

Institute for Public Policy Research



ENGLISH DEVOLUTION AND MIGRATION

**A ROLE FOR STRATEGIC
AUTHORITIES**

Lucy Mort

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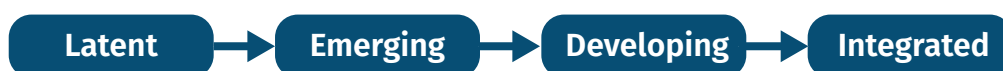
SUMMARY

As English devolution accelerates, strategic authorities (SAs) are becoming more important actors in policy areas that shape how people settle, integrate and build lives in local communities. They hold, or are acquiring, responsibilities across skills, employment support, housing, public service reform, public safety, transport and economic development. But migration and asylum policy remain highly centralised, with key decisions still largely made in Whitehall and by the Home Office – creating a persistent disconnect between where decisions are made and where their impacts are managed.

This matters *now*. English devolution is still taking shape, while the policy context around migration is also in flux. The government has committed to an integration strategy, is taking action to strengthen cohesion, has set out ambitions to expand safe routes, and is preparing the next generation of asylum accommodation and support contracts. But if devolution is about giving places the tools to respond to the issues that shape them, migration must be a central part of the devolution settlement.

This report asks what role SAs are already playing in relation to migration and related areas, including asylum, integration and cohesion, where their added value lies, and how their role could develop over time.

Current engagement is varied, uneven and often emergent. Some authorities have dedicated or semi-dedicated migration capacity. Others are only beginning to recognise how migration intersects with their core functions. These differences reflect institutional capacity, local context, and political and strategic priorities. This report therefore argues against a one-size-fits-all model. To understand different patterns of engagement and the kinds of support SAs may need, it uses a maturity typology:



Understanding these different starting points is crucial to setting out a vision for a stronger strategic authority role on migration that is both realistic and ambitious.

The strengths of SAs lie less in frontline delivery and more in strategic regional leadership. They can see patterns across local authority boundaries, convene councils and partners, and mainstream migration into wider agendas. This is already visible in work on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and employment support, homelessness and refugee move-on, and cohesion and public safety. Mayors can also use their platform to shape narratives, escalate shared concerns and create political space for action.

But there are significant constraints. Many SAs lack a clear remit on migration-related work. Capacity, expertise and funding are uneven. Relationships with Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) vary, and there is not always clarity about how SAs and SMPs should work together. Migration is also hugely politically sensitive. Above all, SAs can find themselves managing the impacts of national decisions without the data, funding or powers to shape them.

The report argues against applying a single model uniformly across all places, instead calling for a differentiated approach that is sensitive to local needs and political context. Options for the future include the following.

- **Use existing powers and relationships more systematically.** Government should improve Home Office data sharing, involve regional and local partners earlier in national policy design, and include them in asylum accommodation and support contract redesign. SAs, SMPs and local partners should agree how they work together as English devolution evolves.
- **Build capacity and test clearer regional roles.** SAs at earlier stages of developing work on migration should be supported through specialist advisors, civil society secondments, knowledge exchange and evaluation. Government should also strengthen regional roles on ESOL, skills and inclusive growth, including by protecting ESOL as a core part of devolved adult skills provision, and supporting the use of mayoral commissioner roles for cross-cutting priorities such as integration and cohesion where locally appropriate.
- **Formalise and expand regional roles through future devolution.** More developed SAs should be able to use routes such as the right to request to test stronger responsibilities over time. Where conditions are right, this could include a more regionally organised asylum accommodation and support system, and a longer-term role for SAs in linking migration, workforce planning and regional growth.
- **Define the role of SAs in cohesion and integration strategies.** The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) should work with SAs, local authorities, SMPs, police and civil society to define their role in the promised integration strategy, the cohesion action plan, Pride in Place and related work on community resilience, public safety and ESOL.

This report makes the case for a shift from doing migration policy to places, to giving places a real role in shaping it. Devolution should mean regional and local partners have the tools to respond to the pressures and opportunities migration brings and, ultimately, to build stronger communities across England.

1. INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As English devolution accelerates, new opportunities are emerging to think differently about how migration¹ is governed. SAs now hold increasing responsibilities across areas such as housing, skills, health, public service reform and economic development, all of which shape how people settle and build lives in local communities. But despite the government's commitment to devolution, the UK's migration and asylum system remains highly centralised. While policy and operational decisions are by and large made nationally, their consequences are felt locally and regionally: in the provision of asylum accommodation and support, in pressures on community cohesion, or in the extent to which people are able to access skills, employment and opportunities to contribute locally.

This is a particularly important moment to ask what role SAs could play on migration. English devolution is still taking shape, while the policy context around migration, integration and cohesion is also in flux. The government has committed to an integration strategy, is taking action to strengthen cohesion, has set out ambitions to expand safe routes, and is preparing the next generation of asylum accommodation and support contracts. If SAs are to become meaningful regional partners, they need to be involved early in shaping policies that will affect the places they serve, rather than being asked to manage consequences after decisions have been made.

This study examines the role SAs are currently playing in this space, the variation in approaches across different regions, and the scope for a stronger and more joined-up role over time.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The report explores both the current and future role of SAs in relation to migration. It first considers the existing evidence base, before mapping how the current system operates in practice. This includes setting out the evolving devolution context and examining how responsibilities for migration are organised across different levels of governance.

Drawing on in-depth qualitative research, the report then examines the role SAs are already playing, including:

- which policy areas they are engaging with and how these intersect with migration,
- and how they are working with partners.

This provides the basis for a maturity typology, which aims to explain variation in practice between SAs. The report then analyses the strengths and barriers shaping stronger regional action.

1 This report uses 'migration' as a shorthand for a broad set of migration-related policy areas, including asylum, integration and cohesion. These are distinct but overlapping areas. Asylum refers here to asylum accommodation, support, move-on and related local impacts; integration refers to the social and economic conditions that enable migrants to participate in local life; and cohesion refers to relationships, trust, safety and belonging across communities, including responses to tension, polarisation and misinformation. Where necessary the report refers to each area separately.

The final chapter sets out options for the future. These are grouped into three broad areas: enhancing the use of existing powers and relationships to improve the current system, recommendations for building capacity and testing clearer regional roles on migration, and more ambitious options for formalising and expanding the regional role over time.

METHODS

This scoping study combined a review of relevant literature and policy documents with original qualitative fieldwork. The fieldwork was intended to build a more up-to-date picture of how SAs are currently engaging with migration, and how this is understood by those working across the system.

The research included 21 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from a range of sectors and levels of governance. Interviewees included strategic authority officers and advisors, mayors and deputy mayors, local authority officers, SMP leads, voluntary and community sector partners, central government officials and academic experts. The sample was designed to reflect a range of regional perspectives, including SAs at different stages of development and with different devolution arrangements. Interviewees were drawn from Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire, the North East, the West Midlands, the East Midlands, Liverpool City Region and London, alongside national and cross-cutting stakeholders.

The interviews focussed on how migration is currently organised within and across SAs; what roles SAs are already playing in practice; how they work with partners across the system; and where stakeholders saw the main pressures, gaps and opportunities for stronger regional action. Topic guides varied slightly by interviewee: for example, interviews with officers focussed more on governance and delivery, interviews with mayors on political leadership and ambition, and interviews with central government officials on institutional constraints and routes to reform.

2. EXISTING EVIDENCE BASE

THE EMERGING ROLE OF STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

The existing evidence base on the role of SAs in migration remains relatively limited. Much of it comes from policy and practice reports rather than detailed studies of what SAs are currently doing, and some of the most relevant work was produced when English devolution was at a much earlier stage. It is therefore timely to revisit these questions, as SAs have taken on wider responsibilities and become more established institutions.

Early work by Katwala et al (2017) – written in the wake of the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, which provided for the introduction of directly elected mayors – drew on international examples and London’s experience to make an ambitious case for SAs to take a leading role in promoting integration. In particular, they argued for a cohesion and integration lens to be applied across core combined authority policy areas including growth and jobs, skills and education, health and housing, and for mayors to create dedicated deputy mayor roles with responsibility for integration. They also highlighted the potential benefits of acting at a regional scale: enabling more ambitious and far-reaching initiatives, generating economies of scale, and creating stronger links between national policy, local delivery, civil society and residents.

They identified devolved adult skills funding as a key opportunity, particularly the Adult Education Budget (AEB), which they saw as an important mechanism through which SAs could strengthen and better tailor English language provision to local needs. This meant SAs were understood as regional actors able to champion and catalyse integration, celebrate diversity and challenge barriers to participation.

Katwala et al (ibid) also suggested that migration-related pressures were already creating practical challenges for new mayors. In Tees Valley, for example, they identified the housing of asylum seekers as a pressing issue for the incoming mayor, arguing that improving support arrangements and coordination with the Home Office and accommodation providers was an emerging task for regional leadership.

Broadhead’s (2017) work on *Inclusive Cities* also linked the case for city-level action on integration to the then-emerging UK devolution context, arguing that metro mayors and city deals created opportunities for local leadership and convening on inclusion, and for more targeted action through devolved responsibilities in areas such as skills, employment and spatial planning.

As devolution has evolved, subsequent work has further illustrated the strategic role that SAs can play in these issues. Morris (2021) identified a set of concrete ways in which SAs could support integration, even in the absence of direct migration powers. He argued that mayors and SAs can shape the narrative on integration, convene partners across a region and press for change in Whitehall, while also using existing levers more strategically.

Proposals included taking action on the following.

1. **Adult education**, using the AEB to commission and coordinate ESOL provision, experiment with different delivery models, and link language learning more closely to integration and employment goals.
2. **Economic inclusion**, using regional strategies to better recognise migrants' skills and labour market barriers, and tackling the economic exclusion of vulnerable migrant groups – including those with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) – via regional approaches to homelessness prevention.
3. **Creating safe access to services**, through using police and crime functions to promote safe reporting for undocumented migrants, reduce discretionary cooperation with immigration enforcement, and encourage more inclusive 'sanctuary city' style approaches across health and public services.

In this briefing, SAs were depicted not only as bodies that can weave integration through existing functions, but also as political actors able to use their voice and leadership to remedy and challenge aspects of a restrictive national policy environment.

This also points to the role of mayors as migration governance actors in their own right. Bazurli et al (2022) argue that mayors sit at the intersection of horizontal governance within their own regions and vertical governance with higher tiers of government, meaning they can provide both symbolic and substantive leadership but must navigate antagonistic media, local politics, civil society relationships, national constraints and the specific pressures facing different types of places, including smaller, rural or 'left behind' areas. Although not an SA mayor, Marvin Rees' tenure as Bristol city mayor illustrates how mayoral voice can be used to share a more welcoming local context and connect local migration issues to national and international debates, while still grounding that outlook in local concerns such as housing, poverty and community relations (Robert Bosch Stiftung 2022).

A further contribution from UCL Policy Lab (Hartman et al 2023) examined the relationship between national and local responses to migration and integration, in what it described as a 'decoupled' policy environment, where national and local policy lack meaningful coordination or are even in direct conflict. Citing the work of the Greater London Authority (GLA) – for instance through its ESOL Plus programme (GLA 2026), All of Us strategy for integration (GLA 2018), and the secondment of civil society staff into the GLA's social integration function (Renaissi 2022) – the report shows how subnational leadership can create space for more progressive local and regional action, even where national policy is more restrictive.

More recent work has also pointed to a potentially enlarged role for SAs in refugee resettlement and asylum governance. The Commission on Refugee Integration (2024) and Mort and Morris (2024) both argue for greater devolution or decentralisation of asylum-related responsibilities, with SAs identified as potential regional actors within a more devolved system, alongside local authorities and SMPs. Recent research on asylum devolution develops this argument further, suggesting that SAs could play a stronger role in asylum accommodation through strategic leadership, regional oversight and coordination, but that this would depend on clear roles, long-term funding, robust data sharing and closer integration with housing and local services (Good Faith Partnership, Housing Festival and NACCOM 2026).

This literature points to a nascent but growing interest in the role SAs could play in migration. It has also identified a number of promising entry points, particularly around ESOL, economic inclusion and, increasingly, asylum-related pressures. However, it has been better at imagining and advocating for a stronger role than at documenting the role SAs currently play in practice. This paper helps address that gap by mapping their existing activity before considering how that role may develop in the future.

LEARNING FROM CITIES AND SUBNATIONAL INTEGRATION GOVERNANCE

A substantial literature focusses on cities as key sites of integration, in part because migrants tend to settle disproportionately in urban areas (Broadhead 2017; 2025). Therefore, cities are often closer than central government to the practical effects of national migration policy, and they are responsible for several policy areas that shape integration, including planning, housing, education, employment support, community safety and cohesion (Gebhardt 2014; Broadhead 2017). UK work on *Inclusive Cities* is particularly relevant for this study, and has highlighted the role of local leadership, partnership, positive messaging and action planning in supporting the inclusion of newcomers and longer-standing residents (Broadhead and Kierans 2019).

This literature also presents cities as active players in governing migration, not simply as places where integration happens (Gebhardt 2014; Manatschal et al 2020; Broadhead 2025). Cities can provide local leadership, convene partners, adapt services, shape inclusive narratives and advocate to national government (Broadhead and Kierans 2019; Broadhead 2025). And they may have a very different approach when compared to national government – with evident tensions or incoherence between national and local visions of integration (Gebhardt 2014; Hartman et al 2023; Broadhead 2020;2025). This may be particularly visible in cities that understand themselves as open, diverse or global, where articulations of who is welcome and who belongs may contrast with national policy or rhetoric (Broadhead 2025).

However, the evidence is stronger on cities shaping integration, service access and local narratives than on cities directly shaping national migration policy. Advocacy to national government may have limited or uncertain impact, while more meaningful central-local collaboration often takes place through centrally led consultations, pilots or implementation work rather than shared decision-making.

For England, the geography of devolution points to the need to look beyond cities alone. Many SAs operate across wide footprints, bringing together major cities, towns, suburbs and more rural areas within a single strategic authority (LGA 2025). This creates a more complex task for political leadership as mayors may need to speak across places with different migration histories, demographic profiles and public attitudes, and build shared regional narratives on migration, integration and cohesion that resonate beyond urban centres.

3.

THE GOVERNANCE LANDSCAPE: DEVOLUTION, MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

THE EVOLVING DEVOLUTION CONTEXT

English devolution has evolved piecemeal through individual deals and negotiations rather than a single national settlement (Sandford 2025). As a result, different parts of England have moved through the devolution process at different speeds, with significant variation in powers, institutional maturity, political leadership and capacity (Fright and Paun 2024).

The government is moving towards universal coverage of England by SAs, but this remains a work in progress (ibid). The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act (2026) – which has recently received Royal Assent – places SAs and the devolution framework on a firmer statutory footing, but for now, places will still differ in the powers they hold and the capacity they have to use them.

SAs are expected to operate across key areas of competence (MHCLG 2025a) to drive growth and support public services, including:

1. transport and local infrastructure
2. skills and employment support
3. housing and strategic planning
4. economic development and regeneration
5. environment and net zero
6. health, wellbeing and public service reform
7. public safety.

While these areas of competence are not migration-specific, they shape many of the conditions that support integration, settlement and cohesion, including access to housing, skills, employment, transport, health and local opportunities. This creates an important opening for SAs – even without formal migration powers, they may be able to influence migration-related outcomes through their existing and emerging responsibilities.

The introduction of Integrated Settlements is also expected to provide greater flexibility for Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities.² Integrated Settlements are intended to consolidate funding across policy areas into a single settlement, linked to an outcomes framework designed to measure the effectiveness of local policy intervention. This could give eligible SAs greater security and autonomy over their spending, enabling more localised prioritisation and some ability to move funding between budget lines (MHCLG 2025b).

2 Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities (EMSAs) are the most developed category of SA under the English devolution framework, preceded by Foundation Strategic Authorities (FSAs) and Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs). FSAs include non-mayoral combined authorities and some local authorities without mayors; MSAs include mayoral combined authorities and mayoral combined county authorities; and EMSAs are MSAs that meet additional criteria, including having existed for at least 18 months, agreed a Local Assurance Framework with government, demonstrated good financial management, and negotiated a detailed Outcomes Framework with targets for each policy area. The GLA is also treated within this framework as an EMSA but is institutionally distinct and has a separate London devolution settlement.

HOW IS MIGRATION CURRENTLY GOVERNED?

Migration and asylum policy remain highly centralised. The Home Office retains primary responsibility for immigration policy, asylum decision-making and asylum accommodation contracts, while the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) also has a role in related areas, including homelessness, cohesion, integration and community resilience. National decisions routinely have significant local and regional consequences, particularly in relation to asylum accommodation and dispersal (Mort and Morris 2024), community cohesion (Mort and Morris 2026) and, more recently, earned settlement proposals (Association of Directors of Children's Services [ADCS] and NRPF Network 2026). Policy choices made at the national level can leave local and regional bodies managing operational pressures, heavy financial costs and cohesion risks that they have little role in shaping. There is therefore a persistent disconnect between where decisions are made and where their impacts are managed.

This disconnect is especially important in the current policy context. The government has made commitments on cohesion through the *Protecting What Matters* action plan (MHCLG 2026), including a promised integration strategy, while *Pride in Place* is a flagship programme that aims, among other things, to build stronger communities (MHCLG 2025). The expansion of Community Sponsorship as 'the new norm' (Home Office 2026), the development of the next generation of asylum accommodation and support contracts (Home Affairs Committee 2026), earned settlement proposals (Home Office et al 2025), and the new Child Poverty Strategy's recognition of the impact of NRPF on children (Cabinet Office 2025) all have clear local and regional implications.

Local authorities are central to the practical management of integration and cohesion. Their responsibilities include safeguarding, homelessness prevention, children's services, public health, community cohesion and support for people with no recourse to public funds. They are often the first to identify and respond to pressures created by national policy decisions, including around asylum accommodation, destitution and community tensions. Many have developed local integration strategies and played increasingly significant roles in resettlement and humanitarian protection, from the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme to the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme. However, their capacity varies significantly, and many are operating under severe financial pressure, limiting their ability to respond in the way they may like.

SMPs also form a central part of the governance landscape. The first SMPs were formed in 1999, in response to the Kosovan Evacuation Programme and the newly introduced programme of asylum dispersal, initially as voluntary consortiums of local authorities. Since then, their role has evolved significantly, with 12 SMPs operating across the UK's regions and nations.³ They support leadership and coordination on migration and act as an important point of collaboration between national government, local authorities, voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and other key partners. They coordinate and represent local government on migration issues regionally and nationally, and support consultation, information sharing and the project management of key migration programmes. Their work includes areas such as asylum, resettlement, integration, ESOL, and unaccompanied-asylum seeking children, among others. They are funded by government departments, including the Home Office, MHCLG and the Department for Education, but are independent of government, enabling them to act as a 'critical friend' in supporting the development and delivery of migration programmes.⁴

3 However, Northern Ireland's SMP arrangements are not currently functioning the same way as SMPs in England, Scotland and Wales.

4 A summary of the role and functions of SMPs is hosted on the South East SMP website. See: <https://southeastspm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/SMP-Summary.pdf>

Darling (2024) characterises SMPs as playing a dual or ‘ambivalent’ role. On the one hand, they help translate central government policy into practice at the regional and local level. On the other, their partnership and coordination efforts can create opportunities for local authorities and VCS organisations to raise concerns, challenge aspects of government policy and advocate for change. However, these spaces remain constrained. While participation may allow concerns to surface, Darling finds there is limited scope to change policy and no guarantee that concerns raised will be acted upon.

SAs sit somewhat differently within this landscape, and are themselves a varied set of institutions. Some are relatively mature, with established functions, recognised mayoral leadership and significant institutional capacity. Others are newer, less resourced or still developing their internal role and relationships with constituent local authorities, SMPs and civil society. Across this uneven landscape, SAs do not generally hold formal migration or asylum powers, but they do hold – or may increasingly acquire – responsibilities across policy areas that shape integration and settlement. As the report goes on to show, their contribution is therefore emerging through areas such as ESOL, skills, employment, homelessness, cohesion and anti-poverty work, rather than through a clearly defined migration remit.

They sit, then, within a complex and uneven governance landscape. SAs do not replace central government, local authorities or SMPs, but their growing role across policy areas relevant to migration raises important questions about what they are already doing, where they add value, and how their role could develop over time.

CASE STUDY 1: LEARNING FROM THE GLA

The Greater London Authority is the most developed example in England of a regional authority playing a sustained role on migration, integration and cohesion. But it is also distinctive. London has a mature mayoralty, a recognised regional geography, significant institutional capacity, a large and diverse migrant population, and a global city identity in which migration is central to the city’s social and economic story. This has also been shaped by sustained mayoral commitment to an inclusive civic identity, visible in strategic communications campaigns such as London is Open, launched after the EU referendum to present London as open, diverse and inclusive.

It also benefits from a degree of institutional alignment – including hosting the London SMP – that is not the norm elsewhere in England:

“London has unusually coterminous geographies on lots of things... you have a relatively long-established mayoralty... if you need to have a conversation with the NHS, you can do that. If it’s going to work anywhere, then London ought to be your best case.”

Expert stakeholder 1

Since 2016, the GLA has built a specific migration function, evolving from earlier work on social integration, and three strategic pillars of equality, participation and relationships. Its current work spans insecure immigration status, immigration advice, refugee resettlement, asylum, ESOL, migrant rough sleeping, labour exploitation, digital status, Windrush legacy, NRPF, and Ukraine, Hong Kong and Afghan coordination. Recent programme funding also illustrates the breadth of this function: for 2025/26, the GLA approved £590,000 of GLA budget for migration-related work, alongside additional grant funding from the Home Office and MHCLG for, among other things, the London SMP, ESOL capacity, and Hong Kong and Ukraine arrivals coordination (GLA 2025a). This breadth reflects both historic crisis response and institutional design.

The GLA's role is not primarily legislative or operational. Its value lies in strategic convening, horizon scanning, commissioning, escalation to government, and embedding migration into wider systems. This role is not static, with the GLA's migration team continually adapting its support for London boroughs and London Councils in response to changing pressures, partner feedback and emerging gaps. For example, the migration team works with adult skills colleagues on ESOL eligibility and barriers for new arrivals; with rough sleeping teams on services for migrant rough sleepers; and with employment rights partners where immigration advice and labour exploitation intersect. This reflects a wider lesson for SAs: migration work must be carried out collaboratively between teams addressing different policy areas. As one participant observed:

“Migration doesn't just sit in a single place, does it?”

Expert stakeholder 1

A particularly distinctive feature is the Citizenship and Integration Initiative (CII), which seconded civil society experts into City Hall. One participant involved in funding the CII said this makes the GLA 'much more porous' to migrant communities, while giving regional government access to expertise, networks and lived experience. Work on the EU settlement scheme illustrated the model's value. Rather than relying on a website, a secondee who knew the community well advised an outreach-based approach, working through trusted local organisations to “go to them” rather than expecting communities to come to the GLA. This sat alongside multilingual resources and legal advice.

While the GLA should not be seen as a straightforward blueprint for other SAs, its experience offers practical lessons on how regional government can build capacity, work with civil society, and embed migration more effectively across wider policy agendas.

4.

MAPPING THE CURRENT ROLE OF STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

WHICH POLICY AREAS ARE STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES ENGAGING WITH?

Skills, ESOL and employment support

This emerged as the clearest and most ‘natural’ fit for SAs, given their existing responsibilities and influence in relation to economic development, adult education, employment support and inclusive growth. This view was shared by a range of stakeholders, including SMP leads and Home Office officials, making it one of the areas where there was strongest consensus about the potential role of SAs.

In practice, several SAs are already supporting initiatives aimed at economic integration. Examples include Greater Manchester Combined Authority’s (GMCA) Refugee Welcome Programme, West Yorkshire Combined Authority’s (WYCA) work with Migration Yorkshire on a migrant women entrepreneur’s project (see case study 3), and emerging collaboration between the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority and the North East SMP around ESOL and employability. One stakeholder suggested that SA engagement was strongest around ‘the sort of ESOL and employability agenda’, with more limited involvement beyond this. This points both to the relative strength of skills and employment as current areas of activity, and to a perceived boundary around the issues in which SAs are seen to have a role.

ESOL appears to be the most tangible way in which SAs act on this agenda. Those with devolved adult skills funding can shape eligibility, provision and links between language learning, employment and vocational training (see case study 2).

Stakeholders also saw employability support not only as a route to practical integration, but as part of a wider inclusive growth agenda. As one Home Office official put it, the challenge is how to get people ‘into the job market or into education’ and challenge perceptions that they are ‘purely a cost’. Similarly, the South Yorkshire mayor, Oliver Coppard, suggested that asylum and migration should be understood ‘through the prism of jobs and growth and opportunity’, helping people to see migration as ‘a good thing for us’. This points to a broader role for SAs in connecting migration to regional economic priorities, including skills, workforce participation and inclusive growth, while also shifting public narratives towards the contribution migrants make.

However, some cautioned about SAs becoming too narrowly focussed on the economic side of integration. One stakeholder reflected that while this reflected ‘the way combined authorities’ other powers are set up’, they had seen most value when SAs had retained a focus on ‘social and community elements as well as the economic ones’.

CASE STUDY 2: EMPLOYMENT-LINKED ESOL AT WMCA

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) offers a useful example of how devolved skills powers can be used to support migrant and refugee integration. It frames migration as central to the region's economic and social story, describing the West Midlands as a young, diverse and multilingual region where adult education has long supported new arrivals to build English language skills, confidence and routes into work (Hatton 2024).

Through its Adult Education Budget (now Adult Skills Fund), WMCA has sought to use 'the levers of devolution' to improve opportunities for migrants and refugees, including by investing in ESOL and embedding language learning into vocational training (ibid).

This vision is reflected in the Coventry Language Integration Project (CLIP), supported by WMCA alongside Coventry City Council and ACH, a social enterprise organisation. CLIP offers intensive 'ESOL for Work' courses alongside employment coaching, CV and interview support, guidance on qualifications and wrap-around integration advice. The programme also offers personalised employment support for up to three months after completion and is open to some asylum seekers with permission to work.

CASE STUDY 3: MIGRANT WOMEN IN BUSINESS, WEST YORKSHIRE

The Migrant Women in Business project in West Yorkshire offers an example of SA-funded, SMP-led economic inclusion work (Refai and Lelontko 2025). Funded by WYCA and led by Migration Yorkshire with university and civil society partners, the project provided tailored pre-startup support for aspiring migrant women entrepreneurs, including mentoring, peer support, travel and childcare support, and links to business networks and finance. The project shows how SA funding can be combined with SMP expertise to address gaps in mainstream economic support for migrant communities.

Cohesion, public safety and community resilience

Cohesion, public safety and community resilience⁵ emerged as a growing area of interest for SAs, particularly in the context of recent protests, unrest and renewed central government attention to cohesion. While this role is less developed than work on skills or employment, several stakeholders saw it as a potential 'growth' area as devolution settlements mature and mayoral authorities take on wider public safety responsibilities.

An MHCLG official suggested that of all the areas covered by this report, cohesion is the one where SA involvement is gaining most traction:

"It's been under explored, but... community cohesion at the moment is... the one I've heard most conversations [about]."

5 This report uses these terms to cover both upstream preventative work to build trust, relationships and belonging, and more immediate activity to monitor and mitigate community tensions. These functions are closely related but are not always well linked in practice.

This was linked in part to the growing alignment between mayoral leadership and police and crime functions. As the same official put it:

“With the addition now of police powers sitting with the mayor, I think there’s certainly more that can be done on some of these issues.”

One newer SA similarly looked ahead to the point at which it would take on Police and Crime Commissioner responsibilities, noting: “That area of concern will very much become something that is more relevant to us.”

A key argument for SA involvement is based on geographic scale. As one stakeholder put it: “Cohesion challenges don’t necessarily follow local authority boundaries.” Migration-related tensions and risks may circulate across wider geographies, creating a potential role for SAs in taking a more strategic regional look at tackling community tensions.

However, stakeholders were clear that this should not mean lifting cohesion work away from local communities. One VCS stakeholder warned that ‘community cohesion, community safety... probably need to come down rather than go up,’ because effective work depends on ‘town hall meetings’, facilitated conversations and communications that are ‘in touch with what people are thinking’. SAs therefore cannot replace local authorities, VCS organisations or community groups. Instead, stakeholders pointed towards a model in which any stronger SA role on cohesion develops alongside local authorities, with regional coordination supporting rather than displacing local leadership.

This wider strategic role may be particularly important because many of the underlying drivers of tension – including poverty, deindustrialisation, housing pressures, pressure on public services, lack of agency and mistrust in institutions – are linked to policy areas where SAs already have influence. As the South Yorkshire mayor argued, where people lack money, social capital or the ability to change their circumstances, ‘change is scary’. SAs may therefore have a distinctive contribution because they influence some of the structural determinants of cohesion, including skills, transport, economic development, housing, public service reform, policing and regional narratives.

Mayors were also seen as having an important role in visible political leadership. An SA advisor said mayors have a massively important convening role in this space, while an SMP lead said their voice and convening power can make a difference. GMCA was cited as an example where political leadership has been consistent in expressing ‘pride and value’ in the diversity of the city region and its history of providing sanctuary. Others saw mayoral leadership as important in challenging divisive rhetoric, with one mayor saying: “If a politician is saying highly racist things online in my area, I’m gonna call it out.” This reinforces the idea that mayors can play a role in shaping inclusive regional identities that may offer a more accessible sense of belonging than national identity alone, particularly for people from migrant backgrounds (Wisthaler 2021).

However, this remains a fragile and limited role. In many places, SA engagement on cohesion is still at an early stage and depends on individual leadership, short-term funding or advisor capacity rather than embedded teams or dedicated budgets.

CASE STUDY 4: COHESION AT SYMCA

South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority provides an early example of what a regional cohesion role can look like in practice. A seconded advisor has worked from within the SA to build relationships across local authority cohesion leads, policing, violence reduction and community safety structures, as well as positioning cohesion as a priority within developing local growth plans.

Alongside this, they've supported the development of practical initiatives designed to create shared spaces and identities through sport. A football club programme, We are United, co-designed with South Yorkshire football clubs, uses the social appeal of football and 'the power of the badge' to respond to increasing levels of isolation, health inequalities and community division, together with rising concerns around loneliness, hate crime and social tensions across the region. The programme focusses on supporting adult men who may be experiencing isolation or marginalisation, including individuals from White British, South Asian, Roma, refugee and asylum-seeking communities. The programme seeks to train and develop 'Wellbeing and Integration Champions', with accredited training. The aim is to blend physical activity with wellbeing support and guided conversation, creating safe, welcoming spaces where participants can build confidence, develop trust and form meaningful social connections.

The South Yorkshire Unity Cup similarly brought together young people from a range of backgrounds, including people seeking asylum and those from local towns and villages, to promote social interaction through street cricket.

Homelessness and move-on support

In several places, migration is most visible to SAs through homelessness, rough sleeping, NRPf, and refugee move-on pressures. This is especially clear in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, where migration work is closely linked to homelessness prevention. Homelessness was seen as a key area where migration issues had to be mainstreamed into existing SA priorities. As one SA officer put it: "You can't end rough sleeping if you're not considering migrant populations."

SAs do not hold statutory homelessness duties, which sit with local authorities. Their role is therefore not to replace local delivery, but to coordinate, provide regional intelligence, convene partners, escalate issues to central government and commission support where there is a clear case for regional provision. This was described in Greater Manchester as explicitly additive:

"Absolutely everything that we do is intended to add value to local authorities and help them manage pressures."

SA officer 1

The same participant described the convening of local authorities as 'probably the most crucial part' of the SA role, enabling areas to 'share good practice, share concerns, identify trends, raise issues, and act as an onward liaison'. In the West Midlands, the SA coordinates homelessness work through a regional taskforce that includes subgroups focussed on rough sleeping and NRPf-related homelessness, involving local authorities and other partners.

Some SAs also described commissioning pan-regional services, particularly where demand crosses local authority boundaries or where individual councils may struggle to fund provision alone. Immigration advice was cited as one example, given its relevance to preventing or resolving homelessness linked to status, eligibility and entitlements. In Liverpool, one local authority officer saw this as a compelling reason

for greater involvement from the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, arguing that the SA may be able to unlock funding streams unavailable to migration-specific or Home Office-funded work. They pointed positively to GMCA, saying it had ‘brought in different funding that’s not taking away from the local authorities, it’s adding to it’.

CASE STUDY 5: HOMELESSNESS AT GMCA

GMCA provides a clear example of an SA developing a strategic role on migrant homelessness and refugee move-on. Its migration function sits within public service reform and aligns with wider strategic priorities in the city region, including Live Well, Housing First and equalities commitments set out in the Greater Manchester strategy. It is closely linked to wider homelessness work, reflecting the fact that asylum and migration pressures often become visible through homelessness presentations. Crucially, the early mayoral commitment to ending rough sleeping gave this work a political and institutional home, helping to ‘create space for migrant homelessness and immigration advice work.’

In response to accelerated asylum decisions and rising refugee homelessness, GMCA has supported practical work around earlier intervention and support for people leaving asylum accommodation. This includes, among other things, the Refugee Homelessness Prevention Programme, Restricted Eligibility Support Service, Asylum Crisis Service, and a test-and-learn refugee lodgings pilot – all of which work closely with local VCS organisations with expertise in supporting migrant communities.

This wide-ranging offer is designed to fill gaps between asylum accommodation, local housing systems and mainstream support, including where people leave Home Office accommodation without sufficient time, documentation, income or housing options in place. As the deputy mayor, Paul Dennett, put it, the SA role is ‘all about how do SAs add value, reduce inefficiencies, duplication, [and] take a trauma-informed, person-centric approach.’

Asylum accommodation

Asylum accommodation is the most contested and least developed area of SA engagement. Generally, SAs do not play a central role in the current system. Accommodation remains a strongly held Home Office function, outsourced to private providers, with Migrant Help providing the support element. Under this model, local and regional authorities have limited formal influence over procurement, placement or standards. One political figure argued that the current contractual model sidelines local and strategic authorities, as if ‘we don’t matter’.

However, accommodation decisions create significant local and regional impacts that SAs are concerned about and increasingly drawn into. These include hotel use, uneven dispersal, refugee homelessness and move-on pressures, community tensions and pressure on local services. As one SA officer put it: “Asylum contracts are not well embedded in local systems.” Some SAs use their role to escalate shared concerns from constituent local authorities to central government and the Home Office, and in some cases, these have been amplified through mayoral intervention.⁶

6 For instance, see 2023 letter from Greater Manchester leaders to government on the impact of asylum and immigration policies on homelessness: <https://www.greatermanchester-SA.gov.uk/news/letter-from-greater-manchester-leaders-on-asylum-immigration-and-homelessness/>

Asylum hotels were raised by stakeholders as a particular concern. One mayor argued:

“There should be no world in which anybody is living in a hotel in this country... from a wellbeing point of view... public purse point of view... public narrative point of view, that just needs to stop.”

Several stakeholders also criticised the lack of local accountability in the current private provider model. For some, any stronger devolved role would need to involve the power to change that model, rather than simply inherit it. As one mayor put it, they would want:

“The power to be able to get rid of some of those horrible contracts where you’ve got predatory companies... housing people in miserable circumstances.”

There was some cautious interest in a stronger regional role, but this was heavily caveated. As one political figure put it:

“I am on the page of SAs having a bigger role, but I think it needs to be carefully considered.”

Stakeholders distinguished between a strategic role for SAs – around planning, coordination, commissioning, escalation, data sharing and connecting accommodation to wider housing and homelessness approaches – and a more operational role in directly sourcing or managing accommodation. One expert stakeholder warned against assuming SAs could simply become delivery bodies, arguing that’s ‘not what they’re designed to do right now. They are literally designed to be *strategic* authorities’. In Greater Manchester, the deputy mayor also pointed to the fact that, before outsourcing, the 10 GM local authorities directly delivered asylum accommodation services – a model he saw as preferable in principle to the current marketised system. Any stronger SA role would need to develop alongside clearer local authority roles, with the GLA’s Asylum Welcome project offering one example of how regional government can help local authorities share learning and develop their role in this area (Weihmayer 2024).

At the same time, some stakeholders saw value in regional authorities being involved earlier in shaping what comes next, rather than finding themselves managing consequences once decisions have been made. One SA was highlighted through this research as already undertaking horizon-scanning and influencing work around future asylum accommodation reform, particularly ahead of the post-2029 contracts. As one SA officer put it: “2029 just feels too close for me, if we want the opportunity to think drastically different.” This suggests that even where SAs are not ready or resourced to take on direct accommodation responsibilities, there may be a clearer role in helping design future models that better align with local needs and systems.

For some, the appropriate geography for any future devolved role is also unresolved. Stakeholders noted that the Home Office currently works through a small number of large accommodation contracts, and that moving from this model to multiple mayoral deals with smaller sub-regional footprints may be complex. Some felt that SMPs may offer broader regional coverage, alongside existing migration expertise. Mayors, by contrast, were seen as bringing political authority and convening power, particularly where difficult conversations with constituent local authorities are needed, for example around full dispersal. As one stakeholder put it: “Who’s... got political power in a place? Well, a mayor does.”

Avoiding duplication and over-complexity between SMPs and SAs would be essential for any decentralised model. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, the right balance is likely to vary between places, depending on the maturity, capacity and relationships of both the SA and the SMP.

Stakeholders who discussed direct responsibility for asylum accommodation were cautious about SAs taking on direct responsibility for it under current conditions, pointing to gaps in capacity, powers and funding, as well as the risks attached to the current system. An MHCLG official suggested that any expanded role would need to test whether mayors or SAs have the ‘powers, funds, public standing and local legitimacy to influence the outcome’. A Home Office official also noted litigation as a key blocker to devolution,⁷ stating that ‘absolutely anything we do is litigated’, underlining the risks attached to this policy area. This does not rule out a stronger SA or regional role in future, but it does suggest that any expanded role would need to be carefully designed, properly resourced and clearly accountable, rather than simply transferring responsibility for a high-risk system without the tools to improve it.

HOW ARE STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES ENGAGING WITH MIGRATION-RELATED WORKSTREAMS?

SAs are engaging with migration in varied and uneven ways, shaped by their powers, political priorities, institutional maturity and local pressures. In most places, migration does not appear as a standalone function; instead, it becomes visible through wider SA agendas. The table below summarises the main ways this engagement is currently taking place.

TABLE 4.1: HOW ARE SAs ENGAGING WITH MIGRATION-RELATED WORKSTREAMS?

How SAs are engaging	What this means in practice	Illustrative examples
Dedicated migration/integration capacity	More established teams or functions focussed directly on migration, migrant rights and social integration, allowing them to work across policy areas rather than relying only on mainstreaming through other agendas.	The GLA is the clearest example, with a dedicated migration team, supporting work on migrant rough sleeping and adult skills, and leading work on building immigration advice capacity, migration system leadership, and welcome and integration support (GLA 2025b). GMCA is a partial comparator, with a dedicated asylum and migration function embedded within public service reform and homelessness.
Mainstreaming migration into wider SA agendas	Migration work often emerges through existing SA priorities rather than as a standalone function, including skills, ESOL, homelessness, cohesion and employability.	WMCA approaching migration through homelessness prevention and adult skills.
Convening and coordinating partners	Bring together local authorities, SMPs, VCS partners, public services and other institutions to share practice, identify pressures and coordinate responses.	GMCA convening local authorities around asylum, homelessness and move-on. SYMCA linking cohesion leads, policing and community safety partners. WMCA coordinating homelessness work through a regional taskforce and subgroups on rough sleeping and NRPf-related homelessness.

⁷ For instance, judicial review or other legal challenges relating to asylum accommodation sites, dispersal arrangements, and duties towards unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and people with particular support needs.

Regional intelligence and escalation	Identify patterns across local authority areas, gather intelligence on emerging pressures and escalate shared concerns to central government or accommodation providers.	GMCA escalating issues to the Home Office, Serco and the SMP. <i>Note: This overlaps with a key function of SMPs.</i>
Strategic commissioning	Commission provision at city-regional level where needs cross local authority boundaries or where individual councils may struggle to sustain provision alone.	GMCA commissioning pan-GM immigration advice, employment support and open-source ESOL resources. WMCA using adult skills funding to shape ESOL and employability provision. GLA developed specialist provision around migrant rough sleeping.
Community funding and small grants	Use grant funding to support VCS, faith, community and migrant-led groups that can respond flexibly to local integration needs.	EMCA's Mayor's Community Development Fund is being used to invest in communities in ways they help shape, with an eye on how this may support cohesion. North East MSA Mayor's Opportunity Fund for charities and community groups for hyper-local activity to support inclusion, cohesion and resilience. ⁸
Capacity building and workforce development	Strengthen local systems by funding posts, building staff confidence, producing resources and improving immigration/asylum literacy.	GMCA frontline migration workforce network and immigration/asylum literacy work. Civil society funded advisor roles in SYMCA and North East MSA.
Political leadership and regional voice	Mayors can use their platform to shape narratives, provide political leadership, challenge divisive rhetoric, advocate for national policy change and escalate shared regional concerns, particularly where centralised migration decisions have significant local impacts.	Greater Manchester mayoral leadership around rough sleeping, NRPf, asylum system and earned settlement. South Yorkshire mayoral voice on cohesion and communities. North East mayoral voice on a more positive narrative around migration.

Source: Author's analysis

WHO ARE STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES WORKING WITH ACROSS THE SYSTEM?

The role of SAs on migration is highly relational. Where they are engaging, they are usually working through existing systems rather than delivering directly, including by convening local authorities, partnering with SMPs, funding or supporting VCS organisations, linking with public services and escalating issues to central government. These relationships are central to the value SAs can add, but they also create risks of duplication where roles are not clearly defined.

⁸ See North East MSA (2025): <https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/news/education-skills-and-inclusion/mayor-kim-mcguinness-pledge-for-grassroots-community-projects-in-the-north-east>

TABLE 4.2: WHO ARE SAs WORKING WITH ACROSS THE SYSTEM?

Partner	How SAs are working with them	Key issues or tensions
Local authorities	Constituent local authorities are foundational to SAs as they make up the SA itself and sit within its governance structures. They also hold many of the statutory responsibilities most relevant to migration, including homelessness and housing, social care and children’s services, and community cohesion. SAs can convene councils, identify shared pressures and add regional capacity.	SA action depends on consensus among constituent councils, which may have different politics, pressures, dispersal patterns and levels of appetite for engaging with migration. Mayors may bring political authority and regional visibility, but local authorities retain many of the statutory duties, local intelligence and community relationships needed to make migration-related work effective. SAs need to be clear about their added value, avoiding duplication or the perception that they are overriding local authority roles.
Strategic Migration Partnerships	SMPs bring extensive migration expertise, relationships with local and national government, and data and regional coordination experience. SAs may work with them on asylum pressures, move-on, ESOL, employability and regional planning. SMPs play an important role in subnational coordination on migration, both strategically and operationally, and can provide continuity where SA capacity is limited or political priorities change.	The main tension is role clarity. SMPs may hold the strongest migration expertise and coordinate cross-sector migration structures, while SAs may bring political authority and wider policy levers. Relationships are also uneven. In some areas, interaction between newer SAs and established SMPs appears limited, meaning the foundations for partnership working still need to be built. Geography may also require navigation, as some interviewees noted that SA and SMP boundaries are not always coterminous, adding a further layer of coordination in some areas.
Voluntary, community and faith partners, and local anchor institutions	SAs may fund, commission and convene specialist organisations on migration and cohesion related issues. These partners can also help SAs understand lived experience, identify emerging pressures, shape priorities and design support that is trusted by migrant communities. In some places, SAs are using community funding or small grants to support flexible, local activity led by organisations already embedded in communities.	These organisations often hold the trust, lived experience and specialist knowledge that SAs lack, but smaller groups may struggle to engage with regional structures if processes are too formal or distant.
Public services, employers and local institutions	SAs connect migration and cohesion work to colleges, employers, housing providers, police, health services, DWP, violence reduction units and adult skills providers.	Frontline staff may lack confidence or immigration/asylum literacy. Employer engagement appears underdeveloped in some places, despite being central to the skills, ESOL and employment agenda.
Central government	SAs engage with the Home Office, MHCLG and others to escalate shared concerns, influence policy design and seek better data, funding and clearer routes for resolving policy and operational problems.	SAs are often expected to respond to the local and regional impacts of asylum and migration policy, but they do not control many of the decisions that create those impacts. There is also a political balancing act between maintaining constructive relationships with central government and escalating concerns where national decisions create local risks. This is made harder by perceived hesitancy within central government to devolve or test decentralised models in areas seen as high-risk.

Source: Author's analysis

EMERGING MATURITY TYPOLOGY

This scoping research shows that SA engagement with migration is best understood not as a single model, but as a spectrum. Some SAs are at a very early stage in developing a migration role, while others are beginning to identify links with core functions. A smaller number, particularly those in city regions with significant migrant populations, have developed multiple active workstreams and play a key role in adding regional capacity on migration.

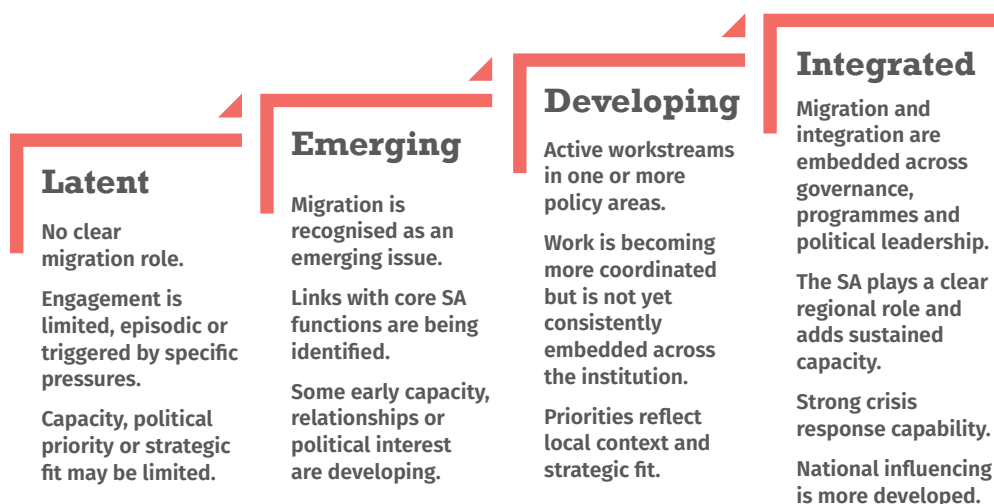
The typology below summarises these different stages. Importantly, it is not intended to rank SAs or imply that all should follow the same path. Differences between SAs reflect three main factors:

- **Institutional capacity**, including staffing, funding, expertise, data, governance and established relationships.
- **Local context**, including population profile, migration history, asylum pressures, salience of migration locally, and cohesion risks.
- **Political and strategic prioritisation**, including mayoral interest, political will and the extent to which migration is seen to align with existing SA priorities, such as skills, housing, public safety or growth.

Within one SA, some policy areas may be more developed while others remain more limited. An authority may, for example, prioritise skills and employment because this aligns with its economic strategy, while playing a more limited role on cohesion or asylum accommodation. The intention is therefore to capture different patterns and stages of engagement, and to help identify the barriers, opportunities and support needs facing SAs in different contexts.

FIGURE 4.1: EMERGING MATURITY TYPOLOGY OF STRATEGIC AUTHORITY ENGAGEMENT WITH MIGRATION

Illustrative stages of SA engagement with migration



Note: These are not fixed categories, and SAs may sit between stages or show different levels of engagement across different policy areas.

Source: Author's illustration

In practice, the typology helps show what development might look like over time where SAs choose to build a stronger migration role. For **latent** SAs, migration may still only come into view when a specific pressure arises, such as around

community tensions or refugee homelessness. There may be no clear owner within the SA, and no settled view about whether migration sits within its remit.

Emerging SAs are beginning to make these connections more deliberately. This might involve advisor roles, early conversations with SMPs and local authorities, or work to understand how migration links to existing priorities such as skills, child poverty, homelessness, public safety or cohesion. **Developing** SAs are turning this awareness into practical offers and workstreams, such as ESOL and employability initiatives, community funding, cohesion activity, homelessness coordination, or support for people leaving asylum accommodation.

At the most developed end of the spectrum, **integrated** SAs no longer treat migration and integration as isolated issues, but embed them across programmes, partnerships and political leadership. This gives such SAs the greatest ability to work across policy siloes, support local systems and influence national policy design. However, this does not mean every SA should develop in the same way, or that a high level of activity across all areas is always necessary or appropriate.

The next chapter looks at the strengths and constraints that shape where SAs sit on this spectrum. The typology is then used in the final chapter to consider what different SAs may need to develop their role, where this fits with local priorities and context. A central takeaway from this typology is that strengthening the SA role will require a staged and differentiated approach, rather than a single model applied uniformly across all places.

5.

WHAT IS ENABLING OR CONSTRAINING STRONGER STRATEGIC AUTHORITY ACTION?

EXISTING STRENGTHS AND ASSETS

Strategic headroom and regional perspective

A key strength of SAs is their ability to operate as a ‘middle tier’ between highly centralised Home Office decision-making and very local delivery. This does not mean SAs are best placed to deliver frontline services directly. Rather, as a number of stakeholders within and outside SAs told us, one of the key added values of SAs lies in being able to see the bigger picture across a wider geography and connect this to regional strategy.

As one mayor put it, SAs can be:

“Big enough to be strategic... and close enough to understand more direct impact on the community.”

This perspective is especially relevant where migration-related issues do not sit neatly within local authority boundaries, including labour markets, homelessness, cohesion, public safety and regional welcoming narratives. It becomes more visible as SAs move from latent or emerging stages into more developing roles, where they start to identify cross-boundary patterns rather than responding episodically to individual issues.

Ability to mainstream migration and work across siloes

A recurring strength across the interviews was the ability of SAs to embed migration into mainstream agendas rather than treating it as a niche or standalone policy area. This is particularly important because, for many of them, migration does not yet have a dedicated institutional function. Instead, it becomes visible through existing portfolios such as homelessness, ESOL, employability, skills, public service reform, cohesion and community safety.

One SA officer described the value of having migration work embedded within the combined authority:

“There’s huge added value to have the function embedded within a combined authority... mainstreamed... through your homelessness services... with education, work and skills teams, with ESOL, and being embedded into the decision-making structures.”

Another stakeholder, contrasting regional with central government, reflected that SAs may have more scope to work across policy boundaries because they are smaller, more place-based institutions. This mattered because people’s lives do not follow departmental structures:

“Everything is done per government department. But... all of us... are every day of our lives experiencing multiple systems around us.”

This kind of mainstreaming approach can also help protect such work in a politically volatile context. One interviewee noted that:

“Embedding it within existing public service work streams could be more sustainable and effective in many ways.”

This suggests that, for emerging SAs in particular, the first step may not be to create a new migration strategy or team, but to ask how migration is already shaping existing SA priorities.

Convening power

Convening was one of the most consistently identified SA strengths. SAs can bring together local authorities, VCS partners, public services, SMPs and, in some cases, central government and national providers. Stakeholders saw this as especially valuable where migration cuts across multiple systems and no single organisation holds all the levers, requiring coordination, shared intelligence and collective problem-solving.

As one SA officer put it:

“Probably the most crucial part of our role... is the convening of local authorities, so that they can hold networks, share good practice, share concerns, identify trends, raise issues, and act as an onward liaison.”

This convening role can help build trust, deepen understanding of local pressures, avoid duplication and support more joined-up responses. It is particularly valuable where individual local authorities are facing similar challenges, but may lack the capacity, relationships or leverage to address them alone. However, this strength depends on SAs being clear that they are adding value to local authority and SMP roles rather than replacing them. In some areas, this may include helping to coordinate integration or cohesion work where this sits outside, or only partly within, the SMP remit.

Scale and specialist capacity

The most integrated authorities show the value of dedicated or semi-dedicated migration capacity. Such specialist capacity can enable SAs to move beyond reactive engagement into horizon scanning, commissioning, escalation to central government, regional workforce development and more innovative programme or policy design.

This was clearest in the longer-standing regional authorities, particularly the GLA and GMCA. The GLA shows the value of a more dedicated regional migration and social integration function, while GMCA provides a partial comparator through its asylum and migration function embedded within public service reform and homelessness. In both cases, specialist capacity helps connect migration across portfolios, rather than allowing it to sit only within one team or be addressed in an ad hoc way.

Scale also enables some provision to be developed at a pan-regional level, particularly where it would not make sense for every local authority to commission separately. Immigration advice was a strong example, given its relevance to homelessness prevention, asylum move-on, NRPf and wider integration. SA-level capacity can therefore reduce duplication and create support that individual councils may struggle to sustain alone.

For newer or more emerging SAs, seconded advisor roles demonstrate a lighter-touch route into specialist capacity. The North East mayor, Kim McGuinness, described the value of this kind of support as ‘helping us to get more of a grip of what the actual picture is and what is needed’.

This suggests that specialist capacity does not have to mean every SA building a full migration team. It may begin with time-limited advisory roles, secondments or partnerships that help authorities understand where migration intersects with their existing functions, build relationships across portfolios and support mainstreaming over time.

Political leadership and democratic mandate

Directly elected mayors can give visibility, legitimacy and political weight to issues that might otherwise remain technocratic, fragmented or hidden. Several stakeholders emphasised the role of mayoral leadership in shaping narratives around migration, sanctuary, cohesion and contribution.

In Greater Manchester, one SA officer described the importance of political leadership:

“The mayor and political leadership in GM have been consistent... about the pride and value put on diversity of the city region, and the pride in our history of providing sanctuary to refugees.”

Mayoral leadership can also help create space for action on politically sensitive issues. For example, the early mayoral commitment to ending rough sleeping in Greater Manchester helped create an institutional and political home for migrant homelessness and immigration advice work. In other areas, mayors described using their platform to challenge divisive rhetoric, as in South Yorkshire and the North East, or to shift the public conversation on migration towards opportunity and shared regional benefit.

However, this strength comes with an important caveat. Political voice is not inherently positive or constructive. One stakeholder warned that while ‘that voice is really important’, mayors could ‘also use that where it’s negative’. Put bluntly, some elected mayors, now or in the future, may not have a progressive vision for migration in their region. The same stakeholder therefore cautioned: “Be careful what you wish for.”

The democratic mandate of mayors can help SAs act on behalf of all residents and communities, but it also means that migration work is shaped by local political context. A stronger SA role therefore depends not only on mayoral visibility, but on how that visibility is used, and whether it creates space for inclusive, evidence-based action rather than amplifying division.

BARRIERS AND LIMITATIONS

Unclear remit or mandate

As described, many SAs do not have a clear formal remit on migration. This can create uncertainty about legitimacy, particularly for latent or emerging SAs that are still trying to understand their place within the existing migration governance system. As one advisor in an emerging SA put it: “The combined authority role in that is not that clear yet.”

An SA officer reflected that:

“Sometimes, maybe for a combined authority, it doesn’t always feel like it’s a legitimate space, because it somewhere sits between... the Home Office and the local authority and the Strategic Migration Partnership.”

Without a clearer mandate, SA engagement can depend on individual initiative, short-term capacity or ad hoc responses to crises rather than agreed responsibility. This can make it difficult to move from an emerging to a developing role, even where officers or mayors can see clear links between migration and SA priorities.

Uneven capacity across a patchwork geography

A second challenge is the significant variation between SAs, including their institutional maturity, staffing, political priorities, devolution settlements and relationships with partners. Some have dedicated teams or advisors, while others are still putting in place the basic building blocks, including relationships with SMPs and civil society.

Funding also shapes uneven capacity. Some SA activity has developed opportunistically, using short-term pots, internal underspends, external funding or in-kind advisor roles. This can enable useful innovation but makes it difficult to sustain capacity or plan strategically. One mayor captured the wider problem, saying:

“What I don’t like is where you are given responsibility for an outcome and not the tools to do the job.”

This variation is made more complex by the patchwork of institutional geographies. Some interviewees noted that SMP and SA boundaries are not always coterminous, which can add further layers of coordination in areas where roles and working relationships are still being established. As one SA officer said:

“The defining of that collaborative relationship between a regional strategic migration partnership and a combined authority when the patches don’t match is one of the more tricky, but important... aspects of these developing asylum [and] migration functions.”

The typology helps here, as different SAs will need different forms of support, depending on where they sit on the maturity spectrum. SMPs also have an important role in providing coverage, continuity and migration expertise across the whole system. This may be especially important where SAs are still latent or emerging, but SMPs remain key partners even where SAs are developing more active roles.

Political sensitivity and volatility

Migration is a highly politically sensitive area for SAs to engage with, especially in the wake of the hostile environment, ongoing asylum accommodation pressures, recent unrest and the growth of more explicitly anti-immigration and populist politics in some local areas. This can make positive, proactive work on migration difficult to sustain publicly, even where there is officer-level recognition of need.

One SA officer described the constraints created by the wider political climate:

“You only have to look at the national mood music... with local elections coming up as to what you might be able to publicly say about migrants, and what you might publicly be able to do about migrants.”

The same stakeholder suggested that:

“It would take quite [a lot] of bravery for lots of politicians to come out and say they want to do more in this space.”

SAs may be less directly exposed to local electoral churn than local authorities, giving them some ability to provide continuity and leadership through political change. However, political sensitivity still shapes what they feel able to say, fund or prioritise. This may encourage mainstreaming through wider agendas, which can be useful and sustainable but may also mean migration-specific needs remain partially hidden.

Insufficient levers

SAs may be expected to respond to the consequences of asylum and migration policy without control, or sufficient input, over the decisions that create them. This is particularly evident in relation to issues such as asylum accommodation, move-on and NRPF.

Even understanding how these policies are affecting a region can be difficult because of insufficient and patchy data-sharing, particularly from the Home Office. This was identified as a key problem by stakeholders at SA, local authority and SMP level. For SAs trying to coordinate, convene and share regional intelligence, a lack of information on asylum decisions, arrivals and hotel use prevents appropriate planning. As one SA officer told us: “It’s hard to be strategic if you don’t even know what’s coming down the line.”

Without data and policy levers, SAs risk being asked to manage impacts without being able to meaningfully shape the decisions that drive them or respond to their consequences.

Central caution and the risk of ‘halfway house’ devolution

Some stakeholders perceived central government as cautious about devolving or testing decentralised models in areas seen as high-risk, particularly for asylum accommodation. This was linked to legal risk,⁹ political sensitivity and the fact that migration and asylum do not yet sit clearly within the current devolution framework. As one MHCLG official viewed it:

“Migration, asylum, maybe to a slightly less extent integration and community cohesion... don’t fit comfortably within the defined role of a strategic authority.”

This caution was not always framed as opposition to devolution. The same official warned against responsibilities being devolved without sufficient powers or understanding:

“We don’t want to see stuff just devolved and then not really have the powers or understanding to know what they can and can’t do.”

However, other stakeholders saw the barrier as more deeply rooted in the centralisation of the migration system itself. One senior stakeholder argued that:

“The whole immigration integration system is just insanely centralised... to Whitehall, within Whitehall, to the Home Office, within the Home Office, to the Home Secretary.”

Several stakeholders also cautioned against partial or poorly designed devolution. Taking asylum accommodation as a test case, one mayor supported its devolution in principle, but argued that it would need to be done in a ‘really quite holistic way’, avoiding the transfer of isolated responsibilities for one element, such as housing but not support, without a joined-up settlement. Otherwise, they warned: “You would end up with a halfway house that just wouldn’t work for anybody.”

Many stakeholders across different levels of governance saw clear benefits in decentralising aspects of migration-related work and giving regional and local actors a stronger role. This was particularly evident for opportunities on cohesion and regional coordination, while more complex areas such as asylum accommodation were seen as requiring a longer-term and carefully phased approach. But the caution expressed by stakeholders was not an argument for keeping these issues centralised by default. Several stakeholders argued that

9 As described earlier in relation to asylum accommodation.

if English devolution is to be meaningful, migration-related policy should not be treated as exceptional or permanently out of scope. The task is to design decentralisation well, through earlier and more structured engagement with local and regional partners, rather than designing policy centrally or handing down partial responsibilities without the powers, funding, data and accountability to make them work. A recent resettlement pilot offers one example of a more decentralised regional model in practice (see case study 6).

CASE STUDY 6: DECENTRALISED RESETTLEMENT PILOT IN YORKSHIRE AND HUMBER

The Afghan Pathfinder in Yorkshire and Humber offers a recent example of decentralised migration delivery. Launched by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in April 2025, the pilot gave Migration Yorkshire, the SMP for the region, and local authorities responsibility for both transitional and settled accommodation for resettled Afghan households. The programme has supported around 650 Afghans, from arrival through transitional accommodation and into settled housing. It is led by the SMP, with the participation of all 15 local authorities in the region.

Under the model, Migration Yorkshire receives funding to procure and manage transitional accommodation (instead of the MoD and Home Office doing this), while working with local authorities across the region to help people move into suitable settled housing.

The National Audit Office (NAO) (2026) reports that early performance data shows people moving from transitional to settled accommodation more quickly under this model, contributing to reduced costs. While the pilot has not yet been formally evaluated, the MoD and local authorities told the NAO that the model simplified casework and could improve long-term integration.

This pathfinder shows how regional migration infrastructure can coordinate accommodation, integration support and local authority participation across a region. It offers relevant learning for future regional pilots, including on how accommodation is procured and managed, how people are supported into settled housing, and how regional coordination can connect accommodation with wider integration support.

6.

CONCLUSION: OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

There is no single model for a stronger strategic authority role on migration. The evidence points to the need for a staged and differentiated approach, reflecting variation in institutional capacity, local context, and political and strategic priorities.

Asylum and migration should be an active strand of English devolution conversations. Few issues more clearly expose the gap between centralised decision-making and local impact. Migration shapes local economies, public services and community life, bringing both pressures and contributions. If devolution is about giving places the tools to respond to the issues that shape them, migration cannot be treated as permanently out of scope.

A stronger regional role should not mean central government simply passing risk from central to local or regional partners. But nor should risk aversion become a reason to keep the system highly centralised when the effects are felt locally and many of the practical answers may be found there too. A key thread through stakeholder interviews was a sense of too often being 'done to' by national policy decisions. As the English devolution settlement gathers pace and more of the devolution map is filled in, earlier, more structured and intentional engagement between central government, SAs, local authorities, SMPs and civil society will be critical to getting migration governance right.

SAs should also be supported to identify their own priorities. Not every area will need or want to act across every part of the migration agenda. Some may focus on skills, ESOL and inclusive growth; others on homelessness, asylum pressures, cohesion or public safety. A staged approach should allow places to map where they are already active, where there are gaps, and where a stronger regional role would add most value.

USE EXISTING POWERS AND RELATIONSHIPS MORE SYSTEMATICALLY

These actions are foundational. They would help latent and emerging SAs understand how migration intersects with their existing responsibilities, while also strengthening the basic infrastructure that developing and integrated SAs need to act effectively.

Strengthen regional data-sharing and intelligence

The Home Office, working with MHCLG, should establish a targeted piece of work to fix and monitor migration and asylum data-sharing with local and regional partners. This should involve SAs, SMPs, local authorities and relevant statutory partners, with clear rules on what data can be shared, at what level, how frequently and for what purpose. The aim should be to support planning, prevention and coordination – not simply monitoring.

This should cover data on asylum accommodation, arrivals and dispersal, asylum decision-making, move-on, hotel use and closure, NRPF and housing procurement in the provider pipeline. Better data would allow regional and local partners to plan for the wider impacts of migration and asylum, including implications for housing need, school places, GP access, cohesion, service demand and workforce planning.

Clarify SA and SMP roles in English devolution

SMPs play a vital role in regional migration governance. They provide migration expertise, coordinate cross-sector migration structures, hold relationships with local authorities and key partners, and provide continuity across areas where devolved capacity is uneven. However, their relationship with SAs is currently inconsistent, particularly where newer SAs are still building relationships with established SMPs, or where different institutional geographies add complexity to coordination.

SMPs and SAs should be supported to develop a shared proposition for how their roles should relate within the changing geography of English devolution. This should examine how roles, relationships and routes for coordination should work in practice, including where boundaries align, where they diverge, and where devolved coverage remains limited. Given wider efforts to align SAs with the regional systems and services they increasingly work with, migration governance should be part of this wider devolution effort rather than treated as separate from it.

SMPs, SAs and local authorities should work with the Home Office and MHCLG to test and refine this proposition. If a shared proposition does not emerge, government should still convene partners to clarify roles, avoid duplication and agree how regional migration infrastructure should evolve as SAs mature. This process should recognise SMPs as a core part of the system, not as bodies to be bypassed or replaced.

Involve SAs in national policy design and delivery

Central government should involve SAs, local authorities, SMPs and civil society earlier and more consistently in the design and delivery of policies likely to have significant local and regional impacts. This should reflect a broader principle that regional and local partners should be treated as collaborators in policy design, not simply as bodies expected to manage the consequences of national decisions.

This is particularly important for the promised integration strategy. *Protecting What Matters* identifies this strategy as a key commitment, but there has so far been limited detail on what it will contain or how it will be delivered. MHCLG should involve key partners in designing the strategy and its action plan, including the role SAs could play in regional coordination and in aligning integration with skills, ESOL, employment, housing and cohesion.

Another area where this principle should apply is Community Sponsorship, given its role in the government's approach to expanding safe and legal routes. SAs, alongside other regional and local actors, should be involved early so that policy design takes account of housing pressures, ESOL provision, integration, cohesion and wider place-based support.

More widely, this principle should apply to any policy area with major local and regional implications, such as Pride in Place, the Child Poverty Strategy, asylum accommodation reform and ESOL.

Include regional and local partners in asylum accommodation and support contract redesign

Even without devolving asylum accommodation, the Home Office should involve SAs, SMPs and local authorities in the redesign of asylum accommodation and support contracts. Current contract structures often leave local and regional partners dealing with consequences without meaningful influence over decisions. Any future system will also need to confront the current misalignment between risk and reward, where local and regional partners may be expected to absorb political, financial and operational risks without sufficient powers, funding or local benefit.

Regional and local partners should be involved in contract design, provider accountability, data-sharing expectations, community impact assessments, integration support and move-on planning. At a minimum, future contracts should be better embedded in local systems, with clearer routes for regional and local partners to challenge poor decisions. Government should also open a more serious conversation about how the benefits of reform are shared, including how any savings or assets generated through a more regionally managed system could support local and regional housing priorities.

BUILD CAPACITY AND TEST CLEARER REGIONAL ROLES

These options are about moving from recognition to practice. They would support SAs that have identified migration as part of their remit, but need additional capacity, clearer mandates or practical mechanisms to turn that awareness into sustained workstreams. Testing should include knowledge exchange, monitoring and evaluation, so that learning from pilots and secondments is shared across places rather than remaining isolated.

Use specialist capacity and secondments to support newer SAs

Not every strategic authority needs a standalone migration team. However, newer or less-developed authorities may need temporary specialist capacity to understand how migration intersects with their existing responsibilities.

MHCLG and the Home Office should work with SAs and, where appropriate, philanthropic funders to support time-limited specialist advisors or civil society secondments, drawing on lessons from established secondment schemes. These roles could help authorities build relationships with SMPs, local authorities and civil society, identify links with wider priorities such as skills, housing, cohesion and public service reform, and determine whether more permanent capacity is needed.

Specialist capacity can help ‘beat the drum’ but should not be expected to carry the agenda alone. It is most effective where there is senior sponsorship, cross-directorate buy-in and access to wider analytical and policy capacity.

Expand commissioner roles to include integration and cohesion where locally appropriate

The new devolution framework allows mayors to appoint commissioners linked to the seven defined areas of competence. Government should consider whether this mechanism could be expanded or interpreted flexibly enough to allow mayors to appoint commissioners for cross-cutting priorities such as integration or cohesion, where there is local demand.

A commissioner role could provide visible leadership and accountability without requiring every SA to build a full migration directorate. It could be particularly useful in areas where migration cuts across multiple portfolios but has no obvious institutional ‘home’. This may be especially valuable for cohesion, where challenges have multiple determinants and often require multi-agency responses across local authorities, public services, VCS partners and communities. South Yorkshire’s Equalities Commissioner model may offer useful learning for how a cross-cutting commissioner role could support this kind of agenda.

Strengthen regional roles on ESOL, skills and inclusive growth

SAs already have important levers through adult skills, employment support, inclusive growth and local economic planning. Government should work with SAs to treat ESOL, migrant skills and labour market inclusion as central to regional growth and integration, not as marginal issues.

This should include better regional analysis of migrant skills and labour market barriers, stronger links between ESOL and employment support, and more

consistent engagement with employers, colleges and adult skills providers. ESOL should also be protected as a core part of devolved adult skills provision. Unlike statutory adult skills entitlements, ESOL access depends more heavily on local funding decisions and commissioning priorities. Government should therefore set minimum expectations for ESOL access within devolved adult skills funding, recognising its role in employment, integration and community participation, while preserving local flexibility over delivery.

FORMALISE AND EXPAND REGIONAL ROLES THROUGH FUTURE DEVOLUTION

These options are more ambitious. They are not appropriate for every SA immediately but could provide a route for SAs to move beyond coordination and into clearer regional responsibility, where the right conditions are in place.

Use the 'right to request' to build a stronger regional role over time

The right to request provides a route for ambitious SAs to propose additional functions or flexibilities on migration, integration or cohesion. Rather than prescribing a single national model, government should invite places to come forward with proposals that reflect their capacity, politics and local challenges.

There may also be value in collective propositions from mayors, for example through the UK Mayors Network or a coalition of city-region mayors for whom this agenda is particularly relevant. A shared proposition could be especially persuasive where individual areas face similar pressures around issues such as cohesion, asylum move-on, ESOL or homelessness. The Mayoral Council could also provide a forum for structured discussion between government and mayors on these topics.

Move towards a more regionally organised asylum system

The most ambitious near-term option is to move towards a more regionally organised asylum accommodation and support system, as we and others have previously recommended. This should not mean simply passing risk from the Home Office to local or regional government. It would need to be properly funded, phased and designed around clear accountability.

Government should pilot a formal regional role in asylum accommodation and support in areas with sufficient capacity, political willingness and strong relationships between SAs, SMPs and local authorities. Drawing on learning from the Afghan resettlement pilot (see case study 6), such pilots could test how regional bodies can improve procurement, placement decisions, integration support, community engagement, move-on planning, accountability and value for money.

Establish regional migration pathfinders to support local growth

Government should establish regional migration pathfinders with a small number of SAs to test how migration, skills and labour market policy can better support local growth plans, industrial strategy and sectoral workforce needs.

These pathfinders would test how SAs can feed regional labour market and economic intelligence into national migration and skills planning, including through the Migration Advisory Committee's (MAC) work with Skills England, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council. They would also explore how SAs can use their powers over skills, employment support and economic planning to boost domestic skills and training in priority occupations and sectors, including those identified through the MAC's Temporary Shortage List.

International examples show that more regionally responsive migration systems are possible. In Australia, regional migration arrangements use designated regional areas and incentives to support migration outside the largest cities. In Canada, provinces and territories can nominate migrants with skills, education and work

experience that support their economies through the Provincial Nominee Program. These approaches show how migration policy can take better account of the needs and opportunities of different places.

Over time, these pathfinders could build the evidence and governance needed to consider whether more regionally responsive worker-entry routes, including potential regional visa arrangements, may be appropriate in future.

CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATION: DEFINE THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES IN THE COHESION AND INTEGRATION STRATEGIES

Cohesion and integration cut across the staged approach set out in this chapter. Government can involve SAs in live policy design now, build regional capacity further over time, and consider whether cohesion and integration should sit more explicitly within SA remits and outcomes frameworks in the longer term.

As a first step, MHCLG should work with SAs, local authorities, SMPs, police, civil society and other relevant partners to define the role SAs can play in delivering the government's cohesion and integration strategies set out in *Protecting What Matters*.

This should not mean lifting cohesion work away from local communities. Local authorities, VCS organisations and community groups remain central because effective cohesion work depends on trusted relationships, local intelligence and neighbourhood-level engagement. The SA role should be strategic and enabling, helping to connect local activity across boundaries, align cohesion with wider policy levers, and support regional responses where issues cut across local authority areas.

In practice, this could include:

- convening local cohesion and integration leads across the region
- supporting shared intelligence on tensions, misinformation and community resilience
- linking cohesion to skills, housing, transport, public safety, health, economic development and public service reform
- coordinating with police, local resilience forums and violence reduction units where relevant
- using mayoral voice to set a constructive regional tone and challenge divisive rhetoric
- working with civil society and local authorities to shape how flexible funding, including integrated settlements where available, can support cohesion and integration outcomes.

For SAs with mayoral police and crime functions, government should clarify how these powers can support regional work on community tensions, hate crime, public safety and cohesion. For SAs without these functions, the focus may be more on convening, strategy, funding alignment and support for local partners.

Over time, MHCLG should consider whether cohesion and integration should sit more explicitly within SA competences and integrated settlement outcomes frameworks. This should be locally appropriate and should not require every SA to develop the same model. But where SAs want or need to act, there should be a clearer route for doing so, backed by funding, data, capacity and partnership arrangements.

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