

BLACKBURN AND DISTRICT TRADES UNION COUNCIL

Response to consultation the "Draft Proposal" for a Lancashire Combined County Authority

Blackburn and District Trades Union Council is a local Trade Union body, registered with the Trades Union Congress, comprising delegates from Trade Unions with members working or living in the Boroughs of Blackburn with Darwen and the Ribble Valley.

When it comes to the linked issues of devolution, regional economic development, the legacy of de-industrialisation, "left-behind" communities, and regaining economic growth the particular points to which we give emphasis are:

A)

That British governments consistently underestimate the scale of resources needed, and have failed to give sufficient weight, in particular, to the level of investment required to turn things around;

B)

That the habit of allocating money from a piecemeal confusion of different funding pots works against the implementation of stable medium-term strategies and creates a sort of "squawking chick" model, in which a lot of time, energy and focus is lost as areas "compete" for attention; and

C)

The one most important thing we need is a strong central government with the political will to raise and deploy the resources required and be much more actively involved in meaningful investments along, say, the French model.

See: ["Levelling up" - public investment needed to address geographic inequalities - Blackburn and District Trades Union Council \(bdtuc.co.uk\)](#) and [UK has under-invested to the tune of half a trillion pounds, or 30 Elizabeth lines, says IPPR | IPPR](#) and [German comparison shows government's plan to level up is inadequate \(northwestbylines.co.uk\)](#)

This context leads us to be generally quite underwhelmed by the recent mix of devolution plans - involving combined authorities and mayors - which claim to be amplifying local voices and control but which practically do little but reorganise the "squawking chick" nest and reflect a belief that bigger more centralised organisations can do better, even if they don't really represent much in terms of additional resources (mirroring the ICBs in healthcare).

Whilst the Combined County Authority (CCA) model does involve some "devolution" it also, from the local point of view, involves a new level of **concentration** in decision making, with the new "Authority" being a very small group of people (and the introduction of non-elected, albeit also non-voting <but how many votes will there be?>, members). It is difficult to see this unequivocally as *"decision making brought closer to communities, increasing the visibility of those decisions"* (p28 of Draft Proposal).

The current Government, it seems to us, puffs up the "achievements" of local advocates to deflect attention from the threadbare nature of delivery across the piece. The "Shared Prosperity Fund", for instance, was presented as replacing the money that British regions used to access from the EU for purposes such as economic development and regeneration, and every grant was accompanied with hullabaloo, but for the first two of the three years spending announced the amount handed out only equated to EU funding if it was added to the amount of EU money that still being spent on Britain up to the end of year 2023-24.

The "Lancashire Devolution Deal" hardly seems likely to break this mould. We can see the temptation of being a bigger "squawking chick", but even any gains from this are likely to be temporary and marginal as the community of "devolved" local voices grows and people begin to realise that the new institutions represent just a rationalisation of old practices and structures still largely tied into a nationally defined agenda.

Rather, however, than respond to the consultation over the "Draft Proposal" either for or against we want to concentrate on highlighting some potential issues that may need addressing if the plans go forward.

1)

The "Draft Proposal" says (p6) that Lancashire is a *"coherent economic area"*. This is a point of view we expressed some reservations about in our response to the "call for evidence" made by the Independent Economic Review in 2021. It seems to us that East Lancashire, at least, has some distinct forward requirements which we believe already struggle to gain recognition, whether in the context of "Lancashire" or, more widely, "the North".

In 2021 we said the following to highlight some of the issues we were thinking about:

- *"The relative level of importance given to the issue of "extending", or "finishing", the M65. This gets a mention in the "Transport for the North" "Strategic Programme; Outline Case" for the "Central Pennines Strategic Development Corridor", which says (3.46) "There is a need to improve east-west connectivity (road and rail) between the North's towns and cities within the Corridor. Road connections are variable in quality. For example, the M65 terminates at Colne to the west of the Pennines, with onward connectivity to Yorkshire largely via a network of lower standard roads which lack coherence, capacity and resilience". But the matter is weakly put – the point being to link particularly with Bradford, Leeds, the M1 and Hull – and it then subsequently seems to somewhat drift from the Programme's attention. The "Yorkshire Post", on Saturday 23rd January 2021, reports that: "Transport for the North (TfN) has told Ministers that there should be no further work on developing plans for dual carriageways between Sheffield and Manchester or further north between East Lancashire and North Yorkshire".*
- *The failure of the area to feature in any of the significant "Transport for the North" plans to improve northern rail connections. Specific considerations here are the lack of direct links to Liverpool or to Manchester airport. Supporters of the Skipton East Lancs Rail Action Partnership argue that their proposals will also open up other future projects, such as the building of a strategically placed freight terminal at the former Huncoat Power Station site near Accrington.*

- *Until the recent announcement that UCLAN intends to broaden its footfall in Burnley to 4000 places by 2025 the aspiration to expand Higher Education provision in East Lancashire has been largely unfulfilled. We don't have a full picture of the extent of the Burnley proposals, but the main question we would ask of them is whether they would greatly expand STEM provision. We have looked, for instance, at the degree-level courses offered by the University Centre at Blackburn College, and our estimate is that there are only 13 out of 113 one would define as STEM courses and that these are predominantly engineering. We appreciate that there will be other higher-level qualifications not captured by this, but when one considers that the issue of enrolment to the University Centre has been identified as a problem one wonders whether support for it to increase its STEM provision might not be a way forward of mutual benefit.*
- *The loss of Civil Service jobs. We think we are correct in saying that two HMRC offices – in Accrington and in Blackburn – have been “lost” in recent years, whilst there has been a loss of staff numbers at Melbourne House in Accrington and at Cardwell Place in Blackburn. The recent “Northern Policy Foundation” publication “Bursting the Westminster Bubble: How moving departments can help level-up” put forward proposals for relocating Civil Service jobs and Departments – but it allocated nothing at all to East Lancashire!”*

Can any assurances be given that the proposed Combined County Authority (CCA) will be any more sensitive to the needs of East Lancashire than would be either the status quo or other possible alternatives (such as promotion of East Lancashire itself as a "city region")?

2)

On p28 of the Draft Proposal it says that a Lancashire CCA will have a "*greater say on where to spend investment*". We are not sure what is meant by this.

What the "devolution" part of the proposal seems to entail is that certain funds that would otherwise be spread by government across Council areas by central government decision will now go as single payments to the CCA, which will then take on the responsibility of distributing the money. Having a CCA will not increase the total amount available, but it will mean that it can be spent, if the CCA so desires, in a more concentrated fashion.

The money involved seems to be:

Influence over the distribution of the "Shared Prosperity Fund": (p30)
"Government's expectation is that delivery responsibility for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), a flexible funding pot, will be aligned with devolution deal responsibilities. This would mean that the proposed CCA could have such responsibilities from 2025/26. In carrying out this role, the proposed CCA and the constituent councils will work closely with the Lancashire District Leaders Forum in an advisory capacity".

Control over the "transport" monies released as a consequence of abandoning HS2: (p32) *"The proposed CCA will receive a proportion of the £2.5 billion announced as part of Network North to transform local transport in areas in the North outside of the big city regions. • The proposed CCA will receive a proportion of the £770 million of funding for Bus Service Improvement Plans in the North. • The proposed CCA will receive a proportion of the £3.3 billion funding to fix potholes in the North", and*

Control over the allocation of some "education" money: (p31) *"devolution of adult education, the core Adult Education Budget, and the opportunity to further refine the Local Skills Improvement Plan. Funding for Free Courses for Jobs will also be devolved and will be ring-fenced".*

Was nothing to change, some of these funds would be money that the constituent Councils would "bid" for. Is it envisaged that they will still be encouraged to submit applications and proposals for their areas, or will the new framework mean that allocation will be much more a matter of what the CCA sees as being the priorities?

We do not understand how extensive the devolution is when it comes to the education monies. Does this refer specifically just to the Education and Skills Funding Agency AEB? Even if this is the case, we do not know exactly who gets how much currently. Could this have an impact on FE Colleges?

3)

The Draft Proposal answers the question of who will be involved in developing regional industrial and economic strategy once the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership (LEP) reaches the end of the road.

The LEP itself had represented a narrowing of the range of interests involved in this area, being particularly notable for lacking any Trade Union involvement

whatsoever. We had hoped that subsequent arrangements might lead to a review and a widening of engagement, but we read the Draft Proposal as indicating entirely the opposite. No anticipated composition for the Business Board is given, but the name is sufficient to imply that it will represent exclusively employer interests. The private sector is, indeed, to be embodied in the governance structure.

Would the CCA be prepared to consider either widening the composition of the Business Board, or having a Social Well-being Board, of equivalent status to the Business Board, with a responsibility for providing input on issues such as living standards and workforce representation?

4)

The £20m grant that comes as a sort of reward for setting up the CCA is to be spent as follows:

£6m capital investment to create an Innovation Hub of international excellence at Samesbury Enterprise Zone;
£6m for the Blackburn Technology Innovation Quarter;
£2m for the Cosy Homes in Lancashire domestic retrofit scheme; and
£6m capital investment for a Low Carbon Data Demonstrator Centre at Blackpool Enterprise Zone.

So far as we can tell, these are projects that existing constituent Councils have been working to realise and take forward.

What, though, will be the scope for Councils to have and promote such ideas in future? Will everything be drawn into the CCA orbit, or will local Councils still be expected to pursue plans which might then look to the CCA for support as well as to other sources of investment?

5)

On p35 of the "Draft Proposal" it says: *"The proposal would give Lancashire the ability to exercise compulsory purchase powers, to help drive regeneration and build more affordable homes, boosting supply and bringing down the cost of newly built dwellings"*, but on p45 it says *"the exercise of compulsory purchase functions is subject to the consent of all the local planning authorities affected"* - so it is hard to see what the CCA will do that an existing Council could not, or what the CCA could do unless the affected existing Council is in agreement. We presume, in any case, that the power to grant planning permission for any

proposed housing development will continue to reside with the existing District or Unitary authority?

By email to: Lancashiredevolution@ipsos.com

15.01.2024