Andy Burnham leaves Manchester £1.34bn in the red

‘Big-spending instincts’ of PM-in-waiting should concern taxpayers, opponents warn

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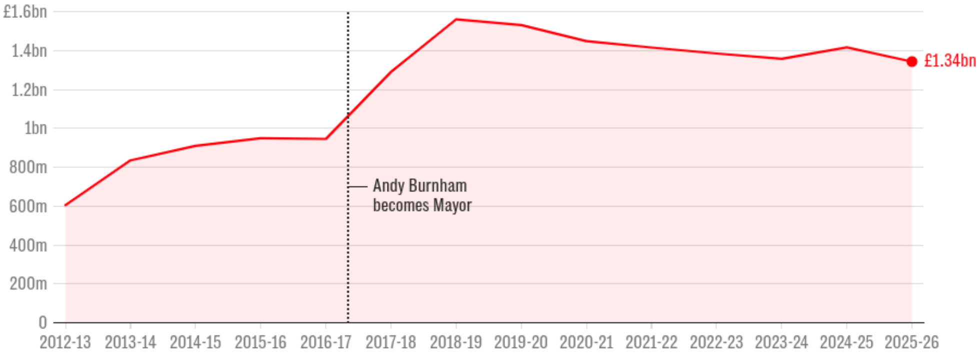
Published 14 July 2026 12:00pm BST

Greater Manchester Combined Authority's outstanding debt



Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/money/bills/council-tax/andy-burnham-left-manchester-134bn-in-the-red/

Andy Burnham left Greater Manchester with the highest debt of any combined authority in England, analysis shows.

The former mayor’s outstanding borrowing totalled £1.34bn by the end of the last financial year, up from £964m before he took office in 2017, according to government figures.

Adjusted for population, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)’s debt per resident was £462, the second highest of all combined authorities.

Sir James Cleverly, the shadow housing minister, said Mr Burnham had left Manchester in a “mountain of debt” even as taxpayers faced higher bills.

He said: “In his time as mayor, the general mayoral council tax precept rose by a staggering 127pc. With the prime minister-in-waiting promising more and more spending, the national debt is set to hit new heights.”

Analysts warned that more bills would be “pushed on to taxpayers” if Mr Burnham took “the same big-spending instincts” into Downing Street. It came after a report on Monday warned [taxes could rise by £38bn under his premiership](#).

£550k on yellow buses

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) data show that outstanding borrowing rose by 65pc in just two years under Mr Burnham to a peak of £1.56bn in 2018-19.

GMCA’s debt level was nearly two and a half times higher than the West Midlands combined authority, which has racked up a £544m deficit.

Mr Burnham's outstanding borrowing costs have been primarily associated with capital investment projects, such as the rollout of the flagship Bee Network – Greater Manchester's integrated transport system – as well as housing and regeneration developments. Accounts also showed that under his transport reforms, the former mayor spent £550,000 painting 93 buses yellow.

GMCA's deficit on the Bee Network alone reached a net £227m per year under Mr Burnham, which included income from fares paid by passengers, according to CPT, a transport industry body.

It reported that the expenditure had been rising since the network's inception in 2023, warning that it served as a "reminder that bus franchising is, in general, expensive".

Spending on management consultants also more than tripled during Mr Burnham's time in office, from £8.7m in 2019 to £26.9m in 2025, according to figures from the data analytics firm Tussell.

'The country can ill afford it'

Last month, the prime minister-in-waiting used a speech to lay out plans for a "No 10 North" office and a significant expansion of English devolution to transfer power from Westminster to regional mayors.

The new MP for Makerfield pledged to continue his vision of "Manchesterism" – greater intervention in the economy and the "end of neo-liberalism" – as prime minister.

But concerns have been raised about Mr Burnham's approach after comments he made in September that politicians had "to get beyond this thing of being in hock to the bond markets".

William Yarwood, campaigns director of the TaxPayers' Alliance, said Mr Burnham's Greater Manchester legacy should worry taxpayers.

"He leaves behind a combined authority weighed down by £1.34bn of debt, yet now wants to take the same big-spending instincts into Downing Street," he said.

"If Burnham-style government means more borrowing, more bureaucracy and more bills pushed on to taxpayers, the country can ill afford it."

A Reform UK spokesman said Mr Burnham's "high tax, high spend" leadership, in which his mayoral precept rose by 44pc in a year, was "unsurprising", adding: "This reckless approach to public finances will rightly worry taxpayers across the country when he becomes prime minister."

Tees Valley was third on the list of the 15 combined authorities, with outstanding borrowing levels of £433m, followed by Liverpool City Region Combined Authority with £261m.

Seven of the 15 combined authorities reported no outstanding debts at the end of the last financial year.

The Greater London Authority recorded debt of £4.7bn, but it is not considered a combined authority despite performing a similar role.

A GMCA spokesman said: “Greater Manchester has the biggest devolution deal in England, an annual spend of over £3bn, and more powers and responsibilities than any other combined authority.

“For example, we fund and manage the city region’s fire and rescue service, the police and crime commissioner function and the waste disposal and recycling services, so our spending cannot be compared like for like with other combined authorities even on a per capita basis.

“As the first place in England to bring buses back under local control after 40 years, alongside owning and operating the largest light rail network in the UK, we also own major transport infrastructure, with our joined-up public transport system, the Bee Network, delivering value-for-money for residents and connecting everyone with opportunities.

“All of these vital functions require capital investment, including funding from fully costed and affordable long-term borrowing, as is the case across local and national government.”

A spokesman for Andy Burnham said: “Andy has always been clear that investment must go hand in hand with sound public finances.

“Greater Manchester’s finances are rock solid, and that stability has helped build business confidence, attract investment and support the fastest-growing city region economy in the UK.

“Under Andy’s leadership, Greater Manchester invested for the long term in the infrastructure and public services needed to support growth and improve people’s lives, while maintaining strong financial discipline.”