

Devolution for the Heart of the South West FAQ Update July 2016

What is devolution?

Devolution is the redistribution of powers and funding from national Government to groups of local authorities. The Government wants devolution to deliver improved productivity, a more skilled workforce, more housing and reduced public sector costs.

Why is it important?

Devolution gives us freedom to make decisions more locally than ever before.

This will mean we can be very precise in how and where we spend money, and focus closely on the problems in our area. Greater local control over the decisions that impact on all our lives gives us the chance to improve our roads, railways, and digital connectivity, to create jobs and build homes where they are needed, and give more support to grow our economy.

A single voice from 23 different organisations across Devon and Somerset is a very powerful voice. Decision making, controlled and delivered locally, will help us to build on our achievements so far and lead to economic growth, savings and efficiencies, a more resilient and connected area, and increased productivity.

What will a devolution deal do and how will it benefit people?

Until a deal has been signed we cannot be certain what powers, responsibilities and funds we will be given. We are working to agree a devolution deal that gives us powers and funds over things like:

- **Transport** – having a greater say in infrastructure investment such as road and rail improvement will help improve access to work, training and essential services for our residents and businesses.
- **Connectivity** – we are pursuing a commitment to 100% superfast broadband coverage across the Heart of the South West.
- **Learning and Skills** – helping people, especially young people, to develop skills they need to get work in our area.
- **Business Support** – having the freedom to join up a range of Government agencies locally to provide a better, more coordinated offer to businesses.
- **Employment Support** – we want to influence the new Department for Work and Pensions Health and Work Programme and other Government initiatives where they have not been devolved to us.
- **Land and Housing** – greater influence over the use or disposal of central Government land and assets, and working with Government on planning reforms. We want greater powers to build the homes our local people need, and to support our economy as it grows.
- **Health and wellbeing** – making the connection between jobs, connectivity, skills and wellbeing will help our population to age well and become healthier. Our proposals have a direct relationship with the wellbeing of our communities, especially mental health and increasing the numbers of people able to access employment.

- **A new Productivity Plan** – this new plan will explain how we will deliver greater prosperity. It will be an overarching, strategic document which our devolution deal will feed into. A key objective will be improved skills and employment prospects particularly for our younger population and people who have had difficulty finding work.

What is a Combined Authority?

Combined Authorities are a new way for local authorities to work together on key strategic functions that cross geographic council boundaries. They allow councils and partners to do things which are better done together rather than separately. Ours will be responsible for delivering the devolution deal.

Combined Authorities are legal bodies with powers of decision making granted by Parliament. Examples include transport, regeneration and skills. Members of the Combined Authority are democratically elected Councillors from partner councils.

Government is offering to devolve powers and funds to our area. For this to happen we must demonstrate strong governance arrangements and in this instance we have proposed a Combined Authority.

Why are we looking to create one?

Partners in the Heart of the South West believe that a Combined Authority is the most democratic, cost-effective way to deliver a devolution deal for our area, and work with our neighbours. Devon and Somerset have much in common and our economic futures are bound together. We have similar challenges but also know that some areas are more successful than others.

A Combined Authority is an efficient option: it is transparent, publicly accountable and gives a voice to all partners.

Why this particular geography?

A Combined Authority is required to cover an area that makes sense economically. For example an area within which many people commute to work or where there are strong links between local businesses and communities.

A Combined Authority also needs to be big enough to pull together the resources needed to support economic development. Our Combined Authority is large enough to take advantage of economies of scale, and the Government agree that our size and membership is the right one. A strong argument in our favour is the common boundary between our proposal and the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership through which the local authorities and business representatives already work together in many of the areas covered by the proposal.

Will there be an elected mayor?

We do not believe an elected mayor is necessary for our plans and do not propose one. Also, the Government has told us that because of our large geography and its rural-urban make-up an elected mayor is not a priority at this time.

Who will hold the Combined Authority to account?

The elected members of the participating local authorities and partners will hold the Combined Authority to account.

The Combined Authority will also have at least one scrutiny committee and an audit committee. These committees will scrutinise the Combined Authority in public and in the same way as they do for your council. The work (including decisions) of the Combined Authority will be transparent and subject to local authority access to information requirements and Freedom of Information rules.

Would devolution save money?

One of our objectives is to make the public sector more efficient and save money. With less bureaucracy and more economies of scale, devolution will reduce costs.

The Government expects devolution deals to be fiscally neutral – it does not want to spend any more money than it already spends. But our communities should benefit from economies of scale, delivering better outcomes.

How can I make my voice heard? What consultation will there be?

To make comments or find out more about our emerging Combined Authority and devolution deal please contact your local authority in the first instance or address any queries to your council Leader or local Councillor.

There will be full stakeholder and public consultation on the draft devolution deal once it is produced, including proposals for the Combined Authority.

Finally, all member councils will carry out local consultation as part of their own decision-making when approving the final deal.

What are the timescales for creating it?

The experience of other parts of the country is that timescales can be changeable. However our hope is that we will agree a deal through the 2016 Government's Autumn Statement and set up the Combined Authority by 2018. There is an option to establish a shadow Combined Authority in advance of 2018 if all of the councils decide to do so.

What is important is that we get the best deal we can, so if timescales need to change then we will do that but keep you informed.

What difference has the vote to leave the European Union made to our plans?

It is still very early to know what the precise impact will be and we are actively watching events as they unfold. What is clear is that we still have challenges in the Heart of the South West – poor connectivity, skills shortages, a need for more homes and jobs – which must be addressed.

Getting additional powers and funding will put us in a better place to deal with challenges, and take advantage of the opportunities that may arise from our exit from the European Union.

We are working with Government to understand the implications of the leave vote - in the meantime partners have agreed to press ahead with devolution for the Heart of the South West.