

Report of the Chief Executive to the meeting of Executive to be held on 5 March 2024

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Subject: Level Four Devolution

Summary statement:

1. For information:
 - a. To provide an overview of the recently announced Level 4 Devolution Framework, through which the West Yorkshire Combined Authority can apply to access new powers, functions and flexibilities, and the associated readiness conditions.
 - b. To provide an update on work that has taken place since November 2023 to develop the West Yorkshire response and the Combined Authority's submission to Government, including the foundational partnership principles.
2. For decision: To formally ratify the Council's support for the Combined Authority's application to begin talks on adopting new Level 4 Devolution powers.

EQUALITY & DIVERSITY:

Further Devolution at West Yorkshire level will impact on the work of the Council in several key services and will benefit our residents and communities. Increasing our powers and duties at a West Yorkshire level will also support the delivery of the West Yorkshire Plan. Bradford Council's Equality Objectives commit us to promoting diversity, tackling inequality and discrimination in partnership to ensure that our services are inclusive to create a place where everyone feels that they belong. The extra powers devolved at the West Yorkshire level will allow us to ensure that decisions are made with knowledge of Bradford's diversity and needs as part of our equalities commitment. The West Yorkshire Plan itself is underpinned by the collective Vision 'A brighter West Yorkshire – a place that works for all. An engine room of ideas and creativity, where anyone can make a home.' This cross-cutting approach of being a place that works for all affirms that further powers of Devolution will be implemented through a lens of equality. As this work progresses an Equality Impact Assessment will be required against the different elements of devolution.

Lorraine O'Donnell
Chief Executive

Portfolio:

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Overview & Scrutiny Area:

Corporate

1. SUMMARY

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2. BACKGROUND

On 22 November 2023, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) released a technical paper outlining the new Level 4 Devolution Framework. The Framework marks a move towards greater devolved funding and powers to eligible institutions who choose to participate and provides a stepping stone towards a single settlement through the offer of consolidated funding at the next multi-year Spending Review. The Framework aims to standardise English devolution, moving away from the previous approach of agreeing bespoke region-specific deals. Whilst this approach does not meet the partnership's full aspirations for devolution in West Yorkshire, the opportunity to pursue deeper devolution is welcomed.

The Government announcement stated that new powers would be available for regional Government, including (1) providing regional Government with some additional powers similar to local authorities and (2) devolving powers held in national government to regional Government.

West Yorkshire Combined Authority, with the support of local authority leaders, has submitted an initial application to begin talks on whether the Combined Authority may adopt some of these powers. Though each local authority has indicated its support for talks to begin, there has been agreement that we need to formally confirm our support. The recommendation presented via this paper is to formally confirm our support for the application. The paper also provides an update on available powers and the process to explore these with government.

3. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 Level 4 Framework

The Level 4 Devolution Framework, attached at Appendix 1 to this report, for information set outs the powers and functions available to eligible institutions, across a range of policy areas.

Key highlights on offer through the Framework are as follows:

Policy area	Summary of Offer
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding simplification with a consolidated DLUHC pot, available at the next multi-year spending review, as the first stage towards a single settlement. • Removal of Gainshare gateway reviews for eligible institutions which have passed Gateway One and meet criteria relating to local evaluation frameworks.
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devolved and consolidated integrated local transport settlement for eligible institutions subject to demonstration of appropriate level of fiscal sustainability and broader capacity/capability from the next multi-year Spending Review for the length of the Spending Review. • A range of other offers linked to the Key Route Network, Pavement Parking and Taxi Licensing. • <i>Access to Transport powers must be taken as a whole and are not available to pick and choose as with other powers on offer.</i>
Employment and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further commitment towards a more devolved adult skills system with increased flexibility on adult skills programmes and the ability of institutions to be central convenors of careers provision in their regions, however availability is dependent on outcome/ implementation of Trailblazer deals. • <i>Employment and Skills powers and flexibilities on offer must be taken as a whole.</i>
Housing and Land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local leadership of the Affordable Homes Programme from 2026. • Move towards greater collaboration between eligible institutions and DLUHC on housing quality.
Net Zero, Climate Change and Natural Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government will consider devolving net zero funding, including for retrofitting buildings subject to the outcome of the trailblazer pilots and following a review of the effectiveness of the approach.
Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new concurrent power to take on a public health duty, offers no new funding but aims to create a 'health in all policies' approach to the Combined Authority's work.

In addition, the Framework provides other significant opportunities, including the move towards a general, rather than the existing, functional power of competence and the ability to make technical adjustments to historic legislation, offering the opportunity for eligible institutions to advise on changes to statutory guidance or legislation that could be disapplied or removed to support areas in meeting their objectives. The partnership is considering how it may utilise this opportunity to pursue technical adjustments that meet strategic objectives e.g. changing the current requirement for the Secretary of State to approve the location of roundabouts in local areas.

The Framework also enables eligible institutions to take on board powers that other areas have previously secured, should areas wish to do so.

3.2 Application Process, Timeline, and Readiness Conditions

The Framework sets out the application process, eligibility and access criteria that areas wishing to make an application for Level 4 Devolution will need to follow. A summary of the key criteria are as follows:

- Level 4 of the Devolution Framework will be available to combined authorities, combined county authorities and local authorities who have implemented a Level 3 deal.
- Level 4 will be offered once areas can provide confidence in the capacity, governance and culture of the institution to manage its activities effectively and take up further powers.
- Ministerial decisions will be taken in the round and the Government will engage further with individual areas before making a decision.
- Areas must confirm that they will report on how they are implementing the Scrutiny Protocol, as set out in the English Devolution Accountability Framework, within one year of confirmation from the Secretary of State that the Government is content to proceed with a Level 4 agreement.
- The Scrutiny Protocol sets out proposals for improved future working including the potential for areas to consider moving towards a single scrutiny committee model.
- MP sessions to further enhance scrutiny in the future, similar to those arrangements being established in GMCA and WMCA, will need to be adopted by areas.
- The final transfer of each policy area will be subject to areas demonstrating compliance with specific readiness conditions for each policy area within the framework.
- Subject to eligibility tests, an area can apply at any time to access further powers from the Devolution Framework.
- Any subset or a combination of powers unless otherwise specified may be applied for and there is no obligation to take all the powers on offer.

Eligible institutions must decide which parts of the Framework they would like to apply for and a final decision on this must be made by the mayor or directly elected leader with the agreement of all constituent members in the case of an eligible devolved institution.

3.3 West Yorkshire Level 4 Submission

Since the Government's publication of the Level 4 Devolution Framework in November 2023, the Combined Authority and five local authorities have been working closely, and at pace, to understand and consider the opportunities that a Level 4 Deal presents for West Yorkshire.

In discussions that have taken place, the partnership has been clear that deeper devolution must align with our collective objectives and priorities for the region. It must offer greater opportunity and levers to achieve the objectives and outcomes the partnership is seeking to deliver for our communities, businesses and places, as set out in the West Yorkshire Plan.

Following approval from the Finance Resources and Corporate Committee on 18 January to proceed, an initial application, seeking access to all of the opportunities available

through the Framework has been submitted to Government. The West Yorkshire letter of application is attached as Appendix 3.

It should be noted that the initial submission of a letter of application to the Secretary of State does not constitute an irrevocable step and does not form part of the statutory process. However, it signals an intent to engage with Government and proceed with the Level 4 Framework, subject to further development work between the West Yorkshire partnership and Government. The legislative processes for the different aspects of the application would need to be worked through in progressing this, as part of which all statutory requirements, including the need for individual consents on whether to accept new powers, would take place.

Following submission of the West Yorkshire application letter, the decision lies with the Secretary of State as to whether to progress the West Yorkshire Level 4 application. The Secretary of State will consider whether the application in the round including the elements of the Level 4 Framework applied for, considerations on the Combined Authority's previous delivery record and whether the readiness conditions (as set out in section 2.3) have been met.

3.4 West Yorkshire Scrutiny Protocol

The Scrutiny Protocol, published alongside the Level 4 Devolution Framework, is guidance for good regional scrutiny. Its relevance to West Yorkshire devolution is in it setting out guidance relating to:

- the relationship between the Mayor and the combined authority
- how the overview and scrutiny and audit committees hold the combined authority and Mayor to account

Technical guidance states that eligible institutions will be required to confirm in their application how they intend to implement the Scrutiny Protocol within one year of agreement with the Secretary of State and then must confirm by that deadline how they have implemented all the key principles of the Scrutiny Protocol.

The Scrutiny Protocol intends to strengthen the accountability, assurance, audit and scrutiny functions of eligible institutions to ensure greater accountability for additional powers and funding.

The Scrutiny Protocol includes 18 key principles including: sustained appointments made on interest and skills; well-resourced training; inviting technical expertise; remuneration and status; participation in pre-policy and pre-decision scrutiny; regular performance monitoring including agreed outcomes; focused task and finish exercises; access to data; research; and analysis and strong relationship with audit committees.

Two further principles recommend a single committee structure and the introduction of a public Mayor's Question Time.

On 24 November 2023, the Corporate Scrutiny Committee established a Scrutiny Protocol Working Group to review the published Scrutiny Protocol and make recommendations on how the Combined Authority can implement the Scrutiny Protocol in full. The Working Group, which consists of members from all three existing Scrutiny Committees (Corporate, Economy and Transport), is currently scheduled to meet on 29 January 2024 and 16 February 2024 to consider and review feedback from stakeholders.

At the time of writing, a final report and recommendations was planned to be submitted to a March meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee for agreement, prior to submission to the 14 March 2024 meeting of the Combined Authority for approval.

Subject to findings of the review, the intention is to implement any proposals from June 2024.

3.5 West Yorkshire Partnership Principles

The first West Yorkshire Devolution Deal, agreed in 2020, was underpinned by a set of partnership principles which has supported the successful development of the partnership over the last three years. Since that time, the West Yorkshire partnership has grown and strengthened, demonstrated by our successful delivery of a range of ambitious programmes and initiatives which have resulted in better outcomes for local people, business, and place.

The strength of the West Yorkshire partnership of the five local authorities and the Combined Authority will underpin our ability to successfully deliver deeper devolution across the region.

Work to develop the West Yorkshire response to the Government's Level 4 Devolution Framework has provided a useful catalyst to review and refresh these principles, to support the next stage of the Combined Authority's devolution journey.

Revised partnership working principles developed in collaboration between the local authorities and Combined Authority are now set out below for consideration:

1. Collaboration and Co-production
2. Sovereignty
3. Subsidiarity and Devolution
4. Transparency and Accountability
5. Fairness and Equity
6. Flexibility and Funding Simplification

In seeking any further deepening of devolution in West Yorkshire, our approach recognises and acknowledges the parity of partnership, our strength as a collective of six and the lack of appetite for any proposal which diminishes the role or sovereignty of our constituent parts. We will work to these collectively agreed principles to ensure that moves towards deeper devolution across West Yorkshire support the achievement of our ambitions and deliver better outcomes for local people, businesses and communities across all areas of the region.

3.6 Next Steps

The West Yorkshire application letter was submitted to government by the West Yorkshire Mayor ahead of the government's deadline.

The known next steps are now as follows:

1. Consideration and ratification of the initial application is being carried out by each Constituent Council
2. Further discussions will commence with Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities and individual government departments to develop detailed proposals for each policy area. In particular, this will include consideration of whether

consultation or statutory changes are required to implement individual elements of the Framework.

3. Further detailed work on the Scrutiny Protocol and its application to West Yorkshire, following consideration of an initial paper on Level 4 Devolution by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 19 January 2024. As set out above, a Working Group has been convened to review the Scrutiny Protocol and its application, and, at the time of writing, recommendations are scheduled to be considered at the 14 March Combined Authority meeting for approval.

To ensure that work is undertaken at pace and that the Executive is informed at all points of the forthcoming devolution journey, regular updates will be provided as discussions with government departments takes place and work progresses.

4. FINANCIAL & RESOURCE APPRAISAL

There are no significant resource implications directly arising from this decision. If the decision is taken to proceed with Level 4 Devolution, this creates a financial impact at Local Authority level resulting from financial implications for the Combined Authority, including the move towards a DLUHC single settlement. It should be noted that the financial impact has been mitigated through the inclusion of a 'No Detriment Clause' within the agreement.

5. RISK MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

There are no significant risk or governance implications directly arising from this report. Risks will continue to be monitored as part of the discussions around potential new powers.

6. LEGAL APPRAISAL

Although there are no direct legal implications at this stage, statutory processes will need to be followed as appropriate to progressing different elements of the framework. This will become clearer upon advice from government as the process progresses.

Officers of the Combined Authority and partner councils are working collaboratively in assessing and taking forward any legal and statutory elements of this process.

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

7.1 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

There are no sustainability implications directly arising from this report, however further flexibilities made available to the Combined Authority through accessing Level 4 Devolution could support the Council's sustainability priorities.

7.2 TACKLING THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY IMPLICATIONS

There are no climate change implications directly arising from this report, however further flexibilities made available to the Combined Authority through accessing Level 4 Devolution could support the Council's climate and environment priorities.

7.3 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

There are no community safety implications directly arising from this report, however further flexibilities made available to the Combined Authority through accessing Level 4 Devolution could support the Council's Safer Communities priorities.

7.4 HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

There are no Human Rights Act implications directly arising from this report.

7.5 TRADE UNION

There are no Trade Union implications directly arising from this report.

7.6 WARD IMPLICATIONS

Throughout the engagement with the Combined Authority, we have emphasised the importance that one size doesn't fit all across West Yorkshire. We have agreed that powers, funding and flexibilities from the national level and afforded to West Yorkshire to enable economic, social and environmental transformation will be deployed at the lowest appropriate level. In addition, it has been formalised that that new regional powers will not take powers away from districts and individual area needs within districts. This will preserve our ability to make decisions in Bradford District based on our understanding of our different places.

7.7 AREA COMMITTEE LOCALITY PLAN IMPLICATIONS

There are no area committee plan implications directly arising from this report, however further flexibilities made available to the Combined Authority through accessing Level 4 Devolution could support Local Authorities to strengthen delivery of plans.

7.8 IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

There are no Children's Services implications directly arising from this report, however further flexibilities made available to the Combined Authority through accessing Level 4 Devolution could support the Council's ambitions for children to have the best start in life.

7.9 ISSUES ARISING FROM PRIVACY IMPACT ASSESMENT

There is no privacy impact that results from this decision. This will be reviewed as the elements of Devolution are progressed.

8. NOT FOR PUBLICATION DOCUMENTS

None.

9. OPTIONS

Option One - To formally ratify the Council's support for the Combined Authority's application to begin talks on adopting new Level 4 Devolution powers.

This option provides an important opportunity to increase the influence of Bradford over decisions that affect our district. It is, for example, a stepping stone to a 'single settlement' funding mechanism that would give us greater flexibilities over how we spend and invest devolution funding, allowing the Combined Authority to be more flexible, responsive, and strategic in achieving positive outcomes in West Yorkshire.

The partnership principles will help to shape how we put devolution into practice here in West Yorkshire. As part of the associated work, we have agreed that no organisation or part of West Yorkshire should experience a worsening position because of any new Level

4 powers and flexibilities. The principles will also enable the ongoing strengthening of collaboration and communication in West Yorkshire, which will only make us better in enabling and delivering for local residents.

Option Two – To request that the application for Level Four Devolution is withdrawn or paused.

This option prevents Bradford from benefiting in the ways created by Option One. It provides for maintain the status quo and therefore needs less resource to implement. This element comes with reputational risk as it would prevent all areas of West Yorkshire benefitting from Level Four Devolution.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended -

To formally ratify the Council's support for the Combined Authority's application to begin talks on adopting new Level 4 Devolution powers.

11. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Level 4 Devolution Framework - [Technical paper on Level 4 devolution framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

Appendix 2 – Scrutiny Protocol

Appendix 3 - West Yorkshire letter of application

12. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

There are no background documents.