

Tracy Brabin  
Mayor of West Yorkshire  
*Sent via email*

22 July 2025

Dear Mayor,

**Submission of Scrutiny Committee Conclusions and Recommendations – 2 May 2025**

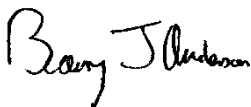
Please find enclosed the conclusions and formal recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Committee session held on 2 May 2025, at which you were in attendance to discuss *the role and impact of the mayor in the context of further devolution*.

The Committee's recommendations aim to help bridge the gap between the mayoralty, councils and councillors, and to strengthen the Mayor's ability to lead, influence and deliver through effective use of soft power. In short, the Committee is seeking to put *place before politics* and ensure the region better speaks with one voice when it matters most.

No response is required at the Combined Authority meeting on 24 July. However, in accordance with the Scrutiny Standing Orders, the Committee requests a formal written response within two months.

We look forward to receiving your response in due course.

Yours sincerely,



**Councillor Barry Anderson**  
Chair, West Yorkshire Combined Authority Scrutiny Committee

*CC: [Chief Executive, Mayor's Chief of Staff, AD Legal, Governance & Compliance, Scrutiny Officer]*

*Enclosures: Scrutiny Committee Conclusions & Recommendations to the Mayor (2 May 2025)*

## Conclusions and Recommendations: Scrutiny Committee, 2 May 2025

1. The item on the agenda was entitled: “Devolution and the role of the Mayor”. The Mayor and Chief Executive were present – and a short report presented.

### **Objective:**

2. The purpose of the item was to determine what impact the *position* of metro-mayor has made on the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) and WY region – successes, challenges and future expectations from further devolution.
3. The focus of the Committee’s questions was on: (1) specific success points, (2) identifying specific challenges, and (3) clarifications on decisions and programmes revealed throughout discussion.
4. Pre-agreed focuses included:
  - The Mayor’s ‘soft power’ agenda, ‘enabling’ role, ‘day-to-day’ activity – and examples of impact from these i.e. progressing challenging projects, securing additional funds.
  - The Mayor’s public profile and recognition, and issues most raised by the public (and members) with the Mayor direct - at MQTs, interviews, correspondence and casework.
  - The impact of metro-mayorality to-date, the potential impact of devolution on metro-mayoralities and regions, and mayor’s appetite for proposed new powers and functions.
  - Devolution’s aim for clarity in accountability for ‘the public pound’ and fragmented but overlapping public services i.e. health, skills, economy and transport.
  - The capacity and resource challenges impacting on metro-mayors and mayoral combined authorities’ (MCA) ability to deliver – and additional challenges possibly posed by more powers and functions.

### **Context:**

5. Role of Mayors and MCAs: The Mayor and MCA’s current role is more as a *funder* and *enabler* of partnership activity, than a direct deliverer of most services outside of transport – which is also fragmented between different responsible parties.
6. Change in national government: Realistically, the change in administration nationally led to change in how soft power is exercised by the current Mayor. There is less *public* criticism, due to additional *internal access* not available previously – due to the realities of party alignment.

7. Relationships with Ministers: The Mayor's relationships with former MP colleagues who are now ministers has been advantageous – but is limited by rules on conflicts of interest i.e. As a Leeds MP, the Chancellor must recuse herself on local schemes (e.g. WY mass transit).
8. 'Soft power' mechanism: The main mechanism for soft power influence for politicians, including the Mayor, is letters sent to ministers, which lead to formal (trackable) response and follow ups between appropriate counterparts on each side – officers and civil servants.
9. Public engagement: The issues most raised by constituents are transport related (i.e. buses, rail); partly because WYCA was the Integrated Transport Authority (ITA), and partly because it's the biggest productivity block. Others include public (and women's) safety, anti-social behaviour, and jobs/education. These are tracked internally.
10. Deputy Mayors and Commissioners: There are already several individuals acting as 'de-facto' commissioners (as envisioned in the White Paper). These include formal deputy mayors Cllr James Lewis and Alison Lowe (for policing) and "advisors" Mandy Ridyard (business) and "champions" Fatima Khan-Shah (inclusion). In addition, Council Leaders lead on key issues for the Mayor (i.e. Cllr Hinchcliffe on Transport) as portfolio holders. These – any future – appointments are made with careful consideration and subject to Combined Authority approval.

### **Successes:**

11. Mayor's Forum leadership: The national Mayor's Forum acting as a voice and platform for MCAs and metro-mayors is chaired by the Mayor of West Yorkshire – which provides a degree of profile, influence and leverage in the government's new liaison bodies for devolved English regions and national governments.
12. Notable partnership working: West Yorkshire is perceived by partners in private sector and government as putting emphasis on cooperative and partnership working across councils and sectors compared to other regions e.g. extensive housing and development cooperation noted recently by Developers Forum.
13. WYCA's influence on policy: The government seeks advice from the WYCA on devolution issues, seeing it as a mature and successful MCA doing well in certain key areas, such as skills and health. WYCA's advice is routinely taken on board including "The Power of General Competence" as integral to MCAs being able to flexibly operate locally.
14. Additional funds secured: Funding has come to West Yorkshire due to having a Mayor e.g. £3bn devolution deal in 2021, including Gainshare funding of £38m per annum for 30 years (25% capital and 75% revenue). This money can be spent at a combined authority's discretion. *The 2021 deal also included funding for: 'British Library North' (£25m), Mass Transit, £317m from Transforming Cities Fund (TCF), £3.2m to develop sites with Homes England, Bradford and Leeds rail station schemes, and £101m for flood risk management schemes.*

15. Securing major strategic decisions: The Mayor has kept the momentum going on lobbying for Mass Transit funds by convening the region's 24 MPs in parliament to act as one cross-party voice raising matters with ministers in parliament of benefit to the whole region through a "place before politics" approach. These interventions are tracked through WYCA's daily internal media scan.
16. Convening and resolution role: The Mayor convenes partners to tackle issues requiring cross-organisational collaboration to solve. One live example is intersection between employment, productivity and health, tackled with the ICB / ICP with an "economic activity" Trailblazer and local "Health Accelerator" programme. Other examples include a collaborative effort to secure Microsoft's investment in a 'super' data centre in Leeds and resolving bus driver shortage issues with colleges and bus companies.
17. Pan-Yorkshire cooperation: Some issues are cross-boundary with other MCA areas. The White Rose Agreement made up of the current Yorkshire Mayors (North, West, South) coordinates to commission work on issues of relevance to the entire region E.g. Lord Blunkett's rail review making recommendations on rail investment in Yorkshire. Representations are also made with neighbouring Greater Manchester.
18. Unlocking challenging projects: Despite not (yet) having planning powers, the Mayor has utilised devolved management of central government capital funds such as Brownfield Housing Fund (BHF) and formal partnerships with the planning councils and Homes England to help unlock difficult or stalled brownfield developments with viability issues.
19. Direct Mayoral decisions: Bus Franchising is one of the few direct mayoral functions and powers conferred by law for them to decide alone, through a statutory process. Despite this the Mayor made her decision on bus franchising in a formal CA meeting as a collaborative decision with council partners. The other, connected, direct mayoral power is the Local Transport Plan, which is expected to overlap considerably with bus franchising and mass transit to achieve the Mayor's goal of a fully integrated transport system.

### **Challenges:**

20. Measuring impact of 'soft power': It's difficult to measure success of the Mayor's lobbying and campaigning. Sometimes it's quantifiable i.e. a change in criteria for a capital fund (e.g. Brownfield Housing Fund) or securing funding for a particular project (e.g. British Library North). Other times, a national policy lobbied for is announced, but it can't be proven it was as a direct response to lobbying.
21. Public profile level: Metro-mayors derive legitimacy in being *directly* elected on a policy agenda and their level of public profile correlates with the level of impact they can make through soft power interventions. Despite effort and attention given to marketing and public relations, public recognition and knowledge of the Mayor and organisation is still less than desired – though people recognise the Mayor more than the organisation.

22. Politics and partisanship: Political perceptions can also impact on metro-mayors soft power ability, as they need to work in tandem with local councillors, many of whom may perceive the Mayor as being unapproachable due to their political persuasion. For many councillors this leaves the Mayor as a remote figure for them, seen closer to an MP or minister than a local leader.
23. Lack of direct mayoral power: The emphasis on soft power is necessary due to the lack of direct executive and delivery power for English metro-mayors. This remains very different from systems in comparable countries where regional leaders have far more executive power to manage public services and drive reform in their areas e.g. compared to the German federal or the French “prefecture” model. This means metro-mayors must rely far more on convening, enabling and lobbying to secure change.
24. ‘Accountability gap’: Gaps in accountability have been identified in situations where there’s no clear ‘owner’ and responsibility is shared between different organisations and partners. The public don’t care about technicalities of remits; they just want problems to be solved. In this environment, there is a growing pressure – and expectation - for metro-mayors to be ‘systems leaders’ by default for all matters within their territory, public or private. This de-facto role also comes with the challenge of ‘blame without power’, where mayors are blamed for matters (currently) outside their control e.g. bus fares, concessionary passes, bus routes. Mayors may also be reluctant to ‘step on toes’ and been seen to undermine remits of key partners; local council, central government agencies or transport operators.
25. ‘Scrutiny gap’: This fragmented system of accountability subsequently makes scrutiny of public services increasingly challenging. Projects and services are often jointly delivered. Without a clear accountable ‘owner’, it is harder to scrutinise and hold responsible parties to account for outcomes. Currently there is no one recognised body able to consider ‘Value For Money’ across the entire public sector in an area.
26. Perceptions on devolved powers: There is a strong perception locally that devolution is councils losing powers to MCAs, when in almost all cases it is powers going from ministries or government agencies going to regions via MCAs. E.g. On planning, local powers are not being taken over by MCAs but existing Homes England and ministerial powers may be devolved. While this means MCAs playing a role in planning, it is still devolution from central to local government (ministers to MCAs).
27. ‘Democratic deficit’: Concerns have been raised in some quarters about the possibility of the weakening of the link between metro-mayors and council leaders – and combined authorities and constituent councils – if the direction of travel is to a more “London model” with a Mayor supported by a cabinet of appointed “Deputy Mayors” leading portfolios. If enabled by further devolution, democratic safeguards would need to be considered to ensure checks and balances.
28. Not enough funding: Strategic priorities like mass transit and bus franchising are still not fully funded. There is a lack of available funding for mayors to implement their agenda. Gainshare is limited and doesn’t rise with inflation, losing

considerable value over time. The “Mayors Precept” is also very limited in size and scope. The Transport Levy depends on local authority conditions and approval. This means mayors are still reliant long-term on government funding, such as with mass transit.

29. Limitations on expected funding autonomy: There remains doubts as to whether further devolution and Integrated Settlement go far enough to allow MCA enough flexibility. The Integrated Settlement is much better than the status quo, but remains constrained into pots and thematic blocks, with details to be clarified on classification of funds on cross-cutting policy areas – a key MCA function.
30. Local autonomy vs national missions: While the standardisation of devolution as a consistent framework across England has its positives, and increasing devolving of funding authority and revenues powers is progress, the national government continues to give MCAs missions for them to deliver for national priorities, which can clash with the principle and goal of allowing regions to truly manage themselves according to their own priorities and needs to have a unique place and identity in a way they see fit.

#### **Further points of enquiry:**

31. That the Committee’s devolution working group could address further the following points:
- Risks and opportunities posed by further devolution.
  - Possible uses of the White Paper’s proposed “Right to Request” (powers) mechanism.
  - Potential challenges in organisational capacity and resource.
  - Ensuring strong democratic governance with new functions.
  - Lessons learned from other MCA areas.

#### **Recommendations:**

The challenges identified in this session are summarised as a need for greater clarity in accountability and greater engagement with councillors and the public in mayoral activity – and the recommendations seek to resolve them.

The recommendations arising from the **2 May 2025 Scrutiny Committee meeting** to the **Mayor of West Yorkshire** are:

##### **1. Devolution communications and leadership:**

**That the Mayor take ownership of, and a lead role in, comprehensively communicating devolution to councils, members and the public so they understand well and engage with it.**

##### **2. Tightening up councillor liaison:**

**That the Mayor strengthen communication links between the mayoralty and councillors by establishing a direct, priority line of communication (i.e. email)**

for councillors to raise queries, casework and petitions – and a commitment to respond quickly and report efficiency quarterly as a KPI.

**3. Improving councillor engagement:**

That the Mayor establish appropriate lines of communication, if technically feasible, so that councillors are made aware of Combined Authority projects and mayoral engagements in their areas for their knowledge, comment, support or participation.

**4. Evidencing “soft power” impact:**

That the Mayor maintain a monitor of the quantifiable outcomes arising from “soft power” activity (i.e. lobbying, trips, visits, interventions, convening etc) – to present in future reports to Committee for discussion and scrutiny.

**5. Engaging councillors in “soft power”:**

That the Mayor to provide councillors and other committee members with a list of funding and policy asks being made to government and partners, so that interested local councillors can support efforts in the interests of West Yorkshire and the “place before politics” principle.

**6. Monitor Mayor’s public profile:**

That the Mayor undertake an evaluation of the mayoralty and Combined Authority’s public profile to understand and bridge gaps in public participation and knowledge of decisions, activity and outcomes undertaken with their money, in their name.

**7. Bridging the accountability gap:**

That the partnership principles agreed between the Combined Authority and Councils are revisited if necessary to provide flexibility for the Mayor to intervene in *persistent, unresolved* local issues with no clear ‘owner’ that have an impact on West Yorkshire *as a whole* (i.e. fly tipping at a key visitor entry point).