



Three policy priorities for the new West Yorkshire Metro Mayor

Introduction

In May 2021, voters in the West Yorkshire Combined Authority area will head to the polls for the first time to elect a metro mayor. The devolution deal will allow the area to unlock £1.8 billion of long-term funding alongside greater powers on adult education and skills, transport, housing, and finance.

The West Yorkshire Combined Authority includes the primary urban areas of Bradford, Huddersfield (comprising the local authority of Kirklees), Leeds and Wakefield as well as the local authority of Calderdale. More data on the West Yorkshire economy and how it ranks compared to other metro mayor areas can be found in the [factsheet](#) and, for the individual cities and large towns in the area, in [City Monitor](#), in the [High Streets Tracker](#), and the [UK Unemployment Tracker](#).



This briefing sets out three policy priorities for the mayor after the election to address the biggest issues facing the West Yorkshire economy. Beyond the immediate challenge of recovering from Covid-19, which has seen unemployment-related benefit claims increase by 53,000, they are: **investing in adult education and skills**, using new powers to **introduce congestion charges and bus franchising** as well as focusing on **improving city centre office space**.

Policy 1: Invest in adult education and skills to open up opportunities and increase productivity in the combined authority

- **Target support for adult education in areas where it is most needed.**
Bradford and Wakefield need the most support for adult education. The mayor should also establish a UCAS-like portal for apprenticeships, similar [to that created by the mayor of the Liverpool City Region](#).
- **Use influence to shine a spotlight on underperformance in education.**
Children’s learning is a major priority in West Yorkshire, and the mayor, despite not having direct power over schools, can do a lot using their ‘soft power’ to highlight this issue and support extracurricular learning.

The West Yorkshire Combined Authority makes a significant contribution to the national economy of more than £55 billion a year. However, productivity sits below the national average, which is in part a result of challenges around education and skills.

In Bradford and Wakefield in particular, the key issue is the lack of skills among workers and poor GCSE performance. While this is a problem across the combined authority, it is a particular issue in Bradford – despite making improvements over the past decade, it still has a share of people with no qualifications that sits six percentage points above the national average. Educational attainment for those with qualifications is an even greater issue with the share of the population achieving good GCSEs in the city sitting 10 percentage points below the national average. Improving in these two areas will be a key first step in improving the productivity of the combined authority by allowing people to access the employment opportunities that it offers as well as attracting new businesses.

The new mayor should approach these issues in two ways. The first is to use the new £63 million Annual Adult Education Budget to target support towards Bradford and Wakefield where it is most needed. The challenge in these places is to upskill those who may not have access to or information about the courses that are on offer. Support should therefore focus on ensuring that the courses available are as accessible as possible, for example by expanding the option of evening and weekend classes as well as shorter and more informal qualifications. In addition to this, providing more guidance and information on the courses and options on offer may help to increase uptake. To help this the new mayor should consider rolling out a system similar to [the UCAS-like portal Be More that the Liverpool City Region put in place for apprenticeships](#).

The second is to use their ‘soft power’ to shine a spotlight on the relative underperformance of pupils at a GCSE level. While the Mayor will not have formal powers in this area, the office will bring with it influence to help shape school performance. In policy terms, this can be done by extending support for extracurricular learning through replicating programmes such as [Sheffield’s Children’s University](#) as championed by neighbouring mayor Dan Jarvis for his city region, which gives credits for certain activities undertaken outside of school time.

Policy 2: Implement congestion charges, bus franchising and clean air zones to reduce congestion and pollution and make the road system more efficient

- **Introduce a congestion charge and workplace parking levies in Leeds city centre as well as clean air zones elsewhere.** By reducing excessive demand for car travel into Leeds city centre, demand for public transport and urban mobility will improve.
- **Introduce London-style bus franchising across the combined authority.** The mayor should use the powers of the Bus Services Act and the money unlocked by the National Bus Strategy to build a public transport network that works for the local economy and increases bus passengers.
- **Funnel funds raised back into the wider Metro system.** The revenues raised by these measures should then be used by the mayor to support an expansion of public transport in West Yorkshire.

Poor air quality and congestion are both problems across West Yorkshire. Congestion is a particular problem in Leeds with the city having one of the most congested roads outside of London. And Leeds and Wakefield are in the top 20 for having dangerously high levels of NO₂ on a per capita basis, with transport being a key contributor. While congestion and air pollution temporarily fell during the pandemic, Centre for Cities' research has shown that despite the restrictions on movement they have already reached pre-pandemic levels.¹

The new mayor should introduce a congestion charge and workplace parking levy in Leeds city centre to tackle rising congestion and pollution. The West Yorkshire Combined Authority's Transport Strategy 2040 recognises that congestion is an issue across the combined authority area, but focuses more on the need to improve road capacity and less on making the existing road network more efficient. On pollution, although Leeds local authority has made positive strides in encouraging a switch to cleaner vehicles, both private and public, this will not have reduced the PM_{2.5} emissions from the natural wear and tear of brakes, tyres and road surfaces. Introducing a congestion charge and workplace parking levy would tackle both of these issues head on with special consideration given as to whether the most polluting vehicles – whether by engine type or weight – should be charged more. In London, [research shows that the congestion charge reduced traffic in the city by 21 per cent and the workplace parking levy in Nottingham was effective at reducing congestion and pollution by increasing bus and tram use.](#)²

¹ Quinio V and Enenkel K (2020), How have the Covid pandemic and lockdown affected air quality in cities?, London: Centre for Cities

² Clayton N and Jeffrey S and Breach A (2017) Funding and financing inclusive growth in cities, London: Centre for Cities

The new mayor should also work with local councils to introduce clean air zones across the combined authority. Bradford has made positive strides in this respect, having recently announced a clean air zone to be implemented in the city. Other local authorities should follow suit. Making these changes should be done as the combined authority refreshes the West Yorkshire Low Emission Strategy that comes to an end this year.

The congestion charge should be complemented by improved bus services and the best way to achieve this would be through the mayor introducing a London-style franchising system. Franchising would allow the mayor to run the bus network for the benefit of local people and the entire local economy, and this is why Greater Manchester is pressing ahead with its own plans. This would improve the quality and coverage of services, allow integrated ticketing to be introduced so a single fares system covers the whole network, and unlock funding announced in the new National Bus Strategy that is tied to progress on this issue.

The mayor should recycle funds raised from a congestion charge and workplace parking levy in Leeds back into the wider public transport system so that the rest of the combined authority area can benefit as Leeds grows. Extra funds could be allocated to the Metro system, which aims to coordinate the different modes of public transport in the combined authority area. It could also be used to maintain and keep fares low on any potential West Yorkshire Mass Transit System, if it is rolled out. These improvements will be essential to counteract the fall in bus ridership of nearly 44 million users over the past decade, while high dependency on private vehicles has risen still higher. Bringing in these changes should allow the mayor to match the commitment made by Leeds City Council to double the number of bus users by 2029 in place of the combined authority's current 25 per cent target.

Policy 3: Supporting city centres in West Yorkshire

- Encourage people back into Leeds city centre when it is safe to do so.** Like other large cities across the country, Leeds has faced a shock to city centre commuting and spending in the pandemic. The new mayor should work with government on a campaign to reassure people that city centres will be safe once the pandemic is over.
- Allow growth in Leeds through creating more high-quality office space.** It is not obvious that the working patterns brought about by the pandemic will be permanent, or if they are that the need for city centre office space will decline. The success of Leeds city centre supports the rest of West Yorkshire and its continued success is key for nearby towns and cities.
- Kickstart the city centres in the rest of the combined authority area by replacing industrial and retail space with high quality office space.** The other city centres in the combined authority area are over-reliant on shopping and do not have the commercial space needed to support their local economies. The new mayor should pursue their redevelopment, and help them shift towards a balanced mix of commercial space.

City centres are crucial for driving the economy by providing jobs for both high-paid office commuters and for those working in local services jobs that rely on these commuters for footfall. Despite the economic impact of the pandemic, [Centre for Cities' research suggests that city centres will continue to play an important role, and with the right support, should bounce back quickly to continue playing this role in the future.](#)³

The new mayor should encourage people back into the city centres when it is safe to do so. As shown in Centre for Cities' research for Core Cities UK, Leeds city centre, like that of many other large cities, has been badly hit by a [drop in footfall](#) as those who could shifted to working from home.⁴ The knock-on effect of this is that local services businesses have been left high and dry without the commuters on whose custom they are usually rely. The new mayor should work with the Government's [Urban Centre Recovery taskforce](#) to launch an advertising campaign to encourage the return of city centre workers when it is safe to do so. This should be similar in scale and scope to the campaign that originally discouraged people away from city centres.

In the longer term, the mayor should allow Leeds to grow its footprint of high-quality office and amenity space in the city centre. The growth of Leeds city centre should sit at the heart of plans for the combined authority to increase productivity, and the Spatial Development Strategy should reflect this. Centre for Cities' [research](#) has shown that the success of local city centres supports prosperity in nearby towns. In practice, this will mean allowing Leeds city centre to expand, as demand for employment space in Leeds grows. The mayor should explore development opportunities near the city centre to replicate the ongoing success of the Southbank development.

³ Breach A (2021) Core Cities: the impact of the first wave of Covid-19, London: Centre for Cities

⁴ Breach A (2021) Core Cities: the impact of the first wave of Covid-19, London: Centre for Cities

In other cities and towns in the combined authority area, the mayor should focus on kick-starting growth in centres by making sure that the office space on offer is as attractive as possible. Centre for Cities' research shows that the centres of Wakefield, Huddersfield and Bradford are dominated by retail and industrial space, while office space plays a comparatively smaller role. For example, while 50 per cent of the average city centre's commercial property is office space, only 21 per cent is in Wakefield, as 29 per cent is industrial.

Of the office space that is available in these places, a smaller than average share is of high quality, and vacancy rates for high street uses like shops and restaurant space are above average. Shifting away from having high shares of industrial and retail will be key for these places to reach their potential by making city centres more attractive to do business. The new mayor should support additional high quality, small city centre office projects such as the Bradford City Hub and The Media Centre in Huddersfield, and use the Spatial Development Strategy to prioritise further remodelling of these centres.

The importance of the mayor

The election of a mayor will provide two main things for West Yorkshire. The first is extra powers and budgets to help support future growth of the economy. And the second is the role of advocate for the area in dealings with both national government and potential international investors. A number of other city regions, most notably Greater Manchester, have benefited from this for a number of years now. May's election provides the opportunity for West Yorkshire to catch up.

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