years**

The election of the New Labour government in 1997 under Tony Blair had a manifesto commitment to hold referenda to devolve power to Scotland and Wales and for the formation of Regional Development Agencies in the English regions. How serious a project this was, and how much of a priority it was, is probably best illustrated by how much attention it was given in the reflective biographies of the three most prominent political figures associated with the Labour governments of 1997 to 2010 (Blair, 2010; Brown, 2017;

and Mandelson, 2010). None of them reference an English regional devolution agenda. Blair doesn't mention English devolution or regional policy at all. Brown makes one reference to Regional Development Agencies, that the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott made a vigorous case for them while in opposition, but as a means of providing the economic data sets to provide a business case to access funds from with European Community. Mandelson makes only a passing reference in his account of his "comeback" in 2008 as a strategy of regionally focused industrial activism which saw him commission the Secretary of State for Transport, Lord Andrew Adonis to construct a regional policy agenda 'Building Britain's Future'.

The overriding response to the attempts to address regional imbalances and governance questions even during those years was that the Blair government wasn't serious (Jones and Macleod, 2002). Added to that was the sense that the Regional Development Agencies (RDA) exacerbated regional tensions by creating polycentric regions, containing rural and urban areas and spread the jam thinly as a result. They broadly succeeded only in a rescale, rather than a resolution, of Britain's long standing regional economic problems (Jones and Macleod, 2002).

None of this captured a populist creed for regional identity or a serious federalism on a German scale, or with anything like the fervour of Scottish and Welsh devolution. There was no compelling narrative of the political right at all, and no attempt to water the intellectual roots of a leftist tradition of English devolution. One existed, and can be dated back to a Fabian Society pamphlet on a "New Heptarchy" dividing England into seven administrative regions. It was briefly revived in the Redcliffe-Maud reports of 1965 – 1969, which the writer Alex Niven describes in *New Model Island* (Niven, 2019) as offering the possibility of "an enhanced, socialist-modernist version of love of country... harnessing of volitional civic attachment to cities, towns and locales" (Niven, 2019: 121).

Yet the failure to capture the public imagination wasn't without moments of colour. The late broadcaster and music mogul Anthony H. Wilson (1950-2007) commissioned a North West flag, designed by his designer friend Peter Saville as the totem for a YES campaign in a planned referendum on elected regional assemblies in the North West, North East and Yorkshire. Ultimately however, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's dream of polycentric elected regional assemblies holding powerful development agencies to account was



defeated in a first referendum in the North East in 2004 and the whole project scrapped. It was interpreted as a failure of Labour party political mobilisation (Moon and Bratberg, 2014), but also campaigning imagination, outwitted by the North East Says No campaign under the stewardship of political strategist Dominic Cummings (Norton, 2008). As one Blair government insider characterised it: “One side had a set of arguments on the need for urban regeneration, industrial renewal and stronger democratic accountability. The other side had a 20 foot inflatable white elephant. Guess who won?” (Taylor, RSA Podcast, 2020). It was also widely viewed at the time as the death of regions as a policy focus and the revival in the priorities of cities. In turn, policy shifted towards city regions (Ayres and Stafford, 2009), and functional economic areas (Ward et al., 2015).

Greater Manchester’s pursuit of its own economic agenda saw the investment in the first bi-annual Manchester International Festival in 2007, and a strident effort to attract foreign direct investment and relocations from global financial businesses such as Bank of New York and Royal Bank of Scotland into the burgeoning Spinningfields district, and other hot spots in the city centre. To bolster its presence at international urban investment markets - like MIPIM on the French Riviera and South by Southwest in Austin, Texas - in 2003 Manchester City Council invested in its own brand development and review. Undertaken by the Factory Records designer Peter Saville, who built on the city’s own heritage narrative as “the original modern city” where co-operation, global connectedness and a distinct pride in being a leading cultural industrial and sporting city was taken as a given (Urban Design Observatory, 2016).

Uniquely too the city region added to its cluster of agencies with a series of “commissions” including the Commission for the New Economy to undertake strategic economic thinking, notably to embark upon, in the teeth of the global financial crisis, the Manchester Independent Economic Review (MIER, 2009). This was intended to construct its own evidence base for a wider growth narrative for the city region as a node of economic growth. Its findings were notably frank, concluding that the city was held back by poor educational attainment, low skills and poor integration of sectors like creative and digital into regional supply chains, all conspiring to create a productivity gap. It’s supporting narrative commentary also attempted to place the city in an aspirational European and world context as a “smart devolution” antidote to an all-powerful unsustainable centralised

state (Calzada, 2017), with Charles Leadbeater from the think tank NESTA providing a powerful supporting narrative by writing:

“It is a sign of Manchester’s recent achievements that it must adopt different yardsticks to measure its future efforts. Manchester must widen its horizons beyond a parochial competition with Leeds, Birmingham and Liverpool. Instead it must compare itself with successful second cities around the world: Melbourne, Barcelona, Lyon, Osaka, Shanghai. By that measure Manchester still has a long way to go.” (Original Modern, Manchester’s Journey to Innovation and Growth, 2009: 6)

Central to this was the development of a new political culture based on networks with a shared purpose and a common focus, which would be drawn from civic leaders across business, politics, public service, academia and civil society (Leadbeater, 2009). To this end, the tail end of the Labour government introduced a 2009 Act of Parliament, paving the way for city deals and combined authorities with collective legislative powers. In Manchester this took the form of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA), “a light-touch strategic authority in which the ten districts of the conurbation were constituent members seemed the logical step in a twenty-year process of deepening collaboration” (Emmerich, 2017: 98).

These partnerships, this business-friendly, pragmatic and place-focused leadership would later convince Chancellor George Osborne that Manchester was a city he could safely devolve powers to, a city region that had developed its own governance stories and narratives, many of which convinced him it was a city region he could do business with (Osborne, 2014).

### **The Coalition Government**

Regional policy changed under the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition government of 2010. The Liberal Democrat policy of abolition of the RDAs made its way into the coalition agreement. The minister responsible, Vince Cable, backed instead the formation of Local Enterprise Partnerships in the ‘bonfire of the quangos’ (O’Leary, 2015), including one for Greater Manchester. There had been a false start in their attempts to encourage a new localism when a very low turnout of electors in the administrative City of Manchester rejected the creation of a directly elected Mayor for the city. The City of Salford did elect to

create such an office. The previous Labour government had created the precedent for significant new regional political roles to be subject to a public vote, just as the North East was offered, and rejected, the opportunity to create an Elected Regional Assembly in 2004. The most recent new directly elected local political officer also achieved a very low turnout in their elections, for the Police and Crime Commissioner, which was 15%. Later, policy was guided by a largely favourable response to Lord Heseltine's report *No Stone Unturned in Pursuit of Growth*, which critiqued the mechanisms of government and recommended 89 measures to "unlock growth" in cities (Heseltine, 2012). It ran in parallel to academic urbanist writing on the primacy of metro-centric economic growth (Florida, 2010; Glaeser, 2011; Katz and Bradley, 2014). The central research question at the centre of this study relates to how much new networks have been convened in order to deliver Greater Manchester's devolution structures and strategic policy priorities. Therefore it would be a mistake merely to think of a Conservative localism rooted in the Heseltine vision of urban regeneration, or an enthusiastic embrace of democratic enhancement (Tait and Inch, 2016). Rather, a dominant narrative at the time also existed of 'Broken Britain' (Blond, 2010) into one where a perceived over-centralisation overwhelmed Labour (Westwood, 2011), and where Labour's over-reaching, over-centralised state, a broken society, resulted in a decline in individual responsibility and a dangerously unbalanced economy. A devolved response was a solution to a myriad of economic and social challenges, a narrative shared with politicians and elites.

The most significant aspect of regional policy during the Coalition years was the signing of City Deals with Greater Manchester. The powers ascribed to Greater Manchester in the City Deal and Devolution agreement of 2014 included health, social care, policing and criminal justice, as well as the imposition of a directly elected Mayor as the eleventh member of the cabinet of Greater Manchester, the rest made up of local council leaders. The New Local Government Network's director Simon Parker identified the roots of the Manchester deal of 2014 as "the product of 30 years of hard graft" (Parker, 2015). It was signed by Chancellor George Osborne, also the MP for the neighbouring Cheshire seat of Tatton, and the ten Greater Manchester leaders. It also came at a moment where the Manchester swagger and its own myth making had reached a zenith all of its own. The widespread adoption of the bee as a symbol of the city region, the fervent nostalgia for the Factory records era of the

80s and 90s and the quoting (sometimes erroneously) of key figures from that time on anything from marketing brochures, properties, tea towels, and, later, a Mayoral election manifesto. As Parker (2015: 47) argues:

“The fact that Greater Manchester is blazing a trail for other regional cities is incidental to what the city’s leaders really want, which is a more powerful Manchester. It is an attitude that privately annoys the hell out of some of the other big cities. It is certainly true that this experiment is far from perfect. The thing is, it’s working.”

It is possible to critique a Greater Manchester exceptionalism, but the product of the networks that slowly formed from 1986 onwards is a step towards more fully formed structures capable of taking devolution to the next stage.

### **The Northern Powerhouse and Greater Manchester’s emerging urbanism**

George Osborne’s Northern Powerhouse speech (Osborne, 2014) was a managerial step change in how local government leaders co-operated with Westminster. But it came with a price, the “imposition” (Gains, 2016) of a directly elected Mayor. The speech was rooted in a critique of political economy that linked economic management to a further need to address declining political consent and trust. Local elites supported an economic strategy of agglomeration layered on top of developed devolved structures, which in turn provided the impetus for further devolution, explicitly referred to in an evidence base, notably the Manchester Independent Economic Review (2009) and the City Growth Commission (2014) to speak to the evidence required by Whitehall. These insights linking the economy to other powers are provided first hand by Mike Emmerich, then the chief executive of New Economy Manchester, and the city’s chief economist, and the second most influential civil servant involved in those processes (Emmerich, 2017). Indeed, on the day the first agreement with government was signed, Sir Richard Leese, the leader of Manchester City Council, made the explicit observation that the powers vested in the new devolution agreement were designed to “achieve higher sustainable levels of economic growth and social inclusion to deliver the Greater Manchester strategy” (Ashton, 2014). Into this mix was a further attempt to build an intellectual evidence base for a differentiated approach; that urban settings held the potential for a fairer economic settlement in a new economic

model of agglomeration and “inclusive growth”. The RSA’s Inclusive Growth Commission (2016) suggesting that ‘reducing inequality and deprivation can itself drive growth’ while sympathetic critiques acknowledge its progressive policy making potential (Lupton et al., 2016) when adopted as part of a wider urban policy strategy (Lee, 2019).

However, these developments also led to observations (Gains, 2015: 156) that the governance arrangements were “under developed” in the context of a bigger “democratic vision”. And that they were something of a missed opportunity as regards public engagement:

“However the governance arrangements developing for the GM metro mayor pose questions about the checks and balances built into these new executive arrangements. In particular how accountability and scrutiny of the metro mayor should be conducted going forward in GM, and elsewhere.”

In contrast to virtually any other governance structure in the United Kingdom, the Mayoral model doesn’t possess an in-built opposition in an assembly or parliament, there is a system of scrutiny committees of largely part-time councillors from within the party system, while many policy making forums are conducted completely away from national party and traditional local government structures.

The participation of policy actors in these structures directly provides us with the bridge between a constructivist approach required to take us on the historical journey through the institutions. It also links to the interpretivist analysis advocated by Bevir and Rhodes of this particular set of circumstances, and a means by which to look closer at the key actors in the structures through the methods chosen. These issues will be addressed in the methodology section, but it is important to return to the review of the literature that covers some more of the historical commentary of how devolution in Greater Manchester arrived in the shape it did, but then how the participation of key actors shaped and reflected on it. This also requires an acknowledgement of the contribution to political science literature of the debate concerning the agency of key actors in political structures (Hay and Wincott, 1998).

The primacy of economic performance lay at the heart of the political strategy that led to the formation of the office of a directly elected Mayor for Greater Manchester in the first place. As described, it featured centre stage in George Osborne’s Northern Powerhouse

speech (Osborne, 2014) which directly led to the announcement of City Deals, Metro Mayors and, eventually, Devo Manc. This issued a big challenge to regions to take control of their strategic destiny by constructing big visions and demands of central government – “you tell us” was the parting concluding shot (Osborne, 2014). The structure of the Mayoral authority, devolution and the relationship to the Northern Powerhouse are closely bound. The economic strategy of the Treasury under Osborne was specifically to raise the productivity and the ‘power’ of the economy of the North. This project had at its genesis the expectation that Greater Manchester would be at the epicentre of this movement, this growth, and an honest evidence based appraisal.

This was inherent in the commissioning of a Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review, very much in the shape and scope of the Manchester Independent Economic Review (2009), which argued for the transformation of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities into a more coherent Greater Manchester Combined Authority. It argued for a pooled resource and a shared strategy where the case for further powers was constantly made and remade. It also formed part of the evidence base for the later Greater Manchester Local Industrial Strategy (HM Government, 2019) which focused on four prime capabilities, notably ‘Digital, creative and media’, ‘health innovation’, ‘clean growth’ and ‘advanced materials’. In turn this strategy took findings from an extensive Independent Prosperity Review (2019) and boasted (HM Government, 2019: 7): “This Local Industrial Strategy represents a strong partnership between local leaders and government ... it has been developed from the ground up with local and national stakeholders, including business and social enterprises, trade unions, universities and colleges, and community and voluntary organisations.”

The eventual cooling of central government towards devolution (Burnham, 2021) also required a response from businesses, keen to incorporate the new and preferred language of a different government, with different priorities.

### **The American urbanists**

The body of work that sets out a constructivist framework for city governance (Katz and Nowak, 2017; Barber, 2013) only takes us so far in understanding what happens next. How do the people involved in managing and populating the structures derive meaning from

their actions, and how are those actions in turn influenced by those of others? A strong influence on the Manchester leadership through the 2000s was the work of Katz and others who portrayed urban leaders as pragmatic problem solvers (Katz and Nowak, 2017). In so doing they highlighted tensions between the hollowed out nation state and powerful autonomous cities (Moisio, 2018) and quoting Reed Hoffman, the public intellectual and founder of LinkedIn, possessors of high levels of “network intelligence”. While one of the most enthusiastic cheerleaders for the movement of Mayors (Barber, 2013), boldly states that only Mayors have the power to “save the world”.

This has all formed an intellectual trajectory that built up the momentum towards Greater Manchester’s devolutionary model described by Jonathan Derbyshire in Prospect in July 2014 thus:

“These stirrings of metropolitan self-assertion build on a large body of academic research – by economists, geographers and theorists of urban planning – which shows that cities and conurbations are, as the American policy analyst Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley put it in their recent book *The Metropolitan Revolution*, the engines of economic prosperity.” (Derbyshire, Prospect, July 2014: 52-55).

It began a process of highlighting not just what Mayors were given statutory powers to do, but a growing curiosity that charismatic and enterprising local leaders across Europe (Borraz and John, 2004) also identified with, working alongside and in a similar way to high profile entrepreneurial leaders for cultural development (Pimlott and Rao, 2002). Emmerich (2017), in the closest the current trends featured here have to a memoir from a notable insider, cites the influence of this plethora of urbanist gurus (Florida, 2014; Glaeser, 2011; Katz and Bradley, 2014) on the thinking in the Greater Manchester leadership at the time of the City Deals and the moves towards devolution. In particular, the strong sense that the over-centralised state concerned itself with too much that was local. Significantly, the Greater Manchester family of institutions, including Michael Oglesby’s Bruntwood property group, together with Manchester City Council, funded Conservative think tank Respublica to produce a report *Devo Max*, *Devo Manc*, which made a strong economic case for further devolution (Blond and Morrin, 2014).

## **Critiques of the Greater Manchester model**

Two things arise from this. One, the structure we have – where that came from. Two, the Mayor that was elected and the political choices he has made with priorities, new structures, ambitions and the style of leadership that required new networks of the willing.

Important academic analyses of the shape of the devolution deals focus on the ‘metagovernance’ (Jessop, 2011) and the role of the Treasury in defining the parameters of governance from a distance (Bailey and Wood, 2017) and on its limits (Pike et al., 2018). While scholarship on the focus on city regions as emerging areas for policy interests (Beel et al., 2016) invites a fresh look at policy pluralism (Waite and Bristow, 2018). They are not without critics, who identify a “metrophilia”, defined as the fashionable yet uncritical embrace of city-centric narratives of development in place-based policymaking (Waite and Morgan, 2018). Central to this was co-operation with the Whitehall centre in City Deals, funding for growth projects and greater autonomy (O’Brien and Pike, 2018).

This counters a critical appraisal of Combined Authorities more generally by Shutt and Liddle (2019: 196-207) who argue for broader stakeholders (business, civic and community) to engage with Combined Authorities in order to build trust, bridge a democratic deficit, ensure transparency and accountability, foster ‘inclusive growth’, and clarify reporting and accountability mechanisms upwards and downwards.

Another important consideration here, especially when one later considers the formation of governance networks in the emerging alliances of devolved city regions, is the antipathy to the ideas by the opposition Labour Party (Mycock, 2016). Though there were pro-regional siren voices at the time (Cox et al, 2014 and Cruddas, 2015, for example), who pushed for a more radical approach to English devolution, Labour’s leadership had proven ‘too arrogant to listen and too timid to act’ and ‘couldn’t let go of its desire to control from the centre’ (Cruddas, 2015). According to Tristram Hunt, then an MP, front bench minister and sometime historian, the party’s cautiousness had allowed the Conservatives to appropriate the devolution agenda. Radical devolution thus held the potential to redress Labour’s election defeats in Scotland and England by stemming the rise of nationalism in both nations (Hunt et al., 2016). John Denham, former Labour MP and minister, spoke for many holding this view, noting that the party needed to ‘embrace both the new localism and a distinct,



autonomous and democratic English Labour’ (Denham, in Hunt et al 2016). While even amongst Greater Manchester MPs, notably Wigan MP Lisa Nandy, the devolution deals represented the transfer of power from one distant elite to one slightly closer to home (Nandy, 2015).

Early critiques of the process of the creation of structures, notably by Sandford (2019) and Prosser et al (2017) focuses on the ‘top down’ deals negotiated by elites, and disregarded public sentiment. Indeed Kenealy goes further and finds that not only was this closed process a self evident characteristic, but in interviews with members of local elites finds that many actively ‘embrace the secrecy of the process’ that gave birth to these structures (Kenealy et al., 2017). This chimes too with the historic elite membership of Manchester’s cultural and commercial partnerships with different versions of the favoured elites of the civic establishment of ‘the Manchester family’. In particular, the dominance of property developers is consistently the subject of critical analysis (Folkman et al, 2016) and a warning of a need for a different approach to economic and housing policy and away the historically dominant agglomeration based model (Deas, Haughton and Ward, 2020).

Much of the academic focus on Greater Manchester’s recent experience with city region governance has tended to lead on a critique of the agglomeration economics that underpins the project (Scott, 2001; Jonas, 2013; Brenner, 2004; Harrison and Hayler, 2014; Haughton et al, 2016). Discussion of whether the election of Andy Burnham represents a new disruptive politics, often focuses on opposition to property development (Folkman, et al, 2016; Hodson et al, 2019) and argues that this stage of regional politics is transitional (Pemberton and Morphet, 2014), rather than a re-awakening of regional English politics (Colomb and Tomaney, 2016).

### **Brexit and the Leave vote**

However, in between times there had also been a shattering wake-up call to the political establishment with the unexpected vote to Leave the European Union in June 2016. It triggered in sequence the resignation of the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the denouement of his Chancellor George Osborne, the architect of the Northern Powerhouse, by Cameron’s successor in Number Ten, Theresa May. Her political priorities were focused on an acceptance that the political class wasn’t listening to the people who voted Leave.

Focus had shifted towards delivering Brexit and in turn to addressing the causes of the discontent that led to the vote for Brexit. For all of the attention that has framed the vote as cities versus towns, or a liberal metropolitan elite given a bloody nose by an uneducated working class. But that divide exists in Greater Manchester too. Despite the city of Manchester, Trafford and Stockport narrowly voting to Remain in the EU, the rest of the seven Greater Manchester boroughs voted to Leave (Shutt and Liddle, 2019; Sandford et al, 2018). The Conservative government elected in late 2019 not only promised to settle the Brexit issue, but to 'level up' and rebalance the economy in favour of the very communities in the North who voted Leave in 2016 and for Boris Johnson's Conservatives in 2019, many of them located outside of metropolitan city regions. Even the enthusiasts for greater devolution, such as the think tank IPPR North, recognised the existential threat to all political institutions that the Brexit vote represented, and urged a pivot in emphasis towards towns (Cox, 2016: online): "Our obsession with the big cities and aggregate growth must take a new turn and wake up to the cries of those on the margins". These tensions latterly came to the surface in October 2020 as the challenges of combatting Covid-19 saw clashes between devolved city region Mayors and Whitehall over the support extended to cities they placed into more stringent lockdown conditions. The dispute served to highlight the lack of discussion between different parts of government in how individual councils in Greater Manchester would be compensated for implementing support packages for areas placed into Tier 2 and Tier 3 restrictions. There appeared to be no consistency in how local authorities in the Liverpool City Region and Lancashire were offered support. But it also provided an opportunity for Andy Burnham to briefly be the talisman for opposition to an unfair balanced approach to the Covid-19 response (Pidd, 2020: online). But it also exposed tensions between local government, central government and the role of Mayors. If building a strong narrative means anything, it is creating capacity to deploy that convening power and network building into a force that may collide with government.

### **Metro Mayors as a solution to the problem of a broken politics**

If Thatcherism is the response to the break of the post-war corporatist consensus, then analytical models of political realignments devoted to countering that have been plentiful. Through the crystal clear prism of hindsight, all of the previous attempts to provide an intellectual ballast to emerging political responses end on the same road – Trump, Brexit,

populism (Blyth, 2016). Yet all were fashioned with an eye on a 'new politics' and a different political settlement that all peppered trace elements in the localism and devolved political structures that followed.

The first attempt at a serious intellectual reimagining of a post-Thatcherite alternative politics grew from the unlikely source of Communist Party of Great Britain's glossy monthly Eurocommunist magazine, *Marxism Today*. These were New Times, said the thinkers behind the project Stuart Hall, Martin Jacques, Geoff Mulgan and others (Hall and Jacques, 1989) that foresaw a response to Thatcherism requiring a different configuration of alliances.

Giddens (1997; 2000) began the theoretical framework for a Third Way adopted by Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroder and Bill Clinton, as a response to new political fault lines drawn up following the collapse of the Soviet Union and state communism. In response to his critics, Giddens was arguing for a politics that could address popular blockages (Giddens, 1994) with a different framework, moving away from bureaucratic, top-down government favoured by the old left and an instinctive hostility to the state from a right wing that would aspire to dismantle government altogether.

Terry Nichols Clark analysed a framework of a new culture that included wider public participation. One aspect of the Third Way explored by Richard Carr in his work is the relationship with business. The private sector has to generate tax receipts, in order to pay for the transformations that a project of the centre left sees as essential to redistribution of opportunity and a safety net for the most vulnerable in society (Nichols Clark and Hoffmann-Martinot, 1998).

At the tail end of the Blair / Brown New Labour years Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg claims he was 'the new politics'. Indeed his take on his own political journey specifically refers to New Labour's failures as too managerial and disinterested in the empowerment of communities (Clegg, 2016).

But the end point of these political sirens wasn't English regional devolution at all, but Brexit. The social fracturing of a country of "two great subterranean value blocs of modern Britain", the "somewheres" and "anywheres" (Goodhart, 2017). People on one hand rooted in their left behind communities, resentful of the changes globalisation and mass

immigration has wrought to their lives, and the urban metropolitan liberal elite, highly educated and globally mobile.

### **Andy Burnham's response to challenges - new networks**

There is an additional and important consideration when considering how the networks and loose structures of Greater Manchester took shape. Nowhere in his suite of powers as the Metro Mayor, or under the gift of the Combined Authority, does it require the Mayor to tackle rough sleeping, or to create a framework to create an employment charter that can reset industrial relations within a single geographic region. While membership of a Local Enterprise Partnership, and of the body that has created the Greater Manchester Strategy (2017), does require a strategic plan; it doesn't embed a policy imperative into day to day actions. A frequent criticism of Regional Development Agencies (Danson and Lloyd, 2012) was that they were unaccountable to an elected body. The presence of council leaders and officials on the board, alongside business leaders, and with the scrutiny of a Secretary of State or a Deputy Prime Minister seemed to dodge the local politics (Bellini et al., 2012).

While any governance or policy document will make a virtue of its evidence base and close connections to the people it is intended to serve, the significance of the Greater Manchester project was also the foundations in two sectoral "summit" events, a Digital Summit and a Green Summit. These took place during the first three years of the first term and sat alongside working projects such as the appointment of work streams led by high profile advisors. A newly appointed Cycling and Walking Commissioner (former Olympic cyclist Chris Boardman); the Night Time Economy Adviser (nightclub entrepreneur Sacha Lord); an LGBTQ+ advisor (business owner Carl Austin-Behan, former Lord Mayor of Manchester) and the establishment of a Mayor's Business Advisory Panel to provide strategic advice to the Mayor. They were intended to complement the economic strategy driven by the Local Enterprise Partnership, on which the Mayor also sits. It is argued that Combined Authorities, Manchester especially, were designed to the structures that delivered the Northern Powerhouse and were therefore conceived to enjoy support from the business sector (Blakeley and Evans, 2018). The very essence of the Northern Powerhouse, as argued, wasn't to bring greater democracy to the regions and to reform local government, rather it was to make cities engines of growth, but with a single point of accountability and growing

authority. Therefore, assessing the authenticity of that private sector engagement and the priorities of those participants seems a critical area of further enquiry and examination.

This starts to highlight the shifting priorities of Andy Burnham's project, which many of his speeches focus on, supported by an adoption of the language of 'inclusive growth' (Lupton et al, 2016) and the embrace of a regional and industrial strategy towards the political architecture that can empower, include and coalesce around the metropolitan and civic networks. Were these then required to deliver change to the economic fortunes of the cities of the North and not just trickle out bounty from the centre. In a 2016 paper, *Devolution Future, The Centre for Cities*, a centre left think tank, said that over time the powers of the Metro Mayor may well increase, as has happened in London (Centre for Cities, 2016):

“The Devolution Bill is a deliberately non-prescriptive and enabling piece of legislation that allows for the devolution of almost anything – housing, health, welfare, policing and more – to a local level. The limit to the level of devolution under this model will be the willingness and ability of local and national politicians to reach agreement on what other functions may be devolved in the future.”

The most suitable theoretical lens through which to examine the development of these forces and actors should successfully describe how they have created the new structures of Greater Manchester's devolved governance. How key actors behave, their prior knowledge, their own networks and professional interests and power relations. These are all core to the tools of interpretive governance (Rhodes 2017; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006).

The architects of the new governance system in Greater Manchester certainly never envisaged a politician who had served as a Secretary of State under both Blair and Brown, and certainly not one born in Liverpool. Sir Richard Leese favoured an appointed Mayor from one of the ten local authorities. He was unconvinced of the need for an elected 'Metro Mayor' with no power and just another seat around the cabinet table (Ashton, 2014). At the time of the creation of the new Mayor as the chair of the eleventh member of the cabinet the role was described by Iain Roberts, Stockport Council's deputy leader, a Liberal Democrat, in *Local Government Chronicle* (Paine, Smulian and Wiggins, 2014), as “a first among equals” who couldn't act independently of the cabinet as the London Mayor could override the Assembly. The Labour leader of Tameside, the late Keiran Quinn (1961-2017),

admitted the creation of the elected Metro Mayor was a concession to central government and that “the government’s red line was a Mayor, ours was devolution, so we matched them up” (Paine, Smulian and Wiggins, 2014).

The interim Mayor was Tony Lloyd, the Police and Crime Commissioner, elected into that office on a turnout of under 15 per cent in 2012, and who Burnham comfortably defeated to become Labour’s candidate in for the election in May 2017. Briefly, Burnham defined his role on selection as about demonstrating competence in government and working with the ten leaders who form Greater Manchester’s cabinet. But in his acceptance speech as Labour candidate he looked beyond division, saying:

“I do think we need to open up politics here. It has been too closed. I want to open it up to more than the Labour Party. I do want to involve our members and councillors more. I want to send a message today to the church groups in Greater Manchester, the voluntary organisations, young people, the business community. I want everyone to get involved.”

His speech also spoke of the need to do things in a new way, to move on from the politics of the past.

“I’ve been stuck on the M60 for the last year because I’ve been going everywhere, because in my view politics needs to change from the bottom up and get out and engage people in different ways, which is what we tried to do with our manifesto - we asked people to write it and they did.” (Williams, 2017)

The point of difference has frequently been stated as ‘the tired old Westminster way’ (Mayoral manifesto, 2017).

“A new way of doing politics – we will develop new mechanisms to help people hold the Mayor to account and commit to holding at least one Mayoral Question Time in each borough every year.”

On more than one occasion, Andy Burnham has quoted Wellington Webb, former Mayor of Denver and past president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors who he quotes as saying: “The 19th century was a century of empires, the 20th century, a century of nation states. The 21st century will be a century of cities” (Burnham, 2018c), speaking at TEDx Manchester in

2018. The solutions expanded upon in Benjamin Barber's work *If Mayors Ruled The World* (Barber, 2013), who also quotes Webb, claiming Mayors are a more agile and flexible antidote to dysfunctional systems and political paralysis. These themes are examined in the later chapter analysing consistent themes in speeches and published articles.

But this wasn't just a political landscape that required greater managerial oversight, some strategic tweaking of infrastructure investment and civic boosterism; this was also the era of digital politics, Brexit, Trump and an urgent cry to serve 'left behind communities'. Shutt and Liddle (2019) identify the accelerated imperative, post-Brexit, for the leaders of Britain's cities and towns to simultaneously act locally and globally in developing strategies for economic and democratic transformation, for continuing for the professional and co-ordinated approach towards attracting Foreign Direct Investment to Greater Manchester, in competition with other city regions in the UK and Europe. Giovannini (2018) also discusses this opportunity and the consequences of pitting networks of local elites in competition with one another in a mixed set of supposedly democratically accountable structures with strategic implementation of any future replacement for European structural funds.

But beyond the analysis of cities and Greater Manchester's particular journey several other emerging schools of thought can be detected in the ideological pulse points of the rhetoric around this model. The roots for a recast of politics lie in the traditions of Catholic Social Teaching (Glasman, *The Good Society*, Blue Labour 2015: 13-26):

"There will have to be coalitions between religious and secular, unions and employers, public and private sector, .. so that we can invite our exiled traditions home and have them engage with each another in creating the new institutions, relationships and practices necessary to treasure quality and equality, power and responsibility, virtue and vocation and above all the strange combination of democracy and liberty that distinguishes the English political tradition."

The answer isn't to recreate institutions that either mirror central government, as the influential North American metro advocates argue (Florida, 2014; Glaeser, 2011; Katz and Bradley, 2014), instead governance focused on relationships constructed from incentives towards virtue, a common good.

Subsidiarity, the belief that the best decisions are made at the most appropriate level, was also the underlying basis of the structures of the Greater Manchester devolved model. The exercise of soft power by the Mayor's elected mandate creates the possibility of a Mayor rising above the structures that were created to constrain his or her actions. One study draws on interviews with elite players in Greater Manchester and found them to embrace the secrecy of the processes that created devolution (Kenealy et al., 2017). Others (Prosser et al., 2017) conclude that public participation policy making in the devolved structures was minimal.

Another body of analytical literature addresses pop-up insurgent movements of the left and the right (Goodwin and Ford, 2014; Bartlett, 2018; Bartlett, 2017; Susskind, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2018). These tend to question the very basis of how politics is conducted, where the debates are transacted and how structures are being undermined and reimagined and new actors emerge to challenge old orders. Movements such as Podemos in Spain, The Five Star Movement in Italy, The Brexit Party, Leave EU, En Marche have all sought to disrupt politics in various guises and from different points on the political compass. Both Bartlett and Susskind provide colourful analyses (Bartlett, 2018 and Bartlett, 2017) and exhaustive long range thinking of the potential and threats of technology (Susskind, 2018; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2017), where the roots of discontent are deep and the changes to how participatory actors can in turn seek action for their preferred outcomes immense. Gerbaudo examines how political organisations and online democratic systems are beginning to respond, one being "hyper-leadership" (Gerbaudo, 2018: 141). There are elements of hyper-leadership in Burnham's personal style: "an immaculate history of political engagement which gives the leader an impression of authenticity, ingenuity and honesty". However, this study is not to pursue this analytical method, rather to view the Burnham model in many ways as a response to this broad accusation that all politicians are the same, but in a fast moving, volatile and uncertain political landscape where it has been shaped by technology and anomie.

### **Network governance and narratives**

Rhodes sets out to define network governance (Rhodes, 2006: 424) as follows: "Policy networks are sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared if endlessly negotiated beliefs and interests in public



policymaking and implementation. These actors are interdependent and policy emerges from the interactions between them.”

The three most important components in relation to the areas of this study and the formation of networks are identified by Rhodes as trust, diplomacy and reciprocity. These are central to the curiosity that lies behind this study; essentially that Greater Manchester had something that key central government actors found it could trust. That individuals on the Greater Manchester side of the table were open to arrangements that underpinned the trust invested in them, and that the evolving networks in Greater Manchester could form into cohesive channels and shared policy objectives.

Rhodes further identifies ten conditions which favour network building which provide a fascinating theoretical framework which subsequent commentary and interviews will seek to assess the Greater Manchester model, of which its governance narrative is so central.

- Multi-agency co-operation spanning the public, private and voluntary sectors is required
- Professional discretion and expertise are core values
- Quality cannot be specified or is difficult to define and measure
- Actors need reliable and have thicker information, or local knowledge.
- Commodities are difficult to price
- The policy arena is insulated from party politics
- Service delivery is localised
- Central monitoring and evaluation incur high costs – both political and administrative
- Implementation involves chains of organisation and potential ownership disputes
- Shared narrative of what is being done

In reviewing and countering critics of his theoretical approach (Rhodes, 2017), he again drew attention to the presence of a multiplicity of state, private, civil and third sector participants to create policy and the important role of network management. In turn he also seeks to provide not only a theoretical framework through which to attempt interpretations of political governance structures, but by focusing on the very behaviours, motivations and

actions of key actors almost demands a method which rigorously places primary importance on the roles and interpretations of those same people.

Or, looking at it the other way round, even those critics of Rhodes (notably in Finlayson, 2004) acknowledge there is more to arguments about methodology than just methods: “They map on to and can define broader debates concerning what government is, how it works and whether or not it is changing. Central to Bevir and Rod Rhodes’ *Interpreting British Governance* (2003), which advocates and demonstrates the analysis of governance using interpretive theories and methods, is a significant development in these debates. They stress the significance of traditions in shaping actions, even as those traditions are reshaped by the ways in which people act.”

Bulpitt applies a framework (Bulpitt, 1983) that identifies key actors within these looser structures, along with competent statecraft and a hegemonic control of the periphery. More recent scholars such as Ayres et al (2018) identify George Osborne as the key ‘constitutional entrepreneur’ in this era, opening a window of opportunity to remove executive blockages. Osborne had clearly identified in Manchester a network led by city council chief executive Sir Howard Bernstein that suited his purposes for the centre-periphery model to work effectively. A powerful inside track on the negotiations by Guardian writer Simon Jenkins pulled no punches in portraying the dealmaking duo of Bernstein and Leese grafting in the background, then selling the benefits to their political allies as a done deal (Jenkins, 2015: online):

“Either way the cat is out of the bag. Manchester may yet have to show it can become the “second city” to London, but it is unquestionably in recovery mode. Anyone walking its streets can sense the adrenaline pumping through its veins. The Osborne-Bernstein deal was like two mafia bosses carving up Apulia. There was no white paper or consultative document, let alone a debate in parliament. Manchester’s deal with Osborne was reached by sleight of hand, by one man with a political problem to solve and another who saw this as an opportunity.”

Into this context, the UK Mayoral model of governance provides an alternative case study to analyse. Not only does the governance structure open itself to this form of analysis, by its nature it embodies these very characteristics. Manchester’s civic narrative and occasional

exceptionalism is a strong binding force in mobilising networks. As Daniel Finkelstein commented in *The Times* in early 2020 (Finkelstein, 2020):

“Managing personal relationships with interest groups and community organisations is a crucial part of the mayor’s job and being a bit fuzzy on theory, as well as flexible rather than dogmatic, can help with that. Mayors try to make themselves a little independent of their parties and have their own brand and personal appeal.”

Furthermore, the election of the Mayor in 2017 and the announcement of Burnham’s intention to ‘do politics differently’ has to take into account not only the limitations of the structures he inherited for the position he sought, but also the wider discontent with politics. This was exemplified by the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, the result of the 2016 referendum to Leave the European Union, and what that demanded as a political response. Claiming to emerge as the fresh alternative to a broken system is nothing new. Only the circumstances differ.

The next phase of this work is to examine the first term of the devolved Mayoral authority in Greater Manchester in this context. By analysing significant media interviews, key speeches made by the Mayor, by interviewing a selection of key players in the formation of that narrative and re-examining the theoretical framework in the light of this analysis. Posing the question whether the use of soft power and fluid networks has influenced the responses to how Rhodes imagined a networked governance structure, how Fung (2006) conceived the dimensions of negotiated mechanisms, and Bulpitt (1986) frames a negotiated settlement with the centre.

## Methodology

Greater Manchester is a city region of cliques, networks, spiders webs and inner circles. It is also a city that has undergone an enormous social, economic and civic change. The purpose of this study is to delve into those networks and make some observations on how effective a system of governance has been and to apply an interpretivist approach to the cultural and unifying themes inherent in them. These are displayed in textual analyses of media interviews, speeches, press releases and then ultimately in interviews with key individuals. It is not a way of disproving, stress testing or layering on the interpretivist approach – the intention of this study is to use those analytical tools and create a golden thread throughout, which then clearly states the roots in that approach. However, useful as that may be, the principal focus remains an attempt to tell a story about something new and remarkable in British political culture. The study focuses on the new system of a directly elected Mayor in Greater Manchester – within and beyond the powers negotiated by the Combined Authority and Whitehall - deployed new networks to make additional change; that convening and “soft” power were deployed to expand new networks; and to enquire as to whether devolution’s next chapter has itself been advanced by the mobilising narrative, and a Greater Manchester civic personality, through these networks?

To do so, there are three broad methodological approaches to this study: background research; studying what key people say; then taking the evidence of key participants to ascertain whether there is validity to the claims they make. The methodology section will briefly state what these approaches are before expanding on a wider discussion of interpretive political science and the methods deployed.

First of all, the current governance structures of the Greater Manchester city region didn’t happen overnight. The literature review places a firm contextual analysis to a number of important political trends and wider theoretical questions around consent, sustainability of institutions and the differing priorities of UK central government from the 1960s onwards. Secondly, scrutinising a series of major speeches and set piece interviews for key words, examples and evidence of the different approaches of this Mayoral model was intended to provide the linkages to the theoretical underpinnings of this model of governance, and to draw attention to the political programme that was being enacted. And thirdly, it owes a double whammy of appreciation to the work of Rhodes (2016), who advocated not only a

theoretical framework through which analyses of governance structures could be attempted (see literature review), but a method too. Particularly, his adoption of Robert Park's pioneering of the research technique of political and elite ethnography in order to better understand the motivations, connections and 'sense making' of those key players in these networks. As Gains describes it (Gains, 2011): "his influence is on a new generation of scholars keen to understand how the 'webs of belief' of government elites and other political actors inform the processes of governing."

As set out earlier in this study, and this is outlined in the literature review, the methods deployed in the key semi-structured interviews focus on the shared narratives of the participants and their networks. The traditions by which network culture is characterised include that commitment to reciprocity and long term relationships built upon the creation of obligations (Rhodes, 2017).

The absolutely crucial point to make here is that the contemporary governance story of Greater Manchester's recent economic and social transformation is entwined within the developments of its elites, networks and alliances. The convening and shaping of projects, commissions, institutes and partnerships has at its very heart a distinctive way of doing business – the formation of a Manchester family, a term favoured by the late grandee Michael Oglesby (1939-2019). Others have taken this self-evident truth and used it as the basis to analyse other urban developments in the city region; notably Lewis and Symons make an attempt at an ethnographic study of environmental, community and business networks in Greater Manchester (Lewis, 2017).

So precisely because the newly elected Mayor sought to implement his winning manifesto with a wider open group of participants and experts, it felt all the more important to delve into these relationships and examine what Gains calls "an acknowledgement of the broader institutional as well as ideational contexts within which situated actors interpret their agency" (Gains, 2011: 156-166). In other words, getting their take on how this all works and whether they were able to make a difference or were just being used.

Therefore, a sizable part of this study concerns itself with attempting to gain 'thick insights' from a selection of five highly targeted individuals engaged in the wider network of specific aspects of the governance and policy formation in Greater Manchester. These individuals

weren't just plucked from the phone book, however. They were identified through much 'deep hanging out' (Boswell et al, 2019) in and around the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the multiple business engagement forums, all of which contributed to a careful understanding of the dynamics of the day to day operations of the Burnham administration since the election in 2017 and through observation and understanding of the political and business communities in Greater Manchester. I also attended speeches by the Mayor in different cities around the UK, in Doncaster, Newcastle, Liverpool, Rotherham as well as in different places around Greater Manchester. I observed the reactions and the debates that followed, but also tracked the projects themselves that required co-operation in the networks of which the Mayor and other leaders in the North sought. This was crucial in identifying the interview subjects who could provide the deeper insights required for an interpretivist study.

It brought to mind something Peggy Noonan said, the former speechwriter to Ronald Reagan, who observed (Noonan, 2008): "history needs data, detail, portraits, information; it needs eyewitnesses. I was there, this is what I saw." Or as Sir Anthony Seldon, biographer of Prime Ministers puts it in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800-2000* (Brown et al., 2018: 588): "warm vivid contemporary history has almost always been written by authors who have conducted interviews; dull clinical history is often produced by those who have buried themselves away in libraries and archives." This is entirely consistent with the philosophical approach to studying political networks and cultures that Bevir and Rhodes (2014) outline.

The detail of the interviews will be covered in the data analysis section, but there are a few further issues surrounding social scientific methods, and in particular the ethnographic techniques used in this study, that it is important to address. Principally, these involve interviewing key players who may pass the test of being "elite" and analysing their experiences, reflections and critiques, against the official policy documents and the stated public positions of the principal political figure in this case study, the Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham.

Methodologically, leading scholars of the interpretivist school remake the case for an ethnographic approach to political science research, particularly so in light of wider perceived resentment towards elites. They typically (Boswell et al., 2019) describe it as

‘deep hanging out’ with people and an immersion in the everyday lives of the people they are studying. Amongst the range of methods that exist to complement this are outlined by Boswell et al (2019):

- Hit and run fieldwork, described as repeated, short bursts of intensive observation as researchers move in and out of the field.
- Ethnographic interviewing, semi-structured interviews with key actors
- Memoir, scrutiny of speeches, media profiles and interviews

Some ‘hit and run’ fieldwork has been deployed in this study in sourcing interview subjects, though as described, it becomes unavoidable that there are strengths as well as weaknesses to this approach. A researcher relatively unfamiliar with the personalities and informal networks of Greater Manchester might wish to try and track these at a formal level. They might seek out conversations around political meetings and spaces where the Mayor was building his own networks. This study starts from a position of relatively high levels of understanding of these networks and that knowledge informed the choice of interview subjects and the tracking of the narrative arc through Andy Burnham’s speeches and media appearances.

There is a limit to the amount of data any researcher can accumulate in a semi-structured interview. Insights can also be highly subjective interpretations and partial accounts. A decision was made not to run focus groups due to the range of subjects required, but to gain more discrete and personal recollections and observations from interviewees about their own role, and to avoid the risk of groupthink.

Boswell et al further stress the importance of this type of data, dismissing the charge that it is unreliable and lacks the ability to provide a causal account of political change and process. Drawing on Bevir (2006) the distinctive form of a narrative – a set of contingent beliefs, practices and patterns of actions – that form a wide range of actions and practices.

The interviews conducted also sit alongside analyses of published set piece speeches and long form media interviews with Andy Burnham. Although he makes many speeches, the ones selected were published on the Greater Manchester Combined Authority website and were clearly intended to make interventions that defined the broad policy agenda he is pursuing. The very genesis of the Mayoral position - imposed on the system, rather than

voted for in a referendum – required a high profile, visible, consensual Mayor. This required a grid-based communications system that maintained a steady stream of initiatives, messages and evidence of co-operative working.

In all of the speeches, key words and consistent themes emerge. These included references to broken politics, Westminster's dysfunctional system, the fresh new and open way he wanted to 'break' open the Greater Manchester system, and finally his relationship with the national Labour Party – which he articulates as 'place before party'. Obviously greater analysis of those data sources will follow in the relevant section, but Burnham set great store by the creation of alternative networks and it was these references and the consistency between rhetoric and reality that the study seeks to track.

Another methodology considered was the academic seminar, operating as a high energy scrutiny committee. Partly this was because of an initial interest in embarking upon this study was the inspiration of a group of academics in London studying and teaching on the modern practice of government at King's College London, and prior to that at Queen Mary University of London. In forming the Mile End Group at Queen Mary, they learnt at the feet of the master, Professor Peter Hennessey, the grandfather of this school of contemporary political historical studies. Hennessey is perhaps the best known academic historian of UK political elites having written extensively on the constitution, but also on the workings of government and the role of networks and key relationships between leading personalities (Hennessey, 2002).

Davis and Rentoul utilise this technique as a learning tool, but also in their own book on the Blair government (Davis and Rentoul, 2019). They give their subjects rigorous scrutiny in the arena of the postgraduate course seminar, which are typically graced by the attendance of figures from recent British politics and the civil service, including at least three recent Prime Ministers. Having attended one as an observer, it provides a fresh and urgent body of work, but one that is not without its pitfalls, not least from partial and self-serving testimony from key players seeking to defend their positions and with an eye on their personal and professional reputations. Ed Balls, former treasury official turned senior minister, and latterly a contestant on a TV dance competition, is also a visiting professor and colleague of Davis and Rentoul, as well as being a substantial contributor to their book.



This point isn't made to contest this particular narrative, or to be over-critical of their work, more to stress the importance of partiality in interpretive approaches to political studies. Gains (2011) makes a case for political elite ethnography to be used as an interpretive methodology but one which also utilises a wide range of other methods, and always to be mindful of the relationship between interviewee and interviewer and the potential for that to taint the data.

Therefore, the elite interviewing forms the core of the field work of the study. As Dexter characterises (in Harvey, 2011: 431- 441) elite is defined as "a group of individuals, who hold, or have held, a privileged position in society and, as such, as far as a political scientist is concerned, are likely to have had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public". This study comfortably covers a definition of these data sources.

When Richards outlined the advantages and problems of elite interviewing (Richards, 1996) he also offered practical guidelines, which proved helpful, particularly in interpreting the context of the interviewee. In doing so he outlines how interviews provide information not recorded in official documents; can interpret reports and documents; focus on personalities behind decisions; establish networks that help interpret the context, the atmosphere.

"Elite interviews are a key tool of qualitative analysis for political scientists, but they do present problems. In particular, interviewees can be awkward, obstructive, unforthcoming, or even deceitful. Likewise, the researcher will often not be able to interview all those he/ she may wish to, resulting in gaps in the information gathered. However, what this type of interview does provide is an account by a major player in an event or issue of importance to the researcher's work. This allows the interviewer to understand the perceptions of that player and what may, or may not, have led that individual to think or act in the way s/he did." (Richards, 1996: 199-204).

This influences the interpretive approach by placing the relationships and networks of any studied individual in their personal context and not just in the structures of their governance relationships. Richards also urges the political scientist to combine information and insights gained from elite interviews with other sources of data, and argues that by combining an analysis of structures with that of personal insights, then a far more powerful research

package can be presented. That said, Richards also warns against the use of elite interviews as part of a wider number of research tools and that they shouldn't be the sole tool for research.

This places ethnographic elite interviewing as part of a rich and important tradition in the social sciences, but not necessarily in political science or urban studies, though there is no reason why not (Rhodes, 2017). And while he describes the fieldwork technique of deep hanging staying at the heart of the discipline and in doing so opens up to those serendipitous moments that can only come about by being there.

The scope of this study is to attach judgements and interpretations to participation in a limited number of policy making processes by elite members of the wider network of our chosen area of study. Their proximity to key decisions hasn't been constant, but has ebbed and flowed, has been called upon in different policy spheres.

All of these observations were in pursuit of thick descriptions of the operation of Andy Burnham as a politician coming to terms with his new role. Though having served Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as a Secretary of State and had been the MP for Leigh since 2001, he had no experience of local government, or regional networks. So to see him operating in a new social milieu provided an important contextual background and a source of potential sources to seek further and more detailed accounts, based on direct experience of the operation of the family of institutions of Greater Manchester and its shortcomings.

All ethnographic research – in fact all research – contains a subjective element – it's just important to be honest about it. Gains (2011, p156-164) cites Yanow calling this the 'double hermeneutic' and insists candour in laying out facts and observations from the collected data. But it should be clear that the author and researcher is also an active citizen of the city region being studied, and as a result of being politically and professionally engaged, is personally familiar with great many of the key actors involved and am therefore in a well-connected position to examine the political forces at play. It is impossible not to hear things, to unknow the personalities and to spot the rising stars. Since he was elected Mayor I have interviewed Andy Burnham on three separate occasions, two for publications which are included as published sources in the citations of this study, and one in a live event setting. A professional familiarity reinforced on many more occasions in the course of the professional

‘day job’ also has to be declared for the purposes of full disclosure. But this research isn’t constricted by these circumstances, more so that the interpretive nature of the work enhances the process of formal data gathering and its analysis.

Also, it cannot be discounted that 30 years experience as an elite interviewer in a journalistic capacity has assisted greatly in gaining access to powerful business and political figures. This has involved deploying skills of persuasion and negotiation to extract nuanced stories and confidential information, mostly for publication. This study is a wholly different exercise. For a start it is, as discussed, interpretive, rather than revelatory, or even merely descriptive. The interviewees are not using the occasion to promote their observations and views to a public platform. All five of the interviews were conducted under strict conditions of anonymity. The data gathered therefore could not be tainted by a motive of settling a score, pushing a cause or even self-promotion. This is an important consideration too in relation to earlier discussions about the relationship between the two participants in an interview. As well as the conduct of the interviews themselves, the methods also required the interpretation of the data gathered. This used the frameworks of the shared experience within governance networks, both to understand the governance story of the Greater Manchester, and the devolution structures under the Mayor.

## **Case Study – Why Greater Manchester?**

Greater Manchester is a city region at the forefront of a new form of governance previously untried on such a scale in the English regions. This study seeks greater understanding of the set of circumstances and available networks that built up a particular story unique to the city region and why they have taken the shape they have. The introduction of a directly elected Mayor, with powers, personal charisma and cabinet level experience, at the helm of a network of combined local government functions provides for a rich mix of opportunity. Greater Manchester is also an economy making the transition from a post-industrial to a knowledge economy, with particular challenges of inequality, social mobility and the difficulties of working with globalisation. All of this makes it a vital and compelling territory for a study of the roots and effects of this remarkable transformation to British politics. No other provincial UK city region has achieved the levels of collaborative working from the 1990s to the present day, while enjoying a stable civic leadership, but the step change in governance has raised the possibility that a City Deal, a Mayor and a plethora of networks could inspire other city regions, as well as provide learnings.

To recap, this study concerns itself with the central research question as to whether Greater Manchester's new political system involved a mobilising narrative of wider public participation in policy making in Greater Manchester that will make for better governance of a better, fairer city region. In so doing, by adopting an interpretivist approach to methods of enquiry, it seeks deep and thick insights from the key participants in that process of narrative building. It is not a broad detailed analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of the governance structures, or of a particular policy.

As the introduction and background literature reviews have made clear, Greater Manchester's journey towards this new structure of a directly elected Mayor came about over a long period of time, a maturing of structures and, as argued, the creation of a strong civic narrative.

There are two types of ways in which Mayors wield their political power. By enacting the laws and the statutory powers that they have; and by directing policy change through the use of soft power and convening power over areas where they do not. This case study looks at both by focusing specifically on economic strategic priorities.

There are three main reasons for choosing the private sector elites. Firstly, the genesis of devolutionary policy is to seek fairer economic outcomes and improved performance for the UK's cities; second, a requirement of new structures to deliver that policy outcome; but thirdly, the building of a fair, modern city narrative could seek to mobilise powerful elites in addressing profound issues of policy failure, notably street homelessness. In so doing, many of the local circumstances that drove the Mayoral policy priorities, especially those that did not directly involve statutory powers, but required competent and consensual leadership of non-traditional elites and wielding of soft power.

In this case study, particular attention is given to the media interviews, speeches and op-eds by the first directly elected Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, specifically on the emphasis he places to parts of the wider city region. He builds the case for “different” methods of public engagement in aspects of economic policy and couples this very directly with a negative comparison to the methods of Westminster.

### **Sampling**

As described elsewhere in the study, ‘thick insights’ were sought by utilising the research technique of semi-structured elite interviews with highly targeted individuals in and around the policy networks of Greater Manchester. These individuals weren’t chosen as a result of their formal roles more so as a result of long term informal ‘deep hanging out’ (Boswell et al, 2019) in and around the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, multiple business engagement forums and political networks. These were amongst a larger number of people in different networks who had observations and something to say about how the networks were operating, particularly from within wider ranks of local actors engaged from the private sector that have been engaged in the wider network governance (Rhodes, 2017).

These five interviews were conducted in person, typically an hour long, and took part in the early part of 2020, prior to the lockdown brought upon by the Covid-19 virus. The first was with a civil servant, three more were with business leaders. One final interview, with a member of the commentariat, and an important part of the wider communication of the network of government, had to be postponed and took place over Skype in the fourth week of the lockdown. All interviews were conducted under condition of anonymity, where the intention was to allow a thorough exposition of insight and experience. The three business

leaders interviewed have been involved in senior consultative roles within different circles of the wider network of governance of the city region, but in subtly different ways. One was peripheral to the formal structures of the decision making bodies, and therefore effectively excluded from their decisions and discussions. Another was close and influential and involved in an executive role with an organisation with close contact to economic decision making, though not through formal structures like the Local Enterprise Partnership. A third insight was sought from a well-respected business leader who had very little experience of engagement in policy, but was recruited into the formal structures precisely for the need for a voice from those not deemed to be something different to 'the usual suspects' and from a business with no previous experience of participation in governance and policy formation. Obviously greater analysis of these contributions forms a substantive part of this study.

One key individual is from an organisation embedded within the Greater Manchester family of business groupings. Another, however, is from a very different business organisation in a significant strategic sector. This decision was deliberately made to seek out alternative narratives that may have had contrasting and critical experiences. The final interview was with a senior commentator of the political scene who was an extremely useful conduit for other observations and interpretations based on their own professional endeavours. There is a gender balance to the interviewees, three female and two males.

The next section will begin with a discussion of the method and explain the context in line with the objectives set out in this explanation of the reasons for this approach and this case study, before progressing to an analysis of those insights with the stated political narratives conveyed in set piece speeches and targeted media and the interviews.

## **Field Work – finding and analysis**

### **Introduction to the field work**

This section features an introduction to the field work before including documents, analyses of texts and speeches, and then a substantive playback of the key relevant themes extracted from the interviews. It adopts a twin approach to answer the research questions set out at the very beginning of the study: Do the powers invested in the Mayor of Greater Manchester new networks to convened through soft power? And does the utilisation of these networks provide insights into how new governance structures? In so doing, has devolution been advanced by the mobilising narrative and a Greater Manchester civic personality?

Key to all of this is the perspective of the principal actors, during the first term of the first directly elected Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, the emergence of structures, and the thoughts and insights of a sample of some of those closely involved.

This section will explain how the ethnographic methodology described in earlier chapters has been executed in the research. It will seek to present the insights demanded of the Bevir and Rhodes theoretical approach to political science research methods by gaining accounts from those embedded in the networks, including the Mayor, and interpreting their meanings and insights. It also consolidates the essence of the interpretivist approach (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003), that people act according to what they think and believe, namely in this case that subsidiarity to the correct level of government is positive, that better engaged networks produce better results in a fairer, modern city region, driven by a shared sense of history and vision. There is also a recognition of an imperative to be seen to be rebuilding trust in politics, or at least recreate something worthy of trust in this new form of regional politics.

Although attendance at several events where the Mayor spoke informed the insights presented in this study, oftentimes this was without notes, and also where he answered several questions, and these have not been included for detailed analysis. Partly because many of the same common themes emerge, instead the study has restricted analysis to those lengthy set piece speeches, which were officially released to the media and the public. They were also published on the Greater Manchester Combined Authority website. These

interventions, and those in major media outlets, capture the rhythms, tone and characteristics of the style of the Mayoral operation.

The insights from Andy Burnham are formed by textual analysis of media articles and interviews, a policy document describing his statutory policy responsibilities, and highlights of speeches that refer to the core research question – opening up policy to new networks, especially in the business community, and having a distinctive vision of what kind of city region Greater Manchester should be.

The shape of the five semi-structured interviews that follow are with key participants in the policy making networks of Greater Manchester and they seek to build on those central propositions. The interviews are placed after the terms of reference for the Mayoral role based on the legislation, and the analysis of set piece speeches and significant media activity.

In these, priority and focus is directed towards specific references towards the ability of the Mayor to convene networks to address issues, either those he is legislatively bound to cover, and those he is not, and how these derive their inspiration from the particular strengths and characteristics of the city region. An accompanying table is included to helpfully signpost the more detailed reproduction of texts and commentary. Particular emphasis is focused on economic strategy. All of the interviewees, in different ways, played a part in the formation of different economic and industrial initiatives established by the Mayor, but they also touch on social justice narratives, notably the urgency of the need to tackle homelessness. They are included as they are examples frequently cited by the Mayor of how this new governance structure is different. The methods deployed here therefore seek to describe and analyse the stated preferences and policy objectives laid out in the strategy. They also seek to analyse the political communication of that strategy and the extension of it to a wider set of political priorities of the Mayor; with the first hand experiences at the heart of the bodies and strategy groups set up by the Mayor, and administered by the officials in the system.

Let us remind ourselves of the central analytical framework here. To explore how the interpretive school of political science seeks to deeply understand key individuals in



governance networks, their shared narratives, and its direct links to methodological approaches of immersive study and elite interviewing.

### **What the Mayor Does**

The documentation (*What the Mayor Does*, 2020) describes the Mayor's role and drives particular attention towards the Mayor's own accountability, the permission the Mayor has to work independently of the other cabinet members, and to partnerships with other stakeholders in the region. Also embedded in to those descriptions is the balance between immediate political responsibilities, good governance, and an eye to future devolution plans.

Although only a short descriptive synopsis of 640 words, it contains a revealing use of the words "leading" and "represents" it describes his role as the chair and 11<sup>th</sup> member of a cabinet government of the city region, and describes his support by two deputy Mayors. Setting budgets, being an ambassador for the region, a public voice, and taking strategic decisions. Significantly, the framing of the role is pivoted on the narrative around working in partnership and with other networks. Such a fluid description of the role and of the embedded nature of the partnerships inevitably piques curiosity as to what those partnerships look and feel like, to the Mayor, and to those taking part in them and observing how they work.

"This way of working isn't easy to get right and we're one of the only regions to make it work so well. We recognise that our strength lies in successful partnership – not only with each other, but with other public services, businesses, local communities and the voluntary sector." *What the Mayor Does*, Greater Manchester Combined Authority website, 2020.

For the purposes of commentary and signposting, those documents outline what Bevir and Rhodes (2004) would identify as the ten conditions which provide at least the structural scaffolding onto which policy and governance networks are built.

## **The Manifesto**

The manifesto process for Andy Burnham's election campaign also struck the first chord in the participatory style which was to characterise his first term in office, 2017-2021. Entitled *Our Manifesto* it was a relatively brief 12 page document, but it was significant to the character of the devolved governance style that it broke away from implementing the Labour Party's national policies locally and started from an entirely different place. As described in the manifesto itself, it was formed by holding focus groups, discussions and sector focused events, described as a new way of doing politics. Seeking to include policy actors with thicker insights, information and knowledge (Rhodes, 2017) and include a multiplicity of voices, beyond political parties, but a different localised shared narrative.

"It is time to build a new future for Greater Manchester. A Digital City. A Green City. A Young City. A modern capital of industry where everybody has a part to play and every voice is heard. A beacon of social justice to the country"

(Burnham, 2017a: 3)

You would need a fine toothcomb or a microscope to spot the Labour branding in the document. One contributor to the process, named only as 'Lee', quoted in the finished document, said it was a "fascinating insight into the future of democracy and public engagement in Greater Manchester," (*Our Manifesto*, 2017: 12). The final words on the back page made the ambitious claim that this was a long term game-changer, but rooted in Manchester's own myths and shared narrative of radical change.

"Above all, devolution is a chance to change politics and break out of the old way of doing things. To achieve our ambitions, we cannot wait for Westminster to come up with the answers. We need to think of our own solutions.

"Greater Manchester's history is full of examples of changing politics from the bottom-up. It's time to do the same again."

(Burnham, 2017a: 12)

## **Media and speeches – highlighting common and emerging themes**

This section will provide a linear trajectory through the first term of Andy Burnham from 2017 to 2020 by highlighting evidence of his commitment to a different form of political network building. It covers his interviews, speeches and direct public policy interventions, with particular reference to how he engages with businesses and business organisations in order to contribute to his stated vision of a fairer, more modern city region. The inclusion of media ‘grey literature’ is deliberate and important, because it is such an important part of Burnham’s identity as a visible, high-profile, able communicator. He was also far better known by the general public than any other local politician. In the immediate aftermath of his election, media and academic commentators assessed that the election turnout had been slightly higher than expected, the conduct of the campaign less rancorous than national politics, and offered some hope that it could represent a breakthrough moment.

“But the inaugural Greater Manchester mayoral election ultimately highlighted the limitations of an elite-driven, bespoke and often confusing approach to devolution in England which has left many voters unsure of its aims and relevance to their lives. To ensure greater citizen engagement and participation in future elections Mayor Burnham – and indeed the country’s other metro mayors – will need to prove he is an effective political alternative to Westminster. The lack of a significant electoral mandate in terms of turnout means Burnham will need to hit the ground running and articulate a coherent vision of regional government and secure further powers for the city-region.”

The Manchester’s mayoral election: turnout was low but there is hope for the future (Mycock, 2017, online).

As a guide, the following table summarises the main sources of the studied narrative, highlighting not only the source, but where there was a distinctive critique of the negative way of transacting politics, and then in the final column a suggestion in the text for how the narrative will be towards creating better way.

*Table 1: Summary of speeches and media interviews, building the new narrative*

Source	Critical narrative of old	Suggested shared narrative of the new politics
Burnham's First 100 days, Huffington Post, 2017	He insisted that Northern Powerhouse minister Jake Berry come to him at the Museum of Science and Industry, while the event was taking place, and where he was committed to stay for the day.	"create positive social change in Greater Manchester that others take inspiration from."
Interview with MetroPolis, 2017	"My motivation is that I spent sixteen years in Westminster, it's as simple as that. I lived through people's changing attitudes to politics and a growing disillusionment."	The imperative behind that is not only that it's the right thing to do, inviting people into politics. The reality is, with the way public spending is, you have to mobilise every bit of resource that you can get your hands on."
City Monitor, 2017	Burnham displayed great leadership and visibility in the aftermath of the terrorist attack at the Manchester Arena in May, leading the city's response and mourning.	Burnham has taken the government to task on crime policy, including criticising the Prevent programme
Andy Burnham, TEDx Manchester speech, 2018	"centralised, antiquated, London centric, political system"	"The role of the politician in a new healthier political system should be to facilitate, to invite people in and to write our policies with people, not do to people but do it together."
Andy Burnham, evidence to the parliamentary committee for Exiting the EU in June 2018	"People feel alienated from here, from this place, from the way decisions are made and there is a resentment, as I say, that found expression in the European referendum."	In Greater Manchester we say all the time, "We don't do to people. We're doing with".
Andy Burnham, speech at Methodist Central Hall in Westminster entitled English Devolution: the best	"a shaft of light in an otherwise gloomy political scene."	"Devolution... has had a profoundly positive effect on the culture of our city-region."

answer to Brexit, September 2018		
Andy Burnham, speech on health, Place based integration and whole person support: the Greater Manchester Model, October 2018	“Whitehall departments like nothing more than fighting turf wars.”	“Instead, we have a much better chance of implementing the Marmot Review from the bottom up rather than top-down. And that is what we are doing in Greater Manchester.”
Andy Burnham, the Future of Greater Manchester, January 2019	n/a (implied)	“A new industrial strategy, with the help of partners in our business community and our outstanding universities.”
Andy Burnham, call to end rough sleeping, with launch of Bed Every Night scheme, May 2019	n/a (implied, obvious policy failure)	“I have no doubt that it can still be improved. But this is a prime example of doing politics differently – developing policy with people rather than dropping it on them – and it is stronger for that.”
Commentary in Financial Times on future of Shared Prosperity Funds, summer 2019	Consultation was “becoming urgent if we are not to be left with a damaging gap between the ending of EU structural funds and the setting up of the Shared Prosperity Fund” AB.	The Financial Times reported the story with Burnham in the driving seat, cementing his and Greater Manchester’s position as the senior player and the most high profile Mayor, and also the one with the most devolved power.
GQ profile on Andy Burnham, 2019	English cities haven’t had the powers to advance themselves. The 21st-century economy will be all about cities.	“We have endorsed a date of 2038 for carbon neutrality – way ahead of the UK target of 2050 – and 2028 for zero-carbon buildings. We’re prioritising cycling and walking infrastructure. Manchester has the most radical environmental policy anywhere in the country.”
Manchester Evening News, Freedom of Information	The Labour leadership features in his diary very	In total there were 226 interviews and press

trawl through Andy Burnham's diary	little. There was just one scheduled meeting with Jeremy Corbyn.	opportunities in the mayor's first 484 days - so roughly one every other day.
Andy Burnham, launching Our Manifesto for the North, The Guardian, 2019	It sets out the terms for a new political settlement, around which all political parties can and should unite, and upon which a badly divided nation might begin to heal in the long term.	Our "power up the north" call, championed by our newspapers, is a positive, self-confident ask for the power to do more for ourselves, rather than just a plea for resources.

The framing of these key issues in this way is an attempt to pick a narrative arc relating to an under commented upon aspect of the Greater Manchester Mayor's style and method. It forms part of the core source material for an interpretive approach to political science. The table distils each piece of content, highlights an example of Burnham's critique of how politics was conducted before the creation of the role, nationally or locally, then contrasts with his own prescription for a contrasting course of action.

#### **Analysis of content, a core narrative and building consensual networks.**

One of the first major calls upon the Mayor came after a devastating terrorist attack on the a concert at the Manchester Arena which killed 22 people on the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, 2017. It dominated the news and immediately raised Burnham's profile locally and nationally. Burnham's first 100 days were clearly scarred by the terror attack on the Arena, as a piece in the Huffington Post describes, it also played to Burnham's undoubted strengths as an empathetic and tactile political leader who can rise to the occasion.

"In many ways the system wasn't designed for a politician like this. Greater Manchester's strength has been pragmatism, ambition and collective working. Unlike other local politicians that the civic officials have been working with, Burnham wakes up in the morning thinking about Politics with a big P. He isn't in this to manage an existing strategy for Greater Manchester, but to open up policy making and politics, or as he said at the Peoples Powerhouse conference in Doncaster, to create positive social change in Greater Manchester that others take inspiration from."

(Taylor, 2017: online)

In the summer of 2017, he said in an interview to a policy magazine produced by the think tank MetroPolis:

“We need to do things differently. My motivation is that I spent sixteen years in Westminster, it’s as simple as that. I lived through people’s changing attitudes to politics and a growing disillusionment. I felt it. You feel it personally when you’re a Member of Parliament, particularly through that period, pre-social media and I lived through the arrival of social media and the whole thing has changed. I came to the conclusion myself that same old, same old isn’t going to work. So we need change in two ways, don’t we? Change number one, is breaking out of the Westminster bubble and the London centric approach to life which is what we’ve lived under for a long time. Secondly, devolution also means that you don’t just create a new form of top down politics a bit closer to people. Actually, there’s a hunger for some real change and that you involve people in the co-production of services and government. The imperative behind that is not only that it’s the right thing to do, inviting people into politics. The reality is, with the way public spending is, you have to mobilise every bit of resource that you can get your hands on.”

Q. How important is that to how you intend to operate as Mayor?

“You’re more likely to succeed in that level of co-production the more people feel involved in the journey that you’re on. The principle that I established with the manifesto, where we called it Our Manifesto and that it was written with people from the front line of the public sector, private businesses, voluntary sector, and that has been carried through into the first 100 days. So, some examples, homelessness. The homelessness action network is established and the aim is that the experts, the charities and the organisations out there working with homeless people will write the plan, they write the strategy and agree it in terms of how we’re going to end rough sleeping and reduce homelessness.

“Secondly, with the digital summit I was coming at it from a different angle, I’ve set that up by saying, ‘look, you tell us what the digital plan should be for Greater Manchester’. We’ve got the follow-up event in December, if we actually get to a

point where we all say, that is a plan and that's what we all have contributed to, it will have a much greater chance of success."

The Burnham Identity, MetroPolis, Manchester Metropolitan University (Burnham, 2017b).

The establishment of a number of far-reaching groupings with the purpose of co-creating policy frameworks, strategies and plans is an under-researched characteristic of the Mayoral model. It wasn't provided for in the legislation that created the Mayor, nor were some of the policy objectives included in the devolution agreement. However, the Digital Summit, Green Summit, Industrial Strategy, Business Advisory Panel and the network of business leaders concerned about rough sleepers were convened with genuine enthusiasm and energy, forming large networks of the willing.

At the end of the first year in office, City Monitor struck a similar tone.

"Moreover, Burnham displayed great leadership and visibility in the aftermath of the terrorist attack at the Manchester Arena in May, leading the city's response and mourning. His extensive range of powers has also enabled him to wade into debates that other mayors can have less influence over."

(Jeffrey, 2017: online)

Not only did the reach of policy areas give Burnham the platform to comment on areas beyond the remit of the economic focus of the Devolution Agreement, it marked an opportunity to continue with the mobilisation narrative, building not only capacity in how policy could be formed and delivered, but building on existing narratives of the city region, its traditions and history. Returning to his theme of the new politics in the high profile TEDx speech at the Bridgewater Hall in 2018, he again evoked radical traditions of Manchester and the centrality of participation to "the new politics we are trying to create here" which was providing an alternative to the "centralised, antiquated, London centric, political system" he wished to counter.



“The answer I would say is being true to the Manchester tradition a tradition of pragmatic radicalism that we've seen through the centuries where you don't just tear everything down what you do is you open up the structures to people.

“That was the purpose of the trade union movement founded here 150 years ago. That was also the purpose of the Suffragette movement, let people have access to the power, to the levers that make change. That has always been the Manchester spirit and it's what we're trying to build here; where politicians don't dictate. I don't sit there and say this is how everything must be. The role of the politician in a new healthier political system should be to facilitate, to invite people in and to write our policies with people, not do to people, but do it together.”

TEDx Manchester (Burnham, 2018a: online).

Giving evidence to a parliamentary committee in June 2018 saw Burnham back in Westminster. He didn't hold back on his frustrations with the world he previously operated in, and the opportunities that his new role presented, in particular 'place before party' and the disassociation from national Labour priorities.

Ronnie Cowan MP: “I am curious about a number of things you have said. To what level do you think an area like Greater Manchester should have devolved powers? You have mentioned a whole raft of them. Where does it end?”

Andy Burnham: “Well, I don't think it necessarily does. Famously, Greater Manchester talks of doing things differently. The more that we have the power to do that—to write policies that are right for us—the more we will make the political culture of this country healthier again.

“We have a real problem here, don't we? People feel alienated from here, from this place, from the way decisions are made and there is a resentment, as I say, that found expression in the European referendum.

“The answer, it seems to me—well, this is what I found in my first year—is that if you put power over key things, like health, closer to people, you can then actually involve those people in a more meaningful way in the use of that power. In Greater Manchester we say all the time, “We don't do to people. We're doing with”. We are

opening up the power that we have to write our policies with the voluntary and community sector, the business sector and we are trying to create a new political culture.

“The one thing I was clear about on leaving this place was I was not going to come out of here and do the old top-down politics in Manchester. The time has come for a very different way of engaging people in politics. The great thing is—I think Andy Street touched on this—it allows you to leave the point scoring behind and start to focus on place rather than party, and I think that is one of the great strengths of regional devolution. It allows a different way of doing things; that there is a better way of doing things.”

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (Burnham, 2018b).

Amidst the context of continued political attrition in Westminster during the fractured and frustrating attempts to push a Brexit deal through parliament, Burnham upped the stakes in September 2018 in an expansive speech at Methodist Central Hall in Westminster entitled English Devolution: the best answer to Brexit. In it he cited his relative success in tackling rough sleeping because “we have built a movement behind it, uniting public, private, voluntary and faith sectors.” Citing Bruce Katz who lauded Mayors for putting “place over party, collaboration over conflict, and evidence over dogma”.

“Devolution is not just a series of technical changes to the machinery of Government. It has had a profoundly positive effect on the culture of our city-region. It has created a new energy, a sense of possibility; a shaft of light in an otherwise gloomy political scene.

“It has allowed us to give a level of engagement to our leaders in business, the universities, the faith and voluntary sectors in developing new policy solutions that you can never provide from a national level...”

English Devolution: the best answer to Brexit, Westminster (Burnham, 2018c)

A few weeks later, speaking in more detail about proposals to reform public services into a place-based model, he again re-iterated the political means to implement such a change

would have been impossible in Westminster, but were created collaboratively in Greater Manchester.

“Implementing the Marmot review (into health inequalities) recommendation of taking a life course approach to improving health and, within that, giving highest priority to early intervention and young people’s educational and social development, would have required the full buy-in of the entire Whitehall machine. “Knowing that world as I do, I am confident in saying that it would never have come. Whitehall departments like nothing more than fighting turf wars.

“Instead, we have a much better chance of implementing the Marmot Review from the bottom up rather than top-down. And that is what we are doing in Greater Manchester.”

Place based integration and whole person support: the Greater Manchester Model (Burnham, 2018d).

In January of 2019, he sought to plot a number of key priorities for the final year of his first term, inviting partners and investors to join him on a journey, reshaping the planning regime through a new Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (since renamed Greater Manchester’s Plan for Homes, Jobs and the Environment).

“A new industrial strategy, with the help of partners in our business community and our outstanding universities...alongside the industrial strategy we will launch Greater Manchester’s Good Employment Charter – a plan intended to improve business productivity as much as people’s working lives.”

(Burnham, The Future of Greater Manchester, (Burnham, 2019a)

Tackling homelessness and rough sleeping frequently features in policy approaches to housing and jobs, representing the worst aspects of system failure. In May of 2019, the second anniversary of his election, and on the back of a government declaration of a Climate Emergency, Burnham called for a declaration of a Homelessness Emergency. Reductions in rough sleeping and a better response was possible, he claimed, because of the way he had been able to marshal resources from different sectors, including from property developer Tim Heatley of Capital and Centric, chair of the business network formed to address rough

sleeping, and to Vincent Kompany, captain of Manchester City Football Club who started his own Tackle4Mcr charity.

“Through the Greater Manchester Homelessness Action Network, we have built a strong partnership between our ten councils, public services and the voluntary, faith and business sectors.

“We have developed a clear strategy based around the four Rs – reduction, respite, recovery and reconnection – and are bringing forward new policies under each heading.

“I have no doubt that it can still be improved. But this is a prime example of doing politics differently – developing policy with people rather than dropping it on them – and it is stronger for that.”

(Burnham, 2019b)

Into 2019, and with a political crisis looming, the Conservative Party having elected the former London Mayor Boris Johnson as leader and a General Election looking probable, the Greater Manchester narrative was pushed with greater fervour onto a national stage.

As Brexit loomed closer, Burnham positioned himself as the high visibility leader of the Metro Mayors to push for greater local control over what government funds would replace European Structural Funds. Theresa May had outlined Shared Prosperity Funds, but at issue was who would dispense them and manage their distribution. The Financial Times reported the story with Burnham in the driving seat, cementing his and Greater Manchester’s position as the senior player and the most high profile Mayor, and also the one with the most devolved power.

Labour’s Andy Burnham of Greater Manchester, Steve Rotherham of Liverpool city region, Dan Jarvis of Sheffield City Region and Ben Houchen, the Conservative elected mayor of Tees Valley, have joined forces to demand control over the replacement funding. All four mayors said the need for the consultation was “becoming urgent if we are not to be left with a damaging gap between the ending of EU structural funds and the setting up of the Shared Prosperity Fund”. Campbell

Robb, chief executive of the independent Joseph Rowntree Foundation, warned that families across the UK could not afford to wait for the government's priorities to be set out in next year's spending review.

(Hughes, 2018: online)

Robert Chalmers, author and writer for the Independent and GQ magazine, spent a significant amount of time shadowing Andy Burnham throughout the summer of 2019, writing a lengthy and sympathetic profile in the glossy lifestyle magazine GQ. In it Burnham again reflected on the difference between being an MP, minister and opposition politician in Westminster and being mayor of a conurbation of 2.6 million people. Westminster, he said, "has become a living nightmare. The place is antiquated. And basically dysfunctional." Framing the analysis by building the case for further devolution beyond the current policy spheres.

"Burnham is friendly with Michael Bloomberg, mayor of New York from 2002-2013. 'When you look at the things he has done on a whole range of things, especially health,' Burnham tells me, 'it's extraordinary. American mayors have made amazing changes. They're powerful and they shape their cities. English cities haven't had the powers to advance themselves. The 21st-century economy will be all about cities. Bloomberg invited me over not long after I was elected. When Trump got in and opted out of the Paris climate agreement, the convention of US mayors opted back in. I believe the power of national government can be undermined by devolved cities.'

"In Manchester, he adds, 'we have endorsed a date of 2038 for carbon neutrality – way ahead of the UK target of 2050 – and 2028 for zero-carbon buildings. We're prioritising cycling and walking infrastructure. Manchester has the most radical environmental policy anywhere in the country.'

"American mayors, he adds, 'can do much more in terms of borrowing money and building. If we could do that, it would answer some of the problems we've got. Westminster created Brexit, for instance, by failing to look after all parts of the UK equally, notably the industrial towns in the north of England.'"

(Chalmers, 2019)

In August of 2019 came a revealing media revelation about the people the Mayor had met during his time in office, following a Freedom of Information request to see his diary (and that of the director of his office, Kevin Lee, his closest political confidant and advisor) by the Manchester Evening News (Williams, 2019):

“In total there were 226 interviews and press opportunities in the mayor’s first 484 days - so roughly one every other day.

“They included a broad sweep of everything from local TV and radio, through to the Manchester Evening News, Radio 4’s Today programme, Sky News, national newspapers, trade publications and even The Cricketer magazine, for an article called ‘Why I Love Cricket’.

“Alongside that there were around 70 other communications slots in his diary, for announcements, filming for the combined authority’s social media channels or other communications.”

“Sir Richard Leese, veteran leader of Manchester council and one of Mr Burnham’s deputy mayors, regularly features - more than 20 times - for one-on-one meetings and the odd dinner or (Manchester) City (football) match.

“Stockport, Oldham and Trafford’s leaders, who have all changed over the course of the mayoralty, managed to see him around four or five times apiece. Rochdale and Bury’s leaders saw him one-on-one only twice, while the late Tameside leader Kieran Quinn saw him once one-on-one before he passed away in December 2017. Since then, his successor Brenda Warrington has had no meetings with the mayor at all.”

“By contrast regular phone calls were scheduled in Kevin Lee’s diary, however, to ring the leaders ahead of group meetings, appearing to suggest the task had largely been delegated.”

“The Labour leadership features in his diary very little. There was just one scheduled meeting with Jeremy Corbyn, a brief joint media opportunity with the Labour leader at Victoria Station about the state of northern rail services.

“There was also one sit-down catch up with shadow Brexit secretary Keir Starmer in the Mayor’s office in July 2017.

“Other than that, the shadow cabinet are absent. It arguably reflects the way Mr Burnham’s Labour operation often appears almost independent of the national operation, not necessarily an accident.”

“Hardly any backbench councillors - of which there are more than 500 in Greater Manchester - crop up in the mayoral schedule. Three meetings with Liberal Democrat group leaders across Greater Manchester are also mentioned, along with a couple with individual councillors, albeit usually with another hat on - as a trade union representative, for example, or in their professional capacity outside of their council role.”

(Williams, August 2019: Manchester Evening News online)

The highlights shed some important light on his priorities and his network, with notably few meetings with local political leaders, the national Labour Party leadership, and a high number of media interviews (one every two days on average).

With a General Election called, November 2019 saw the publication across every city newspaper in the North of England, a bold joint campaign with a Manifesto for the North,

Front and centre of this was Burnham, appearing on the national news as well as in the regional media. It was also the product of the second Convention of the North in Rotherham, a coming together of cross party local politicians, business leaders and public sector executives. Significantly, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was the keynote speaker. But the manifesto set out a call for more devolution, more power, especially over a fractured and underperforming rail network, and for urgent attention to bridge economic divides.

“The publication of the first Manifesto for the North, resulting from the recent Convention of the North, simply can’t be ignored. It is a positive intervention into an

otherwise highly divided political debate. It sets out the terms for a new political settlement, around which all political parties can and should unite, and upon which a badly divided nation might begin to heal in the long term. Crucially, it asks the government to make rebalancing the economy a formal HM Treasury objective, to deliver transformational investment for the north. In the past, it has been all too easy for talk of the north-south divide to be labelled “northern whinging” and relegated to the margins of national political debate. But that won’t be possible this time. First, our “power up the north” call, championed by our newspapers, is a positive, self-confident ask for the power to do more for ourselves, rather than just a plea for resources. Second, it is backed by heavyweight analysis from a commission led by the former head of the UK civil service, Lord Kerslake, which has found that the north-south divide in England today is as stark as the east-west divide in Germany in the early 1990s.”

Our Manifesto for the North is the message of positive change this election needs, The Guardian, November, (Burnham, 2019c).

Though Burnham would campaign in his previous constituency of Leigh, where his successor was defeated by the Conservatives, he did not have a high profile role in the campaign. His focus was on building an evidence base and a wider network to continue to develop a different agenda in the post-election landscape with an expected Conservative majority. It was an investment in political capital that would prove to have been good preparation for the conflicts with central government that followed during the lockdown and Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. The newspaper front pages, op-eds and analysis that hailed Burnham as “King of the North” were rooted in this time (Rea, New Statesman, 2020; Bagehot, Economist, 2020; Nurse, The Conversation, 2020; Pidd, Guardian, 2020).



## Interviews

These five face to face interviews were typically an hour long, and took part in the early part of 2020. They were designed to probe the governance stories of Greater Manchester's networks, especially in those coalesced around economic policy activity, but not exclusively fixed on that. They sought to collate 'thick descriptions' of the practices guiding political actions (Rhodes, 2013). They relate to the research questions stated at the start of this study, in that they seek to discover the existence of characteristics that define the Mayoral administration and how those consistent narratives have mobilised these participants. The first was with a civil servant. Three were with business leaders. One final interview, with a senior regional commentator, had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 lockdown, and took place over Skype in the fourth week of the lockdown in April 2020. As described in the explanation of the sampling technique used, there is a gender balance to the interviewees, three female and two males, but these aren't ascribed to the interviewees as all interviews were conducted under condition of anonymity, where the intention was to allow a thorough exposition of insight and experience. The three business leaders interviewed were involved in consultative roles within different circles of the wider network of governance of the city region, feeding into a particular aspect of the strategies referred to elsewhere in this analysis. Further details as to which projects and sectors aren't always revealed, and details are occasionally redacted, in order to protect the anonymity of the interviewees and some of the content of their observations. But these five were chosen for the breadth of their experiences and for their noticeable differences. From informal enquiries it was established that some limited agency had been conferred upon them by the Mayor, none were wholly uncritical or afraid to critique their experiences born of frustration, cynicism or outright exasperation. Although it is a relatively small sample, it represents a deep dive into areas of policy development closely linked to, principally, economic strategy and business policy, but appreciative of the wider vision of what the city region should be.

The Interviewees are referred to as follows:

- Senior Civil Servant
- Business Leader
- Business Owner
- Sector Business Leader

- Senior Commentator

For the purposes of analysing the data gained through this process, the helpful framework analysis of qualitative data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2004) provides the outline for interpreting their key points.

These are interpreted as follows:

- Current knowledge and experience of the systems of local, regional and national governance and the powers the Mayor has
- Perception of the core messages of Andy Burnham's strategy for Greater Manchester, to open up policy making to new networks and voices
- Assessment as to the success of those interventions, as measured against expectations

*Table 2: summary of attitudes and beliefs of interviewees*

	<b>Senior Civil servant</b>	<b>Business Leader</b>	<b>Business Owner</b>	<b>Sector Business Leader</b>	<b>Senior commentator</b>
<b>Knowledge of governance structures</b>	High	High	Low	Low	High
<b>Perception of message</b>	High	Mixed	High	High	Moderate
<b>Perception of Mayor's success</b>	High	Medium	High	Medium	High

In order to identify themes within the data, gleaned from semi-structured interviews, the interpretations are presented under five specific headings, which seek to cover all of the central themes within the core research questions stated throughout this study: does the use a mixture of soft power and firm levers use new networks to make additional change? Does the use of convening and “soft” power give us fresh insights; and has the longer term cause of further devolution been advanced by this mobilising narrative based on an inspirational Greater Manchester civic personality? To get to the heart of the matter, the themes are broken down into the interviewees views and insights into the following areas: their understanding of devolution; their views on the effectiveness of the Mayor and his networks; whether new informal place based networks take precedent over Labour Party structures; and whether they think devolution is adequately resourced.

### **Understandings of devolution**

One of the central assumptions throughout this study has been that the exercise of power at the devolved Greater Manchester level has been different and that key actors, notably the Mayor, Andy Burnham, have used a strong narrative to mobilise networks to support a new political project where power is devolved. This set of questions seeks to establish how well understood devolution is. Widening power was identified as a thread in the narrative built up by Burnham from the time he expressed interest in the position, through his campaign and in the many speeches and media appearances analysed in the previous section. But what was the experience of the end users who heeded the call, either to join as a member of staff in the local service, or to engage in a meaningful way? All of the interviewees were asked about the powers that the Mayor had and his ability to exercise power in the city region. They were all asked whether their experience suggested he used a different form of power in order to create meaningful change.

“Partly that is the product of a political choice and a choice by Andy Burnham to work in that way. But I think it's also partly driven by circumstances. The Mayor actually has relatively few formal powers. And Greater Manchester might be at the forefront of devolution in England but it's still light years behind the rest of the developed world in terms of its own local regional self-government. The biggest impact that the Mayor can have is through a sort of convening and influencing power. And I think that was that was underestimated by everybody, including me,

before the election. There has been a very clear sense that is partly because Andy Burnham has a high media profile, he knows how to operate as a senior politician, with his experience from central government, and how to influence and convene and set an agenda. He's brought that into local government and put rocket boosters on it.

"I think he's come to see the most influential lever he has, is convening power, bringing together businesses, academics, campaign groups, the voluntary sector, trade unions to develop policy and to develop agendas and drive change, but not in a sort of formal regulatory or legislative way that you get from central government. This is a much more convening power. An example would be the Good Employment Charter, but also the Green Summit or how we've tackled homelessness. The Mayor has no formal legal powers around homelessness, but he set it as his number one political objective and has brought together funding from the voluntary sector, from businesses, from Vincent Kompany at Manchester City."

(Interview, Senior Civil Servant, January 2020)

"We've had a chequered relationship where we have a job to do anyway. Our job isn't just to support whichever administration has been there at the time and there have been times where we've tried really hard to help them, to influence them, give them knowledge, and it just got too difficult. And so there have been periods of time where we've just not worked with them. Because it hasn't benefited our sector. The benefit has come from what we can do ourselves. But when Andy Burnham got elected, we very much saw that as an opportunity to re-engage. And to be fair, we were very niche, but now we're very mainstream and difficult to ignore.

"When large companies are looking at relocation, a compliant Combined Authority is obviously really helpful and whatever else they can do, whatever the packages that they put together, the real reason they made to come here is because of the universities and because of the other companies that are here. You know, the conditions are here. And I think Andy Burnham is such a prominent figurehead and

that has to be recognized as a positive thing that's really helped Manchester in in terms of its profile, in terms of becoming a leading city in our sector.

“And certainly when I talk to colleagues from around the UK Andy is a positive, while the Mayor in Bristol is pretty much non-existent. No one's ever heard of him. He's never really seen at anything. Every other city is jealous that we've got Andy Burnham, he'll get to talk about your sector, he'll turn up at company office openings. In retrospect, it was a big mistake to attach himself to a controversial figure like (named individual), and he just didn't realize it because he donated to his campaign and also because it was a loud voice who displays all the trappings of a very successful business.”

(Interview, Sector Business Leader, February 2020)

“Would we have said we shaped a policy? I'm not too sure. It felt a little bit more like we've done this work. What do you think of it, folks? And that may have been a little bit unfair, but I think it'll be hard for any of us to pinpoint something we could say that's changed because we've said something. But I think a lot of what he's doing is good. So the Good Employment Charter, there was nothing in it you couldn't like. It's a good idea, but I don't think we felt we formed it. And I'm not so sure you could point to a piece of paper that says, 'we fed into that'. So I'm not trying to be negative at all, but it's just that the feeling of impact for me is probably zero. There's nothing I could look at, like I do in my day job where I can look at impacts all the time, and have that very instant gratification.”

(Interview, Business owner, January 2020)

“Related to the digital summit and the conversations that go on around these events, it's similar to other things I have sat on over the years. Is it a proper, full, genuine discussion? I think it's a start and agenda, usually backed up by all sorts of numbers that have been produced from somewhere, whether it is the Growth Hub or wherever, which says this is what's currently going on and nothing actually

changes it. I think there is a degree of genuine engagement, but I've had Andy come to various events, and I have been to various events when he's been there. A discussion has taken place, but whether that is then merging through into action, or a revision of policy, or whatever, it isn't clear. Could the discussion be wider? Yes, it could be. But more importantly, what's actually happening on the back of it? I'm not clear and I wonder if are you just ending up with a slicker version of what you started off with?

"So you've got somebody in there with Andy that has got greater powers probably, but probably not as great potential to implement them. Whereas previously Sir Howard Bernstein would just get on and do what he thought needed doing."

(Interview, Business Leader, January 2020)

"I think it has been different. It depends in what way you look at it. I think that if you were to compare it to the way a council or central government does governance, there's definite differences. And I suppose you could argue that it's got a foot in both camps. And it kind of depends on whether you're looking at the way Andy Burnham operates or the way that system and structure operates.

"I think Andy Burnham is probably a mixture of a traditional local authority leader, where what he's doing is quite technocratic and what you might expect to see being done in Town Hall. He's got planning functions. He's got the role of police commissioner and so on. But then he's also got a hat that is more like a cabinet minister or a Lord Mayor. So I think in the first term, a lot of it has been about defining that role. And on the outside, sometimes it can feel as though perhaps he's more comfortable with the sort of cabinet minister/Lord Mayor hat, than he is with the technocratic governance hat. And it was certainly very noticeable if you look back to the 2016 manifesto many of the things that were certainly personal priorities for him were soft power things as opposed to local authority, traditional, hard power things. Homelessness is the classic example.

“But this is also important, his whole operation has been run like the campaign to re-elect him since day one.”

(Interview, Senior Commentator, April 2020)

In summary, the insights here are rich and perceptive. They display a self-awareness of their own roles and limitations in the networks that Burnham convened, but also a genuine sense of excitement about how this new form of politics was working, that a figure with direct accountability would turn up and support a key sector, would bring together people from different sections of the business community to discuss a policy project. They are also by any definition members of the Manchester elite who all have the power to shape networks and narratives. There was also some revealing analysis of the differences with how Sir Howard Bernstein ran the City Council and Combined Authority in a very practical way, even though he was a public servant and not an elected politician. Some of the observational tactical material included here provides an important context to how everyday conversation and shared axioms, basic beliefs and knowledge forms an underlying narrative that devolution is a work in progress and their individual participation (and potential failure) can matter to the future shape of devolution.

Significantly too, the sector business leader, possibly the most critical of the mechanics of participation, acknowledged that Greater Manchester had a visible Mayor willing to fight for the city region and be part of the community. It plays to the strong mobilising narrative of a unified strategy for that sector, which other city regions don't have, and that although imperfect, there is a recognition of both a structure and a narrative that is powerful enough to mobilise engagement. Whether that is always with the right people is another matter.

### **Effectiveness of Mayoral networks**

Within each of the networks our interviewees are part of are informal arrangements, and formal ones. There is a legislative requirement for Greater Manchester to have a Local Enterprise Partnership, but not a Business Advisory Panel, or a Commissioner for Cycling, for

example. Is this an indication of the agility of the system as it's structured, or a weakness? And are the right people involved?

"They are all much more ad hoc and the advantage of that is it means those structures are flexible to different circumstances. How the voluntary sector want to be represented may be entirely different from what you'd want in a night time economy adviser. So you've got the flexibility to do things in different ways. The trade off is that there's not a consistency of approach. They all look very different. It'll be interesting to see whether that whether the Mayor looks to take a more consistent approach in his manifesto before the next election. None of these appointments or panels have a formal legal role in the structure, the Combined Authority structure, but all of them have been basically set up with the agreement of all the leaders and the rest of the system.

"So the LEP is very much the key people who you would expect to be in senior influential positions in Greater Manchester, while the business advisory panel is made up of people who wouldn't normally get involved through such formal structures, but are willing and interested in engaging in the debate and in the policy making work of the Combined Authority.

"The Mayor uses this advisory power more and more as a sort of informal sounding board to get the views of business. What's the impact of Brexit? How are Transport For Greater Manchester doing? It gives a different insight and a less formal insight into what businesses are thinking and doing."

(Interview, Senior Civil Servant, January 2020)

"I do think that the Greater Manchester LEP has really become subsumed into the formal governance of Greater Manchester. And I think it is seen as a bit of a rubber stamp exercise that, you know, this is the voice of business and they approve of it. Well, it is not really. And we've had all sorts of conversations with members over the years where they've said, well, what is it the LEP actually does? What is it? How does



it work? What has it done? Has it actually achieved or has it delivered what it was set up to do? I don't think it actually has.

“And I think an interesting bit was when the Mayor set up his Business Advisory Panel, which left some of us scratching our heads, trying to work out where that fitted in. Was it a shadow LEP? What on earth was that about?”

“I think here in Greater Manchester, I think the LEP has played its part from the point of view of aligning itself with key messages that need to be said at a national level. But I don't think it's actually achieved, or done, or operated in the way it was originally envisaged way back in 2010 when it first started. I think it's got lost and I think it's just become another arm of the Combined Authority.”

(Interview, Business Leader, January 2020)

“But I think that the idea with the Business Advisory Panel is genuine. Andy genuinely sets it up in a way that he wants to consult and engage. I think the difficulty is that the format has maybe 20 of us sat around the table and trying to get your voice heard is very difficult because it's always the loud voices that take over. And I think after maybe second or third one, as a format, it wasn't working very well because it was just two or three loud voices that just wouldn't shut up, had no emotional intelligence to realise that the room was getting very frustrated.”

(Interview, Business Owner, January 2020)

“At this particular point in our growth I think it's very easy for the wrong people to get involved, for the big fish in small ponds and for local government officials to seek the wrong advice. To find people that are more willing to maybe concur with their views, which is a thing I often find with governments if you don't disagree with or you have a different opinion. It's easy to find someone that agrees with you than rewrite the strategy. The problem that organizations like the Combined Authority are always going to have is they never have the right people in the room when they're doing those meetings.

“I worked on that (sector) summit to some extent, but it felt like Andy got railroaded by (named company). For every workshop that I looked into, there was barely a business person in there, it was all people who have a vested interest in support programmes. Almost everyone in this was a training provider pretty much.”

(Interview, Sector Business Leader, February 2020)

“I think there was vacuum into which Andy Burnham stepped, though he certainly operates very differently to Howard Bernstein. I think that although there’s been this change in Greater Manchester, to some extent there still remains in place a culture where many of the individuals that formed the power structures under Howard still remain. They may not officially be on paper in the power structure, but they are still around, they're still voicing their opinions, they are still the great and the good. And they still, in some cases, have money and influence.

“Greater Manchester likes to think that it's completely different to anywhere else and it's not. Everywhere else you look, you have these groups of elites and its power structures that exist alongside each other and overlap each other. And those groups have kind of coalesced and worked differently. Some new faces have come in and new interests have come in. But I think that you don't eradicate a kind of culture, do you?”

(Interview, Commentator, April 2020)

Each of these comments reflected the empirical reality of each of the individual interviewees, their own self-perception and a certain amount of defence of their own actions and beliefs. The development of the emerging bodies that Burnham required to find new voices often didn’t seem to work. One interviewee didn’t understand the need for a Business Advisory Panel, while another had a largely positive experience of being involved in it; while a civil servant with some direct experience of why it was set up nevertheless had an ‘eyes wide open’ view of its limitations. But even as a counterpoint to a formal structure like the LEP, the Business Advisory Panel, still operated in parallel to informal structures and

networks that are more difficult to identify and pinpoint. The proposition that the 'wrong people' were involved was a serious charge that reflects not only commercial rivalry, but the messy and experimental nature of network building. It also reflects a desire to be mobilised by a relatively new political culture.

### **Place before party**

One of the main differences in approach of the Mayor since 2017 has been the primacy of "place before party", a feature that advocates of the Mayoral system frequently channel. It represents, potentially, an emergence in Greater Manchester of 'informal governance' networks (Ayres, 2017). Has this been a straightforward benefit as the champions have said?

"Much of the first term has been a dash to define exactly what the role is. I think a lot of that has been about Public Relations.

"I think he's been on quite a steep learning curve. And I think it's been quite a steep learning curve for (Kevin Lee) his political adviser too. I suspect if you were to interview him now, he would say that there was a hell of a lot that he didn't know about local bureaucracy and local governance before he did it.

"I also don't think that he was particularly embedded in the structures of the Labour Party within those circles and that has taken some time to knit together.

"You'll sometimes hear grumbles where people go back to 2016, after he won the nomination, there was this Greater Manchester wide campaign for him in the Labour Party and everybody was involved in delivering his manifesto and then as soon as he was elected, it disappeared. And I think in the early days, put probably for the first half of the term, if not more, there was quite a lot of tension between that traditional local government structure and the new Andy Burnham era of savvy cabinet minister, slightly more Westminster thinking, which I realise is a huge irony.

"I think that has settled down a little bit now, but that tension was definitely there in the early days. There's been a process on both sides of local government accepting that they're in a new era now and they do have a figurehead and he does have some

powers and he can actually tell them what to do in certain circumstances. But also, Andy Burnham understanding how the politics of that side of things works.”

(Interview, Senior Commentator, April 2020)

“With the local authority leaders, the members of the cabinet, you've got a group of people that, apart from Richard Leese, they weren't involved in the original devolution deal. While they still appreciate the fact that Greater Manchester is better working together, you've also got people asking 'what is my area getting out of this? What am I getting that I can go back to my people with? Because, you know, we are all in this together and we are all politicians. So what's in it for us?' And I think that's where he really has his work cut out. I have no evidence of that. But it's just my take on the thing.”

(Interview, Business Leader, January 2020)

Only two of the interviewees were sufficiently well qualified to provide the kind of sophisticated political commentary of the relationship between Burnham, his office, and the local Labour establishment. Nevertheless it provides some validation for the empirical data of the Mayor's diary that the level of engagement with fellow cabinet members wasn't as close and collegiate as it may have been designed when the early political signatories of the system envisaged a cabinet of 11 with the Mayor a 'first among equals' (Paine, Smulian and Wiggins, 2014).

### **Networks and real power**

But where does the Mayor manage the expectation that many of these policy initiatives lack power and don't result in change? Does the convening of wider governance networks result in the change those taking part expect, and if not, is that a risk?

“The Digital Summit and the Green Summit drew together a whole lot of expertise and different sectors behind a common purpose and agenda. And certainly in the case of the Green Summit, it was massively challenging, when you think of the scale of the challenge in terms of addressing climate change and reducing CO2 emissions. But a convening approach, I suspect, is only going to take you so far because in the end it's going to need cold, hard cash behind it in order to make the transition to net

zero. But it has certainly boosted it up the political agenda. We were also able to bring it into our Local Industrial Strategy where we were able to give it a bigger role than in our previous strategies. But also there's an acceptance from central government that that was a key part of our industrial system; to pay they were willing to sign up to as well and they were happy to have the new 2038 target for net zero carbon emissions as a sort of headline announcement on the day that the industrial strategy was launched. So even from a central government point of view, you could think they were happy for us to be out there shaping the debate and perhaps pushing into areas where they didn't have the political ability to go yet."

(Interview, Senior Civil Servant, January 2020)

"I think the idea of the Mayor's Business Advisory Panel was a good idea. I think it does have diverse voices and it's not your traditional voices at all. I just don't know whether it's making an impact. Andy could help with that with a bit more of a feedback loop, probably, by saying at the end of each meeting, these are the takeaways from today. Then at the beginning of the next meeting, have you done anything on those takeaways, have they had any impacts on any of your thinking? It sounds so obvious as I'm saying it out loud."

(Interview, Business Owner, January 2020)

"Again, the Good Employment Charter is one of those things that makes absolute sense, but I think it's vastly different now from where it was at the start. I can remember a presentation on it that was ripped to shreds, to be polite. In the early days it was called the Good Employer Charter. We worked to repackage it and start again. It was essentially a good idea because we could see the benefits of it. But the focus on it was completely wrong. If you call something a good employer charter, that's a very personal point. And if the inference is that you're not a good employer, does that mean you're a bad employer? It's about employment. It's about workplaces. You could be a really good employer, but your business might be dumping chemical waste into the Irwell. Well, what message is that? If it is employment, it is employment practices. It is good business. It has got to be a much wider and a more accessible thing than just being a good employer. People met with

Andy and with Kevin Lee and we kicked this around. You've eventually got into the Good Employment Charter bit. We tried very much sense of focus on those wider things are going to be good business, ethical, rather than it being a big stick to beat businesses with. So I think we made some progress.”

(Interview, Business Leader, January 2020)

“I think Andy Burnham is quite an emotional politician. You'll notice sometimes when he's criticized on certain things, he's almost actually hurt rather than intellectually offended, or irritated. I think if you look at the causes that he's championed successfully and with genuine fervour over the years, they all have an almost religious element that is saving people who are in a desperate state and have a lot of the kind of emotion around them, Hillsborough, the blood scandal and homelessness.

“So I think one of the things with the homelessness issue was simply that he did actually personally feel very passionate about it and decided to pick it up and carried a lot of people with him just at a moment where people were really ready to get galvanized and do something about it.

“But also in fairness, they did go out and pull all those people together. It's not bad, you know. You couldn't say he's met his pledge or that there haven't been problems and tensions with the old system. But when I look at the way Manchester City Council now operates, compared to how it was, say, three years ago, sure they had changes of personnel, but there's been a change in mindset and a change in the whole focus and values right across Greater Manchester as a whole.”

(Interview, Senior Commentator, April 2020)

Each interviewee used a different example to make a similar point that while they knew the bodies they were involved in had some influence, this does feel different and new, and potentially successful. But that the collaborative and shared co-production and ownership of different policy agendas was important to building trust, consent and a shared narrative that could unlock the next devolution opportunity. The lack of feedback loops and

accountability causes some concern, but ultimately that they are genuinely engaged in a process of governance that has resulted in change.

### **Devolution and resources**

All the interviewees discussed to varying degrees how the political system in Greater Manchester was either hampered by a lack of influence of their governance networks, or a lack of statutory and fiscal power. They further questioned whether there has been a real blockage in the ability of local government to achieve anything because of limited resources?

“There aren't many formal powers that we're lacking at this level. It tends to be much more about resources. There is very little in the way of resources at the local level. So if you, for example, had to tackle homelessness, then you're still scrabbling around for funding from different sources. Same goes for infrastructure, public service reform, what's replacing EU structural funds. We don't need power, it's money. Which takes us to the question what is the financial settlement going to be for devolution.”

(Interview, Senior Civil Servant, January 2020)

“I think it's a very good thing and I think he is making a difference. I think he's visible. I think he's accessible. I think his heart, in my view, is absolutely in the right place. I think he's genuine. Obviously, I could be completely getting it wrong. I don't know him personally, but this is the impression I have of the man, is that he is genuinely trying to eradicate homelessness, that he is genuinely trying to make a difference to all these things. I think he desperately needs to get education under his remit. I think education not being run locally is a huge issue. My impression is he's got a clear vision and he's primarily there for the people. You know, the proper sort of Labour attitude to the world, not the Corbyn view, but the moderate middle ground sensible approach of valuing business, and valuing people as well. You can do both. We have seen with Our Pass, he followed through something that's had massive impacts for 17, 18 year olds with the free travel on the Our Pass. That's had an impact, that's him passionately believing in something. I remember meeting him and he said he was doing it, but had no idea how he was going to fund it, but he wanted to do it.”

(Interview, Business Owner, January 2020)

“I think the devolution process has probably lost its way a little bit (since the election of the Mayor). There’s a big point to make here about the devolution of powers and funding. It’s all good in one respect. But then you’ve got to make sure that you can effectively deploy skills at the sharp end. It’s no use turning round and saying I’ve got all these powers, we’ve got this funding, if that doesn’t get followed through on and I do get a sense of a bit of stagnation and a lack of imagination are really beginning to come out from the people that should be making these decisions of over where money goes how it’s spent and actually loses sight of some of the key drivers behind it. You know, you’ve got areas in Greater Manchester, where they still have huge deprivation. You’ve got a massive drop off in things like level 2 apprenticeships. You’ve got all these things going on.

“And yet in some of the conversations we’re having with people in the Combined Authority responsible for skills, the scope seems to be narrowing and narrowing. And they seem less able to actually take on board the reality of what’s going on or to realise they’ve got the power to change it and do something about it. It’s almost like they’ve almost lost the ability to be innovative. That obviously is worrying on a number of levels. But ultimately, at the end of the day, that’s not delivering any benefit, any economic growth, any development, for the residents and businesses in Greater Manchester. It’s almost as though it’s become hidebound. It’s almost like it’s all become like a little mini government sat in Churchgate House, really, which is a worry. And again, I can’t put a finger on why or when that happened, but that’s just the sense I get. I also think as well to be quite honest that some of it is probably shielded from the Mayor himself. I just don’t think that we’ve probably got to that level of maturity in the structure that that becomes second nature.”

(Interview, Business Leader, January 2020)

Across the detail of any policy will be a sense of critical appraisal from stakeholders who are close to the process. It is clear from these observations that the complexity of a large organisation like the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is not without its tensions,



particularly as it has transitioned from one way of working to another. However, as the Business Owner observed in relation to the setting up of the Our Pass for 16-19 year olds in Greater Manchester, it served as a symbol of the force of will from the newly elected Mayor to drive a policy forwards and a totem of his authenticity and commitment to social justice. The sensory frustrations from the Business Leader demonstrate a warning that maybe the best intentions of a figurehead, well-meaning politician aren't best served by a system that has its own issues. The cold hard reality of life in local government, expressed by the Senior Civil Servant, expresses the view that all the willingness and good intent is worth far more if it is backed with money from central government. At heart, the building of credibility, a narrative of place, of authentic leadership is driven by the wider objective of achieving more power and better governance as a result.

## Analysis

What this field work reveals is a new form of governance in a city region level has taken time to negotiate meaning, accountability and consent amongst stakeholder groups, local government officials and political actors, but mobilised by a shared narrative.

Let us return once again to the central research question of whether Greater Manchester's devolved political structure represents a genuine attempt to do city region politics in a different way, and particularly by mobilising a wider network of sector specific participants in the newly emerging system using shared narratives.

The common theme across the speeches, the media contributions, and then ultimately across all of the interviews was a sense of the newness of this arrangement. An interpretivist approach starts from the basis of actions being driven by beliefs and preferences and that we must go beyond the objective facts about what they say and do and look deeper at their situations, status, self-perceptions and thicker insights (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). In the data accumulated here the purpose of framing the Mayor's national media narrative as a high importance strategy was borne out by the observations from the interviewees. Getting political projects going required buy-in and convening. It is difficult to do so if few people respect the mandate, understand the powers or believe in the ability of the system to deliver on the political priorities.

The themes of the interviews essentially covered five areas and threw up the following hypotheses.

- Devolution required a different form of power in order to create meaningful change.
- The blend of formal and informal structures and policy priorities was an indication of the agility of the system but sometimes the wrong people were involved.
- Place before party is a good political slogan, and though it has been a consistent presence in the Mayoral narrative, sometimes the sticky business of intra-political delivery gets in the way.
- Networks without power carry the risk that they don't bring about change, or action.
- In turn, devolution without resources carries the risk of affecting confidence in the future and the next phase.

The comments of the interviewees are rich in critical insight of the Mayor, especially in light of his speeches, media comments and statutory governance modes of reference. They also recognised that this was a new system of governance and was taking time to find itself a purpose and a way of working. And without exception the participants in the interviews acknowledged that the Mayor and his team acted for the most part in good faith and were 'authentic' and displayed an understanding of the rhetorical ambition to build a politics for a modern, socially-just and culturally alert city region.

The interviews, conducted in a reasonably close proximity to one another in January 2020, reflected the wider context too. The country had emerged from a period of stasis and confusion caused by firstly by Brexit and then the surprising election of a minority Conservative government in 2017. Many of the attempts to drive through a number of initiatives in Greater Manchester have to be seen with an appreciation of that rancorous backdrop, relieved only by the election of an 80-seat majority Conservative government in December 2019, committed to 'Get Brexit Done'. In addition, working with government to deliver a Local Industrial Strategy was a piece of political action that ran counter to the rest of the legislative timetable throughout 2019.

While parliament was unable to agree on a way to leave the European Union and other big decisions were being neglected, the people interviewed here, and the Mayor of Greater Manchester himself, were engaged throughout that period in a number of initiatives to improve people's lives. They firmly believe they were doing so in a collaborative and consultative way in order to co-produce new policy, in this new governance setting, or at least in one instance, provide commentary on it. Narratives are so significant in the Greater Manchester context because of what has gone on before, the sense that the city region is one of pioneering change makers taking their place on the next arc of history. These mobilising narratives draw on historical examples, but also modern civic exceptionalism.

Woven into that has been a shared narrative, a sense of what the governance arrangements are able to do, and in an empowering sense, what the Mayor has sought to use his position to achieve. The example that kept coming up was the strategy to end rough sleeping, but also to create a free bus pass for young people.

Some of the initiatives around economic strategy and different sectors caused difficulties for the participants because of the conduct and presence of those they considered to be the wrong people and as a result reached inadequate conclusions. These are obviously subjective assessments but they nonetheless point to the inherent tensions in the system for conflict and disappointment. However, they do provide a direct link to key operational aspects of the Mayoral experience as it has been conducted in the first three years of its life in Greater Manchester. It provides a window onto a different mode of governance, an alternative political narrative that encourages civic pride, duty, co-operation and commitment to emerging political institutions in order to influence and shape them. In short it provides new insights hitherto unappreciated in the field of political science of UK regional political economy and urbanism.

## **Revisiting governance networks in the Greater Manchester Mayoral setting**

At the start this study set out to analyse developments in the most recent phase of Greater Manchester's devolution process by utilising the practical and theoretical tools of interpretive methodology (Howell, 2013; and Rhodes, 2017) in order to analyse the workings of networks of governance.

The central research question concerns Greater Manchester's new system of governance. A directly elected Mayor has pledged a commitment to develop wider networks of governance to meet the demands of the structures, but also to leverage his own soft power to mobilise new networks to address different policy challenges and build consent for the position and momentum for a case for more power.

Finlayson (2004) credits Rhodes and Bevir for placing great importance on "traditions" in shaping actions, even as those traditions are reshaped by the ways in which people act, acknowledging the latitude for individual agency within a structured context. They use this to help make sense of a shift from government to governance: a revision of the 'Westminster model'. This takes an analysis of this case study so far. This has proved useful as it has set up the consistent narrative inherent in all of Andy Burnham's media appearances, major policy speeches and actions. It has built up an alternative narrative of difference and Manchester exceptionalism to reinforce the profile of his own political persona and that of the office of Mayor and to continually build the case for further powers and greater public consent. In turn, this has been revealed in the questioning of the core interviewees and pinpointed the key political statements that have punctuated the first three years of an entirely new system of governance and government in Greater Manchester. In particular the election of Andy Burnham as the first directly elected Mayor of Greater Manchester, and the networks he was able to mobilise.

There is an important shared narrative too, a common set of assumptions that runs through much of the data, particularly the interviews with five policy actors. It is also as Skrbina (2001) and Howell (2013) helpfully outline that a participatory paradigm requires that specific understanding of the time and place within Greater Manchester in 2019 and the empathetic framing of the discussions due to shared interest in the day to day life of the city region and its often messy politics and civic life. This opens the research up to the criticism

that it lacks critical reflexivity and a subjective interpretation based on some version of Greater Manchester groupthink, but hopefully there are sufficient comments and observations of discord and critique that make them useful.

Working through the framework advocated by Rhodes it is worth reminding ourselves of the defining principle behind the policy networks and what they are. As stated in the literature review, policy networks (Rhodes, 2006, pp. 425-447) share these characteristics: “Policy networks are the sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other societal actors structured around shared, if endlessly negotiated, beliefs and interests in public policy-making and implementation.”

Therefore to fully articulate the centrality of governance networks in the Greater Manchester narrative, it is important to reflect on the five interviews and also the aspirations expressed in Andy Burnham’s public statements regarding the opening up of the political system and who should be taking part in its new structures and the negotiated beliefs and interests of the participants. There are ten pillars of the governance narratives identified by Rhodes as vital to a shared narrative. Taking each of these in turn and applying them to the theoretical framework:

***1. Multi-agency co-operation spanning the public, private and voluntary sectors is required***

The analysis of speeches and media narratives (Table 1) highlight the signalling to public, private and third sectors that this new form of governance offers something new and different and invites their participation. In turn, each interviewee of the deep dive interviews came from a very different background. One inside the local governance tent, two of the others co-opted into the processes and discussions, often motivated to do so from a sense of civic pride and with the allure of taking part in something new and different. Though the terms of reference for each were different, they nonetheless recognised their own roles alongside that of others from the public and private sectors.

***2. Professional discretion and expertise are core values***

Even the Senior Commentator, who observes the political system and provides counsel for many insiders, and therefore a conduit for their insights into this study, recognises the

negotiations between the different network actors. While that is a matter for their own professional standards, it is also a recognition of the boundaries between other professions and their expectations in the exercise of network governance. The observations of the Sector Business Leader, though critical of the outputs, still held the critique of the strategy they felt excluded from as an example of the Mayor listening to advice and expertise, just that it was the wrong input from the wrong people.

### ***3. Quality cannot be specified or is difficult to define and measure***

There are tools of policy evaluation and measurements of success and quality for any individual policy, that can themselves be ‘spun’ to fit a measurement narrative. Networks however operate in a more fluid and subjective space. The comments of the Business Leader and the Business Owner reflect the loose nature of the discussions around the Good Employment Charter and the indeterminate outcomes.

### ***4. Actors need to have reliable and thicker information, or local knowledge***

As covered in the explanation for the sampling of the chosen interviewees, and outlined in the table of their beliefs and experiences, each actor had a high level of expertise, knowledge and insight. These weren’t just restricted to a narrow field of technical expertise, but also related to governance of business, understanding of relationships between local government leaders and city region leaders, and a historic understanding of how the previous structures of city governance operated prior to the 2017 election of the Mayor of the Greater Manchester City Region.

### ***5. Commodities are difficult to price***

One of the strategic objectives of the Mayor, outlined in the manifesto, is the success of economic sectors such as the Green energy sector and ‘digital’. Projects were established to mobilise networks for both. But measurement and pricing of that success wasn’t defined, or priced, suggesting that the goals are shifting and the relationship between actions and eventual outputs are aspirational, rather than directly measurable. One clear example of this could be the number of jobs created in a new sector. The interview with the Sector Business Leader suggests this is a trend very much in train, where additional actions are

grafted on to feel like the city region has a grasp of the actions required and is in contrast to other cities where it is less successful.

#### ***6. The policy arena is insulated from party politics***

The citations of the first manifesto and the textual analysis of Andy Burnham's speeches and media appearances highlight his independence from national Labour policy. It is clearly a stated aim that the networks he seeks to build stretch beyond the Labour movement. The media coverage of his diary (Williams, 2018) reflects this distance, including from local Labour leaders. In the interview, none of the participants in the interviews declared their membership of the same political party as Andy Burnham. Of the civil servant, it was assumed due to prior biographical knowledge, but none were recruited into the policy network tent because of their party political links. Rather, they were all at least notionally enthusiastic members of the 'Manchester party' or at least with the narratives associated with civic pride and a desire to follow the Mayor's frequent clarion call to do things differently. The interview with the Business Owner specifically applauds the Burnham Labour approach in contrast to Corbyn's Labour and highlights the potential for informal governance networks to emerge (Ayers, 2017).

#### ***7. Service delivery is localised***

The building of a narrative through speeches and regular media interventions (Table 1) places a primacy in the delivery of policy at a local level. This is the essence of devolution to this regional level. The choice of case study for the involvement of business people in the policy networks serves as a highly useful lens through which to view policy initiatives that create new structures and policy objectives that are localised in a specific geographic definition of the term. Core to all the interviews was that commitment to belief, action and delivery at the local level.

#### ***8. Central monitoring and evaluation incur high costs – both political and administrative***

The highest price any politician can pay is loss of office, either through election, or abolition. As the Senior Commentator opined in their interview the campaign for Andy Burnham to be re-elected as Mayor started at the moment he was elected for his first term. All of the



actions, the mobilisation of the networks, the attempts to create a single narrative arc that supports that mobilisation, all serve to address that electoral jeopardy. But the dynamic with the other business participants is one of credibility in the existence and sustainability of those networks. The Business Leader had at times a withering assessment of the bureaucracy of the machine, a function of their closer proximity to operational actions and decision making. Similarly, and more positively, the Sector Business Leader expressed the high expectations of visibility and leadership where Burnham compared favourably to Mayors of other cities.

### ***9. Implementation involves chains of organisation and potential ownership disputes***

All of the interviewees discussed complex relationships and the disputes between policy actors in and around the system. The Senior Commentator described the tensions with the Labour Party leaders in Greater Manchester; the Business Leader spoke of the mild dysfunction of the Mayor's office and the mechanics of the operation; the Business Owner wasn't clear where the involvement in the Business Advisory Panel was able to link with the direct policy goals of, for example, the Good Employment Charter; and the Sector Business Leader expressed disdain at the 'wrong people' having the ear of the Mayor and thus weakening the process of creating a coherent sector strategy. Even when each individual was successful, there is a recognition that may come at the expense of someone else.

### ***10. Shared narrative of what is being done***

Throughout this study, the importance of rhetoric and communications has sat at the heart of Greater Manchester's own narrative. The evidence in the speeches evoking the time honoured struggles of Manchester past and the opportunity for a better future are linked to a moment in a city region's history. Time and again, as the analysis of speeches and media set pieces has demonstrated, that is rooted in political discontent with the centre, an optimistic view of what the city region can achieve by 'doing things differently' and that other city regions are envious of what Greater Manchester has. The Sector Business Leader specifically referencing the contrasts in effectiveness with Bristol. Each interviewee backed this up, with the slightly cynical take from the Senior Commentator that Greater Manchester as a city region suffers from a sense of exceptionalism. Yet this is borne out by commentary cited in the literature review (Jenkins, 2015; Parker, 2015; Emmerich, 2017; Derbyshire,

2014) where the very fact of Greater Manchester city region being the first outside London to elect a Metro Mayor was a reward. Significantly, it was in the city centre Museum of Science and Industry that then Chancellor George Osborne launched the set piece Northern Powerhouse concept.

The central research question posed at the start of this study was that Andy Burnham has attempted to create viable networks to build a modern and dynamic economy in the city region in a fair way. It is to do politics differently and thus make the case for further devolution. That this is a legitimate response in the North, or more specifically Greater Manchester, to counter the negative consequences of inadequate political structures failing to arrest economic decline, or take better decisions closer to home.

There's another theoretical presence lingering throughout the literature, the analysis and the case study, that of the new localism, advocated by Katz and Barber and in many places, Andy Burnham. This study hasn't sought to prove, disprove, or add weight to the central argument of Barber that Mayors represent an alternative model of sustainable government and a better hope for civilisation. However, it does accentuate the importance of derived meanings from key actors in a changing and evolving system and networked interplay of relationships, especially as the moves to build trust, consensus and the case for further powers that the commentariat reinforced (Jenkins, 2015; Parker, 2015; Emmerich, 2017; Derbyshire, 2014).

All of the interview subjects consistently pointed to the key relationships and informal power structures that have shaped this phase of city governance. They set store by their meanings, their interpretations and their takes on what was going on around them often in very lucid and descriptive terms. They describe who was there, what was said and what actions have followed.

Crucial to this has been a shared understanding of the Manchester narrative. The sense that the city region is seeking to do something bold, different and counter to the culture of a national system of doing politics and government that isn't working. Each and every justification for the strategy of the city region by Burnham in the examples cited in Table 2, and the subsequent commentary around the interviews press home the point.

Where the theory is challenged is by virtue of the new setting. The added dimension is of the untested waters of city region government; a new shared experience, layered on a consistently constructed history of a city of a recent popular culture, a commercial dynamism and a spirit of togetherness forged in recent tragedies such as the terrorist attack on the Manchester Arena in May 2017. All of this is then given added poignancy and power with regular calls to action on acts of social justice, such as homelessness, precarious employment and free bus travel for teenagers, while at the same time, speaking to business elites about their sector needs and the importance of a constant dialogue around shared needs and ambitions for the city region.

The interpretivist model has been applied predominantly to re-evaluate the Westminster system in all its grandeur, glory and pomposity built up over decades (Rhodes, 2011). This study is an attempt to provide these understandings in a different political sphere, and a very new one that is deserving of particular understanding precisely because it is claiming to be new, fresh, different and a challenge to the old order. The literature, rightly, focuses on economic development and trends in relation to regional development. But this is an attempt to frame what has happened in Greater Manchester in a different political context, but one that is actively advanced by the principal political actor, Andy Burnham, and those he has sought to bring into his wider governance orbit. His narrative summarised in Table 2 develops this governance story, designed to restate the city region's unique history and how that can shape the future policy ambitions. Nearly every speech cited in this study evokes the history of Greater Manchester's difference, be that in music, protest, or civic action, ranging from Tony Wilson to Emmeline Pankhurst (Burnham, TEDx 2018).

As outlined in the methodology section of this study, and citing the leading scholars in the field (Rhodes and Bevir, 2004) ethnographic research and elite interviewing in particular has two main aims. First, to get under the skin of the official documented 'facts' by providing texture to the context. Secondly, it tries to let people involved tell their own stories, giving us an authentic view of what just happened.

## Conclusion

To launch his crowdsourced election manifesto on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2017, Andy Burnham strode on to the stage at The Sharp Project in North Manchester to the tune of *One Day Like This* by the local musical heroes, Elbow, to a backdrop of the quote – “this is Manchester, we do things differently here”. It’s a re-statement of a political narrative that has sought to mobilise key actors in policy making and participation in order to govern a city region in a fairer way, with an aspiration to create a culturally smart, modern and fair city region. In one swoop it applied the importance and key aims of this study: that Greater Manchester’s steps into devolved government contained a unique element of civic exceptionalism, and the Mayoralty Burnham would go on to win would be characterised by a new participatory mode of local governance with a strong unifying narrative.

While the whole event was choreographed to be a celebration of all that Greater Manchester had contributed, the music choices (Mayor’s Manchester Music, 2017: Spotify online), the culture, the food on offer (Manchester tart and Eccles cakes), the stories of struggle (suffragettes and slave cotton), and the myths. So too this study has sought to pursue, through interpretive methods, the essence of the people taking part in these new structures. They did so with that spirit, that sense of difference and an adherence to those powerful and consistent political narratives. That Greater Manchester has a Mayor who is fighting their corner, in adversity, or by waving a flag.

Let us recap on the research questions posed at the start. Has a new politics in Greater Manchester been true to its ambitions to be different, inclusive of new voices, and made an effective case for more devolved power, based on the force of a shared narrative and a compelling Greater Manchester story, constructed over 30 years? It is only possible, as this study shows, to extricate any understanding of politics and governance around the city with an earnest appreciation of those myths and that core narrative. This study has sought to entwine the political motivations of those key actors who could determine the reach of the new inclusive approach in the policy landscape, by placing their contribution in a cultural context of Manchester exceptionalism. The spirit, the challenges, the steadfast belief in contributing something meaningful to the common good was imbued throughout the findings.

The very reason Greater Manchester caught the eye of a government in need of ideas and a legacy project in 2014 was the self-confidence, swagger and energy of a city re-inventing itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a city that took the challenges of economic underperformance seriously and demonstrated a way of working outside of party and sector boundaries.

This study has looked at aspects of the Greater Manchester Mayor's operation, in particular by asking the question whether it is manifestly different in tone and structure to central and local government, and whether the convening soft power of the first holder of the office, Andy Burnham, resulted in a sufficient change of gear.

Firstly, the current governance structures of the Greater Manchester city region didn't happen overnight. The literature review places a firm contextual analysis to a number of important political trends and wider theoretical questions around consent, sustainability of institutions and the differing priorities of UK central government from the 1960s onwards. It also draws on a number of alternative descriptive narrative frameworks through which political analysis can take place, including the emergence of a new localism, of metropolitan practical civic minded pragmatic actions for the common good of the city region.

Secondly, scrutinising a series of major speeches and set piece interviews for key themes, examples and evidence of the different approaches of this Mayoral model was intended to provide the linkages to the theoretical underpinnings of this model of governance, and to draw attention to the political programme that was being enacted.

And thirdly, the study builds on work of other political scientists, notably Rhodes, Gains, Bevir and Park who have advocated theoretical frameworks through which analyses of governance structures could be attempted (see literature review), but a method too. In particular, analysis of political networks and the narratives they construct makes a play to isolate the 'sense making' of the 'thick descriptions' of those key players in these networks, an under researched element of the devolution settlement.

Central to those webs of belief are a commitment to place and the primacy of that as a political strategy. Working cross party between Mayors on issues such as transport, and occasionally colliding with government, has not been a barrier to forceful advocacy on behalf of Greater Manchester. At the same time, a narrative has emerged of a central government committed to 'levelling up' parts of the economy in left behind towns – many

of which voted for a Conservative MP for the first time in 2020, including Leigh in Greater Manchester, the seat formerly held by Andy Burnham before he quit to stand for Mayor in 2017. None of which is inconsistent with the Northern Powerhouse strategy which propelled this system of government onto the statute books back in 2014.

And so to the slogan emblazoned on the stage at the film studio cum technology innovation hub, and on the first page of the manifesto, the words, “This is Manchester, we do things differently here”, attributed (inaccurately) to the late broadcaster and music mogul Anthony Howard Wilson (1950-2007). A savage irony here, that a man for whom myth making was his business in his lifetime, it was proved on that day, to be part of his legacy in death as well. But it has at least attempted to solidify the underlying civic exceptionalism that has mobilised elite actors towards the new Mayor, rather than to be against him, or indifferent to him, and take seriously the ambitions of the political leadership in the city region. Events also appear to have reinforced the findings of this study. The powerful central narrative of the Mayor of Greater Manchester ran consistently through the disputes with the government in the autumn of 2020 over funding for lockdown. Not only did it consolidate Burnham’s status as Mayor, but of his principal core narrative of fairness and modernity and the media coronation of him as the ‘King of the North’ (Pidd, 2020: online).

Further study of this model of government, which is arguably more advanced in Greater Manchester than in any other English city region, is essential to a greater and more refined understanding of how it can develop elsewhere. Understanding what has happened so far, how the networks of governance and consultation have intertwined in order to deliver policy responses to profound political and economic challenges. Doing so will surely enhance understanding of devolution in the future, and whether it has a future.

## **Limits to the study and further research**

This has been a study of a new system of regional governance in one the UK's largest city regions, Greater Manchester. The scope of this study has been the extent to which the new directly elected Mayoral model of regional metropolitan governance has been new, different and a break with previous structures. Evidently choosing relationships with the business community as a case study takes one element of the first three years of just one of the devolved administrations with its own unique historical and cultural context.

It set out to test many of the foundation statements and policy goals of this new era through elite interviewing, textual analysis and setting the key actors in a historical and contemporary political context. That context features the vote of the UK's electorate to leave the European Union and to support populist politicians, a wider crisis in confidence in traditional political parties and individuals. Principally these took place at a time of widespread volatility and discontent with political structures nationally and internationally and that these new ways of working were driven by the charisma and skillset of the key individual, and his close cohorts. Therefore, the unique set of local circumstances may offer little for other city regions.

Two choices at the outset of the research were made with an awareness of their limits. One was to focus on the policy areas of economic and industrial strategies, and the other was by choosing that area of focus, to limit the interviewees to key actors with specialised knowledge in that specific space. Clearly, other choices may have produced richer, thicker and certainly different interpretations. The limitations of the chosen sample, is that they represent just one sector that has experienced the wider networked arrangements and have experienced a system in its early stages. By its strict definition, this study could have been enhanced by a deeper dive interviews with the Mayor himself and other members of the Greater Manchester cabinet.

This study was also intended to be bookended by the Mayoral Election of May the 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, marking the end of the first term of Andy Burnham's position as the very first mayor of Greater Manchester. However, due to the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the election was cancelled and the first term extended by a year, so it has inevitably covered events throughout the remainder of the first term, but in the extraordinary circumstances of

a pandemic. Further study would benefit from comparative analyses of other city regions which are some way behind Greater Manchester in the powers devolved to them, but also of the collective regional governance narratives. In addition, governance narratives may have to shift in the light of another shift in prevailing central government strategy against an industrial strategy and a cooler attitude towards Metro Mayors (Burnham, 2021; Sainsbury, 2021). In February 2021, in a reflective piece in the *New Statesman* magazine about Scottish devolution's next phase (Deerin, 2021), Labour's only MP in Scotland, Ian Murray said: "Look at how well Andy Burnham and the other mayors have done bringing power closer to the people." The hope is that research such as this is just the start of a process that does exactly that.



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