

# WMCA

## Areas of Research Interest

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### 2025-26

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**West Midlands**  
Combined Authority

**Research  
and Insights**



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# Executive summary

## Purpose

The purpose of this document is to communicate the strategic research need of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) with external stakeholders. These research needs support evidence-based policy making toward the six aims of the Combined Authority:

1. Promote inclusive economic growth in every corner of the region
2. Ensure everyone has the opportunity to benefit
3. Connect our communities by delivering transport and unlocking housing and regeneration schemes
4. Reduce carbon emissions to net zero and enhance the environment
5. Secure new powers and resources from central government
6. Develop our organisation and our role as a good regional partner

Nevertheless, the Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) contained within this document should not be seen as specific to the West Midlands. We anticipate that many combined authorities across the UK will be grappling with similar questions. There is, therefore, the possibility to have a considerable amount of impact across the UK from responding to these questions.

## Context

The WMCA was established in 2016 to drive economic growth, improve transport, and enhance housing and skills in the region. The increased powers and accountabilities for the WMCA through deeper devolution gives us the opportunity to transform the lives of residents and respond directly to challenges such as youth unemployment, business scalability, and the green transition. Key areas of focus are economic growth, affordable housing, efficient public transport, and (good) job creation. The WMCA's 2025/26 budget of £1.3 billion aims to tackle these issues by investing across the region in skills and training initiatives, the transport network, housing and regeneration schemes, business support, and in decarbonising homes.

## What are Areas of Research Interest (ARIs)?

Areas of Research Interests are statements of topics / research questions published by organisations that are looking to collaborate with others to carry out research to inform their policies and evidence-gaps. They have been published by a range of policy bodies, including UK Government Departments, Parliamentary Committees, Regional Authorities, and Local Councils, to raise awareness of their research priorities and engage with the research community. ARIs are not an invitation to tender.



## Relevance

These ARIs published by WMCA seek support for evidence-based policy making toward the [four mayoral priorities](#):

- Growth for everyone
- Homes for everyone
- Jobs for everyone
- Journeys for everyone

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

- Governance
- Health, Wellbeing & Prevention
- Social inclusion

# WMCA Areas of Research Interest 2025

## Growth for everyone

Helping businesses grow, supporting innovation and creativity, making sure everyone benefits, and the environment is protected.

### 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](#) is designed to focus all types of investment on the same set of social and environmental missions, known as the ‘fundamentals’. These fundamentals ensure that people and places are not lost in thematic silos when it comes to decision-making.

In developing our system response with regional partners, we are interested in:

1. What is the role of alternative economic policy in supporting mission led government policy?
2. What are the examples of where adopting an inclusive economic growth approach has led to longer-term sustainable economic growth and how has this worked?
3. What is the cost of vertical and horizontal income inequality and to what extent is it an obstacle to economic growth? (including productivity costs)

4. Are there any examples of instances where all the negative externalities of growth have been entirely eliminated, or will there always be some who are negatively impacted no matter the approach/intervention?
5. We understand some people would like to become more involved in local decision making. What are the barriers to becoming more involved in local decision making? What are the consequences of a lack of local engagement in decision making?
6. How can we effectively measure and monitor the extent to which residents trust public institutions and if there is mistrust, the reasons for this?
7. What is the real economic impact of disability in the WMCA area?
8. What are the success factors and challenges that can be identified among case studies of entrepreneurs in the WMCA area with disabilities?
9. Who within the WMCA area is facing compounding challenges relating to poverty and inequality? How can these issues be addressed?
10. 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 and what specific WMCA programmes/levers could be effective mitigations?

## **Innovation**

Innovation drives economic growth, creates jobs, and enhances competitiveness and productivity. The WMCA's innovation ecosystem includes 11 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 selected 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. 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?
2. What explains the higher-than-average business birth and death rates in the WMCA area?
3. What is the breakdown of innovation spend in the WMCA area between technology transfer, translational, and exploratory? And how does this compare across public and private businesses in the region and FDI?
4. The relationship between youth, diversity and innovation has been documented, what are the enabling factors that make this relationship stronger / weaker?
5. How can a regional authority facilitate / encourage a move away from narrow and deep R&D investment to a balanced level?
6. What manufacturing supply chains in the WMCA area are at most risk from technological change?
7. How have other places successfully transitioned from legacy industries into new markets in an equitable way?



## Social 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.

1. What are the levels of awareness and understanding of the social economy among the general public, private sector, public sector, and those working for the organisations themselves?
2. How many people are employed and volunteering for social economy organisations?
3. What business support services are social economy organisations accessing? How effective is the support?
4. What are the key risks facing organisations operating in the social economy?
5. What are the good examples of social economy support and why are they more effective than other types of support?

## Business growth

Business growth is crucial as it boosts local economies, fosters innovation, and supports sustainable business practices. [Business Growth West Midlands](#), part of the WMCA, 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 SMEs?
5. What explains the apparent low capacity of business leadership in the WMCA area?
6. What proportion of productivity growth in the everyday economy translates into increased allocation of leisure time?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. How have regions worldwide successfully developed priority economic clusters to enhance value addition, boost productivity, and promote inclusive job creation?
10. How can harnessing priority clusters enhance supply chain transitions and drive higher productivity through value chain improvements?

## Towns

COVID-19 has changed the way we live and work. 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](#) 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 contribution to GVA of the West Midlands' Night-Time Economy?
4. What is the contribution to GVA of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in the WMCA area?
5. To what extent are BIDs replacing services traditionally fulfilled by the public sector?

## Creative industries

The WMCA [wants to spark creativity](#). 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.

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?
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?

## Environment and net zero

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

1. How do we reach our economic growth goals whilst also meeting net zero and environmental goals?
2. How dependent is the WMCA area economy on imports of resource and material to sustain it, what impacts would difficulties in importing goods have?
3. How is it possible to value opportunity costs of energy infrastructure upgrades?
4. Will the WMCA area see a loss of specific species and habitat due to drought or floods?
5. To what extent can Nature-based Solutions help the region achieve climate related targets?



6. What behavioural mechanisms and/or interventions are most successful for driving specific pro-environmental behaviour change with specific demographic groups in the WMCA area?
7. How has responsibility for carbon reduction been apportioned in multilevel governance structures?

## West Midlands Futures

The West Midlands Futures [programme](#) is exploring a long-term vision for the region and our place in the national and global economy. Working with local, regional and national partners, we are developing a deeper understanding of the grand challenges and opportunities facing the WMCA area now and in the years ahead. This understanding will help partners to generate and test ideas for how we can collectively bring about inclusive regional economic transformation, for the benefit of people, businesses, and communities.

1. What goods and services do the biggest industries in the WMCA area import from other regions of the UK and abroad?
2. Do polycentric functional economic areas that are growing tend to become more monocentric over time?
3. Does the presence of significant non-service industries in a region change the nature of agglomeration benefits and how they are accrued?
4. How is the WMCA area represented in media and what is it telling audiences about who we are? How does that impact how we think about ourselves? And other outcomes, such as entrepreneurship, etc.
5. What examples exist of 'new' political geographies using reasoned and imagined coherence in identity articulation?

## Homes for everyone

Building social and affordable homes and creating vibrant communities so that everyone will have a place to call home.

### 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 housing (and in particular a lack of affordable PRS housing) on productivity?
2. What are the housing (all tenures) contributions to public health (ill health prevention)?
3. How does the type of brownfield site impact the desirability of land for redevelopment and is this changing over time?
4. How do we regenerate former industrial sites other than turning them into housing?
5. 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?



6. How is old industry restricting brownfield regeneration in desirable areas?
7. 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 as a result 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.

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

## Jobs for everyone

Investing in jobs, skills, training and apprenticeships, reducing youth unemployment, and ensuring everyone has a job that pays well.

### 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 on the individual of achieving different qualification levels (level 2, level 3, level 4+)?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. What are the most effective education strategies for raising awareness, promoting and embedding lifelong learning skills toward sustainable lifestyles among different demographic groups and ages?



5. What are the relative advantages / disadvantages for individuals of A-level and university degree qualifications vs BTECs and Apprenticeships?
6. What are the potential impacts of supporting incarcerated WMCA area residents with skills interventions? E.g. address skill gaps, individual wellbeing, reduction in likelihood of reoffending. And what are the resulting savings for the public purse?
7. Where are the barriers to delivery of high-quality courses, and how might these be overcome? (DfE national 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 which aim to reduce youth unemployment / inactivity?
2. What factors explain why people of a White ethnicity have amongst the highest rates of high skilled employment despite lower qualification levels?
3. What are the key factors driving gender differences in educational outcomes, at each level of education?
4. What factors influence differences in course type and subject choices across ethnic groups?
5. What impacts have there been so far from the 'Disability Confident' scheme for employers? What changes to Disability Confident could be suggested in order for greater recruitment and progression?
6. Who are our night-workers? An analysis of our night-workers and the issues they face.

## **Social 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.

1. What is the additional social capital and social mobility benefit in adulthood from participation in extra-curricular activities and hobbies in childhood?
2. What is the value (economic, social, health, personal) of soft skills vs qualifications?
3. How does the individual 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?

## **Journeys for everyone**

The West Midlands Combined Authority area is a diverse region; we have a mix of different urban and rural communities. We need a transport system that allows us to deliver the best quality of life for all of our residents and businesses. In order to develop a transport system that is fair for everyone, we need a plan for the future which balances the need to provide access with the harmful impacts that

transport can have on people and places. By having a plan that addresses our region's issues we can ensure transport better supports our daily lives now, as well as leaving a better legacy for the future. Our vision for transport can be found [here](#).

Our research needs are grouped under the three primary transport outcomes within our Local Transport Plan:

### **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's 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. 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?
2. How does the general public view Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) and well connected / 15-minute neighbourhoods in the West Midlands Combined Authority area compared to other areas of the UK?
3. How do public bodies overcome the social, economic and political barriers (within the planning system) to achieving dense/well connected/accessible neighbourhoods with good access to amenities?
4. How do public bodies convince citizens to reduce car dependency/how do public bodies translate and communicate the disbenefits to car users effectively?

### **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. How do public bodies make the case for sustainable travel and successfully communicate to win over the hearts and minds of the public?
2. How do public bodies convince funders that active travel/sustainable travel is value for money beyond direct benefits?
3. Which Transport for West Midlands market segments are most likely to use the bus more—either as regular, occasional, or new users—and for what types of trips? Also, which segments, along with their trip types, are least likely to shift to using the bus?

### **Decarbonisation**

Decarbonisation in a regional transport network means reducing or eliminating carbon emissions from transport, mainly by shifting to cleaner vehicles, fuels, and travel modes. It is important because it helps combat climate change, improves air quality, supports public health, and aligns with



environmental goals. A decarbonised network is essential for creating a sustainable, future-ready transport system.

1. What factors are hindering the adoption of Zero Emission Vehicles (ZEVs) by the public?
2. 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?
3. What needs to be done in the freight sector to speed uptake of cleaner vehicle fleets? (Building on existing commissions)
4. How can public-private partnerships in logistics decarbonisation be strengthened?
5. How can Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure (EVCI) strategies be co-developed to serve both passenger and commercial (freight, van) fleets equitably?

## Governance

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 are the biggest opportunities to apply computational social science, artificial intelligence and/or digital technologies to regional public policymaking?
2. 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?
3. What are best practice examples of how complex organisations can break down internal siloes and deliver systems change for places?
4. Which principles best support Enhanced Mayoral Strategic Authorities in coordinating cross-sector and cross-boundary collaboration on pan-regional issues?
5. How effective are established business case models in supporting efficient and dynamic decision making? How might we use AI and other approaches to enhance processes?
6. What examples are there of taking an integrated approach to policymaking in regional government? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

## Health, wellbeing and prevention

A health in all policies approach ensures that health considerations are integrated into all sectors, promoting overall well-being. 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 digital health interventions be used to increase physical activity among older adults?
2. How do cultural and social factors influence physical activity levels in diverse populations?
3. How can AI be used to predict and prevent physical inactivity in different demographics?
4. What are regional emerging and historical trends in alcohol consumption and consumer habits in the WMCA area, with special emphasis on demographics?

## Equality, diversity, and inclusion

Inclusive communities foster a sense of belonging, equity, and opportunity for all, ensuring that everyone regardless of background, identity, or circumstance can participate fully in society.

Inclusive communities drive social cohesion, economic growth, and improved well-being. The WMCA is committed to creating a more inclusive area by addressing inequalities, amplifying underrepresented voices, and designing policies that empower all residents to thrive.

1. 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?
2. What social capital policies and programmes have been pursued by other regional governments around the world, and what has their impact been?
3. What is the impact of social capital on outcomes such as, health and wellbeing, economy, careers?
4. 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?
5. What evidence exists about people’s use of social infrastructure in the WMCA area? Has this changed over time, and what are the reasons?
6. What evidence exists about any differences in the personal values held among different demographic groups?
7. How much do people value: social capital, social infrastructure, social mobility, social inclusion?

## Working with us

### Current engagement

The WMCA has existing links with many organisations and networks, including ONS local, the Economic Intelligence Unit, Centre for the New Midlands, City-REDI, Productivity Institute, Connected Places Catapult, Energy Systems Catapult, the Data, Research, Evaluation, Analysis and Monitoring Team (DREAM) network, Intelligence and Policy Partnership (RIPP), the Combined



Authority Senior Researcher Forum, Senior Subnational Data group, the Cross-Government and Public Sector Data Science Community, West Midlands Skills Officers Group, as well as with all of the area's universities.

## Anticipated engagement

The WMCA expects the disciplines of Economics, Sustainable Development, Politics, Management, and Real Estate will be most directly relevant to our current 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 enterprises and other organisations in the West Midlands region; however, recognising the national and international relevance of these questions, we would also like to hear from researchers and organisations outside of the West Midlands.

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

- If you have new evidence that completely or partly answers one of our questions, or relates to the WMCA's areas of work more broadly, we invite you to share that.
- If you are, or plan to be, carrying out research relating to one of our questions, we would like to hear about it.
- If you are submitting a funding or grant application that aligns with one of our questions, we hope that referencing the WMCA's ARIs will help strengthen your case for the possible public impact of the research.
- We may also be able to offer 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 make contact with 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 Mayoral Priorities and key objectives for the benefit of the people of the WMCA Area. The WMCA has responsibility for policy regarding brownfield regeneration and affordable housing delivery, housing energy efficiency retrofit, homelessness, social inclusion, transport, adult skills, digital inclusion, local growth planning, business support, and investment zones.

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](mailto:research@wmca.org.uk).

The latest version of the Areas of Research Interest will be available at <https://wmca.org.uk/research/>