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Ardent Insights

From Devolution to Delivery: What a Burnham Premiership Could Mean for Transport

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS

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Introduction

With Sir Keir Starmer stepping down and Andy Burnham emerging as a leading contender to become Prime Minister, organisations across the transport and infrastructure sector are beginning to consider what a Burnham-led government could mean in practice.

While any future policy direction would ultimately depend on wider fiscal constraints, Burnham's record as Mayor of Greater Manchester offers perhaps the clearest indication yet of how transport policy could evolve under his leadership.

Unlike many national politicians, Burnham has spent the past eight years overseeing the delivery of one of the UK's most significant programmes of transport reform. Through the Bee Network, Greater Manchester has become the first city region outside London to bring buses back under local control, while integrating buses, trams and active travel into a single transport system designed to support economic growth, regeneration and improved passenger experience.



For organisations delivering transport and infrastructure projects, the significance extends well beyond buses.

If elements of the Greater Manchester model begin to influence national policy, the biggest shift may not be higher transport spending, but a different approach to how schemes are planned, prioritised and delivered.

This could mean:

- Greater influence for Mayoral Combined Authorities and city regions
- Stronger links between transport investment, housing and regeneration
- Increased focus on integrated transport networks rather than individual schemes
- Greater emphasis on delivery capability alongside political ambition

For organisations operating across transport, land, infrastructure and regeneration, understanding these potential shifts now will place them in a stronger position should the policy landscape begin to change.



Why This Matters

One of Burnham's defining characteristics as Mayor has been his focus on transport as an economic development tool rather than simply a means of moving people.

Rather than viewing transport projects in isolation, Greater Manchester has increasingly linked investment decisions to wider ambitions around housing delivery, town centre regeneration, employment growth and placemaking.

This integrated approach has helped shape investment across the city region and has become central to Burnham's political identity.

Should he enter Downing Street, it is reasonable to expect that many of these principles could begin influencing national transport policy.

However, it is equally important not to overstate the scale or pace of potential change.

Any future government would continue to operate within Treasury spending limits, existing legislative frameworks and wider political pressures. Significant reforms to planning, compulsory purchase powers or infrastructure funding would take time to develop and implement.

The more immediate shift is therefore likely to be strategic rather than financial.

Five Themes To Watch

Networks, Not Isolated Schemes

One of the defining features of Burnham's transport strategy has been its focus on building integrated networks rather than delivering standalone projects.

Future investment decisions may increasingly assess how schemes contribute to wider transport connectivity, regeneration and economic growth, rather than considering individual projects in isolation.

What could this mean for organisations?

Interchanges, stations, depots, active travel routes and local rail improvements may increasingly be considered as part of wider network strategies.

Business cases will need to demonstrate wider economic, regeneration and placemaking benefits alongside traditional transport outcomes.

Greater collaboration across the transport planning, engineering, land, stakeholder engagement and regeneration disciplines is likely to become increasingly important.

Mayors & City Regions Move Closer to the Centre

Devolution has been central to Burnham's approach throughout his time as Mayor, and a Burnham premiership would be expected to continue strengthening the role of Mayoral Combined Authorities in shaping local transport policy.

While the Department for Transport and HM Treasury would remain central to decisions to award funding, greater responsibility for identifying priorities, developing business cases and delivering programmes could increasingly sit with regional leaders and local transport authorities.

For organisations operating in the sector, understanding local political priorities and maintaining strong relationships with Combined Authorities may become just as important as engagement with Whitehall.

What could this mean for organisations?

Greater emphasis on aligning projects with regional transport strategies and local growth plans.

Increased engagement with Combined Authorities, Local Transport Authorities and regional delivery bodies during project development.

Stronger collaboration with local stakeholders to demonstrate how schemes support wider economic and community objectives.

Bus Franchising Becomes a National Conversation

Greater Manchester's introduction of bus franchising has become one of Burnham's defining policy achievements and is likely to remain central to discussions around the future of local transport.

Although franchising is already available to local authorities through existing legislation, a Burnham-led government could encourage wider adoption where local circumstances support it. That does not necessarily mean a national rollout, but it could increase momentum behind greater local control of bus services.

For organisations working across transport, this would have implications beyond bus operations alone.

What could this mean for organisations?

Operators may see increased opportunities within franchised delivery models and long-term service contracts.

Advisers could experience growing demand for support around procurement, transition planning, network design, stakeholder engagement and operational readiness.

Integrated transport planning is likely to become an increasingly important consideration as authorities seek to improve passenger experience across multiple modes.

Transport-Led Regeneration Moves Further up the Agenda

Throughout his time as Mayor, Burnham has consistently linked transport investment with housing delivery, brownfield regeneration and wider economic development.

Should that philosophy influence national policy, transport infrastructure is likely to be viewed increasingly as an enabler of regeneration rather than simply a means of improving connectivity.

Discussions around land value capture may also continue, although any wider reforms would require careful consideration to ensure they support investment without discouraging development.

What could this mean for organisations?

Station-led regeneration and transport hubs may become increasingly attractive locations for investment and development.

Projects that clearly demonstrate links between transport, housing and economic growth may be better positioned to secure political support.

Demand for expertise in land assembly, compulsory purchase, planning, stakeholder engagement and statutory powers could continue to grow as regeneration-led schemes progress.

Delivery Will Be Everything... if it's Permitted

Burnham may have bold ideas that have worked regionally, but national government is a different beast.

Land acquisition, statutory powers, planning, DCO/TWA, utilities, depots, construction capacity, supply chains, stakeholders and local government capability will all limit how far the model can be pushed beyond Greater Manchester.

What does this mean for the sector?

Promoters will need robust delivery plans, not just strategic narratives.

The contractors and consultants who can de-risk programmes – through programme management, consents strategy, stakeholder engagement and interface management – will be vital when it comes to turning ideas and ideology into real projects.

A bi-lingual approach from organisations well-versed and confident in both politics and project delivery will be strongest in a competitive field.



Understanding The Pace Of Change

Even if as expected Burnham takes residence in 10 Downing Street, meaningful policy change would take time.

Some early signals could emerge within the first six to twelve months of his tenure, while wider structural reforms would inevitably take longer to develop and implement.

Early Indicators To Watch Out For

- The appointment of a Transport Secretary with a strong focus on devolution
- Increased emphasis on integrated transport networks in government policy announcements
- Updated guidance around bus franchising and local transport powers
- Renewed discussion around city-region funding settlements
- Greater political focus on the relationship between transport, housing and regeneration

Expected Longer-Term Developments

- New capital investment programmes for regional transport
- Wider rollout of integrated ticketing across multiple transport modes
- Further devolution of rail responsibilities to regional authorities
- Continued discussion around land value capture and infrastructure funding
- Potential reforms affecting planning, compulsory purchase and wider infrastructure delivery

The speed of any reforms will depend on fiscal priorities, parliamentary time and the capacity of local authorities to deliver change, meaning evolution is likely to be gradual rather than immediate.





What This Means For Different Organisations

Promoters

Promoters should ensure that future schemes demonstrate clear alignment with regional growth strategies, housing delivery, regeneration objectives and wider transport networks. Projects that sit naturally within a broader, place-based vision are likely to attract greater political and stakeholder support.

As Combined Authorities continue to play a more prominent role, early engagement around land assembly, statutory powers and delivery strategy will become increasingly important.

Contractors

Contractors should continue to monitor opportunities across stations, interchanges, depots, active travel, local rail, tram and mass transit, alongside the supporting infrastructure needed to deliver integrated transport networks.

Investment may increasingly favour projects that contribute to regeneration and long-term network resilience rather than standalone projects which improve capacity.

Consultancies

Demand is likely to remain strong for consultancies that can bridge the gap between strategy and delivery.

Clients will continue to require support across business case development, option appraisal, integrated transport planning, funding strategies, programme management, land and property, stakeholder engagement and delivery planning.

Bus Organisations

For bus operators, the direction of travel suggests franchising will remain an important area of policy discussion.

While a nationwide rollout should not be assumed, organisations should be prepared for continued growth in franchised models, with greater emphasis on operational performance, partnership working and long-term service delivery.

Rail Organisations

Rail organisations should closely monitor how a future government approaches rail devolution and the evolving role of Great British Railways.

Greater Manchester's ambitions around local rail integration are likely to remain an influential case study when considering how regional rail services could develop elsewhere.

Highway Authorities & Road Promoters

Investment in roads will not just stop, but future schemes may face greater scrutiny regarding their contribution to wider economic, environmental and placemaking objectives.

Maintenance, resilience, safety improvements and projects that complement integrated transport networks are likely to remain priorities.

Land, Planning & Stakeholder Specialists

As transport and regeneration become increasingly interconnected, expertise in land assembly, compulsory purchase, planning, statutory powers and stakeholder engagement will continue to play a vital role in successful infrastructure delivery.

Organisations that can reduce delivery risk while helping clients navigate increasingly complex projects will be well positioned.

Developers & Regeneration Bodies

Developers should continue exploring opportunities around transport hubs, stations and key growth corridors.

Schemes that demonstrate how transport investment supports housing delivery, commercial development and town centre regeneration are likely to align more closely with evolving public sector priorities.

Investors

Investors should monitor how future governments approach regional funding models, public-private partnerships and the emerging discussions around land value capture.

While significant reform would take time, understanding how public investment priorities evolve will be important when assessing long-term infrastructure opportunities.

The Key Takeaway

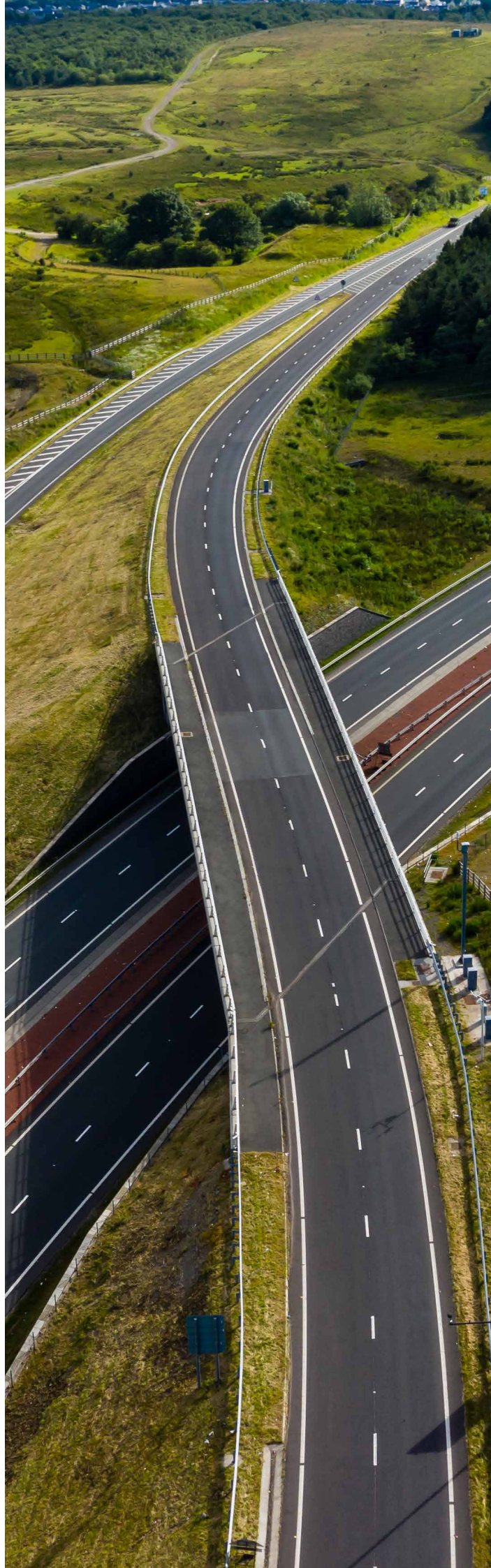
An Andy Burnham premiership would not automatically transform transport funding overnight, nor would it guarantee the nationwide rollout of every initiative introduced in Greater Manchester.

What it could do is accelerate an existing direction of travel towards greater devolution, more integrated transport planning and stronger links between infrastructure, regeneration and economic growth.

For organisations operating across transport and infrastructure, the opportunity lies in understanding where decision-making is evolving and ensuring projects are positioned to support wider place-based outcomes, not simply individual transport interventions.

Those best placed to succeed will be organisations that combine strategic insight with practical delivery expertise, working collaboratively with national, regional and local partners to deliver infrastructure that supports long-term growth.

As the policy landscape continues to evolve, staying informed, remaining adaptable and understanding how political priorities translate into project delivery will be essential.






About Ardent


Ardent supports clients across transport, infrastructure and regeneration by providing specialist expertise in land, property, planning, stakeholder engagement and consent management.


By combining strategic advice with practical delivery experience, Ardent helps public and private sector organisations unlock complex infrastructure projects, reduce delivery risk and create places that deliver lasting economic and social value.

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