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Resilience Through Multi-Level Governance: Soft Geographies in the West Midlands Conurbation

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Abstract

Cities and regions are increasingly confronted with complex social, economic, and environmental challenges that demand governance approaches capable of addressing issues across administrative boundaries. In the United Kingdom, the West Midlands conurbation exemplifies these dynamics. This study investigates how multi-level governance arrangements in the region reconstitute flexible “soft geographies” that enable territorial responses to urban challenges such as housing shortages, environmental degradation, unemployment, and inefficient public transport.

The research applies the multi-level governance framework of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to examine institutional reforms, territorial cooperation, and public management innovations in the West Midlands. The analysis draws on the case of the West Midlands Combined Authority and Local Enterprise Partnerships, highlighting their role in cross boundary strategies for economic development, housing, transport, and environmental management.

The results show that multi-level governance has enabled the development of integrated strategies that cut across conventional hard boundaries. These arrangements foster adaptive capacity by coordinating decision making, pooling resources, and aligning territorial goals with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities. While challenges remain regarding civic participation and the integration of environmental priorities, the study demonstrates that the evolution of soft geographies has enhanced regional resilience by providing flexible governance mechanisms to address systemic stresses and long term risks.

The paper contributes to theoretical foundations of resilient and sustainable urban development by illustrating how governance reforms at metropolitan scale create enabling conditions for resilient neighborhoods. It advances the argument that resilience is not only about withstanding shocks but also about building institutional and territorial arrangements that allow cities and regions to adapt, recover, and thrive.

Keywords: cross-boundary cooperation; multi-level governance; resilience; soft geographies; territorial governance.



Introduction

Urban regions across Europe face persistent and interlinked challenges such as housing shortages, environmental degradation, unemployment, inefficient transport, and socio economic inequalities. These challenges are intensified by processes of rapid urbanization, economic restructuring, and climate change. Traditional governance models anchored in rigid administrative boundaries often lack the flexibility to respond effectively to these complex issues (Bache & Flinders, 2004); (Deas & Hincks, 2017). As a result, new institutional arrangements have emerged that reconfigure territorial cooperation across local authorities, producing governance models that transcend conventional spatial limits.

While numerous studies have examined multi-level governance in European metropolitan regions as governance models for flexibility, few have explored how such arrangements foster resilience through the creation of soft territorial geographies. Existing analyses tend to focus on institutional design and coordination across administrative tiers (e.g., Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Corcaci, 2023) or economic competitiveness (Anastasiou et al., 2024), while recent European research highlights the role of functional urban areas and territorial cooperation in supporting adaptive governance and resilience (ESPON, 2020). This gap in understanding how governance reforms translate into adaptive territorial capacities that support sustainability and resilience forms the core focus of this paper. The study situates the West Midlands within comparative European debates on metropolitan resilience and sustainable territorial governance.

In the context of the United Kingdom, these developments have been particularly visible in metropolitan areas such as the West Midlands conurbation. The abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies in 2011 created a governance vacuum in regional planning (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2011). In response, the central government promoted devolved governance through the Localism Act, which led to the creation of Combined Authorities to coordinate policy across multiple municipalities (Sandford, 2018). The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), established in 2016, represents a major example of this transformation, providing decision making authority over housing, transport, and economic development for one of the UK's largest urban conurbations (West Midlands Combined Authority, 2018).

These developments resonate with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) framework on multi-level governance, which identifies three key dimensions: institutional decentralization, territorial cooperation, and public management. In the West Midlands, this has been operationalized through the devolution of planning powers, the creation of flexible "soft geographies" that cut across administrative boundaries, and the formation of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) that integrate public and private stakeholders in decision making (Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership, 2015). Soft geographies refer to functional governance spaces that extend beyond statutory boundaries, allowing actors to collaborate across administrative lines in pursuit of shared territorial and resilience objectives. They represent adaptive arenas for coordination rather than fixed jurisdictions.

The OECD framework highlights that metropolitan regions with coherent multi-level governance structures perform better in achieving sustainability and resilience outcomes (OECD, 2022). Other European research have expanded the OECD framework by integrating resilience and adaptive governance concepts. Studies on metropolitan governance under the EU Urban Agenda (ESPON, 2020) demonstrate that soft territorial cooperation mechanisms such as functional urban areas and cross-border partnerships play a decisive role in enabling resilience through flexibility and collaboration. This reinforces the relevance of examining the West Midlands as a case where institutional and territorial innovation interacts to deliver sustainability outcomes.

Proceeding with the examination, this paper situates the West Midlands case within the wider discourse on resilience and sustainable territorial development. Resilience in urban studies refers not only to the capacity of cities to withstand acute shocks, but also to their ability to adapt to

Methods

long term stresses, recover from crises, and maintain essential functions while pursuing sustainable futures (Wilson, 2015). Multi-level governance arrangements are particularly important in this context because they provide adaptive capacity through shared responsibilities, collaborative strategies, and cross boundary resource allocation (OECD, 2018).

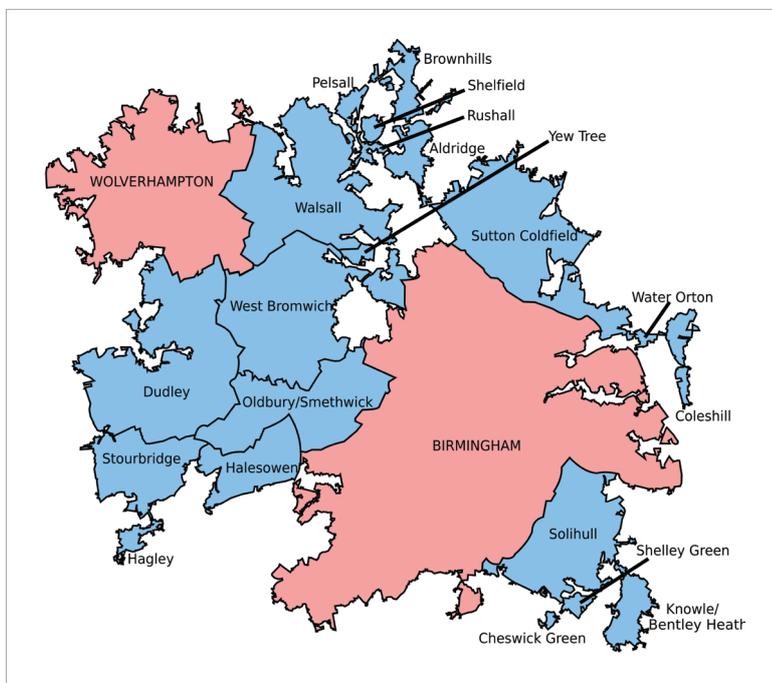
The aim of this study is to analyze how multi-level governance in the West Midlands conurbation has enabled the formation of soft geographies that contribute to resilience and sustainability. The study reviews the institutional reforms shaping governance in the region, investigates the strategies developed by the WMCA and its partners, and evaluates their role in delivering the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities (United Nations, 2016). By doing so, the paper contributes to the theoretical foundations of resilient urban development and highlights the role of governance structures in creating enabling conditions for resilient neighborhoods.

England has historically been characterized by a high degree of centralization of power within central government. This concentration of authority has contributed to a range of urban issues in large metropolitan regions that operated primarily within their individual administrative boundaries. In recent years, however, the devolution of powers to Combined Authorities has opened new opportunities for addressing urban challenges at supra local levels (Sandford, 2018).

This paper focuses on the West Midlands conurbation, which includes the cities of Birmingham, Solihull, Wolverhampton, and parts of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, and Coventry (Fig. 1) (City Metric, 2017). The map shows the six metropolitan boroughs that form the West Midlands conurbation. Birmingham and Wolverhampton are highlighted in red to denote their official city status, while Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, and Walsall are shown in blue as metropolitan boroughs without city status. Together, these administrative units constitute the functional urban core of the West Midlands Combined Authority (Wikimedia Commons, 2010). These areas are deeply interconnected and collectively face major challenges such as housing shortages, inefficient public transport, and unemployment (Bryson & Taylor, 2006). The study aims to investigate how recent developments in multi-level governance enable sustainable and resilient territorial development in this metropolitan context.

Fig. 1

Cities and metropolitan boroughs of the West Midlands conurbation (Creative commons, 2011)



This paper adopts a three-step analytical framework, drawing on the OECD multi-level governance model (OECD, 2017), to investigate how governance reforms and territorial strategies in the West Midlands conurbation contribute to sustainable and resilient territorial development. The OECD model, with its focus on institutional decentralisation, territorial geographies, and public

management, provides a conceptual lens for structuring the analysis.

Step 1: Review of multi-level governance reforms

First, we examine governance restructuring in England, focusing on the Localism Act, the creation of Combined Authorities (CAs), and the role of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). These developments are analysed through the OECD's institutional, territorial, and managerial dimensions.

Step 2: Exploration of territorial strategies

Building on these governance reforms, we analyse key strategies formulated at the conurbation level to address persistent urban challenges such as housing shortages, transport inefficiencies, unemployment, and green belt depletion. This step highlights how multi-level governance generates soft territorial geographies that allow actors to collaborate across administrative boundaries.

Step 3: Investigation of sustainability and resilience dimensions

Finally, we assess the extent to which the identified strategies incorporate sustainability and resilience objectives, with reference to Sustainable Development Goal 11 (sustainable cities and communities). This step combines OECD's governance lens with SDG benchmarks to examine both the design of strategies and their performance in practice.

The method allows for a comprehensive analysis of how soft geographies, emerging from new governance arrangements, strengthen resilience by enabling coordinated responses to systemic urban challenges. The analysis follows a methodological flow, linking governance reforms, territorial strategies, and sustainability and resilience outcomes. Therefore, even though this study is primarily conceptual, it triangulates policy documents, institutional reports, and regional strategy frameworks to derive analytical insights, following a document-based qualitative approach (Bowen, 2009). This method enables a structured evaluation of governance mechanisms without primary field data.

1. Multi-level governance reforms in England and the West Midlands

Urban resilience depends on the ability of governance systems to adapt flexibly across scales. In England, urban regions have long struggled with the highly centralized nature of governance, which has limited their capacity to address complex and interrelated challenges. The OECD identifies three dimensions of multi-level governance that are critical for building resilience: institutional decentralization, territorial geographies, and public management (OECD, 2017). This framework provides a useful lens to examine governance reforms in England and their implications for the West Midlands conurbation.

Before the governance reforms were introduced in England, metropolitan regions operated under a fragmented and highly centralised system. Local authorities worked largely in isolation, with limited mechanisms for inter-municipal coordination. Strategic planning responsibilities were distributed among overlapping agencies, leading to inconsistent policy implementation and duplication of efforts. This compartmentalised structure restricted regional problem-solving and left major cross-boundary challenges such as transport integration, housing supply, and economic disparity largely unresolved. This context set the stage for a series of governance reforms aimed at empowering local institutions and enhancing regional coordination. Devolution of institutional structure in England – The Localism Act

Rapid urbanization and intensifying economic competition in England's city regions placed growing pressure on national planning systems to decentralize authority. The Localism Act of 2011 marked a key step in strengthening the role of local governments by devolving decision making powers from central government to communities (Politics.co.uk, 2012). The Act facilitated the creation of Combined Authorities, enabling strategic collaboration across territorial boundaries. From

Results

a resilience perspective, this decentralization broadened the scope for more adaptive and context specific responses to urban issues.

Territoriality in the West Midlands region – WMCA

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) was formally established in 2016 under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. It unites constituent and non-constituent authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), and other stakeholders in decision making over transport, regeneration, and economic development. The WMCA provides an institutional space for aligning strategies across the conurbation, which includes Birmingham, Solihull, Wolverhampton, and surrounding areas. This territorial cooperation created opportunities for shared strategies across the conurbation, aligning policy solutions with the needs of a wider region (Deas & Hincks, 2017). By addressing challenges collectively, the WMCA supports the resilience of the wider metropolitan region through shared objectives and coordinated policies (Deas & Hincks, 2017).

Public management – Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)

Local Enterprise Partnerships, introduced in 2011, were designed to foster collaboration between local authorities and businesses to stimulate sustainable economic growth. Six LEPs operate in the West Midlands, playing a vital role in co shaping policies alongside the WMCA (Black Country LEP, 2015). Their engagement illustrates the adaptive capacity of governance systems to mobilize resources from both public and private actors. From a resilience standpoint, the LEPs embody the collaborative ethos of soft governance, pooling expertise and investment to strengthen regional responses to socioeconomic and environmental challenges.

Review of multi-level governance in the West Midlands

Taken together, the devolution of powers via the Localism Act, the creation of the WMCA, and the establishment of LEPs demonstrate a significant reconfiguration of governance in the West Midlands (Fig. 2). These institutional reforms embody the OECD's model of multi-level governance, redistributing powers and resources across scales and reinforcing the importance of territorial cooperation. The cooperative framework constitutes a form of soft geography, enabling more flexible and adaptive governance practices that enhance the resilience of the conurbation (Midlands Engine, 2016).

2. Territorial strategies addressing urban challenges in the conurbation

Resilience in metropolitan regions is most directly challenged by persistent urban issues such as housing shortages, inadequate public transport, and economic restructuring. In the West Midlands, decades of industrial decline and underinvestment have significantly eroded living standards (Lupton & Power, 2004). In response, the WMCA and its partners have formulated territorial strategies that operate across hard administrative boundaries. These strategies reflect core principles of resilience by fostering integration, flexibility, and long-term adaptation. Through multi-level governance, shared challenges are addressed collectively, strengthening the region's capacity to withstand and adapt to ongoing pressures.

Urban challenges in the conurbation

Historically shaped by industrial growth and subsequent decline, the West Midlands has struggled with unemployment, low investment, and uneven development. The West Midlands conurbation of 4 million residents faces interlinked challenges of housing shortages, inefficient transport, green belt depletion and unemployment above the national average (Barker, 2017; Revolvly LLC, 2015). These issues illustrate the vulnerabilities of the region but also its potential for systemic transformation. Strategies developed through multi-level governance aim to respond to these vulnerabilities by integrating housing, transport, and economic development within a territorial framework.

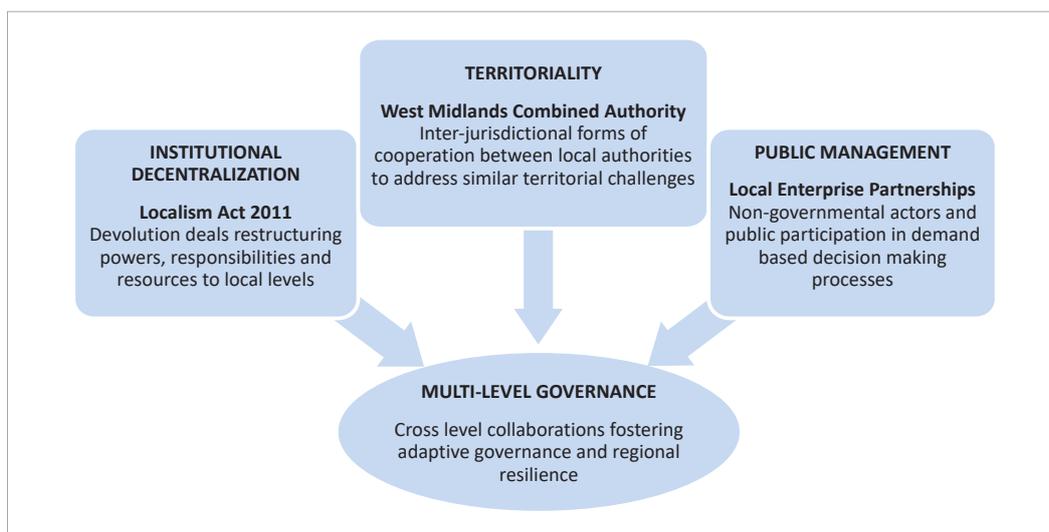


Fig. 2

Multi-level governance arrangement in the West Midlands as per the OECD model (Author)

Territorial strategies in the West Midlands

To address these challenges, the WMCA and its partners have developed strategies that transcend local boundaries. Several strategies illustrate how resilience is being institutionalized across the conurbation:

- WMCA Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) – Sets long term goals for inclusive growth, job creation, housing, and low carbon technology development (WMCA, 2017).
- Greater Birmingham & Solihull SEP (GBS SEP) – Pursues innovation, skills development, and sustainable growth across Birmingham, Solihull, and surrounding areas (GBS LEP, 2016).
- West Midlands Strategic Transport Plan – Outlines a multi-tiered transport system integrating metropolitan rail, rapid transit, and smart mobility to enhance connectivity and reduce vulnerability to congestion (Network West Midlands, 2018).
- HS2 Growth Strategy – Aims to harness national investment in high speed rail to catalyze regional resilience through improved accessibility, employment opportunities, and skill growth (WMCA, 2017).
- WMCA Environment Strategy (2014–2019) – Promotes environmental sustainability, reduced carbon emissions, and improved air quality, thereby directly addressing ecological dimensions of resilience (WMCA, 2017).

The selection of housing, transport, and economic strategies reflects sectors where supra-local coordination is most advanced and data availability strongest. Environmental and social dimensions, such as green infrastructure and community well-being, are acknowledged but remain less institutionally mature (Kippin & Morphet, 2023). This focus allows clearer assessment of governance mechanisms shaping core metropolitan resilience functions. These strategies demonstrate how theories of soft geographies of cooperation have been reconfigured to address shared challenges. Their territorial focus reflects an understanding that resilience cannot be secured by individual authorities alone but requires cross-boundary approaches.

3. Multi-level territorial governance approach to address sustainability and resilience

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities, underscores the importance of integrating sustainability and resilience into urban planning. Multi-level governance in the West Midlands provides the framework through which local challenges are connected to these global objectives.

Sustainable and resilient development

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 calls for cities and human settlements to be inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (United Nations, 2016). The West Midlands conurbation's challenges—housing shortages, transport inefficiencies, unemployment, and green belt depletion mirror the targets of SDG 11. Evaluating the conurbation's strategies against these global benchmarks highlights how multi-level governance contributes to both sustainability and resilience. Resilience in this context refers not only to environmental adaptation but also to institutional flexibility and economic diversification that enable the region to withstand shocks and sustain long-term development.

Linking local challenges to global sustainable goals

The flexibility of multi-level governance in the West Midlands fosters synergies between institutional reforms and sustainability objectives while strengthening resilience. By combining the capacities of different authorities, the WMCA supports adaptive governance, enabling systemic responses to social, economic, and environmental stresses (Wilson, 2015). This adaptability is central to resilience as it allows strategies to evolve in response to shocks and long term trends. Fig. 3 illustrates how multi-level governance acts as a bridge, linking local urban challenges in the West Midlands to SDG 11 priorities through collective territorial strategies.

This relationship demonstrates how governance reforms translate local concerns into strategies with global relevance, embedding sustainability and resilience into the region's development trajectory.

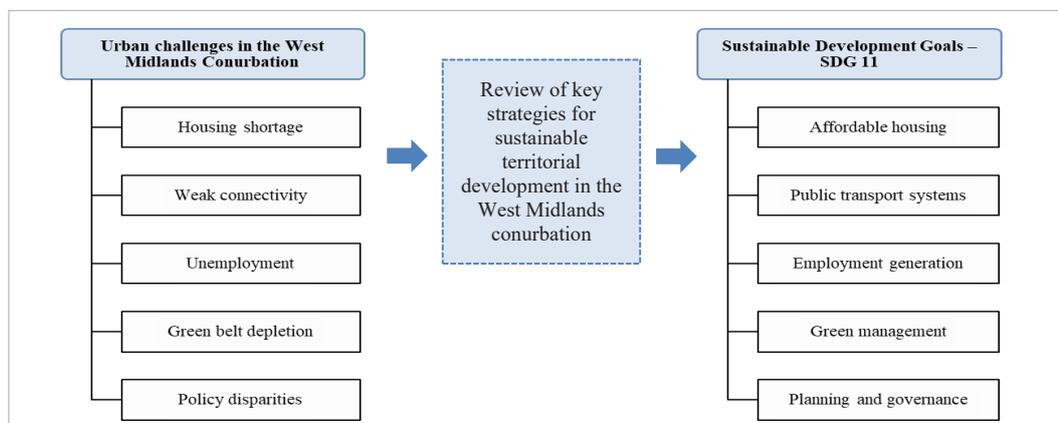
Sustainable territorial development in the West Midlands conurbation

The restructuring of government through devolution has transformed hard administrative boundaries into softer territorial objectives (Bache & Flinders, 2004). These arrangements enable the West Midlands to pursue cross-boundary solutions to housing, transport, and environmental issues, leveraging regional synergies to achieve sustainability and resilience at the metropolitan scale. Strategies such as the SEP, Strategic Transport Plan, and Environment Strategy illustrate how targets related to housing, employment, climate action, and air quality are embedded in governance frameworks. The emergence of these territorial spaces demonstrates how governance reforms enhance resilience by integrating adaptive capacity and sustainability into regional development.

At the territorial level, strategies devised under this governance model safeguard the implementation of sustainable development objectives. They foster cooperation across local boundaries, improve connectivity, mobilize resources, and ensure that urban development aligns with environmental and social priorities. By combining local targets within a broader framework, the West Midlands is able to leverage regional synergies that enhance both sustainability and resilience.

Fig. 3

Multi-level governance delivering sustainable territorial development (Author)



Performance of the WMCA strategies in delivering resilience and sustainability

To evaluate how effectively the WMCA strategies have delivered on sustainability and resilience goals, it is useful to consider external assessments that systematically review regional progress. Sustainability West Midlands (SWM) is the region's officially recognised sustainability champion and advisory body that regularly monitors the performance of local authorities, businesses, and combined authorities against sustainability indicators. Its benchmarking framework, first introduced in 2017, represents one of the earliest regional attempts to link governance reform with measurable resilience outcomes. The exercise assessed nine English Combined Authorities on their strategic alignment with sustainability goals, institutional capacity, and delivery performance. Comparable frameworks developed by the OECD (2022) and the European Commission's Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities also similarly emphasize on multi-level coordination and evaluate the institutional and governance readiness of cities to accelerate transitions toward climate neutrality and resilience (European Commission, 2024), which similarly assesses the governance and institutional readiness of cities to accelerate climate neutrality and resilience transitions. Positioning Sustainability West Midlands (SWM)'s assessment within this evolving European context highlights its pioneering role and continued relevance beyond the UK.

The results of SWM's benchmarking (2017) showed that the WMCA had embedded sustainability across its strategic portfolio while building resilience through carbon reduction, green infrastructure, and productivity measures. However, the integration of these principles was uneven across sectors. The benchmarking also evaluated governance maturity across leadership, resource mobilization, and stakeholder engagement. The West Midlands performed strongly in strategic coordination and low-carbon innovation, reflecting the influence of multi-level governance in aligning territorial priorities. However, it showed moderate performance in social inclusion and community participation. These findings underline the need for continued institutional innovation and stronger alignment between sustainability objectives and civic engagement mechanisms.

Although gaps remain in terms of devolved powers and resources, the findings confirm that multi-level governance has strengthened the region's adaptive capacity. Embedding sustainability and resilience as guiding principles marks a significant step in shaping long term territorial development. The strategies developed by the WMCA and LEPs align with several targets of Sustainable Development Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities (United Nations, 2016). For example, the Strategic Transport Plan addresses mobility and air quality, the Environment Strategy tackles carbon reduction, and the economic plans promote employment and skills development. These contributions are summarized in **Table 1**.

Strategy	Key Territorial Geography	Resilience / Sustainability Contributions
WMCA SEP	Birmingham, Solihull, Coventry, Wolverhampton	500,000 jobs, 1.9 million houses, skills development, low carbon innovation (WMCA, 2017)
GBS SEP	Birmingham, Solihull, East Staffordshire, Cannock Chase, Lichfield, Tamworth, Redditch, Bromsgrove, Wyre Forest	250,000 private sector jobs, inclusive growth, housing supply, enhanced connectivity (GBS LEP, 2016)
Strategic Transport Plan	Birmingham, Solihull, Black Country, Coventry	Integrated transport, reduction in car usage, improved cycling infrastructure (WMCA, 2017)
HS2 Growth Strategy	Birmingham, Solihull	50,000 jobs, 2,000 apprenticeships, improved accessibility, business support (WMCA, 2019)
Environment Strategy	Birmingham, Solihull, Black Country, Coventry	Carbon reduction, energy efficiency, waste reduction, recycling (WMCA, 2017)

Table 1

Selected WMCA strategies and their sustainability and resilience targets

These strategies illustrate how multi-level governance has generated soft geographies that foster adaptive capacity. By integrating local and supra local objectives, the West Midlands conurbation has developed a framework for resilient territorial development. The alignment of territorial strategies with sustainability objectives such as carbon reduction, transport integration, and housing supply that demonstrate progress towards SDG 11 targets. At the same time, resilience is strengthened through adaptive governance, cross boundary cooperation, and economic diversification.

The SWM benchmarking (2017) confirms these findings, noting extensive good practice on sustainability and resilience. However, it also highlights the absence of new devolved powers and funding as a barrier to fully realizing local priorities. Thus, while multi-level governance has created a framework for resilient territorial development, further institutional and civic engagement reforms remain necessary.

Discussion

The West Midlands conurbation illustrates how multi-level governance reforms can reshape urban governance in ways that advance both resilience and sustainable territorial development. These reforms represent a process of systemic transformation, whereby governance structures evolve from hierarchical, sector-based arrangements to adaptive, multi-actor systems capable of responding dynamically to territorial challenges. This adaptive institutional design strengthens the region's long-term resilience by embedding flexibility and learning into governance processes. The creation of the West Midlands Combined Authority, together with the integration of Local Enterprise Partnerships, has similarly established a new institutional tier of governance that mediates between central and local levels. This adaptive layer enables collaboration across administrative boundaries, resource pooling, and the alignment of strategic objectives in areas such as economic growth, housing, transport, and environmental management (Deas and Hincks, 2017; West Midlands Combined Authority, 2018).

These governance arrangements represent a shift from rigid "hard" geographies to more flexible "soft" geographies, which are not bound by statutory limits but instead adapt to functional realities such as labor markets, housing needs, and commuting patterns (Shaw and Jones, 2017). Such flexibility is central to resilience, as it allows territories to respond dynamically to emerging challenges. In the West Midlands, this has been demonstrated by the ability of strategies such as the Strategic Transport Plan and the HS2 Growth Strategy to address cross boundary issues that no single local authority could resolve alone. Comparable patterns have been observed in other European metropolitan regions where multi-level governance has strengthened strategic coordination such as the Metropolitan Area of Lyon and the Randstad Region (OECD, 2022; Moore-Cherry et al., 2022; Zimmermann & Feiertag, 2022). These examples provide a useful comparative backdrop for interpreting the West Midlands case and underscores that the West Midlands' experience resonates with a broader European trend toward adaptive, network-based metropolitan governance.

The analysis also shows that resilience is not only about the capacity to withstand shocks, but also about the ability to address long term stresses through institutional and territorial innovation (Wilson, 2015). By embedding sustainability goals such as carbon reduction, low carbon innovation, and air quality improvements into regional strategies, the WMCA is beginning to align its development trajectory with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (United Nations, 2016). This demonstrates how governance reforms can provide a pathway for embedding resilience within broader urban and regional development frameworks.

Nevertheless, limitations remain. First, while economic and infrastructural objectives are strongly embedded in the WMCA strategies, environmental and social priorities are less consistently integrated. The emphasis on economic competitiveness risks overshadowing the need for robust environmental safeguards and equitable social outcomes (Sustainability West Midlands, 2017).

Second, opportunities for civic engagement in shaping these territorial strategies remain limited. Although LEPs involve private sector and stakeholder participation, stronger mechanisms are required to incorporate local communities into decision making processes. Without meaningful civic participation, resilience risks being framed primarily as an institutional or economic goal, rather than as a holistic outcome for communities (Brown, 2015).

Policy implications emerging from this study point to three priorities for metropolitan regions: first, strengthening mechanisms for inter-authority data sharing to support joint decision-making; second, embedding resilience indicators within strategic plans; and third, expanding participatory governance structures that include community and civil-society actors (ESPON, 2020; Tasan-Kok & Baeten, 2022).

Despite these challenges, the West Midlands experience provides valuable theoretical insights into the relationship between governance and resilience. The case demonstrates that resilience is not only a matter of infrastructure or technology, but also of governance arrangements that are capable of coordinating across scales and fostering adaptive capacity. The reconstitution of soft geographies through multi-level governance thus provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how metropolitan regions can create enabling conditions for resilient, sustainable urban development.

The case of the West Midlands demonstrates how multi-level governance reforms can provide a foundation for resilient and sustainable territorial development in metropolitan regions. By creating new institutional arrangements such as the WMCA and fostering cross-boundary cooperation through Local Enterprise Partnerships, governance in the region has moved beyond rigid statutory geographies toward more adaptive, flexible “soft” geographies. This flexibility has enabled the alignment of strategies across housing, transport, economic development, and environmental management, thereby addressing complex urban challenges that transcend local boundaries.

The analysis highlights that such governance arrangements contribute to resilience by coordinating territorial strategies for housing, transport, economic development, and environmental management. By aligning these strategies with sustainability objectives and the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 11, the West Midlands case illustrates how metropolitan governance can create enabling conditions for resilient territorial development.

At the same time, the findings point to areas that require further development. Civic engagement in decision making remains limited, and environmental priorities are not yet embedded as strongly as economic ones. Addressing these gaps will be essential for ensuring that resilience is pursued as a holistic objective that integrates social, environmental, and economic dimensions. For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of maintaining continuity and coordination across administrative levels. Strengthening the institutional capacity of combined authorities and ensuring that sustainability targets are embedded in funding frameworks can enhance long-term policy coherence. Mechanisms for citizen participation, regional foresight forums, and community climate assemblies can be integrated within metropolitan planning processes to ensure that resilience strategies reflect local needs. Establishing inter-authority task forces on housing, mobility, and green infrastructure would further support systemic transformation by linking policy domains that are often treated separately. Together, these measures can help translate the principles of multi-level governance into tangible, citizen-driven outcomes for metropolitan resilience.

Overall, the West Midlands case provides theoretical and practical insights into how soft geographies and multi-level governance can underpin resilience. It suggests that future research and policy should focus on strengthening civic participation and deepening environmental integration within metropolitan governance, thereby enhancing the capacity of urban regions to adapt, recover, and thrive in the face of both shocks and long term stresses. As other metropolitan regions

Conclusions

confront similar challenges, the experience of the West Midlands offers important lessons on how multi-level governance can create enabling conditions for resilient, sustainable urban futures. Future research should compare the West Midlands with other European metropolitan regions undergoing similar devolution reforms to evaluate how soft geographies evolve over time. Such comparative analysis would deepen understanding of how multi-level governance can systematically enhance metropolitan resilience across different national contexts.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools

During the preparation of this article, the author used ChatGPT to support language editing and improve text clarity. The author independently reviewed and revised all content and assumes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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