

Accountability matters

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This is an executive summary for the report [Accountability matters: Securing the future of devolution](#), published in May 2025 by IPPR (the Institute for Public Policy Research). This report addresses shortcomings in the system of accountability for England's metro-mayors and mayoral strategic authorities. It suggests that some of these shortcomings arise from a lack of inquiry into the nature and purposes of 'holding to account', meaning that real-world accountability procedures often reflect tacit assumptions. The report proposes some adjustments to accountability procedures that would better reflect the Government's aspirations for mayoral strategic authorities. We argue that these types of change are not a luxury – they are critical to strengthening public acceptance and the democratic legitimacy of mayoral authorities.

Executive summary

In England, the new metro-mayors face multiple, overlapping accountability requirements. But much of this activity simply comprises familiar procedures: financial assurance, scrutiny committees, and data gathering. These procedures derive from shared understandings within the 'Westminster model' of government, and their internal logic is often not perceived.

As a result, policy-makers can easily lapse into familiar structures and practices without asking whether they are fit for purpose. This is detrimental to mayors' growing role of place-based leadership, convening public bodies and local actors in the service of a common vision.

The emphasis on financial accountability

This system attaches particular importance to procedures for managing public money. Central government demands detailed information to allow it to satisfy itself that devolved funds have been spent appropriately. Good use of funds is an important part of accountability. But it absorbs far more resources than other elements of accountability: in particular, making data available and conducting public scrutiny of policy-making. Place-based data sources are slowly improving, but local overview and scrutiny committees have almost no dedicated resources.

Focusing on managing public money can obstruct innovative local policy-making, and work against place-based leadership. It also creates a compliance burden for mayors, whose teams expend considerable resource reporting and evaluating: and also for the government departments that have to read and track the reports. Place-based leadership works best when local spending resources from multiple public sources can be pooled, and where mayors face fewer reporting obligations.

Strengthening accountability

The report makes a number of recommendations for better-designed institutions to strengthen local democratic accountability. The recommendations cover financial audit, making information and performance data available to the electorate, and providing an outlook on how effectively local public bodies work together. Better designed institutions would come at a cost – but they are critical to ensuring that the new mayoral authorities come to command public support and, therefore, democratic legitimacy.

In the English Devolution White Paper the government expressed interest in exploring proposals for Local Public Accounts Committees. Our proposal for MAACs adapts and develops the LPAC idea to meet the challenges of Mayoral Strategic Authorities.

We suggest the creation of a **Mayoral Authority Accountability Committee ('MAAC') in each mayoral strategic authority**. This would be an extension of the existing overview and scrutiny committee in the strategic authority.

MAACs would be able to summon officials from the mayoral authority, but also from a range of other local public bodies. These could include the Integrated Care Partnership and allied health bodies; the police and crime commissioner; the fire and rescue, and probation services. They would have a small, independent staff team, possibly employed by the Government's new Local Audit Office.

Part of the MAAC membership could be drawn from individuals with experience of public service provision in the mayoral area. Independent members would prevent MAACs from being regarded as a rubber stamp or as 'just another' local authority committee. They might also make membership of the MAACs more attractive to councillors.

In localities that have established MAACs, **we recommend piloting Local Accounting Officers**, starting with the 'established mayoral strategic authorities'. A senior local official, such as the chief executive of a mayoral authority, would be appointed as local accounting officer. They would be accountable to Parliament for defined lines of local spending. The aim would be to enable financial assurance to be managed locally in the medium term, removing the need for Government departments to be involved.

Data collection and analysis

Each mayoral authority should have access to capacity to collect data locally. The Integrated Settlements offered to Greater Manchester and the West Midlands use a range of local and national data. Collection, accessing and sharing data will grow in importance as more mayors take on integrated settlements.

To ensure comparability between mayors, an optimal outcome would be for a core group of identical indicators to be collected in all mayoral areas. But this core should be small. Mayors and localities regularly emphasise that the challenges faced by their areas are very different. The details of how the core set of sub-national data would be selected and analysed could be a subject for discussion at the government's proposed Mayoral Data Council.

In mayoral authorities, it is particularly important for data to be analysed in the light of the limits to mayors' powers and capacities. This could help to minimise unrealistic expectations.

Analysis highlighting the key findings within data can help to avoid what one scholar has called "performance blight and the tyranny of light" - the idea that public authorities sometimes publish large quantities of data but behave 'defensively' to counter criticism.

Knowledge brokering organisations (KBOs) exist in a number of regions in England. These are university-based specialist units that undertake multiple roles, such as data collection and analysis; expert advice to local decision-makers; and consultancy-style research for public bodies. Many of them already work closely with mayoral authorities. **KBOs could provide a source of data and basic analysis that MAACs could publish and also use to support inquiries into public issues - a 'regional evidence infrastructure'.**

Making it happen

We suggest that **the upcoming English Devolution Bill should include provisions enabling the Government to introduce MAACs and local accounting officers**. These bodies would not necessarily become compulsory immediately: sequencing of this type of reform, and achieving acceptance of it within Whitehall, are important. Equally critically, both changes would need to be accompanied by a commitment to provide sufficient financial and staff resources to make them work.

MAACs would help to bind together upcoming changes in England's governance and democracy. They need not be prohibitively costly. They would help to make place-based leadership a reality by incentivising independent public bodies to collaborate. They would make better quality information available to the public on what mayors do – and how well they do it.