



LEFT: The sky garden at Castlefield Viaduct offers respite from the city  
BELOW: Aviva Studios

From sky parks and cultural centres to enhanced transport links, Manchester is reclaiming its legacy as a northern powerhouse

WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER

# UK spotlight: Manchester

Castlefield Viaduct is reminiscent of New York's High Line, or the Coulée Verte in Paris

I'm standing on the Grade II-listed Castlefield Viaduct, the Victorian railway bridge that played a key role in Manchester's industrial history. Built in 1892, the vital transport link carried heavy freight and passengers for 77 years until it was finally abandoned in 1969. Fifty years on, the disused site has been spectacularly transformed into a modern urban sky park, with blooming flora and neatly kept community gardens covering half of the 330-metre stretch.

Through gaps in the graffitied steel frame, I catch glimpses of Manchester's changing skyline, populated by cranes, hazard lights and red-brick warehouses that have

been repurposed to house museums and cultural centres. The new community park perfectly encapsulates the Manchester of today: a city breathing life into old infrastructure to make way for new opportunities.

Located to the southwest of the city centre, in the oldest part of Manchester, the pilot project is a partnership between community organisation Castlefield Forum and The National Trust. The scheme seems like a no-brainer, offering a free public space for the community, a new tourist attraction and an example of sustainable redevelopment that

celebrates the city's heritage. So far, the site has welcomed more than 40,000 visitors in a 12-month period, and it has been successfully extended until September 2024. Landscape architects BDP are already working on plans to develop the second half of the 330-metre stretch, and there's also longer-term aspirations to reach the one kilometre mark.

It's reminiscent of the High Line in New York and the Coulée Verte in Paris, but Manchester has put its own stamp on the elevated park, with four community plots and a programme of free events, ranging from yoga to seed

## Manchester's metamorphosis

One such "vibey" destination is the neighbouring St. John's area, an up-and-coming district experiencing major developments in the cultural and business spheres. Leading the way is Factory International at Aviva Studios, Manchester's impressive new 13,350 sqm cultural centre that will showcase everything from intimate theatre performances to warehouse-scale gigs and multimedia shows.

While its eye-catching angular facade is certainly shiny and modern, the interiors pay tribute to the city's



planting workshops and exhibitions showcasing local artists. Additionally, there's a plot dedicated to trees that have played a role in the heritage of the city – damson, for instance, produced dyes for the city's cotton mills – and a comments wall for visitors to provide feedback, which has been very favourable.

"We've definitely seen resounding positivity that it's what people want," says Kate Picker, operations and experience manager at National Trust. "It lifts you out of the hustle and bustle of the city. Manchester is very vibey, busy and high-energy. But sometimes you need time out from that, and this allows you to come up, be with the plants, trees and birds, and just breathe a little bit."

heritage and the fact that it sits beside the world's oldest surviving passenger railway terminus: Liverpool Road station (now home to the Science and Industry Museum), with red brick arches incorporated into the design, exposed ceilings, plus a bar that draws inspiration from the city's 90s counterculture era.

I visited during the soft launch in early August, where Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's *You, Me and the Balloons* demonstrated the scale and versatility of the spaces, with 10-metre-high polka-dot installations.

The cultural space officially launches this month with *Free Your Mind*, a dance, music and visual effects reimagining of *The Matrix* trilogy, directed by the renowned



Danny Boyle. “[We’re] using arts institutions to bring soul into the city,” explains venue director Sheena Wrigley. She highlights that many of the productions premiering in Manchester will tour internationally afterwards, which is a clear vote of confidence in the city and helps to put Manchester on the map.

“You can’t underestimate the scale of transformation of the city,” says Nick Brooks-Sykes, director of tourism at Marketing Manchester. “People laughed if you suggested a short break to Manchester 30 years ago as there was still this sense of industrial and northern negativity, but the city has really changed its offerings. Now, Manchester positions itself as a vibrant and exciting place to be, with dynamic leisure offerings.”

Still to come in St. John’s is Manchester’s first co-living property, Union, a 30,000 sqm riverside food hall called Shipyard, plus Mollies Motel and Soho House (see box on page 40), which will be located within Old Granada Studios, the former home of TV soap *Coronation Street*.

A business district is also unfolding in the neighbourhood. Enterprise



**The UK’s largest live entertainment venue, the Co-op Live Arena, will open here next April**

City encompasses more than 185,000 sqm of development, with companies across the tech, media and creative industries housed in both new-builds and revamped warehouses – names include international advertising agency WPP and online travel agency Booking.com.

“Having these big anchor tenants next to Factory International is an example of how quickly the city is transforming,” says Joe Manning, managing director of MIDAS, Greater Manchester’s inward investment promotion agency.

Manchester’s metamorphosis owes much to the burgeoning cultural scene, and locals tell me that there’s been a staggering change in career

prospects over the past 30 years. “To have a creative job, you couldn’t make a life and living here,” says Wrigley, recounting her own experience. “Now you can. Ambitious projects like this confirm this possibility, and it’s amazing to see people gravitate towards the city.”

Manchester will also welcome the UK’s largest live entertainment venue in April 2024, the Co-op Live Arena, located next to the Etihad Stadium. It’s a joint venture between Oak View Group (OVG), City Football Group, Co-op, and world superstar Harry Styles. The venue will have capacity for 23,500 people, with 120 events planned for its first year, including its first-announced artist, the Jonas Brothers, in June 2024.

The venue also plans to attract indoor arena sports, international tournaments and esports. Analysis →

**ABOVE AND LEFT:** Inflatable artworks by Yayoi Kusama on display at Aviva Studios, home of Factory International, during the month of August

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Now under local control, the Bee Network will link up the city's buses, trams and trains

**OPPOSITE:**  
The Bee Network connects the city with Greater Manchester

## NEW HOTELS

Greater Manchester plans to see an additional 5,694 rooms by 2024, a growth of 21 per cent on the current supply. In April 2023, the city also introduced a £1 per room per night "tourist tax" on accommodation (see page 42 to find out more).

### Treehouse Hotel Manchester

Starwood Capital and Property Alliance Group's 216-room hotel will open in 2024, forming part of a £200 million redevelopment of the former Renaissance Hotel on Deansgate. The design will incorporate sustainable features such as reclaimed and recycled materials, living green walls and a kitchen garden harvesting rainwater. Dining facilities will include a ground floor restaurant, a southeast Asian restaurant on the 14th floor, and a rooftop bar. [treehousehotels.com](https://treehousehotels.com)



### Mollie's Manchester

The team behind Soho House will open this hotel in the former Granada Studios in St. John's neighbourhood in early 2024. The 140-room property will offer a diner restaurant, a lounge bar with live music and an outdoor heated terrace, as well as a Soho House on the top floors. [mollies.com](https://mollies.com)

### Malmaison Manchester Deansgate

The brand's second property in the city is expected to open next month, offering 70 rooms with retro designs. Decor will juxtapose the building's brutalist facade with bold patterns and nature-based motifs and murals. The hotel will include Malmaison Bar & Grill and Sora rooftop bar, overlooking Albert Square and Manchester Town Hall. [malmaison.com](https://malmaison.com)



by Ekosgen and PwC suggests that the arena could double the number of events taking place in the city, leading to a considerable increase in overnight visitors. The combined operation of Co-op Live and Manchester Arena is estimated to generate up to £1.5 billion of additional economic activity (GVA) over a two-year period.

## Buzzing around

Part of Manchester's charm is its walkable and easily navigable city centre, but links with suburban areas are also improving. At a centralised level, there's the roll-out of the Bee Network, named after Manchester's "worker bee" symbol.

The system launched its first phase last month, and makes Greater Manchester the first region outside of London to bring buses under local control since the 1980s, with the aim of creating a "one-stop shop" public transport network in which buses,

trams and trains will be linked up and under local control. "This will revolutionise the way that people move around the city. It's the next biggest step change that we have. One ticket, one price,

one network, no confusion to which bus you can get on. Single branded, yellow buses, yellow trams, easy to understand. We'll see a real uptake in people using public transport," believes Brooks-Sykes.

Services will gradually be added to the network until January 2025, while local trains will join from 2030. For the time being, locals and visitors can benefit from a combined bus and tram ticket in Greater Manchester, which is 20 per cent cheaper than separate tickets. In two years' time the city will also trial contactless payment options for some local train services. These improvements are largely thanks to the city's Trailblazer Deal struck with the UK Government in March 2023, which sees more powers devolved to Greater Manchester →



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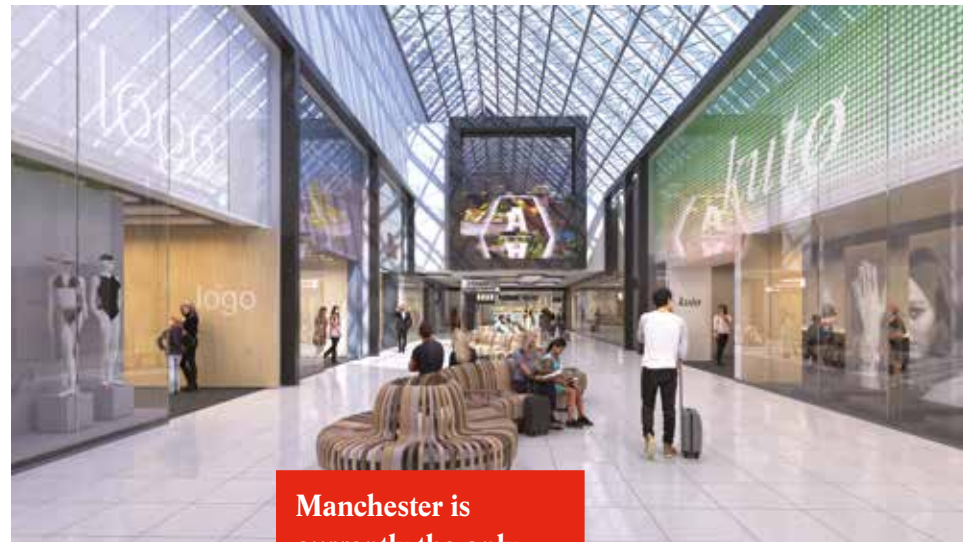
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**Manchester is currently the only city outside London with a direct route to Mainland China**

**THIS PAGE:** Manchester airport's £1.3 billion revamp is set to complete in 2025



and its mayor Andy Burnham.

This is also a big boost for business, explains Manning. "If you're an investor, that transport connectivity really matters. You start to have something that feels much more like what you expect from a modern European city, which will be a bit of a game changer."

Manchester airport's £1.3 billion 'Transformation Project' is another step change, which will ramp up global connectivity and attract further investment into the region. The first phase was unveiled in July 2021 with the expansion of Terminal 2, and the final phase of the transformation is set to complete in 2025 (see [busesstraveller.com](https://www.busesstraveller.com) for more details).

Consultancy firm York Aviation forecasts that the airport's current £3.5 billion contribution to the northern economy will increase to £6.3 billion by 2040 as a result.

Manchester is currently the only city outside of London with a direct route to mainland China – Hainan Airlines launched its Beijing-Manchester route in 2016. "When that started, we saw a massive spike in the number of Chinese visitors coming into Manchester and starting

their tour of Britain from here," says Brooks-Sykes, adding that tourists recognise that "it doesn't have to be London every time." In April, the service increased to four times weekly.

Challenges do remain, however. International visits are not yet back to 2019 levels on long-haul routes, and there's still some way to go in terms of connectivity. With the US representing the city's biggest source of foreign direct investment, and a priority market for international tourism, the return of direct long-haul routes will be key to further growth.

### Promising potential

After just a few days in Manchester, I left convinced of the city's future

### Tourist tax

Manchester became the first UK city to introduce a 'tourist tax' in April 2023, with guests required to pay an extra £1 per room per night on their accommodation. Brooks-Sykes reveals that the levy was driven by hoteliers concerned with ensuring there was enough demand to meet the pipeline of hotel development. He says: "[It was a question of] how are we going to maintain our occupancy and that level of business? The conundrum was how do we drive more business into the city?"

The levy, which is expected to raise £4 million per year, will be used to fund the new Manchester Accommodation Business Improvement District (ABID), which aims to boost further overnight business stays by improving the city's cleanliness and helping to secure large-scale events.

"Visitors are used to paying taxes when they check into hotels and pushback has been non-existent. All those pounds add up and we can do something significant with that," he concludes.

potential. The revamped landmarks, exciting cultural debuts and my peek into the emerging business scene were just a snapshot of the city's regeneration, but one that I found highly appealing.

The question now is, where does Manchester go in the next ten years? Can it attract talent who might otherwise be in London but can have a different lifestyle here?

"I speak to my mates, most of whom are in London, and Manchester's in quite an interesting part of its growth now where you can have a more affordable city lifestyle in Manchester and a career in a way that perhaps you couldn't 20 or 30 years ago. Is Manchester in that sweet spot where you can offer both? I think we're increasingly close to that," believes Manning. Count me tempted. **BT**

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