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Place-based collaborative opportunities and challenges for public procurement of innovation

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Executive Summary

Public procurement represents a significant and underutilised opportunity for local governments to stimulate inclusive growth and innovation, address socio-economic goals, develop firms, and enable the transformative power of emerging technologies specific to the *needs of the place*. This Research Brief examines how public procurement can be deployed as a strategic approach to meet *place-based needs* at a local level when public resources are severely limited, and how public organisations can create new opportunities and mechanisms for collaboration to enhance **public procurement of innovation**.

In the UK, particularly with an ongoing devolution in England, there is a growing complexity in the territorial dimensions of public procurement as a policy instrument. Firstly, drawing on recent academic literature and policy documents, we review recent procurement policies in the UK, including those of devolved administrations and regions in England. Secondly, we will discuss opportunities and challenges for local governments focusing on the issues of public procurement of innovation to create social values. Thirdly, we will build a conceptual framework of an *innovation-public value ecosystem* with examples of recent and ongoing place-based collaborations in Birmingham and the West Midlands region in England.

By clustering innovative customers and suppliers, public procurement would be able to have a dynamic effect on the regional innovation ecosystem and regional economies more broadly. As an exemplar of such transformative processes using public procurement as a policy tool, an illustration of the “West Midlands Innovation Programme” (WMIP)’s *Digital Innovation in Public Services* (DIPS) presents how a region can take ownership and develop its regional ecosystem, creating values through procuring innovation with an Innovation procurement partnership model.

Introduction

There is increasing policy and practitioner interest in the strategic potential of public procurement in innovation and industrial strategies, social development, competitiveness and sustainability agenda (Billing, 2024). Public procurement refers to “a process used to plan and organise public-private interactions that create or deliver the goods and services needed to achieve policy goals and deliver public value” (Uyarra et al., 2019). Public procurement encompasses a variety of institutions, sectors and professions (e.g. policing, education, construction, IT, transportation, health, and social care services, sustainable development) at multiple levels (local, regional, national, and international). Public procurement takes several different forms, including “sole procurement by individual anchor organisations”, “procurement at higher tiers of government”, “local and national collaborations”, and “quasi-regional procurement” (Parker and Liddle, 2024).

The potential of public procurement to act as a “demand-side stimulant” for employment creation and business growth at the regional level has been identified in recent studies (Day and Merkert, 2021; Eckersley et al., 2023; Uyarra et al., 2020). Local governments play a special role in procurement (Dale-Clough, 2015;) – this is partly because local government procurement spending is a large source of expenditure in the local economy, often the largest. Public procurement may represent a significant and underutilised opportunity for local governments to stimulate inclusive growth, innovation, address socio-economic goals, develop domestic firms, and enable the transformative power of emerging technologies specific to the needs of the place. Public procurement is also seen as a tool that

enables the supply of net zero goods, works, and services to procure “local net zero solutions” (Sugar et al., 2022; Walker and Brammer, 2009).

To design and implement “place-based procurement” (Day and Merkert, 2021), tensions have existed between broader social values and narrower economic and market objectives of public procurement. In the UK, in August 2022, the Local Government Association published its response in the form of the “National Procurement Strategy”¹ on how local governments in England might better deliver both economic and social value to their communities (LGA, 2022a). According to LGA, local governments’ spending exceeded £70 billion annually in 2021. To support the delivery of the “National Procurement Strategy” for local government and enhance the value of innovation, the LGA published “Innovation Roadmap - A Guide to the Procurement of Innovative Solutions” (LGA, 2022b). Recent national policy such as the Green Paper, “Transforming Public Procurement” (2020), is expected to drive broader objectives at a local level to include wider economic, social or environmental benefits. The most recent legislative changes, like the Procurement Act 2023 (which took full effect in February 2025), introduces new ways for contracting authorities to innovate, drive social value, and streamline procurement, replacing outdated regulations with a more efficient, transparent, and inclusive framework (Uyarra and Shah, 2025).²

Despite a series of recent changes and developments, key challenges remain. Public procurement is still seen as the process that hinders or halts innovation’s successful adoption and scale rather than as a driver of innovation. We should note that local governments across the UK are facing

¹ [National Procurement Strategy for Local Government in England 2022 | Local Government Association](#)

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/54/contents>

increasing pressure to deliver services while managing tight budgets driven by recent cost and demand pressures. This is combined with a long-standing funding reduction. Following the global financial crisis in 2008, since 2010, local councils have faced the challenge of fiscal constraints due to the UK government having substantially reduced their funding.³ This has significantly impacted procurement as a greater focus on cost criteria drives the public sector's buying behaviour and weighs decisions about the proposal (Dale-Clough, 2015).

This Research Brief examines how public procurement can be deployed as a strategic approach to meet *place-based needs* at a local level when public resources are limited and how public organisations can create new opportunities and mechanisms for collaboration to enhance *public procurement of innovation*. Firstly, drawing on recent academic literature and policy documents, we review the territorial dimension of recent procurement policies in the UK, including those of the devolved administrations and regions in England. Secondly, we will discuss opportunities and challenges for local governments focusing on the issues of public procurement of innovation to create social values. Thirdly, we will build a conceptual framework of an evolving *innovation-public value ecosystem* with examples of recent and ongoing place-based collaborations in Birmingham and the West Midlands region in England (see also IPEC Research Brief by [Parke, 2024a](#), [2024b](#); [Rafique, 2025](#); [Rafique and Yuan, 2025](#)). The paper concludes with future research agendas.

Regionality of Public Procurement in the UK

Dale-Clough (2015) highlights how *places* vary in terms of “procurement regulations and policies, the local roles of politicians, the professionalisation of procurement and relationships with supplier and markets”. In the UK, procurement rules and practices vary across the country. The devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales can develop their own initiatives, including the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, and a series of procurement policy documents. The UK government has also encouraged procurement to drive economic, environmental and social well-being through a series of national legislation, e.g. the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 (UK Government, 2012) and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (UK Government, 2015), followed by the Procurement Act 2023, which took full effect in February 2025 (see Table 1 on the next page for an overview).

In terms of the “territorial dimension” of public procurement as a policy instrument, based on a study based on the analysis of 90,000 contracts of local governments across the UK, Eckersley et al. (2023) show that Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish councils are more likely to select suppliers based within their territories compared with their counterparts in England. The legislative and policy changes precipitated by Brexit could accelerate a trend towards “more regional sourcing” (Eckersley et al. 2023) in the UK, potentially with wider economic, social or environmental benefits.

The English Devolution White Paper, published in December 2024, further accelerates the devolution of power and decision-making to local governments in England. As Eckersley et al. (2023) argue,

³ The central government grants were cut by 40% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20, from £46.5bn to £28.0bn (2023/24 prices). [Local government funding in England | Institute for Government](#)

Table 1: Recent public procurement policy instruments in the UK/England and Devolved Administrations

The UK	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012		The Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014	The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.	The Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy document (2014; 2019) ⁶
The Public Contracts Regulations 2015; The Public Procurement Regulations 2016		Scottish Procurement Strategy (2017)	Wales Procurement Policy Statement (2015; 2021) ⁵	
The Procurement Act 2023		Public Procurement Strategy 2023-2028 (2023) ⁴		

“governance rescaling” through recent devolution and increased local political leadership in England (e.g. Mayoral Combined Authorities) may also be contributing towards varied “regionality” in local government procurement strategies and practices. Over the last decade, Combined Authorities (CA) in England have been set up to improve their region’s economies. A CA is a legal body set up using national legislation that enables a group of two or more local councils to collaborate and make collective decisions across council boundaries. The creation of a CA means that member councils can be “more ambitious in their joint working and can take advantage of powers and resources devolved to them from national government”⁷. Parker and Liddle (2024) identify a diverse and disconnected set of practices in local government procurement across English regions in the complex spatial governance systems in the UK. They argue that more “collaborative public procurement approaches” are required across local governments and between local, regional and central governments.

Pace-based public procurement: procuring innovation in the public value ecosystem

Public procurement is increasingly seen as a key means of fostering innovation, particularly nurturing regional innovation (Uyarra et al., 2019). The IPEC Research Briefing shows that local procurement enhances community-level infrastructure and applied technological solutions, particularly with Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) (Deng et al., 2025). With the “territorial responsibility” of local governments encompassing both economic well-being and quality of life of local residents, local public procurement of innovation would help align regional innovation efforts with broader policy objectives. For instance, public procurement of innovation at the local level will respond to place-based societal challenges such as community energy requirements and a need related to local demographic changes by addressing “unmet

⁴ [Public procurement strategy: 2023 to 2028 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/public-procurement-strategy-2023-to-2028/pages/introduction/) [Accessed 20 Feb. 2025].
⁵ [Wales procurement policy statement \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/topics/procurement/public-procurement-policy-statement/)[Accessed 20 Feb. 2025].
⁶ <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/topics/procurement/public-procurement-policy-northern-ireland> [Accessed 20 Feb. 2025].
⁷ While established by Parliament, CAs are locally owned and have to be initiated and supported by the councils involved. <https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/devolution/devolution-online-hub/devolution-explained/combined-authorities> [Accessed 20 Feb. 2025].

need and market failure” in advance of national governments (Dale-Clough, 2015).

Innovation is defined by the “Public Contracts Regulations 2015” as:

“the implementation of a new or significantly improved product, service or process, including but not limited to production, building or construction processes, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations, including with the purpose of helping to solve societal challenges or to support the Europe 2012 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.”

In recent years, growing interest in public procurement to achieve a broader set of policy goals to meet public and social values has been well documented (Jain et al., 2020; Selviaridis et al., 2023). For example, Scotland has been known for its policy focused on “social procurement” (Roy et al., 2024). At the sub-regional level in England, for example, municipalities such as Preston in Lancashire⁸ and Knowsley in the Liverpool City region have used procurement as a way of the strategic approach to local transformation where “anchor institutions” (see [Parke, 2024a](#)) use their buying power to ensure that benefits are captured locally or within the relevant region. Selviaridis et al. (2023) examine how public

procurement in anchor institutions promotes social value creation through 17 local cases in England. At the national level, in the “Transforming Public Procurement” Green Paper (Cabinet Office, 2020), the UK government presented a message that commercial teams do not have to select the cheapest bid and that they can design evaluation criteria to “include wider economic, social or environmental benefits”.⁹ Following this, the “Levelling up White Paper” (2022) included plans to put “social value” at the heart of government spending and to simplify procurement processes, making it easier for small businesses and social enterprises to bid for and win public contracts.¹⁰

Osborne et al. (2022) developed a conceptual framework of the “public service ecosystem” where “value” is delivered across multiple (macro, meso, micro, sub-micro) levels (Osborne et al. 2022). While the concept can be applied to an analysis of procurement policy (see Roy et al., 2024), to better understand processes of place-based *public procurement of innovation*, we need to conceptualise *public-private interactions of value creation* set in an innovation ecosystem. In the following section, we will examine the recent evolution of a regional innovation ecosystem in the West Midlands region by focusing on the design, implementation and evaluation of the “West Midlands Innovation Programme” (WMIP)¹¹.

⁸ The “Preston Model” is a term applied to how the council, its anchor institutions and other partners are implementing the principles of Community Wealth Building within Preston and the wider Lancashire area. See Preston City Council (undated). What is Preston Model? Webpage: <https://www.preston.gov.uk/article/1339/What-is-Preston-Model> [Accessed 22.03.2024]

⁹ Cabinet Office (2020), Transforming Public Procurement https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fd77b11e90e076630958ecc/Transforming_public_procurement.pdf [Accessed 22.03.2024]

¹⁰ The Levelling up White Paper states: “... will legislate to put social value at the heart of government spending – weaving a thread of social improvement and civic responsibility through the UK Government’s £300bn annual expenditure on procurement.” <https://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/posts/2022/08/public-procurements-role-in-innovation-productivity-and-societal-challenges/#:~:text=The%20recently%20published%20Levelling%20Up%20White%20Paper%20includes%20plans%20to,to%20bid%20for%20and%20win> [Accessed 22.03.2024]

¹¹ The evaluation was conducted by a team at City-REDI. See <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/the-west-midlands-as-a-regional-test-bed-for-innovation-policy-and-support/> [Accessed 22.03.2024]

Public procurement of innovation in an evolving regional ecosystem – lessons from the West Midlands region

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) was established in 2016 as one of the mayoral combined authorities in England. The West Midlands Local Industrial Strategy¹² was published in 2019 as a long-term plan to increase regional productivity. It was locally led and developed in partnership with the government, aligned to the national Industrial Strategy (2018), which aimed to “create an economy that boosts productivity and earning power throughout the UK”.

The West Midlands Local Industrial Strategy set out how the West Midlands would:

- Meet the Future of Mobility Grand Challenge as the centre of transport innovation in the UK
- develop new market opportunities in data-driven health and life sciences, modern services, and through the application of creative techniques and technologies in future industries
- build on the five foundations of productivity, including targeted action on skills, housing and transport, with plans to drive up levels of business innovation and the commercialisation of research and development
- make sure all communities can contribute to and benefit from economic prosperity

The Local Industrial Strategy resulted in the “West Midlands Innovation Framework”. To help deliver the West Midlands Innovation Framework, the “West Midlands Innovation Programme” (WMIP) was launched in 2019 aimed “to drive up levels of demand-led business innovation across all areas of the region”.¹³ The programme was designed around five pillars set out in the framework: Networks and linkages, Investment programmes, Talent, Intelligence and Culture.

The WMIP presents a model of procuring innovation as interactions between public sector services, local SMEs and anchor institutions aiming for demand-led business innovation and public value creation. An early assessment of the WMIP points out that the WMIP was seen to “open doors by identifying challenges faced by the public sector” (Bramley et al. 2022). The WMIP helped to provide a “home-grown solution, intellectual property and products that can be provided within the region”, thereby creating additional business opportunities that support the wider regional economy. Specific projects under the WMIP provide good practice examples of “demand-led approaches” to the region’s innovation ecosystem by providing support for businesses and other stakeholders to be able to take innovative approaches.

Digital Innovation in Public Services (DIPS)¹⁴ is a project supported by WMIP as a demand-led policy approach as part of a scoping study funded through the WMCA and Innovation Alliance for the West Midlands. Innovative businesses in the West Midlands had identified “procurement into the public sector as being one of the largest hurdles” they encountered. To tackle this challenge, DIPS supported Birmingham City Council’s work with innovative procurement to go beyond “approved suppliers” so that tech SMEs can

¹² [West Midlands Local Industrial Strategy - GOV.UK](#) [Accessed 22.03.2024]

¹³ [The West Midlands Innovation Ecosystem](#) [Accessed 24.02.2025]

¹⁴ Innovation Alliance for the West Midlands (undated) Digital Innovation in Public Services. Webpage: <https://innovationwm.co.uk/wmip/projects/digital-innovation-in-public-services/> [Accessed 22.03.2024]

access City Council contracts. The DIPS project has been developed and put into practice in collaboration with Birmingham City University to provide evidence of how innovations in the public sector can be encouraged and embedded.

The *innovation partnership model* is proposed to resolve the challenge for innovation procurement by wrapping up in one procurement process the “appointment of one or more innovation partners with an option for the contracting authority to purchase the innovative supply, service or works developed”. The pathways of the *Innovation partnership*¹⁵ procurement model are presented as follows:

Figure 1: DIPS Innovation partnership procurement model (Source: Innovation Alliance)¹⁶

Direct Pathway



Showcase Pathway (Pilot Model)



¹⁵ [Digital Innovation in Public Services – Innovation Alliance for the West Midlands](#) [Accessed 24.02.2025]

¹⁶ “Better, Digital Innovation in Public Services”. Interreg Europe, <https://innovationwm.co.uk/wmip/projects/digital-innovation-in-public-services/> [Accessed 22.03.2024]

This approach enables the local authority to reduce exploitation from large national corporations, meaning “they can pay less and do more with their budgets”, benefiting the regional economy of SMEs with more opportunities to “enter previously closed supply chains, enabling their business growth and increasing GVA for the West Midlands”.¹⁷ The DIPS pilot project has now been incorporated into the larger DIATOMIC (Digital InnovAtion Transf OrMative Change) Accelerator project to support innovation in public procurement, being led by Connected Places Catapult (CPC) in conjunction with other anchor institutions, including Aston University, Birmingham City Council, Birmingham City University, Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, and the University of Birmingham.¹⁸ This comprises the West Midlands Innovation Accelerator Programme (2022-2025) and other regional projects.¹⁹

It is noteworthy that Birmingham City Council adopted a social value policy in 2013, which considers how proposed procurement might improve the relevant area’s economic, social and environmental well-being. Social value has been used as one of the tools that helps the council award contracts to businesses and organisations. This is illustrated in the case study of East Birmingham by Conrad Parke ([Parke 2024b](#)) at the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES)²⁰, who manages the Birmingham Anchor Network with the Birmingham City Council.

In 2021, Birmingham City Council spent £194,619,328 in its surrounding areas to

“improve the social value of its commissioning and procurement”. As of 2021, in terms of the procurement spend from the Birmingham City Council, 79% is spent within the West Midlands, with 56% being spent within Birmingham itself. The potential value of public procurement for decarbonisation and transition to net zero is highlighted by Annum Rafique (Rafique 2025), who draws on a study on the social housing retrofit in the West Midlands region. The analysis shows that many contracts are awarded to suppliers outside the immediate local areas of the contracting authorities in the West Midlands (Rafique and Yuan, 2025). There appears to be conflicting evidence concerning the local value of public procurement depending on the sector and the nature of the supply chain.²¹

Discussion and conclusion

In the UK, particularly with an ongoing devolution in England, there is a growing complexity in the “territorial dimensions” of public procurement as a policy instrument. This Research Brief examined how public procurement can be deployed as a strategic approach to meet *place-based needs* at a local level, and how public sector organisations can create new opportunities and mechanisms for collaboration to enhance *public procurement of innovation*.

Malcolm Harbour, one of the co-authors of “The Art of the Possible”²² and the chair of IPEC Research, argues that “strategic public procurement” would help position Birmingham and the West Midlands as “a leading

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ <https://cp.catapult.org.uk/programme/innovation-in-the-west-midlands> [Accessed 22.03.2024]

¹⁹ <https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/economy-and-innovation/west-midlands-innovation/west-midlands-innovation-accelerator> [Accessed 22.02.2025]

²⁰ Building on the principles of Community Wealth Building, the CLES has been developing a model where ‘anchor institutions’ can play a defining role in creating and reinforcing local economic ties. <https://cles.org.uk/get-involved-2/birmingham-anchor-network>

²¹ William Eichler 26 April 2021 <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Birmingham-CC-spends-nearly-200m-in-local-economy/52222> [Accessed 22.03.2024]

²² The Art of the possible, <https://www.ipec.org.uk/art-of-the-possible/>

innovative region”.²³ Several conditions need to be met to achieve this goal by designing and implementing “place-based” strategic procurement.

First, the public sector needs to be innovative by demanding innovative suppliers. Second, innovative suppliers, including SMEs and start-ups/scale-up firms, need to get into the public sector system. By clustering such innovative customers and suppliers, public procurement would be able to have a dynamic effect on the regional innovation ecosystem and regional economies more broadly. As an exemplar of such transformative processes using public procurement as a policy tool, the case of the WMIP illustrates how a region can take ownership and develop its regional innovation ecosystem through procuring innovation. Potential investors would be encouraged to work with new suppliers, understand their needs as well as the challenges they are tackling, and develop new investment opportunities.

We also note a number of examples of public procurement driving social goals and delivering social value, including the East Birmingham business support project and the wider Birmingham Anchor Network. The public sector organisations and anchor institutions collaborate across local communities and third-sector organisations in designing and implementing procurement. This would help innovation meet a place-based need.

We propose further consolidating a conceptual framework of an *innovation-public value ecosystem* encompassing local, regional and national levels. Public procurement must be integral to evolving regional ecosystems, connecting innovative and entrepreneurial private and public actors and wider

communities. For our future research, we aim to enhance micro-level understanding of policy implementation and value creation through place-based procurement of innovation across different sectoral settings.

²³Rethinking public procurement for post-COVID recovery (2021) <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/rethinking-public-procurement-for-post-covid-recovery/>

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