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'Devo-pragmatism' and 'Devo-anxiety': Devolution and Multi-Level Government in Yorkshire and the Humber



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Y-PERN

Executive Overview

This report provides a unique insight into the impact of iterative but bespoke devolution on governmental relationships between Strategic and Local Authorities in a key region of England. It is based on interviews undertaken by the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN)[1] with Strategic and Local Authority political leaders, chief executives, and senior policy officers from Yorkshire and Humber Councils. The report explores how evolving but asymmetric regional devolution has impacted on sub-national multi-level governmental relationships during a period of significant national political and policy change.

Our research highlights that a shared 'mission' has emerged amongst the region's Strategic and Local Authorities as devolution has matured. The collaborative approach necessary to agree each of the region's four devolution 'deals' had built trust and strengthened relationships. A collective 'devo-pragmatism' now existed to 'get on with the job' of progressively expanding the remit and scope of devolution through place-based and region-wide partnership working.

We also found evidence that uneven and bespoke approaches to devolution by successive UK governments has had disadvantageous effects on relations between local and strategic authorities, impairing a regional 'collective voice' when speaking to central government. Emergent tensions between Strategic and Local

Authorities have strengthened in the wake of the current UK Government's English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (2025).

The report concludes by outlining four areas of work which could further strengthen regional partnership working and drive forward collaboration to enhance growth, public service delivery, and the strategic development of devolution:

- Build on existing networks and partnerships to further strengthen collaboration across the Yorkshire and Humber Region
- Amplify a Collective Regional Voice in Westminster and Whitehall to deepen devolution and secure sustained investment
- Encourage Regionwide Frameworks and Initiatives to enhance Policy Learning, Transfer, and Scaling within and between Strategic and Local Authorities
- Work with region's universities to create an Evidence-Informed Approach to Devolution

[1] Y-PERN is a ground-breaking collaboration between the 12 universities across Yorkshire and Humber and all the Strategic and Local Authorities across the region. It is based on a Memorandum of Understanding agreed between Yorkshire Universities and Yorkshire Humber Councils [first signed in 2021](#). In April 2025, both partners renewed this commitment, leading to a [refreshed Memorandum of Understanding](#). Yorkshire Universities and Yorkshire Humber Councils have also co-authored a range of regional position papers including on [Levelling Up](#). Yorkshire Universities is a key partner in the [YHealth4Growth programme](#) with Health Innovation Yorkshire and Humber and is the primary partner in the [National Institute for Health Research \(NIHR\) Applied Research Collaboration Yorkshire and Humber 2.0](#).

Introduction

A Short History of Devolution in England

Devolution in England has proven to be uncertain and uneven in its development over the past 25 years or so. It has been incrementally instigated by consecutive governments of different political hues over this period, beginning with the creation of the Greater London Authority in 1999. The backdrop to this short history of devolution in England is the progressive centralisation and disempowerment of local government in the post-war period. The more recent story of English devolution encompasses the failed attempt to create regional elected assemblies across the north of England in 2004, Multi-Area Agreements initiated in 2008, City Deals in the early to mid-2010's, and finally an – so far at least – incomplete framework of Combined Authorities (CAs) with or without elected Mayors from 2011.

At the same time, successive UK governments have sought to reform and 'modernise' local government in England – to varying levels of success – to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the services local authorities deliver for their citizens and communities. A plethora of initiatives have been introduced to embed competition for service provision, reform executive leadership models, revise performance evaluation and outcomes criteria, augment community involvement in decision-making, and encourage collaborative working between local authorities and health bodies, emergency services, and voluntary and civic organisations (Sandford, 2024). Such reforms have been undertaken in a period of significant reductions in local government funding, which in turn have encouraged the outsourcing of operational and service delivery provision, the sharing of services

across local authorities, and digital transformation.

Although ongoing efforts to devolve funding and powers have been welcomed, it has been oft noted that, regardless of which political party is in power in Westminster, devolution has lacked a clear sense of purpose or idea of its end point either in England or the UK more widely (see, for example, UK2070, 2020; IPPR North, 2023). Furthermore, ongoing attempts to reform local government in a period of severe financial constraint have lacked coherence with aspirations to roll out devolution across England. Too often, it is claimed, change and modernisation have been driven by the localised impacts of ongoing reductions in central government funding rather than by Whitehall (Arnold and McKenna, 2024).

English devolution has thus proven *ad hoc*, with each 'devolution deal' negotiated separately between the constituent local authorities and UK government departments. A patchwork of multi-level governance arrangements has emerged across England. Some areas currently do not have 'devolution deals', while those who have signed a deal have differing powers, funding, and governmental arrangements (some have elected mayors, and some do not). Moreover, these 'devolution deals' have been struck with combined and local authorities in the context of austerity and increasing financial constraint, leading some to argue that the creation of mayoral and non-mayoral combined authorities has often been driven by a 'fear of missing out' of enhanced financial incentives (Barnett and Chandler, 2023).

This has led some to argue that a 'hyper-active incrementalism' has seen devolution in

England shaped by short-termism, incoherence, and fragmentation (Diamond et al. 2024). Furthermore, a 'top down' approach to devolution has also seen tightly constrained funding pots which have extended the maintenance of control of an evolving multi-level government framework by Westminster and Whitehall (Warner et al., 2024). A lack of any significant evaluation of the effects of ongoing reforms is also cited as having led to a 'cycle of policy failure' rather than innovation replicated in different places as devolution has evolved across England.

A Clearer Vision for English Devolution?

The election of the Labour government in July 2024 promised a change in pace and focus. The English Devolution White Paper (MHCLG, 2024) and the subsequent introduction of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (MHCLG, 2025) in the UK parliament saw a commitment to filling in the 'devolution map'. It also announced new statutory bodies, Strategic Authorities (which replace Combined Authorities), will be organised into three categories (Foundational, Mayoral and Established Mayoral) with ascending levels of delegated powers and autonomy from Whitehall. The Bill outlined a shift from unanimous to majority voting rules between the constituent local authorities and their respective strategic authorities with the aim to streamline decision making. New 'integrated settlements' have been introduced to simplify funding streams which allow strategic authorities flexibility in their allocation. Finally, the UK government announced plans for further local government reform to move two-tier areas to unitary authorities across England.

There now appears to be a clearer, more universal vision of devolution in England. Hickson and Newman (2025) argue however

there are inherent tensions regarding stated ambitions of successive governments to enhance democracy, encourage policy efficacy and government efficiency, and disrupt the over-centralisation of power in Westminster which the new UK Government's devolution does not address. Furthermore, some note tensions in how devolution is framed as both a tool to address engrained regional economic and social inequalities across England *and* improve national growth (McKay et al., 2024). It is also uncertain as to how new forms of community and neighbourhood representation outlined in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (MHCLG, 2025), which are still to be identified at time of writing, will marry with existing forms of representative local democracy and scrutiny (Newman et al., 2024a).

Such tensions are likely to be further exacerbated by the growing complexity of multi-level 'metagovernance' shaping relationships between strategic and local authorities and the various departments of central government (Newman et al., 2024b). Inequalities persist in governance capacity at both strategic and local authority level which continue to impair multi-level governance functioning and devolved policymaking (including the delivery of the current UK Government's five core policy 'missions') (Newman and Hoole, 2025). If not addressed, this unevenness of capacity and capability across local and strategic authorities could facilitate further divergence between established and newer strategic authorities and undermine attempts to address regional growth disparities.

English Devolution and Community Evolutionary approaches to devolution and institution-building have however also facilitated lesson-learning about the impacts and limits of devolved powers and identifying opportunities for further reform (Denham and Morphet, 2024). Multi-level governance

arrangements and working relationships in England have been established and developed as devolution has evolved (Anderson and Arnold, 2025). Elected Mayors have had to individually define their roles, formal and informal patterns of working had been established, and political compromises reached. For the most part, strategic and local authorities have worked on a collaborative rather than hierarchical basis, establishing a delicate balance of accepted working practices. Importantly, these have had to be worked out in place-based contexts, reflecting the diversity of specific institutional, cultural, and political histories and arrangements across England (Durose and Lowndes, 2021).

Warner et al. (2024) have concluded though that – thus far – English devolution have been a prescient example of how policy ‘solutions’ can in turn create new problems or challenges for policymakers. Hickson and Newman (2025) suggest that – if unresolved – tensions outlined above could both further undermine the trust between established and emergent tiers of government (and citizens) and diminish a shared sense of ‘mission-based’ policy delivery.



Devolution in Yorkshire and the Humber



Devolution in Yorkshire and the Humber

The issue of identity and affective attachment across the Yorkshire and Humber region has loomed large across the years as a pattern of devolution evolved and played into a long process of contest over geographical scales, followed by compromise. A campaign for devolution to the whole of Yorkshire did garner significant public support, and thus delayed the firming up of arrangements for sub-regional combined authorities. The proposal for 'One Yorkshire' was finally rejected by the UK Government in 2019.

Importantly, the region's devolution journey is settled in that, at least for now, the institutional map has been determined. It has a mix of more established strategic mayoral authorities in South and West Yorkshire [2] and two newer mayoral strategic authorities for York and North Yorkshire and Hull and East Yorkshire. Moreover, Yorkshire and the Humber have an established pattern of unitary authorities and does not have to undertake local government reform after the unitarisation of North Yorkshire in 2023.

'Yorkshire' remains an influential identify and brand. It operates on an institutional level through the Yorkshire and Humber Councils, and Yorkshire Leaders Board which brings together the region's local and strategic authorities to support strategic regional collaboration. A range of other collaborative partnerships and networks have emerged across the region involving local and strategic authorities, universities, the public sector, business, voluntary and charitable organisations, and communities. The White Rose Mayoral Agreement, signed in March 2025, between the Mayors of West, South

and York and North Yorkshire committed them to collaboration over a range of key areas of policymaking.[3] The region's local and strategic authorities are also represented in various partnerships on a north of England scale, including Transport for the North and the Great North Partnership.

Report Context and Methods

The voices and views of national and strategic authority policymakers and politicians have been influential in shaping discourse about devolution across England. Several academic studies have captured these, though studies have typically focused on the experiences of new mayors and the inter-governmental relations between combined (now strategic) authorities and central government (see, for example, Blakeley and Evans, 2023; Anderson and Arnold, 2025); Ayres et al. 2025). Less attention has been paid to the experiences of the political and officer leaders within local and strategic authorities as devolution has been rolled out, either in terms of their views on its evolution or emergent relationships between them and central government.

This report is based on research carried out by the Yorkshire Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN) in response to a request by the Yorkshire and Humber Council's Leaders' Board. It considers governance arrangements, and the division of powers and responsibilities across and between the various scales of government in the region, and possibilities for future enhancement and collaboration. The report responds to the evolving multi-level devolution landscape and the current search for innovative and effective public service delivery arrangements amidst severe financial constraints and increasing demands.

[2] Chesterfield, Bassetlaw, Bolsover and Derbyshire Dales remain as non-constituent members of SYMCA, and York remains a non-constituent member of WYCA.

[3] The Hull and East Yorkshire Mayor initially indicated he would sign the White Rose Agreement when elected in May 2025, but subsequently withdrew support in August 2025.

Specifically, the research sought insights in three broad areas. First, what were the experiences of senior leaders and officers across Yorkshire and Humber region of the devolution process thus far, and the scale and scope of powers devolved. Second, to what extent had the devolution of powers, funding, and capabilities been located at the appropriate level. And finally, how did they see the future direction of travel in relation to the devolution agenda in terms of Local and Strategic Authority government, and local-to-national relationships.

What We Did

An initial review was undertaken of the international literature and research on the forms and impacts of devolution, and more widely, decentralisation, to sub-national tiers, on a range of economic, social, political and well-being issues. This was followed by review of evidence of the effects of scale and collaboration on a range of public service outcomes. These revealed there were no hard and fast, or easily applicable lessons which could be drawn for the region. The distinctive local contexts and institutional and political histories of each case reviewed mattered. In short, place and geography mattered, as did the specific nature of governance within and across Yorkshire and the Humber, including institutional arrangements, and were key to shaping our research.

To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve leaders (councillors) and fourteen chief executives of local authorities, as well as three strategic authority chief executives and one Mayor (with one further Mayor submitting a short, written response).[4] The interviews focused on the three areas of enquiry set out above and were conducted between June and

September 2024 (prior to and after the UK General Election held in July 2024). A follow-up workshop with the Yorkshire and Humber Councils Policy Officer Network was held in January 2025 in Leeds which focused on the English Devolution White Paper. This was supplemented by anonymous interviews with eight senior policy officers drawn from across the Yorkshire and Humber Councils network.

Several salient themes emerged from this research which following overview sets out. They are based upon analysis of interview transcripts and qualitative data analysis using NVIVO. The report is worded to ensure the anonymity guaranteed to all interviewees. An initial version of the report was first submitted to the Yorkshire Leaders Board in April 2025. We are deeply grateful that they have supported the publication of this report for a wider external readership.



[4] Mayoral elections for Hull and East Yorkshire Combined Authority had not yet taken place when this research was undertaken.

Findings



1

There is confidence that devolution can positively and pragmatically emerge and develop, particularly with Strategic Authorities now established across the region.

Despite the progressive emergence of the region's four Strategic Authorities, and the uncertainty and complexity of the current environment, our research participants expressed a shared confidence and optimism for future devolution. Emergent multi-level governmental relationships were sufficiently mature and founded on a shared trust amongst the key actors. As one Chief Executive noted the local and strategic authorities were *'growing up together while we're working'*.

As such, there was a strong belief in the ability to negotiate and resolve any potential contestations over funding and scales of responsibility for delivery. Evidence for this collective and consensual approach was said to exist in the successful negotiations over Investment Zone funding in South Yorkshire [5] and West Yorkshire [6]. This pragmatic mindset was seen to be key to a 'place based' approach to devolution that contrasted with a 'one size fits all' approach which appeared to shape successive UK government's thinking.

At the same time, there was also a view that a clear and agreed strategic framework for devolution had been lacking and was urgently needed from the UK government going forward. This view was summed up by

one interviewee who lamented the 'smoke and mirrors' approach of successive UK governments, meaning that multi-level governmental arrangements were 'disputed' due to lack of a clarity and certainty of the process and the purpose of devolution. With the deepening and widening of devolution, a set of competencies for each scale should be determined which reflected current and future stages where possible to provide clarity and purpose to the overarching agenda.

Furthermore, opinion amongst our interviewees reflected a desire to seek the 'sweet spot' between flexibility and fixity (a 'holy grail' long sought after by practitioners and scholars alike). This was summed up by one of our interviewees, who warned against *'prescribing how you must be rather than [allowing] an emergent process which is largely more realistic'*. They continued however by noting *'I think you need a template for potential against which you allow things to emerge'*.

Interviewees encouraged realism in understanding evolving multi-level governmental arrangements and relationships whose 'constant flux' would continue to be influenced by cross cutting pressures, the remnants of institutional histories, the agency of local actors, and by the evolving legal and financial parameters set by central government.

Devo-pragmatism: 'Just get on with it'

A widely shared 'Devo-pragmatism' now underpins a desire to 'just get on with it'... with some concerns. Frustrations at the contested genesis of the Strategic

[5] <https://invest.southyorkshire-ca.gov.uk/news/article/f7a18322-1bf0-4dbf-bc82-9cf1a7f6e999>

[6] <https://westyorks-ca.gov.uk/all-news-and-blogs/mayor-kickstarts-delivery-of-160-million-investment-zone-with-new-support-for-hundreds-of-healthtech-firms/>

Authorities were not a reflection of a desire to reopen ‘old debates’ about the geographies of devolution. Institutional structures were seen to be maturing, and relationships had settled or were becoming settled. Interviewees from local authorities were clear that, as the constituent orders of Strategic Authorities, they had been the determinants of devolved policymaking. The principle of subsidiarity was widely mentioned, informed by a common belief that powers should reside at the ‘lowest possible level’.

There was a clear expressed view that evolving relationships were consensual, and a considerable amount of trust now existed. Interviewees from the region’s Strategic Authorities described Local Authorities and elected Mayors as working cooperatively and expressed a strong desire to sustain and strengthen these relationships.

Moreover, there was significant – albeit not unanimous – agreement that the Strategic Authority level was the most appropriate to deliver strategic investment, transport, and skills development, and to co-ordinate economic development and strategy. Their creation had served to focus attention on the importance and value of shared strategic issues in way that might not have been achieved under more informal collaboration.



2

There is a lack of a shared ‘Yorkshire and the Humber’ view regarding the evolution of devolution. This impairs the ability to speak with a collective regional voice to the UK Government.

It should perhaps be no surprise that unanimity of views on the devolution process thus far or its future development was not evidenced in our research. Diversity in how devolution was understood and experienced reflected in part the lack of certainty or surety in its overarching design, delivery, or purpose displayed by successive UK governments, and the uneven progress of the establishment of the region’s four Strategic Authorities. The involvement and experiences of some participants in previous iterations of regional devolution over the past 25 years or so in our research also impacted on their views.

However, there were predominant views, though with some areas of contestation:

Firstly, there was considerable dissatisfaction amongst both elected and appointed interviewees at the process by which Strategic Authorities had been created and the associated model of ‘deal making’ approach to devolution in England for over a decade. Participants consistently commented that the process has been too disjointed, bespoke, and incremental. Other points frequently raised were devolution that it was too often Treasury-led, was ‘top-down’ rather than consensual in its process and nature. Furthermore, other central government departments (e.g. DWP) were peripheral or not involved, and that at times

some government departments appeared to actively opposed to the devolution of their functions. Shared concerns were also expressed about funding in silos being too restrictive and limiting (and competitive at times) and reporting and performance regimes too constraining. Opinions here mirrored those commonly reflected in the established research literature and analyses of devolution in England outlined in the introduction to this report.

Secondly, participants argued that the lines of accountability overwhelmingly ran 'upwards' to central government rather than to places and local communities. Strategic Authorities were seen to have been created primarily to secure funding offered by central government, rather to facilitate policy innovation or re-energise local democracy. Many noted Strategic Authorities were, as one interviewee put it, 'the only game in town' for hard-pressed and cash-strapped local authorities. Moreover, the piecemeal nature of the devolution process had sparked a 'Devo-anxiety' to 'secure deals' and 'catch up' with more established Strategic Authorities, both in Yorkshire and Humber and elsewhere in England, to alleviate fears of being 'left behind'. The devolution processes across Yorkshire and the Humber had thus been driven by a shared pragmatism rather than an initial 'hearts and minds' desire to establish and embrace Strategic Authorities.

Thirdly, our research indicated there is widespread acceptance of what is now seen to be a settled position. This noted, the evolution of devolution had proven a contested process. The residue of past debates and contestations concerning competing geographies and the proposed 'One Yorkshire' devolution bid might have abated but not disappeared. Institutional memories of prior Yorkshire and Humber-wide institutions - most notably Yorkshire Forward, the Regional Development Agency

abolished in 2012 – also resonated.

Some concerns were voiced that the incremental, asymmetrical, approach to devolution had left an uneven formal set of devolved institutional arrangements across the region, whilst informal relationship building between and across tiers have evolved at different paces. Thus, the patchwork of often fragmented and disconnected relationships crossing local and regional organisational and geographical boundaries now exists that have limited transferability of policy and the overarching regional coherence and functioning of devolution.

A strong collective regional voice was frequently cited by interviewees to be key in lobbying and strengthening representations to central government for shaping future discussions about the form, scale, and funding of devolution. For many, there was a sense that Yorkshire and the Humber were, as one interviewee put it, 'not really punching our weight, we're not noisy enough'. In the words of another, there was a need to be 'hunting as a pack' in a similar way to the 'trailblazer' regions such as Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. The strengthening of a 'regional voice' was seen as important in delivering a consistent voice on strategic issues and investments around transportation and providing a collective 'elevator pitch' for other major national and regional infrastructure initiatives (such as energy and climate change/sustainability).

Existing regional agencies and networks were cited as examples of good practice. Yorkshire and Humber Councils was identified as a collective voice over common issues, with, for example, an already established practice of Chief Executives taking a lead on particular issues (for example, leading on talks with Yorkshire Water on strategic water and environmental issues).

There were however some concerns

expressed about the implications of potential tensions created by evolving approaches to devolution on the collective voice and agency of Yorkshire and Humber Councils going forwards. Participants noted that each Strategic Authority area had strengths in sectors or policy areas, which could be strategically leveraged for the benefit of all. Ports, energy, technology, national power infrastructure, and agriculture/food production were cited in this context.

Two areas were most frequently given as examples of collaboration. Firstly, tourism promotion, based on recognition of the 'Yorkshire Brand' and sense of identity. Secondly, climate change and the transition to 'net zero', where a regional geography was deemed to be appropriate due to the river patterns, and the work of the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission. However, in turn, both had revealed tensions borne out of issues relating to identities and uniqueness of places (tourism), and institutional divisions over responsibilities and political ownership.

3

There is strong support for a Yorkshire and the Humber scale of engagement but limited networks or mechanisms for facilitating regional collaboration.

There was broad agreement that having the region covered in full by Strategic Authorities is advantageous, aiding connectivity and collaboration. There was no desire to see the creation of formal region-wide institutional arrangements across Yorkshire and the Humber. Instead, most interviewees thought cross border' relationships and collaboration would be negotiated on an issue-by-issue basis, drawing on existing and extensive

'experience of regional inter-authority collaboration. Thus, a spectrum of approaches was being drawn on – from informal sharing of best practice and learning, through to formal joint arrangements.

There was collective recognition of the value of developing work on transferability of policy learning and collaborative opportunities to enhance capacity building and 'joined up' working across the region multi-level governmental setting. This was however distinguished from scalability across the region or more widely. Opportunities for scaling were apparent but needed to be developed and based on emerging evidence and good practice rather the development of formal region-wide arrangements. As one interviewee concluded, *'you're on hiding to nothing if you try and design those relationships and hard wire them in, it doesn't work. You've got to be agile and flexible'*. Another concurred, noting *'you have to define what the relationship is around a particular scheme or issue as opposed to broadly being able to prejudge everything and pocket it into one or other level (of government)'*.

It was also recognised that the relevant geographies of policy delivery were often fluid, requiring collaboration beyond Yorkshire and the Humber; what one interviewee described as 'a complex adaptive system'. Institutional boundaries were recognised as being bounded and yet also necessarily porous. These 'soft spaces' would continue to interact with and across the newly emerging sub-regional system of multi-level government, and again required flexibility and agility, which could be encouraged by a focus on outcomes rather than institutional 'ownership'.

There was a recognition of possible tensions concerning how cross-boundary collaborations might retain legitimacy and accountability, and how they would be 'tethered' to the hard local and strategic

authority institutional boundaries. Such observations resonated with requests for an outcomes-based accountability and performance framework that accommodated cross-boundary collaborations. That said, the current organisational boundaries in the region were seen by most interviewees to offer a pragmatic solution, being both territorially embedded whilst also being as compatible as possible with more relational networks. This was due, it was recognised, to the particular political alignments at the time - and it was accepted by many that these will likely evolve and change.

4

While Local Authorities were recognised by all as the primary institutions delivering foundational public services across the region, their role in strategic policymaking is seen to be under increasing threat.

The continuing pressures on public service delivery provided a source of significant concerns about the future direction of the devolution agenda. Uncertainties over the potential reallocation of leadership responsibilities to Strategic Authorities over 'mainstream' front line services, and in driving public service reform, were also noted by some. There was a strong feeling amongst Local Authority interviewees that the 'territory' of Strategic Authorities should be focused on inward investment, transport, economic growth, and sub-regional strategies issues - but not public service delivery.

Several Local Authority interviewees stated that Strategic Authority's powers should be 'deepened not widened'. This noted, there

was also a recognition that Strategic Authorities could help identify and 'fill in the gaps' in holistic provision in local public services where required. Any changes to the division of powers and responsibilities between Local and Strategic Authorities needed to be evidenced-based.

Local Authority interviewees were also keen to stress their foundational role in the formation and composition of Strategic Authorities and drew attention to the key and continuing role of local government as strategic place-shapers and deliverers of public services. Finally, Local Authorities were keen also to highlight their own innovative strategic policy capacity and extensive scope for collaboration outside of their respective Strategic Authorities.



5

Connecting fiscal devolution and accountability to more powers and responsibilities is key

The stated desire to seek the 'sweet spot' between flexibility and fixity in shaping the future direction of travel for devolution (see point 3) was evidenced most frequently in terms of interviewees citing the need for more financial flexibility (including 'single pot' funding), longer term financial settlements, an end to competitive bidding for national funding pots, and alignment of funding streams with outcomes. In turn, this was seen in the light of the need for a more outcomes-based performance and accountability framework, and in some cases for new place-based accountability.

There was recognition that the 'asks' around finance needed to be set in the context of a broader review of local government funding, aimed at re-balancing the skewed relationship between needs and resources. If competitive funding was ended, then how should resources be allocated or generated? In turn, this issue could not be separated from the evolving devolution agenda, especially fiscal devolution. Many interviewees stated funding needed to follow powers and responsibilities to the appropriate scale in ways that addressed the tension between the need to ring-fence funding for key services and providing space for more local flexibility.

6

Concerns resonate about the direction of devolution and a shared 'mission', indicating growing disquiet about future collaborative working between Local and Strategic Authorities.

The change of UK government during this research project and the publication of the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024 and subsequent English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill in July 2025 have provided clear evidence of a continued 'push' on the devolution agenda. Mayors and Strategic Authorities have been identified as the principal agents in delivering on the new UK Government's manifesto commitments and 'mission' to deliver regional economic growth. The White Paper and Parliamentary Bill have seen the UK government seek to deepen Strategic Authority responsibilities for economic growth and regeneration, skills and transport, whilst also opening debate about at what level and scale strategic spatial planning and housing should reside.

Whilst there was a generally warm welcome for the continuation of the devolution agenda by the current UK Government, and support for both its widening and deepening, the White Paper and Parliamentary Bill have added to existing concerns outlined above. Concerns were expressed by most interviewees about the potential future direction of travel of devolution but were more noticeably located at Local Authority level. In particular, the heightened focus on Strategic Authorities and Mayors as the primary 'drivers' of this agenda intensified attention on the future role of Local Authorities amidst concerns that powers should not, without their full agreement, be devolved 'upwards' from Local to Strategic Authorities.

Growing 'Devo-anxieties' evident both before and after the publication of the White Paper (and subsequent parliamentary bill) were often framed by interviewees in the wider context of the intense pressures of financial constraints impacting on public service delivery. It was clear that, even prior to the publication of the White Paper, multi-level government in Yorkshire and the Humber stood at an 'crossroads' or inflection point regarding Strategic Authorities being primed to both deepen and extend their powers and remits.

Some saw an incremental 'encroachment' onto traditional areas of Local Authority responsibility from which further tensions may emerge. As one Local Authority interviewee noted, *'we're not going to get bullied around.... you know it could get more difficult'*. Concerns were also expressed that the devolution agenda was being pushed too hurriedly, without a fully considered analysis of where responsibilities should lie or to the overall framework of multi-level government.

Fear of touching the 'third rail'

The overall picture was of an evolving, asymmetric and inconsistent devolved system of government across the region where some working relationships were fragile and often underpinned by an emergent trust. The incremental building of 'maturity' of the region's Strategic Authorities had produced a cautious atmosphere which one interviewee described as a *'fear of touching the 'third rail''*.

There was a notable divergence between Local and Strategic Authorities in their views of the potential de-stabilisation of established collaborative approaches. Some Local Authority participants cited evidence of insufficient engagement by Strategic Authorities with them both on the process of devolution and the development of some devolved multi-level areas of policymaking.

They felt this was exacerbated by the UK Civil Service increasingly approaching Strategic Authorities as the first point of call about devolved policymaking, sometimes over issues which were the responsibility of the Local Authorities (with an example being offered in relation to Local Remediation Action Plans).

Conversely, there was a perception amongst some Strategic Authority interviewees that of a need to be cautious not to 'tread on toes' of Local Authorities and an attempt to focus on their core responsibilities. As such they were reluctant to 'intervene' or collaborate unless they were invited to do so and where they could add value. The feeling was overall that there needed to be a change in multi-level government culture to support a 'different method of policy making'.

Linked to this were broader concerns over perceived lack of understanding at levels of sub-national government, particularly their distinctive political and policymaking environments. Some interviewees cited a need for Strategic Authorities to be more sensitive to the internal governance arrangements and political decision-making processes of Local Authorities. There was a need for time, it was argued, for issues to 'clear' each stage of both formal and informal decision making before they could be confirmed as policy.

In turn, the role of Local Authority leaders as members of Strategic Authorities was evolving and (inevitably) varied depending on individual characteristics. At present, they performed a hybrid role as both representative of their Local Authorities, and a part of their respective Strategic Authorities. Generally, working practices were such that lead Local Authority members supported the 'wider picture' of sub-regional policy and this was mutually advantageous. Concerns were expressed though that the emergent devolution agenda outlined in the White Paper and parliamentary bill would put

pressure on this dual role. Alternatively, some noted unease that lead Local Authority representatives saw their Strategic Authority positions as a secondary role. This was evidenced by the number of Strategic Authority meetings which were not quorate.

Working at a Yorkshire and Humber scale

Our research underlined that at both a political and an officer level, governance and working relationships had been evolving at a steady and uneven pace. This was inevitable given the disjointed pace of devolution. There were however pitfalls, and tensions which had been surfaced and were being worked through in the region's two Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities which could serve as lessons for the two Mayoral Strategic Authorities.

It was noted by some participants that the White Paper and subsequent parliamentary bill indicate that UK Government will 'support' Mayors in collaborating at pan-regional level. However, this leaves open the question of what should or can be achieved at a Yorkshire and Humber level given asymmetries in powers, capacities, and budgets devolved, and through what means. Interviewees cited the key challenge was the aligning of Strategic Authority policy priorities whilst also retaining a Yorkshire and Humber-wide perspective and voice. Some noted the development of other collaborative arrangements covering a range of geographies, such as the White Rose Agreement (involving three of the four Mayors in Yorkshire and Humber) and the Convention of the North and Great North initiatives. There was a need for clarity according to many participants of the continuing role of collaboration at a Yorkshire and Humber scale and its value.

A 'Democratic Deficit' Model of Devolution

The proposed move to majority voting on Strategic Authorities has been framed by the UK Government as a necessary move to allow Mayors to 'get things done'. There was some support for this view and acknowledgement that such arrangements already existed in some parts of region. There was however some disquiet expressed about its universal roll out, particularly in Strategic Authorities with fewer constituent members. Some interviewees highlighted the potential negative impact on consensual governance and relationships arrangements, decision-making and veto powers in policy areas which have been established with much effort and mutual trust. Some also noted a perceived 'democratic deficit' as more responsibilities were moved 'upwards' to the sub-regional level and away from Local Authorities.

The White Paper and subsequent parliamentary bill frequently have also stated devolution will give communities a greater say in decisions that affect them. It does not provide details about how this is to be this beyond asset transfers. Research indicates a broad lack of public and community engagement with or understanding of the devolution agenda, or the complex and asymmetric structures of the evolving multi-level government in the region. [7] Some interviewees noted Local Authorities have extensive experience of working with and engaging communities and remain the first point of contact for most citizens. Questions were raised as to a perceived lack of consideration about how emerging devolved multi-level governmental institutions will connect with established hyper-local (neighbourhood panels, town and parish councils) and local democracy in shaping future iterations of devolution and devolved policymaking.

[7] <https://www.westcocommunications.com/blog/public-perceptions-of-local-government-reorganisation-in-england-2024-2025>

'Shovel Ready' for further devolution?

Finally, concerns were expressed regarding the organisational readiness and capacity of Local and Strategic Authorities to deliver devolution, and the positive outcomes identified by its advocates, in a connected and comprehensive manner. The White Paper and subsequent parliamentary bill outline that Strategic Authorities will carry a heavy burden in delivering economic growth, becoming the principal strategic planning body with responsibilities for Spatial Development Plans and Local Growth Plans. They will also have more control over strategic housing land allocation, transport, and infrastructure development. This will place a burden on Strategic Authorities in terms of their capacity, staffing and expertise as they will be required to integrate existing plans with those created by the current UK Government.

Local Authorities, who have already cut staffing levels due to reductions in central government funding and lost experienced staff to the Strategic Authorities, are seriously concerned about losing more. Some interviewees also noted newly formed Strategic Authorities were viewed to be lacking depth of specialist knowledge beyond economic development work. There are also reservations concerning the UK Civil Service backgrounds of some senior Strategic Authority staff. This is seen very much as a double-edged sword; on the one hand forming a 'bridge' between central and local government, on the other hand leading to a feeling that senior management did not fully understand local government, local democracy, or their places.



Summary and Next Steps



Summary and Next Steps

Since our research was undertaken, the *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (2025)* has confirmed the UK government's intention to strengthen devolution at strategic authority and sub-local authority levels. This raises important questions as to the organisation, purposes and functioning of existing local democracy arrangements, and also nascent working relationships between different levels of devolved government in England.

While the devolution map across Yorkshire and Humber now appears to be complete and settled, significant differences in how each of the four Strategic Authorities has been empowered and resourced to deliver devolution endure. Indeed, while the overall direction of travel of devolution seems a little clearer, the current three tier system appears to further engrain divergence in the evolution and scope of the region's established and emergent Strategic Authorities. This has implications both for the strategic coherence and connectivity of devolution at a regional scale, and also for constituent local authorities within each of the region's four Strategic Authorities.

Recent exemplars of divergence in how the region's four Strategic Authorities have been treated include the awarding of Local Innovation Partnership Funds. While at least £30 million of funding has been earmarked for both South and West Yorkshire, the other two strategic authorities must compete for small awards of £20 million. Inequalities in access and scale of funding and investments supporting the delivery of different aspects of the UK government's industrial and growth strategies between established and emergent Strategic Authorities are also evident. This will approach will likely further exacerbate regional differences in funding allocations and public spending across England (Taylor and Velthuis, 2024; Boileau et al, 2025).

The value of our research is thus deeply resonant in the context of the current devolution landscape as it continues to evolve. It reveals a widely held 'Devo-pragmatism' which is informed by the resolution of divisions across the region evident in the genesis of devolution, and a shared desire to 'get on with the job'. Strategic and Local Authorities have moulded a distinctive approach to devolution which reflects the unique political and policymaking characteristics of the region. Participants expressed pride when reflecting on the scale of transition work collectively undertaken as new institutions have emerged, matured, and working relationships have embedded. Moreover, they were keen to draw attention to the extensive multi-level collaboration across a broad set of policy area, both in terms of its scale and – if not consistent – pace across the region's four Strategic Authorities. There was a strong shared commitment to build on these patterns of working as devolution evolves and changes over time.

There was however evidence of a growing 'Devo-anxiety' at the same time. The next steps for devolution outlined by the UK Government, combined with the effects of ongoing financial constraint in local government funding and the UK government's drive for growth, were seen by many to present threats to evolving multi-level relationships and patterns of working. It was noteworthy that both Strategic and Local Authority political leaders and public services officers expressed a need to balance boldness and consensus-building in delivering devolved multi-level government.

Local Authority participants also stressed concern regarding a perceived 'drift' of powers to Strategic Authorities and further diminishing their ability to develop place-based policy and public services met local needs. Trust and mutual understanding have been widely built across the region, but our

research indicated this could easily decline or be lost if concerns outlined in this report are not acknowledged and addressed.

A pervading disquiet was evident amongst many participants concerning a perceived lack of an overarching Yorkshire and Humber narrative or collective 'mission'. This was in part a product of what was collectively seen as the piecemeal, inconsistent, and disjointed evolution of devolution. It is also reflected what some saw as the continuation of an often hurried and open-ended approach to further devolution established by successive UK governments. This was seen to limit the potential for an inclusive approach in consultation either with all levels of government or communities and other public and private sector stakeholders.

Our research does however provide considerable grounds for optimism for the future of devolution across the region. Below we outline next steps to strengthen partnership working and drive forward collaboration to enhance growth, public service delivery, and the strategic development of devolution.

1

Build on existing networks and partnerships to further strengthen collaboration across the Yorkshire and Humber Region

Our research underlines that devolution has created new spaces to drive innovation, public sector reform, and new forms of policy learning and transferability (and scaling where appropriate) within and across the region. Experimentation and innovation ('test and learn') were seen as key to the future of devolution across the region, not only at Local and Strategic Authority scales but also

region. Experimentation and innovation ('test and learn') were seen as key to the future of devolution across the region, not only at Local and Strategic Authority scales but also across Yorkshire and Humber and the North of England.

The potential to build on existing networks and partnerships – such as Health Innovation Yorkshire and Humber and the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission – and the wide range of professional and service-related networks organised at Yorkshire and Humber scale is significant. There is a clear case for maintaining and growing a Yorkshire and Humber 'footprint'. This regional scale offers both emotional and practical advantages: a recognised cultural identity, institutional memory, and a coherent geography for data, analysis, and cross-sector collaboration. Sustaining this approach will enable continued innovation, joint working, and scaling of successful initiatives across local, sub-regional, and northern levels.

Yorkshire and Humber Councils are currently undertaking a structured programme of stakeholder engagement designed to inform regional strategic planning and collaboration. As part of this initiative, representatives are visiting all mayoral offices to collate perspectives on priorities and areas of engagement over the next three years. In addition, outreach is being conducted with local authority leaders to ensure that the views of both political and administrative stakeholders are comprehensively captured. The evidence and insights gathered through this process will be synthesised into a three-year business plan, providing a coherent framework to guide decision-making, resource allocation, and collaborative activity across the region.

2

Amplify a Collective Regional Voice in Westminster and Whitehall to deepen devolution and secure sustained investment

To deepen devolution and secure sustained investment, Yorkshire and Humber must speak with a strong, unified voice to central government. Existing structures such as the Yorkshire and Humber Councils, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire, and the White Rose Mayoral Agreement provide the basis for articulating a shared regional view and mission. Developing and communicating a coherent regional narrative—anchored in shared priorities and values—will strengthen advocacy across Westminster and Whitehall, enhance influence in national policymaking, and ensure the region’s needs and opportunities are clearly represented.

Amplification of a collective regional voice is not however solely the responsibility of our political and policy representatives. The region’s universities, both individually and collectively through Yorkshire Universities, have a role in supporting the articulation and voicing of the region’s shared view and mission. Together with public, private and third sector stakeholder communities, the region’s universities have significant representative and advocacy ‘soft power’.

3

Encourage Regionwide Frameworks and Initiatives to enhance Policy Learning, Transfer, and Scaling within and between Strategic and Local Authorities

Our research indicated there was a growing appetite for shared learning and practical collaboration across Yorkshire and Humber. Initiatives such as the Yorkshire and Humber Councils Policy Officer Network have already shown how linking policymakers, academic researchers, and practitioners can improve evidence use and foster innovation. The region should continue to invest in mechanisms that support networked, evidence-informed policy collaboration, promoting the transfer and scaling of effective practices between Strategic Authorities and Local Authorities. This will not only strengthen local delivery but also demonstrate the wider value of regional devolution as a collaborative model for devolution across England.

Collaborative regional approaches to this work should strongly connect with national initiatives such as the Sheffield Policy Campus, the recently announced health campus led by Leeds Health and Social Care Hub, and the wider UK Government’s Places for Growth strategy. The potential to better connect and integrate regional and national communities of policymakers, academic researchers, and practitioners to support ‘mission-led’ multi-level government, while facilitating civil service and public sector reform, is significant. Bringing together central, strategic and local government delivery plans and industrial strategies can aid more efficient and effective policymaking and help identify gaps and investment priorities.

4

Work with region's universities to create an Evidence-Informed Approaches to Devolution

Yorkshire and Humber's diversity - spanning urban, rural, and coastal communities - and multi-level governmental arrangements makes it a powerful testbed for devolution and research-to-policy collaboration. The region's universities, research partnerships, and data infrastructures provide a robust foundation for developing strategic, evidence-informed approaches to evaluating the outcomes and impacts of devolution.

Y-PERN was awarded £3.9 million in funding from the Research England Development (RED) Fund to connect the research expertise of the region's universities with local and regional policymakers.[8] The Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP) has secured £5 million in ESRC funding to extend Y-PERN's work through new programmes centred on inclusive growth, sustainable living, and data analytics, with a specific emphasis on marginalised communities.[9] YPIP has established the Yorkshire Engagement Portal, an open-access data platform run by the Yorkshire and Humber Office for Data Analytics (YHODA) to help multi-level governments, communities, and researchers better understand the economic, social, and environmental health landscape. [10]

Other significant initiatives based in the region include the Yorkshire Policy Collaboration (involving the Universities of

Huddersfield, Leeds, Sheffield, and York), the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission, and the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration Yorkshire and Humber [11] and its four Health Determinants Research Research Collaborations (in Bradford [12], Doncaster [13], North Yorkshire [14] and Wakefield [15]). Yorkshire and Humber has thus established a national reputation as a 'trailblazer' region for investments developing regional research-to-policy engagement.

The opportunities to develop further established pioneering regional approaches to evidence-informed policymaking across Yorkshire and Humber are significant and respond to the ambition outlined in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (2025) to better evaluate evidence and impacts of devolution. Through strategic, place-based, and collaborative approaches to evaluating both the individual and collective impacts of evolving devolution commitments, our universities can play a vital role in galvanising policy learning and facilitating policy transfer across the region's Strategic and Local Authorities.

This work is already in progress. Y-PERN is working with a wide range of academic, health, and strategic and local governmental partners to develop connected Areas of Research Interest to support evidence-informed policymaking. It has also supported Strategic Authorities in their development of their local growth plans and data and expertise to support the delivery of the UK government's Industrial Strategy across the region. A new Higher Education Compact has been signed by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Yorkshire Universities, and

[8] <https://y-pern.org.uk/>

[9] <https://ypip.org.uk/>

[10] <https://yhoda.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/>

[11] <https://arc-yh.nihr.ac.uk/>

[12] <https://www.bradford.gov.uk/health/bradford-health-determinants-research-collaboration/bradford-health-determinants-research-collaboration/>

[13] <https://www.doncaster.gov.uk/services/health-wellbeing/health-determinants-research-collaboration-hdrc-doncaster>

[14] <https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/healthy-living/health-determinants-research-collaboration-north-yorkshire-hdrc-ny>

[15] <https://www.wakefield.gov.uk/our-people-and-communities/partnership-working/hdrc-wakefield>

and universities in York and West Yorkshire to stimulate inclusive economic growth, drive innovation, and enhance social and environmental well-being. [16] And YPIP is working with communities and citizens to enhance local and regional policymaking and data capacity, funding 22 community-led projects across the region.



[16] Yorkshire Universities convened university leaders across the region to sign the West Yorkshire Higher Education Compact, and is a key signatory itself: <https://www.westcocommunications.com/blog/public-perceptions-of-local-government-reorganisation-in-england-2024-2025>

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