

Manchester Council: Reinventing the City

Manchester aims to be considered a top-flight world class city. Having arrested the population and industrial decline of the late twentieth century, the city has reinvented itself in recent decades and is now experiencing rapid population and economic growth. The ambition is to continue to grow but in an inclusive, sustainable way whilst ensuring that the city continues to attract, retain and nurture talent, creating jobs and building new homes at the scale required to accommodate an expanding and changing population.

In recent years the council has worked with a wide range of partners to revitalise and reinvigorate the city centre. Over the last 30 years the population of the city centre has increased from just a few thousand residents to fast approaching 100,000. Regenerated neighbourhoods such as Ancoats and New Islington now frequently make it on the world's 'cool' list, and with the demand for housing stronger than ever, council leaders work in partnership to ensure that there is a robust residential supply pipeline extending far into the future.

Ambitions for Victoria North

Victoria North is one of the UK's largest residential growth programme. Delivered through a joint venture partnership with Far East Consortium (FEC), this ambitious project seeks to regenerate 155 hectares of brownfield, under-utilised land to the north of the city centre. Over the next 15-20 years some 15,000 new low carbon homes, will be delivered across a range of housing types and tenures, including new homes for social rent. In addition the partners will work to bring forward new parks and public spaces, and social and community infrastructure including schools, health facilities and transport improvements.

Running concurrently to the Victoria North programme, the council is working closely with health sector partners to bring forward plans for a new state of the art hospital complex for North Manchester. Plans include a new in-patient mental health facility as well as the creation of a new 'healthy neighbourhood' next to the hospital, providing flexible supported forms of accommodation to enable people to live longer, healthier, independent lives.

These ambitious programmes could allow North Manchester to spearhead the city's continued transformation over the next 20 years, making a significant contribution to tackling the spatial inequalities within the city and to developing stronger and more resilient communities as part of the council's aims for an inclusive economy.

As council chief executive Joanne Roney puts it: "Victoria North is the most ambitious city-led place-based regeneration programme, practically a new town in a city. It's the kind of thing that you would only normally embark on if you had significant government funding for regeneration. Manchester has not been prepared to wait for government to back regeneration. We've gone out, developed it ourselves, and found a private sector backer to support us to do that."

Social ambitions

As council leader Bev Craig explains: “Growing the economy for social purpose has been Manchester’s mission over the last 20 years. We’ve been working on expanding the economy across key sectors, but we also want to lift up our population, provide access and opportunities.”

Neighbourhoods in North Manchester, including those covered by the Victoria North programme, are among some of the most deprived in the UK. Leaders recognise the importance of making sure the benefits of planned investment is shared with all parts of the community. This includes not only the provision of new homes but pathways into employment; improved health and well-being; digital inclusion; increased community resilience; and a zero carbon future.

At the heart of the Victoria North programme, and the wider coordinated focus on North Manchester, sits a ‘Social Benefits Framework’ developed and led by all of the key partners. The framework aims to ensure that local residents and the local economy experience sustainable health, social, employment and wider economic gains. (See: https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/200095/tenders_and_contracts/8524/north_manchester_social_benefits_framework)

The ambitious framework sets out the local priorities and the local needs. It’s a guide for contract partners and partner agencies so that all parties can be aligned and can tailor their social value activities to identified local need, ensuring maximum impact. It articulates the key priorities, opportunities, and outcomes which activities related to Victoria North and wider North Manchester major regeneration programmes could contribute. The outcomes were co-produced with a wide range of stakeholders and align with the broader strategic ambitions for the city.

Programme leaders are committed to ensuring that the planned investment through the Victoria North programme, a gross development value of circa four billion pounds, benefits all local communities and residents. It is seen as a platform and a catalyst, giving young people access to good jobs and good careers, as well as physically transforming the place. The ambition is to create an area that is sustainable in every way, whether that's in terms of life chances, the environment, or the economy.

Who’s Involved

The joint venture

In order to meet the residential growth ambitions for this key part of the city, in 2016 the council decided to seek an investment / development partner with the financial resource, ambition, understanding and expertise to jointly drive forward the redevelopment of the Victoria North programme area and deliver its full potential. An international marketing exercise was undertaken which ultimately identified Far East Consortium International Limited (FEC) as the preferred partner for this initiative and the council formally entered into a joint venture with FEC in April 2017.

Council leader Ms Craig stresses the importance of choosing the right private sector partner. “We picked FEC because we thought they were someone that we could do good business with. And I think that's really important, not just taking anybody, but somebody that you can work with.”

Working with the NHS

NHS interviewees for this case study highlighted Manchester's long history of partnership working and collaboration across the city. They described seeing themselves as working for Manchester and the people of Manchester regardless of which organisation employs them. As Manchester NHS's director of strategic projects, Michelle Humphreys, observes: "The maturity of Greater Manchester partnerships over the years sets the scene. The city has always seen that working together gets you further and delivers more for communities and for business."

Strategic governance arrangements are in place at both a regional and city-level, which bring together partners to jointly plan health and social care services for the city. NHS bodies, such as the Manchester NHS Foundation Trust, and Greater Manchester Mental Health Trust, are key partners in the city and are playing a leading role in the regeneration of North Manchester.

The council is supporting plans for a new hospital in the area, including a new in-patient mental health facility and integrated healthy neighbourhood. The delivery of state of the art fit for purpose health facilities are seen as a fundamental component of improving the health of local residents and creating attractive and sustainable neighbourhoods.

Involving the community at every stage

All the interviewees stressed the importance of engaging local residents at every stage in the process, to understand their concerns and priorities. A strong approach to community engagement is embedded throughout the programme, with local residents valued as key stakeholders.

Leaders from both the council and the developer recognise the need to build trust in the local community. Areas such as Collyhurst, part of the Victoria North programme, have had a stop-start experience of regeneration in recent years. A £252m private finance initiative had previously been on the cards for the estate, and local residents were consulted extensively on the plans, but this was ultimately cancelled by the coalition government in 2010. Residents in the area have been waiting for investment to come to them for a long time and there is a degree of skepticism based on previous experience.

Interviewees shared examples of reaching residents in different ways such as through local schools, and with local voluntary and community sector groups. In addition the University of Manchester were commissioned to produce research reports, enabling researchers not directly involved in the programme to have the types of conversations with local people that the council and the developer were not able to have in the early stages due to the lack of trust. As momentum started to build, FEC appointed a community liaison manager who now bases herself for part of the week in the heart of the community, providing a visible local face for the developer.

Leadership

Setting the Strategic Direction

Deeply understanding the city's key challenges and opportunities

The council's ambitions are based on a deep understanding of the city, gained from drawing together all the key players' knowledge, from engaging local residents, and from data analysis. Partners described how the council leadership understands the DNA of the city, what makes it unique, and how to amplify that to make it an attractive proposition.

Creating the time and space to think long term with key partners

All the leaders interviewed emphasise the importance of devoting sufficient time to long term planning together. In spite of a challenging local government financial landscape, and a significantly reduced workforce compared to a decade ago, the council has managed to carve out the capacity to enable long term strategic thinking.

Agreeing clear widely shared long term ambitions and priorities

The council leadership have been clear about their long term ambitions and priorities for many years. There is widespread support for these from the city's critical stakeholders, including local citizens, businesses, anchor institutions, and the voluntary sector. Partners in the private, public and voluntary sectors describe Manchester as having strong and stable civic leadership, and a clear strategic direction.

Chief executive Ms Roney stresses how vital it is that the city's ambitions are widely shared. "It starts with that vision of what you're trying to create, and the extent of buy in to that vision. It needs to be owned by the place, not the council alone. It's got to be rooted in the place so it transcends leadership change, because it should be the vision for the place. And the key strength of Manchester is that our plans will transcend individuals. It's not all owned by a couple of people at the top of the organisation or a couple of people in the local team."

Key shared strategies include the 'Our Manchester Strategy' and the 'Housing Strategy'. The council's partners highlight how the clarity of thought and the long-term strategic direction, enables them to buy into the vision, giving them confidence that Manchester is a great place to do business, a great place to invest, to work and to live.

In addition the council has had great success in using spatial development frameworks for areas of the city undergoing regeneration and transformation. Strategic regeneration frameworks and neighbourhood development frameworks set out the vision and character of an area, as well as the guiding principles for future development, providing long-term confidence to developer partners, employers and local residents.

Fostering robust partnerships

Developing strong personal relationships and trust

All the leaders emphasise the central importance of building strong personal relationships and mutual trust between partners. For example the NHS's North Manchester strategic lead for integrated care Sarah Griffiths observes: "It's about trust, having those trusting safe spaces for leaders to have open conversations."

Adam Green, who recently became the director of local voluntary organisation 'Yes', describes how council staff have made great efforts to support and encourage him in helping local residents find better opportunities. "I'm clear I've got the council's backing."

Ms Roney highlights the importance of fostering mutual understanding. "You have to work that partnership. You can't just create a joint venture company and expect it to go off and deliver. You have to stay in touch. The Leader and I have regular contacts with FEC to get their perspective on how things are going. You create the partnership, but then you nurture it, you make it part of your leadership."

Sharing the leadership, creating an enabling environment

Many leaders praise the way the council shares the leadership of different aspects of the programme, rather than rigidly dictating how particular ambitions should be achieved.

As Ms Roney explains: "I would describe our political leadership as very generous leadership in that it works with partners, very collegially and very collaboratively. And so in many ways the council doesn't feel like it has to do it all and has to be leading it all. It might convene, it might collaborate, it might create the circumstances, but we're very happy for private sector to lead or communities to lead or the voluntary sector to lead. It is truly, genuinely, comfortable in that space."

NHS partners highlighted how they operate in a relatively permissive environment that enables them to get on with things, reaching outside of their traditional roles and making connections in new ways. And voluntary and community sector partners described being able to identify and fill gaps, using their flexibility and their local relationships, confident that they have the council's backing and a shared sense of purpose.

Ensuring Delivery

Promoting the vision and the city

Many interviewees raised the importance of promoting the vision widely to all those who can help to deliver it. Partners also praised the way council leaders advocate for the city nationally and internationally, including to government departments and to the commercial sector.

Ms Roney highlights the importance of a compelling narrative. "It's the story. We don't just create a plan and the vision and the strategy, and then send a team off to deliver it and forget about it. We keep it live. And we keep telling our story. Recently we took all of the Directors from across the council to a session where FEC presented to remind the whole council, what the vision is, and

what progress has been made. We got all the Directors across all services in the council to work through what their contribution is to the delivery.”

Establishing cross partnership delivery plans

All the interviewees stressed the critical role of robust joint delivery plans. As Ms Roney advises: “The partnership needs to be clear: what is the structure to deliver? And how are those arrangements going to be created, sustained, developed, as well as effectively governed?”

Victoria North is one of the most ambitious regeneration programmes the city has ever undertaken. It’s not just about new housing, it’s about new parks and public spaces, creating places that are inter-generational where people can lay down roots, raise a family, and grow older. To ensure successful delivery requires the leaders to span boundaries, building strong connections outside their own professional expertise, teams, and organisations.

Manchester has significant experience of delivering major transformation projects. Leaders highlighted the importance of breaking the programme down into a series of deliverables, identifying the resource requirements early on, while ensuring that there is sufficient flexibility to adapt and evolve. They discussed prioritising in the short term, without losing focus on the overall goal, making tough choices, and dealing with difficult issues as they arise.

Good governance was highlighted as a key strength. The leaders explained that the partners have transitioned from winning hearts and minds initially into the leadership actions for getting things done, keeping it on the agenda and making sure they maintain traction. They described undertaking stakeholder mapping collaboratively, examining where relationships already exist, who’s best placed to forge new relationships with whom, and then having tactical conversations around the table.

Attracting, developing and keeping experienced, committed staff

The leaders all underline the importance of having people with the right skills, experience and motivation to deliver. As council leader Ms Craig puts it: “You get what you pay for. We’ve had to make difficult decisions during an ongoing period of financial challenge to protect the strategic capacity to deliver regeneration and development priorities for the city.”

Manchester public services have managed to attract and retain good people. Interviewees explained that it’s an exciting city to work in and that the clarity of purpose and long-term strategic planning, give people a real ‘stake’ in the future of the city. They also commented that people are motivated by tangible, visible progress and the role that they can play in shaping and improving the city and the lives of local people.

For example, the council’s assistant director for major regeneration, Ian Slater, is clear about why he continues to do his job. “Working in Manchester is progressive, it’s interesting, it’s practical, it’s empowering. You wake up in the morning, and it’s hard but I enjoy it. You get the support, leadership and direction from above.” He adds: “We’ve benefited from lots of area based regeneration programmes, which has meant that we’ve developed experienced multifaceted regeneration teams.”

And FEC’s Tom Fenton describes his staff’s enthusiasm for the programme. “We are all passionate about it. All 35 of us in the office are from Manchester. It’s a privilege to be able to work in your own city on something that potentially will deliver such profound change. There’s not many things that you can work on that will have that kind of legacy.”

Persisting for the long term

Manchester leaders clearly demonstrate determination. The city has arrested the decline of the latter part of the twentieth century and is now a thriving, growing city once again. Stability at the leadership level has helped play a part in Manchester's revival: the former council leader and previous chief executive were both in post for more than twenty years, through multiple government administrations. Manchester leaders have always been willing to work with the government of the day in order to deliver the best outcomes for the city.

Interviewees who remember the city of the 1980s and 1990s, whilst recognising that the city has been physically transformed in the years since, agree that the city is still uniquely Mancunian. Leaders recall the challenges of securing buy-in to certain aspects of the long-term vision, whether that was creating an attractive housing offer in the city centre; bringing well-paid high-skilled jobs to the city; retaining graduates; or regenerating areas that people thought could never be transformed. Local leaders have stayed true to their long-term vision for the city and have shown determination, flexibility, perseverance, and pragmatism.

There is a strong sense of a collective understanding and shared values in how to drive and deliver change in a uniquely Mancunian way. As a city that has been doing urban regeneration successfully for decades, the experience and learning from the past flows through the leadership, not just at the council but amongst local partners too. There is a recognition that successful regeneration takes time, and that whilst development frameworks and masterplans are useful, they will, and should, evolve and change as the city changes and as external factors change.

Patient partners are key as Ms Roney observes: "In FEC, we selected the right partner with shared values up front. If we wanted to find private investors to build shiny city centre flats, we'd have a queue round the block. We want investors with the vision and the patience to look at social regeneration as well as economic regeneration. That patient approach to capital outlay and return on investment is so important in a programme like Victoria North."

Finance

Securing government investment

Manchester's track record of success in delivering major projects has had a positive impact on the city's ability to gain more resources, including the leveraging of government investment. As Ms Roney states: "We are well regarded and trusted to deliver by the government. We are trusted to find solutions to tricky problems, to work through problems and barriers and find a way forward. There's a maturity of that leadership in this city that gives us a good reputation nationally."

Other leaders agree that Manchester is perceived as a council that does what it says it's going to do, and has an excellent track record of making the case for change, securing the required investment, and delivering. Again, the clear sense of direction, long-term planning, strong leadership and a track record of working in partnership to deliver stands the city in good stead. It consistently finds creative ways to make things happen, whatever the colour of government and whatever funding streams exist at the time.

Working positively with private sector partners

Both the council leadership and leaders from Victoria North's JV partner, FEC, recognise that each has certain different interests that need to be openly addressed. It's a 50:50 joint venture and both parties always have to feel like they're a 50% partner and not a 25% partner or even a 49% partner. Although generally both sides want the same outcomes, a private sector partner's profit-driven, commercial objectives may not always match the council's objectives. Council leaders have had to be pragmatic, ideally finding middle ground, while sometimes conceding and sometimes being firm and pushing back.

Challenges

Dealing with many pressures

Many interviewees raised the challenges posed by the constraints on resources, as well as the ever-changing external context. Compared to previous initiatives leaders have had to be more creative in terms of how the Victoria North programme operates. Despite the workforce of 2023 being significantly smaller than in the period before 2010, but the council has never entertained the idea of diminishing its ambitions for fear of not being able to deliver.

And Ms Roney observes, "Delivering a programme of this size is incredibly difficult. There's the constant challenge of the changing context. As well as just the challenges in delivering regeneration at this scale, there is a very turbulent environment that constantly adds more pressure into the ambition."

How the government could help

Local leaders suggest that long term government commitment to local regeneration projects would help enormously. As Ms Roney puts it: "There's a real requirement for government to have an economic plan for the UK. And to be partners in the delivery of that economic plan. That's the missing piece of the jigsaw for me, that there isn't an understanding, or a collective buy in between governments and cities, to deliver improvements in productivity and growth. And that's what we can bring."

Leaders highlight the relatively short-termism of the government's spending review periods and funding packages. Whilst Greater Manchester is a city region with an elected mayor, and some funds and powers devolved through several devolution deals in recent years, there is a clear sense that Manchester leaders would like to have a grown up strategic conversation with the government around a much longer-term funding programme. They want the government to be clearer about what outputs it is looking for and when, and to know when it could make that strategic investment, so they can make plans to lever in other sources of investment and to give delivery certainty over a longer period.

Addressing residents' concerns

Programme leaders have found that it is not always easy to reassure local residents about exactly what is happening with so many different aspects to the programme. As referenced earlier, those working on the Victoria North programme recognise that they are starting from a position where local residents are still unsure of what is happening and when.

It takes time to finalise the details of some elements of such a long-term programme. Many factors may influence the precise phasing of new developments including the availability of vacant land, financial challenges, key infrastructure requirements and potential compulsory purchase orders. In addition, there are certain parts of the programme which start out as an aspiration but develop surety only as the respective business cases progress. For example, the aspiration for a new tram stop to serve the local area and considerations around the optimal locations for social and community infrastructure, including parks, schools and health facilities.

The council leadership has recognised the need to be pragmatic when working in partnership with external organisations, particularly with private sector developers. With the Victoria North programme, the council's joint venture partner, FEC, is taking the development risk, creating homes for open market sale as well as other affordable tenures. The leaders acknowledge that they cannot control every aspect of what happens.

Progress so far

At the time of publication, the first 80 homes for sale have now completed as part of the Victoria North programme. A further 908 homes are under construction, including 130 new homes for social rent, and a further 4,800 homes have secured planning permission.

Huge effort has gone into building the robust and dynamic partnerships required to deliver this complex programme, as well as consulting the community at every stage in the process.

Given their long experience of delivering other major programmes together, the Council and its partners have every confidence that they will achieve their ambitions.

Learning for other cities

Over many years, Manchester City Council and its partners have built success upon success. Many different elements have contributed to their achievements, but overall the Manchester leaders highlight the importance of having clear widely-shared ambitions; robust, dynamic and committed partnerships; and effective ways of delivering together.

Contact for further information

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Interviewees

Manchester Council:

- Bev Craig, Council Leader
- Joanne Roney, Chief Executive
- Ian Slater, Assistant Director Major Regeneration
- Matt Doran, Victoria North Strategy and Co-ordination Lead

Manchester NHS:

- Sarah Griffiths, North Manchester Strategy Lead, Integrated Care
- Michelle Humphreys, Director of Strategic Projects

Far East Consortium:

- Tom Fenton, Project Director
- Rebecca Kirkland, Community Liaison Manager

Voluntary Sector:

- Adam Green, Chief Executive, YES Manchester
- Martin Roberts, Business Development Lead, Moston and Collyhurst Boxing Club