



Greater Manchester Manifesto

For the 2024 - 2028
Manchester Metro Mayor

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Federation of
Small Businesses

FSB

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) is the UK's leading business organisation representing the self-employed, micro, small and medium-sized organisations. Celebrating our 50th anniversary in 2024, FSB exists to help our members succeed in business, and to lobby for a better environment for the wider SME community. We are a non-profit making, non-party political trade body.

We ensure the voice of small business is heard by decision-makers at every level of government – from the local authority level through to national government – and at every other level in between, including the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, headed by the Metro Mayor's office.

We are a cross-party, non-partisan organisation. We work with elected mayors, councillors, MPs, peers and elected representatives from all major political parties. We campaign and lobby for a better business environment, but we also bring our entrepreneurial spirit into our work by proposing practical policy changes and championing for change as a 'critical friend' of policy makers.





FSB Greater Manchester Manifesto for the 2024 – 2028 term Metro Mayor

This document is aimed principally at candidates and policymakers in all parties running for office in the 2024 GM mayoral election. It is also a useful guide for decision makers in local government to understand what businesses need and want to be successful over the next four years and what councils can do to help.

It sets out the areas that small business owners expect the next mayor, working in conjunction with the 10 local authorities in GM, will need to deliver on to make the City Region a better place to run a business, create wealth, and grow the regional economy.

This document – evidenced by multiple surveys of GM businesses through Autumn 2023, and fleshed out with a number of 1-1 interviews, suggests where the focus should be to support GM's 125,000 micro and small businesses to help deliver sustainable economic growth by:

- **Recovering from the cost of doing business/cost of living crisis**
- **Making sure GM has the right infrastructure in place to meet the region's needs, particularly post-HS2**
- **Going green sensibly**
- **Ensuring the workforce has the necessary skills for employers**
- **Helping GM be a leading city region in which to do business**

This manifesto considers a variety of real issues for GM's SME community. The policy proposals presented here will help deliver sustainable economic growth and job creation, led by our small business owners. Manchester's third Metro Mayor, regardless of political persuasion, needs to back small business.

This manifesto explains how.

*This is a living document and was correct at time of going to press (January 2024)

Foreword

Getting behind Greater Manchester's small business community

Micro and small businesses – whether long-established or just starting out – are a vital part of GM's business scene. Not just as drivers for growth and jobs, but as the glue that holds communities together. They help to make the 10 boroughs of GM the unique and diverse places each has become.

The GM workforce numbers around 1.4 million people. As of October 2023 there were 134,000 active businesses, with the overwhelming number of those sitting in the micro or small category.

The importance of this type of business cannot be underestimated. They are the backbone of the regional economy on which multitudes of families rely for economic security.

The next Metro Mayor has many issues to address, not least the region's ongoing recovery from Covid-19, the hangover of which rumbles on still today. GM businesses were arguably battered more than most in other regions due to harsher, longer lockdowns.

While memories of the pandemic in the public psyche have on the surface started to fade, the next existential threat to the business community landed with a cost-of-living crisis. With energy bills still at unsustainable levels for many, and interest rates at highs not seen for almost two decades, the rate of insolvencies in the UK is at its highest since records began in 1967. It's not surprising small businesses are in distress and many in urgent need of support.

The next Mayor will need to listen to the small business community for the region to forge ahead over the next four years and leave the gloom of now behind. This requires genuine and meaningful engagement with businesses of all sizes, from all sectors, and all types to ensure a holistic, inclusive and fair approach to policy setting.

FSB has a part to play in helping those many voices meld to one coherent voice, speaking for the many, helping foster and deliver a business scene in GM that will increase productivity, allow businesses – whatever their size – the opportunities to thrive, grow, and create employment opportunities for everyone of working age, and those approaching it.

This manifesto sets out how the new Metro Mayor, working alongside the 10 local authorities, can achieve that.



Helping small business bounce back from the cost-of-living crisis

Public Sector Procurement in GM

Public sector procurement is an essential lever through which to support small business growth and innovation, therefore enhancing the productivity and the wider competitiveness of the GM City Region economy.

Research shows that every £1 spent by a local authority with local SMEs generates an additional 63p of benefit for their local economy, compared to just 40p generated by large local firms. This is because small firms are more likely to spend with other local businesses, and employ local people.





However, figures in GM show it is still a postcode lottery as to how much time and energy local authorities put in to promoting, encouraging, and ultimately awarding contracts to small, local businesses, especially the smallest. Data available shows there is a big gap between how well authorities in GM do in this respect, with some awarding close to two thirds of their contracts to small, local businesses, with others far lower.

There is much more to be done in this area, and huge benefits for the GM City Region economy if this nut can be cracked by encouraging even the smallest firms who, today, most probably regard this type of procurement work as ‘difficult and out of reach’, to feel empowered and able to ‘have a go’, tomorrow.

FSB Greater Manchester commissioned a survey of small businesses in Autumn 2022 to explore the subject of public sector procurement, effectively asking: why do some businesses see it as an opportunity, whereas most don’t include it in their business plan?

Why does public sector procurement have the image it has? Are small firms even aware of the opportunity, and if not, why not? Our survey work showed...

- 68% of small businesses have negative perception of public sector procurement
- Only 8% see it in a positive light.
- 67% of respondents were unaware contracts under significant financial thresholds, as much as £50k in GM, didn’t need a full tender process and could be signed off by an officer.
- Only one in 10 (11%) of respondents felt they knew how and where to apply for public sector work.
- 56% of respondents said they’d like to deliver work for the public sector to help their local area.

How often over the past three years have you attempted to procure work from the public sector?			
			Response Percent
1	Never		55.36%
2	Once		11.61%
3	Twice		5.36%
4	Multiple Times		27.68%

The prevailing sentiment among small business owners is that public sector procurement is not an easy or viable option to pursue. And the smaller the business the less likely they are to consider bidding for work.

In GM, FSB has been working with the GMCA to develop and implement a pilot scheme that could address some of the challenges outlined by business posed by the existing procurement process, but progress has stalled despite real interest from the Business Board.

This project would involve promoting low value jobs, typically those under £50k, to small/micro size businesses which do not need to go through a full tender process on the CHEST, using an online system to help contracting officers in town halls 'matchmake' with suitable small businesses. Jobs with lower contractual values typically can be awarded with just three quotes from a contracting officer, or even just one quote for contracts sub-£10k.

Helping small firms deliver public sector contracts at this low level would create vital new work streams for the private sector, and aid with growth and job creation across the City Region. It would almost certainly encourage some of those to bid for larger contracts further along their business journey.

Public procurement has an important role to play in supporting business growth. Utilised effectively, it can stimulate innovation through helping companies flourish and employ more staff.

A reformed procurement model in GM could also deliver better value for money for hard pressed town halls, slash red tape, drive innovation and make it easier for smaller suppliers to do business with the public sector. Ultimately this will create better value for the taxpayer and could potentially help councils save money if there is more competition.

The next mayor should:

- Aim to increase the number of small and micro sized businesses/VCSEs who can deliver for the public sector.
- Begin a dialogue with local authority leaders/the Business Board around the benefits of public sector procurement for smaller firms especially with the Procurement Act due to come into law in October 2024.
- Help FSB find a suitable council to pilot a small business procurement project to show the smallest firms can and should deliver more contracts for local councils.
- Encourage LAs in GM to publish their under-threshold procurement spend and quantify how much of this is
 - i) local to their council area;
 - ii) spent within GM borders; with the aim for all councils to improve local spending.

Prompt payment and invoice discounting in GM councils

Every year, late payment costs small firms billions and can and does lead to business failures.

Small businesses are owed around £36 billion by large organisations at any one time – that figure has risen year on year. The problem is getting worse.

FSB has been highlighting the impact of supply-chain bullying (suppliers are forced by larger firms to cut their prices), retrospective discounting (larger firms forcing a discount of an already agreed price) and paying-to-stay (smaller companies pay larger firms to remain a supplier).

National research by FSB has shows one in five members have experienced supply chain abuse.

FSB is aware a number of councils in GM are using the practice of invoice discounting with suppliers. This is paying suppliers ahead of contracted terms but taking a percentage cut of the invoice for the 'privilege' of swifter payment. This is frowned upon by the Small Business Commissioner, and is generally, when deployed in the private sector, seen as a 'sharp' practice.

It seems unbelievable the public sector should be using this same method in GM with public money, and in some cases using this as part of scoring methodology in official procurement processes for those firms that accept its use. FSB knows five GM councils are actively using these types of schemes, or variations of them, and refuse to stop.

Paying promptly is a matter of respect – simply doing for others what you would like to happen in return. It shows respect to suppliers and treats them as most would wish to be treated themselves. The public sector should be leading the way and showing the private sector what 'good' looks like, not copying the worst of their bad habits.

The next mayor should:

- Use the evolving nature of the GM Good Employment Charter to ensure signatories – which includes all 10 local councils – sign the Prompt Payment Code, and pay small suppliers within 30 days.
- Use the Good Employment Charter to stamp out invoice settlement discounting by making this one of its principles as part of its promotion of ethical business practice and being a 'good' employer.

Town centres and high streets

Town centres have had a bruising few years, starting with the pandemic. Foundational economy businesses in retail and hospitality took the brunt of the pandemic when the lockdowns began. The figures for 2023 show the nation lost a further 6,000 high street businesses. Many businesses who took Bounce Back Loans to survive, have simply been unable to bounce back.

There are myriad reasons for this. Among them is 'working from home', now so prevalent it even has its own acronym. WFH is an accepted ask of many office workers and still impinges on weekday footfall in towns and cities across GM. The practice appears to be more commonplace in the public sector, although it is still seen widely through the private sector.

Depressed consumer spending due to the cost-of-living and energy crisis has been further compounded by interest rates spiralling and eating into household budgets more and more. In 2024 around 1.5M discounted mortgage terms will end, worsening household disposable spend as we push deeper into the year.




Changes to consumer buying trends were on the scene long before the pandemic, but were further accelerated by it when there was a significant move to retail e-commerce. While e-commerce continues to grow at pace, footfall at many town and district centres is in reverse.

The loss of big brand names from our high streets are stark proof of the collapse in high street shopping, but what are councils doing about it?

“Too many towns and cities are shells of their former selves. Boarded-up shops left vacant, dwindling numbers of banks and post offices. And in their place seemingly endless rows of vaping and charity shops.”

Dame Sharon White, Chair John Lewis Partnership



Has your local district high street/town centre improved post-Covid?			
			Response Percent
1	Yes, it seems busier		9.18%
2	It's about the same as before		31.63%
3	It's less busy		59.18%

There are success stories. Stockport and Altrincham have both been able to reinvigorate areas of their main town centres by transforming them in to ‘foodie’ and cultural destinations, with a focus on small, independent businesses, better marketing, and effort being put in to creating a ‘day out’ experience for visitors – particularly younger consumers.

But what else can be done to increase footfall into our town centres? Local businesses are at the heart of all GM communities, playing a vital role in ensuring each continues to thrive, create local jobs for local people, and generate a sense of local community and place. Easy accessibility is key to driving footfall up. While there have been many initiatives injecting millions of pounds into active travel schemes across GM, this has largely been to ignore the reality that cars remain the single most important transport mode. Active travel schemes, welcome as they are, have a place, and are not conducive with ‘big’ shopping.

The table below reveals how, at many local councils in GM, rather than trying to encourage more people into their town centres post-pandemic by reducing car parking charges, the price to park for three hours has gone up at four authorities (by as much as 250% in one borough), and two have remained static. How does this help struggling high street businesses? Set against a backdrop of increased business rates retention in GM, this makes no sense.

	Main Town Centre	Parking Price for three hours in 2023/24	Parking price for three hours in 2019/20	Percentage change + / -
1	Bolton	£4.50	£3.00	+ 33.3%
2	Tameside	£3.50	£1.00	+ 250%
3	Salford	£3.50	£3.50	0%
4	Wigan	£3.00	£2.70	+ 11%
5	Trafford	£3.00	£2.50	+ 20%
6	Stockport	£2.70	£2.70	0%
7	Bury	£2.50	£2.30	+ 9%
8	Oldham	*£2.00 <small>*Free at weekend for 3 hours & 30 mins on street in week</small>	£2.10	- 5%
9	Rochdale	Free	Free	N/A

Under the Road Traffic Regulation Act (1984), it is illegal for councils to deliberately raise income from parking revenue. When surpluses are generated, the excess revenue must be invested back into the parking function or used to support other transport initiatives, which ensures the local authorities cannot ‘profit’ from parking management or its associated activities. Importantly, revenue raising cannot be the deliberate objective of a council’s parking regime and surplus can only be justified where the need exists to manage demand.

For what reason then are councils in GM charging, in some cases, such high parking charges? [Data published by the Manchester Evening News in October 2023](#), suggests councils in GM are earning considerable sums through parking revenue.

While the prevailing political attitude in GM has for many years been to penalise car ownership, despite more than 75% of residents in the City Region owning at least one vehicle, this stance only adds to the woe of high streets, where many of the biggest names have already vacated due to either going bust, or rationalising assets to out-of-town centres where parking is free.

With anchor stores gone, small independents are left face dwindling footfall with customers having one less reason to visit.

Local Authority	Total income from parking account in 2022/23
Bolton	£1,059,000
Bury	£772,000
Manchester	£13,286,000
Oldham	£384,000
Rochdale	-£39,000 (loss)
Salford	No data
Stockport	£2,463,000
Tameside	£807,000
Trafford	£1,146,000
Wigan	£366,000



In your view, what would encourage shoppers to visit their local high street more often and spend more money with businesses there? (choose up to three)			
Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	If it was easier to get there and back any time of the day		58.76%
2	If there was an element of free car parking		85.57%
3	If there were more family orientated events taking place there		23.71%
4	A better choice of shops and services		60.82%
5	Other (please specify):		20.62%

What businesses said...

- *“Online shopping is hard to compete against. Just economics.”*
- *“Incentives on business rates would improve the offering on the high street as more vendors would be able to be successful due to reduced overheads. High streets have so many charity shops as they don't have to stump up for business rates.”*
- *“Better road infrastructure and no charges for driving in.”*
- *“A 5-year moratorium on paying business rates for any businesses bringing a long empty shop back into use.”*
- *“Reduce businesses rates by 90 percent for small shops and create free parking in towns for visitors.”*
- *“More independent retailers.”*
- *“Better planning and strategy around town centre management and development, giving thought to older people and safety, making spaces more welcoming with a mix of places to eat as well as shops.”*
- *“Experiences/events that cannot be replicated online”*
- *“Safety - town centres seem to accumulate troublemakers.”*
- *“The appearance of the high street, councils used to spend money on flowers, plants, lights.”*

The next mayor should:

- Help councils replicate successes as seen in Stockport via the Mayoral Development Corporation in other GM towns, helping unlock funding and investing in town centre housing stock as part of a ‘build it and they will come’ approach to breathe life back in to declining high streets.
- Work with councils to ensure business rates retention is maximised by taking steps to encourage independent shops and venues back to high streets.
- Encourage councils to consider less punishing car parking charges, or at least offer some form of free or discounted parking on weekends to boost high street footfall, while being more transparent around where parking revenues are spent.
- Ensure GM’s newly established Business Compliance Support Team continues after the initial 18-month funding runs out in early 2025. This new service helps businesses get compliance right first time, protecting the public and helping local authorities and businesses save time and money, and is particularly important for high street businesses in F&B, and could be funded in future from Shared Prosperity Funding (SPF) allocations.
- Fund a ‘long-term vacant unit’ team with a dedicated vacancy manager to work with local councils to help get long term empty units filled.
- Encourage councils to look at town centre planning groups, like the Wigan Town Centre Board, where stakeholders can come together to share concerns and issues affecting town centres and high streets.



REDROCK
STOCKPORT

Business crime and policing

Official stats suggest two in five shopworkers face verbal or physical abuse every week.

Small businesses can be especially vulnerable to business crime, partially because of perceptions that security measures are costly. As a result, they are often seen as easy targets by criminals.

Theft, burglary and cybercrime are still the most reported crimes by small businesses, but the story in 2023 has been retail crime, which has seen a huge spike as the effects of the cost-of-living crisis have bitten hard in communities. This has only made life harder for high street retailers. The move to self-checkouts by most of the large supermarkets has also put a spotlight on the issue with retail theft and assaults being increasingly reported by media.

There's no doubt that soaring levels of retail crime on our high streets and the violence, threats and abuse towards retail workers are out of control, and without more focused police intervention in GM nothing will change. In fact, if recession bites through 2024, it is likely to get worse.

Research published in December by FSB's national policy team shows traditional crime, including organised shoplifting, drained more than £1,000 from over half of small business victims in England and Wales in the last two years, with one-in-ten losing in excess of £10,000.

FSB's Cracking the Case report shows how small businesses are facing a double whammy of virtual and physical crimes, with an overwhelming 81% - or 4.1 million – of them in the two nations affected by at least one crime between January 2021 and January 2023. That's a jump from 49% in the same period between 2017 and 2019.

The report reveals a growing trend of organised shoplifting and threatening behaviour towards shop owners and their staff. More than a third (35%) have been impacted by at least one traditional crime in the last two years. These crimes are related to vandalism/damage to premises and anti-social behaviour (34%), followed by burglary or robbery (30%) and theft by a third/external party (29%).




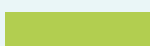
Figures published by the ONS show a dramatic rise in shoplifting offences over the past 12 months, with on average a thousand a day in England and Wales. Greater Manchester recorded the fourth highest instances of shop thefts at 16,463, only behind the West Midlands, West Yorkshire, and London.

However, the proportion of shoplifting incidents that led to court action has tanked to just 12.2%, compared to 19% in 2020. New figures in December 2023 showed throughout England and Wales there were 206,000 cases of shoplifting not investigated.

Last year Asda Chairman Lord Stuart Rose declared shoplifting had effectively become “decriminalised” because of a lack of police action. Tesco CEO Ken Murphy was so concerned by the sharp rise in attacks on staff every one of the supermarket's 300,000 frontline workers were offered the option of wearing a bodycam. Small independents can't afford such protections.

Reporting business crime is an important part of preventing it. Only by having sight of the scale of the issue can the authorities address it. It is also important in order to bring perpetrators to justice and prevent them from targeting other businesses. Providing that key piece of missing information can be vital.

FSB survey research found 70% of business owners in GM would report a crime in 2023, compared to 68% of those asked the same question in 2019. However, almost a third (29%) said they would only report a crime if they needed a crime reference number for insurance reasons. This figure was 19% in 2019 suggesting a further decline in confidence in the police to act.

Which of the following most accurately reflects your view of GMPs attitude to business crime...			
Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	The police would definitely take a business crime seriously no matter the severity		8.70%
2	They aren't bothered about low level business crime		40.22%
3	It would probably take ages to get through and wouldn't be worth my time		17.39%
4	The police have so much going on business crime is at the back of the queue		33.70%

Fewer than 10% of survey respondents believe the police take all business crimes seriously. Over 40% were of the opinion GMP were not bothered by low level business crime, such as shoplifting – sentiments perhaps borne out by spiralling levels of retail crime over the past 12 months and widely reported in the media. A further 17% believed it would take a long time for police to answer their call, while 34% had the opinion that business crime was at the back of the queue compared to other types of crime.

These are worrying sentiments from the business community, although unsurprising in GM, the Force having been in special measures for several years which has garnered much media attention.

With the Force no longer in special measures as of October 2022, and figures from GMP published in November 2023 around 999 response times and recording of crimes showing much improved stats, these attitudes may now be an unfair representation of the current reality.

“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.”

Warren Buffet

It will take a long time for GMP to win back the business communities' wider trust, and certain myths will need to be 'busted'.

Caveating that, however, the current GMP website features a 'report' section where a wide variety of crimes can be reported, such as drug 'spiking', 'road traffic incidents', 'domestic abuse', and even a 'lost and found' section. There is however nowhere to specifically report 'business crime', or even more specifically, 'retail theft', despite being one of the most prevalent types of crime.

This again is the unspoken demeaning of 'business' crime, and a crime not being given appropriate focus by GMP.

What businesses said...

- *“There are now so many crimes that the Police do not prioritise and attend adequately for, business crime is just one.”*
- *“The level of trust for GMP is probably at its lowest, in recent times.”*
- *“(The) Focus on safety and security of citizens, business crime doesn't even make the top 50.”*
- *“Crime is crime, not low level or high level. There are too many incidences of shop lifting going unpunished, which just reinforces the notion that it's ok to help yourself.”*
- *“We need more police officers in our communities.”*
- *“There seems to be a very different emphasis in terms of what they perceive as their role and priorities. I don't believe they would respond to low level crime domestic or business related - it is very sad.”*

The next mayor should:

- Encourage GMP to set up a dedicated business crime portal on their website where businesses can report any instances of criminality affecting their business, if nothing else to at least demonstrate parity with other crimes.
- Encourage GMP to take business crime more seriously by...
 - i. Always pursuing lines of inquiry/evidence where there is one i.e. CCTV footage.
 - ii. Embarking on a targeted communications campaign to 'report it', to help counter the premise that business crime doesn't matter at GMP.
 - iii. Ensuring all businesses that report a crime, whether by phone or online log, get a police response in a timely fashion – like any other victim of crime would expect.
 - iv. Setting up a dedicated retail crime unit to tackle store theft and incidents of violence against staff as per the SPoC guidelines (single point of contact).
- Include business crime as a priority in their Metro Mayor manifesto, demonstrating commitments to business crime from the beginning to the end of their term.

- Clarify there is no £200 threshold for investigating organised shoplifting offences. There is currently an impression that shoplifters will not be arrested if they steal under £200 worth of goods.
- Introduce a mandatory recording process for business crime and add a 'business crime' section to the crime outcomes in England and Wales statistics so progress can be tracked, and targets set.
- Instruct GMP to clamp down on the number of dangerous cycling offences in town and city centres where road laws are routinely flouted by delivery riders, creating a danger for other cyclists, pedestrians and other road users, making busy high streets unwelcoming for vulnerable members of society, and fostering an atmosphere of lawlessness.
- Aim to increase the average number of police officers in GMP to 445 per 100,000 population. At present it is 335 per 100,000.










Transport and Infrastructure in Greater Manchester

'In 2018/19, London received £10.6billion in transport investment, compared to £2.4billion for the whole of the north west'

From the Manchester Strategy, 2023.

GM remains a city region addicted to private motor vehicles, driven by poor access to reliable public transport. What's available is – typically – expensive, piecemeal in terms of provision, and often unreliable. Consequently, public transport is not considered a practical option for far too many small businesses and their employees.

In terms of transport modes, which of the below is the most important to the success of your business? (select up to three)			
			Response Percent
1	Air travel		9.47%
2	Train		37.89%
3	Metrolink		37.89%
4	Car/Van		82.11%
5	Bus		17.89%
6	Bike		5.26%
7	On foot		13.68%

Although progress has been made since 2020, with the buses being reregulated and fares capped at much more affordable levels, the extension of Metrolink to those GM boroughs not yet connected to the network is no further forward, and communication around this is muted.

And with the disastrous events in autumn around HS2 being cancelled it's no wonder the business community feel corralled towards private vehicle ownership, and understandably still see it as the future, certainly in GM.

Survey work carried out as part of this manifesto shows a continued and huge reliance on private vehicles, with 82% of respondents citing car/van as the most important mode of transport for their business. While this is down by 4% on exactly the same survey question in 2020, perhaps showing some progress if the aim is to reduce business reliance on motor vehicles, it's marginal.

There appears to be more encouraging data comparisons from respondents who indicated transport modes 'bus', 'bike' and 'on foot' as important to their business. In 2020, when asked the same question, bus was cited by 12% of respondents as important to their business model, that figure now stands at 18%. The comparison for bike use is 0.89%, now 5%; and for 'on foot', 3% compared to 14% now – which is the biggest increase for active travel options.

Considering the amount of money pumped into active travel and the bus system in GM over the past four years, the increases are welcome but don't represent huge progress.

The next mayor should:

- Lobby the Government of the day to ensure funding subsidies reflect that offered in London allowing bus fare capping to continue past 2024.
- Seek to access funding to expand Metrolink to GM boroughs not yet benefiting from the tram network, to create a fairer and more inclusive public transport system in GM.
- Push forward as fast as possible plans to introduce multi-modal ticketing systems to deliver a London style Oyster Card system of seamless ticketing experience.
- Ensure multi-modal public transport services operate into the small hours to help nighttime economy businesses in hospitality.



Rail and other transport modes

Interestingly, air travel appears to have fallen in popularity down from 18% when the same question was asked in 2020, to 10% currently. This is perhaps suggestive of a change in travel and working habits post-pandemic, with less international business travel, and fewer domestic flights taken for work purposes.

By comparison, train travel appears to have grown in popularity, with 36% of respondents citing train travel as important to their business – a 13% rise on 2020's figures. The irony of this will not be lost on business users in GM who have over the past few years suffered with appalling service levels from the likes of Trans Pennine Express, and to a lesser extent, Northern Rail. Avanti service levels linking GM to the capital are also hit and miss, and are starting to look severely inadequate again. Ticket prices are also cause for concern.

The future of rail services in the North also now looks more uncertain than any time in the past decade, certainly to many businesses who surveyed the unravelling of the HS2 project as a wholly predictable farce. HS2 north of Birmingham is now dead and buried, and the underlying message to the people of the North is that, yet again, our region is at the back of the queue for fair public transport funding.





There is now also increasing discussion around what will replace HS2 in the guise of Network North. Underfunded, uncosted, and with some parts of the plan reliant on projects that themselves have yet to be formally announced, Network North worryingly has the hallmarks of a transport 'package' that could suffer the same fate as HS2.

It was described by Sir John Armit, Chair of the National Infrastructure Commission, a government advisory board, as: *“not been designed in any sense of detail whatsoever”*, with *“costings plucked out of the air”*.

Even if the current government isn't serious about Network North, the next Mayor has to give it front and centre priority to ensure GM can salvage something from the ashes of HS2.

What must also be made clear to the business community, and as soon as possible, is the similar amount of work required to enable the Northern Powerhouse Rail elements of Network North, which in GM at least, mimics much of the HS2 scheme. This will include complex underground tunnelling between Manchester Airport and Manchester Piccadilly that will be hugely disruptive and affect vast swathes of south Manchester and Trafford, across the border into Cheshire East, impacting both the business community and the wider general public for the best part of a decade. Very few businesses are aware of this impending disruption and now believe post-HS2, that they have nothing to fear.

Businesses must be kept up to speed with the proposed works, and more consideration given to helping/supporting businesses who would be badly affected by construction work. This should include help to relocate premises – and financial assistance for those worst affected.

I understand HS2 rail is definitely coming to Manchester, and I am aware of the issues its construction could pose to my business during its construction?			
			Response Percent
1	Totally agree		25.0%
2	Partially agree		38.9%
3	Mostly disagree		16.7%
4	Totally disagree		19.4%

The above table shows business attitudes to HS2 prior to its cancellation, in early October 2023. Only a quarter of survey respondents were aware of the disruption the building of HS2 would bring to much of GM, particularly around the south of the City Region. This must be addressed with plans due to be delivered as per Network North (if it happens), with better communications and planning for the guaranteed business disruption.

The next mayor should:

- Ensure the business community is kept fully informed about the scale of disruption in order to complete Network North, particularly around Ardwick, as well as the district shopping centres in south Manchester, namely Didsbury, Chorlton, Hale and Rusholme/Longsight.
- Ensure GMCA has a dedicated team in place to help businesses manage the disruption of tunnelling work in south Manchester, including a comms team, help around disaster recovery, mitigation work, and relocation.
- Ensure GM gets a fair slice of the Network North pot and hold Government of the day to account if this doesn't happen.
- Lobby the government of the day to try and unlock more cash required to improve east-west connectivity in the North – which is traditionally what many businesses have called for over improved connections with the South.
- Work with the Midlands Metro Mayor to try and mitigate as much as possible the disaster of HS2's cancellation and make the best of a bad situation.



Roads

It may be an unsavoury fact for many decision makers, but roads are the most important piece of transport infrastructure in GM – and will become more important as we move forward because of current transport policy.

While cars and vans are currently the main users of highways, buses and cyclists also make up the numbers in terms of usage. With the ambition to increase bus patronage over the coming years, as well as big investments to encourage more cycling for shorter journeys, our roads will need to be managed better to ensure services are reliable, safe for users, and able to move all types of traffic at all times.

Poorly maintained (and designed) roads require major road works, and even closures sometimes, to repair. The ‘stitch in time saves nine’ principle is not being observed across GM.

“I believe the local road networks in GM are well maintained, well managed, and are resilient to extreme weather and sports events.” How much do you agree with this sentence?			Response Percent
1	Totally agree		1.04%
2	Partially agree		26.04%
3	Mostly disagree		31.25%
4	Totally disagree		41.67%

With more cyclists being encouraged to take to GM’s roads to get from A to B, road surfaces need to be kept in better shape for obvious safety reasons. A pothole ‘incident’ for a cyclist has a distinctly worse outcome than with a car/van.

FSB research in summer 2023 showed there were almost 27,000 complaints concerning potholes in GM for the year 2022/23. While this figure is down on the 2021/22 figure of 43,415 (possibly higher due to disruption to repair work due to Covid) the figure is still huge. The same research also showed five GM councils failed to spend their allocated road repair budget in 2022/23, albeit an improvement on the previous year’s figure of seven.

Local Authority	Total allocated spend for road repairs V. (in red) actual spend	Amount of total allocated spend for road repairs spent by the end of the financial year Red figure denotes % difference + or – overspend/underspend	Number of complaints received concerning roads/ highway defects	Number of legal claims recorded	The road maintained by the council that received the highest number of complaints (regarding any and all types of damage)
Bolton	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	-£487,045 -8.15%	3846	82	Chorley New Road, Horwich
Bury	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	£0 0%	2274	119	Refused to disclose
Rochdale	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	-£100,000 -8.04%	3691	138	Halifax Road
Oldham	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	+£251,658.57 +4.95%	1395	13	Not disclosed
Tameside	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	+£717,000 +35.27%	873	13	Huddersfield Road, Stalybridge.
Stockport	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	-£88,000 -0.97%	1221	28	Gorton Road
Manchester	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	£0 0%	5573	180	Princes Road
Salford	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	-£140,298 -6.94%	2024	95	Information not held
Trafford	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	£0 0%	3419	115	Norris Road, Sale
Wigan	£5,973,127 £5,486,082	-£257,082 -23.86%	2568	118	Not disclosed
			TOTAL: 26,884		



The next mayor should:





- Share data from the newly reregulated bus network with councils to identify traffic pinch points (so they can act accordingly) caused by:
 - a) road works
 - b) congestion
 - c) poorly timed traffic light sequencing
- Implement a Lane Rental Scheme similar to London’s to control the carrying out of works in specified traffic sensitive locations at traffic sensitive times, forcing utility providers to work more closely and be more joined up when carrying out works and preventing roads being repeatedly dug up.
- Lobby government for extra cash to tackle the epidemic of potholes in GM.
- Explore the possibility of GM councils pooling resources to invest in new tech to repair and fix potholes such as JCB’s new Pothole Pro, able to fix a pothole in just eight minutes, with a cost of around £30. Traditional repairs can take hours, causing delays to traffic, increase pollution levels, and cost significantly more.
- Look at how other countries perform when it comes to traffic and roads infrastructure management, such as the Netherlands’ CROW Platform (<https://crowplatform.com>) to understand what best practice looks like.

GM's Digital Infrastructure

Fast internet speeds and good digital access are a basic necessity for businesses. It is now regarded a key 'utility', like water, upon which a business would be unlikely to choose a location if the provision was poor or non-existent. However, it's surprising how many companies still face numerous issues with their existing digital connections, from broadband wi-fi to mobile connectivity, leading to frustrating experiences and hampered productivity.

Reliable and fast internet should not be too much to ask for in a leading city region, which is increasingly being billed as a digital front runner. In fact, it's an essential foundation for seamless communication, efficient workflows, and optimal performance. It's disappointing to see there is much work to be done across the whole region to improve data speeds and mobile connectivity for everyone.

Greater Manchester's digital infrastructure (broadband and 5G mobile) is currently at a good standard, and I am pleased with the performance I get...

Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	Totally agree		18.56%
2	Partially agree		51.55%
3	Mostly disagree		21.65%
4	Totally disagree		8.25%



What businesses are saying...

- *“Outside the city centre is poor. We need 1gb internet connection everywhere. Especially on every industrial estate.”*
- *“Parts of Didsbury and Chorlton are appalling for 4G. As a small business taking card payments, we regularly have to use customer Wi-Fi.”*
- *“Just had a new mast refused in our area due to nimby concerns. If we are supposed to be working from home surely it makes sense to have better connections?”*
- *“Can be patchy and it's a postcode lottery as to whether you get a good signal.”*
- *“5G connection to my home in WN3 is inadequate - it would not serve as backup if broadband went down which has an impact on my business resilience.”*
- *“Proper full fibre to the premises needs to be enabled for all businesses.”*
- *“The provision of full fibre across many areas of GM is poor and our experience is that the mobile network coverage has practically deteriorated across the last 3-5 years (it may not have actually deteriorated but the increase in usage on the same networks maybe causing a noticeable deterioration in actual coverage and performance.”*
- *“At present it seems 4G is better than 5G, it is more readily available, more stable and quicker.”*

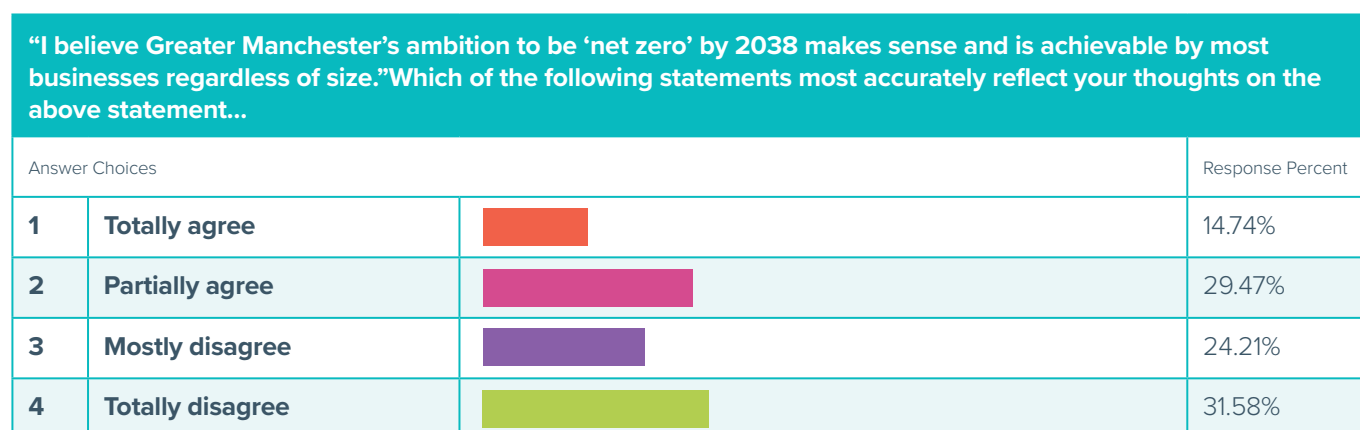
The next mayor should:

- Ensure all areas of GM are treated fairly for the rollout of 5G and not just the main town and city centres.
- Ensure the fastest possible rollout of full fibre across the City Region ensuring no areas are left behind.
- Work with regulators and provider to ensure when 2/3G signals are switched off in 2025 the 4G signal coverage can cope with demand.

Going Green Sensibly

GM has sets itself a target to be net zero by 2038, undercutting the Government’s target for the UK to be the same by 2050. This is beyond challenging, and not realistic.

Most business owners would like to be more environmentally aware, recycle more, use less energy, and produce as little pollution as possible. But many of these businesses – particularly the smallest – just don’t know how they themselves can make a difference.



Only 15 per cent of businesses agree that GM’s 2038 target for net zero ‘makes sense and is achievable’. In total, 56% either mostly disagree (24%) or totally disagree (32%) that the 2038 ambition is attainable, and a further 29% partially agree.

This is not a vote of confidence in the policy and suggests a considerable piece of work is required of policy makers in GM if they are to convince small business owners the 2038 ambition is not an undeliverable, fashionable sound bite.

Failing to take businesses on the carbon reduction ‘journey’ at this point, which is still early in to the long ‘journey’ ahead, is damaging, undermining the push to encourage more smaller businesses to begin their own carbon reduction preparations, and from being more environmentally aware. It makes net zero seem like an impossible target in GM and, ultimately, breeds cynicism.

What businesses are saying...

- *“How do you achieve net zero as a small SME and what training and financial support is being given to get there?”*
- *“Cost implications of a ridiculous agenda are crippling.”*
- *“Net zero is an almost impossible standard to try and attain.”*

- *“The council is pushing businesses to achieve this, but the same council continues to build sub-standard housing that will need significant future investment to decarbonise. The council seems wedded to ‘the usual suspects’ in the building sector who, frankly are too lazy to adopt new standards.”*
- *“The measure of Net Zero is very ambiguous... if we close our Didsbury office and move everyone to be working for home, then yes, that could be a Net Zero business... Unfortunately, we need premises and they are currently old Victorian listed buildings on Lapwing Lane that simply leak heat out from every square inch.”*
- *“It's a great target to have. But having recently attended a funded Net Zero training course, we have a long way to go. Small businesses won't be able to get us there (myself included). We need big businesses and targeted legislation to make this happen.”*
- *“Public transport isn't fit for purpose and a car is the only way to get to many parts of the boroughs.”*
- *“My business is all being run by diesel vans and will not be possible to change that.”*
- *“Overall cost versus benefit to my business.”*

“When it comes to de-carbonising my business, while I get the sentiment there’s very little I can practically do to help.” Which of the following statements most accurately reflect your thoughts on the above statement...			
Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	Totally agree		28.87%
2	Partially agree		40.21%
3	Mostly disagree		20.62%
4	Totally disagree		10.31%

One of the most often cited barriers to carbon reduction facing small businesses is around ownership of premises. Most businesses with bricks and mortar premises don't own the property, meaning carbon reduction measures are typically not their call to make.

For those located in older building stock retrofitting is often not suitable, but whatever the age of the premises, investing in carbon reducing ‘green tech’ is not cheap, and landlords are typically resistant to spending money on environmentally friendly tech which has no return on their investment, unless they put up rents. Few small businesses, even ignoring the current economic climate, would want their rent to go up and thus wouldn't initiate a tenant/landlord conversation around such a subject.














“I don’t think we’ll get working class people behind the drive to net zero if it’s about tax, charges, bans on things – basically making their lives suffer more. The only way we can do it is to give people incentives to do the right thing.”

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, December 2023

Ironically, fitting carbon reduction tech such as solar panels and wind turbines to businesses can affect a property’s business rates classification, and if identified by the VOA causes an increase of rateable value. This is a clear example of poorly joined up policy meaning increased costs.

One of the easiest ways for smaller businesses to reduce their carbon/reduce emissions is to switch to electric vehicles. While the technology is not ready for electric vans, which remain restricted to ranges of around 70-80 realistic miles of range and which would be of limited use to most trades type businesses, EV cars are increasingly practical for non-trades business uses.

However, Greater Manchester remains poorly served by charging points comparable to other major cities, with just 473 charging points at the last count. For a city region with nearly three million residents, that’s concerningly low. In fact, Government data shows the North West region has the lowest number of EV chargers per 100,000 head of population in the entire country at just 42. By comparison London alone has 193, while the GB average is 75 – almost double GM.

United Kingdom		73
Great Britain		75
England		75
North East		58
North West		42
Yorkshire and the Humber		46
East Midlands		46
West Midlands		65
East of England		52
London		193
South East		63
South West		54
Wales		66

While the Conservative government has recently pushed back the ban on ICE vehicles in the UK from 2030 to 2035, Labour has said it will rescind this decision if it wins the next general election. This creates another layer of uncertainty for businesses as to which path to take.

With regards the proposed ban on the sale of petrol/diesel vehicles by *2030/5, I am concerned how my business will be able to operate when this happens* Conservatives have changed this to 2035 but Labour say they will stick to 2030 target.

Answer Choices		Response Percent	Response Total
1	I have no concerns	43.75%	35
2	I have concerns because (answer in comment box below)	56.25%	45

What businesses are saying...

- *“Unsure that EV Infrastructure is capable yet to accommodate demand.”*
- *“Mileage capability on vans is very poor at present, and the charging/repowering infrastructure is the same. Needs a longer lead time, maybe 2045.”*
- *“The electrical infrastructure is not in place to support a fleet of purely electric vehicles. Furthermore, with the national push towards electrical heat pumps (away from gas) will stretch the grid even more; potentially leading to a situation of electrical rationing and/or turning off of vehicle charging outlets.”*
- *“Cost, range anxiety and reliability of replacement EV vehicle.”*
- *“As a very small business, I'll be moving over to hybrid soon, but not sure about when for all electric in view of charging point numbers.”*

The next mayor should:

- Consider whether it's sensible policy to continue calling for a net zero GM by 2038 which experts say is virtually impossible/unachievable and undermines the genuine sentiment behind carbon reduction.
- Ensure the entire Greater Manchester City Region is catering for a future when electric car travel will be increasingly prevalent, by ensuring significant investment in electric charging stations, including motorway services and rural areas.
- Using powers of devolution, look at changing housing planning policy to raise the bar for insulation standards in new build office space and residential alike.
- Ensure an element of state funded business support offered in GM around carbon reduction is both relevant and practical for the smallest businesses who don't own a premises, allowing them to make a contribution towards net zero targets.
- Look at a project to engage with commercial landlords who are key to driving up standards in their properties and aim to unlock grants to pay for 'green' property improvements.
- Create a best practice guide for councils seeking to expand cycling routes as part of the Bee Network to:
 - Ensure full consultation on the impacts reducing road capacity will have on local high street businesses financially.
 - And on communities around them, with particular regard for increased congestion and pollution levels.

Clean Air Zone (CAZ)

Illegal levels of harmful airborne emissions found in towns and cities across the UK have been well documented. But in GM, like other large cities, they're now in rapid decline in all but a handful of hotspots.

As older diesel vehicles phase out naturally and are replaced by cleaner vehicles emitting either far fewer emissions or no emissions at all, this trend will continue.

It is readily accepted science older diesel vehicles play a part in reducing the quality of our air. The vast majority of businesses – whatever their size – agree with the principle that GM needs and wants cleaner air, but that this transition must be managed in a sensible and orderly way, and without punishing those businesses least able to afford to make the required changes. In most cases, this is costly vehicle replacement.

GMCA's current policy around the CAZ is that there should be no charging, which in the current climate is the right policy and one FSB has long lobbied for. Introducing a regressive business tax during a cost of doing business crisis, with its origins in 2020, makes no economic sense.

Even a much-reduced CAZ in terms of size would be damaging for the City Region, and yet this could still be the direction of travel ordered by Government. The effects of such a CAZ while not as far reaching in terms of number of businesses directly affected, would still serve to create an existential issue for a significant number already trading there.

It would create a two-tier economy with business costs higher there than outside the 'zone', making it less attractive to start a business there, and have a chilling effect on future investment. This would also impact on the appeal of those areas for residents as a place to live, and create further costs for businesses servicing/operating in retail and hospitality which as a sector is already battered.

The next mayor should:

- Continue to back a non-charging Clean Air Plan, and resist any plans by any Government to force a chargeable Clean Air Zone on GM.





Education and skills

Successful and growing small businesses are essential to the UK’s economic success. But only when business owners and their staff are equipped with the right skills can their enterprise grow.

Meeting the skills needs of small businesses is a key part of having a productive and growing economy, and devolution in GM is allowing the City Region to chart a new way forward for post-16 technical education – although the results will not be delivered quickly.

So what else needs to change? Small businesses still bemoan the lack of work ready skills in new starters fresh from education. Very few have any meaningful experience of work, paid or otherwise; their first day in work often being the first time in a workplace situation, and the pandemic has made a bad situation worse.

An FSB survey carried out in GM in autumn 2019 revealed a commonly held view: young adults arrive for the world of work unprepared.

In 2019, this is what businesses said:

In your experience, young adults fresh out of education arrive prepared and primed, ready for the world of work...			
Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	Totally agree		1.87%
2	Partially agree		25.23%
3	Mostly disagree		47.66%
4	Totally disagree		25.23%

We asked business the exact same question in autumn 2023, and in just four years the results show our young workers are now less prepared than ever. This has to change.

In your experience, young adults fresh out of education arrive prepared and primed, ready for the world of work...			
Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	Totally agree		0.00%
2	Partially agree	<div style="width: 22.34%; height: 15px; background-color: #e91e63;"></div>	22.34%
3	Mostly disagree	<div style="width: 40.43%; height: 15px; background-color: #9c27b0;"></div>	40.43%
4	Totally disagree	<div style="width: 37.23%; height: 15px; background-color: #c8e6c9;"></div>	37.23%

The data suggests, perhaps not surprisingly, that rather than making progress around work readiness in GM, the City Region’s businesses believe we are going backwards. While it would be easy to blame the societal impact of the pandemic for this reversal, the issue should be how to address it.

FSB would like to see the next Mayor act definitively around improving work ready skills/employment knowledge using new funding delivered for post-16 education to deliver some form of work experience. Ensuring young people leave further education equipped with at least some basic work ready skills will help give confidence to employers to recruit from younger talent pools.



What businesses are saying...

- *“I am a career coach with 30 years’ experience in recruitment and can totally state that people leaving education, at any level, are nowhere near ready, or prepared for the world of work.”*
- *“I think the majority of students are being cheated... Gaining great qualifications, gaining a great amount of debt & absolutely no idea how to present themselves professionally.”*
- *“They need experience.”*
- *“No work experience.”*
- *“They are lazy.”*
- *“More emphasis needed on vocational skills. Too much focus on ‘traditional’ academic subjects disengages many pupils.”*
- *“I find few have had part time jobs and real experience.”*
- *“A lot to do with their upbringing and inherent work ethic, professionalism, how they treat people etc.”*
- *“While the hard skills are important, we need to focus on the soft skills, particularly communication, collaboration, clarity and curiosity, to drive serious improvement in our employability.”*
- *“Education is not geared towards work skills whatsoever.”*
- *“Many young people arrive with a good education but with reduced 'life skills' than previous generations and greater difficulty in making the transition from education to work.”*
- *“I mentor young people to be ready for work and find there is little direction or understanding in preparation for work in pre-Further Education schools.”*
- *“Very few in our experience have the right attitude or aptitude for work!”*
- *“Most young people are not taught about business and the real world. They are totally unprepared and have very unrealistic expectations of working life.”*



Research shows the more encounters young people have with a business, the less likely they are to be unemployed, or classed as a NEET. At least four encounters mean they are 86% less likely to be classified as such, and can earn up to 18% more during their career.

Yet only 40% of schools offer young people this kind of encounter. Where there's a lack of work experience and life skills, young adults are more likely to struggle to transition from education to employment.

The next mayor should:

- Look at building on the 'Bridge' project, and expand the initiative in terms of scope and scale to bring its benefits to more schools.
- Launch a campaign to bring back the Saturday job, complete with a support guide/pack for small businesses around their regulatory requirements, and with further work to myth bust perceived barriers for this type of work.
- Implement an online 'match-making' work experience hub where businesses, education providers and pupils/students can be put in touch, making work experience placements easy and accessible for everyone.
- Ensure young adults learn hidden skills, such as CV writing, and work etiquette in schools and colleges to develop work readiness skills.
- Look to promote post-16 education opportunities around apprenticeships and T-levels. These routes to work must be promoted more widely to all pupils in GM, to make up for those schools failing to push anything other than the 'uni' route.
- Encourage schools and colleges to do more to promote a career in self-employment, especially for those who are elect to train in technical education where this line of work is a natural career path.



Devolution in Greater Manchester

While regional devolution may have some supporters, it also has critics. The below data chart suggests a sizeable majority of small businesses do not understand or see the potential new benefits regional devolution can offer. It's likely most have little knowledge of how devolved decision making can benefit the private sector, and unlock other indirect benefits around education, training, transport, housing – and other key areas such as business support.

14. "Devolution in Greater Manchester has benefited my business" How much do you agree with that last sentence?			
Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	Totally agree		8.70%
2	Partially agree		42.39%
3	Mostly disagree		22.83%
4	Totally disagree		26.09%

Devolution, in the words of the LGA, should result in... ‘more effective, better targeted public services, greater growth and stronger partnerships between public, private and community leaders in local areas.’

In Manchester, a city region where ‘doing things differently’ is a proud maxim, this should be addressed. GM has led the way on regional devolution, although this is something few outside politics and policy bubbles are aware of, particularly among the small business community, nor how self-governance is helping the City Region push forward in new and innovative ways courtesy of more local decision making.

With more powers of devolution recently handed over to GM by Government, the GMCA might consider how to better promote the benefits of devolution, and ultimately encourage more businesses to see GM as a forward-thinking place to start-up and grow.

Decisions affecting smaller businesses need to be judged through a small business impact assessment, to help understand the impact of a proposal on SMEs, with particular focus on the smaller end of the SME scale to include micro business – that is 1-9 staff. Decision makers should be asked to give consideration on whether the likely outcome will affect those businesses in a different way to larger businesses.

This test needs to measure and show the disproportionate costs to small businesses in time and money which policy decisions can have. Such a process in GM would help foster a culture of welcoming and inclusiveness and demonstrate empathy for a vitally important sector to the regional economy, made possible by devolved decision making.

The next mayor should:

- Seek to recognise, reward and capitalise upon the invaluable role smaller businesses play in supporting social mobility, wellbeing and fuller working lives and how through devolution they can play an increased role in that process.
- Commission and appoint a Mayoral Small Business Champion to develop the criteria for this small business filter, and apply it to all policies before they are implemented.
- Develop this project, by asking local authorities to consider having a dedicated small business champion in their senior management team where issues specifically affecting those types of business can be raised.
- To further develop this theme, implement a small/micro business champion on the Business Board able to raise issues to board level discussion.



About FSB

As experts in business, FSB offers members a wide range of vital business services, including advice, financial expertise, support and a powerful voice in Government. Its aim is to help smaller businesses achieve their ambitions. More information is available at www.fsb.org.uk

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