

Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe
Chair
West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Wellington House
40-50 Wellington Street
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Friday 17 July 2020

Dear Cllr Hinchcliffe

Re: Public consultation on the West Yorkshire Devolution Deal

Yorkshire Universities' (YU) core mission is to strengthen the contribution of the higher education (HE) sector to place-based development, and to build strong and effective relationships with public, private and voluntary sector partners. Our members in West Yorkshire and the wider Leeds City Region play a vital role in the economic, social and cultural life of the region. In this letter, we provide some comments on the West Yorkshire Devolution Deal, which is out currently to public consultation.

We welcome the agreement reached between the government and political leaders in West Yorkshire on a new Devolution Deal. The Deal should provide West Yorkshire with new resources and flexibilities to address particular socio-economic opportunities and challenges that were evident prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and which have been amplified by the virus and the subsequent crisis. Through a process of genuine devolution, underpinned by a renewed partnership between the government and West Yorkshire, with local partners also working collaboratively in pursuit of common goals, there is a much better chance of building a more prosperous, resilient and healthier economy and society in the region.

The public consultation invites comments on specific elements of the Deal, which, whilst different to some other deals, do share common features. What is noticeable in the West Yorkshire Deal is the size of investment funding (i.e. £1.8 billion) compared to other city-regions. YU welcomes this level of investment, and the ambition and confidence it signifies. The resources present an opportunity to deliver interventions in projects and programmes that better-reflect local priorities. Importantly, the investment will attract and leverage private finance over the long-term. Greater fiscal autonomy to West Yorkshire will help the city-region, but we are in difficult economic circumstances at present, which are expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Tools such as external borrowing powers, strategic infrastructure tariffs and levies are important mechanisms for West Yorkshire to have at its disposal. Learning lessons from elsewhere, we would encourage the government to do all it can to make the practical use of these instruments as easy as possible for West Yorkshire. Similarly, there is an impetus on the government, which itself can borrow at historic low interest rates, to recognise that national public investment in

West Yorkshire is beneficial investment for the country as a whole. More national investment in West Yorkshire and the wider region should materialise as a result of the Devolution Deal.

The powers and resources in the Deal, in relation to transport, housing/planning and skills and employment, are policy areas that fit with existing devolved responsibilities in England. As we plan for recovery, YU members will have a critical role to play in training, re-training and skills development, working with the public sector, business and other providers, including FE colleges. As we face the prospect of increased unemployment, all parts of the education system will need to work collaboratively to support people back into work or education/training. We support the development of a new employment and skills plan for the city-region, which should identify, through a COVID-19 lens, the immediate and longer-term opportunities and challenges we face in getting more people into better quality, skilled jobs in the region. We would encourage and importantly support West Yorkshire to make the case to government for more national skills and employment programmes to be devolved to the region.

Finding an appropriate balance between devolution from government to West Yorkshire, and also convening partners to work on shared priorities at a broader geography beyond individual local authority areas, will be pivotal to the success of the Deal. Equally, the Devolution Deal and West Yorkshire institutions should commit to work, where possible, on a functional economic geography, especially in relation to York and North Yorkshire. YU welcomes the fact that the West Yorkshire Deal includes a commitment to work at a Yorkshire-wide level. There are real benefits in working collaboratively with other parts of Yorkshire, reflecting the realities of business operations, supply chains and labour markets – helping to strengthen connections in the region and across the north of England. These relationships will be vital as the region seeks to help key sectors, such as tourism and hospitality, manufacturing, culture and creative industries, and retail, recover from the economic shock caused by COVID-19. YU members have been actively supporting local businesses during the last few months, and our universities would expect to feature heavily in West Yorkshire's business growth hub and support arrangements working through the Devolution Deal.

The Devolution Deal provides surety to government that a decision-making framework will exist in West Yorkshire where public policy will be open to informed scrutiny. The Metro Mayor will be accountable directly to the people of West Yorkshire. He/she will need to act as an inclusive leader, championing the case for the city-region nationally and internationally, and drawing upon public, private and community institutions, including universities, for support. YU members look forward to working closely with the new Mayor when he/she is elected. Professor Shirley Congdon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bradford, is a Board member of the Leeds City Region Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The relationship between the Mayor and the LEP will evolve over time, but we would expect Board members of the LEP to continue to impart a wider business and civic dimension to the work of the Mayor and the Combined Authority.

The Devolution Deal references 'innovation', but the powers and funding for place-based innovation activities in West Yorkshire is limited at present. At YU, we have mapped our members' research capacities, and our analysis re-emphasises the presence of leading research and innovation (R&I) strengths within the region's academic institutions. Our work has informed the Leeds City Region Local Industrial Strategy. We believe these assets, alongside commercial and industry infrastructure, present a robust business case to government to direct more national R&I funding to Yorkshire. We would encourage the Devolution Deal to work closely with universities and business, through the new West Yorkshire Innovation Network, to recognise the

uplift in national public R&I investment, and to embrace the government's strategy to introduce a stronger place-sensitive approach to R&I. The challenge of driving increased demand for innovation amongst the private sector requires a system-based approach, and we believe that the West Yorkshire Devolution Deal has an important role to play.

We would also encourage any place-based funding and/or private investment directed through the Deal to be used to attract new investment to help West Yorkshire achieve its stated goal of being net-zero carbon by 2038. At the same time, as we have seen recently, a greater focus on improving overall well-being and productivity, especially in low paid industries and sectors, should underpin our ambition to build a more inclusive and equitable economy and society. YU's work with the Yorkshire and the Humber Academic Health Science Network and the NHS Confederation, illustrated in our new report, ['Levelling up Yorkshire and the Humber'](#), sets out a plan on how to embed health and well-being firmly within economic strategies and plans in the region. There is already a solid foundation for progressing this work in West Yorkshire, through the emergent strategic partnership between universities and the West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership. Here, YU members and partners are identifying how best to plan for sustainable recovery in the health and care sector, post-COVID, with the West Yorkshire Devolution Deal very much in mind.

Each day, YU members offer tangible examples of how 'civic universities' support local and regional development. For example, supporting the West Yorkshire Economic Recovery Plan, YU and its members have convened academic research, via a series of webinars, to examine specific policy questions posed by the West Yorkshire Economic Recovery Board. We believe, as we head towards the advent of a new Mayor in 2021, that there is an opportunity to create much stronger and collective research, analysis and policy capacity, supported by universities, which will help West Yorkshire formulate policy ideas and business cases for investment.

We wish the Devolution Deal every success and look forward to the creating a new partnership with the Mayor and Combined Authority, based upon shared priorities and the significant contributions that the HE sector makes to West Yorkshire.

Yours sincerely



Dr Peter O'Brien
Executive Director