

Devolution Consultation Responses

Context

The Government is offering places in England the chance to have greater responsibility and control over decisions and spending in their region. This process of transferring powers and decisions which would usually be taken by Central Government to a more local or regional level is called devolution.

On the 21st of July, the Government said that: “City regions that want to agree a devolution deal in return for a mayor by the spending review will need to submit formal, fiscally neutral proposals and an agreed geography to the Treasury by 4 September 2015.”

York is currently in the process of deciding where it should sit with regards to devolution. As part of this process, City of York Council is undertaking a consultation to get residents’ views and opinions on how we should proceed.

Consultation process

Between the 10th and 20th of August, City of York Council held four devolution consultation sessions. These sessions included a presentation providing some background information on devolution, as well as some context around York’s regional partnership working (available to view at https://www.york.gov.uk/downloads/file/7327/devolution_presentation). Following this, each session had a group discussion/question and answer session. Residents were invited to attend these open sessions and a selection of executive council members/policy officers attended each session to discuss with residents:

- What their priorities were (to get from a devolution deal)
- Whether they would like York to be involved in a devolution deal
- What their priority ‘asks’ would be

Residents were also given the option to email in views and opinions to devolution@york.gov.uk.

Around 30 people in total attended the consultation sessions and approximately 37 people have emailed in their views to the devolution mail box so far. This process of consultation is ongoing and City of York Council is committed to continuing to take residents’ views into account throughout the decision making process.

This document pulls together – and makes publically available – the results from the first stage of devolution consultations. If you would like to view an example of how the consultation sessions worked, a webcast of the first devolution session can be found at https://www.york.gov.uk/info/20003/your_council/1739/devolution_explained.

Summary of responses – key themes

One thing that quickly became clear from the first stage of the consultations was that the issue of devolution is huge and complex, and as such it was not possible to reach any kind of firm consensus on what path York should take. However, some key themes did emerge and these are presented below. This is not an exhaustive list of all the comments gathered but an attempt to gather together comments and gain an initial steer from the results of the consultation so far.

What was clear, however, was that the vast majority of respondents were in favour of seeing some form of devolution deal for York, as long as it would bring most long term benefits for York, its services, residents and economy.

1. We must be clear on our ‘asks’ – and ensure they unlock the right outcomes for York

A clear theme throughout the first stage of consultations was that any decision about devolution will have significant long term implications for York. It was noted that throughout these discussions it is important to bear in mind what overall vision we have for York’s future; what is best for York should remain at the heart of all discussions. This should include considering what will attract businesses, investment, tourism and jobs in the long term to ensure York’s economy prospers.

It was highlighted that part of this process should include us trying to understand what is ‘blocking’ growth already in our city, and whether there are things we can do as a city to deal with this that are within our power already – for example, developing a Local Plan. Any devolution deal of which York is part must enable us to do things that are not already within our power to help unlock growth and opportunities; devolution would be worthwhile if it allows us to move past these obstacles as part of a bigger group of places.

Reflecting this, another consistent theme was that we must carefully consider exactly what our ‘asks’ are – as most involve at least some transfer of risk. For example, health care was one area that most participants felt it would be best to avoid gaining responsibility for. Several residents expressed the opinion that devolution should not be about simply taking any powers on offer, but should involve careful consideration of what tangible benefits they will bring to York.

Overall, it was clear that the focus of a devolution deal for York should not just be about gaining the maximum amount of powers and resources possible; it must be about identifying the key barriers we face as a city and ensuring that the deal we do get allows us to deliver against these aims to unlock what York needs.

2. Importance of issues beyond financial value – heritage, relationships and identity

It was consistently expressed throughout the consultation sessions that devolution is a long-term decision about the future of our city, and as such a decision must be made based more than just what monetary value a deal could bring to York. This has several facets to it.

One resident highlighted the importance of York's place as the 'cultural capital' for North Yorkshire and East Riding, and therefore the importance of retaining links with this geography through regional governance arrangements e.g. York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Local Enterprise Partnership.

Culture and heritage were also identified as key drivers of economic growth, and it was expressed that a devolution deal must be one that can enhance these assets. Some residents expressed concern that this heritage may not be preserved or maximised if York were to enter a deal with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority area.

Further, it was stated that the social implications of devolution should be considered when looking at prospective deals. For example, through looking at whether a deal includes skills provision – a driver which both promotes economic growth for the city and enhances social inclusion for individuals.

It was also clear from discussions that residents felt a close alignment with North Yorkshire. Many expressed that they felt 'natural' links with North Yorkshire through shared history and joint working. Thus, residents were keen to ensure these working relationships were preserved through a devolution deal.

3. York should take a leading role

Another theme that became clear throughout the discussions was that York is in a strong position and should use this to take a leading role in negotiations on a potential deal. York has a lot to bring to an arrangement – for example, a prosperous economy and the brand of a leading international tourist destination.

Within the discussions, York was described as both a 'key economic driver for both West and North Yorkshire' and a 'magnet' that other authorities are keen to work with. It was felt strongly that we must use our unique position – as sitting between North and West Yorkshire with the potential to choose between two deals – to our advantage. It was felt that we must clearly identify York's priorities and use this strong position to lead on shaping a deal that most closely matches our priorities and brings the most long term benefits to York, regardless of what geography the deal is based upon.

4. Importance of the 'Yorkshire brand'

Several residents, particularly those representing the business community, expressed the importance of maximising the use of the 'Yorkshire brand' – and of York's position as a strong brand within it. It was stated that this brand is particularly useful in terms of getting international traction, and attracting investment in York. Further, this is important in building on our assets as a tourism city and desirable city in which to live.

These discussions were linked to the desire for a 'Greater Yorkshire' devolution option (which would likely include the constituent authorities of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Local Enterprise Partnership and Hull). It was articulated that York is at the centre of this brand – which has a strong emotional as well as economic element to it – and

should maximise the opportunity to capitalise on this more through devolution. Failing the option for a 'Greater Yorkshire' deal, it was felt it was important for the Yorkshire brand for York to stay in an arrangement with North Yorkshire.

5. Maximise York's transport infrastructure

Improving York's transport links to neighbouring Yorkshire authorities was one area consistently flagged as a priority for any devolution deal involving York. It was seen as a big advantage of both unlocking funding, and gaining the opportunity to take a more joined up approach through devolution. It was argued that commuting patterns should be taken into account, especially considering the difference between the amount of commuters between North and West Yorkshire. One resident also highlighted that good transport links are a crucial way in which economies are linked, and therefore a crucial element of building an effective Northern Powerhouse is to invest in transport infrastructure.

Building on York's strong transport system was flagged as important both within Yorkshire (as above) and with the rest of the UK. It could be particularly useful to maximise this in order to attract investment and businesses from London.

One resident highlighted the difference between investment in sustainable transport between the West and North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnerships – the West Yorkshire Combined Authority has historically invested more in sustainable transport.

The importance of working collaboratively with the whole region – i.e. the whole of Yorkshire – to improve transport links, was emphasised in several of the sessions. This was stated as important regardless of what geographical footprint a devolution deal might take.

6. The 'fish and pond' debate

The debate about whether it would be more beneficial for York to be a 'big fish in a small pond' (through entering into a Combined Authority with North Yorkshire and East Riding authorities, for example) or being a 'small fish in a bigger pond' (for example, entering into a deal with West Yorkshire/a 'Greater Yorkshire' deal) was widely discussed in both consultation sessions and emails. The pros and cons of both options were debated; an overall consensus on which option would be preferable was not clear from the results as many respondents saw the positives and negatives of both arguments.

The main advantage of being a 'small fish in a bigger pond' was that the bigger the area the devolution deal covers, the more power and resources will be available to places to invest in improving the region. Some participants expressed the view that it might be worth taking more of a back seat role in a larger Combined Authority, as long as this enabled York to unlock its priority asks. This would require some careful work to ensure York does not get 'swallowed up' by larger West Yorkshire authorities, for example, but that it effectively uses the arrangement to get the most positive outcomes for York.

Others expressed concern that York's 'voice' could be drowned out in a wider regional arrangement, and that it may not be prioritised for funding against other, more deprived, areas as York is

perceived as relatively prosperous compared to some West Yorkshire authorities. This was a considerable concern as York does have significant pockets of deprivation, and residents felt one of the priorities of a devolution deal should be to tackle these. There were also some concerns around integrating certain areas on a regional level – for example policing and education – as York performs relatively well in these areas and might not be perceived as ‘needing’ extra resources. Therefore, some respondents expressed the view that it would be better to take a leading role in a smaller organisation.

7. Discussion on an elected mayor/governance structures

Throughout the consultation sessions, there were various concerns around the practical implications of what a devolution deal would mean in terms of York’s governance structures.

Some concerns were raised about the possibility of having an elected mayor including issues around whether a mayor would become ‘just another layer of governance’ that would be expensive to administer, specifically what his/her role would be and whether it would unlock significant funding opportunities for York. Several residents put forward the view that it was necessary to have adequate checks and balances in place to ensure a mayor would be democratically accountable – for example could the role of scrutiny committees be strengthened to act as an effective check on power? Would there be a cabinet around the mayor of the elected leaders of its constituent authorities with veto powers?

One resident said that a mayor would work if it was ‘light touch’ without involving a huge bureaucracy and had the correct checks and balances in place. The general view from the discussions with residents was that they were open to the idea of a mayor subject to several caveats: 1. That residents are given the opportunity to understand exactly what a mayor’s role would be and 2. That having an elected mayor would significantly contribute to unlocking York’s potential in a way that would not be possible without the extra powers and resources gained through a devolution deal e.g. housing, infrastructure and health opportunities in the long term. There was a general view that it would be a ‘missed opportunity’ to not at least explore the possibility of having a mayor.

8. Discussions on geography

There was no unanimous consensus from stage one of the consultations on a preferred geography for a devolution deal including York, although there was a widespread view that York should stay in a deal with North Yorkshire, whatever form that might take. All of the groups highlighted valid pros and cons for the various options available. It is also worth noting that the consultation was not specifically about the geography element of a deal, as at the time of the consultations it was very difficult to identify the most likely possibilities of a geography including York.

Widespread concerns were shown by respondents that splitting York from the rest of North Yorkshire (for example, if York were to pursue a deal based on the Leeds City Region geography) could cause significant problems in the long term; for example it could hinder our ability to meet York’s housing need. Some participants were also of the opinion that that York has much stronger links to a rural economy (i.e. North Yorkshire) than to an urban economy (i.e. West Yorkshire).

Considering this, there was significant traction for a 'Greater Yorkshire' devolution model. This option was supported particularly strongly with representatives of the business community. Many expressed the view that if a 'Greater Yorkshire' option was not feasible in the short term, it would be preferable to form two separate combined authorities with a view to combining them in the medium to long term. One resident noted that if this were to happen, by the time it came to merging the two, York might be in a stronger position to negotiate with West Yorkshire to gain a better deal for York and the region. Both of the options outlined above highlight the fact that most respondents saw significant potential gain in pursuing a devolution deal including North Yorkshire, and felt a natural alignment with it.

There was a strong view from respondents from the business community that links with North Yorkshire were important and should be preserved – whether through a devolution deal with North Yorkshire and East Riding or through a 'Greater Yorkshire' deal. It was also expressed that the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding Local Enterprise Partnership has put significant levels of support and funding into small businesses – which are crucial to York's economy – compared to the West Yorkshire Combined Authority. There was also a strong view from the discussions that York should be open to including Hull in a deal.

Further, some residents expressed concerns about York joining the West Yorkshire Combined Authority if this would mean no longer working with North Yorkshire; it was seen as essential that these relationships should be preserved. Some respondents, however, did highlight the benefits of joining the Leeds City Region, in particular in relation to the investment in infrastructure this could unlock.

It was noted that another factor to consider was the impact of York's services being 'associated' with other areas, and whether this could be a positive or a negative thing depending on the context or regional arrangement. This could mean that the visibility of York's high performing service areas may be disguised if associated with other places' services that are not so well performing. Conversely, devolution could represent a positive opportunity to boost some of York's services that are not performing so well, depending on the geography.

Residents that participated were pleased to have been given the opportunity to contribute their views and were keen to continue to be part of conversations on devolution as the process progresses. Many expressed the view that they would be able to give more constructive feedback if they were given the opportunity to better understand the specific 'asks' and processes that would be involved in a potential deal. They also acknowledged the difficulty of these decisions and that they would need to be taken by political leadership.