

## **A Business Perspective on the West of England Devolution Deal**

I am speaking on behalf of most of the business community, the four major business organisations and as former Chair of the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership.

Bath & North East Somerset is a significant contributor to the West of England's very successful economy. But we face significant challenges:

- Declining productivity growth
- A widening skills gap
- Poor transport infrastructure
- Inadequate broadband, particularly in rural areas
- A shortage of affordable housing and housing in general

Meeting these challenges will require significant investment and additional powers which will only be available through the devolution deal. The West of England offer is the best of the proposed deals, equivalent to £815/head – the next highest is Tees Valley £675/head – the much vaunted Greater Manchester deal was only £329/head. And the West of England deal is 50% capital and 50% revenue funding. So it's an exceptionally good deal.

For BANES this means the ability to tackle rural broadband, build an A46/A36 link, improve road infrastructure in Norton Radstock and much more. Because the money can be used to support borrowings investment can be front-end loaded.

The additional powers that will be devolved from central government include powers over bus services and transport, adult education and skills, and speeding up the delivery of new housing. All things that will make a real difference.

In return for the deal Government are asking for a nominated individual to be accountable and that individual has to be elected and have 'mayor' in the title. This is causing much angst, but it is not a reason to say no to a very attractive deal.

Let's lay the myths

- Myth – other places have had a deal without a Metro Mayor  
Not so – any deals with funding have required a Metro Mayor
- Myth – Return to Avon  
Not so – new powers will come down from Westminster
- Myth – single council (Bristol) takeover  
Not so – each of the four councils retains their current powers
- Myth – Metro Mayor can act independently  
Not so – decisions by Metro Mayor require support of at least two council leaders

BANES, Bristol, North Somerset and South Glos have worked closely together over the last 5 years on precisely the areas covered by the deal. The opportunity now is to build on that joint working with additional funding and devolved responsibilities. The business community will be very concerned BANES is not in the premier league of devolution deals and empowered to deliver sustainable growth and development that will benefit everyone – particularly those in disadvantaged communities within our area. We must take this opportunity.