DEMOS

PREVENTION, PRODUCTIVITY AND PDEL

THE GREATER MANCHESTER CASE FOR A DEVOLVED, PREVENTATIVE STATE

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ABOUT THIS GUEST ESSAY

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party policy think tank. We work to upgrade democracy, to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen. Public services are where the wear and tear in that relationship is happening every day and our work on **Public Service Reform** focuses on how we can achieve more relational, preventative and effective public services to help build back trust that democracies can deliver with and for people.

Moving from crisis to prevention is essential to fixing our broken public services and improving people's lives. Greater Manchester has been pioneering a new model of public service delivery and support through Live Well. Now, with it's former mayor as Prime Minister, the UK government is embarking on a series of reforms at the centre aimed at driving prevention. Central to this is the introduction of Preventative Departmental Expenditure Limits (PDEL) an idea developed at Demos.

In this guest essay, **Thomas Johnson**, Assistant Director of Reform, Strategy and Policy at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority sets out the case for preventative spending to help solve the UK's productivity problem, and how devolution and PDEL can work in combination to deliver this step change in how we think about our public services.

THE PUZZLE BENEATH THE PRODUCTIVITY PUZZLE

Britain has spent years trying to solve its productivity puzzle but it has a blind spot. The conversation follows the usual pattern: investment, innovation, competition, infrastructure, management, skills, planning and industrial strategy. A country that fails to invest, build, train, innovate or compete should not be surprised if it grows slowly.

There is more to this puzzle. Britain has become increasingly sophisticated at designing economic policy while paying far less attention to whether the state is organised to make that policy work and, more importantly, make it work for people and places.

Productivity still depends on what workers and firms produce from the resources available to them. But productive capacity is also built over time: in the skills people acquire, the health that allows them to use those skills, the infrastructure that brings opportunity within reach, and the places in which investment lands. None works in isolation. An economy can possess valuable assets and still fail to make full use of them.

Economists readily recognise interdependence in firms and places. Agglomeration economics rests on the fact that workers, suppliers, ideas and businesses become more productive when useful relationships are brought within reach. No serious account of a firm treats it as sealed off from labour markets, transport, supply chains or knowledge.

The question is not whether institutions are the same as firms but whether enough attention has been paid to the productive interactions between institutions. What happens when health, employment, housing, skills, transport, education, local government, policing and economic development act in concert across a place? And what is lost when they do not?

This reaches into two of Britain's hardest problems at once. The country needs stronger growth from an economy that is failing to use all the capabilities it already possesses, while the state is struggling with demand that absorbs resources which might otherwise be invested in the future. Economic policy and public-service pressure are usually treated as separate questions. They meet in the same people, the same places and, increasingly, the same public finances.



Greater Manchester Town Hall

THE PUBLIC PURSE IS ALREADY PART OF ECONOMIC POLICY

Greater Manchester now has an economy worth more than £100 billion a year. Alongside it sits roughly £42 billion of annual public spending across welfare and public services. That is an extraordinary amount of public resource flowing through the same place as one of the country's largest city-regional economies. Yet the two are still largely governed as different worlds: one through the institutions of economic policy, the other through separate systems for health, welfare, education, local government and public services. The economic question is whether that spending helps create the conditions in which a £100 billion economy can use its people, infrastructure and investment to their full potential.

Health, childcare, social care, housing and transport affect whether people can enter employment and sustain a working life. The relevant economic resource is not simply the number of people of working age. It is the effective labour supply: people able to take work, remain in it and use their skills. Employment policy and financial incentives matter; so do the systems that make participation possible.

More people in work can raise employment and output without changing output per hour. That distinction matters. But there is another economic loss which productivity statistics alone can obscure: capabilities already developed but no longer being used. A trained worker who leaves employment because of ill health does not cease to possess skills. The economy simply loses access to them.

The Office for Budget Responsibility now treats this as a macroeconomic issue. Its modelling uses a 28 per cent 'health participation factor': at a given age, work-limiting ill health is associated with a 28 per cent lower likelihood of labour-force participation. In its long-run scenarios, a 25 per cent improvement or deterioration in work-limiting ill health changes participation by 1.5 percentage points by 2073–74, around one million people in either direction.[1] These are scenarios, not promises about what a health policy could achieve. But one

1 OBR, Fiscal Risks and Sustainability Report, September 2024, paragraph 3.48 and Chart 3.19. https://obr.uk/docs/dlm_uploads/Fiscal-risks-and-sustainability-report-September-2024-1.pdf

million people gives a sense of the territory. The argument is no longer about whether health belongs somewhere on the edge of economic policy. It is about how much productive capacity can be lost when the systems surrounding work fail to sustain it.

The same issue appears before people leave work. DWP and DHSC analysis of 2018 data found that more than 100,000 people a year left employment following a spell of long-term sickness absence, and that the likelihood of returning fell as an absence lengthened.[2] Prevention here is partly about retention: keeping health problems from becoming prolonged detachment from the labour market.

There is a similar problem with the resources an economy already has. People can have skills and still be unable to reach or sustain suitable work. Businesses can have demand and still struggle to recruit. A new transport link can widen a labour market, but it cannot by itself overcome poor health or unavailable childcare. Skills investment is worth less if people cannot complete training or reach the jobs in which those skills can be used.

Productive capacity depends partly on whether labour, skills, infrastructure and capital can find productive uses. Public services influence that matching even when nobody calls them economic policy. Their effects are felt in the distance between a qualification and a job, between a transport link and the people able to use it, between an investment announced and its value realised.

PREVENTION AND PRODUCTIVE CAPACITY

Prevention brings this problem into sharpest focus because the failure compounds over time.

Poor health can interrupt work and disrupted education can close off skills and opportunities at a formative stage. Time away from employment can mean lost earnings, weaker networks and a harder route back. What is lost is not always created again easily. Prevention can protect capabilities people already have, preserve the chance to build more, or stop a temporary setback becoming a lasting one.

Every preventative intervention does not need an economic justification. A humane service or support has value in its own right. Acting earlier may protect someone's capacity to participate in work and society, reduce or delay future pressure on public services, or improve the value obtained from money already being spent. Those effects sometimes coincide but often they do not.

Sure Start shows why the distinction is worth making. At its peak in 2009–10, the programme cost around £2.7 billion a year in 2023–24 prices. The Institute for Fiscal Studies' long-run evaluation estimates that a cohort exposed to Sure Start at its peak generated around £2.4 billion in benefits to the public purse: roughly £0.6 billion through health, SEND and children's social care and £1.9 billion in projected additional income tax and National Insurance.[3] The evaluation also found improved educational and health outcomes, but few effects on some intensive specialist services and increased police cautions at some ages. It is evidence of dispersed and long-lived returns, not a licence to assume that every early-years programme pays for itself.

2 DWP and DHSC, Health in the workplace: patterns of sickness absence, employer support and employment retention (15 July 2019).https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/health-in-the-workplace-patterns-of-sickness-absence-employer-support-and-employment-retention

3 The short- and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes (May 2025). https://ifs.org.uk/publications/short-and-medium-term-effects-sure-start-childrens-outcomes

The striking feature is where the benefits turn up. They do not return neatly to the budget that paid in the first place. Some are social, some fiscal and some economic, and many arrive years later. Government budgets are far better at seeing the cost than this dispersed return.

A preventative state concerns itself with problems before they harden. A productive state asks whether people, firms and places can develop and use their capabilities. The connection lies where earlier action protects those capabilities or improves the conditions in which existing investment can succeed.

The prize is larger than reducing the cost of failure. It is the value of skills that remain in use, working lives that are not cut short, infrastructure whose reach is matched by people able to take the opportunities it creates, and public investment that makes other investment more valuable. Some of that value will appear in growth and employment, some in stronger public finances and some simply in better lives. A serious state should be able to see all three without pretending they are the same thing or completely unrelated.

WHY PREVENTION LOSES

Immediate pressure has a structural advantage in the spending system.

There is an obvious reason prevention loses. Today's demand is visible, urgent and often statutory. The benefit of acting earlier is less certain, slower to appear and may fall somewhere else entirely. An organisation accountable for its own budget has good reason to favour spending whose benefits it can see and retain. The result can be perfectly rational decisions inside each institution and a poor bargain for the state as a whole.

Local authority children's services show how far the balance can move. Institute for Government analysis found that real preventative spending on services including youth clubs and children's centres fell by 77.9 per cent between 2009/10 and 2022/23, while spending on looked-after children and safeguarding rose by 58.1 per cent.[4] Updated 2026 analysis by Pro Bono Economics reports that 82 per cent of local-authority children's-services spending in 2024/25 was on late intervention, compared with 62 per cent in 2010/11; early-intervention spending was 40 per cent lower in real terms over the same period.[5]

It would be wrong to read causation straight from those figures. More children have entered care, placements have become more expensive and pressures have changed for reasons well beyond early-help budgets. But the expenditure pattern captures the trap. As acute and statutory demand rises, the capacity to act earlier gets squeezed out.

The organisation capable of preventing a cost may not be the one that captures the benefit. Housing expenditure may affect health. Health support may preserve employment, benefiting households, employers, DWP and the Exchequer. Early-years investment can produce returns across health, education, social care and future tax receipts. Economists would call these fiscal externalities. Public managers encounter them when the business case will not add up inside one budget - a very live issue for local areas trying to set budgets when the right course is clear, but short-term pressures and a fragmented public-service system prevail.

Fragmentation has its uses. Specialist institutions protect expertise and clear responsibility. Coordination takes time, can blur decisions and may dilute professional accountability. Acting across boundaries makes economic sense where the interdependencies are strong enough to justify those costs and that is much more demanding than 'joined-up working'.

4 Hoddinott, Davies and Kim, A preventative approach to public services: How the government can shift its focus and improve lives (May 2024). https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/preventative-approach-public-services

5 Pro Bono Economics: Horton and Franklin, Rebalancing the system: Children's services spending, 2011–25 (June 2026). https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Rebalancing_the_System_Childrens_Services_spending_2011-25.pdf



WHY PDEL MATTERS, IF IT IS DESIGNED WELL

The Government's emerging **Preventative Departmental Expenditure Limit (PDEL)** work is important because it accepts that the shift to prevention cannot rest on ministerial intention or rhetorical nods to prevention. Demos's 2023 work, *Revenue, Capital, Prevention*[6] developed the case for PDEL – treating preventative expenditure differently and protecting it. If money for earlier action is repeatedly pulled back towards acute pressure, it has to become visible in the spending system and harder to raid.

That recognition is important because changing what the state does means changing the rules under which money is classified, allocated and defended.

PDEL contains a paradox. Prevention is often worth doing because its benefits cross departmental boundaries. Better coordination or pooling within Whitehall could address some of that fragmentation. But if PDEL is still designed and passed down through rigid departmental routes, it could protect earlier spending while leaving places with little influence over how resources are combined or used.

Without protection, present demand will continue to win. Yet protection is only the first question. The second is whether preventative resources can be coordinated across departmental boundaries; the third is where decisions about their use should sit. Those questions are related, but they are not the same.

6 https://demos.co.uk/research/revenue-capital-prevention-a-new-public-spending-framework-for-the-future/

PROTECTING PREVENTION WITHOUT PRESCRIBING IT

Making preventative expenditure visible and harder to divert is worthwhile in itself. It would not settle how resources are coordinated within central government, nor how the wider public-service system operating in places (across Strategic Authority and Local Authority areas) can use them.

The risk lies in how PDEL is implemented, not in protection itself. Cross-departmental budgets or shared outcomes in Whitehall could reduce fragmentation before funding reaches places. A broad PDEL protection[7] within a devolved, place settlement (i.e. devolved control over a greater proportion of the public purse across public services) could go further, replacing smaller departmental ringfences and allowing greater freedom over allocation beneath it. A tightly specified national programme approach would do the opposite: Whitehall would determine in advance not only the purpose of the spending but much of the means. Better central coordination is therefore part of the answer, but it does not by itself give places meaningful influence over allocation and delivery, or settle the wider question of how mainstream resources across services are shaped.

If prevention remains a protected margin around mainstream services whose incentives and allocation are unchanged, acute demand may continue to grow faster than preventative programmes can contain it. The state would be spending earlier without necessarily changing the conditions that keep producing later pressure.

Treasury and departments have good reasons to insist on definitions, additionality, evidence and financial control. National entitlements and statutory duties need protection. But categorising spending under PDEL should be about the integrity of the category, not prescription of the intervention. Prevention can mean enabling people to maintain their capabilities, supporting those at risk, or preventing existing needs from escalating. All are needed if places are to have a truly effective preventative system. The test should be a credible account of how spending today could reduce future need or harm. The task is to protect preventative investment without recreating departmental ringfences in another form.

PDEL can protect the purpose without fixing the existing pattern of expenditure beneath it. It can establish a national commitment, define the tests and make the resource visible. Within those limits, places should have devolved responsibility for allocating the protected resource across services and over time, against agreed outcomes and within clear financial and accountability rules.

At national level, the purpose needs protection because preventative spending is persistently vulnerable to immediate demand. Cross-departmental pooling can prevent that protection being divided into separate Whitehall silos. At place level, flexibility within the protected category matters because costs and benefits fall across different services and budget holders, and local needs vary. The national commitment can therefore become firmer while prescription of the means becomes lighter. Protection should attach to the preventative purpose rather than reproduce the existing map of departmental expenditure.

7 https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/protecting-spending-prevention-transformational

Fiscal devolution could strengthen that settlement over time. A place with a greater stake in employment, growth and its own tax base has more reason to invest where benefits appear across public services and the wider economy. It would not capture every return, and national government would retain a large fiscal interest. But the incentives would begin to reflect the geography in which productive capacity is built and public money is spent.

WHY DEVOLUTION MATTERS

Here devolution becomes an important part of the equation. It is not the only way to coordinate resources across boundaries: government can pool budgets and organise spending around shared outcomes nationally. There remains a question about where choices over policy, delivery and allocation can sensibly be made.

Place matters because the economy is not arranged along departmental lines. Labour markets, transport networks, housing, employers, skills and health all have geographies. They rarely coincide perfectly. But they are real, and they meet somewhere.

Greater Manchester makes the scale tangible. Its economy now exceeds £100 billion, and GMCA analysis puts average annual growth between 2015 and 2023 at 3.1 per cent, against 1.5 per cent for the UK.[8] The point is not to attribute that growth entirely to devolution but to notice what sits within the same territory: a large economy, billions of pounds of public expenditure, and enduring problems of health, skills, housing and participation. The economy operates as a place while much of the public money shaping it still does not.

A rising NEET population (young people not in education, employment or training) is not only a service failure or an employment-policy problem. It is the erosion of a place's future productive capacity in real time. A state that waits until that loss has materialised and then commissions programmes to manage it has misunderstood both prevention and growth.

Greater Manchester's reform journey points towards a different view of both the public purse and the state itself. Economic inactivity, children entering care and preventable ill health are not simply demands to be met. They can mark the deterioration of human capabilities in which families, communities, employers and the state have already invested. Prevention, on this account, is not simply spending earlier, but protecting that accumulated investment before it is lost.

There is still a further question: how far should that flexibility extend beyond the protected preventative resource to the wider allocation of mainstream resources across services? The conditions that sustain prevention, and the economic returns from public services, are not confined to expenditure classified as preventative.

The same logic reaches beyond avoided future costs. One investment can change the return on another. Skills are more valuable when people can reach and sustain work. Transport changes which opportunities are within reach. Health affects labour supply. Housing shapes where workers and businesses can locate. These relationships do not require one institution to control everything. They do require government (national and devolved) to be able to act on them.

That moves the argument beyond joined-up working. Cooperation begins after resources have been allocated but the more important question is whether the allocation itself can change.

8 GMCA / Productivity Institute, Economic growth in Greater Manchester (January 2026). https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/dwen3ltn/ifs-gm-economic-growth-paper-web-final-accessible.pdf



A HARD BARGAIN BETWEEN WHITEHALL AND PLACE

A devolved settlement with broad PDEL protection would allow those connected outcomes to matter to the allocation decision, rather than asking each budget to justify only the value it can retain. National government would define the preventative purpose, protect national entitlements, coordinate resources where national action is needed and set the overall fiscal and evidential framework. Within that framework, places would have freedom to allocate the protected resource across services and over time where costs and benefits crossed institutional boundaries. The bargain would be clear: national protection of the purpose, with local responsibility for the means and the results.

Consider early years. The immediate cost may fall through local government or an early-years budget, while the benefits may appear later in health, SEND, children's social care and Exchequer revenue. Devolved control over allocation would allow those wider returns to inform the original investment decision, rather than requiring the budget that spends the money to capture enough of the return itself.

Greater discretion inevitably brings harder questions of accountability. It would need to be clear who held the relevant resources, who made the decision and what evidence would justify continuing it. The time horizon would need to match the claim being made. An investment intended to protect human capital over years cannot honestly be judged as though it promised a cash saving next April.

Evidence of higher employment participation is not evidence of higher labour productivity. Avoided admissions are not automatically cashable savings. Higher lifetime earnings, lower service use and improved wellbeing are different benefits and should remain visible as such.

There is a consequence for Whitehall too. If responsibility moves while every programme rule, approval and control remains at the centre, little has changed except the number of institutions involved.

This would be harder than a conventional ringfence and it should be. Greater discretion over the allocation of public resources must carry more exacting responsibility for evidence, decision-making and results.

MAKING THE ANSWERS ADD UP

Britain's weak productivity still reflects low investment, weak diffusion, management gaps, planning constraints, regional imbalance, skills shortages and infrastructure deficits. There is no institutional master key. But those familiar explanations do not sit apart from the argument here. Their returns depend partly on the conditions into which investment lands and on whether people and places can make use of it. That is why the organisation of the state belongs inside the productivity debate rather than at its edge.

An industrial strategy is weakened when expanding firms cannot recruit. Skills policy achieves less when ill health or caring responsibilities prevent people completing training or using what they learn. Transport investment yields less when people cannot reach or sustain work. The same country that needs more investment also needs to get more from the human capital, infrastructure and public expenditure it already has.

The productive capacity of an economy depends on the quantity and quality of its capital, infrastructure and skills. It also depends on whether people can build and use their capabilities, whether resources reach productive uses and whether one investment supports rather than frustrates another. Public services help shape those conditions. How they are organised has economic consequences, even if they are neither the only nor the main determinant of productivity.

PDEL makes the argument practical. A narrow design could leave us with a more preventative version of the same fragmented state: earlier spending protected, perhaps better coordinated in Whitehall, while places remained unable to shape how resources were combined and used. A better settlement would protect the move upstream and create scope for choices across the public-service system operating in places, where social, fiscal and economic value refuse to fit neatly inside one budget.

Britain's productivity problem is not short of proposed solutions. The overlooked question is whether the state is organised to get the full return from them. That becomes more important as the room for easy choices narrows. Growth is asked to carry more of the burden of improving living standards and repairing the public finances, while acute demand consumes more of the capacity to invest for the future.

PDEL will not settle that question. But it brings it into the spending system, where choices become real. Broad national protection could secure the move towards prevention; cross-departmental coordination could reduce fragmentation within Whitehall; and devolved freedom within that protection could make it possible to act on returns that cross services and years. **Over time, a stronger local fiscal stake could reinforce those incentives. The issue is whether the state can get more from the capabilities, investment and public resources the country already has.**

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