

## **Westmorland and Furness Council**

### **Response to Government devolution consultation**

**This consultation response is not to be treated as a consent under section 110 (1b) of the Local Democracy Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. Should consent be required decisions will be taken by the Council through its decision-making process.**

#### **Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing a Mayoral Combined Authority over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to the area?**

The benefits to Cumbria offered by the new devolution framework are yet to be fully quantified but are potentially significant and the reason why Westmorland & Furness Council decided to join the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP). Devolution would build on the existing joint working arrangements between ourselves and Cumberland Council via our Joint Executive Committee and support delivery of the Cumbria Economic Strategy which sets out our shared vision for our local economy over the next 20 years.

However, fully realising those benefits is contingent on devolution being accompanied by a clear, unambiguous and irrevocable commitment from Government to providing the necessary level of funding, suitable governance framework, appropriate powers and sufficient investment support, both in the short and long term.

In joining the DPP, we have acknowledged that we are dealing with the legacy of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The council is still in a period of transition and continues to be stretched by the ongoing demands of stabilisation and integration. Government has committed to providing capacity support through the DPP, however the details of when that support will be provided have not yet been confirmed. Given the Council's continued funding gaps and depleted reserves, as a result of the LGR process, clarity on this issue is critical to our consent decision.

Given the current English devolution landscape and the status of our surrounding authority areas, we understand why Cumbria is the Government's preferred geography. Looking to the long-term, we remain concerned about the financial sustainability of Cumbria as a devolved geography. Cumbria's population of approximately 500,000 is well below the population threshold of 1.5 million people that Government has set for Strategic Authorities in the English Devolution White Paper (EDWP). Government has described Cumbria as an exception due to our unique geography. We acknowledge this given 94% of our population live and work in the county, but it can be assumed that the population threshold has been set because this is seen as providing the 'critical mass' needed for devolution to succeed. Looking further into the future, we believe the question as to whether

Cumbria eventually becomes part of a larger devolved geography, recognising the important economic linkages we have with surrounding areas, should remain open until such time as it is proven that Cumbria is a sustainable geography.

We await the outcome of the Spending Review later in the year to provide clarity on the future funding for devolution in Cumbria, this understanding will be essential for any decisions to provide our consent. Historically, the area has been funded, via 'per head' funding models that have left the area substantially disadvantaged compared to areas with higher population density. Devolution has been shown to work in some larger urban and metropolitan areas, but it is not clear how the funding model will work in rural areas where there is a higher cost of service delivery for a dispersed population over a large land area. For Cumbria to be a sustainable devolved geography, the funding our area would receive through devolution must be sufficient to make a meaningful difference and address this legacy of underinvestment.

This total funding package is a material consideration for the Council and will be a key factor in our decision making later in the year.

Generally, we would also note that devolution to date has largely focused on larger city regions. The needs of these types of area have shaped the thinking about devolution and how it has developed over time. With Government's expansion of devolution to areas like Cumbria, largely rural, encompassing two National Parks, two World Heritage Sites, but without an economically dominant urban centre, it is important to recognise that the model of devolution that has worked to date may be sub-optimal for areas like ours. For example, discussions about public transport are fundamentally different in Cumbria compared to Manchester given we are a large, sparsely populated, and geographically largely rural area. We are keen to work with government to ensure that the Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) powers are those which are most relevant and appropriate for our distinct context.

**Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed governance arrangements for the Mayoral Combined Authority?**

The consultation document states that “The default voting arrangement for Combined Authority decisions to be approved would be a simple majority in favour, including the Mayor (i.e. 3 out of 5).” We are concerned by this proposal.

In an area like Cumbria with only two constituent Principal Authorities, this creates the possibility of political power imbalances and the risk that one area could be disadvantaged if the Mayor and one authority both consistently vote in opposition to the other council’s priorities. Our strong preference would be for governance arrangements that allow for veto to be exercised by Principal Authorities in particular circumstances, for instance decisions that would give rise to a financial liability for a constituent council. Related to this, we would like clarity on those functions that will be exercisable by the Mayor alone.

This issue will be a key consideration from the council in determining its eventual consent decision. We would welcome dialogue with Government on this issue.

We are committed to good governance and effective scrutiny. We require further details regarding how Audit, Insight and Scrutiny will work and would like to work with Government to co-design the approach.

We support the proposal of an accountability framework and holding the Mayor to account.

We would like further detail of the Local Accounts Committee model should this be the model being progressed and further detail on the establishment of a new body for Local Audit if that is proposed for MCAs.

**Question 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined Authority will support the economy of the area?**

In theory, devolution offers an opportunity to generate local economic growth. The powers available to a Mayor are significant, particularly in shaping the strategic decision making of non-departmental government bodies like Homes England and National Highways. Exercised wisely, these powers could unlock real benefits.

Additionally, MCAs have the potential to implement policies at scale that improve the economy, health and wellbeing. Health and wealth are 'two sides of the same coin'. Poor health and inequality can weaken economic growth and prosperity, reducing levels of employment, leading to lower taxes and higher welfare payments. Inclusive and green economic growth can provide healthy employment opportunities, improving the health of the population and enabling further economic growth. There is an opportunity to develop an economic framework that prioritises benefitting people and the planet, achieving positive outcomes across health, wellbeing and sustainability as well as economic growth.

However, as discussed previously, the powers available to a Mayor will have limited impact without the necessary level of funding and support. For example, Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership was one of the smallest and lowest funded LEPs in the country and was forced to operate on a relative shoe-string across one of the largest geographies. Despite excellent work, this severely impeded the impact that it was able to have. As such, Cumbria's economic challenges remain much as they were two-decades ago. Working with Cumberland Council we have begun the process of tackling these challenges, developing a shared economic strategy and joint governance arrangements, but the fact remains that adequate funding is essential to allow change to happen at pace.

In relation to housing, there is a pressing need to deliver more high-quality, affordable housing across Westmorland and Furness, especially to retain young people, attract key workers, and support rural communities. Devolution needs to empower local leadership with the tools — including planning powers, funding, and partnership levers — to shape housing supply to local needs, not just market demand.

Despite the far wider range of powers available to a Mayor, if historic under-investment is replicated through devolution there is little reason to expect a significantly different set of outcomes. For devolution to deliver on its transformational promise it is essential that it is funded properly.

**Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined Authority will improve social outcomes in the area?**

Across multiple funding streams, education, social care and public health, national formulas fail to adequately resource Cumbria. For example, a recent [IFS report](#) found that Cumbria received 26% less public health funding than our share of estimated needs. These are fundamental issues that will be addressed not so much by the creation of a MCA, as by the allocation of funding to it.

Acknowledging systematic underfunding of some key services in Cumbria and the vital importance of adequate future resourcing, there are potentially significant opportunities for a MCA to deliver benefits to the local community. Many of the devolved powers are essential building blocks for improving social outcomes, such as improving health, housing, transport, employment and the environment. The MCA has the opportunity to lead by example, acting as an Anchor institution and taking long term decisions that impact on not only its workforce and the local population, but also the outcomes of generations to follow.

To achieve this, the MCA will need to have a robust understanding of local population social, health and care outcomes, understand the impact of inequalities and use devolved powers to implement policies that do not just improve overall population outcomes, but also improve outcomes for the most marginalised communities in Cumbria.

As such, the MCA has potential to act as a 'system steward' (aligning provision with economic priorities, bringing together key stakeholders, ensuring policy and funding decisions are coordinated, using data and insight to inform action), facilitating the best outcomes for the local population across Cumbria public services. In this way, the MCA could develop policies that reflect the environment and the needs of the population, and have a local impact, that is difficult for central government to achieve.

Specifically, the opportunity to deliver public service boundary alignment is an essential consideration for a MCA concerned with improving social outcomes. Residents in Cumbria are currently served by two unitary authorities, two Integrated Care Boards, two hospital trusts and two mental health trusts. The geographical footprint of the two local authorities does not align with any of the NHS footprints. An early consideration of alignment between the MCA and particularly the ICB will be essential in maximising the benefits of an MCA. There is currently a complex tapestry of duplication, gaps and inequality across Cumbria that would be fundamentally improved if the MCA and ICB were co-terminus. The MCA also provide opportunities to achieve a more cohesive emergency planning and public protection response with aligned boundaries.

Currently there are multiple overlapping structures operating in the skills and employment support space. We would expect to take the opportunity presented by the creation of a MCA to simplify our existing governance arrangements and take action on a coherent set of priorities. Working across the geography of Cumbria will allow us to partner more effectively with our key sectors (defence, nuclear, clean

energy, land-based and hospitality) and we would align our funding strategy for a devolved Adult Skills Fund to better support our working-age population to gain the skills they need to access opportunities.

The recent success of the Multiply Numeracy programme in Cumbria has identified the need to develop a targeted Skills for Life offer broadened to include Numeracy, Literacy, ESOL, Digital and Employability. Devolution will provide the opportunity to develop new methodologies and partnerships to work together on non-regulated tailored learning to support those furthest from education and employment onto pathways to further learning and jobs. In addition, tailored learning for Health and Wellbeing supports a wide range of social outcomes which help engage individuals facing barriers to education due to issues with rurality, poor health, low self-esteem, confidence and those facing financial difficulties.

It would be helpful to mirror Trailblazer arrangements on careers and 16-19 with the MCA positioned as the 'central convenor' of provision. We would need any growth and skills fund to be substantial enough for meaningful investment in skills priorities, building on the LSIF. We would use this to accelerate delivery through such initiatives as co-funding provision that supports the transition to net zero, or that encourages small employers to generate additional apprenticeship opportunities.

**Question 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined Authority will improve local government services in the area?**

We recognise the potential benefits devolution could bring to those functional service areas that an MCA will have responsibility for, but much will depend on detail, respective powers and decision takers.

In particular, an MCA could act as a suitable successor to the LEP, ensuring that there is a Cumbria-wide strategic body to lead on economic planning. This strategic function will strengthen local government structures following the demise of the LEP and make it clearer where responsibility for strategic economic planning sits, both councils have already agreed a joint economic strategy, providing a foundation for this work.

There is also potential for greater coordination in transport planning, improving how transport networks are developed across Cumbria. A joined-up approach to adult skills and training could help ensure that provision better aligns with employer needs, supporting economic growth.

However, the overwhelming majority of local government services will continue to be provided by the two unitary councils in Cumbria. We are already fully invested in our own service improvement programme following LGR, and these improvements will progress alongside devolution should it take place. The powers of constituent authorities within the governance framework will be key to shaping and delivering this.

Even where an MCA has the potential to add value—such as in economic strategy, transport, and skills—without proper funding and investment, delivery will inevitably be impacted. Simply shifting responsibilities without adequate resourcing will not deliver better outcomes.

While we will make the most of the opportunities devolution presents, success will depend on securing the right resources, and local flexibility.

**Question 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined Authority will improve the local natural environment and overall national environment?**

From an environmental perspective Cumbria makes geographic sense. Numerous river catchments span the two unitary council areas, we share an extensive coastline, the challenges for nature and communities are consistent. Climate Adaptation also works better Cumbria wide as we share the same climate, topography, and likelihood of severe weather events. This is why partners across Cumbria are already working together closely to deliver our Local Nature Recovery Strategy and Bio-diversity Action Plan.

However, the funding available to deliver this activity from Government is inadequate. If devolution brings with it funding, then this would clearly be a positive. If it is simply a transfer of responsibility for current activity, or creation of an additional layer of bureaucracy, then there is little reason to expect improved outcomes given the already extensive and well-established cross-Cumbria working.

Additionally, given the high priority the Council has placed on tackling climate change and supporting nature recovery, we are concerned that a shift in responsibility to a Mayor has the potential to dilute the current focus on this issue that our commitment has ensured. We would want to see the responsibilities of a Mayor to be clearly articulated and reflect the critical importance of this agenda. Irrespective, we are clear that our own commitment to delivering against this agenda would be unchanged

We are also working jointly with Cumberland Council on our Local Resilience Forum Trailblazer and there is opportunity to further develop this and fully embed climate adaptation and resilience into the strategic planning activity of the MCA, given Cumbria LRF will be co-terminus with a Cumbria MCA.

Generally, we are concerned by the absence of areas under the control of DEFRA from the devolution framework, given our large rural geography, the significant role of the land-based economy, and the high proportion of our area designated as protected landscapes. This omission indicates a lack of consideration for how devolution needs to work in largely rural areas with challenges and opportunities that are very different from urban city regions.

We would like to discuss with Government how devolution can impact positively in a large rural area like ours.



**Question 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined Authority will support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities?**

Cumbria is a big place; it is a two-hour drive from Barrow to Carlisle. While Cumbria has existed since 1974, local identities of different areas have remained strong and influential in shaping perspectives. That said, given Cumbria's history, the geography is locally understood and has resonance with residents alongside those more local identities.

To understand the needs and interests of local communities, it will be essential for the MCA to work closely with communities and the voluntary and faith sector. Currently, work is delivered across multiple systems, places and neighbourhoods.

The MCA could help develop a strategic approach across Cumbria that is designed with communities, through engagement, co-production and participatory decision making.

In order to build public trust and confidence in devolution, any Mayor will have to quickly and clearly demonstrate that they are working for the whole of Cumbria, with equal emphasis on meeting the different needs of our different areas, whether that be farming, tourism, heavy industry, energy generation or defence for example.

Should the Mayor exercise the powers available to them skilfully, and should the necessary financial investment be forthcoming, we would expect that the creation of a new MCA could be of benefit to communities in Westmorland and Furness.