Consistent unified vision

Public-private partnerships are commonplace across the North West and come with multiple challenges. Alex Bell lifts the lid on how complexities are simplified by speaking to people driving forward development

"Most importantly, there has to be an alignment of interest and I think that's the challenge that public-private partnerships face."

The words of Andrew Antoniades, head of lending at CBRE, when quizzed on operational efficiencies that make public-private partnerships successful.

"I think it's less about the structure because the tail shouldn't wag the dog," adds Antoniades, who runs the North West Evergreen Fund.

"What's important is that it works and it delivers something. For things to work the goal has to be clear."

No wonder when the government aims to build 300,000 new homes per annum to meet housing needs, be carbon neutral by 2050 (sooner in some cities, towns and regions) and has made £3.6bn available through the Towns Fund for town centre renewals – and to level up.

Public-private partnerships are plentiful in the North West; 17 million sq ft of primed land for development at Atom Valley, the £250m Stockport 8 joint venture featuring Stockport Mayoral Development (MDC) and The English Cities Fund (ECF) and the Lancashire Central site at Cuerden by Lancashire County Council and its development partner Maple Grove Developments which could create up to 5,600 full-time jobs. Just three live public-private partnerships (PPP) examples.

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CBRE

Preston's rise to prominence

John Chesworth has been Preston Towns Fund Chair for four years and led the partnership to a £20.9m award that has been funding projects in the city centre since 2021.

"Animate is the biggest new-build project we've had in Preston in decades and it's going to be a real driver for rebalancing the city centre," says Chesworth. "We know that retail in every urban centre is struggling and decline isn't going to turn around anytime soon. Habits have changed and cities and towns have to repurpose their assets. We're bringing a city centre cinema back and high-quality food and beverage which signifies a real sea change.

"There's also the 'Youth Zone' which will bring in a world-class centre for young

How the Market Quarter will look in Preston city centre people in the city centre. When it's complete it will bring long-term benefits for young people and the future of Preston."

The Youth Zone is expected to open in 2025 and there's plenty more happening in Preston – the 2021 Towns Fund award being a catalyst.

But what has Chesworth learnt about effective public-private partnerships?

"There's a heck of a lot of bureaucracy and red tape that the public sector has to deal with – and Preston City Council is good at it. I've no doubt that the public sector has learned about the private sector's entrepreneurial side.

"It has enabled better relationships between the public and the private sector. And it will allow us going forward to work much more collaboratively on bigger projects."

Karen Hirst is managing director of Maple Grove Developments, development partner at Preston's Animate.

She says: "For any partnership to work well there needs to be a good relationship with trust and a common goal.

"That's true of both formal and informal partnerships with the public sector, private businesses and within local communities – it is about creating places where people want to work, live and visit. For those to be effective places of change it is vital to have the input, support and involvement of not only the local authorities but the wider community."

PPP brings Prestwich's long wait (almost) to an end

Plans to create a new beating heart in Prestwich to the tune of £100m are alive and kicking.

Part of the town centre will be redeveloped, providing a 37,000 sq ft community centre, a multi-storey car park and 200 homes.

Alongside Bury Council, Muse has been progressing the project since 2021 – and is currently in consultation with local stakeholders to further shape plans.

Phil Marsden, managing director, North West at Muse, said: "Prestwich is such a positive scheme and we're lucky to be working with Bury Council. As we are when we work with other authorities including Stockport, Oldham and St Helens.

"We've been working on Salford Central and more recently the Crescent for 20 years now. That's a brilliant case study for what a PPP can do. We've turned surface car parks into thriving new places. There's a whole host of reasons why that's been so successful, but we've developed a really good honest trust in our relationship with the council. We both share the same long-term view and vision.

"We signed an agreement with Salford City Council on Salford Central in around 2008.

"We understand their challenges, they understand ours."

Phil Marsden

Muse

If you think about all the things that have happened since, including a major recession, Brexit, Covid and the shift in how climate change is dealt with. They weren't written into the agreement, we've just dealt with it together. We understand their challenges, they understand ours and we have projects like Eden which is an exemplary project in the country."

"Mismatches can be wonderful"

Antoniades uses a simple example to explain how the Evergreen Fund functions.

"We might put £10m out on a loan. Three years later, we get it back with interest and we invest it again. It increases the size of the fund, a scheme has been delivered, jobs created and a business has been attracted to the area that may have gone overseas or elsewhere."

Current headline figures for the Evergreen include £125m investment to date, £963m GDV delivered and £32m business rates per annum.

"Evergreen is owned by Greater Manchester but with a total of 16 local authorities, and they want to see things happen," says Antoniades.

"One of the beautiful things about the public sector is that it doesn't have to think like the private sector.

"I think that kind of risk of mismatch needs to be guarded against. We should remember that a mismatch is a wonderful thing in this context as you get the best of both worlds."

Antoniades doesn't think there is a market quite like the North West for developers. He adds: "The bigger ones like Bruntwood, Peel and Allied London, and many others including smaller ones, have a passion and know their schemes inside out.

"I find the can do spirit really magnetising and that's why the stuff we fund with Evergreen always come good.

"The developers form really good alliances with money outside the region and internationally as well which is super impressive."

One voice singing together

Chesworth isn't finished explaining the benefits of PPP.

"We're confident that we are going to complete all the projects in the time frames," he says. "We're taking the benefits we have realised from the Towns Fund into forming much closer relationships between Preston City Council, Lancashire County Council, the University of Central Lancashire and the newly formed Preston Partnership.

"What PPP allows you to do is have difficult conversations between closed doors, agree what the strategy is, and then sing with one voice together.

"External investors are looking at whether a place has a consistent vision and whether they are unified. If we aren't together we are not going to fulfil the ambitions we have for Preston.

"I'd say to other towns and cities, get started on it. Preston is a long way behind places such as Manchester but we have started." ■