

Embedding a Transformation Mandate in Strategic Authorities



Summary

England's strategic authorities were created to address challenges too complex for individual councils, yet their current remit is geared towards service improvement rather than the deeper, systemic change needed to tackle food insecurity, widening health inequalities, and climate-related risks. Evidence from the FixOurFood programme, focused on food system transformation, shows that when a dedicated cross-boundary partnership function is formally supported, strategic authorities can drive more coherent and sustained regional transformation. Learnings from this are highly relevant for wider systemic transformations beyond that of food.

The Devolution Bill strengthens this opportunity. It enables the government to expand the Devolution Framework through secondary legislation, allows specific authorities to pilot new powers, and gives established mayoral authorities a 'right to request' further powers and partnerships. These mechanisms create flexible routes to build transformation capability over time. With devolution deals now under negotiation, there is a time-limited opportunity to embed a transformation partnership function from the outset so strategic authorities are equipped not only to improve services but to steward long-term systemic change.

Recommendations:

- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should pilot a transformation partnership function as a new devolved power within one or more strategic authorities.
- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero should jointly develop guidance that supports regional transformation partnerships.
- Strategic authorities should build the core infrastructure needed for transformation, including shared frameworks, governance arrangements, and evaluation approaches that support long term systemic change.

Description of the problem

One in five people in England experiences food insecurity (Food Standards Agency, 2024), health inequalities continue to widen (Marmot et al., 2020; Darzi, 2024), and climate-related risks are intensifying fastest in areas least equipped to respond (NHS England, 2024; Climate Change Committee, 2025). These interconnected challenges cannot be addressed by a single organisation or policy. They require coordinated action across sectors, geographies, and timescales.

Strategic authorities were created to operate at this scale, yet their formal mandate remains focused on improving service delivery, transport infrastructure, and regional economic growth. They lack a recognised function that can convene cross-sector actors around shared transformation goals, align disparate initiatives, and sustain long-term systems change. This governance gap is both political and structural, and reflects prevailing mindsets about how change happens. Without a transformation mandate and the associated capacity and capability, strategic authorities risk becoming more efficient vehicles for existing patterns rather than facilitators of fundamental change.

The current devolution moment offers a critical opportunity to address this gap. The Devolution Bill enables the government to expand the Devolution Framework over time, allows specific strategic authorities to pilot new devolved powers, and gives established mayoral authorities a 'right to request' further powers and partnerships. A transformation partnership function could be introduced as one of these pilot powers, with a longer-term pathway for inclusion in the evolving Devolution Framework and eventual availability to all strategic authorities. This would embed the capacity required for regional transformation from the outset.

Research Findings

[FixOurFood](#)'s five year action research programme across the Yorkshire and Humber region (population 5.5 million) shows that regional transformation depends on what we describe as a transformation partnership function. This is a dedicated cross boundary capability that brings together diverse organisations, aligns activity around shared long term goals, and supports collaboration that can be sustained over time. The importance of this function, and the governance qualities that underpin it, are set out in Buckton et al. (2024), which examines how transformation can be enabled in complex regional systems.

In York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, Public Health supported work of this kind by convening the [Food for the Future](#) partnership that connected national policy, local farming networks, community food organisations, health services, and schools (Everson et al., 2025). This created the conditions for joint procurement pilots, shared data on food insecurity, and cross sector collaboration that linked rural and urban areas. These activities demonstrate how a transformation partnership function operates in practice. It creates the relationships, shared understanding, and collective direction that no single organisation can generate on its own (Everson et al., 2025)..

The research shows that partnerships need to be oriented towards transformation rather than improvement. They need a shared vision and agreed ways of working at scale. Without this clarity, they tend to default to incremental change. A transformation partnership function provides the structures that help people work together, including shared frameworks that give different actors a common reference point. It also requires governance and evaluation approaches that support adaptive decision making and learning over time rather than compliance with short term outputs.

These findings are reinforced by work in other sectors. This includes health through the [Suffolk & North East Essex Integrated Care System](#) and higher education through the [Engaged Futures](#) initiative supported by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Together, these examples show that a transformation partnership function is a transferable governance capability that can support long term change across different policy areas.

Policy recommendations:

- 1. Pilot a transformation partnership function as a new devolved power.** The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should work with one or more strategic authorities to pilot a transformation partnership function as a new devolved power. This would give selected authorities the mandate and capacity to bring together organisations across sectors and boundaries, align activity around shared long term goals, and act as a regional counterpart for national departments. The pilot would generate evidence on how this function operates in practice and would create a clear route for its inclusion in the evolving Devolution Framework. Progress can be assessed through evidence of aligned initiatives, reduced duplication, new cross boundary partnerships, and active use of shared transformation frameworks.
- 2. Develop cross government guidance that supports regional transformation partnerships.** The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero should jointly develop practical guidance that supports transformation partnerships working at regional scale. This guidance should clarify governance arrangements, shared accountability, and the alignment of funding streams. It would give strategic authorities and their partners a sanctioned governance approach that supports long term transformation and would help national departments achieve greater coherence across programmes. Impact can be assessed through the uptake and quality of governance arrangements, reductions in conflicting accountability requirements, and practitioner assessments of the guidance.
- 3. Build the core infrastructure needed for transformation within strategic authorities.** Strategic authorities should work with regional partners to build the infrastructure that enables transformation. This includes shared frameworks that align diverse actors, governance arrangements that support adaptive and distributed decision making, and evaluation approaches that focus on learning and systemic shifts. This would give local organisations and communities a shared direction, reduce duplication, and support collective impact. It would also provide national policymakers with regional frameworks that can connect policy investment. Progress can be assessed through evidence that frameworks and structures are used in decision making, the breadth of aligned organisations, and whether evaluation findings drive adaptation.



Priority Actions

- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should identify one or more strategic authorities to pilot a transformation partnership function within the next twelve months, drawing on learning from Food for the Future North Yorkshire.
- The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero should jointly commission cross government guidance for regional transformation partnerships within eighteen months and test this guidance through pilots in two or three strategic authorities.
- Strategic authorities should audit existing partnerships for transformation potential and develop integrated plans for shared frameworks, governance, and evaluation within twelve months.

FixOurFood

This brief draws on action research conducted through the FixOurFood programme which focused on transforming the Yorkshire food system. It was funded through the UKRI Transforming UK Food Systems programme (2021-2026).

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References

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