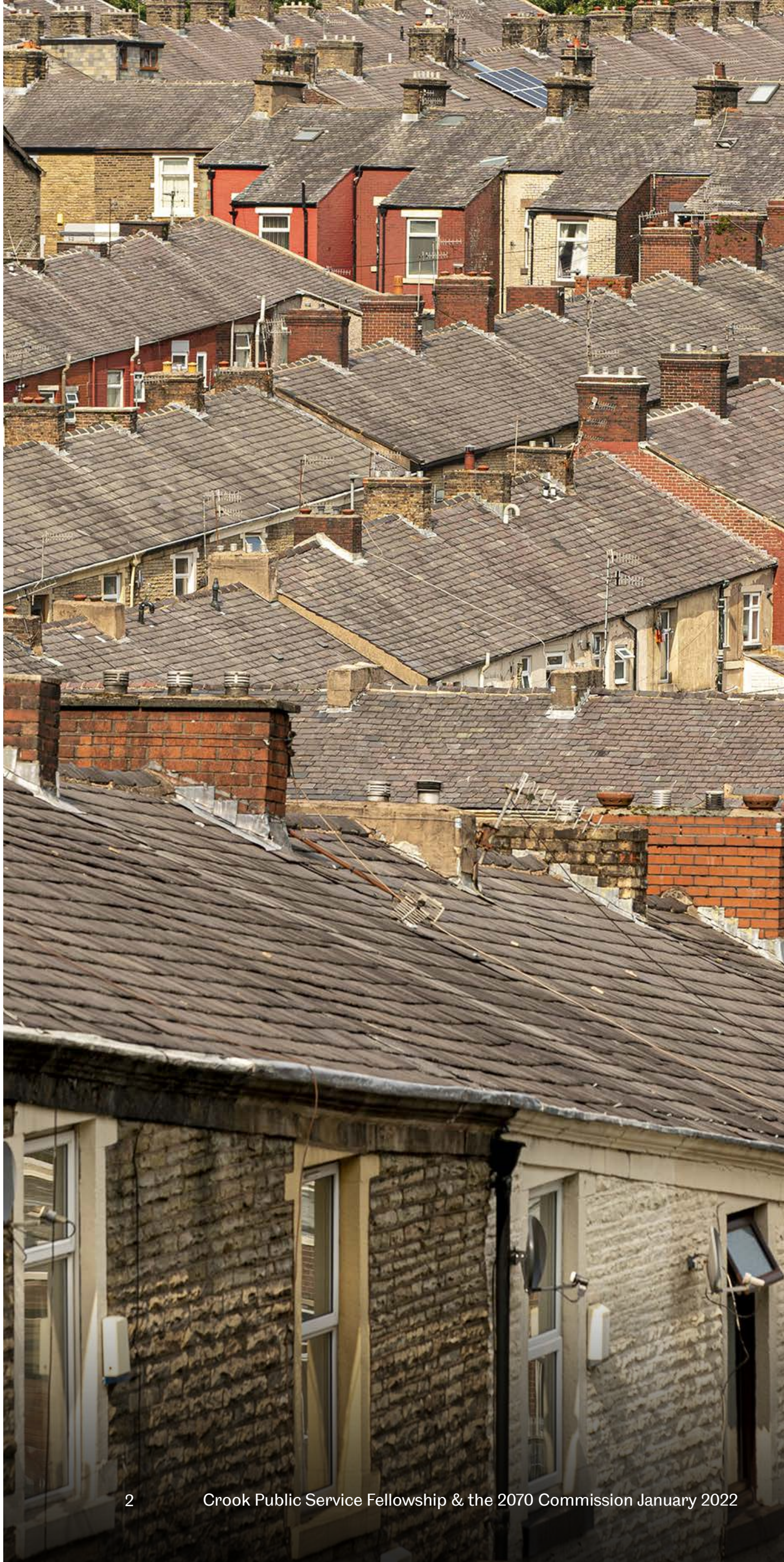


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## Accountable for what and to who? Making mayoral accountability fit for English devolution

The process of the devolution of power and resources in England is very much a work in progress. Since 2014<sup>1</sup> Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs)<sup>2</sup> have become an increasingly important part of the governance landscape. There are now nine MCAs each with a metro mayor and a bespoke devolution deal with central government, covering governance, devolved powers and allocation of funding. As the MCA model evolves, deepens and broadens out to new areas of the country, the accountability of these institutions and their political leaders grows in importance. This statement of intent and set of early provocations are to stimulate debate and will be followed by an interview-based research paper, which will seek to establish what a new model of MCA accountability in England could look like.

The debate over the right form of regional governance has been a feature of policy discourse in most developed countries for decades, including in the UK. More recently, the 2019 UK general election put regional inequality, expressed as ‘levelling up’, and our own systems of local governance centre stage. Success is yet to be formally defined, but co-author of the Conservative Party 2019 election manifesto, Rachel Wolf, has described successful levelling up as “places and therefore lives will be tangibly better than they were two years ago, five years ago”<sup>3</sup>. The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, the Secretary of State for the newly named Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has started to provide a sense of how we get there, including by “strengthen(ing) local leadership to drive real change”<sup>4</sup>.

1. The first area to agree to a devolution deal comprising an MCA was the Greater Manchester Combined Authority <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/devolution-to-the-greater-manchester-combined-authority-and-transition-to-a-directly-elected-mayor>.

2. Corporate bodies comprised of two or more local government areas with a directly elected metro mayor.

3. See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000s9tt>.

4. See <https://policymogul.com/monitor/key-updates/19230/michael-gove-s-speech-to-conservative-party-conference>.

The increasing public visibility of metro mayors during the past two years of the pandemic has put a renewed political focus on what role metro mayors can and should play in reducing the UK's stubborn geographical inequalities, both within and between regions. A successful place-based approach to reducing inequalities relies upon clear, integrated and accountable governance between tiers of local, regional and national institutions. The current UK government has committed to publishing a levelling up white paper, anticipated to include discussion of place-based governance in England and support the continued roll out of a mayoral model, including to rural areas. Whilst political backlash to establish the model previously stymied change, the upcoming white paper is expected to be decisive on whether the roll out of a mayoral model goes ahead.

The lack of a universally understood system of accountability of metro mayors and their combined authorities is by no means the only reason for the slow development of the MCA model. The political dynamic between a Conservative government and predominantly Labour metro mayors has no doubt reopened the question of the political beneficiaries of the mayoral model in England. As has more recent debate to extend a mayoral model to rural England. But accountability is, by mutual consent of the political leaders involved, a tool available to formalise and develop the mayoral model, no matter who is in power.

This note sets out the framework for how we will approach the question of the accountability of MCAs and some early provocations to stimulate debate and interest in the topic. The complex, siloed and uneven accountability of MCAs remains unresolved. Our emerging hypothesis is that these accountability issues will be replicated in any further roll out of the MCA model or in upcoming county deals, without further reform.

This project reflects calls from the 2070 Commission to provide metro mayors with further powers and responsibilities and work by the Centre for Progressive Policy on the role mayors should play in UK governance and as part of the levelling up agenda<sup>5</sup>.

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5. See <https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/beyond-hard-hats>.

## Accountability for what? The problem with the existing system of mayoral accountability

Accountability serves to uphold democracy by helping to hold those with power to account and by facilitating policy learning and assessment against intended outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Broadly, the purpose of devolution to MCAs in England in recent years has been defined as a way to provide local areas with the levers they need to improve productivity and integrate public services. The current system of mayoral accountability in England (complex, siloed and inconsistent) makes both upholding democracy and assessing outcomes more difficult. Ultimately this matters because it will hold back the government from delivering the economic and social transformation it says it wants to achieve through the levelling up agenda. The channels through which the current system of accountability holds back the development of MCAs are manifold.

**The current system of accountability provides no way to assess overall place-based spending.** An effect of no single view of the effectiveness of devolved spending by place is that it makes it hard for local areas to demonstrate effectiveness, or be clearly held democratically accountable, for the totality of their spending by central government, the public or other key stakeholders.

**The relationship between central government and MCAs overall reflects the decentralisation - not full devolution - of power and spending.** Whilst devolution deals have secured investment funds for the MCAs that remain in the hands of directly elected metro mayors, this represents a fraction of their overall spend, much of which is still determined by statutory duties they must deliver and ongoing negotiation over funding (e.g., Adult Skills Budget).

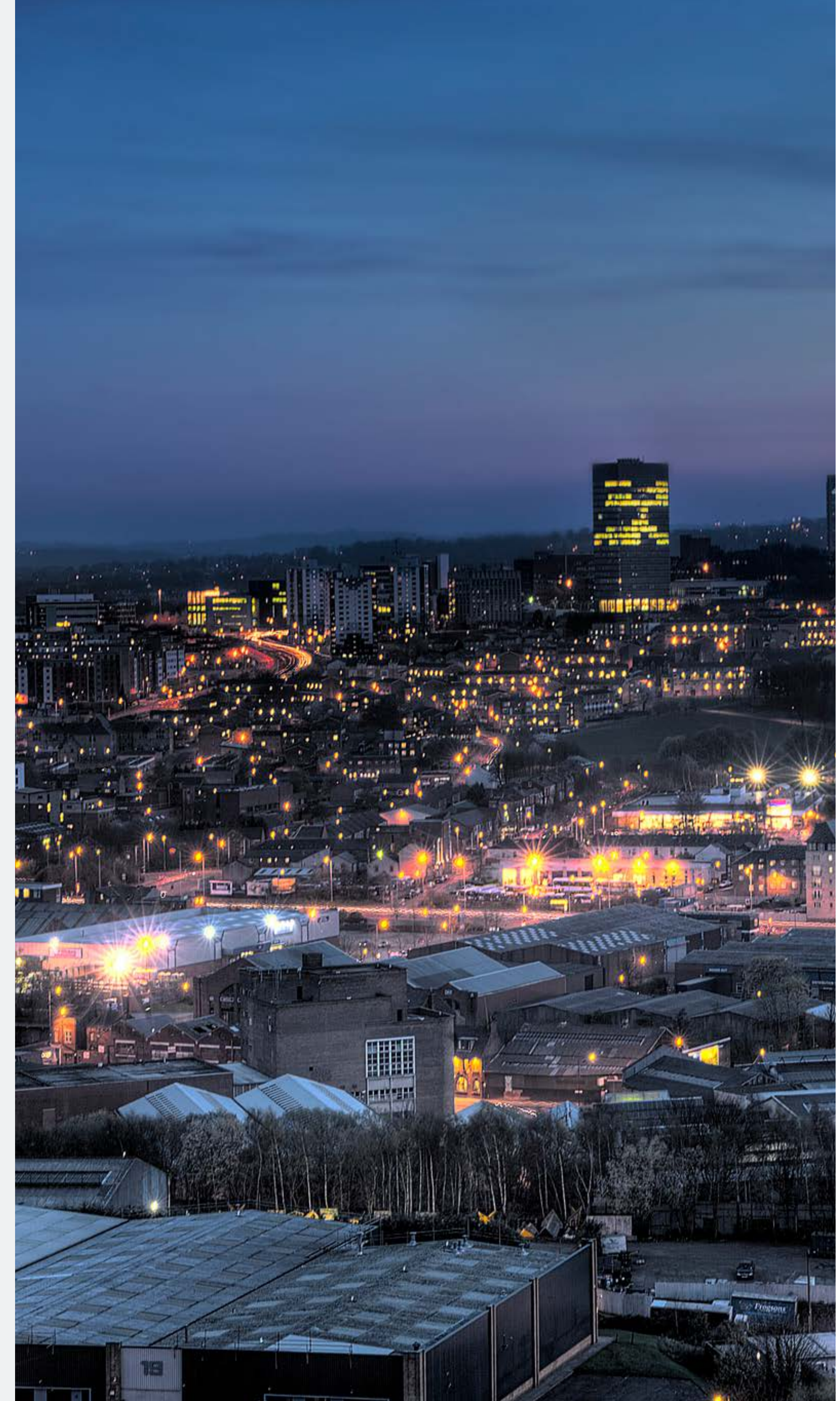
6. See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2753/PMR1530-9576360302>.

**There are mismatched public expectations between what the public think metro mayors can achieve and the levers they have to deliver.** Metro mayors have reported that they are held locally accountable by the public for areas outside of their direct control. This is in part due to the complexity of MCA accountability. In turn this could undermine trust in local democracy.

**Spending siloes reduce the ability of MCAs to innovate locally.** Local spending predominantly reflects central government spending siloes – there is little spending flexibility between budgets locally and MCAs risk effectively becoming delivery agencies for central government with the bureaucracy of central government replicated. In practice this means metro mayors have reduced scope to innovate and

demonstrate how devolved government can do things differently to achieve the goals written into devolution deals.

As a result, the complex, siloed and uneven accountability of MCAs risks being replicated in any further roll out of the MCA model or in upcoming county deals.



## Systematising the accountability of Mayoral Combined Authorities

There are heated debates about how to improve the accountability of MCAs and an array of accountabilities for MCAs across all tiers of governance<sup>7</sup>. The mayor of Middlesbrough, Andy Preston, last year chastised metro mayors as ‘Father Christmas leaders who hand out money’<sup>8</sup> whilst Metro Mayor of Liverpool City Region (LCR), Steve Rotherham, has said that his role involves ‘reading between the lines’<sup>9</sup> of LCR’s devolution agreement.

To take some heat out of the debate, and to frame our ongoing research, we will be using a definition of accountability developed by international expert Professor Mark Bovens from Utrecht University: *a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can*

*pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences*<sup>10</sup>.

Using this approach, academics have studied three primary forms of accountability: vertical, diagonal and horizontal and we will be using this framework in order to assess the types and strengths of relationships between MCAs and their array of stakeholders:

**Vertical accountability.** Perhaps the most widely recognised form of accountability. It includes legal rules requiring lower tiers or organisational levels of government to provide information to other levels and tiers, including, principally, superior ministerial departments. Senior levels of government then issue sanctions or rewards, for example increasing or decreasing budgets, hiring and firing chief executives, and other legal powers.

*Examples of MCA vertical accountability include, to the Prime Minister, to central government, to Parliament, to constituent local authority leaders and the electorate.*

**Diagonal accountability.** Diagonal accountability refers to a broader range of bodies with varied oversight and monitoring responsibilities. For example, parliamentary Select Committees have powers to call evidence and request reports from public authorities, even if they do not have power over budgets or hiring/firing of metro mayors. Regulatory figures like the Information Commissioner or agencies like the Competition and Markets Authority can also request information from public and private companies. Courts can summon information from individuals and organisations in civil litigation before issuing legal rulings. These forms of

7. See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/1/contents>.

8. See (link) <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/metro-mayors-father-christmas-leaders-who-hand-out-money-says-city-mayor-26-08-2021/>

9. Comments heard in person at Labour Party Conference 2021.

10. See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1468-0386.2007.00378.x>.



accountability are all about requiring transparency and openness in a formal capacity, but don't legally 'compel' action in the same way as government edict. *Examples in the case of MCAs include local overview, scrutiny and audit committees and parliamentary Select Committees.*

**Horizontal accountability.** Horizontal accountability is a less formal type of accountability. It includes providing information to a range of audiences with no legal authority over an organisation. Stakeholder working groups and thematic regional boards are common examples. Whilst government legislation may compel a metro mayor to provide a working plan for stakeholder consultation, and take their feedback on board, the stakeholders themselves have no power to compel what the mayor

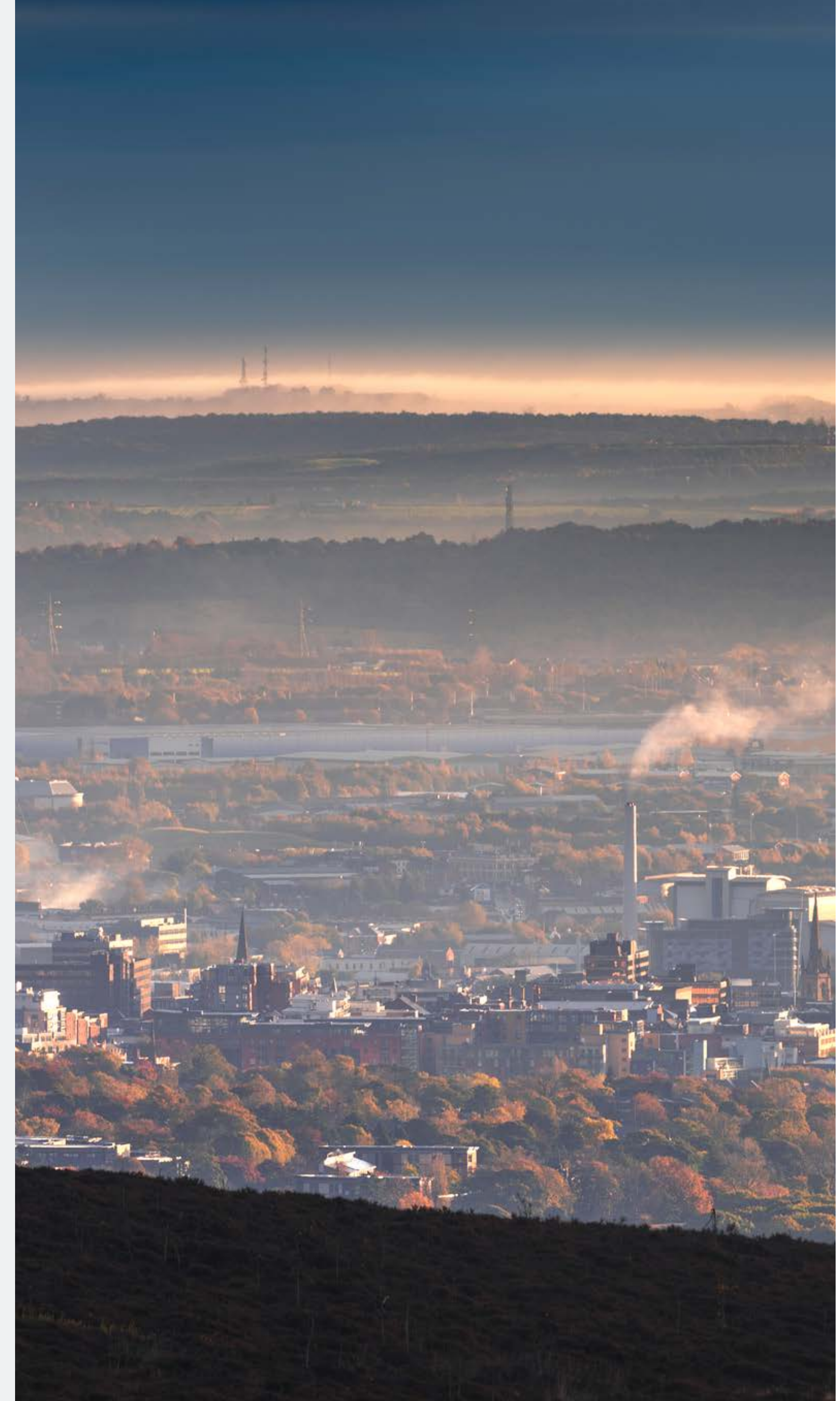
decides to do after the consultation. Sharing information with the media, or to voluntary and community sector organisations, is also a form of horizontal accountability. *Examples for MCAs include the local press or local advisory groups.*

Vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability are the three most basic types of accountability outlined in the academic literature<sup>11</sup>. These categories are not set in stone or are boxes to be filled. 'Ticking off' one or other type of accountability will not in itself achieve a more legitimate accountability structure for metro mayors. Instead, mapping out how and when accountability happens can help us understand where there are gaps in accountability processes, or moments when accountability could be more visible or robust.

11. Some political scientists refer to horizontal and diagonal accountability the opposite way around to how we use the terms - with horizontal accountability referring to monitoring and scrutiny bodies, and diagonal accountability to the wider public/civil society. Our usage is consistent with usage in the literature on accountability within the sub-discipline of governance and public policy (see <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557315X14431855320366>).

**Table 1: an outline accountability framework**

Type	Forum	How	When
Vertical	Electorate, MCA Cabinet, government departments, Parliament	Elections, Cabinet decision making, central government negotiations, Parliamentary debate	Every 4 years for elections, regular Cabinet meetings, 1-to-3-year Spending Review periods, in the run up to devolution deal agreement
Diagonal	Parliamentary Select Committees, regulators, courts	Hearings, reports, accounts	Hearings by request, annual accounts/budget
Horizontal	Stakeholders, communities	Consultations, media	Ongoing





## Early provocations for a reformed system of mayoral combined authority accountability

This note has so far set out why the accountability of MCAs is important, the problem of the existing model and a proposed framework for describing and mapping accountability. We will be using these insights to inform the beginning of our research and interviews with experts and local and national practitioners on the governance of MCAs. We will also be using these discussions to develop ideas for how governance structures could be evolved into a new accountability framework across MCAs.

The following policy provocations are to stimulate debate around a new system of accountability across the breadth of MCA relationships.

### **The relationship between MCAs and government**

*For example*

- Is there a role for place-based budgeting through the Spending Review process?
- Should there be greater focus on MCAs from government ministers, for example through a Regional Accounts Committee with secretaries of state from each relevant government department?
- Is there merit in an existing independent body, such as the Office for Budget Responsibility, to oversee the totality of MCA budgets?

- Is there merit in reintroducing a Government minister for each region?
- Should a National Mayoral Council become a feature of Whitehall decision making on strategic economic and social policy issues?<sup>12</sup>

### **The relationship between MCAs and parliament**

*For example*

- Should the relationship between metro mayors and parliamentary Select Committees be encouraged or developed?
- Should there be greater levels of regional political scrutiny of MCAs?<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/beyond-hard-hats>.

<sup>13</sup> The Centre for Progressive Policy (CPP) and the Northern Research Group of MPs recently called for greater involvement of local MPs. See <https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/driving-growth-and-shared-prosperity>.

An aerial photograph of a city, likely London, showing a mix of residential and commercial buildings. In the foreground, there is a large green park with a winding path and a small pond. The background shows a dense urban area with many buildings and a river or canal. The overall scene is bright and clear.

## The relationship between MCAs and local scrutiny

*For example*

- Should all MCAs have a directly elected scrutiny body with its own staff and resources to the scale of the Greater London Authority oversight committee?
- Should the decline of the regional press be prevented or reversed in order to hold MCAs to account?
- Should MCA meetings or decisions be made more visible to stakeholders and the public?
- Is there a role for collaborative governance structures to help hold MCAs to account in their entirety?

## Path ahead

Following this statement of intent and upcoming research and interviewing process, we will aim to make a set of recommendations on the path ahead for the accountability of mayoral combined authorities by mid-2022. If you wish to get in touch with the researchers involved with the project please email [z.billingham@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:z.billingham@sheffield.ac.uk) and [m.wood@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.wood@sheffield.ac.uk).

