West Midlands CA Areas of Research Interest 2026-27

West Midlands Combined Authority | Research and Insights

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Foreword

As the Head of Research, Intelligence, and Inclusive Growth, I am pleased to introduce the refreshed West Midlands Combined Authority's Areas of Research Interest (ARIs). These ARIs set out the priority research questions that matter most to delivering the region's ambitions. They represent a statement of intent for how the Combined Authority (CA) connects research to policy and practice; fusing the knowledge and experience of our internal research and policy community with that of our academic and research partners to support more effective and evidence-informed decision-making.

Since 2022, we have been strengthening our own in-house capability while working collaboratively with external institutions to develop a best-in-class regional ecosystem of research, intelligence, and evaluation. The publication of our first ARIs last year marked an important step in that journey. It represented a collective commitment from our internal research and policy community to engage our wider ecosystem. In turn, the regional research community has responded generously; through proposals; participation in academic sandpits; and securing exploratory funding to build new relationships.

Through this process, we have learnt three important lessons: the importance of further focus and prioritisation; stronger recognition of cross-cutting issues; and the creation of structured and semi-structured spaces for conversation and collaboration.

This refresh reflects those lessons. Our ARIs are more strongly aligned with our regional priorities. We have identified a set of cross-cutting challenges aligned with our Theory of Growth. And we are working with our partners within the WMCA area – and beyond – to create the conditions and spaces for more sustained collaboration.

We invite you to engage with these ARIs: by sharing your evidence, by working with us to form the basis of research proposals; and by working with us to answer these questions as part of our collective endeavour to make the West Midlands the best place to live, work, and visit.

Si Chun Lam
Head of Research, Intelligence, and Inclusive Growth

Introduction

Purpose

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)'s *Areas of Research Interest* articulates the strategic research needs of the Combined Authority (CA) to the wider academic and research community. This are intended to help the WMCA become more evidence-informed in its decision-making, in line with the WMCA purpose to make the West Midlands the best place to live, work, and visit.

Context

A Combined Authority (CA) is a group of local authorities working together to make their region a better place to live. The UK Government gives combined authorities the money and power to make decisions for their regions. The WMCA was set up in 2016. It was created to deliver an ambitious plan to drive inclusive growth in the region. Through deeper devolution and the three-year integrated settlement of £1.3 billion for 2026-2029, the WMCA will have much greater opportunities to respond to the grand challenges of our times. Today, the WMCA have powers around housing and planning, transport, growth, jobs, as well as communities and public services. This will allow us to transform the lives of everyone across every corner of our region: helping people live in affordable and safe places; training people with the education and skills they need to succeed in life; connecting people to places across our region; and creating the conditions by which businesses and entrepreneurs can grow and succeed.

The West Midlands is a diverse region with significant inequalities and concentrations of poverty between people, communities, and places. The WMCA expects research responding to these ARIs to consider how outcomes and impacts vary across different groups and localities. Evidence that does not account for inequality, diversity and deprivation may provide an incomplete basis for decision-making by masking important differences in experience, opportunity, and outcomes. We therefore encourage research projects to adopt inclusive, place-based approaches that help identify what works, for whom, and where. Information about the context and challenges in the region are set out in the **West Midlands State of the Region**[1]; the latest version (at time of writing) is published June 2026. Our priorities are set out in our Corporate Plan[2]. The latest version of the **WMCA Corporate Plan** (at time of writing) is for 2026-29, published June 2026.

[1] https://wmca.org.uk/sotr
[2] https://wmca.org.uk/corporate-plan

What are Areas of Research Interest (ARIs)?

Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) are statements / topics / questions published by organisations that are looking to collaborate with others to inform their policies and fill evidence-gaps. They are intended to help align research evidence from academia with policy development and decision-making; engage academics and research to better understand the evidence gaps faced by policymakers; and enable policymakers to access stronger policy evidence bases.

ARI documents have been created by UK Government departments since 2017; and today, they are being published by a range of policy bodies, including UK Government agencies and arms-length bodies; parliamentary committees; devolved governments; and local government.

Thematic relevance

These ARIs published by WMCA seek support for more evidence-informed policy making toward the four big changes that need to happen in order to realise our vision[3]:

• Empowering the **people** of the West Midlands to get on in life;
• Enabling the **businesses** of the West Midlands to become more productive and provide good jobs;
• Making the **places** of the West Midlands more prosperous and resilient;
• Telling the West Midlands' **story** and strengthening its partnerships.

Whilst most of the research topics and questions in the following document are readily captured by the four big changes, there are some that sit more neatly under cross-cutting topics. These topics underpin the big changes. They are:

- Governance;
- Community engagement;
- Public service innovation.

While these ARIs are developed based on the needs of the West Midlands, they should not be seen as solely specific to the WMCA area. Through our networks and relationships with other combined authority areas, we know that many of them are also grappling with similar challenges. Therefore, by responding to our ARIs, there is the ability to have a considerable level of impact and influence across all the UK city-regions and combined authority areas.

[3] https://growth.wmca.org.uk/

Categorisation

For this year's ARIs we have used colours and icons to distinguish between research questions, intelligence needs, and evaluation questions more clearly. This is set out as follows:

- 🔍 **Research questions** (deep, exploratory)
- 📊 **Intelligence/data needs** (descriptive, measurement)
- 🩹 **Evaluation questions** (impact, "what works")

Priority ARIs for 2026-27

The following are the WMCA's priority ARIs for 2026-27. We are seeking immediate help to understand these key issues.

1. 🔍 What interventions have the greatest impact on firm-level productivity in the everyday economy?
2. 🔍 What interventions are most effective at helping SMEs in the frontier economy to scale faster and for longer?
3. 🔍 To what extent are vertical and horizontal income inequality obstacles to economic growth?
4. 🔍 How can we identify and effectively reach households at higher risk of homelessness?
5. 🔍 How do we reach our economic growth goals whilst increasing the climate and ecological resilience of our urban environment?
6. 🔍 Understanding Bus/Public Transport Loyalty: Who We Retain, Who We Lose and Why.
7. 🔍 Is the rate of level three qualifications among our residents the most important skills-related factor in determining regional economic growth?
8. 🔍 Which place-based prevention approaches demonstrate the greatest impact on improving health, reducing inequalities, and supporting economic participation?
9. 🔍 How do we co-create and build a new regional social contract for the West Midlands that defines the shared responsibilities, contributions and expectations of public services, communities, business, and place-based philanthropy in improving life outcomes?

The West Midlands Theory of Growth

The West Midlands Theory of Growth has informed the region's priorities[4], which sets out our twelve hypotheses about the underlying sub-systems underpinning the region's economy. These are:

1. Polycentric Structure: From Agglomeration Challenge to "Goldilocks" Opportunity	2. Industrial Mix: A Core Strength of the West Midlands Economy	3. Strong Private Research & Development Held Back by Low Public and Higher Education Investment
4. Business Leadership, Management, and Technology Adoption Gap	5. Low Private and Public Investment Constraining Productivity	6. Inclusive Growth Starts with Early Years, Care, and Tackling Inequality
7. Higher-Level Skills Shortage as the Key Growth Constraint	8. Housing System Limiting Productivity and Regional Vitality	9. Connectivity Challenge: Linking Cities, Boroughs, and the City
10. Energy Constraints and the Case for Smart Energy Systems	11. Limited Devolution and the Need for Stronger Regional Governance	12. Perception Barrier: Unlocking Investment and Talent Attraction

[4] https://wmca.org.uk/tog

The following are our key questions aligned to our Theory of Growth:

1. Can the West Midlands turn its polycentric structure into a “Goldilocks” advantage by strengthening functional integration and leveraging Birmingham’s role?
2. Is the West Midlands’ industrial composition a competitive strength rather than a structural weakness?
3. How can the region unlock the full benefits of strong private R&D given low public and higher education investment?
4. To what extent are leadership, management capability, and technology adoption limiting business performance and productivity?
5. How are low levels of private and public investment in infrastructure constraining productivity growth?
6. What actions are needed to improve life chances, reduce caring-related labour market exits, and address entrenched inequalities?
7. How can the West Midlands address its growing shortage of higher-level skills to support economic growth?
8. In what ways is the housing system constraining productivity, and how can supply, density, and place-making be improved?
9. How can connectivity between cities, boroughs, and Birmingham be strengthened to reduce car dependency and support growth?
10. How can the region overcome energy constraints and leverage smart systems to support its manufacturing base?
11. How can deeper devolution and stronger institutional coordination unlock regional economic potential?
12. How can the West Midlands overcome negative perceptions to attract talent, investment, and opportunity?

People

The people of the West Midlands are its greatest economic asset. Their ideas, aspirations and hard work make our economy tick, and will be the making of a more prosperous future.

Adult skills

Investing in adult skills connected to labour market need and employer demand enhances employability and enables individuals to secure better jobs and to adapt to evolving industries. It addresses skill shortages, attracts businesses, and fosters innovation, leading to increased job opportunities as well as helping businesses boost productivity. This investment supports economic growth and resilience by creating a skilled workforce ready to meet current and future market demands.

1. 🔍 What are all the long-term impacts for individuals and the wider economy from different qualification levels (level 2, level 3, level 4, and level 5)?
2. 🔍 What are the benefits to individuals of re-employment, and what are the resulting reductions on state spending?
3. 🔍 As part of our growth commitment to Net Zero how should we define “green skills” and “green jobs” for the WMCA area and how will demand in these areas change over the next 5, 10, and 15 years?
4. 🔍 What works in enabling, creating, and delivering greater FE and HE collaboration-innovation? Are there effective models in the WMCA area? What are the regional/national exemplars?
5. 🔍 What are the most effective education strategies for raising awareness, and promoting and embedding lifelong learning skills among different demographic groups and ages?
6. 🔍 What are the relative advantages/disadvantages for individuals of A-level and university degree qualifications vs BTECs and Apprenticeships?
7. 🔍 What are the benefits and risks of supporting specific groups (for example, incarcerated WMCA area residents, care experienced young people, Gypsy, Roma & Traveller, NEET) with skills interventions?
8. 🔍 What are the barriers to delivery of high-quality courses, and how might these be overcome? (DfE national ARIs question)

Inclusivity

An inclusive workforce fosters diversity, innovation, and collaboration, leading to better problem-solving and decision-making. It enhances employee satisfaction, reduces turnover, and attracts top talent, driving overall business success and economic growth.

1. 🩹 What can we learn from successful regional labour market interventions or from grassroots and relational interventions which reduce youth unemployment and/or economic inactivity?
2. 🔍 What factors explain why people of a White ethnicity have amongst the highest rates of high-skilled employment despite lower qualification levels? How does that compare across gender and disability?
3. 🔍 What are the key factors driving gender differences in educational outcomes, at each level of education (and into the labour market)?
4. 🔍 What factors influence differences in course type and subject choices across different groups?
5. 🩹 What impacts have there been so far from the 'Disability Confident' scheme for employers? What changes to Disability Confident could be suggested for greater recruitment and progression?
6. 📊 What issues do night workers face in the region? And are they exacerbated by one or more protected characteristics?
7. 🔍 What is the estimated financial loss to the economy due to longer periods of economic inactivity in different groups?
8. 🔍 What are the specific issues and barriers in the WMCA area related to worklessness?
9. 🔍 How can work be made more accessible for those with caring responsibilities?
10. 🔍 What works for improving outcomes for different ethnic groups in the labour market, across causes, costs, and solutions?

Social infrastructure, capital, and mobility

Social capital fosters trust, collaboration, and networking, which enhance job opportunities and innovation. It strengthens community ties, supports knowledge sharing, and attracts investments, driving economic growth and resilience. Our inclusive communities portfolio[5] sets out how we design-in inclusion at the heart of how we plan, decide, and deliver activity across the region.

[5] https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/inclusive-communities/

1. 🔍 Where, outside the formal education system, do children and young people build the social capital and experiences that shape social mobility in adulthood, and how do those who cannot access these assets through their family develop them when schools face severe budget constraints?
2. 🔍 What is the value (economic, social, health, personal) of power skills/soft skills vs. qualifications?
3. 🔍 How does an individual's perception of social mobility impact opportunities pursued?
4. 🩹 What has been the economic and social impact of the National Youth Strategy for the WMCA area?
5. 🔍 What are the best examples of regional policy to strengthen relationships/recognition/offer to social economy organisations?
6. 🩹 How has the recent reduction (last five years) in funding impacted the community sector in the WMCA area? How has it impacted outputs and outcomes?
7. 🔍 What is the impact of positionality of policy and decision-makers at all levels of government on social capital funding decisions? What is the impact of this on communities of different sociodemographic backgrounds?
8. 📊 What evidence exists about people's use of social infrastructure in the WMCA area? How can we strengthen this?
9. 📊 How much do people value: social capital, social infrastructure, social mobility, social inclusion?

Health, wellbeing, and prevention

A health-in-all-policies approach ensures that health considerations are integrated into all sectors, promoting overall wellbeing. It addresses social determinants of health, reduces health disparities, and fosters sustainable development. This approach leads to healthier communities, improved public services, and economic benefits. In 2022 the WMCA adopted a health-in-all-policies approach. Health-in-all-policies is defined as "an approach to public policies across sectors that systematically takes into account the health implications of decisions, seeks synergies, and avoids harmful impacts in order to improve population health and health equity" (WHO, 2013).

1. 🔍 How can mayoral strategic authorities use their devolved powers and investment to improve population health and reduce health inequalities?
2. 🔍 How can digital health interventions be used to increase physical activity among inactive disabled people?
3. 🔍 How does gender, cultural and social factors influence physical activity levels in diverse populations?

4. 🔍 How can artificial intelligence (AI) be used to predict and prevent physical inactivity in different demographics?
5. 📊 What are regional emerging and historical trends in alcohol consumption and consumer habits in the WMCA area, with special emphasis on demographics?
6. 📊 What are the key sources of indoor pollutants within residential settings? What are the levels of personal exposure from these key sources and the potential subsequent health impacts?
7. 🔍 What is the impact of climate change on health and wellbeing infrastructure, health/wellbeing outcomes of residents, and health inequalities?
8. 🔍 To what extent does socioeconomic background impact health and equality outcomes, compared to other characteristics?
9. 🔍 How can digital health interventions be used to increase physical activity among inactive disabled people?

Businesses

The West Midlands has clusters of businesses that are at the vanguard of our drive for growth, alongside six research universities and nine teaching universities delivering real world impact. For over two centuries, the global economy has been shaped by technologies born in the West Midlands, and still today we have businesses that are global leaders in the products and services that will define 21st century economic success. Many of these global strengths sit at the interface between traditional industrial sectors like manufacturing and logistics and emerging new technologies and tradable services.

Inclusive growth

The WMCA defines inclusive growth as “a more deliberate and socially purposeful model of economic growth – measured not only by how fast or aggressive it is; but also, by how well it is created and shared across the whole population and place, and by the social and environmental outcomes it realises for our people.” The WMCA’s Inclusive Growth Framework[6] is designed to focus all types of investment on the same set of social and environmental missions set out across the eight fundamentals of inclusive growth. These fundamentals ensure that people and places are not lost in thematic silos when it comes to decision-making. We are interested in:

[6] https://wmca.org.uk/inclusivegrowth

1. 🔍 What is the role of new economic approaches (doughnut economics; wellbeing economy; circular economy; degrowth; etc.) in supporting mission-led government?
2. 🔍 Must growth always produce externalities? Will there always be some who are negatively impacted no matter the approach/intervention?
3. 🔍 What is the true economic impact of disability in the WMCA area? This may include lower employment rates, cost of living implications and wellbeing.
4. 🔍 What are the success factors and challenges that can be identified among case studies of entrepreneurs in the WMCA area?
5. 🔍 To what extent has social mobility (including accents) and/or social determinants of health impacted on regional economic growth? Are there specific people and places in the WMCA area that are more impacted than others, what are the reasons for this?
6. 🔍 What are best practices in social value approaches for public sector procurement at the regional level?

Innovation

Innovation drives economic growth, creates jobs, and enhances competitiveness and productivity. The WMCA's innovation ecosystem includes eleven science parks, four Innovate UK Catapult Centres, nine universities that produce 72,000 graduates from 157 countries, all supported by access to the best 5G coverage in the UK. Globally, the West Midlands has been recognised as a Regional Innovation Valley (RIV) by the European Commission, committing to strengthen our research and innovation ecosystem and engage in further collaboration across different regions with complementary strengths.

1. 🔍 What are the effective models of broad-based innovation promotion at the regional level? Innovation that covers the everyday economy, public sector, and citizen outcomes.
2. 🔍 How can citizen and employee involvement enhance the effectiveness of innovation activities in the region? What areas of innovation would benefit the most from citizen/employee participation and what can the WMCA do to promote this?
3. 🔍 What explains the higher-than-average business birth and death rates in the WMCA area?
4. 📊 What is the total value of innovation spend in the WMCA area, broken down by technology transfer, translational, and exploratory activity? How does this compare across public and private sectors, and in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI)?
5. 🔍 The relationship between youth, diversity and innovation has been documented (e.g. OECD, UNIDO). What are the enabling factors that make this relationship stronger/weaker?

6. 🔍 How can a regional authority facilitate/encourage a move away from narrow and deep R&D investment to a more balanced level?
7. 📊 What manufacturing supply chains in the WMCA area are at most risk from technological change?
8. 🔍 How have other places successfully transitioned from legacy industries into new markets in an equitable way?

Social impact economy

The social impact economy is a collective term for all 'not for personal profit' organisations that exist to improve disadvantaged communities, support disadvantaged people, and address social or environmental issues but do so using a trading (business) model to generate the majority or all the funds they need. Recognising the contribution these organisations make to creating an inclusive economy, the WMCA set itself the goal of doubling the size of this economic sector within 10 years[7].

1. 📊 What are the levels of awareness and understanding of the social impact economy among the public, private sector, public sector, and those working for the organisations themselves?
2. 📊 How many people are employed in and/or volunteering for social impact economy organisations?
3. 🩹 What business support services are social impact economy organisations accessing? How effective is the support?
4. 📊 What are the key risks facing organisations operating in the social impact economy?
5. 🔍 What are the good examples of social impact economy support and why are they more effective than other types of support?
6. 🔍 What are barriers to uptake of social finance – from both the supply and demand side?
7. 🔍 What examples exist of certification, standards, or verification systems for regional impact economies, and how are these applied in practice?
8. 🔍 Are there examples effective trade or exchange between regional impact economies, and what enables effective inter-regional collaboration?

[7] http://wmca.org.uk/socialeconomy

Business growth

Business growth is crucial as it boosts local economies, fosters innovation, and supports sustainable business practices. Business Growth West Midlands[8] provides free tailored support to businesses in Birmingham and surrounding areas. It offers advice, training, and events to help businesses grow and succeed.

1. 🔍 What business support interventions have the greatest impact on firm-level productivity?
2. 🩹 How effective are the community business support hubs funded by the WMCA at supporting businesses and entrepreneurs in localities (measured as a percentage of all businesses and of residents), especially in relation to diversity and inclusion?
3. 🔍 Why do employers in the UK/WMCA area invest less in upskilling their employees than other countries/regions?
4. 🔍 What are the most effective ways to promote employer investment in staff training and skills by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)?
5. 🔍 What explains the apparent low capacity of business leadership in the WMCA area?
6. 🔍 What is the role of technology in boosting outcomes and productivity in the everyday economy? How is it impacting the labour to capital ratio of inputs?
7. 📊 What would be the most effective methodology for estimating the size of the grey economy in the WMCA area and the number of people directly involved in it? How could we calculate the opportunity cost of the grey economy in the WMCA area?
8. 🔍 How have regions worldwide successfully developed priority economic clusters to enhance value addition, boost productivity, and promote inclusive job creation?
9. 🔍 How can harnessing priority clusters enhance supply chain transitions and drive higher productivity through value chain improvements?

Environment and net zero

In 2019, the WMCA declared a climate emergency for the West Midlands and set out our vision to make the WMCA area net zero by 2041[9]. Considering the environment and climate change in growth policy ensures sustainable growth, preserves resources, mitigates risks, and promotes long-term economic stability and resilience.

[8] https://www.businessgrowthwestmidlands.org.uk/
[9] https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/environment-energy/

1. 🔍 What specific climate risks do different sectors in the West Midlands face, and how can climate adaptation and circular economy approaches help mitigate these challenges and the impacts of development on climate resilience?
2. 🔍 To what extent can small pockets of urban green help connect habitats and species? How well-connected do different pockets of habitat have to be to significantly improve the movements of species?
3. 🔍 How can biodiversity net gain (BNG) be optimised in urban areas to deliver nature recovery, equitable access to green space, and climate adaptation outcomes, and how does its performance compare to alternative urban environmental metrics (e.g. environmental net gain/urban greening factor)?
4. 📊 How dependent is the WMCA area economy on imports of resource and material to sustain it, what impacts would difficulties in importing goods have on economic resilience?
5. 📊 How is it possible to value opportunity costs of energy infrastructure upgrades?
6. 📊 Will the WMCA area see a loss of specific species and habitat due to drought or floods?
7. 🔍 To what extent can Nature-based Solutions help the region achieve climate related targets?
8. 🔍 What behavioural mechanisms and/or interventions are most successful for driving specific pro-environmental behaviour change with specific demographic groups in the WMCA area?
9. 🔍 How has responsibility for carbon reduction been apportioned in multilevel governance structures?

Creative industries

The WMCA area boasts a thriving creative cluster with strengths in screen content, games, e-sports, and design. Investing in creative industries can rejuvenate local areas, boost economic growth, and support the place-based agenda. The WMCA aims to leverage creative expertise across various sub-sectors to stimulate innovation and growth throughout the economy[10].

1. 📊 What is the level of understanding among creative industry organisations as to their revenue generating capacity? How can the WMCA effectively increase awareness and thus sustainability of these organisations?
2. 📊 What examples are there of organisations in the creative industries moving to self-sufficient revenue creation? And how prevalent is this?

[10] https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/culture-and-digital/creative-industries/

3. 📊 What is the value-add to all sub-sectors of the WMCA area economy that an investment in the development of creative skills in the labour force can make?
4. 📊 What is the value of AI created content compared to human-created content and who are the main beneficiaries of that value?

Places

The West Midlands is a diverse region encompassing vibrant city centres, historic towns with their rich industrial and cultural heritage, large residential neighbourhoods and commercial estates, and scenic parks, waterways, and countryside. Our places tell a story about our past and our identity. They are the canvas upon which we will shape the future. Their collective diversity is one of our region's USPs.

Affordable housing and brownfield regeneration

Affordable housing ensures economic stability, better health, and social equity. The WMCA is addressing this by investing in social housing projects, converting buildings, and partnering with local authorities and developers to deliver 20,000 new social homes over the next decade.

1. 🔍 What is the impact of private rented sector (PRS) housing (in particular, a lack of affordable PRS housing) on local and regional productivity?
2. 🔍 What are the housing (all tenures) contributions to public health and the prevention of ill health prevention?
3. 🔍 How do we regenerate former industrial sites other than turning them into housing?
4. 🔍 What are the different approaches to brownfield regeneration around the world? What has been the advantages/disadvantages of each? And how has their impact been evaluated?
5. 🔍 To what extent are sunset industries restricting brownfield regeneration in desirable areas?
6. 🔍 What is the total positive value creation following public investment in brownfield regeneration? E.g. land value, social value, attractiveness, inclusive growth

Homelessness

Homelessness is not confined to rough sleeping. It also includes overcrowding, squatting, the use of temporary accommodation, night shelters, hostels, sofa surfing, and unstable solutions like

intermittent hospital and prison stays. Homelessness is fundamentally an equalities issue, with some communities and people more exposed because of personal and structural inequalities. Our ambition to design out homelessness focusses on creating cross sector service systems that prevent homelessness at the earliest opportunity, rather than seek to tackle homelessness when it has already happened[11].

1. 🔍 How can we measure homelessness risk?
2. 🔍 What interventions work to prevent households becoming homeless at the earliest opportunity?
3. 🔍 What are the long-term effects on individuals who have experienced homelessness (in any of its forms) during childhood?

Towns and high streets

The way we live, and work has changed since the pandemic. This is not easy for many businesses located in town centres. We need to continue to help our town centres to have a sustainable future. Our Town Centre Taskforce[12] will help us to do this with its private sector and community expertise.

1. 📊 What is the contribution to Gross Value Added (GVA) of the WMCA area's high streets? What is the relationship of this with the growth of sustainable industrial clusters in the region?
2. 🔍 What land use composition/commercial mix contributes best to a 'successful' high street?
3. 📊 What is the economic impact of business improvement districts (BIDs) in the West Midlands and wider UK?
4. 🔍 To what extent are BIDs replacing services traditionally fulfilled by the public sector?
5. 🔍 To what extent do negative perceptions of one's local area impact the success of our high streets?
6. 🔍 What's the importance of creating emotional connection in placemaking for local economic development and renewal?

[11] https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/wmca-homelessness-taskforce/
[12] https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/housing-property-regeneration/town-and-city-centres/

Improve accessibility

Accessibility in a regional transport network means how easily people can reach key destinations – like jobs, schools, and services – using available transport options. It is important because it ensures everyone, including those without cars or with mobility challenges, can participate fully in society, supports economic growth, and reduces social inequality.

1. 🔍 Who is most sensitive to reliability, price, safety and last-mile access, and who has no realistic choice?
2. 🔍 What are examples where planning challenges have been overcome with regard to delivering challenging planning policies, such as Transport Oriented Development and reducing car dependency?
3. 📊 What is the public perception of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs), liveable neighbourhoods, well-connected/15-minute neighbourhoods in the WMCA area compared to other areas of the UK?
4. 🔍 How do public bodies overcome the social, economic, and political barriers (within the planning system) to achieving higher density/well connected/accessible neighbourhoods with good access to amenities?

Reduce traffic

Reducing traffic in a regional road network improves air quality, cuts travel time, lowers accident risks, and reduces carbon emissions. It also enhances the reliability of public transport and makes walking, wheeling, cycling, and scooting more attractive choices for short journeys supporting healthier and more sustainable communities.

1. 🔍 What combination of factors is driving falling bus patronage in the West Midlands and wider UK, and which user groups are most at risk of stopping using buses altogether?
2. 🔍 Across city-regions worldwide, where is customer satisfaction with bus use highest (or most improved), and what has caused this?
3. 🔍 What factors explain lower car dependency in other countries, and how could the West Midlands move in the same direction?
4. 🔍 How do public bodies make the case for sustainable travel and successfully communicate to win over the hearts and minds of the public?
5. 🩹 How do public bodies convince funders that active travel/sustainable travel is value for money beyond direct benefits?

6. 📊 Which TfWM market segment(s) are most likely to use the bus more—either as regular, occasional, or new users; and for which types of trips? Also, which segments, along with their trip types, are least likely to shift to using the bus?
7. 🔍 How do public bodies convince citizens to reduce car dependency, including how do public bodies effectively translate and communicate the disbenefits to car users effectively?

Transport electrification

Transport electrification means replacing fossil-fuel vehicles with electric ones powered by low-carbon energy. It is critical to reducing our impact on the environment by cutting emissions and improving urban air quality. It also strengthens energy and network resilience by integrating transport with smarter grids and flexible demand. Economically, it drives industrial innovation, supply chains (e.g., batteries), and green jobs, boosting competitiveness in emerging clean-technology markets. A network and fleet not dependent on fossil fuels is essential for creating a resilient and affordable transport system.

1. 🔍 What factors are hindering the adoption of zero emission vehicles (ZEVs) by the public and business fleets?
2. 🔍 How can combined authorities ensure a just transition to electrified transport systems?
3. 🔍 What practical steps can public bodies take to help both private and public bodies make the switch to electric vehicles and what strategies should we use to plan and communicate this transition?
4. 🔍 What needs to be done in the freight sector to speed uptake of cleaner vehicle fleets?
5. 🔍 How can public-private partnerships in logistics decarbonisation be strengthened?
6. 🔍 How can Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure (EVCI) strategies be co-developed to serve both passenger and commercial (freight, van) fleets equitably?

Story

A region’s story and narrative matter to its economic prospects, whether to a business considering expanding its operations, to an investor looking to invest, to students and visitors weighing up where to go and – most importantly – to residents’ confidence in what their place has to offer to them. This is not just about how a region brands itself, but how it projects itself to the world in a way that is accessible, appealing and deliverable.

Cross-cutting themes

Governance

Deeper devolution in the UK allows regions like the WMCA area to have greater control over local matters, fostering tailored policies and enhancing democratic representation. Effective governance ensures accountability, transparency, and efficient public services, promoting stability and trust in government.

1. 🔍 What assurance, accountability, and governance frameworks are required to ensure mayoral strategic authorities are fit for the future, and how do these align with or differ from alternative regional governance models internationally?
2. 🔍 What are the biggest opportunities to apply computational social science, artificial intelligence (AI), and/or digital technologies to regional public policymaking?
3. 🔍 Multi-level governance in the UK – as we move towards a uniform devolution landscape and more defined roles for different levels of Government, what lessons can we learn from comparative regions/from history and what are the examples of best practice/core principles of success?
4. 🔍 What are best practice examples of how complex organisations can break down internal siloes and deliver systems change for places?
5. 🔍 Which principles best support established Mayoral Strategic Authorities/Combined Authorities in coordinating cross-sector and cross-boundary collaboration on pan-regional issues?
6. 🔍 How effective are established business case models and governance processes in supporting efficient and dynamic decision making? How might we use AI and other approaches to enhance processes?
7. 🔍 What examples are there of taking an integrated approach to policymaking in regional government? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

Community engagement

Community engagement is the process of involving residents, businesses, and local organisations in decision-making, policy design, and service delivery. For CAs, it is crucial because it ensures policies reflect local needs, builds legitimacy and trust, and improves outcomes by drawing on local knowledge. It also strengthens accountability and supports more effective, inclusive growth by aligning strategies with the priorities of diverse communities. In the WMCA, the power and participation inclusive growth fundamental sets out our mission for all our residents and

communities to fully participate in influencing and exercising agency in the things that matter to them.

1. 🔍 What makes communities care about the work of their regional government?
2. 🔍 What are the barriers to engagement in decision making at the regional level? Are some groups more impacted than others? How have these been resolved in other places? Why do people who feel their voice is not heard fail to take up opportunities to engage in decision making?
3. 🔍 We often see people broadly support a problem solution but lack support when it impacts them directly. What explains this, and how can it be overcome?
4. 🧪 Is collaborative / deliberative community engagement - i.e. higher up the ladder of participation - more impactful (on decision making and trust) than participation lower down then ladder – e.g. surveys? If so, how, and why?
5. 🔍 What community engagement approaches work best to increase understanding of a regional government?
6. 🔍 What are the best-in-class examples of regional/local governments improving trust in them by their constituents?
7. 🔍 What examples exist where public services have systematically embedded public voice into decision-making? What organisational change is required to make this happen?
8. 🔍 How do community researchers value community research? What motivates community researchers?
9. 🔍 To what extent does community research help communities to understand themselves better? What is the impact of this?

Public service innovation

Public service innovation is the development and adoption of new ideas, services, processes or delivery models within government and public services to improve outcomes, efficiency, and responsiveness. At the regional level, it is vital because it enables place-specific solutions to economic, social, and service challenges, supports productivity in the wider economy, and improves citizens' quality of life. It also helps regional institutions adapt to local needs, experiment with policy approaches, and drive inclusive, sustainable growth.

1. 🔍 How do we redesign the governance and investment relationship between the state, public services, philanthropy, communities, and business to enable long-term, place-based social change? Sub-questions:
   - What models of shared accountability, risk-sharing and co-financing exist internationally?

- What types of partnerships unlock prevention at scale?
- What governance arrangements help avoid ‘supply-side group-think’?

2. 🔍 What international jurisdictions demonstrate effective ‘whole-system’ public service innovation and what structural, cultural, fiscal, and regulatory features make them successful? Sub-questions:
   - Where have public services avoided or mitigated complex social issues that the UK is grappling with?
   - What can be learned from places with cohesive early-years integration, strong prevention systems, or integrated safety nets?
   - Which city-regions have effectively aligned policing, health, employment, and housing reforms (e.g. Lisbon’s prevention model)?
3. 🔍 How can AI, digital platforms, and data-sharing infrastructure improve multi-agency coordination across a combined authority region? Sub-questions:
   - What are the most viable cross-system use-cases for AI in prevention and early intervention?
   - How can we simplify data governance models to enable multi-partner access without compromising safety?
   - Which models internationally demonstrate responsible, ethical deployment of AI in public administration?
4. 🔍 What organisational behaviours, capabilities and incentives enable services to genuinely collaborate on complex cross-cutting issues (temporary accommodation/asylum, youth unemployment, health & social care, early years)? Sub-questions:
   - What has worked in WMCA’s own design sprints and where are the structural blockers?
   - How do we embed collaboration beyond individual leaders or temporary projects?
5. 🔍 How can public service partners with private finance and philanthropy co-fund and sustain long-term system change? Sub-questions:
   - What forms of blended and catalytic capital are most suited to prevention?
   - What safeguards maintain public accountability in mixed-finance models?
   - How do we avoid dependency and ensure equitable distribution of resources?
6. 🔍 What can the West Midlands learn from international regions that have prevented or successfully mitigated issues such as youth unemployment, homelessness, complex asylum challenges, or intergenerational worklessness? Sub-questions:
   - What early-years, employment or health policies have produced resilience upstream?
   - What cultural or governance characteristics create stability or community cohesion?
   - What lessons translate well to a devolved UK region, and which do not?
7. 🔍 What do residents understand about which services the CA, local authorities and partners provide and what do they expect from a modern regional public service system? Sub-questions:

- How does awareness differ by geography, demographic group, or socio-economic status?
- What would residents prioritise if given influence over future reforms?
- How can we build trust, transparency, and shared agency with communities?

Working with us

General guidance

We view ARIs as conversation starters. If you conduct research on any of the topics outlined above, please get in touch to speak to relevant WMCA policy leads and explore common areas of interest.

We also specifically welcome your engagement with the ARIs in the following ways:

- Send a link to evidence, papers, reports, etc. that you think help to answer one of our questions.
- Submit written responses that speak to one of our ARIs or to the WMCA's areas of work more broadly in a one-page executive summary per ARI question outlining the critical points (bullets points are welcome). If you have academic research, please submit responses in the style of a research article abstract.
- Tell us if you are, or plan to be, carrying out research relating to one of our questions.
- We may also be able to offer letters of support or endorsement of funding or grant applications depending on resources available at the time. The ARIs should be seen as an offer to collaborate with researchers on projects, and we will respond to speculative approaches for research funding where possible and appropriate.

We encourage interested parties to contact us so that we can provide further information on individual questions and help to develop project ideas. Please note that this ARI document is not intended as an invitation to tender for commercial enterprises.

Answering these ARIs will help the WMCA to deliver on the four big changes that need to happen in order to realise our vision for the benefit of the people and places across the WMCA area.

The WMCA is committed to place-based policies and planning. We are, therefore, open in principle to providing access to data that we hold with the aim of understanding our region better.

All contact regarding the WMCA's ARI's should be made via email to research@wmca.org.uk.

Any updates or corrections to the Areas of Research Interest will be made available at wmca.org.uk/ari.

Current engagement

The WMCA has a thriving internal research and intelligence community of practice (RICOP) and a set of Research Champions across all its directorates, ensuring that internal and commissioned research are of high quality, aligned to strategy and policy, and is of the highest ethical standards.

The WMCA works closely with research and intelligence leads from its seven constituent local authorities through groups such as the West Midlands Insights on Society and Economy (WISE) group, West Midlands Skills Officers Group, the Strategic Transport Officers Group; as well as with the region's Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) and research leads from its arms-length economic delivery vehicle, the West Midlands Growth Company (WMGC).

We have strong working relationships to researchers in universities and research institutions in our region and beyond, including the City-Region Economic Development Institute (City-REDI), the Institute for Local Government Studies (INLOGOV), the Centre for the New Midlands (CNM), and The Productivity Institute (TPI).

Across the Midlands region, the *WMCA-East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) Compact*[13] commits the region to work together to strengthen the research and intelligence capabilities of both regions. Following the publication of this revised set of ARIs, we intend to identify common areas of interest from our respective ARIs and explore options to co-commission small and/or pilot projects together.

Nationally, we are represented on the Mayoral Data Council (MDC); convene the Mayoral Strategic Authority Senior Researcher Forum; and have strong working relationships with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) via ONS Local.

Since publishing the first set of ARIs in 2025, we have received twenty-two direct responses and organised an academic sandpit around the broad topic of governance.[14] Responses have focussed primarily on research project collaboration and pilots aligned to the ARIs, some of which are now progressing into larger funding bids.

[13] https://www.eastmidlands-cca.gov.uk/content/uploads/2025/03/EMCCA-WMCA-Compact-FINAL.pdf
[14] https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/research-and-insights/blog/#/article/from-aris-to-action-lessons-from-our-regional-governance-sandpit/

ARI in action: from research question to policy insight

Following publication of the WMCA's first areas of research interest in 2025, a researcher from the University of Birmingham identified a shared interest in understanding how management capabilities influence SME productivity in the West Midlands. Working collaboratively with WMCA policy and research colleagues, the researcher engaged early to refine the question, shape the project scope and develop a joint research proposal.

The partnership explored several potential funding opportunities before securing £50,000 of external funding for a research project on SME productivity and management capability. The project combined academic expertise with WMCA policy insight and access to regional data sources.

The research generated new evidence on business performance and productivity challenges facing SMEs in the region; with findings presented at the Midlands Economic Summit and emerging recommendations shared with WMCA policymakers. The collaboration has also created opportunities for further research activity and larger-scale funding bids, providing a demonstration of how ARIs can act as a catalyst for research partnerships, external funding, new evidence generation, and policy development.

Anticipated engagement

The WMCA expects the disciplines of economics, operational research, social sciences, sustainable development, politics, business and management, and real estate will be most directly relevant to this set of ARIs. We are keen to hear from researchers from a broad range of methodological approaches and who use a range of methods to answer their research questions. We are most keen to hear from researchers, interest groups, social impact enterprises, and other organisations in the WMCA area; however, recognising the national and international relevance of these questions, we would also like to hear from researchers and organisations outside of the area. As we look to focus keenly on our priority ARIs over the next year, we plan to proactively engage in several ways, including:

- Holding sandpit events where precise research questions are yet to be defined;
- Experimenting with ‘evidence clinics’ aimed at producing brief, collaboratively developed evidence summaries, and gap analyses;
- Exploring bi-directional embedded fellowships with our region’s universities.

wmca.org.uk/ari

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