



Researching the city – an economic transition of Manchester: A case study

Notes from a Lecture given by Mike Emmerich, Founding Director, Metro Dynamics and Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Manchester, on 9 November 2023¹.

¹ The text given here is that used in the lecture. A couple of footnotes have been added in relation to points raised in the discussion.

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Part 1 – Setting the Scene

It is a huge honour to be asked to give this second biennial Brian Robson lecture.

Brian was a close colleague at various points in my career and a source of wise counsel during my time running the Institute for Political and Economic Governance here at the University of Manchester and again during my time at New Economy.

Before going further, I should also thank my colleagues Mary Dolphin but above all James Gilmour whose insights on the city region I will use later are central to the arguments I make.

One of the first things that came to mind when I agreed to do this lecture, something that has been at the back of my mind for over 30 years is a disagreement between colleagues in the then Department of Geography at Manchester University.

It eventually turned into rival articles. The first, I think, was by Brian himself. He wrote a piece in the *Business in the Community* magazine in 1987¹, now lost as far as I can tell, on the subject of the decision by the owners of the brewery in Moss Side to reinvest in the site generating some 100 jobs. They took what seems with hindsight a rather modern decision to target the new jobs on local residents. Brian was, I recall, supportive.



Photo: Source unknown

I understand why. The Harp Lager Brewery as it was then stands on the junction of Princess Road and Moss Lane, pretty much the centre of the 1981 Moss side riots. There had been concerns that the Brewery, one of the few major private sector employers in the area might be about to leave. Instead, they were persuaded to reinvest and to take a local approach to their recruitment.

Taking up from debates that echoed up and down the corridors of the Mansfield Cooper building some colleagues from the department wrote academic papers², taking a critical perspective on the notion of the spatial targeting of financial resources. In their view this produced few material benefits for the affected areas. The concern they had was that factors such as the limited local availability of council houses led to people leaving the area. So, although the scheme was successful in its own terms getting local people into work, the local area did not benefit.”³

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This old example surfaces an issue which comes up time and again in research on cities, in Manchester as much as anywhere revealing sharply differing views on what constitutes effective policy – and on the role of academic research in relation to policy per se. Is it to criticise, to build policy foundations, to help to create policy or what?

Should the success be on the good outcomes or the limitations of the of local employment policy or on its inadequacy. What constitutes good and the best and whether there is indeed should be enmity between them is the theme at the heart of this lecture.

But I'm in danger of getting ahead of myself.

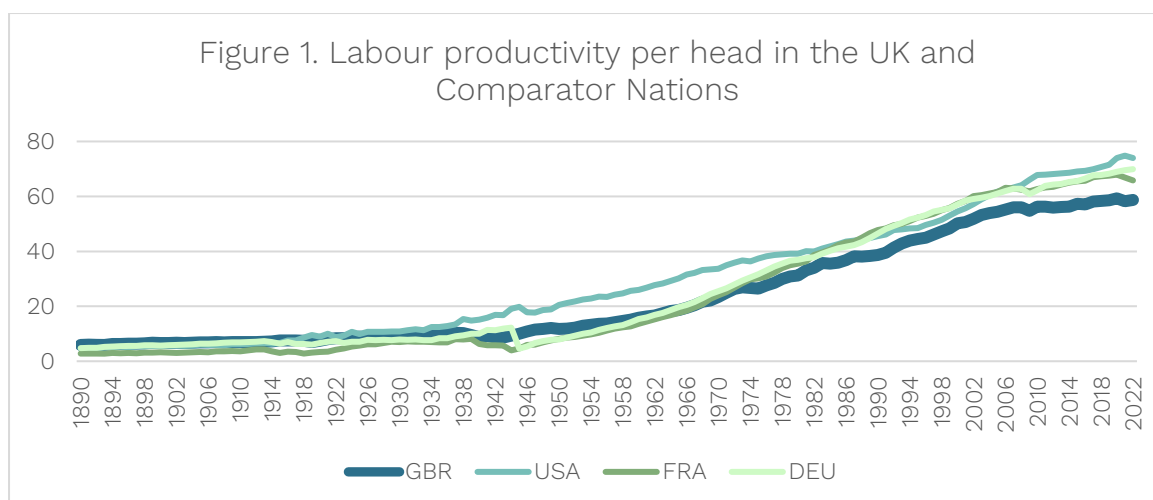
This lecture is part data, part history and part argument. Starting next with the UK economy, and again later in relation to Greater Manchester, there are some sections full of graphs. Their explanation is not the purpose of this lecture but markers along the way of a set of trends – a journey if you want – that I would like us to explore.

Part 2 – Productivity in the UK and its Regions²

Greater Manchester's economy does not exist in a vacuum. We have to start with the national economy and its economic performance. And as Paul Krugman once famously said: productivity isn't everything but in the long run it's almost everything. Growth matters. Our nation's performance has been poor, falling behind over time, catastrophically so over recent years.

² This paper is concerned with economic growth and its distribution. In debate at the lecture at which it was presented we discussed other data such as unemployment and other measures of social deprivation included in the Index of Multiple Deprivation. My argument was that, important as these are, they are beyond the scope of what it is we looked at in our research. We chose productivity and in our GM work GVA because it best captures what it is we wanted to measure – growth. But GVA is far from perfect. See <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/replacing-gdp-with-wealth-and-wellbeing-indicators-by-diane-coyle-2021-12?barrier=accesspaylog> for example. Moving beyond GDP and GVA would constitute progress.

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Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of NIESR⁴

Our productivity, historically high, fell in comparison to our international competitors throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rising to European levels in the 1960s before falling away, with the gap widening thereafter up to the present.

First key take away – the UK has underperformed internationally for decades. That underperformance gap underpins all that follows.

Table 1: Growth rates of the standard of living and of productivity, 1977-2019 (% p.a.)

Growth rates	1977-1990	1990-2007	2007-2019
Standard of living	3.07	1.96	0.47
Productivity	2.35	2.34	0.21

Source: Oulton (2021)⁵

Taking a closer look at the UK, we see that performance post the financial crash looks exceptionally weak. Growth of over 2% up to 1990 gives way to just under 0.4% in the period since 2007.

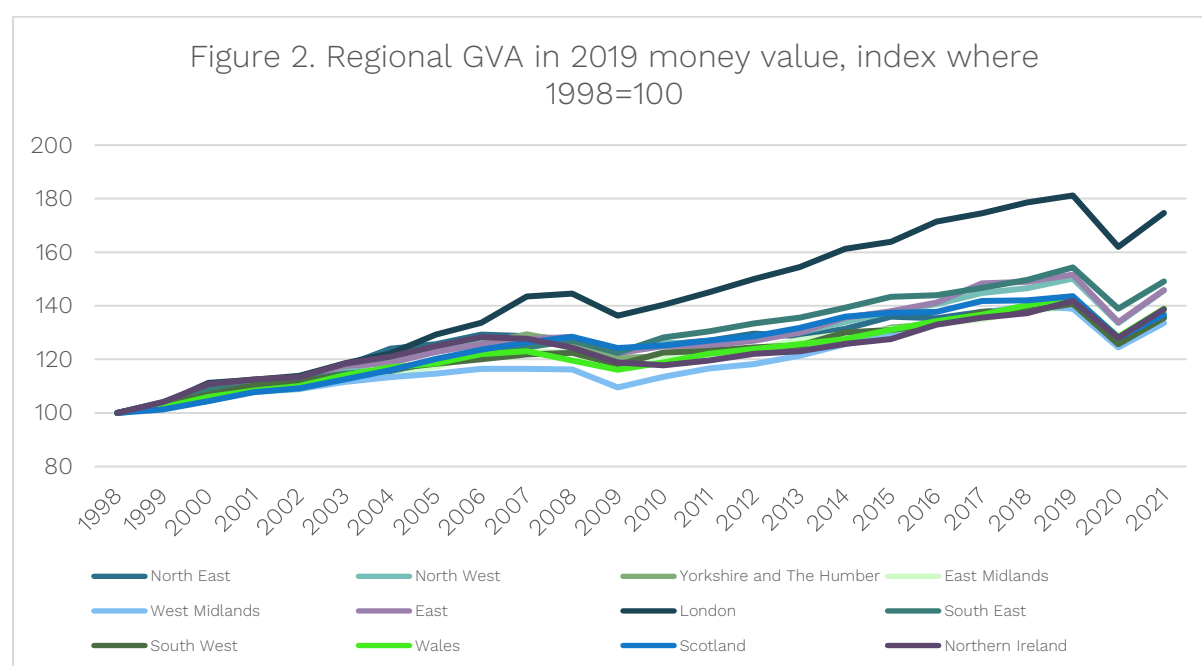
To put it another way, if productivity had remained at 2%, the average UK worker might have been some £5,000 per year better off⁶.

If listeners to this lecture find productivity a subject of marginal interest, think again. This productivity gap had it not existed, would have made tens of billions of pounds available every year to pay for better public services and policies to support convergence between richer and deprived areas.

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Second key take away – shockingly poor productivity performance has made the task of any purposeful economic policy of redistribution much more difficult. We have had an unplanned experiment in degrowth⁷. Its results are not ones we should welcome.

If our national economic performance comes as no surprise to listeners to this lecture more familiar still will be our regional performance. One of the few things about which every researcher if not every commentator on the UK economy concurs is that we have really very wide differentials between different parts of the country⁸.



Source: ONS. *Regional GVA. (2023 Release)*

London had the highest productivity level of any UK region in 2021, with output per hour worked 33% higher than the UK average, maintaining its relative strength, a continuing trend since 1998.

Something has changed in London though. It's probably too soon to tell exactly how it has changed. Some argue that we are seeing the emergence of a new dynamic. London had a bad COVID and its productivity growth has slowed virtually to zero. It is the principal source of the national problems – the national slowdown – I've just described⁹.

But as Figure 2 showed, so vast is the difference in productivity between London and elsewhere, it seems a stretch at very least to argue that we are seeing the development of a new and multipolar British growth model.

Third key take away – there are really very large differences between the different parts of the UK economy including between regions, and whatever we

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have been doing has not worked albeit that we have no counterfactual for the policies we have tried.

Part 3 – Regions and Cities, Geographers and Economists (1st look)

But as we start to turn our attentions towards Manchester, I want to address the thorny issue of spatial levels and the intense rivalry (there isn't that much debate) among researchers on whether or not it is regional or city region productivity that really matters if these gaps are to be closed. My focus here is Greater Manchester. Some researchers would argue I zoomed in too close – that the North West matters more^{10 11}.

To most regional geographers strong regional governance is needed to drive active redistribution policies *between* and *within* regions. The argument essentially is that achieving higher standards of living across whole regions is something that requires a national regional framework and that attempts to do so at the city region level will produce winners & losers – accentuating existing differences.

Some economists and certainly those of the school of the New Economic Geography take a different view¹². Here the argument is that powerful economic forces are driving local economies in different directions. In this view, attempts at regional levelling out are destined to failure and waste public resources if they attempt to achieve essentially unachievable outcomes. Better in this view to grow out from and increase the size of larger labour markets in city regions.

Economists and geographers don't agree on much in the space but one thing they do agree on is that the current towns agenda has poor intellectual (and empirical) foundations. Every piece of research that has been done has concluded that the variation in towns in this country and its causes is so great that to bundle them together as a basis of policy makes no logical sense¹³.

The fourth key takeaway is that there is no consensus view on the primacy of cities or regions but a clear view that the towns led agenda makes no economic sense.

I want to offer a couple of thoughts on where I stand on these issues. The first thought is this.

I was an advisor to and part author of the Millan Commission on regional economic development¹⁴. I started as a regionalist. Having lived through the experiment with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and worked supportively as a Treasury official in an initially quite unsupportive department on their creation in 1997, my experience then and since – of practical policy making – has changed my mind.

The geography of the North West: of Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside, Cheshire and Greater Manchester makes no economic sense. If the RDAs have been concerned with the major road and rail routes, with power infrastructure and water, they may

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have made sense. These are inherently subnational issues that require coordination between places – even if they are different local economies. But they had none of those powers and were never likely to have been given them in our system of government.

When the government tried to give them *some* important powers – for land-use planning – the lack of democratic accountability basically broke the model. When we tried as a country to create an elected regional model, Whitehall and different views among ministers killed that too. This is because the radicalism of the original idea was lost in the baronies of Whitehall (via a Green Paper which gave the regional game away) while disagreements between Ministers forced a referendum that should never have been required in which people rejected it by a margin of something like four to one. In the end, it should be noted, the campaign failed to mobilise support¹⁵.

Even as the regional experiment was tried, a city regional model was being developed. That experiment is still underway with new mayoralties, supported by city regions (and in the case of the North East, a region). It is an approach I support because of our system of government and our need to work within it even as we try to change it. It started in Greater Manchester.

We:

- Are a unitary state in which local government has no constitutional basis beyond the will of parliament for its existence at any given point
- Have no tradition of regional government and an unhelpful recent precedent in the North East referendum
- Have a massively centralised economy showing a few overall signs of becoming less so and strong economic forces which continue to drive sorting effects between places
- Have an even more centralised system of governance with every effective lever of power residing in Whitehall and Westminster

My fifth take away – our objective given the hyper centralisation of our country should be to find a way to create an unignorable evidentially based counterfactual that demonstrates the ability of subnational governance to make a meaningful difference to our economy and polity.

But what constitutes success? To my mind its success or otherwise might be demonstrated by the achievement of three things:

- The ability to create and sustain a governance model that is accepted nationally and locally
- Evidence that it is growing the economy in a sustainable way
- Evidence that it is not doing so at the cost of creating greater inequalities, rather that it is reducing them – creating inclusive growth

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I propose in what remains of this lecture not to dwell on the first of them, suffice it to note that not just Greater Manchester but nine areas of the country now have combined authorities with metropolitan mayors with more on the way. An important recent report¹⁶ suggests that the body of opinion of decision-makers¹⁷ has decisively swung behind this model as the best way of creating subnational government in England including many who have advocated a regional approach. It is early days, and the 2021 Mayoral Election turnouts were not high but Metro Mayors are becoming an established part of our political landscape as we saw during COVID and the recent decision to cancel the Northern leg of HS2¹⁸. If the Mayoralties are to succeed in the long term economically and politically, it is vital that they have the resources to do their job: they need things to be accountable for¹⁹.

The rest of this lecture is about Greater Manchester's economy, how it has changed and where it goes next. I attempt, with the research my colleagues and I have been able to do so far to provide insights into these last two questions: is there any evidence that Manchester's economy is delivering and if so, is it doing so at the cost of widening inequalities?

Part 4 – Greater Manchester's Economy – A second look at the data

We don't have local productivity data until the 2000s. So to paint a picture of the context into which our current discussion of city regional economies was born, we have to rely on data such as employment.

In 1959 manufacturing dominated the Greater Manchester labour market employing over half of all men and women. Like every city region of the UK dependent on the manufacturing and extractive industries of the 19th Century, a steady decline in employment through the 1960s and 70s intensified in the early 1980s. In doing so restructuring changed places completely and permanently.

Greater Manchester lost over half its industrial jobs in the thirty years to 1991, with 207,000 manufacturing job losses in Greater Manchester between 1972 and 1984 alone. As the conurbation slipped into recession, between 1978 and 1981, Greater Manchester was losing manufacturing jobs at a rate of 127 per working day. The majority of those who lost their jobs were men in full-time work with the service jobs created during the period overwhelmingly – 80% – filled by women (with 2/3 of them filled by part-time workers)²⁰. My guess is that income levels fell catastrophically, hollowing out pretty much every part of every community, sowing the seeds of many of the problems described by Michael Marmot in reviews of health and inequality²¹.

I don't think we fully appreciate what happened in this period. If we did, we might take a more benign view on how long it has taken us to recover and a realistic one of our options having surrendered so much productive capacity so quickly.

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But there is also evidence in the literature in both the economies of different cities²² and in their political geography²³, that some cities would emerge more strongly than others. Manchester, odd as it may seem to those who lived in the city in the 1970s and 80s, was better placed than others. The nature of its economy left it with stronger roots. Research comparing Manchester and Liverpool in the 1970s found that the city of Manchester had a stronger service base and a denser network of smaller and indigenous firms which left it better placed than neighbouring Liverpool to respond to policy stimulus. While, as an essentially monocentric city, something which helped its political economy, the DNA of the Greater Manchester model, even then, were already in place²⁴.

Sixth key take away – the profound nature of deindustrialisation in this part of the world is something that needs to be borne firmly in mind when considering what happened next. It has been a long haul back.

Table 2: Change in urban population across conurbations, 1981-2011 (% p.a.)

	Change in urban population (%)		
	1981-1991	1991-2001	2001-2011
London	0.4	7.0	14.0
Tyne and Wear	-2.8	-4.3	2.7
Merseyside	-5.5	-5	1.4
Greater Manchester	-2.5	-1.6	8.1
West Midlands	-2	-1.9	7.1
West Yorkshire	-0.2	1.1	7.1
South Yorkshire	-2.2	-1.7	6.1

Source: *Emmerich (2017)*

The pattern of deindustrialisation was accompanied by depopulation. It may come as a surprise to visitors to this vibrant city today that it was only in the period post 2001 that in Greater Manchester as elsewhere, population loss turned into strong population growth.

I would like to tell the story of Greater Manchester's more recent economic change through the prism of the Manchester Independent Economic Review (MIER)²⁵.

In 2006 after 4 years here I went back to policy to create what became New Economy²⁶. I felt that we had little choice but to do the Manchester Independent Economic Review. There was more research around in Greater Manchester at the time but little that was directly useful to my new stakeholders: the leaders of the city region and its business community. There was, in some quarters, a whiff of complacency. Manchester felt like a place on the up. Still basking in the glow of the Commonwealth Games, with the music and youth scene in full flow, Manchester Utd once again at the summit of European football and Manchester City rising to join them. It felt as if the city had found its Mojo. But its economic numbers were still

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lousy. Persuading the city that it still had a long journey to travel and very hard choices to make, was the challenge.

We assembled the panel with prominent Mancunian economists: Diane Coyle and Jim O'Neill as well as business people and international figures. We raised £1.5 million with the aim of spending most of it on primary research via tender notices advertised in the pages of the Economist magazine. Its formal launch was led by the Local Government Secretary and its final report launched by the Chancellor. Manchester was thinking its way into the national consciousness about economic decision-making as a matter of deliberate policy. Equally deliberate was the way in which we set the review up.

I took our cue from an initiative that I organised while still at the University. Called the Manchester Treasury Initiative, supported by then Exchequer secretary Ed Balls and funded by the University of Manchester, we organised two events as part of the subnational review of economic development²⁷, one here and one in London to answer the question: what drives local growth? I came out of those events with a frame of reference which still broadly underpins UK national policy and which became the foundation of MIER.

The MIER rationale, most simply and effectively put was this: how can we develop an economic model in which Manchester and Greater Manchester do for the broad North and West what London has done for the greater South East? At its heart then was the notion of agglomeration economies and it is probably no surprise as a result of that, that the core economic paper for MIER was undertaken by Henry Overman and colleagues at the London School of Economics.

The review made 10 recommendations which were accepted in full by Greater Manchester's leaders and became the foundation for the growth plan which followed. The point I want to emphasise because I think it is the most important is that MIER changed the way the city thought. It did so politically and economically.

Politically – During the process of doing the review I and colleagues did meeting after meeting with local elected representatives explaining to them what the economics was telling us about the choices they faced. We also set up training programmes for council officers to help them understand how markets work and how best to shape market interventions using their resources to achieve the outcomes they wanted.

By the end of the process, politically the leadership of the city region had grown supportive if not always wholly comfortable of the notion that it was one travel to work area and that the outcomes for their residents matter more than the location of any particular investment or asset. This in turn was fundamental to the Association of Greater Manchester Authority in becoming a proto-polity.

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MIER also changed how Greater Manchester thinks **Economically**. We developed a distinctive economic approach during this period. After the failure of the congestion charge referendum to gain support, the government withdrew £2 billion of funding.

At that key moment we used the insights from the review to prioritise the investments we could afford on the basis of the impact on the city regional economy. The Big Bang in Metrolink expansion into Oldham, Rochdale and South Manchester was informed by MIER over what might have been more politically expedient choices – we focussed on projects which would drive agglomeration.

When Enterprise zones were reintroduced, rather than do what most areas do and make a political decision to place them nearest to areas of poverty, we asked the question: where would the enterprise zones have the biggest economic impact? The city centre aside (which clearly was never a viable political proposition), research found that the greatest economic impact would be at Manchester Airport at the prosperous end of the city region. This way, the investment happened where it would have the biggest impact, but the benefits were shared across the conurbation. Key to all of this was the creation of a tool, the Single Assessment Framework²⁸.

Seventh key Take away – Manchester consciously tried to accelerate the process of recovery with a highly unusual investment model in the development of a new approach.

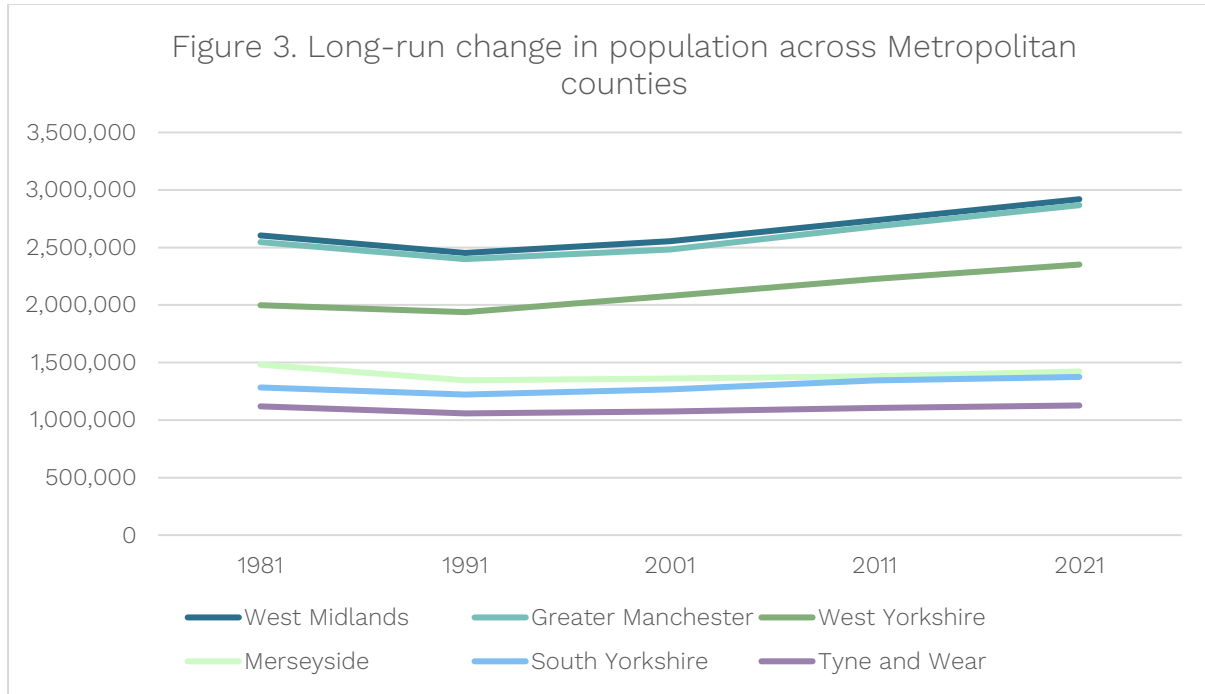
Two questions might reasonably be asked of this approach.

Firstly, are there early signs that this model of growth been successful?

Secondly, this approach sought to channel the market towards the creation of growth where possible in the expectation that this would have widespread benefits at the city region level. This is instead of tacking inequality head on *in place* as some researchers advocate. Do we, as they might expect, see widening differentials?

Let's look at what has happened in this period by looking at the data.

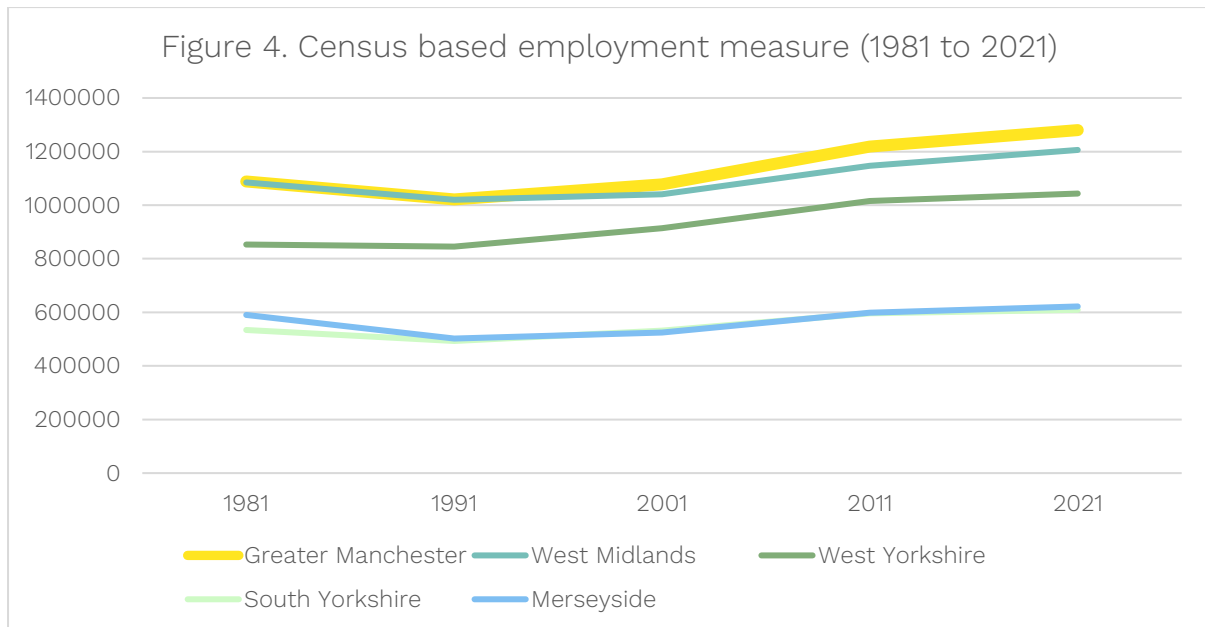
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Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of Census data, Office for National Statistics.

Greater Manchester’s population rebound continued, broadly tracking that of the West Midlands.

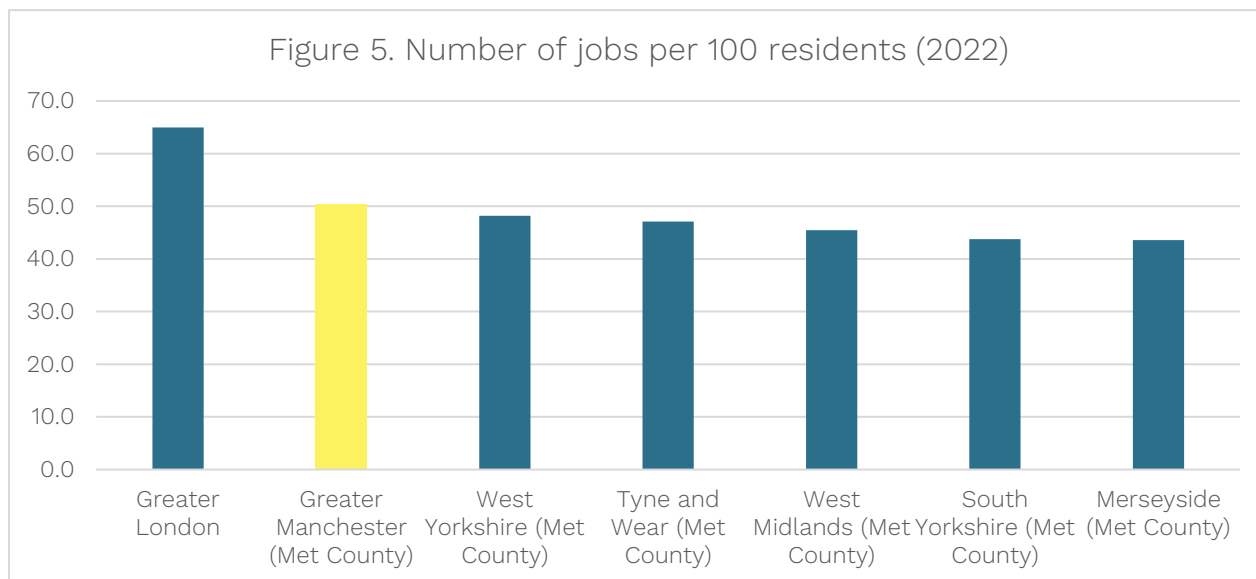
This is not the case in employment. Greater Manchester has grown comparatively stronger in the same period.



Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of Census data, Office for National Statistics.

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This looks strong. Despite a sharp fall in employment between 1981 and 1991, Greater Manchester recovered over time – by 2021, there were 44.6 jobs in Greater Manchester for every 100 residents, with a widening gap with the West Midlands.

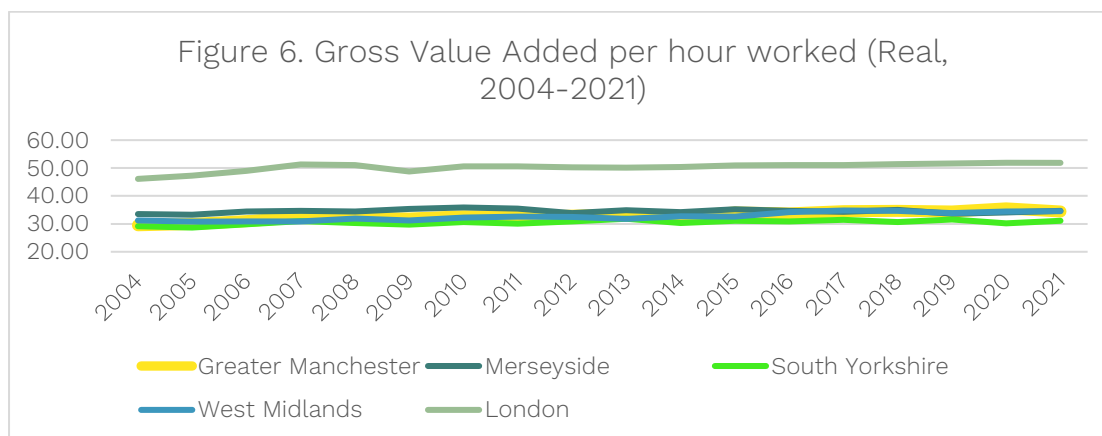


Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of ONS: BRES, Population Estimates

However, London continued to pull away during this period.

So if Greater Manchester’s performance looks as if it was improving a little relative to its peers but with London still pulling away, what is going on in GM and how does that compare to other city regions? Can we see anything that should make us more optimistic that this relative growth matters?

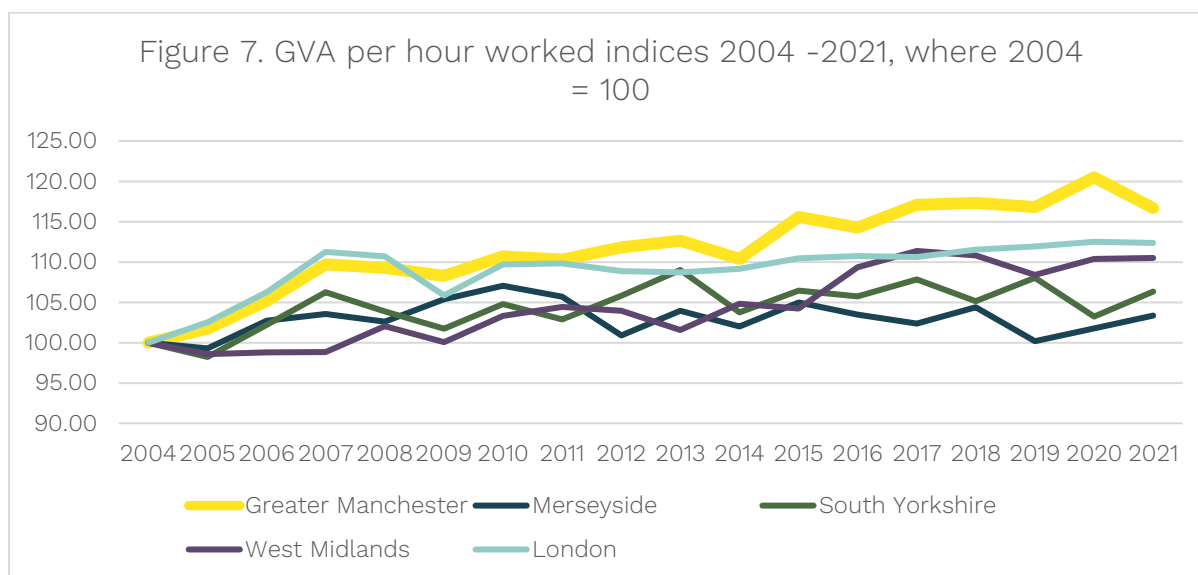
If we look at more recent GVA data in overall terms we see a familiar pattern in one sense. London is way ahead. Less familiar in another: it isn’t pulling away.



Metro Dynamics analysis of ONS, Regional Productivity (2023 Release)

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Looked at more closely on an indexed basis and you can see that since 2004 – certainly until COVID – Greater Manchester performed strongly – albeit among a weak pack.



Metro Dynamics analysis of ONS, Regional Productivity (2023 Release)

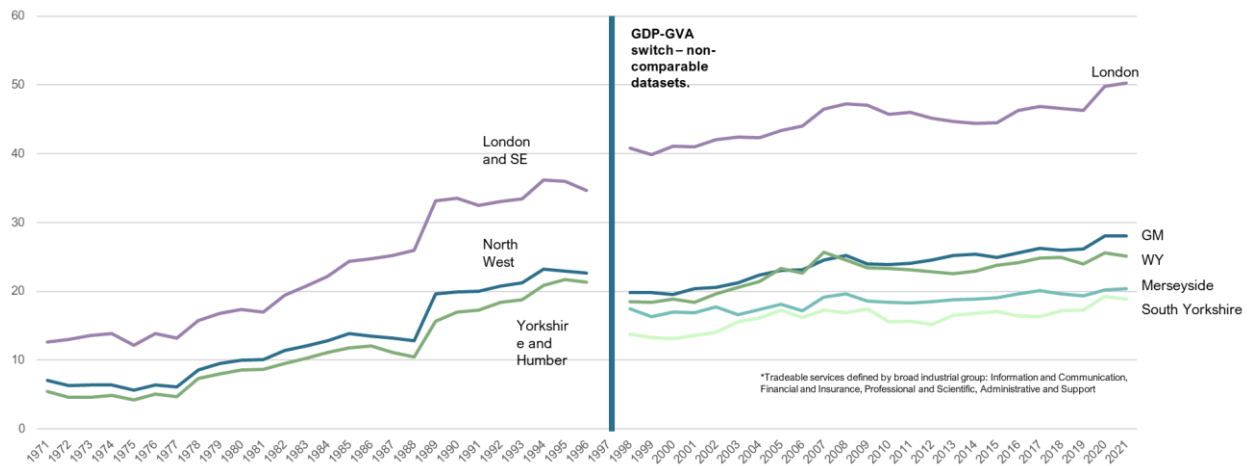
Greater Manchester had 17% productivity growth between 2004 and 2021 – the third highest performing ITL2 in England, (behind Oxford/Berks/Bucks and Hampshire), and highest city region (the next highest is West Yorkshire at 12%)

Given the loss of essentially tradeable manufacturing in textiles and engineering jobs, a focus on what is happening with tradeable activity – services in particular – is important.

Here too are tentative signs of optimism both generally and in the Greater Manchester economy in particular.

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Figure 8. Financial and business services of GDP/Tradeable services* share of GVA



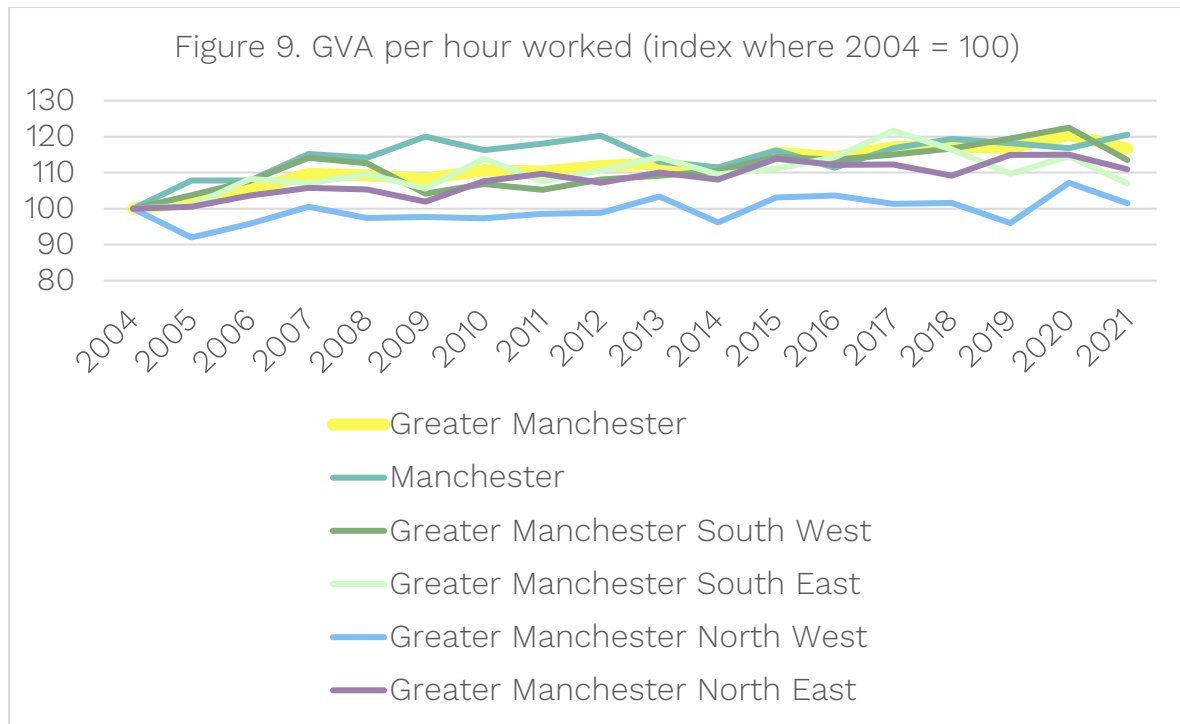
Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of Regional GDP ESCoE, and ONS Regional GVA Statistics (2023 Release)

Compared to other city regions, Greater Manchester has made a relatively more successful transition to tradeable service businesses, following an equally sharp fall in manufacturing activity. By 2021, tradeable services represented 28.1% of the Greater Manchester economy, up from 19.8% in 1998. Greater Manchester's neighbour, Merseyside, began 1998 with a comparable tradeable services share of 17.5%, and today it has a share 7.5% lower.

What is more interesting, and perhaps provides firmer ground for optimism again is analysis of what has gone on within Greater Manchester.

To repeat the point I made earlier: the purpose of the GM project was to improve economic outcomes for the city region as a whole. If one test is whether the economy grows, the other is where it grows.

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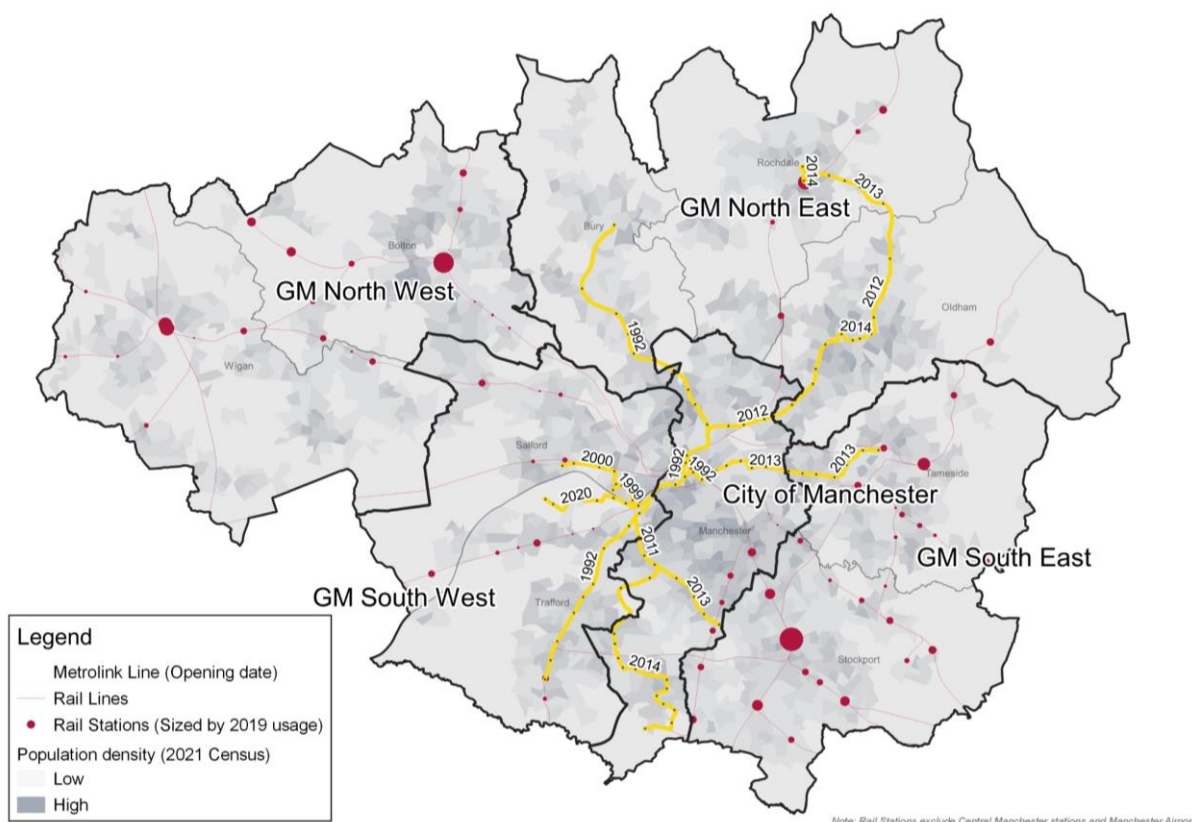
Metro Dynamics analysis of ONS, Regional Productivity (2023 Release)

The data in Figure 9 suggest that the economy has grown in a dispersed pattern. The city has performed well but so has every other quadrant, with one exception – GM North West: Bolton and Wigan.

Look at where the investment in Metrolink has gone, we see that there is some similarity.

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Figure 10. Metrolink expansion and rail usage in Manchester



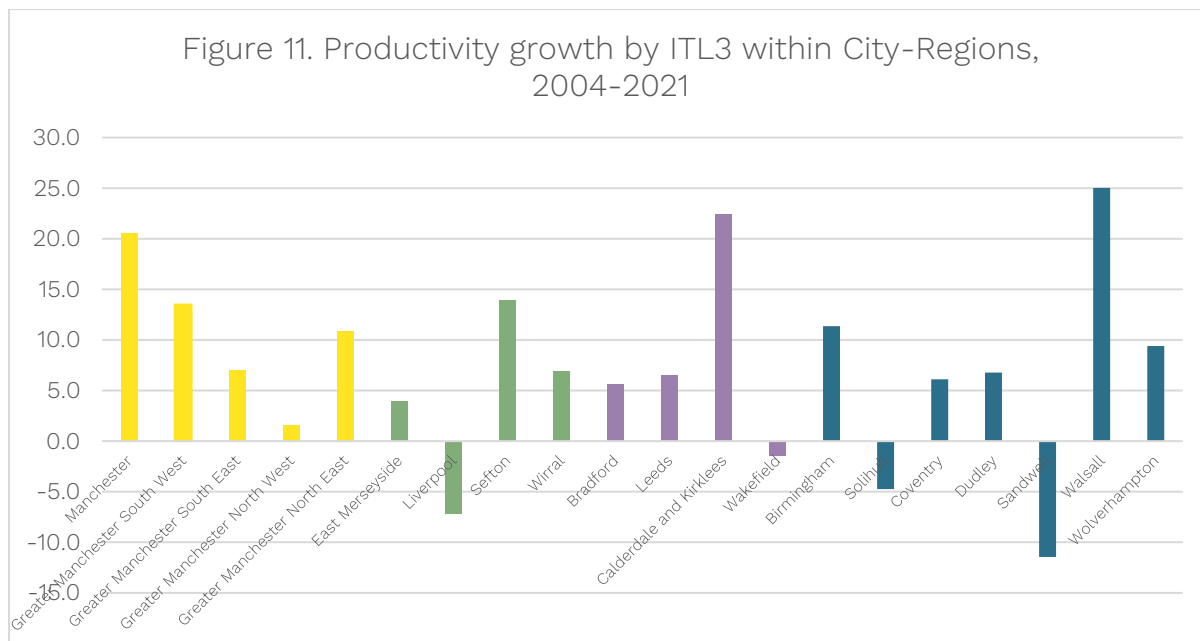
Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of DFT Rail Usage Data (2022), ONS Census (2023)

As the map above shows, the one quadrant of the conurbation where Metrolink has not expanded, the economy has performed poorly. It seems plausible to think there is a link based on studies that have shown property price rises in the areas served by earlier phases of expansion consistent with this. But the truth is, more research is needed. One thing is absolutely clear, there are no grounds in these data for arguing that the investment Manchester and above all in the city centre has served to benefit the city alone³. But were all cities seeing a more dispersed pattern of growth in this period?

³ At this point in the lecture, the analysis turns to the distribution of growth. This analysis is of an economy in which much policy is beyond the control of cities. My point was that prevailing policy can be influenced. It cannot be changed completely. Housing is a good example. See This paper and endnote 35 have good analysis of the issues <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7671/CBP-7671.pdf>.

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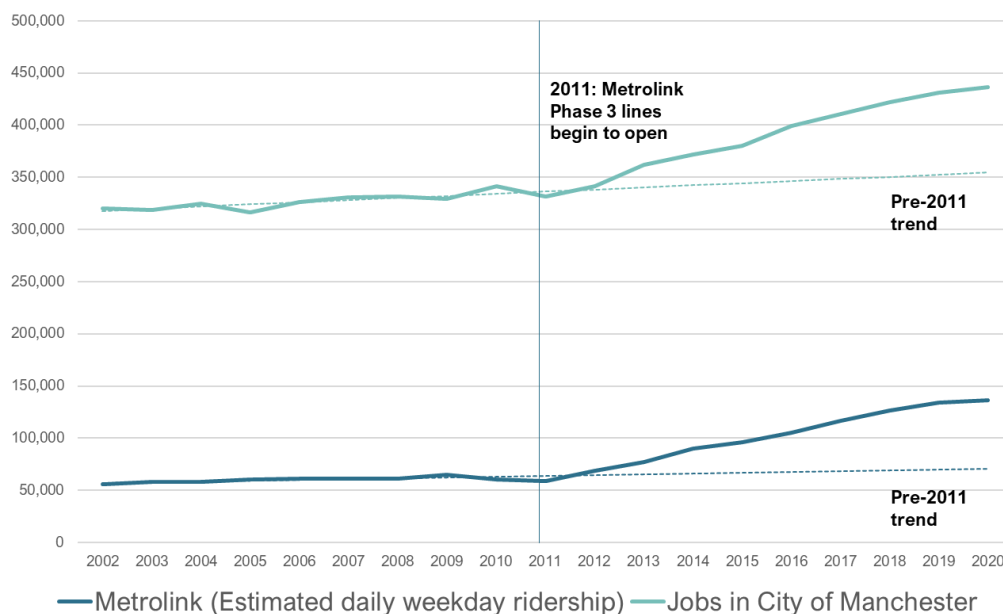
When Greater Manchester is compared with other city regions we see two things. First, as I said a moment ago, we see generally lower levels of growth elsewhere. Second we also see mixed but I think somewhat less dispersed patterns of growth.



Source: *Metro Dynamics analysis of ONS, Regional Productivity (2023 Release)*

Again. Much as I would like to believe there is a causal link here, we do not have the data to prove that. But the data are encouraging. Zooming in on what recent research suggests is the binding constraint on city regions – transport – the chart in Figure 12, of the Manchester Metrolink and the growth in ridership post big bang looks interesting²⁹.

Figure 12. Jobs in Manchester (LA) and Metrolink Weekday Ridership (Estimate)



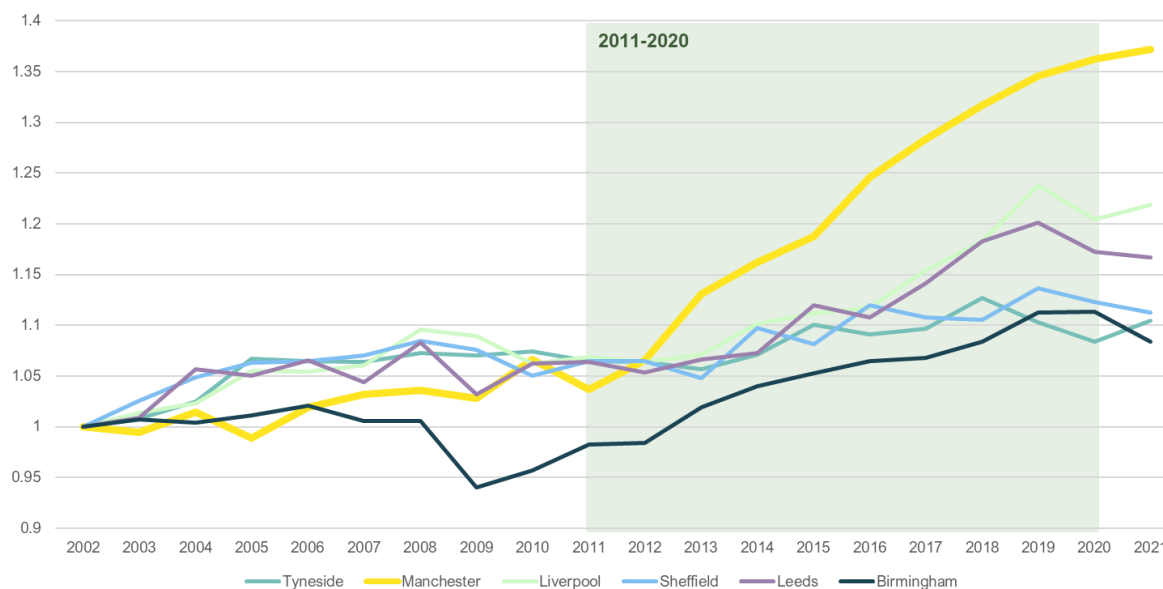
Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of DfT Tram Ridership Data, ONS Regional Productivity Statistics (GVA per job denominator)

By 2019, there were **78,300** more jobs in Manchester than might have been expected relative to the pre-2011 growth trend. There was also, as a result of the Phase 3 expansion, around **64,500** additional daily weekday Metrolink journeys made relative to trend. The core city growth and its exceptional nature is set out in Figure 13.

We can't say that the increase in Metrolink usage can be directly tied to increases in the number of jobs in central Manchester.

However, we think it is likely that Metrolink expansion played a substantial role in the unusual increase of jobs density in Manchester city centre in the 2010s before the pandemic, by alleviating the binding constraint posed by high transport congestion.

Figure 13. Change in jobs by core local authority for city regions, ONS GVA data (Index where 2002=100)



Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of ONS, Regional Productivity (2023 Release). Jobs figure as denominator from GVA per job series.

Take away eight – More research is needed but the data seem to suggest that Greater Manchester’s model can be associated with somewhat positive impacts on the towns around the city region. How much of the better performance by Manchester is due to the city’s monocentricity, industry mix or city led model is not known. If it is the latter, and if other places were to try the same approach with similar observed outcomes, it would be possible to postulate that just because cities are situated in deprived regions, it doesn’t follow that a regional approach is needed.

Manchester’s model has been led by expansion in the city centre. This has seen an explosion in the number not only of jobs but of homes in the city and led to questions – and the occasional forthright assertion – about whether this has had the impact of forcing out the poor resident communities resident there pre-development³⁰.

The change under way is of a transformational nature. By the late 1980s, the population of the city centre was less than 1,000³¹. There were 32,298 residents at time of 2021 Census in City Centre (defined as 4 most central MSOAs), roughly corresponding to inner ring road. That is set to rise considerably again in the future.

Firstly the city centre. It can’t be the case that people were dislocated because it was significantly uninhabited. But there is a growing number of studies, mostly but not all

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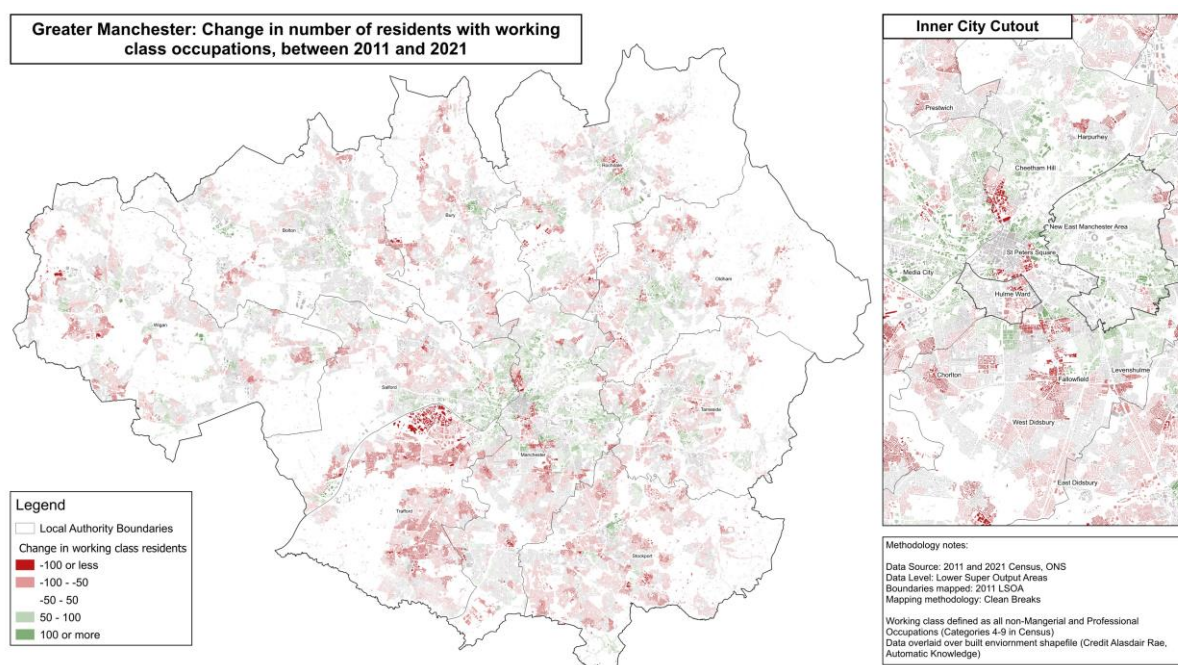
from a critical social science perspective, which argue that the poor have been squeezed out, or their needs neglected within the large scale developments in places like East Manchester³².

Based on my reading of the data, I am not sure the data generally support the arguments of the critics. Taking a lead from a recent analysis in *The Mill*³³, we have looked at the changes in occupational structure across Greater Manchester, focussing in particular on parts of the conurbation core.

The question we asked was whether there had been falls in the absolute number of people in elementary occupations. The proportions would be expected to fall as a new demographic arrived.

If the absolute numbers fell, this would substantiate the case that working class residents from the period prior to population growth had been squeezed out.

Figure 14. Change in number of working class (occupation-based) residents



Source: *Metro Dynamics analysis of ONS, 2021 and 2011 Census. Building shapefiles compiled by Alasdair Rae, Automatic Knowledge.*

What we see is that there has been an outward movement in general (though nothing like as marked in say London). Inadequate housebuilding of every kind, above all social and affordable housing and a failure of the Local Housing Allowance to keep pace with rents have probably driven that³⁴.

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What is interesting is that the data seem to suggest, in the areas where policy has been most active: Hulme for the 20 years from around 1991 and East Manchester today (and parts of central Salford too), there the numbers of people with working class jobs has stabilised and in some cases risen. In the area covered by the New East Manchester regeneration initiative, the number of residents with working class occupations rose by 2000 in a decade. Compare this to a South Manchester suburb like Chorlton with more limited development activity, where the numbers of working class residents fell by 500 in the same period. If this is borne out on further analysis to apply to the previously resident communities (as opposed to newly arriving migrants), it would suggest that the City's policy, far from being the driver of gentrification, is doing some heavy lifting to ensure that, in some places at least, there is a more balanced form of growth and development than the market would otherwise have delivered.

Ninth Key takeaway – there is increasing inequality between different parts of the city. This seems likely to have been driven by inadequate supply of housing³⁵. The argument that policy in East Manchester and Hulme has driven gentrification is not consistent with the evidence we have.

Part 5 – From Research to Policy

Not for the first time, I find myself wondering where the empirical research is with which to stand up or to refute the arguments we have started to make here. Moreover there is something rather Manichean about much of the research I have read in preparation for this talk: drawing stark comparisons between good and bad policy as much from a priori reasoning as anything else³⁶. As with the example of the brewery with which I started this talk, the findings data presented here are mixed. Progress is nearly always nuanced. It's compromised and imperfect: human. At the heart of all the examples I have cited here is the question I started with: might it be the case that the best is the enemy of the good? If, as I argued earlier, Greater Manchester is the crucible of a national experiment in devolved governance, even if it is far from perfect, we might want to research more what has worked? It seems fundamentally important that the best insights from research are brought to bear on policy as far as possible on the facts of what is happening.

The sort of research considered in this talk is, by its very nature, policy relevant. Its aim – or at least one very important aim is, or ought to be, to have an impact on policy. This interface: between the creation of knowledge and its application in the world around us as always seem to me to be problematic for academic research given the incentives on researchers. Perhaps this thought dates back to the Brewery story I started this talk with too.

Brian Robson, Michael Parkinson, John Goddard, Peter Lloyd, Peter Dicken. Yes I know they are all men – even if the standard is now being carried here by Cecilia

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Wong while Diane Coyle, late of this parish has done much to create intellectual momentum on these issues.

These are the sort of empirical researchers upon whose work a great deal of policy has relied. I am just not sure there is as much of it at all as there used including here in Manchester .

Part of it is the natural evolution of the disciplines and the search for causality. You can see it most clearly in the work of Peter Dicken I think. One of his later pieces was a chapter in a book. Its title: Global Manchester: from globaliser to globalised, is an elegant way of describing the transition of the economy of the city over a period of 100 years or so³⁷. His question – my question – is what role Manchester will play in the global system in the future.

In another paper he put it quite bluntly:

“Over the years, geographers have developed a disturbing – even dysfunctional – habit of missing out on important intellectual and politically significant debates, even those in which geographers would seem to have a major role to play”³⁸.

But at least the geographers have been thinking about these issues for decades. Until Paul Krugman and co rediscovered Alfred Marshall a decade or two ago, they weren't even at the debating table. Even now, it seems hard to be published in top journals as an economist looking at the issues considered here today.

I want to draw the threads of this talk together by reflecting on what research does get done and where we go next. In it, you will hear a plea for empiricism, for a different balance between critical and positivist social science and above all for applied inter-disciplinarity and for all to be applied to the issues under discussion today.

Tenth key take away – if we are to raise our game, we need to understand better what we can learn. We need to dig deeper and broader into the trends and our understanding of them, in this country and this city. All this is to enable us to shape its future to the maximum extent we can.

Part 6 – The Greater Manchester Experiment Again

I want to make an assertion. It is that the Manchester experiment is different.

It is too easy to characterise what has gone on in this city for the last thirty years as boosterism. The charge is that entrepreneurial cities with short term boosterist approaches have developed a market-led neoliberal path dependency³⁹. And that the forces which have shaped this have reduced the scope for heterogeneity⁴⁰. But what if this most celebrated case study were found to reveal the opposite? What if Manchester's development was actually a much more complex mix of complex geography, history and purposeful, statist planning? Some critics at least do seem,

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grudgingly, to accept this possibility⁴¹. Very few researchers approach this issue with the roundedness it deserves⁴².

I have not found a single paper on the fact that Greater Manchester was the only one of the 1974 Metropolitan Counties to feature the name of the principal city – such was the importance of the city even then. There is virtually no commentary on the highly unusual decision in the late 1970s by Manchester and Salford to pool their urban grant funding to build the city's first major conference centre at GMEX, now Manchester Central.

The municipal ownership of Manchester Airport and its impact is deeply under-researched. And nowhere in all I've read have I seen reference to what might be among the most important documents in the modern history of the city: the 1984 City Centre Local Plan⁴³.

The plan set out clearly the intention of the Council to bring back housing into the City centre after years of depopulation and dispersal. It set out clear plans to improve public transport access to the city, noting the limitations of car access and buses highlighting the need to consider options including light rapid transit – trams. And, while the challenge of that era was of repurposing the stock of unused and underused office accommodation in the city, it set out the beginnings of the plan for the office boom of recent years.

I often say that successful city building is about doing the right thing, at scale, and for a very long time and trace London's take off back to the completion of the Victoria Line in 1968. So too Manchester?

It is 40 years since that plan was written. The City's overarching strategy hasn't changed in the intervening period except to adapt to changing circumstances. The same political and executive leadership responsible for its creation oversaw its implementation for the next thirty odd years. The careers of Graham Stringer, Sir Richard Leese, Sir Howard Bernstein and many others who stuck the course others were founded on and dedicated to delivering this agenda.

This is the context into which we need to read the development of AGMA and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the roles of MIDAS, Marketing Manchester and New Economy. Along the way are myriad programmes and projects: Metrolink, Airport City, Media City, the Sharp Factory, the Graphene Institute, GEIC, the Royce Institute, Health Innovation Manchester, the Manchester International Festival, the Factory institute the Commonwealth Games and the reinvention of Manchester City and much else besides.

They were all part of a long-term approach which started in the city and evolved into Greater Manchester's.

It just won't do to write off Manchester's approach as being a pursuit of sport and visitors as boosterism – to reduce the city's approach to that of the "entrepreneurial

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city” – not meant as a compliment – given the clear plan and the huge range of projects that followed its development⁴⁴.

East Manchester was once the heart of the industrial city and then for decades a wasteland. It is once again the home of world leading enterprise. As a Mancunian (though not as a Manchester United fan) it is a source of huge pride that the sports facilities in East Manchester are built on the land where the city was forged. Today it is the cream of world sporting talent that works there. There is world class sports science. And not just football but cycling, squash and much else. This is all cheek by jowl with the communities of Grey Mare Lane Beswick, who have the right to use the facilities as do all Mancunians, as much as the new retail facilities they lacked for so long.

Eleventh key take away – Manchester has been a unique, long term, broad and deep experiment in place making. My contention is that this great experiment has been caricatured in the literature and under-researched even while policy of much less significance takes up years of research time.

Our attempts at closing regional and local growth differentials have taken place against a period of fiscal retrenchment, low growth and an ideological disposition on the part of all national governments that has rarely deviated far from the uber liberal in which the space for purposeful policy has been squeezed very hard indeed. If our experiment in Manchester has achieved and is achieving anything in this context, it is pretty remarkable.

My cri de Coeur in Metro Dynamics is that that policymakers and professionals need to rethink and act. My argument is that it is “Time to Get Serious”⁴⁵ about creating sustainable and inclusive growth. Much of our work is about helping people and places to grow together, for growth to be inclusive⁴⁶. But it is early days. We have much to learn and to do⁴⁷.

I want to offer a couple of quotes from a recent book, “Late Soviet Britain” by Abby Innes⁴⁸. Her book is a critique of the application of neoclassical economics to every aspect of modern British political and economic life. It is an intellectually coherent analysis of neoliberalism. In her introduction she argues as follows:

“What follows is an argument about the collapse of the empiricist political centre and its replacement by utopian radicalism. Specifically, this is a story of how the pioneering and socially progressive philosophy of liberalism is being discredited by utopian economics...”

This, from her conclusions relates to the environmental crisis but applies in this context too:

“The paradigm shift we need requires a renewed willingness by governments to test policies and development against historical precedents, known risks, observable social

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facts and moral values, but we must add something else: willingness to advance immediate, radical Solutions to the ecological catastrophe at our door”.

Utopian radicalism has its place. And the waste of potential represented by the relative economic failure, measured in the human costs of shorter, ill-er and less fulfilled lives in cities and regions like this is not a global catastrophe. It is a local one and it is ours. We need to own it.

Policy and politics have a role to play. So too does research. There is a gap between them. My central argument today is that research too can be utopian in fields where evidence and empiricism as well as theory and an understanding of the art of the possible have a role to play. If there are limits to what local policy can do within the prevailing orthodoxy, there are possibilities too.

Part 7 – The Academic and Policy Divide and the Crisis of Economics and Geography

This gap is not a problem. The freedom to think and write is central to the role of universities and to society. It is the size of the gap that concerns me. So before closing I want to go back to the debates I touched on earlier – on the theory and evidence that underpins the regional and urban policy debates in this country and then to finish with some thoughts about what we could do next.

Reading and re-reading the work of regional economists and economic geographers in preparation for this talk, the seeming rejection by some of the empirical aside, perhaps the most striking thing is how much of the debate is essentially about spatial levels: at the level at which we should organise policy rather than what is possible - what we should actually do – in our country now.

The argument I made earlier is that for good practical and pragmatic reasons, the city region is the level at which we are most likely to be able to make progress. But this debate rumbles on. By dividing opinion among those with an interest in reducing the differences which are such a prominent feature of our economy, we give undue space to the power of the status quo.

What would our preferred institutional settlement be if we were to get serious – to really decide to start spending resources to reduce city and regional differences? Opinion is divided on that. An argument made by some economists is that our principal problem is not that London is too big but that our second-tier cities are too small. Theirs is an urban led model. Its justification relies in part on the application of Zipf's law⁴⁹. This law seems to hold in a great many jurisdictions around the world with the effect that second-tier cities are roughly half the size of the largest. But as Henry Overman acknowledges⁵⁰, it palpably does not seem to apply in this country. His argument for expanding second-tier cities is that it should both be feasible, as it happens elsewhere and because it works with the grain of how market forces shape

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places, sorting them according to size and function, it is likely to be more effective than the alternatives.

The alternative model postulated by more traditional regional economists and economic geographers is that the standard planning region is that at which policy can best be coordinated between cities and towns of every size and thereby enable the development of the infrastructure essential for regional development and the policies needed to support growth. There is also a sense that some researchers are sceptical about the ability of local leaders to rise to the challenge⁵¹.

I was fascinated to read the interview Philip McCann did as part of a recent Harvard University led study on the UK. Where he, and I suspect others, clearly agree with the new economic geographers is the processes of economic diffusion do not work in the UK the way they seem to do elsewhere. This lies behind the poor performance of the major cities of England and the areas around them. So why don't we really focus on this and establish why not?

I suspect that the regional geographers are right that we will not fix some of the really big policy we need around into regional road and rail transport, land-use planning including for energy infrastructure without a regional dimension to our policy.

The argument many regional planners make is that we are creating a bugger's muddle: a mishmash of different kinds of local governance. True.

But we need to push on. Only if we have more and more city regional governments using more and more levers of power to create different approaches to policy which palpably work to deliver inclusive growth will our national system of government finally get round to doing something to organise it. But it will do so with a highly voluble elected mayors being a key part of the process. Change could no longer be delivered just from Whitehall.

One thing that constantly surprises me is how little the protagonists of this debate seek to understand their differences. There is little track record I can find of published work which seeks to navigate the issues (one amusing set of exchanges between Henry Overman and some academics at this institution aside. But that generated more heat than light)⁵².

So where next?

I want to home in on one issue in particular to speak about because it goes to the heart of what I have been talking about this afternoon.

So much of what I've read in preparation for this lecture has been critical of the liberal or neoliberal system of the global and national economy.

We have had a market dominant view of much policy, a period of dominated also by fiscal conservatism and centralism. But what strikes me as odd is how little research is undertaken on what we should actually do to make markets work differently – the

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diffusion point I made a moment ago is a good case in point. Perhaps that is why, 35 years on, I still remember the article about the Brewery.

In my career I have been involved in the evaluation of business support programmes few of which have worked. Most were based on a wholly inadequate reading of basic economics on what drives firm behaviour. Very little of that literature has been brought to bear on how we support businesses, innovation or trade in a local and regional context. There is precious little actionable academic research on what government should actually do differently. In any of these fields. It is almost as if we all – academia included – have fallen into the laissez-faire trap – viewing markets and how firms work as beyond the scope of research.

As a member of the Research Committee and then the Council of ESRC I've often been surprised how few research projects come forward for funding that actually involve going to research inside businesses to understand what they do, how they do it and the benefits that might accrue from doing things differently. I find myself wondering how much better off we would be if we spent less time worrying about the spatial level at which we organise policy and more worrying researching policy itself. I don't mean academics doing the job of Government just that there is simply too big a gap between what academic researchers produce and what policy makers need. This is all the more so if we are to trial more interventionist approaches to industrial and other policy. In this endeavour I have no doubt that the Productivity Institute could play a huge role. To do that, a warmer embrace for the role of cities is going to be needed.

My concerns about the policy – academic gap are shared by the academic who gave the first of these lectures, Ron Martin. He has written compellingly on the challenges facing British Economic Geography⁵³. There is a crisis echoed in economics as Diane Coyle has argued with great clarity⁵⁴.

Our policy needs would be served by a more causally curious and at least somewhat more empirical body of UK economic geography research. And in economics, since the efficacy of every policy can't be established via a randomised control trial, we need a wider suite of tools here too. The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth is known in some parts as the "What doesn't work Centre" as that is its main conclusion. Even so I still rely on its work heavily because they are right. But most importantly of all, I would wager too that much that could be effective hasn't been tried yet or hasn't been evaluated by economists or geographers.

Here, I suspect, the answers to some of the big questions we are facing lie in the epistemological grey areas between the great theorists and their schools, as Abby Innes implores. If so, I think we need more empirical research on the issues that concern us. We should always be aware of the socially and politically constructed nature of the market systems in which we work and the constraints that poses on us and what we can do. It is hard to go far in this field without coming across the siren

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voices of Jamie Peck and others of a critical bent⁵⁵. We need a degree of humility on the role of state power courtesy of neoclassical economics to help us frame effective policy choices in mixed economies. But theory is not destiny. If, as I fear we are now, we continue to be bound too firmly by these intellectual roots, they incline us to believe that there is nothing to be done and we surrender our ability to do what we almost certainly can to make a meaningful difference.

Twelfth and final take away – for research to be actionable it needs to be convertible into plausible propositions, policy ideas and then plausible business cases. We need trials and we need evaluation. All the more so if we want to understand how businesses work in order to deliver sustainable, inclusive growth for local and regional economies. For sure it is the job of public institutions to write the business cases but who creates the ideas for policy experiments? Academics, policy people and businesses. Everyone has a role to play.

Part 8 – Conclusion

There are plenty of reasons to be concerned about the U.K.'s economic performance and that of the North West economy and of Greater Manchester but there are some interesting signs of progress, economic and political in Greater Manchester which suggests a possible acceleration.

If this is the case, then two questions follow. Is this the basis of a new model of growth which others could follow and even if it is, does the Manchester model of growth systematically exclude the poor?

The evidence I have set out here suggests that, within the constraints of a relatively small state model with relatively low levels of capital spending and, no written constitution, and emergent city regional infrastructure, that something is happening. If anything is happening to materially close differentials it is surprising and surely warrants further research.

New Economy was the knowledge engine of Manchester for a decade. We came up with many of the ideas that are now core policy in the city. It is now, rightly, serving the GMCA as its in house research team. It is no longer an independent knowledge hub. This University's contribution through CUPS and for a time IPEG, were important. Where is our equivalent of Cambridge's Centre for Business Research? It provides an unfailing source of evidence for that city⁵⁶. The Spatial Policy and Analysis Laboratory is doing its bit. Metro Dynamics does ours. Others too. The Productivity Institute has a bigger role to play than it is currently performing. But there is a gap.

I think the question for the city and for this university is whether it wants to fill that gap and continue with the process of radical experimentation that has characterised the city's development for so long or whether it wishes to bank the progress it has

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made and throw its weight behind the work of the other mayors and combined authorities. The Manchester way I know is to refuse to make the choice. What got Manchester where it is today is doing both: working within the settlement with which we find ourselves while straining every sinew to be at the leading edge of creating what happens next.

Doing that is a challenge for the mayoralty, the local authorities, business, communities and for the academy.

In my view there is a gap. It is a gap we need to fill.

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⁵⁴ Diane Coyle: *Cogs and Monsters: what economics is, and what it should be* Princeton University Press, 2021

⁵⁵ See the article at reference 44 above.

⁵⁶ <https://www.ibs.cam.ac.uk/centres/business-research-cbr/>