

Does Yorkshire Support Devolution?

On the 6th May 2021 West Yorkshire elected its first metro mayor after many years of discussion locally and with the Government.

At 36.8% [1], voter turnout for the contest was the highest for any of the four metro mayor elections which took place across northern England on that day, and the fourth highest of the regional mayoral elections that took place across the country.

Ahead of the election, polling for the Centre for Cities found that 97% of those questioned in West Yorkshire could not correctly name any candidate standing to be Mayor [2]. Such a figure is profoundly worrying for the health of the region's democracy.

It raises the question that after such protracted discussions between central government and local authorities in the region, do the public and businesses across Yorkshire actually support devolution?

On the 25th May Policy Yorkshire, in partnership with Addleshaw Goddard, organised a high profile webinar posing that very question. The event in full can be watched on our YouTube channel [3].

What the Panellists Said

Richard Goodfellow said that he felt Yorkshire does support devolution and spoke of the business community in the region both wanting and feeling excited about the prospect of mayors across the region. He made the following points:

- Businesses will be asking why a mayor is relevant to them. He argued for **the need to show how a mayor can have a day-to-day impact** such as accessing funding, improving skills, ensuring a transport network that works for everyone and providing the region with a voice on the national stage. This will only work, however, if mayors develop strong partnerships with business.

Event panellists



Rt Hon Lord Heseltine
Former Deputy Prime
Minister



Tracy Brabin
Mayor of West Yorkshire



Laura Collins
Editor of the Yorkshire
Evening Post



Richard Goodfellow
Partner and Head of
Infrastructure, Projects &
Energy Group,
Addleshaw Goddard

- Businesses want mayors to be trusted locally and in Whitehall and gain the confidence of central government. **Mayors need the right team around them to ensure they can deliver on their pledges and the region's key priorities.**
- The skills and employment agenda is key for businesses and **needs to be developed in partnership with mayors.**
- **Whitehall should be a partner**, no matter what political party is in government, since that is where the money is coming from.
- **Mayors need a vision for business** and need to be clear about ambitions for the region on the global stage.
- **The region needs to be ambitious about prospects for powers to be devolved to it in the future**, citing Lord Heseltine's 'Empowering English Cities' report [4].

He raised concerns that on the climate emergency agenda, despite the interest there is in it, the current devolution deals do not provide the powers the region needs to do much about it.

Mayors, he argued, also need to use their powers to convene and lead (even where they don't have formal powers over a particular policy areas) to secure the resources and investment that Yorkshire requires and wants.

Laura Collins spoke about the letters' pages of the Yorkshire Evening Post showing that **the public want to know exactly what a new mayor and devolution will mean at a grass roots level.** For many, she said, the concept of devolution is quite abstract for them, not helped by a muted mayoral election campaign as a result of the pandemic. Her readers, she said, want to see quick action to address inequality in all its forms across the region exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of levelling up, she questioned who will be leading the effort to ensure the regional economy recovers, what levelling up actually means and how to measure if levelling up has been successful or not.

It is vital that at the heart of all of this is peoples' every day lived experiences. Her readers want to see quick wins to help them understand what mayors can do for them.

She warned of a general sense of malaise in the body politic and called for greater levels of engagement with those on the ground to understand what they want and need.

Tracy Brabin argued that people are 'fed up' with decisions being made in Whitehall and championed the role that local authorities have played in response to the pandemic. She argued that people wanted a mayor as a loud voice and a champion to speak up for them, pointing out that many people bought into the model when Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester was referenced during her election campaign. In respect of finances, she noted that West Yorkshire has secured a 'good deal' with devolution bringing £38 million a year for 10 years which can be leveraged to borrow funds as well. She argued that the mayoral team is now in delivery mode.

In respect of the public's appetite for devolution, Ms Brabin pointed to West Yorkshire having had one

of the highest turnouts of any of the mayoral elections across the country and to the 4,000 responses received to the consultation which established the devolution deal.

However, she admitted that it is important to help the public understand what the mayor does and what the work of mayors means for them on a day-to-day basis with something tangible.

Communication with the public will be key, including online videos and town hall type meetings along with engagement with businesses and the civic community across West Yorkshire, she said. Building trust between the Mayor and Whitehall will be important as well, working constructively especially on the levelling up agenda.

She argued that her ability to get things done as mayor was much better than being able to get things done as a Member of Parliament. She noted that colleagues within the Labour Party questioned why she wanted to leave Westminster to move to local government.

Ms Brabin asked businesses to work with her on the Kick Start programme to identify suitable green jobs that could be made available under the scheme. Likewise, she called on them to work with her on the lifelong learning and digital skills agendas.

Whilst welcoming the development of metro mayors, **Lord Heseltine** warned that the steam has gone out of the devolution agenda in Whitehall and that the Government has lost interest in its manifesto commitment to ensure all mayoral powers are levelled up to match those of Greater Manchester. He argued that the way departments in central government operate has reverted to type, preferring to decide themselves what is best and being unwilling to relinquish control to the country's great conurbations to address the unique needs of each. Similarly, MPs and local councillors, he argued, are resistant to the idea of relinquishing control and status to a mayor. Inertia, he said, is built into the system based on self-interest.

In respect of the levelling up agenda, he warned that it would all be functional and driven centrally from Whitehall and then presented as a 'fait accompli'. He suggested that mayors across the country needed to address the problem of the Government taking them for a ride.

He warned that the way that the mayoralties have been designed has led to fragmentation, arguing that he still supported the concept of a Yorkshire-wide mayor.

Turning to public opinion, he said that there was no confidence in the body politic with derisory turnout at local elections because people do not think it makes a difference and because they see it as a referendum on the political parties nationally. This, together with a lack of faith in the quality of public administration, explains why the public are not enthusiastic about devolution. He argued that this could change as mayors begin to show what they can achieve with a mayoral leader bringing all sections of society together.

He called on the metro mayors across the county to work together in unison to push the case for further, meaningful, devolution.

Looking at mayors that have been successful, he **pointed to those who set specific targets and then go on to meet them**. He also argued that the **mayoral authorities need to look at the weaknesses as well as the strengths in their area**.

Where to go From Here

To answer the question, does Yorkshire support devolution, the answer, based on our webinar, is a cautious yes. Whilst the concept of devolution is one that is supported, judgement remains suspended until the public and businesses start to see the tangible difference mayors in South and West Yorkshire can make. This will be especially important in persuading those in North and East Yorkshire that developing a mayoral model is worthwhile.

Mayors and what they do need to be seen to be believed. Based on this we identify three key areas that will determine whether devolution is just a token gesture or the start of a long-term, real and permanent shift of power away from Whitehall. These are:

- **Mayors delivering on what they have promised and the public seeing tangible impacts on their lives as a result.**
- **Engagement with the business community, civic society and the public.**
- **Mayors gaining the confidence of central government and acquiring more powers and resources.**

Delivery is Key

For those mayors already in place in Yorkshire and those yet to be established, **delivery is central to the public and businesses appreciating the benefits they can bring to everyday life.** Both need to see tangible impacts on their lives and operations as a result of actions by Mayors. It will be critical to their success that they avoid being seen as yet another layer of government adding to the background political noise that many, as Laura Collins noted, have simply tuned out off.

Given the limited powers that mayors in the region currently have, it is self-evident that not everything that they want to achieve will be within their gift to give. As such, whilst it is important that mayors are robust in standing up for the needs of their areas, they need also to know when to avoid political posturing for the sake of it. This should not inhibit Mayors acting as an advocate for their area where they are being seen to be acting in its interests even if they are speaking out about something over which they have no direct power. Where the harm will be done is where they are seen to be doing this not out of the interests of the area but to create political confrontation.

The promises Mayors make therefore need to be realistic. Whilst they aspire to have more power, in the meantime they will be judged by how effectively they use the powers they have to make a difference. It will not wash for them to blame central government or a lack of power for not being effective.

Mayors across the region need to develop constructive relationships with ministers and officials in Whitehall. It was, in part, a constructive partnership between Labour-led Manchester and a Conservative Chancellor, George Osborne, that provided the confidence in Whitehall to develop the devolved mayoral model and in Manchester's case, grant them more powers than any other mayoral authority. That spirit of co-operative working needs to be re-kindled to help mayors deliver for their areas. To work constructively with the government of the day, they need to put aside their political badges and adopt policies on the basis of what is best for their area, what works and what is the best they can get.

It should be said that a similarly constructive, partnership approach is also needed by Ministers towards mayors of a different political persuasion than themselves. When looking at the local election results in Manchester, it was very clear who the winner was from the verbal fisticuffs between Andy Burnham and Ministers over the imposition of covid restrictions on Greater Manchester, and it wasn't the Conservatives.

Using the powers they do have, mayors need to develop some 'quick wins' to be able to show to the public and businesses that they can and do make a difference to their lives. In devising such quick hits, the mayors need to consider what measures will have the greatest impact on the largest number of people within their areas. This though needs to be balanced against the need for patience in areas such as transport and infrastructure where progress will inevitably take longer.

The mayoral combined authorities should establish delivery units to take a lead on ensuring the mayor's priorities and manifesto pledges are being driven forward. This is particularly important given the frequency by which those in any positions of political leadership can find themselves buffeted by events, being steered off course as a result.

The units should publish an annual statement setting out what has been achieved over the past year and what they hope to achieve over the forthcoming year (a sort of Queen's Speech) matched against what has been promised. In doing so, they should clearly identify the partners with whom they would need to work to achieve these objectives and how they will be engaged.

Engagement With the Public and Business Community

For mayors, the mantra that they need to be seen to be believed is very apposite. Whilst in everyday life the public and businesses will see the role played by local authorities, be it bin collections, running schools or filling in potholes, mayors will not have responsibility for day to day services upon which the public and businesses rely. This makes the job of the Mayors seeking to make people aware of what they do more difficult. The one exception in the case of South and West Yorkshire is bus and local train services and here they need to make it clear, for good or ill, that they are taking over responsibility.

The 'convening powers' Mayors hold, namely the ability to bring together different groups of people on an issue even when it is not within their formal powers, are important and provides them with an opportunity to achieve more than their position otherwise allows them. **Mayors should be clear what those issues are and how they can best lead the charge for policy change in partnership with others.** Key to this is to develop a clear set of evidence-based messages that all in the mayoral combined authority area can get behind and take to central government and others leading policy development not within the remit of the Mayor.

Our event heard that whilst the public generally trust local decision makers more than they do those at the national level and think that decisions are best made at locally, there remains a wariness at developing new tiers of government. The job of mayors is to demonstrate that they are effective local decision makers and not simply an extra layer of bureaucracy.

Given this, it was positive to hear from Tracy Brabin about her plans to use social media videos and Town Hall meetings to engage with the public and to enable her to hear their views and explain what she is doing. **Mayors should explore all options, virtual and in person as permitted to engage with the public and other audiences.**

This could include school gate discussions and consultations, online question and answer discussions on Facebook, twitter and other social media channels. Mayors should look to respond, wherever possible, to relevant letters in local papers to show that they are taking on board concerns or challenges raised by the public.

A strategy also needs to be developed as to how mayors can systematically engage, and ensure they are working in close partnership, with the business community. On a host of issues such as the skills, employment and green agendas, businesses in the region will play a key role in ensuring the success of any mayor's agendas.

To assist with this, **mayors in the region should establish business and employment advisory councils ensuring that businesses and unions in the region are engaged and consulted on all relevant issues.**

Mayors gaining the confidence of central government and acquiring more powers and resources

In May, the Government confirmed plans to develop a White Paper on 'levelling up' later this year [5]. It was subsequently announced that this will incorporate the Government's thinking for the next stage of devolution, so linking the two issues.

As came out from the seminar and previous ones held by Policy Yorkshire, the UK remains one of the most centralised countries in the world. As Lord Heseltine outlined using his vast experience as a Minister, there is a default position for Ministers and senior officials of seeking to retain powers and funding within government departments.

This is preventing the government walking the walk when it comes to significant devolution. One of the results is that the Government has not made good on commitments to ensure metro mayors across the country are given the same scale of powers enjoyed by that of the Greater Manchester Mayor. Not only does this create a sense of unequal treatment from one region to another, it makes it difficult for mayors to make the kind of difference to their communities that they have the potential for.

It also raises a serious question about how committed the Government really is about the devolution agenda. The very fact that the levelling up paper is being driven centrally is a case in point. **Levelling up cannot be imposed on the country from Whitehall. It needs to be achieved in partnership with mayors, local authorities and local business.**

Metro mayors across the country need to provide a united front to the Government about what levelling up should mean, how it should be achieved and how to measure the success. They should take the initiative and publish a pre-emptory shadow white paper. This would force the government into responding and where they disagree with a 'bottom-up' approach, having to explain why. In developing such plans Mayors need to show how a levelling up agenda can best support both towns and cities, not favouring one over the other.

There should be joint ownership of the actual White Paper between metro mayors and central government. Having appointed Neil O'Brien MP to lead on this work, a Labour and a Conservative mayor should be appointed to work alongside him on leading the development of the proposals within the paper.

Following the model of the **Joint Ministerial Committee** which seeks to provide a focus for the

coordination of the relationships between the UK Government and those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, **a similar body should be established to provide a focus for the relationship between metro mayors and Whitehall**. On this would sit all the metro mayors and it should be chaired either by the Prime Minister or, at the very least, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster given his responsibilities for devolution and strengthening the union. Other relevant Ministers such as those from BEIS, DHSC, DWP, HMT and Defra would attend.

The White Paper should set out a staircase of powers, including over revenue raising and spending, which should gradually be devolved to mayoral authorities. Recognising that not all authorities might be ready to take these on all at the same time, **there should be a grading of authorities so it is clear what grade has what powers**. The staircasing will ensure that all see the route through the grading until the maximum number possible achieve the top grade with the most powers.

About Policy Yorkshire

Policy Yorkshire is the region's dedicated think tank. For more information visit www.policyyorkshire.org or email admin@policyyorkshire.org.

References

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- [3] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMt9YVdVdNE&t=2404s>.
- [4] West Midlands Combined Authority, *Lord Heseltine: Give Metro Mayors greater powers to deliver housing, skills and jobs*, 2nd July 2019, available at: <https://www.wmca.org.uk/news/lord-heseltine-give-metro-mayors-greater-powers-to-deliver-housing-skills-and-jobs/>.
- [5] Prime Minister's Office, *Government to publish Levelling Up White Paper*, 4th May 2021, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-publish-levelling-up-white-paper>.