Claire Ward, Mayor of the East Midlands

Summer Engagement Sessions, July 2025

Feedback from the table discussions

Index

Introduction and Summary

This document presents the output of three summer engagement events led by The Mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward, that took place in Derby, Chesterfield and Nottingham.

Table discussions focused on **challenges**, **ambitions**, and **opportunities** across seven key areas: Transport & Digital Connectivity, Net Zero & Green Growth, Housing, Skills and Employment, Culture & Inclusion, Health and Wellbeing, and Economic Growth and Enterprise. It reflects collective feedback and insights from stakeholders and identifies specific, actionable changes that could significantly improve life across the region.

A common thread running throughout all themes is the need for **joined-up, place-based approaches**—from planning and transport to education, health, and employment. The emphasis is on **inclusive, strategic growth** that serves both urban and rural communities, underpinned by strong leadership, regional collaboration, and locally tailored solutions.

Across themes, major barriers include **infrastructure gaps**, **digital exclusion**, **fragmented governance**, and **underinvestment**. However, the region is also rich in potential—whether in **green innovation**, **housing reform**, or **youth engagement**. With the right investment and strategic coordination, the East Midlands can become a **national leader in sustainable development, social equity, and economic resilience**.

Transport & Digital Connectivity

<u>**Challenges & Opportunities**</u>

- **Declining city centre retail** due to rise in out-of-town and online shopping.

- **Train services overcrowded** – some openness to policies that **deter car use**.

- **New housing developments** lack forward-thinking transport and infrastructure planning (schools, healthcare, access).

- **Disconnected bus networks** – e.g. poor links between north and south Nottinghamshire.

- **Parking and fare pricing** – congestion concerns exist, but **high fares** deter modal shift.

- **Rural isolation** – poor public transport services, misaligned village connectivity.

- **Inconsistent local authority planning processes** – especially in **highway approvals** post-planning.

- **EV infrastructure missing** from spatial planning; risk of losing essential transport routes.

- **Digital by default** services can **exclude** people lacking digital access, skills, or confidence.

One Change That Would Improve Life in the East Midlands

- Deliver a modern, connected East Midlands by investing in major transport links like the Nottingham–Derby tram extension, East Midlands Airport access, and HS2, while balancing urban and rural needs. Improve affordability and access through low-cost or free public transport, flexible ticketing, and employer incentives. Prioritise road maintenance, support private investment in regeneration zones, and ensure digital connectivity across all areas. A transparent, region-wide transport strategy—clearly communicated to the public—is key to unlocking inclusive growth and mobility.

Opportunities & Aspirations

- Use **progressive parking policies** (e.g. variable pricing) to support sustainable travel behaviour.

- Support **youth mobility** with initiatives like **free travel for under-21s**.

- Position East Midlands as a **digital and manufacturing hub** – cultivate local digital/applied tech skills via apprenticeships.

- Explore **sustainable regeneration models** that link digital innovation, transport and spatial planning.

- Opportunity for **West and East Midlands to collaborate** more closely – East Midlands has proven transport delivery strength.

Net Zero & Green Growth

Challenges

- **Car dependency** driving regional emissions – especially in Derby – with poor alternatives for non-car travel.

- **A38 redevelopment** expected to increase emissions during construction and use.

- **Insufficient public transport and cycling infrastructure** hampers low-carbon mobility.

- **Low public awareness** of climate crisis urgency and required actions.

- **Mixed messages** and **conflicting priorities** – e.g. net zero vs. growth in development planning.

- **Developers often do the bare minimum** on sustainability.

- **Need for retrofit support** – especially for heritage and non-standard buildings.

- **Fragmented and conflicting regulations** across different levels of government (e.g. planning authorities).

- **Grid capacity** is a barrier – needs localised investment to support low-carbon infrastructure.

- **Risk of greenwashing** – must be transparent about trade-offs.

- **Lack of a clear, shared definition of "net zero"** and quality assurance in offsetting.

- **Skills gap** in green growth sector; **training and upskilling needed**.

- **Green procurement not focused enough on local supply chains**.

- **Siloed thinking** – net zero must be embedded across all strategies, not treated in isolation.

- **Water infrastructure under strain**, limiting growth; utilities resisting expansion without investment.

- **Cost-of-living crisis** worsened by energy-inefficient housing and high fuel costs.

One Change That Would Improve Life in the East Midlands

Deliver a region-wide green transition by embedding net zero into all planning, transport, and economic policy; investing in retrofit innovation (including heritage and non-standard homes); and making green growth inclusive and relatable through community engagement. A unified legislative approach, local green procurement, and free public transport can reduce emissions, retain investment, and create opportunities. Strong leadership from the Mayor and smart procurement on major projects will drive skills, apprenticeships, and workforce readiness for a growing green economy.

Most Exciting Opportunities / Aspirations

- **Smart procurement for social value** – one lead body coordinating regional input.

- **Heat networks and battery tech development** – e.g. in Brassington – driving regional green innovation.

- **Net Zero neighbourhood approach** to deliver local area energy plans (LAEPs).

- **City Lab and future housing strategy** – potential for the East Midlands to lead nationally.

- **Champion success stories** – inspire future generations and build confidence.

- **Shift the narrative** – improve communication around green growth using accessible language.

- **East Midlands positioned as a leader** in sustainable design, housing, and energy systems.

Housing

Challenges & Opportunities

- **Planning system** is slow, fragmented, and lacks collaboration – needs to be more agile and strategic.

- **Land supply issues** – too many dormant plots; slow asset release stalls development.

- **Affordable housing shortages**, worsened by second homes in some areas and limited redevelopment of existing stock.

- **Homelessness** remains high – complex needs are unmet, impacting health and wellbeing.

- **SME developers have disappeared**, driven out by skills shortages and difficult market conditions.

- **Greenbelt constraints** limit growth in some areas; resistance to new housing is common in communities.

- **Mismatch between housing supply and actual need** – especially in rural vs. urban areas.

- **Poor housing contributes to poor health** outcomes, further straining public services.

- **Scarcity mindset**—skills and innovation aren't being fully utilised or supported.

One Change That Would Improve Life in the East Midlands

- Deliver the right homes in the right places through a clear regional housing strategy that includes social, affordable, and private options, prioritises brownfield development, and allows planning flexibility to meet local needs. EMCCA should play a stronger role in land strategy, unlocking delivery through cross-regional partnerships, SME support, and strategic investment. Success depends on aligning housing with essential infrastructure and building trust with communities through better engagement.

Most Exciting Opportunities & Aspirations

- **Designing the homes and communities of the future**, not just meeting today's needs.

- **Connect housing and transport challenges** – sites should be accessible and sustainable.

- **East Midlands Housing Strategy** – a chance for collaborative, long-term action.

- **More entrepreneurial approaches to housing**, engaging young people and apprentices.

- **Retrofit and conversion of heritage buildings** to boost housing supply and sustainability.

- **Leverage shared risk and reward models** for public-private delivery.

- **Centralise funding and streamline planning processes** across the region.

- **Support for student accommodation remains strong** – balance with other housing needs.

- **Public involvement in planning** can build trust and improve outcomes.

Skills and Employment

Challenges

- **Access & Inclusion**: Poor transport, digital exclusion, and lack of welcoming learning environments limit participation—especially in rural areas.

- **Education & Progression**: Many young people lack qualifications; few progress beyond Level 3. Careers advice and soft skills are weak.

- **Funding & System Fragmentation**: Complex, siloed funding processes with late payments. Lack of coordination between DWP, education, and training.

- **Work Readiness**: Gaps in work experience, especially for under-represented groups. Employers face recruitment barriers due to rigid job criteria.

- **Low Aspiration & Awareness**: Generational disadvantage, lack of parental engagement, and poor visibility of training and job opportunities.

One Change That Would Improve Life in the East Midlands

- Aligning education, employment, and support services via place-based commissioning and cross-sector collaboration. Strengthen early employer engagement in schools, expand inclusive and future-ready training (including digital and AI), support all learners, and use EMCCA to promote opportunities and success stories. Empower anchor employers to lead on inclusive recruitment, soft skills, and sustainable skills pipelines.

Most Exciting Opportunities & Aspirations

Create a seamless skills and employment journey by simplifying access to training, support, and opportunities for all residents.

Lead joined-up action across counties and sectors, unlocking the power of collaboration to tackle shared challenges.

Harness devolved powers to transform systems, making them more responsive, inclusive, and place-focused.

Elevate visibility and impact by coordinating investment and showcasing opportunities across the region.

Foster local pride and ambition by breaking cycles of low aspiration and building a culture of possibility and progression.

Culture, Communities & Inclusion

Challenges

- **Intersecting barriers to employment:** Health, homelessness, debt, and poverty often compound each other, making it harder for people to access opportunities.

- **Digital exclusion:** Limited access to digital devices or connectivity restricts participation in work, education, and services.

- **Crisis-driven support models:** A lack of early intervention results in reactive, rather than preventative, community support.

- **Short-term funding cycles** hinder long-term planning and sustainability, cause recruitment and retention challenges in community services, and undermine delivery (e.g., Chesterfield FC youth work, Ashgate Hospice).

- **End-of-life care inequality:** Inconsistent NHS funding creates postcode disparities in hospice care.

- **Postcode lottery in services and funding:** Regional inequalities in support and service access.

- **Council tax disparities:** Residents in the region in less affluent areas often pay more than those in wealthier regions like London.

- **Arts underinvestment:** The East Midlands receives significantly less arts funding than London, limiting local talent development.

One Thing You'd Change in the East Midlands

- Establish strategic, long-term, place-based funding models that enable sustainable community services, reduce inequality, and support inclusive growth.

Aspirations & Opportunities

- **Champion longer-term, regionally managed funding** to move away from fragmented, short-term grants.

- **Tackle regional pessimism** by actively promoting positive stories, especially in harder-to-reach communities.

- **Improve transport consistency and reach,** especially in areas like Staveley.

- **Expand volunteering opportunities** to build local engagement, wellbeing, and skills.

- **Review and reform regional tax and funding disparities** to improve fairness and social equity.

- **Support and celebrate local arts and culture** by prioritising investment in homegrown talent and creative communities.

Health and Wellbeing

The Challenges

- **Mental health pressures** affect key groups including young white men in rural areas, middle-aged white men, women (with data and service gaps), and often isolated immigrant communities.

- **Stigma** around mental health still prevents open discussion and support-seeking.

- **Lack of awareness** around available services and how to access them.

- **Inaccessible public transport** and high costs make it hard for people to attend appointments, especially in rural areas.

- **Postcode lottery** in access to healthcare and wellbeing services – huge regional inequality.

- **Loneliness** on the rise – decline in safe, welcoming community spaces and green areas.

- **Limited early intervention** – issues are often addressed at crisis point, worsening outcomes.

- **Poor health as a driver of exclusion**, especially where services are not joined up.

- **Lack of inclusive space design** – accessibility and community needs are often overlooked.

- **Sense of community has eroded** – fewer social spaces to foster connection.

One Thing You'd Change in the East Midlands

- Invest in preventative, community-based health and wellbeing services that are accessible, inclusive, and locally designed – shifting away from crisis response and postcode-driven inequality.

Aspirations & Opportunities

- **Localise health and wellbeing delivery** – bring services into communities via schools, leisure centres, and repurposed high street spaces.

- **Build inclusivity into design** of buildings, public spaces, and services from the outset.

- **Plan and deliver services in an integrated, joined-up way** across sectors to improve outcomes and efficiency.

- **Use data intelligently at a local level** to understand needs and target interventions effectively.

- **Promote holistic care** – treat individuals based on their full wellbeing needs, not isolated conditions.

- **Improve access to physical activity** – make sport and recreation affordable and inclusive.

- **Reduce waiting times** by offering diverse models like neighbourhood health hubs and integrated care pathways.

- **Champion prevention over treatment** – embed early intervention in policy and practice.

- **Foster shared risk and accountability** – fund collaboratively with the NHS and local partners.

- **Unlock the value of social prescribing** as a tool for inclusive growth.

- **Prioritise equity in growth** – ensure that improvements benefit all, not just the wealthy.

- **Empower local ambassadors** (e.g. in schools) to signpost support and encourage wellbeing.

- **Strengthen partnerships** to share good practice, amplify community voices, and drive real impact.

- **Avoid 'digital-only' models** – maintain accessible, grassroots outreach for all.

- **Adopt best practice** from other UK and international regions to achieve better outcomes.

Economic Growth and Enterprise

Challenges

- **Child Poverty**: Deeply affects life chances and limits social mobility in our cities.

- **Low Ambition Perception**: The East Midlands feels capped in its ambition.

- **Unclear Long-Term Investment**: Positive steps in cities like Derby, but long-term funding plans remain vague.

- **Changing Urban Needs**: City centres must evolve with lifestyle changes and improve transport links.

- **Job Quality**: Concern that incoming businesses offer mostly low-skill roles – we need more high-wage, skilled jobs.

- **Business Environment**: Lack of quality commercial space and limited business engagement in city centres.

- **Demographic Imbalance**: An ageing population – we must support and retain young people.

- **Viability Gaps**: Some locations need gap funding to attract investment.

One Thing You'd Change in the East Midlands

- Drive inclusive regional growth by raising incomes, supporting business expansion, attracting scale-ups, closing viability gaps, and building community wealth—powered by university partnerships, young talent retention, and a stronger, more positive regional narrative.

Opportunities & Aspirations

- **Shared Ambition**: There's momentum, but action needs to happen faster.

- **Vibrant City Centres**: Cleaner, safer, and more welcoming spaces for culture, leisure, and retail.

- **Affordable Housing**: Crucial to lifting communities out of poverty.

- **Visible Growth**: More cranes = more confidence and real progress.

- **Repurpose City Centres**: Make spaces flexible for work, retail, leisure – accessible for all.

- **University-Led Innovation**: HE investment in IP and scale-ups can drive local growth.

- **Next-Gen Entrepreneurs**: Support second-generation managers to innovate and grow.

- **Green Growth Potential**: The region is ready to lead in sustainable enterprise.

- **Business Engagement**: Encourage local firms to mentor, invest, and connect across the region.

Key Questions for Regional Collaboration

- **How can we work together to push for a single funding settlement for the East Midlands?**

- **How is EMCCA using procurement to support local businesses, and how are these opportunities being shared regionally?**