

## Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

### Oral evidence: The Evolution of Devolution: English Devolution, HC 534

Thursday 15 July 2021

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Members present: Mr William Wragg (Chair); Rachel Hopkins; Mr David Jones; John McDonnell; David Mundell; Tom Randall; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Karin Smyth; John Stevenson.

Questions 51 - 86

#### Witnesses

I: Ben Houchen, Mayor of Tees Valley Combined Authority; and Tracy Brabin, Mayor of West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

#### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ben Houchen and Tracy Brabin.

Q51 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Today is a further session to our inquiry into English devolution. I am very pleased indeed to be joined by two of England's mayors. I am going to ask them to introduce themselves for the record, please.

**Tracy Brabin:** I am Tracy Brabin, the Mayor of West Yorkshire.

**Ben Houchen:** Ben Houchen, Mayor of Tees Valley. Thank you for the invite.

Q52 **Chair:** Thank you both. Ben, if I could start with you, how would you describe the current state of governance arrangements in England from your perspective as a mayor?

**Ben Houchen:** It is a decent start. Different mayoralities have different governance structures internally, irrespective of how it then connects in with the centre. We all have an assurance framework with Treasury that is managed by MHCLG on our gateway reviews, on our annual reviews, on how we add value for money, where the investment goes, how jobs



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are created. Our link with the centre is relatively good. I personally think that the governance arrangements could probably be strengthened more directly with Treasury rather than via MHCLG, given the assurance framework is with Treasury.

On a local level, I think that it changes from mayoralty to mayoralty. We are very fortunate because one of the benefits that happened before I was elected, with the establishment of the combined authority, was that the local authorities at the time, rolled the local enterprise partnership into the combined authority as part of the devolution deal. The day of the election, one of the big upsides for the Tees Valley was that the LEP was, in effect, a committee of the combined authority, but the power and the decision making lay with the combined authority cabinet and the mayor.

Obviously, we have seen elsewhere in the country that that has not necessarily happened, and to different degrees that has been less of a problem, but in other areas it has been more of a problem. What you have at the minute with MHCLG is obviously a network of LEPs but then you have the creation of combined authorities, which is obviously more sporadic than the LEP network, in effect, and where you do not fold the LEP into the combined authority you create a second power base. That can cause governance issues about decision making. Pots of money that are devolved from central government sometimes go through LEPs; sometimes it is on purpose, sometimes it purposely excludes combined authorities and vice versa.

On the two parts to your question, I think centrally it is pretty good. I think there could be a little bit more done with Treasury and the centre on who we engage with in the Department, rather than through MHCLG, but locally I think there is more to do. That is largely around what happens with LEPs, what replaces them, and ultimately what happens with round 2 of devolution. If the idea is that this is devolution and for whatever reason there is not going to be the creation of new mayors or many new mayors, then it becomes more of a patchwork of a governance model that is more difficult.

If there is a policy to expand this and get every part of the country covered by a combined authority and therefore a mayor, then I think there needs to be a real review of how that links in with whatever it is that is potentially going to replace the LEPs, or whether the LEP network is going to continue and in what form. Unfortunately, I do not have an answer to that at the moment. My personal preference is that we should see the rolling out of devolution across the whole of England and—if I can go even further—potentially into the devolved Administration areas as well. On that basis you could easily see the LEPs folding into combined authorities as the politically accountable RDA, and you then don't have multiple funding streams that sometimes go to one organisation, or sometimes go to a local authority, a LEP, or a combined authority. There is a lot more work to do on that side of things.



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Q53 **Chair:** Thank you. That was very comprehensive indeed. In summary, what would you say are the main obstacles from your perspective to developing or, indeed, as you mentioned, introducing more effective systems of government in England? What are those obstacles?

**Ben Houchen:** The summary of what I have just given you is that ultimately there needs to be a dovetailing of policy between what is happening with LEPs and what is going to happen with the combined authorities. At the moment those two are not necessarily being dovetailed together as a policy. From my understanding, there is a review going on on the future of LEPs. What is going to replace that? Do they stay the same or do they change? Separately, there is a conversation going on about whether we want more mayors and more combined authorities. The conversation should be one and the same because, by definition, what governs those organisations is interdependent on each other. I think there is something in this that says if you are going to deliver more devolution, the LEP network and the combined authority network needs to be seen as one and the same, and bringing those two things together is a crucial part of having an effective governance model that works well with the centre.

Q54 **Chair:** Tracy, how would you describe the current state of governance arrangements in England from your new perspective?

**Tracy Brabin:** Certainly, coming in brand new—I have been in the post for seven weeks—I would say that it is very complex. Talking to other mayors around the region with different powers and different authorities, and some coming in without a combined authority in place and having to set up the whole structure, it is different everywhere. I think we need a stronger and more consistent level of powers. We might choose to use them differently according to local requirements, but it would be great if there was that level playing field. For example, I am the Police and Crime Commissioner—I have the responsibilities for the police. I do not have responsibilities for health, but Andy Burnham has health. Others do not have the police. I wonder whether the public are being served efficiently enough if they do not have the full array of possibilities. Yesterday we saw that in London Sadiq Khan mandated face coverings on all transport because he had the powers. I only have the powers over the bus stations, and there are other mayors around the country who have powers over their trams and they can mandate face coverings. It is these piecemeal powers that I think government could look at.

I would question slightly the relationship with the centre in that I am not sure I have that same relationship that Ben does with the centre. I am obviously new and building those relationships, but it would be great to have more access, to be more involved in those conversations—it's that old "Hamilton" musical adage: you have to be in the room where it happens. Sometimes over the last few weeks it has felt like I am not in that room.



It would be great to have a more open conversation with the centre because, to be fair, the mayors want to deliver. Certainly, I want to deliver on my 10 pledges and all of those are attached to levelling up. I want to help government deliver on their manifesto pledge on levelling up. It is very timely, this session, isn't it, with the Prime Minister about to deliver his vision for levelling up going forward? We can work with government. Certainly, I am very up for learning from all mayors across the region about how we go forward and how they navigate this complexity, and also combining our powers across the region, whether that is the M62 mayors, with Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham, or whether that is Dan Jarvis in the south. We want to make the offer from Yorkshire as cohesive as possible. In conclusion, the arrangements are complex. I am trying to get my head around them and to bring in all partners.

If I could just pick up on what Ben was saying, the LEP has been a pivotal part of the success of West Yorkshire, and Sir Roger Marsh, who is the chair, has been knighted because of his impact on the region. That relationship is robust, has evolved and it is very trusted. I think they are absolutely part of our success.

I will finally finish by saying that it is part of the bidding process for pots of money as well that takes away our powers and our ability to deliver. Having to be in a beauty contest for pots of money takes away a lot of our energy. If we could get away from that template where we are bidding against each other and have that devolved budget or those powers to raise money across our region, it would be helpful.

There is lots I agree on with Ben regarding the complexity, but also on the importance of the LEP.

**Q55 Chair:** Thank you, Tracy, for that comprehensive answer as well. Do you think the obstacles to developing such a vision as you outlined are technocratic or political?

**Tracy Brabin:** I would say potentially a little bit of both. It is inevitable, isn't it, when you are in government that you are going to want to celebrate the manifesto commitments that you have made? For me on the ground it is about trying to use those devolved powers and funding just to deliver those manifesto pledges, and it is not actually political in that way. As a woman from West Yorkshire, as an MP for towns and villages in West Yorkshire for five years, I feel I know what needs to be done, and it is about using those devolved powers to get things done.

As I was saying to colleagues before we went live on this session, it is great to be in a position where I have money and some powers to make a difference for a community that has really been badly hit after 10 years of austerity and also Covid—particularly by Covid. It is an exciting opportunity coming out of devolution to make that difference. We cannot get away from the impact that the mayors are genuinely making on the ground. That is something to definitely celebrate.



**Q56 David Mundell:** Tracy, congratulations on your election. The Government this week abolished English votes for English laws in Parliament. From your perspective, and in particular from your five years in Parliament, how should the interests of England be represented in the UK Parliament?

**Tracy Brabin:** I would say now I am sort of on the other side in that the regions of England should be represented at intergovernmental level. This is not just about government necessarily; it is our leadership. Where do they come from? Are they from the regions? Where is the voice from the regions in the House of Lords? Where are the mayors represented within the structure of the Houses of Parliament? Whatever your political stripe, there is still a sense that the regions are up there somewhere or out there somewhere, but what is really important is what is happening in Westminster. We need the voices of the regions very much reflected in Westminster. If you think about it, West Yorkshire has an internationally significant economy. We are not just villages. We make a massive difference to the wealth and the success of the country, with an output of £55.4 billion—bigger than that of nine European countries. I represent 2.3 million people, 90,000 businesses, and a workforce of 1.1 million people, but I don't feel that my voice is then represented in Parliament.

When I was standing, someone said, "Why would you want to go into local government?" There is the sense that all the good stuff, all the important stuff, happens in Westminster but I just can't tell you strongly enough that there is amazing stuff happening in the regions. We should be celebrating that, but also learning from the regions about how to deliver for our communities and bringing that back to the centre in order to influence policy.

We are not too dissimilar to Scotland and Wales, and they have populations of 5.5 million and 3.1 million respectively; 41% of England's population now live with mayoral representation, including Greater London. So 23 million people are governed by different mayors with different local priorities, but it is very interesting that our voice is not heard. I don't know about Ben's relationship with Cabinet, whether Ben does presentations at Cabinet, or whether the mayors, as we look forward for the Labour Party, can be more involved in the thinking around policies for our party.

I think the mayoralities and devolutions is a great news story. Obviously, we will call out government when we think things are going wrong, but this good news story needs to be brought back, I think, to those decisionmakers at the top of government to have that connection to the regions. Strangers in Whitehall and Westminster, whatever your political colour, do not necessarily know what is important for our communities. What is important is to open up those conversations and that connected relationship between the centre and Westminster and the regions.

**Q57 David Mundell:** Do you think there is a need for some representation of your region and others in an intergovernmental forum with Scotland,



Wales and Northern Ireland?

**Tracy Brabin:** That is really positive and would be very welcome because it is not just about our little fiefdom, trying to sort out West Yorkshire; it is also learning from best practice. When I was developing my manifesto, so much of my inspiration came from the Welsh Government but there were ideas from elsewhere as well. We can all learn from each other, we all know our communities, and only by having that conversation, that connection, can we do the right thing for the people across the whole of Great Britain.

Q58 **David Mundell:** How do you think that could be achieved? I have been involved in the past in what we called the JMC between the UK Government and devolved Administrations. I think there is a general acceptance that was not a very productive environment, and indeed it is being reviewed. How do you think people would best come together from the regions, the devolved Administrations and the UK Government in a productive way?

**Tracy Brabin:** David, I would say seven weeks in I am not about to launch into my whole strategy in Committee on how to make it work, but certainly I think having conversations with Governments that are non-combative and an open-hearted conversation about how we can all work together and do best for our communities is really of value. Some of the most positive things I have seen over the last few weeks have been, for example, working with Andy Street and other mayors on reduction of carbon emissions and climate change or with other mayors on the fair work charter, trying to get a fair day's pay for a fair day's work.

By working together we can make the outcomes for the people of the whole country better. David, if you have some thoughts, we can take that offline and I would be very happy to talk to you further.

Q59 **David Mundell:** Thank you, Tracy. Ben, could I ask you basically the same question, beginning with the issue of how England, particularly your part of England, is represented within the UK Parliament?

**Ben Houchen:** It is a very interesting point because it is the antithesis of what devolution is actually supposed to be about. It is interesting that both within government and wider politics at the moment there is a bit of a conversation going on about how to bring metro mayors in England into part of a structure, which by definition drags them towards the centre. The whole purpose of devolution is to not be dragged towards the centre for uniformity. It is for differences across the area. If anything, I do not necessarily think we need to be pigeonholed. Do we need the equivalent of what you have, the JMC? Do you need an equivalent? There is this loose working group called the M10—I don't know if it is the M11 now; I cannot remember how many mayors there are. There is no formality to that. Some mayors find that quite useful to be able to bounce ideas off each other.



If you start to formalise something like that, putting a structure in place where there is a grouping of mayors, then by definition, and by definition of politics, it starts to create groupthink. Whether that is mayors as a whole or whether that is factions within mayors drawn on political lines, geographical lines, whatever it might be, it actually goes against what devolution is about.

Devolution is about prioritising what your area is about—what is important to the Tees Valley. North Yorkshire is due to get a mayor very shortly. We have West Yorkshire and we have North of the Tyne all within a relatively small geographical area. What is important to the Tees Valley and what is our priority is different from Tracy's priorities, different from Jamie's priorities and will be different from the mayor of North Yorkshire's priorities. Parliament, the centre and Westminster trying to group us together to understand us in a mechanism is, I think, going to be quite counterproductive, because you are trying to make us too central by dragging us back towards the centre when devolution is trying to do the opposite.

The more powerful thing from my point of view would be to try to give, on a soft power level, the power and the perception of what a mayor can do more credence and, where appropriate and right, where the timing is right and where an organisation is mature enough, to get away from the centre, whereas at the minute we are trying to have our cake and eat it in that we are trying to give more powers away and autonomy but we are also trying to basically put everybody on a lead and make sure the centre has control. Those two things don't marry.

I think it is quite good that there is a decentralised process where there is not a direct mechanism with central government, because it allows for freedoms and it allows for areas like the Tees Valley to make decisions, make progress, make mistakes, and then look across the country at what everybody else is doing. We often have good working practices with everybody else but don't try to tramline devolution into a Westminster mechanism that feeds us back into the centre.

That is difficult because you say, "Where do you fit?" I know everybody likes things to fit in a nice box, but the reason devolution is working where it is working is that there is freedom, not pigeonholing, and there is not a structure, and that allows mayors to create their own space. If you start to tramline mayors, then you are, in effect, clipping our wings and not allowing us to potentially do the things that we would like to do for our local area.

**Q60 David Mundell:** Do you think it is important that your voice or your positions are heard in Parliament? Fortuitously, we would agree, you have a number of MPs of the same political persuasion as you, but others might not have. The parliamentary debate as to what is appropriate for your region might be quite different from your priorities and what you were seeking to achieve.



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**Ben Houchen:** I don't necessarily buy into that, if I can say that, in that if you look on a micro level at where we started in the Tees Valley, when I was first elected the five local council areas that I cover were all five Labour-led, strong Labour councils at the time, yet there wasn't a single decision that we took that was not unanimous because, irrespective of the politics at play, we knew on a micro level of the Tees Valley it was the right decision for the right area.

Strangely enough, that was one of the things that I was very pleasantly surprised by the creation of metro mayors is that a local area does see a mayor as a mayor first and a politician second. They see me as a mayor first and Conservative politician second. It allows you to not have the push and pull of Westminster politics where there is that party political allegiance by definition. That becomes a secondary issue.

On a local level I don't think that is an issue. On a central level the bigger issue is not about representation on how you get your priorities heard—and I might be saying this from a position of being fortunate that I do have a good relationship with the centre at the minute, irrespective of the individuals and the party. The more important thing about devolution, and it is often something that some devolved politicians like to avoid, is it is about what the regions can deliver for the country. Often we see local politicians saying, "We are getting ignored, we don't have enough money, we don't have enough power, the centre does not want to give us any more". My experience, not just of my area but when I have conversations with government about metro mayors in general, and I see this on the ground, is currently because combined authorities are relatively new still, they are only four or five years old, the projects are not there, fully developed and signed off and ready for a shovel in the ground, for government to fund.

I genuinely do not believe this is a point of priority because I am a Conservative mayor in the north-east and all of the things that come along with that. When I started four years ago I couldn't have got any money out of the Government because we didn't have the projects that had been developed by the local authorities to go to the Government and say, "We want x funding." The Government are extremely receptive, whether it comes from West Yorkshire, whether it comes from Manchester, whether it comes from Liverpool. The issue that we have always had in the regions, which I think is one of the big issues for levelling up in the future, is that the regions do not have the capacity, irrespective of whether there is a combined authority there or not, at the minute to develop business cases and develop projects to a level that is satisfactory for government to fund.

It is not about being heard. Tracy and Andy and in Manchester have big platforms, people listen. It doesn't necessarily deliver an outcome unless there is something backing it. I am not saying they do not have things to back it up but it is not about being heard. The centre will turn around and say, "Okay, we are listening, show us what you have," and more often



than not at the minute they do not have the evidence—the detailed evidence, not the concept, not the vision—to back up the business case. What is the cost of this? What are the outcomes? What are the deliverables? What are the BCRs? What are the timescales for delivering this project? What are the overall costs? What are the costs that you take into account from an uplift if there is an overrun and overspend? What is the risk management? That is where government cares. It is not really this idea about how we are heard. To be fair, metro mayors at the moment are more heard than people expected us to be when we were first created.

There is a more fundamental issue at the minute that the organisations are still relatively immature across the board. I would include the Tees Valley in that. There are certain things that I don't think we would take powers for tomorrow because we are not mature enough. That is where we have to focus rather than, "Please listen to us." We have to be able to lift ourselves up because if we are always looking towards the centre, we go back to where I just started, which is we are relying on the centre, and that is counterintuitive to what devolution is supposed to deliver.

**Q61 David Mundell:** Finally, just briefly on the point of any need for engagement with the Scottish Government or the Welsh Assembly Government, there is no fixed mechanism for that, if that was required. Is that an issue for you?

**Ben Houchen:** I think there is a huge opportunity for the devolved areas. I also think there is a huge opportunity for the Union as well in that we should be looking at rolling out metro mayors into the devolved areas. This idea of devolution and more powers to the likes of Wales and Scotland is a fantastic one but my argument—again we have this default position, not uniform but this default position that means the Scottish Government or the Welsh Government need those powers. Why doesn't Edinburgh city region have its own metro mayor? I would argue the people of Glasgow would quite happily have a metro mayor with more autonomy rather than be governed by the Scottish Parliament from Edinburgh. The same goes in Wales, whether it is around Swansea or Cardiff. If you are able to get to a position where devolution and a combined authority model was rolled out across the whole of the United Kingdom then by definition, as Tracy has already said, metro mayors by and large work relatively well together and will come together at that level.

You also get the snobbery of the Scottish Government not engaging with the metro mayor because they are above us—we saw that with the nonsense fallout with Nicola Sturgeon and Andy Burnham. There was almost a snobbery from the Scottish Government—"Why would we engage with Andy Burnham?" when of course they should. This is something that is directly applicable to his area.



If you had a metro mayor in Edinburgh or Glasgow there is a parity and there is a cohesiveness to that. I think that is the way that would solve that problem.

Q62 **David Mundell:** I think that is a very good idea, but unfortunately it is a bit incompatible with devolution to impose your own model of local government having devolved local government to the Scottish Parliament. The concept, I think, is a very good one. Thank you very much.

**Ben Houchen:** I would say you are not imposing anything because the way that devolution works at the minute is government invites local areas to come forward with a package and a plan. I don't think it is necessarily counterintuitive to devolution through the Scottish Parliament if Edinburgh city region wants to come together and wants to come forward and ask for more powers on a much more local level. That is not anti-devolution because it is the Scottish people and the Scottish region coming together and saying, "This is what we want."

**David Mundell:** They could only be given those Parliament powers by the Scottish Parliament and not by UK Government.

**Chair:** Thank you. Tracy, did you want to come in very briefly there? I noticed you indicating.

**Tracy Brabin:** Yes, I did. I agree with a fair amount of what Ben has said about sustainability. We do not want to be going back to government always asking for more money. We want to be self-sufficient, we want to bring in that international investment and be punching above our weight and having those great skilled jobs.

One of the things that I have noticed in the structure of the funding is that so much of the focus is on capital spend and delivering your project in a very tight timeframe, often two years, or three years for big capital projects, but there is no revenue given to combined authorities in order to build up projects so that when a new scheme opens—and this is what we are talking about in the landscape now, isn't it, schemes we have to bid for—we can take something off the shelf that is already at a level where government would be happy to say, "Yes, you can deliver that in two years."

It is a little bit chicken and egg but we have the project, we have the ambition, we have the vision, we have the ideas, but we do not necessarily have the funding in order to develop them to a point where, if government announce a new scheme that we didn't know was coming that we have to bid for, we can then deliver in two years. There have been many opportunities, whether that is the Shared Prosperity Fund or the levelling-up fund for towns, where we are trying to identify projects that can fit these tight timeframes that have been developed from other moneys elsewhere—it may not be the first thing you would go to if you had a choice but it is the one that is ready—and then that capital funding ends. As mayor I have authority, powers and money for hard flood



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defences, for example, but there is no funding for the maintenance of those going forward over the next decade.

It is a balancing act. Of course, as the mayor of West Yorkshire, the last thing I want to be doing is running back to government on a regular basis saying, "Give us money for projects," but we are citizens of the UK and we are doing a job of work for government. We are helping them spend money that they would be spending anyway in our region but we are spending it more bespoke and more appropriately because we know our region.

I would just slightly challenge the way that the model is set up currently. It is not that we do not have the vision or the talent or the capability to think big; it is just these really tight timeframes and the lack of revenue funding.

**Chair:** Thank you, Tracy. Not to make too much of a pun, but we are on tight timeframes, for the Committee as a whole, with questions and indeed with answers. We are very grateful for the detail, but Lloyd had a very brief supplementary question.

Q63 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** It was for Ben. I was interested in what you were saying about the rolling out of the mayoral functions elsewhere. One of the reasons that I asked for this inquiry—every Member will have a slightly different reason for wanting to push it—was about rebalancing Britain, because the England question is the question that we have not resolved in terms of devolution and power.

Is there a problem with what you are suggesting around the mayoral systems spreading to Wales and Scotland, that you undermine that whole point of trying to then rebalance England and you still have England as a body that is not properly politically represented?

**Ben Houchen:** No, I do not think so. All I ever judge anything on is delivery of outcomes. Again, it goes back to this point: do we have a cohesive voice for England? The position of some of the metro mayors is that we have arguably a larger voice politically than most others, irrespective of being a devolved nation or not. No, I do not necessarily think that if you had a devolved combined authority metro mayor for Cardiff or the Swansea city region that would undermine having metro mayors in other parts of England. No, absolutely not. I think the two are absolutely—

Q64 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** David Mundell's point was that we have scrapped EVEL, so there are no longer English votes for English laws. There is no level of English democracy. The alternative was that you create mayors or regions that have a level of English democracy or regional democracy, which can then on an equal standing communicate with Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and then all be equal and all have fair powers. Then Scotland and Wales do not also have chips on their shoulders that they are treated differently.



In your view, how would a devolved system then equalise that relationship with the devolved nations, which is currently—that West Lothian question—lacking in our system?

**Ben Houchen:** It is a good question, and I will be honest, Lloyd, I do not necessarily think I have the direct answer to it.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I suspect no one has exactly the answer to it, but that is why we are posing it.

**Ben Houchen:** You can go to an extreme example. I am not necessarily saying that I buy into this notion, but it has been floated. If you wanted a radical resettlement of devolution in England that would put us on par with other representatives in the devolved areas, you could, in an extreme example, replace the House of Lords with a second chamber of 40 or 50 metro mayors across the United Kingdom, and then there would be a balance and cohesiveness there. You could argue that then does, if you want it to, tie into the centre, because there is representation within Parliament. That creates a more formal standing. You could go to the extreme at that end. I tend to be more at the other end.

The fluidity of it I think is one of the big advantages of English devolution so far. Trying to make us comparable with other devolved areas, whether on a Scottish or Welsh Government level or a sub-regional level, I do not necessarily think is conducive to effective devolution in England.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Fair enough. Thank you, Ben.

Q65 **John Stevenson:** Both of you have touched upon the area that I am going to question you on. If I start with Tracy, in our country, as you know, we have a heavily centralised government, and both political parties have a tendency to be centralist, if we are entirely honest. The centralisation of power tends to be within Whitehall. As a new mayor, it is interesting to get your perspective on that centralisation and what changes you would like to see happen.

**Tracy Brabin:** Certainly, we have seen a lot of enthusiasm—from Osborne and others—for decentralisation, but the mood music at the moment is a bit of a U-turn on that. The Prime Minister spoke at the Convention of the North in 2019, saying that the Government were going to do devolution properly and maximise the power of the north with more mayors. Then we got the West Yorkshire devolution deal, which was fantastic. The 2014 growth deal has been really impactful and has made a massive difference. It allowed £235 million to be invested in economic projects and really focused on local priorities, according to the CA and the LEP. I am talking about it because I am so proud: we have just done our independent economic review, and the benefits were 12 to one, creating or protecting 45,000 jobs, and a GVA impact of £73 billion. Obviously, it is really impactful devolution.

Since the growth deal ended in March 2021, unfortunately, we are now ending up in a bit of a smorgasbord of financing opportunities, whether



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that is the Towns Fund, the High Streets Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, the UK Community Renewal Fund. I think we are being unfairly pitched against communities, when it should be that this is the amount of money that you need in order to develop your communities and to really level up or to give opportunities for young people.

I suppose, to answer your point, it is about doubling down again on that commitment to decentralisation and developing that position on local growth across all Departments.

**Q66 John Stevenson:** I am sorry to interrupt, but I do feel that the centralisation hand of Whitehall is still there, wanting to pull powers back to the centre, rather than releasing out into the mayoralities and the regions.

**Tracy Brabin:** There is no doubt about it, John, absolutely. The appetite for devolution has waned, and I do not know whether that is because of politics, whether that is because of economics, whether that is personalities.

Just to finish the point about yesterday, being on this climate change call, talking about climate change, and then there was a Minister from communities and a Minister from business, but there was no Minister who could talk to us clearly about our region and climate change. We do not have the powers to develop and to deliver on the climate change agenda. We are saying to Government, "You are committed to 2050 zero carbon. We can help you," but it does not feel like there is the appetite to give us those powers to help deliver for the Government. There is a bit of reluctance to go further, which is absolutely what we need if we are going to hit those targets.

**Q67 John Stevenson:** Ben, you are an experienced mayor—you have now had four years. Whitehall sometimes struggles to deal with alternative centres of power. What has been your experience, and how do you feel about the balance between the pull of the centre and the desire for devolution?

**Ben Houchen:** The default for devolution at the minute—this is certainly true of the civil service and to a large extent politicians and Ministers as well—is that combined authority devolution on an English level, on a metro mayor level, is still seen as a mechanism of earned autonomy. The centre is always reluctant to pass out powers from the centre. That is not a revelation to anybody in this meeting.

In certain Departments, there is a willingness that where an organisation starts to mature and shows that it is using the powers and money that it has effectively, you find an acceleration of a relationship between, say, MHCLG, DfT, whatever it might be, where that relationship strengthens, the trust strengthens, and that makes sense to some extent. If the Government were to just dump every single power on the Tees Valley tomorrow, the system would fall over. We are not mature enough to



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handle it. We have not been going long enough. We do not have the structures and infrastructure in place. The centre would be blamed for that. I would not be blamed for that, because people would be saying, "Why have you done that? You have just abdicated all responsibility and you have not given them the infrastructure in place to be able to take it on."

At the same time—this is where this is a bit of a trick missing with devolution at the minute—devolution is a very positive thing because it comes with limited responsibility, if we are being frank. Devolution now needs to come with more responsibility. It has to be a bit of a two-way street. I do not think government are against devolution. I do think you always have to keep central in your mind this idea of earned autonomy. Prove what you have, spend the money wisely, spend it in the timescales you say you are going to spend it in, and you will get more. Where you can prove that, we have evidence to show that government are quite open.

That is inconsistent across government. Certain Departments are much more pro-devolution than others. I think it is fair to say, irrespective of the Secretary of State who is in place, the Department for Education has always, from a civil point of view, been very anti-devolution, which I think is problematic to all of us as metro mayors, given that we are trying to drive the local economy. How can you do that if you do not have a level of input into the skills base that is going to be developed as part of that economy? There is a huge inconsistency.

You also have this multiple-layer issue in that, yes, you have metro mayors, but you also have LEPs. LEPs are accountable bodies as well, so you have two layers there, and you also have local authorities. You have this whole issue of fiefdom, so you have local authorities that would rather, in certain areas of the country, not have a combined authority because they feel that is a watering down of their power, and you have LEPs that think they are the be-all and end-all in their local area. Where you have a metro mayor with those three things as well, government see that, and then the civil servants struggle to figure out, "How do we work with that?" They need a clear steer of what round 2 of devolution looks like. Who is in charge? Is it the metro mayors? Is it the LEPs? Are we going back to a local authority structure? That is where we need some clarity. If you give clarity, that helps solve some of the inconsistencies.

One of the problems that you have also had with the centre, and when we talk about whether we have reneged on devolution and whether we are pulling away from it, is with future devolution deals after the next round of devolution deals, such as North Yorkshire, and a couple of others that are potentially on the cusp, including your own, John, in Cumbria, that could potentially come over the line. After the next two or three deals, you are then into a realm of the natural geographies of where a combined authority would go. They are not going to voluntarily come forward for a combined authority, which is the current model. Then



the question for government is: do they impose it? Do they leave it as it is? Do they impose it, or do they slightly change the model?

Where they could slightly change the model, which I think causes some of the resistance locally—it is not a central issue; it is a local issue of coming forward with a package—is in whether you could have combined authorities on a county level. We have seen it with the large counties, where you could see deals working on a county level. It could have to come with some local government reorganisation, as I know you are acutely aware of, John, but you can see parts of the south-east, in places like Kent as well, where you think a county deal would work, but the current policy prevents an obvious deal from taking place.

We can go on for ever, and I appreciate time is short. I absolutely push against the idea that the centre is against devolution. The civil service is naturally against it in some Departments and quite pro it in MHCLG and BEIS, and to a large extent DfT now, if you get it right, but there is a mishmash of how you deliver it. There are a few problems with the centre, but let's not forget there are lots of problems in the regions as to why devolution has not been delivered.

**Q68 Mr David Jones:** This is a question to both witnesses. How effective do you think that the combined authority model has been for your particular area? What would you say are the positives and negatives for having a combined authority mayor?

**Ben Houchen:** It is fair to say that in the Tees Valley the combined authority has been a complete success so far. We can always do more and go further, but there is money and there is standing. Like I say, the soft power of having a metro mayor who, in effect, has a mandate in our region of 750,000 to 800,000 people is a powerful thing to be able to get your message across to government and to be heard and for Ministers to take note, irrespective of hard powers and cash. The fact that we have a gainshare—an annual payment from government that is agreed over the next 30 years—is extremely powerful, because that is the current revenue stream that allows us to just get on and do what we want to do. That is inconsistent as well across different combined authorities.

A technical point but an important point—I know Tracy raised this, and I think it is a problem in certain combined authority areas—is that when we got our devolution deal, the gainshare money that came to us was revenue based, so we could use it for revenue or capital. In some other combined authorities, it is just capital, so it cannot be used as revenue. I think that is where that has gone wrong; it needs to be revenue based rather than capital based.

We were fortunate that it was revenue based, so we have been able to get on with big capital projects and provide the revenue in the short term to be able to make it sustainable, which makes it extremely powerful. Also, we are basically now in a place, I think it is fair to say, that had it not been for the combined authority, Tees Valley could not and would not



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be in a place where it currently is, which is on a national radar both from an economic and a political perspective. That is solely down to the creation of the combined authority. Is it perfect? Absolutely not. There are drawbacks to the way that funding is provided, and I agree with pretty much every metro mayor on the point that there is more that government could do to have long-term settlements with combined authorities for additional revenue streams.

As part of more powers or more autonomy for existing combined authorities as well as new, they should be giving a mayor more autonomy, because the combined authority at the minute does require either a majority or unanimity, depending on the decision that has been made with its cabinet, which is the local authority leaders. That is a helpful check and balance in some way, but it can hinder progress in other ways. If you are going to have a directly elected mayor who does have the responsibility and the profile for being able to make progress, there should be and there is a mechanism within the legislation to allow for more direct powers to the mayor, separate from the combined authority. There is more to be done in that space that could allow us to go further and much more quickly.

**Tracy Brabin:** In the short time that I have been the mayor, I have seen fantastic work coming out of the combined authority. You only have to see in the response to Covid how having that unity of purpose, drawing people together, fighting against this common enemy and being able to share best practice and resources has been massively impactful and potentially has saved lives. Also, in the pitch, for example, to get Channel 4 to the region, the combined authority and the skills and the talents within the authority, working with Leeds City Council, were able to get that over the line. I am determined to continue the campaign to keep Channel 4 Channel 4 and not to sell it off. We are starting our campaign this week.

Working together collectively, there is much more opportunity to think internationally as well, and globally. I would say that our economy recovery board has been a really powerful tool. It has been frustrating, though, that we have been asked from government to deliver our recovery plan. We have delivered it three times to government, our £1.4 billion plan: summer 2020, then again in the spending review, and again in the 2021 budget, and we have not had a response. The positive is the combined authority can draw that together.

I also just say it is also a magnet for talented, skilled, clever people to stay in their region. They do not feel that they have to move to London for these really interesting, well-paid jobs, and they can make a massive difference in their community. Here in my combined authority, including the metro staff, it is 700 people. I do not think there is one person that is not absolutely focused on devolution and delivering for their community.



It is a way to draw the talents together, but also, as Ben was talking about, there is the gainshare—£38 million a year for 10 years in West Yorkshire. We are already investing £13.5 million of local funds in skills, and I pick up Ben's point as well: that has to be part of our recovery from Covid. Jobs and skills are priority—retraining, employment—with a further £12 million agreed to support local recovery projects, and finally, £5 million invested in each of our five local authorities, plus £6 million to support diverse young entrepreneurs. We are able to identify where the need is and use that gainshare, but just to make a point again that that revenue squeeze is a problem. The combined authority has allowed me to jump into this role and start to deliver in the first few weeks because they were set up and functioning already at such a high level.

**Q69 Mr David Jones:** Do you think that the mayor model would work for all areas of England?

**Tracy Brabin:** Absolutely, yes, but the fundamental change from government away from centralised Whitehall Departments towards devolved mayoral budgets is really important.

Also, and this is another point that we have heard already, local places need to show they can be trusted to deliver. It is about credibility. It is about having that detailed plan and the talented folk in the room to make it happen. It cannot be that areas are "done to". It has to come from us as well to say, "What do we need? What does the model look like?" Being able to speak to mayors around the country, being able to also work together, however large the area of the mayoralty, to do the best for our regions and to use our combined strengths, coming together with a common good, whether that is in Yorkshire, with Dan and me, whether that is across the north more broadly when we are talking about a relationship with GB rail, for example, trying to develop that to make sure that we have that West Yorkshire plan in place to help GB rail deliver. There is lots that we can do together, but it is about credibility and being ready on the ground to have that mayoral chance.

**Q70 Mr David Jones:** When you say that it could work for all parts of England, do you include rural and semi-rural parts of England in that?

**Tracy Brabin:** I am not sure what the combined authority would look like in those regions, but certainly across West Yorkshire we have rural and semi-rural, and lots of people will think about Leeds City region that we are just big cities, but there are so many communities that it is not just a north-south divide or even—

**Q71 Mr David Jones:** You do have the anchor of a large city. I am interested in whether you think that it would also work for very rural areas and semi-rural areas. Do you think that might be more problematic?

**Tracy Brabin:** There would be further challenges, and certainly drawing in staff talent to deliver and to be credible to government could potentially be difficult, but we need to address that more than ever before. We do not want talent to be draining to London and the cities. We



want to make sure that across our regions we can say, “You do not need to leave home, your friends or your family in order to have a brilliant, interesting job.” The pandemic has proved this. I have met people who live in West Yorkshire and work for TfL full-time. There is a new realignment that would mean that potentially we could look at it in a more ambitious and positive way. Like you say, those rural communities could potentially have versions of mayoralties that they could then go to government and get that support and that resource, but it will be more challenging, no doubt about it.

**Q72 Mr David Jones:** Ben, what are your views on that?

**Ben Houchen:** It is an interesting question. In principle, yes, it does work. In practice, it depends, as it always would do, on the practicalities of the geography it covers. Interestingly, the Tees Valley is a great example of this because we are not covered by an accessible city. We are covered by five relatively small to medium-sized towns, with the exception of Middlesbrough, which is categorised as a large town. It works well, so it can work well. It is not just five urban conurbations of towns. We have a huge amount of rural areas that in effect are the old, traditional boundaries—North Yorkshire into places like East Cleveland, a lot of seaside resorts, in effect bordering on Whitby and Scarborough, around Thirsk and so on. It is as rural as it gets pretty much anywhere else in the country. It can work.

There is an additional challenge that we face, for example, that Manchester and to a lesser extent Leeds and others face. If you compared us to, say, Manchester, which, putting London to one side, is probably the opposite end of where the Tees Valley is, if you are looking for longer-term settlements and the ability for more autonomy, certainly around a financial model, the obvious place to do that is around transport. Having a bit like a TfL-style settlement in Manchester becomes relatively straightforward on the assumption that you can get a negotiation with central government. That settlement does not work in a place like the Tees Valley because we do not have anything to be able to base it on. TfL I think was funded 40% from revenue from things like the Tube; you can see a similar model working in Manchester or Liverpool or elsewhere that has a similar type of infrastructure. We do not have any metro, we barely have buses and our rail infrastructure is pretty poor. How do you allow for a long-term transport settlement in a small-town rural area like the Tees Valley? Again, we are trying to explore solutions to that. We have not found one yet.

Yes, absolutely you can get a combined authority in a semi-rural or rural area, but that will not be the panacea or solution to the problems in those areas. We do face additional problems that city regions with a combined authority will not face.

**Mr David Jones:** That is very helpful. Thanks very much.

**Q73 Rachel Hopkins:** Tracy, you know well that only a third of MPs are



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women. When you were elected in May, you became the only female combined authority mayor out of the other nine or 10 who are men. Why do you think there has been such poor representation of women in the newly established roles like metro mayors and combined authority mayors?

**Tracy Brabin:** A great question, Rachel. I am hugely proud to be the first ever woman metro mayor in the country. There is a lot of responsibility on my shoulders, but I am very excited about the opportunity to get a different voice in the room, a voice that represents 50%-plus of my community. The phrase I often use is, "If you can't see it, you can't be it." I am hoping that I will inspire other women to get into senior positions and put themselves forward as mayors.

In West Yorkshire 45% of local authority councillors are women, but we need to inspire more women to come into politics and also formal interventions to potentially support that. I came into politics on an all-women shortlist. It has made a difference in the Labour party; over 50% of our MPs are women, and a lot of those women came in on an AWS. It is a blunt tool and a blunt instrument, but it did deliver.

It is about the terms and conditions, too. There is something to be said for looking into the allowance part of the role. Councillors get an allowance to do their job, but they do not have any maternity or paternity allowance or pensions. It is also potentially looking at how we professionalise what is a very important job. Certainly, if you are in cabinet in a council, it is a really time-consuming job if you do it properly, so it is looking at people with caring responsibilities or others who potentially want a pension, and working-class people who do not have private pensions or shares, so the pension from work is the thing they are going to have to live on.

We need more diversity full stop, and that is why I was pleased to nominate Alison Lowe as the first black female Deputy Mayor for Policing, and her appointment has been unequivocally welcomed across West Yorkshire. We have to make those interventions. I am also going to appoint an inclusivity champion to support me to ensure that inclusivity, diversity and equality are central to all that we do. It is a slow process, Rachel, but we are chipping away at that glass ceiling. Certainly, I am very excited to go back to the estate where I grew up and to say to those youngsters, "It doesn't matter where you come from, how much your parents earn, what your gender is. You can go to the very top for your region." It is a huge honour and one that I reflect on every day of the week and think, "What a privilege."

**Rachel Hopkins:** That is fantastic. Thank you. You have pre-empted my second question around female representation on local councils. Similarly, I was a councillor before I was an MP, and still only 36% of councillors are women. Well done, West Yorkshire, for your 45%, but there is still some work to go. Thank you.



Q74 **John McDonnell:** You have both answered quite a bit of this, but let me just run through it anyway. All the combined authorities have different deals and different sets of powers. Do you feel that you have the right set of powers? Do you use all the powers that you currently have? What powers do you think should be devolved to combined authorities in the short and long term?

**Tracy Brabin:** Do I have the right set of powers? Having come out of a global pandemic and seeing the health inequalities across our region, it frustrates me that I have no impact on health. Obviously, I have the soft powers of convening, of persuasion, but when a young boy born in an affluent area of West Yorkshire today will live 11.3 months longer than a boy born in the most disadvantaged area of West Yorkshire, there is only so much I can do to influence that. On housing, I have committed to 5,000 affordable, sustainable homes; on jobs, 1,000 jobs for young people; on transport, bringing buses back into public control and making them affordable so people can travel to work and be connected. There are things I can do to try to close that disadvantage gap and increase social mobility, but the actual poor health of some of our poorest communities is something that I have no power over.

Skills are another example. I have no authority over schools. Adult education, yes, but the skills agenda is much more fluid. I am setting up a digital academy to address the lack of digital skills across the region. I can also persuade and bring in partners, but it is not the same as having that authority.

Finally, it is frustrating that I do not have the powers to influence or mandate for power and energy companies to work more equitably with us across the region—how many charging points I can fix across the region for electric vehicles, or how I can decarbonise homes and buildings. It really would help me to have those powers.

There is a lot going on in setting up committees and projects and manifesto delivery, so I am busy enough, but going forward, as I get more into the role, I think I will see it as a massive deficiency that I can't influence the climate change agenda. While we are motivated to hit zero carbon by 2038, I have to do it dancing around the powers I have, rather than as in Wales, for example, where the Welsh Government have said, "We are ending all new road building because we have to focus on active travel instead." Their governmental powers are very different, so I am trying to negotiate with government for the powers that I need to help them hit their targets, too.

**Ben Houchen:** Do we have the right powers? It is probably a surprising answer. At this moment in time I think we do. If you were to give me more powers at the moment, we probably would not use them effectively because of the projects that we are developing and the strategies we are developing. It is probably going to take us another two or three years by the time that matures and where we would look to take something else



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on, albeit we are having that conversation potentially in a few years' time. I think there is something around health.

Q75 **John McDonnell:** Sorry, who are you having that conversation with?

**Ben Houchen:** Around health?

**John McDonnell:** Who with?

**Ben Houchen:** It started after the election, so this has only happened in the last couple of months. I raised it with the Secretary of State at the time, Matt Hancock, to talk about the solution.

**John McDonnell:** Sorry to interrupt. Yes, go on.

**Ben Houchen:** No, that is fine, absolutely. It depends also on what control you want a combined authority area to have over the local NHS. I think anybody out in the public would be very upset if I, as a metro mayor, all of a sudden was deciding on operational outcomes and decision making within a trust. However, I think there is an ability and there is potentially an immediate solution to this, which is coming up through the NHS reform Bill—the integrated care system. There is no reason why a combined authority area could not be a building block in the integrated care system in itself. Then you get the combined authorities into being potentially the holders of funding at a certain level. It then has direct responsibility up that hierarchy chain into the NHS and delivers more local accountability and local feed-in to our local health priorities.

I think there is a short-term solution, which means, to be fair, the system wouldn't fall over tomorrow because all you would be doing is cutting and pasting the funding model into the ICS at a combined authority level. You could then develop that over time, so again you are not causing the system to fall over. You can again have that earned autonomy of introducing a certain level of control through funding, which I think would help. For example, Manchester talks about health devolution. It doesn't really have health devolution; it has a seat at a table, but no formal powers, which has kind of led to it getting some of the responsibility but no control over anything, including the money.

There is an obvious solution, which would require some reorganisation to a certain extent, which is that it makes sense for PCCs to be coterminous with mayoralities. That might have to be tweaked. We are not coterminous with Cleveland and that would have to see Darlington come in. I know that Steve Rotherham is a similar conversation about reporting in the Liverpool City region. But again, given the state of PCCs and how they are perceived in the public arena, it would make sense that they would form part of the powers of a mayor. It seems to work reasonably well in London, and in Manchester with Tracy.

There is a very interesting aspect on future powers around tax, because with devolution, as I said at the beginning, there are lots of positives and



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we do lots of good stuff, but there is a level of responsibility that is required with metro mayors that I think is missing. There is an obvious solution to that through potentially the devolution of some tax powers, which is quite ambitious. To caveat all of that, again I think there are some options there that should be considered. I also think one of the reasons that combined authorities across the board more or less have been successful is that they are so focused.

One of the benefits of the organisation is it is not responsible for everything. The way that we run the combined authority in the Tees Valley is we are in effect a directly elected and accountable RDA. The fact that we have a very strict view of investment, jobs and transport, because those things obviously hang together—and you can make the argument about education, et cetera—means that you are not then just subsuming powers. The organisation is not becoming so big and bureaucratic that it doesn't do anything effectively well because it is doing too many things. You have this Goldilocks syndrome of what more powers can make you more effective without becoming more unwieldy.

**Chair:** Thank you. Tracy, we have plenty more questions to get through, but can you be very brief on that, please?

**Tracy Brabin:** Just a very quick addition. The one thing that is important is public health. For me, it is about early intervention. For example, while the local councils have their autonomy over that early intervention, Sure Starts and family hubs, I think it would be brilliant if the mayor had that oversight over support for public health, that early intervention—for example, an ambition to have West Yorkshire the best place to raise a family and to deal with a lot of the issues that we are all picking up further down the line. Earlier on in the journey, that conversation about Sure Starts across West Yorkshire, for example, I can't do that at the moment. I have to work individually with councils without being able to have that sense of all of us rising together across the whole region to be the place to have a family. I just wanted to add that into the mix because it is not just about hospitals, it is about the early intervention work as well.

Q76 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Before I go on to my question, I wanted to follow up, Ben. You were listing some very interesting powers that some mayors don't have that they could have. Do you think it is a relationship that you should have, to go and have early conversations with the Minister here, go with a begging bowl to a Department there, or should there be a system where there is effectively a smorgasbord of powers and that when you are ready, you can go by right to say, "We are now ready for this one. Can we take that off the shelf?" Do you think that the current system of having to negotiate, hope and pray that the moons have aligned and politics want it to happen is the right approach at the moment? Do we need a clearer way that that happens?

**Ben Houchen:** I would agree, Lloyd. I think the idea that you could have a pre-approved list, assuming that a combined authority could meet



some regulatory and governance criteria to make sure that it works, does make sense. Fundamentally you are asking a question there of government to say, "What do you ultimately want metro mayors to be?" and that then dictates what is on the list of pre-approved powers, subject to you meeting certain criteria. No, it would certainly make the whole rigmarole and push and pull of going down to Westminster and discussing things with Ministers and various civil servants much more straightforward, but that is a fundamental decision that government have to make on where they want the direction of travel for devolution. I would agree with it.

**Q77** **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Yes, good, because then we can put it in our report, hopefully, and push them to do that.

One of the long-term issues of governance in England—you have mentioned this already, Ben, and Tracy to some extent—is that there are not always clearly identified administrative units, as there are much more easily with the cities and urban areas. To what extent should the next tranche of devolution of powers be based on administrative numbers or cultural or economic criteria, particularly thinking about what role the cultural region plays? I know that there was much talk about a Yorkshire-wide devolution before West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire.

You mentioned Kent, Ben. I have sometimes heard discussions around Kent and Sussex, which always appalls me. As a proud Sussex man, I would hate to be lumped in with Kent, but these are cultural decisions rather than economic or administrative decisions. What was the priority of how that should work and who would be forcing the hand when the hand needs to be forced, if you understand what I mean?

**Tracy Brabin:** Certainly, picking up on the Yorkshire angle, for the five years of being a Member of Parliament—in fact, I was emptying a box only yesterday that came from my office and there was a speech I had talking about One Yorkshire and how passionate for One Yorkshire I was—there has been lots of back and forth about that, but the Yorkshire identity is so strong that it does seem odd that we are split into two when 35,000 people a day cross between South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire. I definitely see us as a whole, taking Craven and Selby and Harrogate, and that we are a region that is identifiable. Whether it is Yorkshire tea, Screen Yorkshire, Yorkshire is a massive brand. That is why I think the conversations around Leeds city region then mutated into West Yorkshire, because it felt like it was too city-centric and there are so many other variations of what Yorkshire is and what it means to people.

But I would say that when it comes to delivering on the ground, value for money, credibility, conversations with government, I think you do need that structure of the combined authority. You need that organisation in place to be able to handle those large amounts of money, those big plans, those visionary changes for our community, but we can't just tinker at the edges. It has to be a systemic change; it has to be the whole thing.



The back and forth and the ebbing and flowing—are government buying into devo or not?—does slightly draw us away from having that bold conversation about what other regions could have it and what you need in place in order to get a mayor. Just finally, government works with us to help them come to their thinking. That is why it is very important that you have had this Select Committee today because it does feed into government’s thinking about what works. Empower our regions to have those tailored solutions for what works, but underpinned by something that is efficient and that can deliver.

- Q78 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** You say that the combined authorities provide an underpinning for the solution here, so when you have rural counties, does that mean that you kind of abolish the county and the districts become the combined authorities that form that or do you have an alternative? London doesn’t have a combined authority model, of course; London has an assembly model. You have the mayor or you have the figurehead, but how do you get the yin and the yang to it? How do you get the other part to it? Does it have to work with district and borough councils?

**Tracy Brabin:** Lloyd, it isn’t for me to say because it is for those communities to decide for themselves what it looks like for them. You are right that across the country there are different models of the foundation, what the foundation stone is to build on, but my point is that foundation stone needs to be credible and it needs to be able to deliver ambitious projects. For me, tackling that inequality is hugely important, but I need that solid base to deliver on that.

- Q79 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Fantastic, and it is quite right you moved away from the term “Leeds city region”. As a former Bradford graduate, I lived there for eight years and I always felt a bit of a chip on my shoulder when people said “Leeds region” rather than “glorious Bradford”. Anyway, to Ben, the same questions.

**Ben Houchen:** You have led to my point perfectly well. The One Yorkshire deal is a great example as to how devolution can and can’t work. I fundamentally believe you will never ever be able to deliver a One Yorkshire deal. There are two reasons why devolution can work and where it won’t work.

First, you have to have a single economy. Taking One Yorkshire as an example, Yorkshire is not a single economy. The economy of South Yorkshire is not the same as that of Whitby and Scarborough or Northallerton in North Yorkshire. It is just not the same economy. You need a single economy, which kind of then prejudices and helps you carve out areas where you could put a combined authority, but the economy is not the only thing you can have. I wouldn’t say culture; I would say community, so you have to have a single community. I know that is being pedantic, but I think it is important because you have the Yorkshire identity. I am a Yorkshireman, I was born in Yorkshire, very proud of it too, as are most people still in the Tees Valley, despite being in a unitary



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and not part of County Yorkshire. It is the whole identity crisis many of us go through.

The reason the community aspect is so important and why it dovetails in with the economy aspect is we are investing £110 million in Darlington Station on the East Coast main line, the gateway to the Tees Valley. That is fantastic for the people of Darlington, but the people of Redcar, who are 40 miles away on the coast and in a completely different local authority area, see that as an investment in them because they understand that that investment is going to help their local economy in Redcar because of the connectivity. They see themselves as the same people of Darlington, they see themselves as part of that community, so even though it is in Darlington, it is an investment in them.

If you transfer that same analogy and you say, "Right, we are going to invest the same amount, £100 million, in Northallerton Station in North Yorkshire," do the people of Bradford really feel like that is an investment in them? Then you get into the whole politics and the push-me pull-me of, "Well, if they are getting it, we want it as well". Then you get into this argument of, "Well, you are just carving up money equally, despite it not having the biggest economic impact," which is why One Yorkshire was never going to work, because while you have a Yorkshire identity, it is not a single community, nor is it a single economy.

That is where certain counties might work. I don't know Kent particularly well; it might work on a county level at Kent. Where I think it would work very well is in County Durham, which is a single identity and a single economy, so it could work there. How do you do it administratively? Let's just say you did that in Kent. You can't have a combined authority area that is coterminous with a local authority, which in the North Yorkshire deal was pretty important. You have two local authorities and a combined authority that is going to sit on top, so in effect you have a cabinet of two local authority leaders with a mayor.

To some extent, I will be interested if the Government does go down this idea of a county-level deal. For me, it kind of instinctively means local government reorganisation, so you do away with the county, you do away with districts and you then bring in the unitaries—whether that is two, three, four or five, it doesn't really matter—and then you overlay a combined authority on top of that. Yes, I think that is how it would work on a county level. You would get more deals over the line.

The question is what is the appetite from government to either force those deals or encourage the change of rules that then brings people to the table. I don't think there is any appetite in government to force deals at the moment. That is not what I am hearing on the ground. I do not think they are going to go along and start drawing lines on the English regions and saying, "You are getting this and you are getting this." There is still going to be this coaxing of areas to say, "Okay, we have changed



the rules a little bit, so are there any other areas that now want to come forward under the new rules that feel like this deal works for them?"

**Q80** **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Does it have to come with a mayor? Surrey, East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove unitary put in for a devolved deal, but did not include a mayor. They said explicitly, "We wouldn't go ahead with it if it was a mayor," and the Government rejected that. Is it your view that you have to have mayors to make it work? That was what the Government's view was.

**Ben Houchen:** Absolutely, because without having a mayor, there is no single point of accountability, irrespective of where the decision making lies with the cabinet. It is why the metro mayors do have a level of profile and soft power as well as all of the stuff that comes with it. That is where you have problems potentially with the county deal. If the Government do away with the mayoral requirement—which I think would see many other deals get over the line, by the way, as I am sure others do—it fundamentally means that all you are doing is doing a financial resettlement of local government with some local government reorganisation. That is not the success of combined authorities. It is predicated on the mayor. To be fair, that is the thing that George Osborne got on day one: it had to come with the mayor. That caused problems, but I think if you got rid of the mayors you would see them not being as effective as where you do have mayors.

**Q81** **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** You are saying mayors have this extra public scrutiny and they have the ability of accountability and all that kind of stuff. I know the London Mayor has his public scrutiny sessions. In the combined authority model, is that something that you have put yourself forward for, where you have these public scrutiny sessions and people asking you questions and it is recorded and picked up by local media? Does it create that for you?

**Ben Houchen:** It does. As part of the legislation and our local constitution, you have to have an overview and scrutiny committee, which is in effect that. That is made up of representatives from all of the local councils on a politically balanced basis. The chair of the overview and scrutiny committee cannot be from the same political party as the mayor, so it allows for that extra ability of scrutiny. Yes, we do, absolutely. I have made myself available multiple times. It is not just me: officers are obviously accountable to that as well and can be called along. Absolutely, every time we have an overview and scrutiny committee it is reported in the local press. There are arguably things you could do to strengthen that, but no, there is a process there to allow for that to happen.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Fantastic, thank you.

**Q82** **Karin Smyth:** Carrying on from that, in both your areas there was no referendum to establish the geography of the combined authority. Both deals were done behind closed doors, so to speak. First to Tracy, then to



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Ben: do you think that that is a problem for local acceptability of the model and the powers that you now have, the fact that there has been no democratic election as to what the combined authority geography is?

**Tracy Brabin:** When it came to the mayor, there wasn't that referendum in our community, "Do you want a mayor?" but I do get that sense that people are excited now about having that figurehead, and the level of engagement around devolution and the mayors has definitely increased. Certainly, in my election it was one of the highest turnouts for any mayoral election. Of course, we want everybody to be engaged in who represents them. We did a consultation about the devo deal and 4,000 people responded, again one of the biggest devo consultations/engagements. I know 4,000 doesn't sound a lot, a tiny percentage of the population, but it just shows there is an appetite out there that we can build on.

I do think people are now understanding the mayor is also the champion for the public they represent. We saw that last year with Andy Burnham standing up for his constituents when the Government seemingly were short-changing them on support during restrictions. I think there has become more public awareness of what a mayor does and more engagement. Certainly, only 21 comments from the responses that we had suggested it should be put to a public vote and 200 said that it was long overdue and needed to happen. I think the mayors have now taken more of a public profile.

I do agree with Ben that you do need that public figure because they are the champion, the voice. It is not just the five council leaders, where you have to individually go to respond. The responsibility falls on the mayor's shoulders and there is somebody accountable. Like Ben, we have three scrutiny committees; we have members of opposition who are scrutinising committees and the mayor, so we are not given a free pass and we work collaboratively as well to get things done. While it was not a public consultation or a vote, "Do you want a mayor?" I do feel that the public in West Yorkshire in particular are very happy to have a mayor. I hope they are happy to have me as mayor, having 60% of the vote, but they seem to be happy to have a mayor.

Q83 **Karin Smyth:** Thank you. Ben, your area contains part of an area that voted very strongly against a north-east assembly previously. Do you feel that that is an issue?

**Ben Houchen:** I don't think it is now. I was going to reference that in my answer in that, yes, we are an area that voted quite heavily against the north-east assembly. I think that goes down to combined authorities. People know who mayors are, but I would argue that the vast majority of people don't really know what a combined authority is and how it works. They understand that there is a mayor and they are a champion and they have some powers and money and it all seems quite positive. When you have one, it generates a positivity, which I think you can demonstrate from the fact that turnout nearly doubled from 2017 to 2021 in Tees



Valley. I got more votes than every candidate in the election from 2017 compared to 2021. Where you are able to demonstrate that it works and you have an effective mayor that can deliver something, then people do buy into it.

The issue is getting it over the line to start off with. I just believe that the public's general default position is the vast majority of people don't like politicians and they don't like politics: why would they want an extra politician and another layer of government? It fundamentally comes down to: do the Government and Parliament believe that there is a role for regional representation like a metro mayor? If they believe in it, which I think we should do, then by backing and approving it, which I think we have seen not just in the Tees Valley but across the whole area, where you have an effective mayor people do buy into it. It calls into question in a positive way for democracy what other politicians are doing.

What I have found in the Tees Valley is there is more scrutiny over, "What is the role of an MP if this is what the mayor does? What do the councils do? Because I don't know who my local council leader is, I don't know who my local councillor is." With a very strong mayor, it doesn't get people interested in politics in the way that they are going to be actively engaged, but it gets them to ask positive questions about who the people are who are elected to represent us. I have found very positively in the Tees Valley people are starting to ask questions that nobody outside of politics would have asked before, like, "Who is my local councillor? What does a council leader do and what do they do compared to an MP?" It is a difficult—

**Q84 Karin Smyth:** I was going to pick up on that. That is an interesting point, because we would expect you and our previous metro mayors to say that of course the position itself is a good one and successful. It is too early to judge that and I am not sure what outcomes we are using, to be fair. I totally accept the ambassadorial role of a single figurehead, but I think the issue is how it reflects very localised democratic representations through council and council leaders, that allocation of responsibilities and accountability and encouraging people to come forward through that food chain, if you like. You have alluded to that, Ben, which I think is an interesting point. There is perhaps more scrutiny of their role, but do they have any power now realistically with a figurehead of a metro mayor? Ben, if you want to continue, then I will come back to Tracy.

**Ben Houchen:** Sorry, does who have more power now?

**Karin Smyth:** The elected councillors and council leaders in your areas with regard to a metro mayor and how do we make sure that that is clear.

**Ben Houchen:** They do, separate from the overview and scrutiny process. There are two aspects to combined authorities at the minute. There is a very limited number of mayoral powers that the mayor can



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exercise exclusive from the cabinet, which is made up of local authority leaders. Where there is an investment plan, which each combined authority is supposed to set, that has to be unanimous across all leaders, which I think is important.

To be fair, when you get into the administrative side and the behind the scenes bit, it is one of collaboration with local authority leaders. In all honesty, there is an element of trade-off about what they want to happen in their local area against what they think is beneficial for the region. Ultimately, if you can't get everybody on board with it and get them to buy into the plan, it does not get signed off. You have this very interesting tension between the mayor having a negative veto to stop things from happening that they do not want to happen, which I think is right because of the democratic mandate that they bring, but counter to that, if they can't carry the majority of the local authority leaders, they also can't force anything to happen, which by definition fosters a need for collaboration.

I use the specific example again of the Tees Valley. When I was first elected, seven of the eight MPs were Labour, we had five Labour leaders and a Tory sat in Teesside. Like I say, we worked genuinely and we worked very, very well together because of the nature of the decisions that we were making, but let's be honest, it was not perfect. We had to make compromises. There were some fraught discussions behind closed doors, but we always got to the right decision because that push and pull led to better decisions for the local area.

**Karin Smyth:** Thank you. Tracy, do you want to briefly comment on that?

**Tracy Brabin:** Yes. I would say that collaboration is absolutely vital. Certainly, the leaders have their own mandate, they are driven by their own priorities, but together we make those decisions. I think that what the mayor brings is that bird's eye view and that strategic planning. For example, we all knew that the bus network system in West Yorkshire was broken, but only the mayor could drive that forward in the way that we have over the last couple of weeks to buy into that enhanced partnership, but also set the direction of travel into investigating what public control would look like, which will obviously benefit all the regions, with all the Labour leaders backing as well. It is important to emphasise it is not just about the mayor, it is absolutely about what happens in those meetings with Labour leaders, who are all equals, and we do need that collective decision-making, absolutely. We all have the same powers, we just need to collaborate, yes.

If I may quickly mention, Karin, the mayoral development corporation. It is a great tool of the mayor to set up a massive investment project, but I would need the say-so of the leader of that council for that to go ahead. They may want it, because it will bring loads of money into their community, but they may have reservations. I cannot impose, I absolutely need to work with and collaborate.



Q85 **Karin Smyth:** Thank you. Chair, can I just come back to Ben on something very interesting he said earlier about health devolution? It is an area of interest of mine. My view is that we should be electing chairs of ISCs, but within a national framework to maintain the National Health Service. You seem to be alluding to perhaps more of a Teesside health service and more devolved control and funding of that. Do you want to clarify that? How would that maintain the National Health Service?

**Ben Houchen:** I don't think it would be wise or healthy to carve out any particular region or multiple regions and say, "There you go," but I do think because the ICSs work at different levels and go up, creating that hierarchical chain into the Department of Health and into the NHS, we could be an effective building block in that; so you don't carve us out, you insert us into it. That is what I would say. As part of that, the north-east is a huge problem anyway because it has a north-east and Cumbria proposed ICS at the moment, which is just bonkers. If you carved that down, there is no reason why you couldn't have a Tees Valley ICS that is democratically accountable through the combined authority. The chair could easily be the mayor and the directly elected mayor that would have to have an agenda on health, but it is not autonomous, it just then feeds into the wider ICS system.

**Karin Smyth:** Interesting, thank you. Thank you, Chair.

**Chair:** Thank you. He has been waiting extremely patiently: it is our final question from Tom Randall, please.

Q86 **Tom Randall:** Thank you, Chairman. Just to draw the various threads that we have had together, you have talked about how this model has developed over the years, but if you were to set out a clear vision for the governance of England and the future of devolution and local government, what would that vision look like to you? Could I go to Tracy Brabin first?

**Tracy Brabin:** As I say, the caveat is I am early in the job, but I would say diversity. Whitehall and local government has to represent us all when it comes to race and class, gender and disability. We are doing our bit of work. We are hiring an EDI officer at the combined authority, the inclusivity champion, but where is the consistent approach across the regions? What is the baseline? What is the expectation from government for mayoral officers to look like and what is their reach? We need to collaborate across all the regions. I am able to do that because I am surrounded by lots of Labour mayors, so we collaborate very easily, but we are open to collaboration across the whole country.

Also on the relationship with mayors, it would be great if there was more recognition that we want to deliver. This is not a political position necessarily; it is about delivering for our communities. It also cannot be a postcode lottery. This bidding for pots of money, the beauty contest, it takes so much person power and money to develop a pitch that then gets discarded and then their terms of reference change and then that is put



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on the shelf. Give us the confidence to go ahead with planning something, knowing that it will be delivered. More devolution, as we discussed, a better relationship with the centre. I really would like to speak more often to government Ministers and to civil servants. We have that combined agenda.

Certainly, having more of a UK-wide voice in policy-making, so those 5,000 sustainable homes, how does that fit into government's ambitions? The climate change agenda here in West Yorkshire, how does that fit into government and more widely across the country? Obviously, climate change isn't just about West Yorkshire or even our country or even jobs; it is about the future of the planet, for our children's children. Those fundamentals, when it comes to housing and transport and GB rail, just finally, if we could have that strategic partnership and that relationship with transport just to be able to guide as well. We know what works, we know what we need, so if government would listen and work closely with us so we can deliver at speed.

**Ben Houchen:** If I was in charge and could wave a magic wand and fast-forward 10 years, I would like to see the whole of England covered by combined authority areas. I think there does need to be clarity from government and wider views from Parliament on what is the actual role. My personal view is it needs to be pretty much focused, not exclusively, but more or less on what they currently are at the moment. I do think democratically elected RDAs in effect as a model works very well as a focused element, but having said that, there are a couple of areas like tax, PCC powers and this idea around an ICS that you could bring into that, which adds cohesiveness to this idea that you are driving the economy. I don't need to rehearse the arguments, because I am sure you are all aware of it.

Then the final part that feeds into that on each of those strands, but again, arguably a wider financial settlement beyond the gainshare that is revenue driven, because then ultimately that leads into the point that I think we cannot get away from on the future of devolution, which is responsibility. If you are allowing for that long-term funding settlement, you allow the whole of the country to have a metro mayor with a focused remit, whatever that remit is, so it is very clear to other politicians and to the public what this role is there to deliver. We are not just talking about in West Yorkshire £38 million—in the Tees Valley case, because it is on a per head of population basis, £15 million per annum—because the gainshare is kind of an arbitrary number. It requires a proper discussion with government about what we require to finance transport in the next 30 years and what we need for health.

It allows for government to have control because they have an assurance framework, which I think you are always going to need, but it allows for a longer-term view on a regional level for what the future of that economy looks like, because irrespective of what we are talking about, none of the things that we are trying to achieve across all of the metro mayor areas



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are going to be solved in three or four years. We are all setting out 10, 15, 20-year plans. By having those things in place, I think all of a sudden you get a much more favourable relationship between central government, local government, the metro mayors and MPs.

**Chair:** Thank you, Tom. Can I thank both Tracy and Ben for being our witnesses this morning on this panel, learning from your insight and your expertise? We are very grateful for your time. Indeed, if there is anything further you might have neglected to mention that you wish to let us know about, please do write in the usual way. But for the moment, thank you both very much indeed.