**Deep Dive: The English Devolution White Paper – provisions and implications**

January 2025

### **Introduction**

For Government, the primary purpose of the English Devolution White Paper (EDWP) is to ‘complete’ the devolution map across England and create a greater degree of uniformity in the roles of different tiers of local government. This multilateral approach charts a different course to the approach to English devolution since 2015, one that has been characterised by bilateral ‘devolution deals’ with individual places and Government departments to establish Combined Authorities, release funding, provide powers and pilot new initiatives one at a time. The standardisation of powers and ambition of full coverage of devolved authorities, if implemented, is the type of model we see in other, decentralised countries like France, Germany and elsewhere.

The English Devolution White Paper (EDWP) is a precursor to the English Devolution Bill, which we expect to be laid before Parliament this year. For Government, the EDWP is an important step in signalling their intent for the eventual Bill and gauging the level of support for different proposals that require will require legislation.

Below is a summary of the key, new, proposals in the EDWP from the perspective of the West Midlands. There are a number of proposals in the EDWP that are new for other places, but that we secured in our 2023 Trailblazer Deeper Devolution Deal and have been implementing since then.

**Governance and structure**

* **New categories of sub-national government:** the EDWP proposes two new categories for sub-national government: 1) **Strategic Authorities (SAs)** — currently known as Combined Authorities, Combined County Authorities, the Greater London Authority; and 2) **Principal Authorities** – currently known as Local Authorities. The stated goal of the EDWP is for all areas of England to be covered by a Strategic Authority.
* **Types of Strategic Authority:** There are three proposed types of Strategic Authority, a term that covers three sub-categories of institution:
  + Foundational Strategic Authority – (currently) non-mayoral CAs, non-mayoral CCAs and local authorities designated as a Strategic Authority without a mayor would automatically be considered a Foundational Strategic Authority.
  + Mayoral Strategic Authority – all MCAs, CCAs, the GLA and MCCAs would automatically become Mayoral Strategic Authority.
  + Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities – those that meet specified criteria may be designated Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities and granted the highest level of devolution, such as access to the Integrated Settlement, alongside being able to propose additional functions to be added to the Devolution Framework. The West Midlands is in this category.
  + **Defined areas of competence for each type of SA:** The EDWP states a ‘devolution framework’ to set out the functions for each type of SA. These functions would be conferred automatically, meaning SAs cannot ‘mix and match’ the functions they take on.
* **Unitarisation**: Local government structures would be simplified. Areas with two tiers of local government could submit plans to merge into **single unitary authorities**, each serving around **500,000 residents**. These proposals are likely to impact the region’s non-constituent local authorities.
* **Decision-making**: For the areas of competence established for each type of SA, votes at Boards would **mostly require a simple majority,** instead of a two-thirds majority, as is currently stipulated by CA Standing Orders. This would create parity between voting on Local Authority and Combined Authority Boards if implemented. Some functions would be **reserved for the Mayor.**
* **Performance monitoring:** The Office for Local Government (OfLog) set up by the previous governmnet will be wound down. The government’s intention is to create a different model of performance monitoring for local and regional government, building out from the Integrated Settlement outcomes framework.
* **Accountability:** The EDWP recognises the variance in different MCA accountability models and expresses a desire for consolidation and standardisation.

**Finance**

* **Local Government Finance**: The EDWP proposes longer-term funding settlements to be introduced for local government, reducing reliance on **ring-fenced grants**.
* **Mayoral Precept**: Mayors would gain powers to use their existing **precepting** powers to fund a broader range of responsibilities.
* **Integrated Settlement (IS)**: A **single funding pot** will give EMSAs greater control over how money is spent. This will begin in the WMCA and GMCA from 1 April 2025.

**Transport**

* **Devolution of consents:** The EDWP proposes the removal of requirements for separate Secretary of State consents for dropped kerbs, conversions of footpaths to cycle tracks and others. Approvals would likely reside with local highway authorities instead (all of the constituent authorities are local highway authorities).
* **A statutory role for Mayors in governing, managing, planning, and developing the rail network:** The EDWP has announced plans to provide a statutory role in the rail network for Mayors, with the precise model of Mayoral involvement yet to be defined.
* **Right to request control of train services and stations:** Mayors will have some ability to decide how often trains run, where they go and how to improve accessibility and connectivity in and around their stations has been proposed. This could lead to better links to bus and tram services at the right times. Much depends on future stations frameworks to be set out in future either in the Railways Bill or elsewhere by the Great British Rail Transition Team.
* **Consultation on moving taxi licensing to CA level:** The EDWP proposes to consult on moving responsibility for taxi licensing schemes from local authorities to Strategic Authorities.

**Skills and employment**

* **A role in 16-19 education:** Government aims to work with MSAs to use their convening powers and influence to secure work and industry placements with local employers that relate to 16-19 education, training and career paths.
* **Employment Support:** Greater alignment between local and Jobcentre Plus boundaries is welcome, adding to what was already stated in the Get Britain Working White Paper about a larger role for SAs in co-design and delivery.
* **Local Skills Improvement Plans:** In relation to LSIPs, which articulate the skills needs of an area reflective of its economic context, a joint ownership model with employer representative bodies (for example, Chambers of Commerce) has been proposed.

**Economy**

* **Export Growth Programme:** This would see the roll-out of a tailored export growth programme for high-growth businesses in the West Midlands, with a pilot in the North of England.
* **Small Business Strategy:** Government intends to publish a Small Business Strategy later this year. The strategy will address how national, local, and devolved business support schemes can align most effectively, as well as outlining how a new Business Growth Service would work. The region will have the opportunity to help shape this.

**Housing and Regeneration**

* **Spatial Development Strategy:** Mayors would be given a duty to put together a Spatial Development Strategy – as of yet, the relevant geography for the proposed Spatial Development Strategy is unknown.
* **Development Management Powers:** Mayors would be given development management powers to intervene in planning applications of strategic importance, bringing powers in line with the Mayor of London.
* **Ability to raise a Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy to fund strategic infrastructure:** This would be akin to the levy whichhelped to fund Crossrail in London and would provide SAs with an additional revenue stream to help fund the infrastructures required for spatial plans.

**Net Zero and Environment**

* **Net Zero and Environment**: As well as confirmation of the inclusion of retrofit funding in the Integrated Settlement, the EDWP offers a strategic role in the delivery of the Local Power and Warm Homes Plans; alongside a (yet to be defined) green jobs and skills coordination role, recognition of SAs’ role in Local Nature Recovery Strategies and local area energy planning, and powers over heat network coordination. The EDWP also proposes to add a mandate for SAs to act strategically in relation to the ‘environment and climate change’.

**Public Service Reform**

* **Police and Fire**: Mayors would take on responsibility for **police and fire governance** where the boundaries of these and SAs align, from the next election.
* **Local Resilience Forums**: The EDWP references government’s ongoing review of national resilience. The outcome of this review will inform whether they pursue designating Strategic Authorities as Category 2 responders, becoming members of their respective Local Resilience Forums and assuming the associated Category 2 responsibilities.
* **Public Service boundaries**: The EDWP direction of travel is for greater alignment between police, fire, probation and NHS services boundaries and the geographies of SAs.
* **Mayoral Data Council:** The EDWP proposes A Mayoral Data Council; a forum for ‘senior data leaders’ from MSAs to influence central decision-making on data issues that affect them. The Data Council will help implement the data partnership principles established in the Trailblazer Deeper Devolution Deals.
* **Public Service Reform Innovation Fund**: Announced prior to the EDWP, the government has picked four places to work with on ‘test and learn’ pilots to address homelessness and improve family support.

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