



Response to Cumbria Devolution Consultation from Cumberland Council 11 April 2025

Introduction

Cumberland Council welcomes the government's commitment to devolving more powers and funding to local decision-makers.

We broadly support the proposal for a Cumberland Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) whilst recognising that, subject to the outcome of this consultation, there is a lot of work to be done before the Council is asked to formally consider becoming a constituent council of the MCA.

Our broad support for the proposal is based on the potential of strengthened strategic leadership on a Cumbria geography to drive inclusive economic growth to benefit all our residents and address inequalities.

It is important that government works with us to create an MCA that meets the particular needs in Cumbria and Cumberland. An MCA that works for Cumbria may be different from some established MCAs in big City Regions. A Cumbria MCA will be relatively small compared to others in terms of population – but it will be large in geography and have a significant potential to unlock economic growth.

To make devolution successful it must be supported by the required funding, powers and capacity. Early confirmation of funding to cover the costs of holding Mayoral elections, and of medium and longer-term capacity funding, would be particularly welcomed at this stage.

About Cumberland Council

Cumberland Council is a unitary council responsible for all local authority services for the area of Cumberland, which covers an area of 3,012 square kilometres and has a population of 276,876. The Council was established in 2023 to replace Allerdale Borough Council, Carlisle City Council, Copeland Borough Council and Cumbria County Council.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing a Mayoral Combined Authority over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to the area?

Answer

Strongly Agree

Please explain your answer.

A Mayoral Combined Authority will bring powers, funding, and freedoms and flexibilities from central government that enable decision-making to take place in Cumbria, rather than in London. That direction of travel is very much welcomed.

Cumbria is the right geography for a Mayoral Combined Authority at this time. Firstly, Cumbria is a well-established economic geography. A Mayoral Combined Authority for Cumbria will build on the existing partnership landscape and key relationships. The newly established Cumbria Economic Growth Board brings the voices of local businesses and anchor institutions together. The Council and our partners, through Enterprising Cumbria, have recently agreed a new 20-year economic strategy for Cumbria 'Going for Growth' which will be a building block for what we want to achieve through the establishment of a Cumbria MCA.

We also recognise that all our neighbouring sub-regions within England have their own Combined Authority arrangements in place. Cumbria must not be left behind in having the arrangements in place to secure investment and powers to unlock economic, environment and social benefits for all communities and businesses across Cumberland and Cumbria.

In establishing a Cumbria MCA, we would want to work with Government to design an Authority that meets the needs of Cumbria and enables us to achieve our ambitions for inclusive economic growth, environmental resilience and enhancement, and better outcomes for our communities..

This means an MCA in a large rural and sparsely populated area without a large city driving the local economy. Cumbria is not a City Region like Greater Manchester, the West Midlands Engine, or even the North East Combined Authority area. It is an area with particular challenges related to productivity, population, economic diversity, skills and strategic infrastructure. It has significant funding challenges related to the cost of delivery of public services over a large geographical area with relatively low population density.

This is a great opportunity to create an MCA that builds on existing collaboration and institutions, and adds value to the ambitious plans and projects that we already have in place. A Mayor working with two new and ambitious local authorities has great potential to unlock sustainable and inclusive growth.

Economic growth in Cumbria must be focused on addressing inequalities between and within our communities. Our Cumberland Council Plan sets out clearly our commitment to supporting local economies that work for everybody, and the importance of community wealth building approaches to maximise the benefits for economic growth for all parts of our local community. We have put health and wellbeing at the heart of everything we do. Without a focus on health and wellbeing we won't achieve inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

In establishing a Cumbria MCA we would also focus on the needs of protecting and enhancing Cumbria's unique landscapes and natural environment, the importance of our natural capital to the UK economy and our long-established excellence in the clean energy and defence sectors.

It will be critical that an MCA is funded and supported fully to deliver benefits for local people. Sufficient capacity funding from government to establish and support the work of the MCA will be critical to maximise the opportunities for economic growth in Cumbria. The initial capacity funding for 2025/26 recently confirmed by the Government is welcomed and we will seek early confirmation of future capacity funding following the Government's Spending Review in early Summer.

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed governance arrangements for the Mayoral Combined Authority?

Answer

Strongly Agree

Please explain your answer.

The proposed governance arrangements for a Cumbria Mayoral Combined Authority are equitable. The proposed membership ensures democratic accountability is central to the governance of the Authority.

The proposed arrangements highlight the size of the proposed Cumbria MCA with two councils as constituent members, in contrast to other larger established MCAs with many more constituent councils. In these circumstances the capacity and support available to MCA members will be critical to the MCA fulfilling its functions and making well-evidenced and robust decisions.

As emphasised earlier, early confirmation of capacity funding and other support which the Government will make available to Cumbria as part of the Devolution Priority Programme will be vital to making good progress.

Funding from the Government to fully cover the costs of holding mayoral elections across Cumbria, in addition to the capacity funding referred to above, will be necessary. The capacity funding needs to be focused on establishing the MCA, its governance and its functions. The costs of holding mayoral elections in a county the size of Cumbria would be likely to use all and more of the confirmed capacity funding

to date, and would pose serious risks to the establishment and functioning of the proposed MCA.

The option for appointment of non-constituent and associate members is welcomed. This will enable the constituent members to explore how best to ensure a diversity of input informs effective decision-making.

The requirement for an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and for an Audit Committee, as part of the proposed governance arrangements is also welcomed as those bodies will enhance the democratic accountability processes. These, with the right legislative and constitutional arrangements in place with sufficient support, will enable a wider input into the decision-making process from locally elected representatives.

In the context of the small size of the proposed MCA and the capacity requirements referred to above, the Deputy Mayor role will need to be carefully considered and scoped out in the constitutional arrangements to ensure that the role can provide the required contribution and gets the support the role needs.

In relation to the proposed voting arrangements, we are comfortable with the principle of simple majority voting; however, the implications of this approach are different to those in a larger MCA with a higher number of constituent authorities. In confirming the voting arrangements in advance of legislation being laid, we would welcome conversations with the government on reviewing voting arrangements on key strategic decision-making, and specific functional decision-making, where necessary.

Question 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined Authority will support the economy of the area?

Answer

Strongly Agree

Please explain your answer.

An MCA, with the right governance and functional arrangements to meet the needs of Cumbria, provides a huge opportunity to drive inclusive economic growth in the county.

Devolved powers and funding in relation to strategic spatial planning and housing, transport planning, economic development and regeneration, environmental improvements and skills and employment support will give local decision-makers in Cumbria more control over some of the critical levers for unlocking growth.

A directly elected Mayor of a Cumbria MCA has the potential to raise the profile of Cumbria as a good place to invest, to run a business, to learn, and to live and work.

One voice for Cumbria on a regional, national and global platform - setting out shared Cumbrian economic and environmental ambitions - could be hugely impactful. A Mayor providing a single voice for Cumbria alongside Ministers and other Mayors at the Mayoral Council for England means Cumbria will have the opportunity to contribute to national decision-making and future devolution policy that the county hasn't had before.

An MCA, focused on achieving shared ambitions, could provide leadership to tackling the county's long-term policy challenges.

Cumbria's declining working age population is an increasingly challenging constraint on the county's economic success. Attracting people into the local workforce to meet the needs of local businesses is a critical issue. Working through an MCA on joining up strategic planning and housing, transport infrastructure, skills and employment support and a coherent marketing offer could help attract people to come and live and work in the county.

We would build on our existing local skills improvement board, working with skills providers and our local further education sector, to ensure we have the skills and capacity in the local workforce to enable the local economy to grow. Also providing good, well-paid job opportunities for all our residents.

The opportunity, through the proposed Mayoral Combined Authority, to ensure that locally designed skills provision leads to positive impacts for local businesses and attracts investment is a critical factor in supporting local growth in a way that addresses long-term structural issues, including attracting a larger working-age population to Cumbria, and addressing inequalities.

It is also important to recognise the important role that the health and care sectors play in the county's economy and working through an MCA provides an opportunity to better integrate the economic contribution of those sectors into strategic public policymaking within Cumbria.

Our productivity challenge is associated with transport issues, the absence of a large city to drive growth, and the rural and sparsely populated nature of the county as well as the population challenges described above. Through the recent work carried out through Enterprising Cumbria and the Local Economic Growth Board on developing Cumbria's new long-term economic strategy, this productivity gap has been quantified as being £3 billion.

An MCA brings opportunities to use the devolved powers and funding as levers to make an impact in improving productivity. The productivity challenge is historic and structural. Long-term and integrated funding settlements, secured through the MCA, will be vital if we are to make a significant impact on productivity over the next 10 to 20 years.

Long-term and integrated funding settlements secured by an MCA will address one of the other major challenges faced by the local economy – and that is the funding challenge. Increased local control over funding will enable smarter and more

effective investment decisions to be made that are most likely to result in growth in Cumberland and in Cumbria. We have established a comprehensive evidence-base, which informed our new Cumbria economic strategy, as a foundation for planning investment that will unlock growth in our local economy.

Long-term integrated funding settlements from the Government will allow Cumbria to address these long-term challenges over time. Long-standing structural economic challenges don't have quick fixes. Short-term funding and numerous bidding process work against long-term planning. We welcome the Government's commitment to rationalising funding streams and moving away from the bidding culture that has established itself over time.

It is vital however, that long-term consolidated funding, and eventually fully integrated settlements, are allocated to a Cumbria MCA on the needs of the economy and the county's contribution to the UK's economic growth. Per capita funding allocations are disadvantageous to sparsely populated large areas like Cumbria and don't enable us to invest in the things that will deliver economic growth, environmental improvements and better outcomes for our residents.

We await the outcome of the Government's Spending Review later this year and further information on the funding approach for MCAs. We ask the Government to ensure that rurality and deprivation are taken into account in the calculation of MCA funding settlements.

Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined Authority will improve social outcomes in the area?

Answer

Strongly Agree

Please explain your answer.

Cumberland Council has put the health and wellbeing of our residents at the centre of everything we do, and we have committed to addressing inequalities in our Council Plan – the role of a Mayoral Combined Authority in supporting these aims is positive.

The proposal to ensure that Mayoral Combined Authorities consider health and wellbeing in the full scope of their decision-making is very welcome. The duty to consider health and wellbeing in all MCA policies and decision-making is critical. Integration of health and wellbeing into strategic policymaking and planning could play a big part in addressing the significant workforce challenges that constrain current and future economic growth in the county.

A healthy population is a pre-determinant of inclusive economic growth.

There is also the opportunity of working through the proposed MCA to enhance current health and care collaboration and planning. Cumbria has a complex health and care organisational landscape. The opportunity to work together through an MCA in relation to community and primary care services is a timely one. Collectively, we need to understand the implications of current changes in relation to the capacity of Integrated Care Systems and Boards. Both council areas within Cumbria currently work across ICS / ICB boundaries leading to complicated and resource-intensive process and collaboration – for the councils and for the health bodies.

Exploring how working together through an MCA could address some of those challenges, particularly in relation to primary and community health services, in the context of resource challenges in all the relevant organisations would be something to consider.

The proposed role of the MCA in leading local nature recovery is also welcome. This will help to align further the role of the environment in health and wellbeing, and in realising the social benefits of a thriving local economy. Our environment is a social asset as well as an economic one, with significant potential to play a bigger role in supporting a bigger and healthier workforce.

We understand that the MCA proposals are ‘a floor not a ceiling’, and we would welcome an ongoing dialogue with the Government to explore further how a developing and established MCA could play a more significant role in achieving environmental ambitions.

A Mayoral Combined Authority will also provide an opportunity to address the significant challenge of housing delivery at the required scale to meet housing targets in the context of Cumbria’s distinct geography. Development Corporation models could bring opportunities to support large development sites. This is a model currently being pursued in Cumberland to deliver the St Cuthbert’s Garden Village near Carlisle. The Garden Village project could result in 10,000 new homes over the next 30 years.

An enhanced relationship through the MCA with Homes England will also support accelerated housing delivery.

Incorporation of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner functions into a Cumbria MCA also provides great opportunities for better and more integrated strategic planning around community safety and policing. As with health and wellbeing, safer communities are important factors in enabling economic growth.

Question 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined Authority will improve local government services in the area?

Answer

Strongly Agree

Please explain your answer.

The powers and funding to drive inclusive economic growth devolved through the Mayoral Combined Authority will put more levers to improve the lives of Cumberland's residents in local hands and, as a result, address over time some of the factors creating rising demand for services and associated financial pressures.

A Cumbria Mayoral Combined Authority will enable Cumberland Council to be more ambitious in our joint working with Westmorland and Furness Council and partner organisations. We will be able to build on the effective collaboration already in place on a sub-regional, regional and national footprint where it adds the most value.

We are committed to ensuring a future Cumbria MCA focuses on where it can make the biggest positive impact on local economic growth and produces the most significant benefits for our residents. It cannot place additional cost burdens on local organisations or on local people that are not outweighed by the benefits of economic growth.

The powers, responsibilities and functions devolved to the MCA from the Government must be properly funded and enhance the delivery of public services in Cumberland and Cumbria.

The MCA provides a vehicle by which the local authorities and partners can work together to achieve the economic ambitions that we currently don't have the powers or funding to do on our own.

It will enable collaboration through robust and transparent governance arrangements, with decisions made by the democratically accountable constituent members and the Mayor, to maximise the growth opportunities of devolved powers and funding.

Opportunities to join up additional local functions from a local level through a Cumbria MCA will be carefully assessed through local decision-making to ensure they are best carried out at MCA level.

In this way, the MCA has the potential to improve local government services through more effective and efficient strategic planning on the most vital economic, environmental and social challenges.

This can build on the collaborative arrangements which are already working effectively on a Cumbria footprint. These include the establishment of Enterprising Cumbria and the Cumbria Economic Growth Board which places engagement with

our businesses at the heart of strategic economic policy and decision-making. Through these arrangements we have a joint economic strategy for the next 20 years in place, providing a good starting point for an MCA of a shared vision and shared strategic approaches.

Question 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined Authority will improve the local natural environment and overall national environment?

Answer

Strongly Agree

Please explain your answer.

Cumbria's natural capital is a vital national economic asset. Our landscapes and nature, our strengths in the generation of clean and green energy, our water resources which provide water for Manchester, and our agriculture and agri-tech sectors are unique and world-class. These assets also play a key role in attracting 41 million visitors a year to Cumbria.

More DEFRA engagement in the devolution framework is something it would be useful to explore. This could help realise more benefit from devolution in relation to the natural environment. The natural environment and our agriculture and food production sectors are key elements of the local economy. Holding some more of the levers in these areas to support these sectors to grow is important, as is an ongoing dialogue with DEFRA on these issues.

An MCA in Cumbria provides an opportunity for better, more joined up strategic thinking on a range of issues which impact on the natural environment, including issues such as nature renewal and net zero. Engagement through the MCA in forums such as Nature North provide opportunities for greater influence and contributions at regional and national level.

A Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Strategy is already being developed and an MCA provides a robust vehicle for progressing collaboration on this.

Collaboration through the Zero Carbon Cumbria Partnership, with a commitment to work towards Net Zero by 2037, could be enhanced through strengthened strategic decision-making through the MCA.

Question 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined Authority will support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities?

Answer

Strongly Agree

Please explain your answer.

The establishment of a Cumbria MCA will lead to improved strategic leadership, policy and decision-making on key long-standing policy challenges. A focus on inclusive sustainable growth and addressing inequalities should be at the core of the MCA arrangements. This will support the interests and needs of local communities by securing economic growth that benefits all communities.

The proposed MCA, with the two constituent councils working with the directly elected Mayor, means direct democratic accountability to local communities is embedded within all decision-making through the Councillors and the Mayor.

Cumberland Council is working with our communities in new ways to ensure that we listen to our communities and work with them, rather than 'do to them'. Our Community Panels provide for engagement and decision-making at the most local level.

Cumbria's rich heritage of diverse communities with their own different identities is a fundamental strength in how communities support each other. In Cumberland this is reflected in how differently each of our Community Panels works and the issues they focus on – ensuring a diversity of views in decision-making,

These approaches are the foundation for council decision-making and service design, and will be embedded in the Council's input to strategic decision-making within the MCA.

Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness, whilst relatively new councils, have already established effective collaborative relationships on key issues, including on economic growth through Enterprising Cumbria.

Whilst the size of the proposed Cumbria MCA poses some challenges in respect of capacity and diversity of input into decision-making, it does mean that we can create a lean, focused strategic authority which is close to the local communities it serves.