Available Online: 3 November 2026 DOI: 10.54254/2977-5701/2026.38608

Evaluation of Andy Burnham's economic and business policies as Manchester's mayor and discussion on replication of such policies across UK

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Abstract. In this essay, Andy Burnham's economic and business policies as Mayor of Greater Manchester are assessed and whether they should be replicated throughout the United Kingdom is considered. It explores the Bee Network's bus franchise model, the Manchester Baccalaureate technical education pathway and coordination of transport, skills and spatial development, informed by the agglomeration theory, regional economic data and policy evidence. The analysis indicates that these policies can boost the existing economic clusters by easing travel constraints, enhancing labour market matching and aligning education with the demand of local employers. But economic growth and higher bus ridership are not a proof of productivity gains or equitable distribution of benefits due to mayoral policy. The strategy is also one where public financial risk is involved, where employers need to be engaged and where there are difficulties in coordinating provision across local authorities. The transferability of this is therefore conditioned by the population density, commuting patterns, capacity of institutions, industrial strengths and continued funding. The essay suggests that the principles of coordinated, place-based governance, but with local adaptations of interventions, should be embraced by other regions. It suggests that pilots be conducted in phases, that accessibility be transparently accounted for and evaluated, that employment, productivity and distributional impacts be accounted for and evaluated, and that safeguards be put in place against simply displacing activity to nearby areas. In conclusion, Greater Manchester offers a good example of regional co-ordination but wider roll out will need to be based on good evidence that locally designed policies offer extra economic and social benefits.

Keywords: Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, agglomeration economies, Bee Network, place-based policy

1. Introduction

Since Andy Burnham became mayor in 2017, Greater Manchester's economy has grown by approximately 18%, faster than any other UK city-region according to Centre for Cities [1]. Separately, ONS regional GDP data show that Greater Manchester's GDP increased from £88,644 million in 2017 to £101,288 million in 2023

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in the relevant chained-volume series[1]. These figures indicate that Greater Manchester experienced relatively strong economic growth during Burnham's mayoralty, although they do not by themselves establish that his policies caused the growth or that labour productivity increased at the same rate [1][1]. He very appropriately applied "sharing", "matching" and "learning" to integrate the urban state of Manchester [2].

As Table 1 indicates, instead of creating a Manchester economy from scratch, his policies in terms of the franchisee bee network (transport), the MBacc pathway (technical education) and targeted real estate agglomeration has reduced the connection costs and aligning the local skills with industry demand [3][2].

Table 1. Type of economics and business policies in Greater Manchester

Type	Details
Skill Training	Skill training bridges regional productivity gaps and supports a debt-free approach to improving opportunities. Employer-led apprenticeship pathways can directly link local education and training to high-growth regional sectors, helping people develop relevant skills and secure employment.
Housing	Housing policies aim to provide a bed every night by expanding the supply of social and affordable housing. This protects low-income households from extremely high rental costs, safeguards disposable income, and reduces public cost burdens[4].
Transport	Transport policies reduce commuting costs and expand labor mobility, making it easier for people to access employment opportunities. Franchising bus services and integrating trams under public control, alongside capped fares, can lower transport expenses for working families.

This essay will evaluate the effectiveness of these policies in boosting Greater Manchester's productivity and explore the potential of replicated the Burham's underlying model across the United Kingdom.

2. Bee Network

The Bee Network represents a structural shift from bus deregulation to franchising in Greater Manchester[1,4].

As per Table 2, the Bee Network helps to reduce monetary and non-monetary transport costs. In March 2025, the Bee Network was carrying more than 4.5 million passenger journeys per typical week, with journeys 4% higher year-on-year[5]. Individual can reach the city center with cheaper fares and more reasonable time[6].

[1] Office for National Statistics. (2025). Regional gross domestic product: All International Territorial Level regions, 1998 to 2023 [Data set]. Office for National Statistics.

[2] Greater Manchester Combined Authority. (2023). Towards an integrated technical education, skills and work city-region: Starting the conversation.

[3] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. (2024, December 16). English devolution white paper: Power and partnership—Foundations for growth. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper

[4] Department for Transport. (2026, January 29). Setting up a bus franchising scheme. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/setting-up-a-bus-franchising-scheme

[5] Greater Manchester Combined Authority. (2025, March 28). Delivering the Bee Network – Network performance.

[6] Greater Manchester Combined Authority. (2023, February 10). Greater Manchester Combined Authority public reports pack.

This is a perfect "matching". Bee Network enhances effective density rather than just physical density, enabling enterprises to select talents from more resources [3].

Table 2. Comparison across deregulation and franchising model

Dimension	Deregulation Era (Pre-Franchising)	Franchising Model (Bee Network)
Market Share	Competition in the market (Open, multi-operator competition).	Competition for the market (Bidding for operating contracts).
Control & Governance	Private operators determine routes, frequencies, and fares.	Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) sets routes, fares, and standards.
Primary Objective	Commercial profitability and demand.	Broader social welfare and public network integration.
Passenger Volume Trend	Dropped 49% (355M to 182M annual journeys by 2019).	Integrated system fully active across Greater Manchester as of Jan 2025.

However, these benefits involve public costs and financial risks. For example, Greater Manchester had previously estimated that maintaining additional supported bus services would require lots of money. Significant public expenditure was also required to develop contactless fare-capping and related ticketing systems[7]. Therefore, franchising does not eliminate transport costs but shifts greater responsibility towards the public sector. Its success should ultimately depend on whether increased ridership, accessibility and productivity generate benefits large enough to justify the additional fiscal cost [4].

3. Agglomeration economics

Burnham's economic strategy can be viewed as an attempt to strengthen existing agglomeration economies in Greater Manchester [2, 5]. With the help of bee network, it has enhanced effective density rather than just physical density, enabling enterprises to select talents from more resources. The larger the labor market, the easier it is for enterprises to find "the right person for this position". It is also easier for employees to find jobs that are exactly suitable for their abilities. Agglomeration is not simply about density; it is about the quality and composition of what is being concentrated [6]. He makes it easier for people to find jobs and enables enterprises to find the people they need. Therefore, Manchester is not merely a labour pool, but a local learning system that constantly exchanges information [7]. But Agglomeration theory itself is place-specific, Connectivity can unlock agglomeration, but it cannot manufacture agglomeration from nothing. Meanwhile, this may lead to a local labor market over supply and may also cause local house prices to be too high [8].

4. Skill training

As per Table 1, Greater Manchester is attempting to redesign the path for young people to enter the workforce from school, with a particular emphasis on technical education, to connect educational content, careerinformation, work experience and the demands of local enterprises more directly. A locally designed technical education and career pathway linking education to Greater Manchester's labour-market. The MBacc Award summarizes this system into five core components: technical learning, work experience, employer

[7] Greater Manchester Combined Authority. (2025, March 28). Delivering the Bee Network – Network performance.

encounters, and digital enrichment careers conversations. Burnham is trying to blur the traditional boundary between education and employment. This offers an equal standing to alternative routes into education. But this will require substantial commitment from local employers in terms of quality work placements. Additionally, it will be essential to have a constant push to change the deep-rooted inclinations of parents and institutions toward the traditional A-levels. It will not be easy to maintain quality delivery, funding, and opportunities for all the ten Greater Manchester boroughs [9].

5. Should these policies be replicated in the rest of the UK

Against this backdrop, the three types of policies implemented by Burnham in Greater Manchester can be understood as a localized solution to these structural problems in the UK (Figure 1). Therefore, if the Manchester cluster policy is applied as a national place-based strategy, the focus should not be on evenly moving London's industries across the country. Instead, it should be allowed for different regions to develop different clusters based on their own existing comparative advantages.

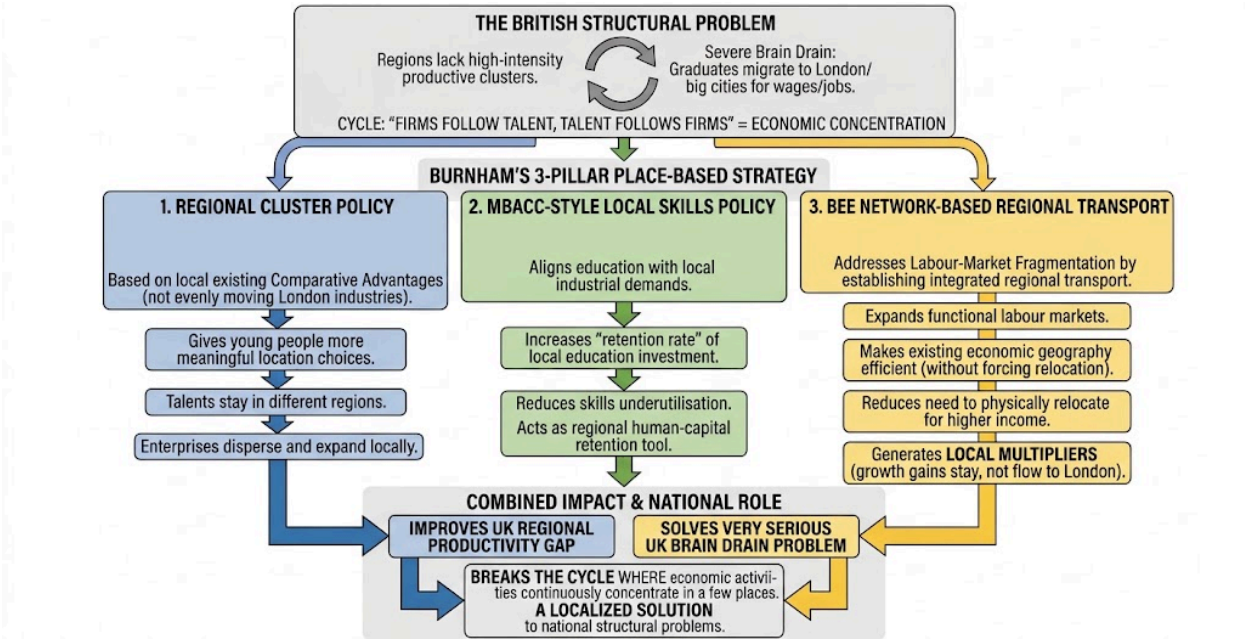


Figure 1. Andy Burnham's Greater Manchester policies

For the bee network model, the "*Public Transport Service Act 2025*" issued by the United Kingdom allows transportation departments in England to engage in public transportation franchises. In addition, the white paper on decentralization has also given many local departments greater autonomy in transportation, employment skills and urban planning.

Even with the support of these policies, moving policies suitable for Manchester to other places may not achieve good results. Greater Manchester has a large commuting range and a relatively high population density. There is also a set of mature cross-departmental joint management mechanism. With a large number of people taking the bus, the fixed costs of route planning, making ticketing systems, and managing cooperation contracts can be shared by a large number of passengers.

If it is changed to small-scale and sparsely populated areas in cities, the average subsidy cost for each passenger will be higher, and the changes that this policy can bring to the local employment market will be

relatively weak.

Also, the MBACC-style local skills policy addresses the mismatch between "national unified education" and "local industrial demands", which can increase the "retention rate" of education investment in the UK, it needs to consider that, in certain regions, they are more focus on tertiary service as mentioned in Table 3.

Table 3. Conditions for transferring the Manchester toolkit

Policy Instrument	Greater Manchester	Other large English city-regions	Smaller or low-density areas
Bus franchising	A dense network and a large passenger base make franchising more practical.	It may work where routes cover one clear travel-to-work area and the authority can manage contracts.	A small pilot or an enhanced partnership may be safer because full franchising could require a large subsidy.
Devolved skills	Courses can be linked to local health, digital, engineering and creative employers.	The principle can be copied, but courses should match the employers in each region.	Authorities may need to share courses if local employer demand is too small.
Strategic planning	Housing, transport and employment markets cross council boundaries.	It can work if the regional authority has enough power to coordinate the councils.	Planning may need to cover a wider area and should not direct all investment into one city center.
Fiscal control	Manchester can introduce the policy in stages, although it still carries financial risk.	Long-term funding and clear reporting of costs are needed.	Central government support and a spending limit would be needed before a full scheme is introduced.

Therefore, similar projects in other regions should start from a small pilot. Before the implementation, count the existing passenger flow, travel time, residents' employability, and single passenger subsidies. First, give priority to transforming the route with a large passenger flow, but it is still difficult for the poor to find jobs [10].

There should be evidence to prove that the project generates real new benefits, rather than just grabbing employment and passenger flow from the surrounding areas and expanding the scale [11]. At the same time, the transformation cost, operating subsidy and ticket income are accounted for separately [12]. Skill training should be evaluated regularly. Do not directly copy Manchester's industry direction to avoid mismatch between skills and positions [13]. Traffic construction should be matched with new houses and employment locations, otherwise traffic upgrading will only make resources further concentrated in core urban areas, and the surrounding towns will not benefit [14].

The central government is still very important. It is responsible for long-term funding, collecting unified data, maintaining national standards, and leaving the project scale and specific plans to local governments to decide [15]. In this way, the policy can fit the local labor market, and there is no need to force all places to have Manchester's population, institutions and financial conditions[8]. This set of policy authority can be used

[8] HM Government. (2024, December 16). English devolution white paper: Power and partnership — Foundations for growth. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper

throughout the country, but each project must have a local basis to prove that the benefits are greater than the costs, and the economic activities in the surrounding areas will not be simply transferred [15].

6. Conclusion

In general, Burnham's policy does have many highlights, but the existing results are not enough for the whole Britain to copy directly. Public transportation franchise, decentralization of skills training and regional planning have indeed solved the practical problems of transportation, talent training and land use. The improvement of Manchester's economy and the increase in the number of bus passengers are welcome, but it cannot be confirmed that these advances are brought about by this policy, and not all residents enjoy the benefits.

This set of policies itself also has shortcomings: the good employment charter is not binding, housing planning requires the cooperation of local councils, and the financial risks of the bee network project are now more borne by the government. Therefore, other parts of the UK should learn its core ideas, instead of copying the full set. The policy should cover the complete commuting range, and the local government should have enough manpower, funds and management authority to be implemented. Starting from a small-scale pilot, it is convenient to compare costs and benefits. Only when the project really shortens the travel time, facilitates the masses to find jobs, improves employment or production efficiency, and especially improves the situation of poor communities, can it be further expanded. Manchester is a good reference sample for regional coordination, but specific policies must be modified and adjusted according to local realities.

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