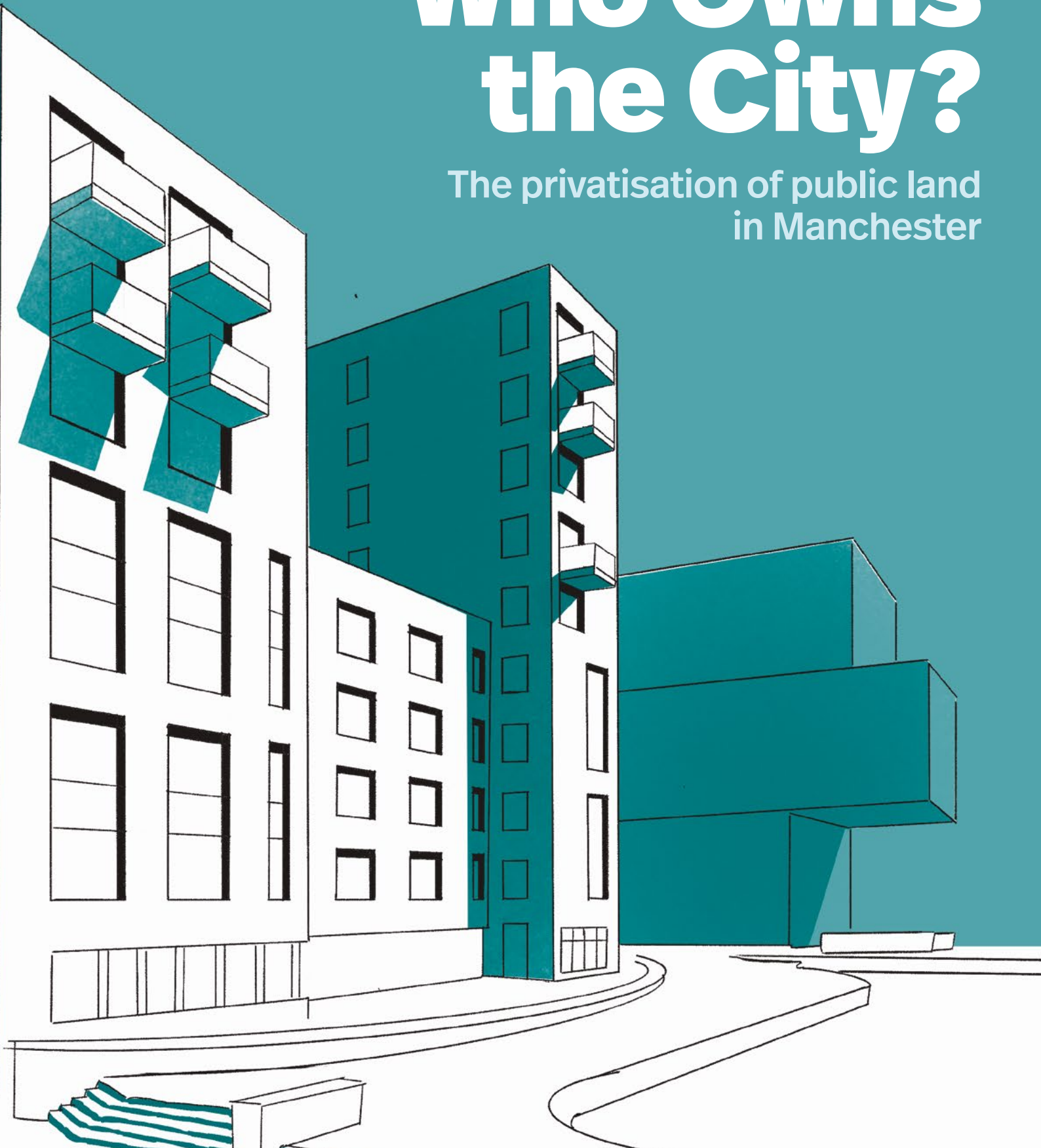


# Who Owns the City?

The privatisation of public land  
in Manchester



**Dr Tom Gillespie** | University of Manchester and **Dr Jonathan Silver** | University of Sheffield

Research conducted in partnership with **Greater Manchester Housing Action**

Supported by the **University of Manchester** and **ESRC**

# Executive Summary

Manchester is a city with historically high levels of public land ownership - the City Council owned 57.9% of land within its local authority boundaries in 1982. The city is currently experiencing a housing crisis characterised by a shortage of affordable and social housing. In this context, there are growing concerns amongst researchers, journalists and civil society groups that public land has been allocated to private developers to build unaffordable apartments. However, there is a deficit of publicly accessible information on which sites have been allocated and on what terms.

This report investigates the privatisation of public land in central Manchester. Our focus is on land owned by Manchester City Council (hereafter ‘the Council’), and we pay particular attention to the central wards of Piccadilly and Ancoats & Beswick that have experienced significant transformation in recent years. Our aim is to establish whether public land ownership and use is transparent, whether public land disposals have been good value for the public, and what type of city is being built using public resources.

The authors obtained data on public land disposals from the Council using freedom of information requests. We combined this with data from the UK Land Registry to identify who particular plots of land have been allocated to. This data collection process has enabled us to highlight three major issues regarding public land privatisation in Manchester.

The first issue is the **lack of transparency** around public land ownership and use in Manchester. There is currently a lack of publicly available data on Council land disposals. In our view, information on how public land is being allocated and on what terms should be freely and easily accessible to the public. Greater transparency will enable public debate and democratic accountability around how Manchester’s public resources should be used.

The second issue is the question of whether the Council is doing all it can to get **value for money for the public** when disposing of its land assets. The available data suggests that the Council is leasing out central urban land to developers at prices significantly below what the Council itself has paid for city centre land. In some cases, it appears that the Council leased out prime plots of land to developers for free (or for a nominal amount of £1). In our view, this raises important questions about the process by which Council land is valued and allocated to private developers. We recognise that there may be mitigating factors that explain why this Council land has a lower price. However, in the interests of transparency and accountability, we invite the Council to explain to the public the valuation process in relation to the land disposals highlighted in this report.

The third issue is **the character of urban development** that is enabled by public land privatisation. As with other cities, Manchester is facing a housing crisis and a climate emergency, and there is a shortage of both affordable and social housing and public green space in the city centre. Public land is an important resource that could be used to address these social and environmental problems. However, the available data suggests that public land is often leased out to developers in order to build luxury apartments that are unaffordable to the majority of Manchester’s residents. In our view, greater transparency and accountability over public land ownership and use will enable a much-needed public debate about the future of urban planning and land use in the city.

Finally, the report suggests that the recently launched Liverpool Land Commission provides a model for a more open, transparent and participatory approach to managing public land. We recommend that a similar approach be adopted in Greater Manchester. In the city of Manchester, we call for a publicly accessible website with records of all Council land disposals and ward-level public land audits led by local councillors.

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# 1. Introduction

This report investigates the privatisation of public land in central Manchester. Our focus is on land owned by Manchester City Council (hereafter ‘the Council’), and we pay particular attention to the central wards of Piccadilly and Ancoats & Beswick that have experienced significant transformation in recent years. Our aim is to establish whether public land ownership and use is transparent, whether Council land disposals have been good value for the public, and what type of city is being built using public resources.

First, we outline a brief history of public land in Manchester. Second, we provide an overview of the methods and data used to understand public land disposals in central Manchester. We also discuss the methodological challenges faced in researching public land privatisation and argue that there is a lack of transparency around public land disposals in Manchester. Third, we use an in-depth focus on the neighbourhood of Ancoats and New Islington to examine in detail what land has been disposed of, the terms of these disposals and how this land has subsequently been redeveloped. Next, we discuss some notable examples of public land disposal that fall outside our case study area of Ancoats and New Islington. The report concludes by calling for greater transparency and democratic accountability to ensure that the city’s public land assets are used to address social and environmental needs.

## 2. A brief history of public land in Manchester

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Manchester City Council began to acquire land in order to create urban parks and provide essential infrastructure in the rapidly growing industrial city. The scale and pace of land acquisition increased dramatically in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the Council sought to address urban poverty by clearing Victorian slums and building large public housing estates in both central and peripheral areas. Council landholdings more than trebled during the interwar period from 1778.3 hectares in 1919 to 5594.7 hectares in 1939<sup>i</sup>. Public land acquisitions continued to exceed disposals all the way until the 1970s, when the total amount of Council-owned land began to decline for the first time. This was partly a reflection of a local shift in Council priorities away from slum clearance and public housing construction. However, it was also a response to growing pressure from the Margaret Thatcher-led central government to privatise local authority land holdings<sup>ii</sup>.

In his book *The New Enclosure*, Brett Christophers describes the privatisation of public land in the UK as the single biggest privatisation of the neoliberal period that followed Thatcher’s election in 1979. During this period, central government argued that public land ownership was inefficient and employed a combination of incentives, targets and funding cuts to compel local authorities to sell supposedly ‘surplus’ land to the private sector. As a result, 10% of Britain’s total land mass has been privatised since the 1970s, equivalent to land worth £400bn<sup>iii</sup>.

This massive transfer of land from public to private ownership has been justified as a means to enable economic growth, house building and employment creation. However, Christophers argues that public land privatisation in Britain has had a range of negative social impacts, including: a lack of value for money for the public; a lack of affordable housing provision; the speculative hoarding of land by the private sector; the displacement of public housing tenants; and the growing centrality of unproductive landlordism and rent extraction to the UK economy. In addition, he argues that there has been a lack of transparency and public debate around this privatisation process<sup>iv</sup>.

A peer-reviewed research paper found that Manchester City Council owned 6762.3 hectares of land within its local authority boundaries in 1982 – equivalent to 57.9% of the total area of the city<sup>v</sup>. At the beginning of the neoliberal period, therefore, Manchester City Council owned over half the land in the city. However, there is a lack of publicly-available information on what has subsequently happened to this land.

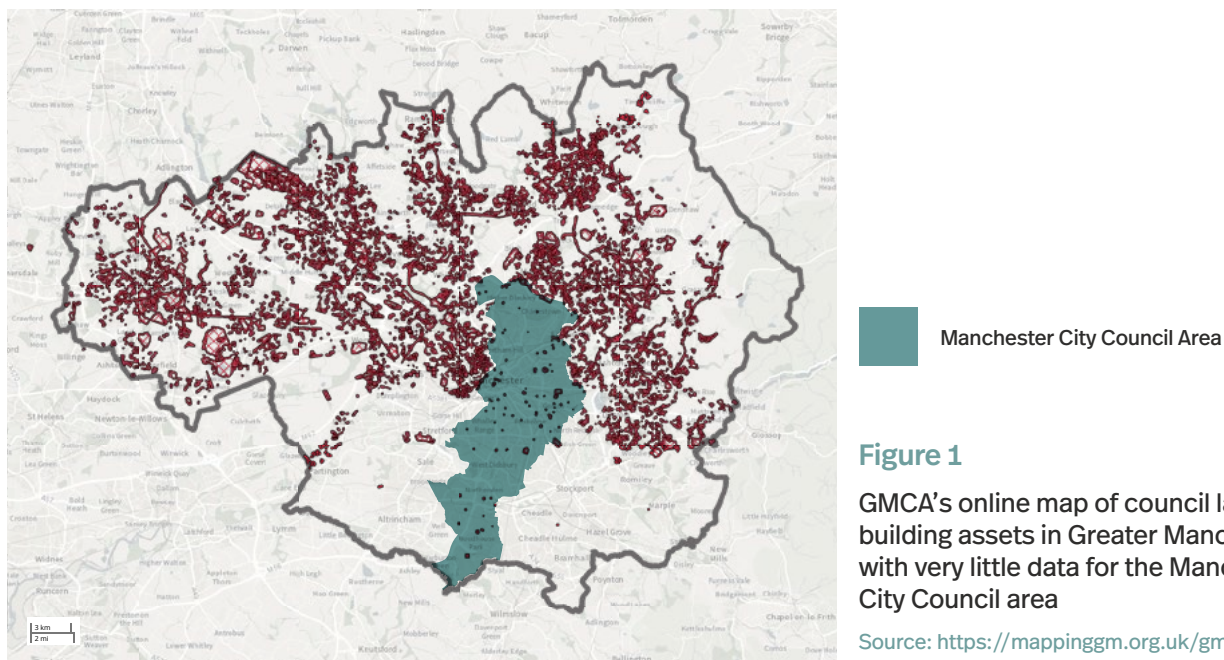
Since the 1980s, the Council has partnered with large property developers to redevelop central Manchester, with a particular focus on building blocks of private apartments for young professionals in post-industrial areas such as Ancoats and Castlefield<sup>vi</sup>. These apartment blocks typically contain no affordable or social housing and are increasingly built as an asset for international financial actors such as pension funds and private equity companies<sup>vii</sup>. The outcome has been the emergence of what Folkman et al. call ‘a kind of parallel, private new town in the central city’ surrounded by deprived urban neighbourhoods<sup>viii</sup>.

Manchester is currently experiencing a housing crisis characterised by a shortage of affordable and social housing; there were 98,898 Greater Manchester households on the housing waiting list in 2019 (an increase of 98% since 1997)<sup>ix</sup>. In this context, there are growing concerns amongst researchers, journalists and civil society groups that public land has been allocated to private developers to build unaffordable apartments<sup>x</sup>. However, there is a deficit of publicly accessible information on which sites have been allocated and on what terms. This research seeks to address this deficit.

### 3. Methods and data

#### 3.1 Publicly available data

Data on Council land disposals in Manchester is not easily accessible to the public. A spreadsheet of Council land assets is available on the Council’s website<sup>xi</sup>. Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) created an online map of council land and building assets in 2015 as part of an initiative to map infrastructure across the city-region<sup>xii</sup>. However, the Manchester City Council area contains very little data compared to other local authority areas (see figure 1). When we asked why this was the case, the GMCA mapping team replied that they had requested this data several years ago, but local authorities were under no obligation to provide data. It is not clear why the Council did not participate in this regional initiative to make data on public landholdings more accessible to the public. As a result, details of the Council’s land assets are currently not available in an easily accessible map format. In terms of disposals, the spreadsheet on the Council’s website does detail whether particular plots have been leased out and what purpose they are being used for. However, there is no information on who plots have been leased to and on what terms. As this information is not publicly available, we decided to request it from the Council under UK freedom of information legislation.



**Figure 1**

GMCA’s online map of council land and building assets in Greater Manchester, with very little data for the Manchester City Council area

Source: <https://mappinggm.org.uk/gmodin/>

### 3.2 Freedom of information requests and Land Registry data

The authors began by submitting a freedom of information (FOI) request to Manchester City Council asking them for the details of all Council-owned land or property in the central wards of Cheetham, Miles Platting & Newton Heath, Ancoats & Beswick, Ardwick, Hulme, Deansgate and Piccadilly that has been disposed of (either as a leasehold or freehold) or transferred to another body or joint venture incorporating the Council between 2009-2019 (the period corresponding to the post-2008 financial crisis era). The data we received from the Council gave information on 36 freehold and 298 leasehold Council land disposals<sup>xiii</sup>.

These were distributed across the wards as follows:

**Freehold:** Ancoats and Beswick (6 disposals), Ardwick (5), Cheetham (4), Deansgate (2), Hulme (1), Miles Platting (5) and Piccadilly (13).

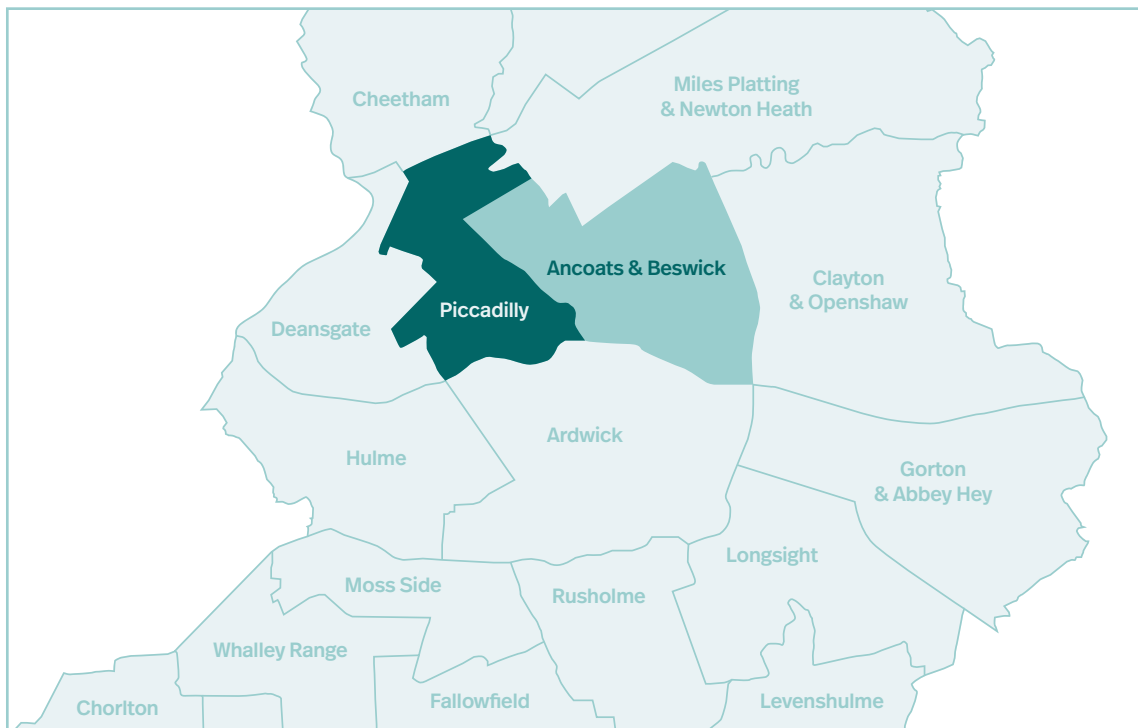
**Leasehold:** Ancoats and Beswick (49 disposals), Ardwick (67), Cheetham (39), Deansgate (48), Hulme (35), Miles Platting (17) and Piccadilly (43).

Of the **Leasehold disposals** we found 174 out of 298 to be long leases (99 years and above), distributed across the wards as follows: Ancoats and Beswick (40 disposals) Ardwick (36), Cheetham (29), Deansgate (17), Hulme (18), Miles Platting (4) and Piccadilly (30).

We calculated that the total price paid for freehold land was £9,026,779.70 and the total 'premium' for leasehold land was £33,444,287.47. This is a total of £42,471,067.17 of Council income generated over the period 2009-2019.

We cross-referenced the Council data with title deeds for specific properties obtained from the UK Land Registry website. Accessing these title deeds required a fee of £3 per property. This enabled us to identify who specific plots of Council land had been leased to.

Next, given the large amount of data, we narrowed our geographical focus down to the Piccadilly and Ancoats & Beswick wards of central Manchester (see figure 2). We decided to focus on these wards



**Figure 2**

The central Manchester wards of Piccadilly and Ancoats & Beswick

Source: [https://www.manchester.gov.uk/directory\\_record/285527/all\\_wards](https://www.manchester.gov.uk/directory_record/285527/all_wards) (Adapted by Authors)

because this is where, according to Silver’s research on housing financialisation in Manchester, a large amount of city centre apartments have been built without on-site affordable housing provision since 2009<sup>xiv</sup>. In addition, these wards are the location of major urban regeneration initiatives such as the Northern Gateway (now rebranded as Victoria North) project. Within this area, 28 sites were selected on the grounds that residential development had either already occurred or was planned for the near future.

Having narrowed our geographical focus, we submitted another FOI request asking whether the Council received any rental income in addition to the premium paid for these 28 leases. The Council responded that all the sites were leased out at a ‘Peppercorn Ground Rent (Effectively £0 Rent)’. This confirmed that the Council wasn’t receiving any rental income in addition to the premiums paid at the beginning of each lease, despite the fact that some of these leasehold agreements extended up to 999 years.

Finally, we submitted a FOI request to the Council for data on land disposals from 1999- 2008 in order to broaden the historical scope of our investigation to include the Cardroom Estate regeneration project (discussed below). We became aware that the datasets we were given in response to our FOI requests appear to be incomplete, and that various sites that were leased by the Council to private developers were not included. For example, the 1999-2008 data did not include land incorporating the Cardroom Estate. It is not clear why these sites were not included.

This data collection process has enabled us to identify some concerning issues with public land disposals in Piccadilly and Ancoats & Beswick. These are discussed in sections 4 and 5 below.

## 4. Case study: public land disposal and residential development in Ancoats and New Islington

### 4.1 Introduction

Here we focus on Ancoats and New Islington, a post-industrial neighbourhood within the ward of Ancoats & Beswick that is located to the east of Manchester’s city centre (see figure 3).

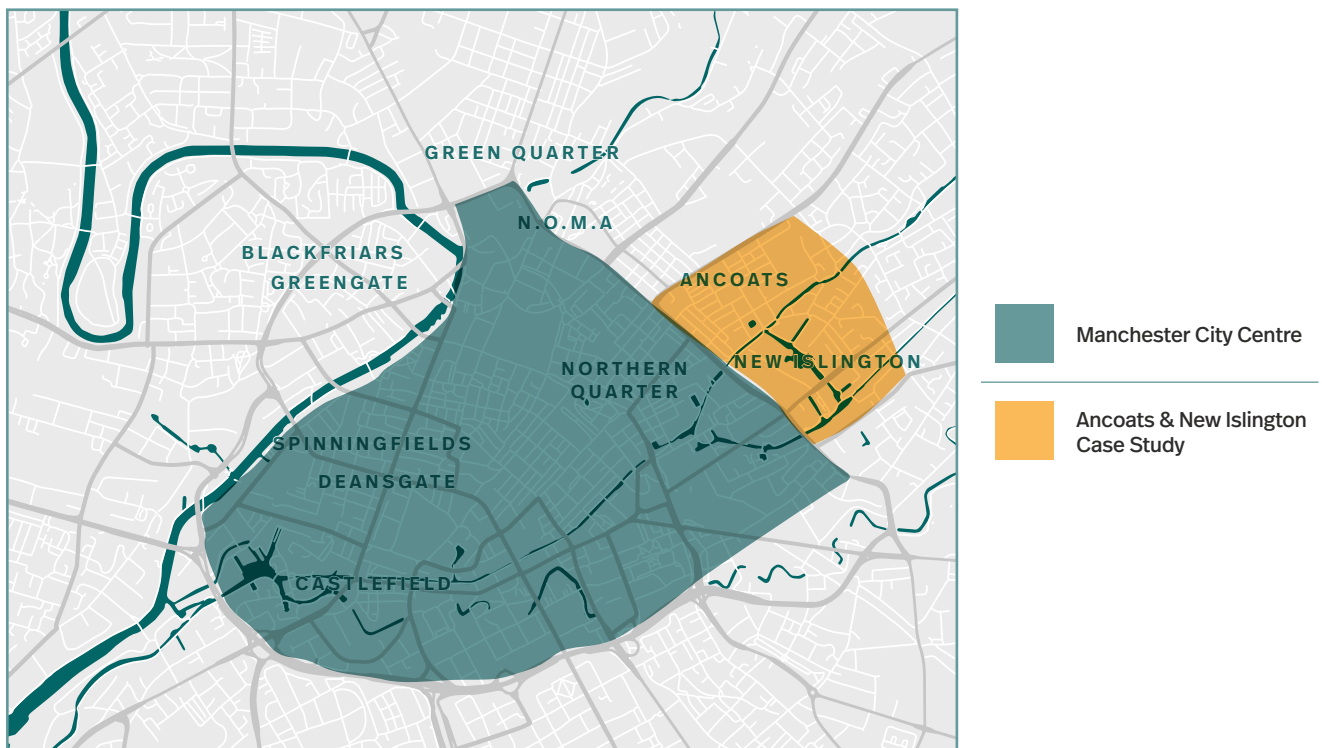


Figure 3

The Ancoats and New Islington case study area

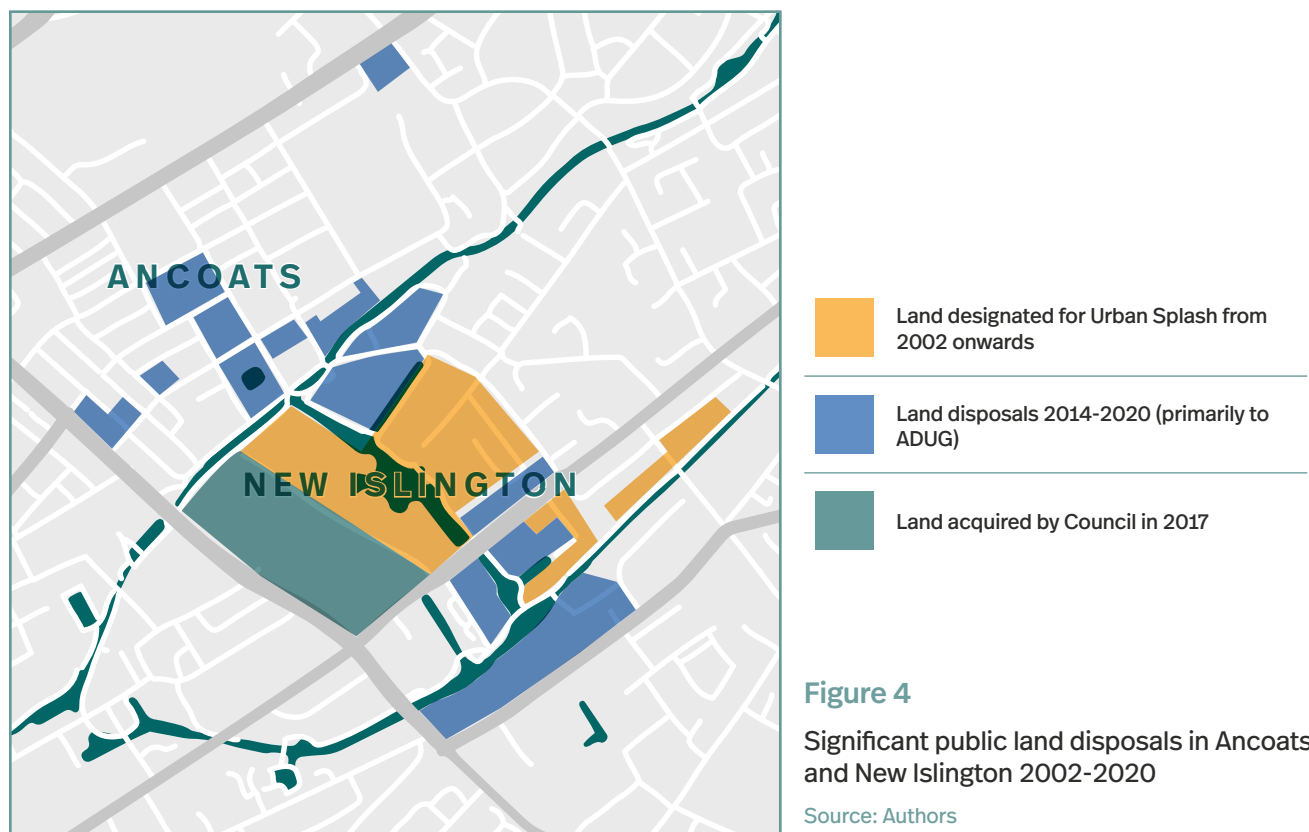
Source: Authors



Over the last 30 years, Ancoats and New Islington has experienced a high number of public land disposals by the Council, often in partnership with other public sector bodies. This neighbourhood is currently undergoing a process of dramatic redevelopment. Due to soaring land values and a shortage of undeveloped sites in the city centre, high-rise residential development has begun to spread to the areas surrounding the inner-ring road. As such, this neighbourhood provides a good insight into the relationship between public land disposals and private residential development in central Manchester<sup>xv</sup>.

## 4.2 A brief history of public land disposal in Ancoats and New Islington

Ancoats and New Islington emerged as a busy industrial area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, land in the area was privately owned by wealthy landlords and was leased for industrial activities such as textile production, in addition to slum housing to accommodate the city's growing working-class population. However, the area experienced a significant reduction in employment and residential population during the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to post-industrial economic decline and slum clearance policies. The Council directly acquired some land in the area during the post-war period in order to build public housing estates such as the Cardroom Estate. In addition, the North West Development Agency undertook a series of Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) in the 1990s. This land was then transferred to the Council via the Homes and Community Agency post-2010.



We identify two waves of significant public land disposal in the case study area.

The first wave concerns the redevelopment of the Cardroom Estate beginning in 2002 as part of New Labour's *Millennium Communities* regeneration initiative (see yellow shaded area in figure 4). Built in the 1970s, the council estate suffered from under-investment and stigmatisation, and half of the homes were empty at the time of its demolition in the mid-2000s. 25 acres of public land were remediated at significant public cost (through English Partnerships) and preferential development rights given to the local developer Urban Splash, who built houses and apartments for sale and rent. Example prices are £350,000 for a two-bedroom apartment and £499,500 for a three-bedroom townhouse<sup>xvi</sup>. The land was not transferred wholesale to Urban Splash, but it seems on a plot by plot basis once each development was completed. However, after the company failed to undertake development for a number of years the

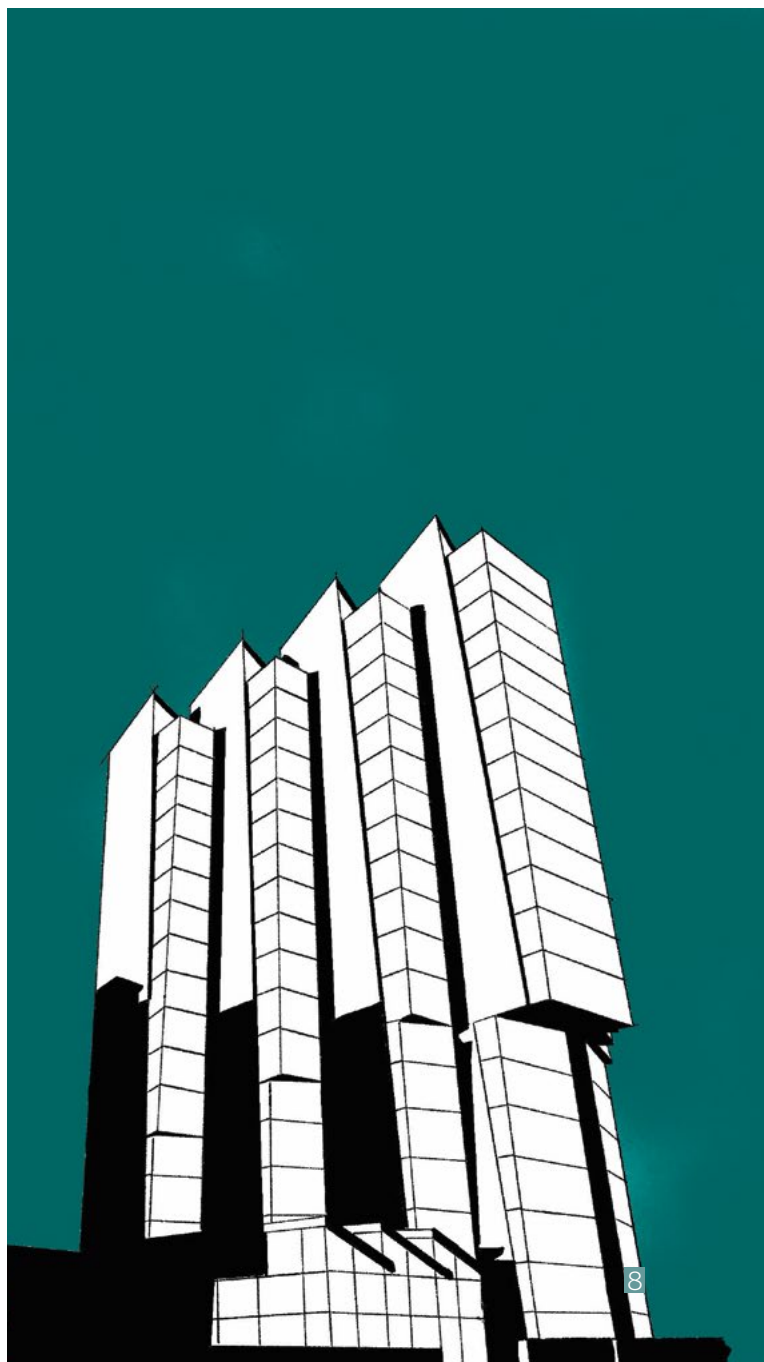


Council regained development control over some of the land. This reduced Urban Splash's development rights to an area that we estimate is around 16.5 acres in size (including the Marina now managed by Plumlife and considered private). There is a lack of public information around how much, if anything, Urban Splash paid Manchester City Council for the various plots of land. In addition, for reasons that are unclear, the Council's response to our FOI request for data on public land disposals between 1999-2008 did not contain information on New Islington.

The second wave concerns disposal of several sites to private developers between 2014-2020 (see the blue shaded areas in figure 4) The single biggest beneficiary has been the Manchester Life company - a public-private partnership between the Council and Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG), the private equity company owned by Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Deputy Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates<sup>xvii</sup>. Following the takeover of Manchester City Football Club by ADUG in 2008, the Manchester Life partnership was established in 2014 so that ADUG could invest in urban development in Manchester via the Jersey-based off-shore company Loom Holdings Ltd<sup>xviii</sup>. Public land for Manchester Life developments is typically transferred to ADUG via Loom Holdings on long leases of up to 999 years. This includes the reallocation of Cardroom Estate land recovered by the Council from Urban Splash. Other beneficiaries of this second wave of land disposal include local developers McCauls, Northern Group and UK Land & Property. Manchester Life have built private apartments for sale and rent in Ancoats and New Islington. Prices in Manchester Life's One Vesta Street development range from £190,000 for a one-bedroom apartment to £690,000 for a four-bedroom townhouse<sup>xix</sup>.

We also highlight the disposal of 4.5 acres of undeveloped land south of the Ashton Canal to the UK developer General Projects for a total of £2.38 million (£528,000 per acre). This land has provided vital green space for the ever-increasing numbers of residents in the area, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has become known as 'New Islington Green' to those who use it. Despite opposition from the local community, General Projects have received planning permission from the Council to develop this land into an office campus<sup>xx</sup>.

In addition to these two waves of disposal, we highlight the purchase of the former Central Retail Park site by the Council in 2017 (see the turquoise shaded area in figure 4). The long-term plan for this site is a mixed-use development of office space and apartments, possibly to be built in partnership with ADUG<sup>xxi</sup>. This raises questions about whether this recently acquired public land will be disposed of in future. In the meantime, the Council planned to use the site as a carpark, provoking successful opposition from local campaigners who are calling for the land to be used as much-needed public green space instead<sup>xxii</sup>. The Council reportedly paid £37,038,000 for this 10.5 acre site: a price of over £3.5million per acre<sup>xxiii</sup>. Although we recognise that land values can vary from site to site due to various factors, this provides a useful baseline land value for the area against which we can assess Council land disposals for public value for money.



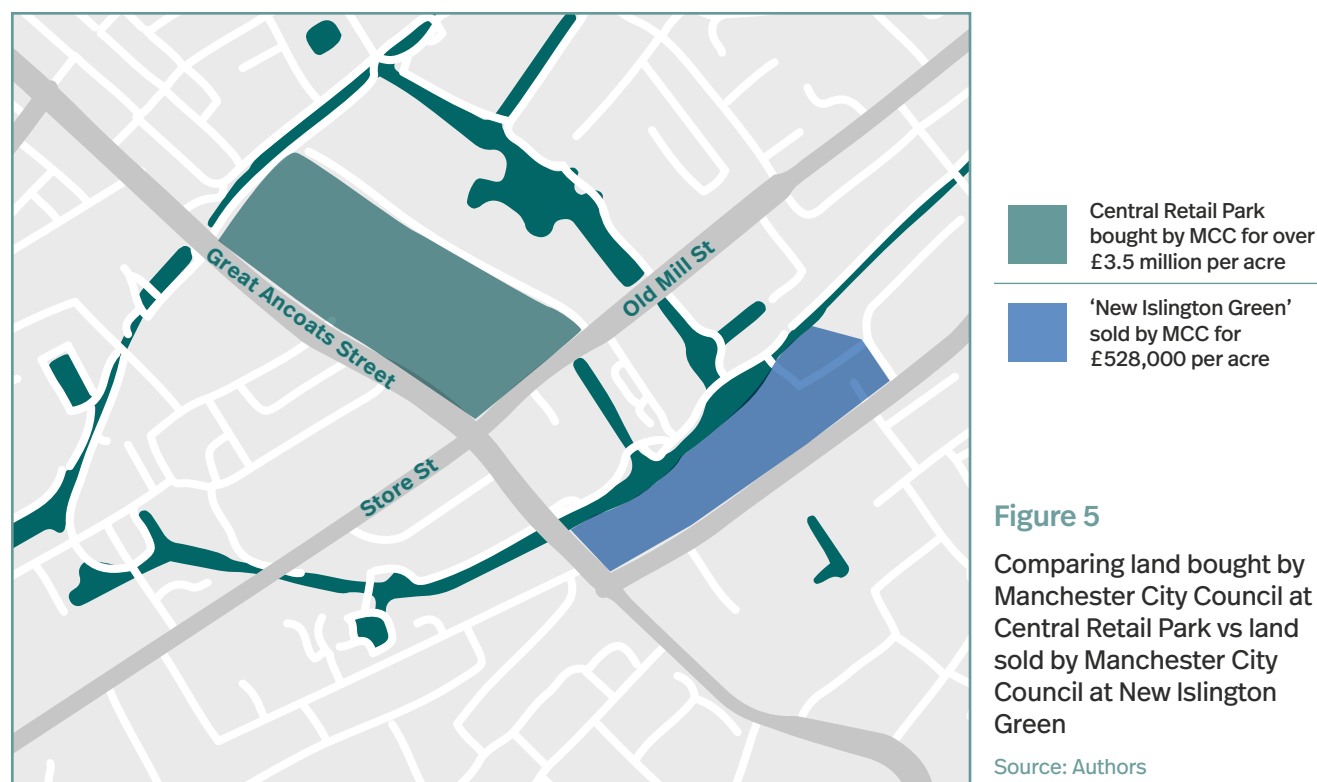
## 4.3 Key findings on public land disposal and residential development in Ancoats and New Islington

### 4.3.1 The terms of disposal and public value for money

The first wave of development in the area was primarily related to the preferential development rights given to Urban Splash from 2002, incorporating 25 acres of land in Ancoats and New Islington. We found in our data analysis that the Council has allocated at least another **15.75 acres of land** to private developers for housing development since 2009. The average **price per acre paid for this land is £388,769**, bringing a **total income to the Council of £6,123,166**.

This average price of £388,769 per acre **contrasts with the 2017 purchase of land by the Council at a price of over £3.5 million per acre** at the Central Retail Park site. Although we recognise land prices can vary from site to site, these transactions suggest that the Council could be **paying over nine times more than it is receiving** in income for land in the same neighbourhood.

If we widen our scope beyond housing development and include the land disposal for the planned office development at New Islington Green, we find that an estimated **20.25 acres** have been disposed of for an average **price per acre of £419,909**. This indicates that the Council has achieved higher returns when disposing of the New Islington Green land. However, this average price of £419,909 per acre is still **over eight times lower** than the amount paid by the Council for the Central Retail Park (see figure 5).



In some cases, according to the Council-supplied data, it appears that public land in Ancoats and New Islington has been transferred to developers for free. For example, 'The Point', McCauls' waterfront development of 117 luxury apartments and houses, is built on Council land that was leased out for 999 years for a total payment of £0 (zero pounds) (see figure 6).



**Figure 6**

Photo of the Point development

Source: Authors

#### 4.3.2 The character of residential development on privatised public land

We estimate that **1,996 apartments have been built** on these 15.75 acres of privatised public land since 2014 (See figure 7). This is in addition to over 400 units built by Urban Splash on the 25 acres disposed by the Council prior to 2014. Based on a conservative estimated average market value of £200,000 per unit, we suggest that the **total development value on this land may now exceed £400million**. The industry standard ‘Operating Margin’ (for developers) is 15-20% of total development value<sup>xxiv</sup>, suggesting these schemes may have generated £80million of profit. This amount dwarfs the £6,123,166 recouped in land sales by the Council.

Urban Splash claim that 31% of housing at New Islington is now ‘affordable’, including a shared ownership scheme with the Great Places Housing Group<sup>xxv</sup>. However, is not clear what criteria Urban Splash uses to define affordability. Furthermore, media reports suggest that the area is exempt from the Council’s policy that all new developments should include at least 20% affordable housing as the land deal predates this policy<sup>xxvi</sup>. Based on field observations, we estimate that Urban Splash built a total of 37 social rented homes on Piercy Street and Islington Square. This housing was replacement housing for tenants from the Cardroom Estate that expressed a desire to stay in the area. Overall, we estimate a loss of 163 social housing units<sup>xxvii</sup>.

Despite the Council’s own requirement for 20% affordable provision, none of the other developments on public land discussed in this report contain any social or affordable housing. In addition, none of these developments involved a financial contribution to social and affordable housing provision as is commonly required by local authorities under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990<sup>xxviii</sup>. As such, public land disposals in Ancoats and New Islington have done very little to address the lack of affordable and social housing in central Manchester.



### 4.3.3 The Council's relationship with Abu Dhabi United Group

As the single largest beneficiary of public land disposals and the single biggest developer of residential units in Ancoats and New Islington (see figure 7), Manchester Life is set to make large profits from the disposal of Council land in order to construct high value apartments and houses. In our view, this raises important questions about the relationship between the Council and ADUG, and who benefits from this partnership.

The Council confirmed in a 2019 Sunday Times investigation that it receives none of the rental income from Manchester Life's property portfolio, but that it does stand to make money through 'longer-term profit sharing arrangements' <sup>xxix</sup>. In addition, we cannot find any publicly available information on whether the Council has received income from the sale of Manchester Life properties. In our view, it is in the public interest for the Council to disclose any profit-sharing arrangements with ADUG.

In addition, the same article quoted other developers being 'furious' about the access that ADUG has enjoyed to public land in Manchester:

"This is a sweetheart deal between the council and Abu Dhabi," said one (developer). "They get the land without any fair competition process, they can build apartment blocks, and when the blocks start earning millions the council gets no rental income. They don't even have to make section 106 payments, like lots of other developers. The whole thing stinks" <sup>xxx</sup>.

If true, this raises important questions about the process by which public land is allocated to developers, whether a fair and open competitive tendering process is followed, and the transparency of this process to councillors and members of the public.

Developer	Total Land in Hectares	Total Price Paid	Total housing units built on land	Total Acres	Price per Acre
Urban Splash	To be confirmed by Council	To be confirmed by Council	400	To be confirmed by Council	TBC
ADUG	4.234	£4,821,280	1465	10.462214	£460,828
McCauls	0.93	£0	169	2.29803	£0
Northern Group	0.39	£1,280,000	176	0.96369	£1,328,228
UK Land + Property	0.5	£0	126	1.2355	£0

**Figure 7**

The key developers who have benefited from public land disposals in Ancoats and New Islington

Source: Authors

In addition to the land discussed above, there are various sites that have already been disposed of by the Council that aren't currently being developed. Some of these sites are likely to be developed in the future by Manchester Life as part of the planned redevelopment of the Poland Street area on the northern edge of Ancoats, including part of what is currently used as a green space (Prussia Park/Ancoats Green) <sup>xxxi</sup>. As such, the disposal of public land for private residential development is an ongoing process in Ancoats and New Islington and should be subjected to scrutiny by local councillors and the public.



## 5. Other notable public land disposals in central Manchester

In this section we discuss some notable examples of public land disposal that fall outside our case study area of Ancoats and New Islington. These examples indicate that the issues identified in section 4 are not isolated to one ward of the city.

### 5.1 The Oxygen development



**Figure 8**

Photo of Oxygen Tower

Source: Authors

‘Oxygen’ is a £82million 32-storey apartment block currently under construction on Store Street in the Piccadilly ward. It features 381 apartments and townhouses (including eight penthouses), a gym, a cinema room, a 25-metre swimming pool and a ‘5-star spa’ <sup>xxxii</sup>.

According to Council and Land Registry data, the Council disposed of a land holding in August 2016 that matches the address of the Oxygen site. The land was leased for 960 years to Store Street Developments (a company registered at the address of the Property Alliance Group) for a total of £1 (one pound). As with many private residential developments on public land in central Manchester, no affordable or social housing provision is included in the development.

In our view, this case raises questions about why the Council appear to have transferred public land to a developer for £1 so that they can build a scheme without affordable housing provision on-site. We make an estimate that, given a rental price of £1000 per month per unit, £4.77 billion of rental income (at today’s prices) will be generated over the course of the 960 year lease (!).

## 5.2 The Hampton by Hilton Hotel



**Figure 9**

Photo of Hampton Hotel

Source: Authors

47 Rochdale Road in the Piccadilly Ward is the site of a new Hampton by Hilton Hotel<sup>xxxiii</sup>. According to Council and Land Registry data, in November 2017 the Council appears to have leased land at 47 Rochdale Road for 250 years to the Hilton Corporation for a total of £1 (one pound).

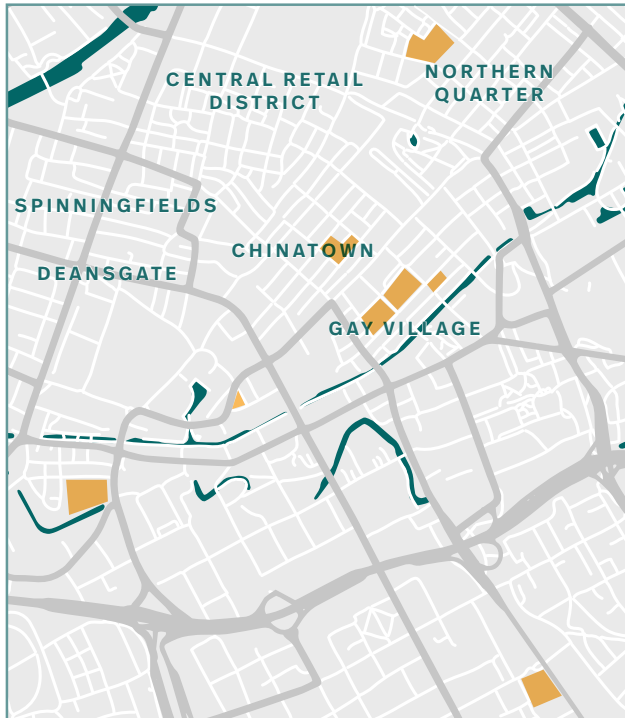
Demand for hotels has been growing in Manchester for a number of years, and it is understandable that the Council wants to support the growth of this sector. However, in our view this disposal of (some or all) of the land for £1 to a corporation with estimated assets of \$14 billion raises further questions about how the Council values its land assets.



### 5.3 City centre car parks

Various public land plots in the city centre are currently being used as car parks. This provides a revenue stream to the Council. However, city centre car parking is likely to be phased out in the next few years if the Council is serious about its commitments to addressing the climate emergency, illegal air pollution levels and the need to shift to a pedestrian/cycle-friendly city centre.

Not including car parks within already developed sites, we found that city centre public land being used for car parks amounts to: 3.447 Hectares/8.5 acres/34,470 sqm.



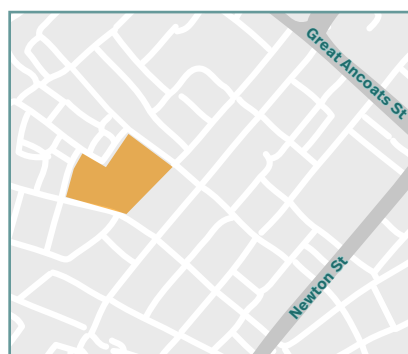
**Figure 10**

Map showing location of Council-owned car parks in the city centre

Source: Authors

The intentions of the Council for the future use of these sites is unclear. Given the urgent need to shift away from Manchester being a car-centric city, our view is that there should be an open public discussion about how these sites can be better used to address social and environmental needs in the future.

The Northern Quarter car park on Church Street (Piccadilly ward) sits on a site of 7,740sqm in the heart of the fashionable Northern Quarter. This is a neighbourhood that has experienced rising rents, gentrification and the displacement of independent cultural enterprises in recent years. What should the future of the site be? Affordable and social housing? Public green space? Affordable live/work studios and galleries for artists? Alternatively, should the Council sell this prime land in order to generate much-needed revenue in the context of the severe funding cuts imposed by central government over the last decade? We estimate that this land could be worth up to £10 million (based on the amount paid by the Council for land at the former Central Retail Park). Although we have our own views on this question, we argue that there is an urgent need for an open public debate around how Council-owned land can be best used to address social and economic needs in the city.



**Figure 11**

Photo and Location of the Church Street car park in the Northern Quarter

Source: Authors

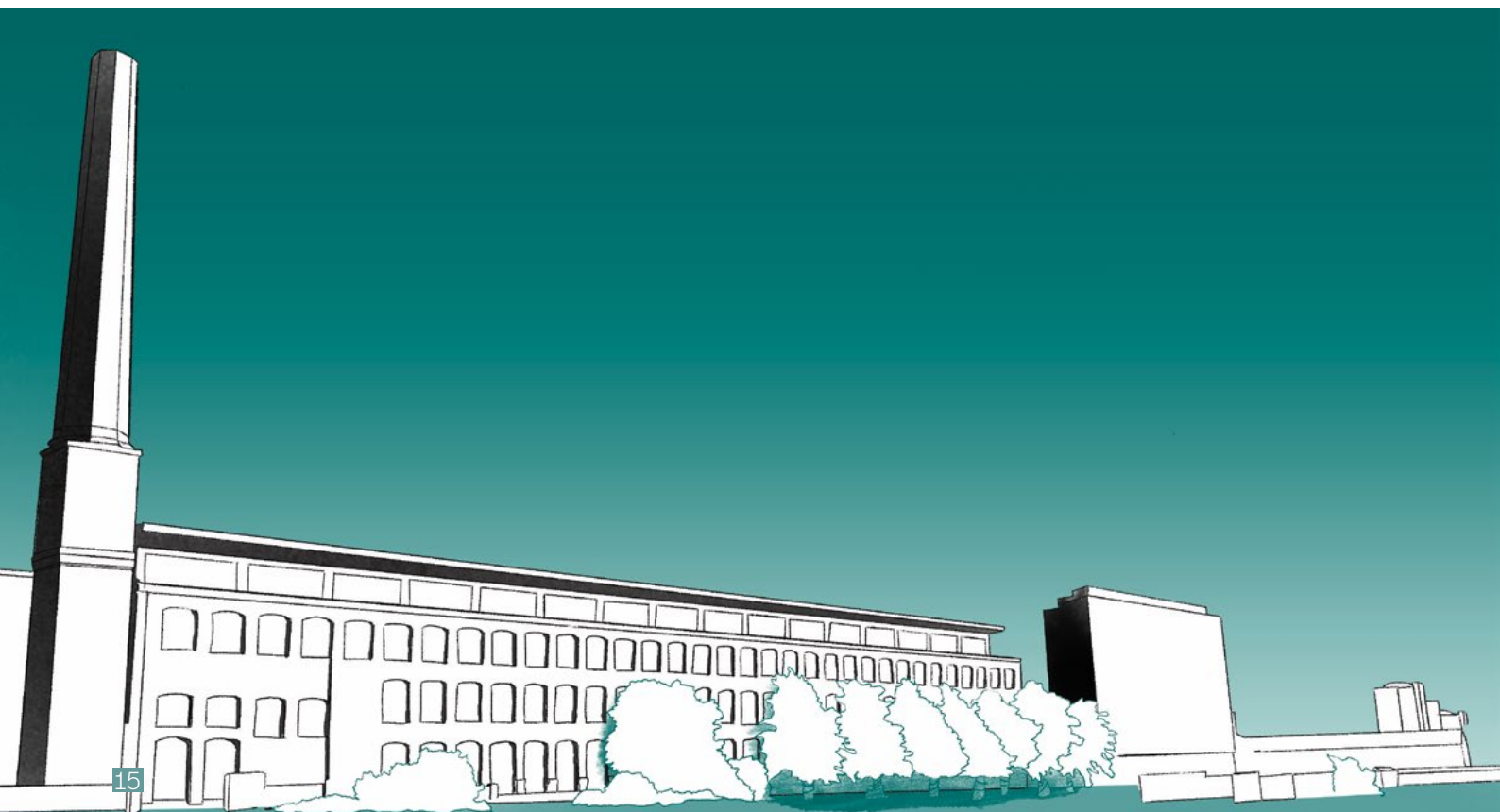


## 6. Conclusions

The research discussed in this report highlights three major issues regarding public land privation in Manchester.

The first issue is the **lack of transparency** around public land ownership and use in the city. Data on the Council's land assets is not available to the public in an easily accessible format (such as an online map). In addition, there is a lack of publicly available data on Council land disposals. The authors of this report have managed to piece together a limited picture of public land privatisation in the city centre using methods such as FOI requests and Land Registry title deeds. However, the collection and analysis of this data is challenging, time-consuming, expensive and requires a degree of research expertise. Public resources such as land are the common wealth of the citizens of Manchester. In our view, information on how public land is being allocated and on what terms should be freely and easily accessible to the public (and to the city councillors who represent them). Greater transparency will enable public debate and democratic accountability around how Manchester's public resources are used.

The second issue is the question of whether the Council is doing all it can to get **value for money for the public** when disposing of its land assets. Urban land is an extremely valuable resource. In the context of ongoing cuts to local authority funding due to austerity policies, it is important that the Council generates as much revenue as possible from any public land disposals. However, the available data suggests that the Council may be paying nine times more for land in Ancoats and New Islington than it has received in revenue for land for private residential development in the same neighbourhood. We also identified several examples of prime city centre land apparently being transferred to developers for free (or for a nominal amount of £1). Although we recognise that various factors will affect the value of a parcel of land, in our view these findings raise a series of important questions about the process by which Council land is valued and allocated to private developers: Is there a fair, competitive and open tendering process? What is the process by which land is valued and prices are determined, and is the future value of a development considered? Who decides the terms, such as the duration and conditions, of lease agreements? How was the £42 million+ of income raised from public land disposals used, and how was this decided? Finally, in our view the Council should declare any profit-sharing agreements made with developers. In the interests of transparency and accountability, we invite the Council to publicly address these questions in relation to the land disposals highlighted in the report.





The third issue is the **character of urban development** that is enabled by public land privatisation in Manchester. As with other cities, Manchester is facing a housing crisis and a climate emergency and there is a shortage of both affordable and social housing and public green space in the city centre. Public land is an important resource that could be used to address these social and environmental problems. However, the available data suggests that public land is often leased out to developers in order to build luxury apartments that are unaffordable to the majority of Manchester's residents. In some cases, public land privatisation has led to the demolition of social housing (such as the Cardroom Estate) and the loss of public green space (such as New Islington Green). In our view, greater transparency and accountability over public land ownership and use will enable a much-needed public debate about the future of urban planning and land use in the city.

How best to achieve greater transparency and accountability over public land ownership and use in Manchester? One possible model can be found in Manchester's neighbour Liverpool, where the Metro Mayor Steve Rotherham has recently launched a Land Commission comprised of representatives of the public, private and voluntary sectors and academia. According to Rotherham, the role of the Commission is to develop 'radical recommendations for how we can make the best use of publicly-owned land to make this the fairest and most socially inclusive city region in the country' <sup>xxxiv</sup>. This example demonstrates that a more open, transparent and participatory approach to managing public land is possible.

Following Liverpool's example, the Greater Manchester Independent Inequalities Commission has recommended the establishment of a Land Commission to look at the relationship between land ownership and inequality in the city region<sup>xxxv</sup>. This recommendation was subsequently adopted by Andy Burnham in his manifesto for the 2021 Greater Manchester mayoral election<sup>xxxvi</sup>. We welcome this pledge and call for the establishment of a Greater Manchester Land Commission with participation from civil society groups, such as climate and housing justice campaigns, by the end of 2021.

In the city of Manchester we suggest two ways forward. Firstly, we call for a publicly accessible website with records of all Council land disposals in order to improve transparency. Furthermore, we encourage local councillors to initiate community audits of public land assets in their own wards. These community audits can form the basis of a democratic decision-making process about the future of this precious resource.

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## 9. Endnotes

- i One hectare is equivalent to 1.5 football pitches
- ii Kivell, P. T., & McKay, I. (1988). Public ownership of urban land. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 165-178.
- iii Christophers, B. (2018). *The new enclosure: The appropriation of public land in neoliberal Britain*. London: Verso.
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- vi Hodson, M., McMeekin, A., Froud, J., & Moran, M. (2020). State-rescaling and re-designing the material city-region: Tensions of disruption and continuity in articulating the future of Greater Manchester. *Urban Studies*, 57(1), 198-217.
- vii Silver, J. (2018). *From Homes to Assets: Housing Financialization in Greater Manchester*. Working Paper.
- viii Folkman, P., Froud, J., Johal, S., Tomaney, J., & Williams, K. (2016). MANCHESTER TRANSFORMED: why we need a reset of city region policy. *CRESO Public Interest Report*, p.6.
- ix Bower, C. (2020) Social housing is key to alleviating the housing crisis, so why are we not building it? *The Meteor*. August 13 2020: <https://themetor.org/2020/08/13/social-housing-is-key-to-alleviating-the-housing-crisis-so-why-are-we-not-building-it/> (accessed 20 October 2020).
- x <https://themetor.org/2017/08/01/manchesters-property-investment-boom-funded-through-tax-dodging-offshore-companies-unethical-international-investment/>
- xi [https://www.manchester.gov.uk/open/downloads/download/142/local\\_authority\\_land\\_2020](https://www.manchester.gov.uk/open/downloads/download/142/local_authority_land_2020)
- xii <https://mappinggm.org.uk/gmodin/>
- xiii 'Freehold' denotes a permanent transfer of ownership whereas 'leasehold' denotes a transfer for a fixed period of time only.
- xiv Silver, J. (2018). *From Homes to Assets: Housing Financialization in Greater Manchester*. Working Paper.
- xv This case study does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of all public land disposals in the Ancoats & Beswick ward. We do note other significant public land disposals in this ward, such as the transfer of land around Manchester City FC's Etihad Stadium to the Abu Dhabi United Group, some of which is being developed into a £300 million entertainment arena.
- xvi <https://www.urbansplash.co.uk/regeneration/projects/new-islington>
- xvii <http://mcrlife.co.uk/>
- xviii <http://mcrlife.co.uk/about-manchester-life/>
- xix <http://mcrlife.co.uk/one-vesta-street/availability-one-vesta-street/>
- xx <https://www.business-live.co.uk/economic-development/office-campus-plans-east-manchester-19482221>
- xxi <https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/news/central-retail-park-earmarked-for-1m-sq-ft-office-scheme/>
- xxii <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/02/manchesters-fight-for-the-city>
- xxiii <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/council-paid-37m-former-ancoats-17064841>
- xxiv [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/app17\\_savills\\_residential\\_development\\_margin.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/app17_savills_residential_development_margin.pdf)
- xxv <https://www.urbansplash.co.uk/resources/urban-splash-completes-latest-phase-at-new-islington>
- xxvi <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/new-islington-manchester-urban-splash-17849046>
- xxvii There were a further 18 'affordable' terraced and semi-detached homes in 'The Guts' in New Islington.
- xxviii Silver, J. (2018). *From Homes to Assets: Housing Financialization in Greater Manchester*. Working Paper; Silver, J. and Goulding, R (2019). *From Homes to Assets: Housing Financialization in Greater Manchester* 2018-19. Working Paper.
- xxix <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/manchester-the-city-that-sold-out-to-abu-dhabi-9mwx7nfck>
- xxx <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/manchester-the-city-that-sold-out-to-abu-dhabi-9mwx7nfck>
- xxxi <http://mcrlife.co.uk/manchester-city-council-manchester-life-and-great-places-today-launched-a-community-consultation/>
- xxxii <https://oxygenmanchester.com/>
- xxxiii <https://www.hilton.com/en/hotels/mannqhx-hampton-manchester-northern-quarter/>
- xxxiv <https://www.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/steve-rotheram-launches-englands-first-land-commission-focused-on-community-wealth-building/>
- xxxv [https://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/4337/gmca\\_independent\\_inequalities\\_commission\\_v15.pdf](https://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/4337/gmca_independent_inequalities_commission_v15.pdf)
- xxxvi <https://andyformayor.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Andy-Burnham-Manifesto-v2.1-002.pdf>

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