

Devolution workshop 3rd February 2023

58 ADEPT members attended this workshop to hear about the six devolution deals that have been agreed since the Levelling Up White Paper was published last year. We were keen to hear about the experience of the local authorities involved in those deals and how negotiations with government had progressed – what had worked well, what not so well, and what learning could be shared with others going through the process?

The workshop was chaired by Paula Hewitt (Deputy Chief Executive, Lead Director for Economic & Community Infrastructure and Director of Commissioning, Somerset County Council). There were speakers from York and North Yorkshire, Derby/Derbyshire/Nottingham/Nottinghamshire (D2N2), Norfolk, Suffolk, and the North East including Durham.

Some of the common themes and key messages coming from the presentations and discussion were:

- View your first devolution deal as just that – the first step in an ongoing process of further bids and negotiations. Get it over the line, develop your governance structure, then go back to government with further asks and offers.
- So don't spend too much time being over-ambitious for your first deal, maybe 80% of the content will be a standard 'one size fits all'. Manage expectations locally about what can be achieved in the first deal and the level of additional funding that can be won. But include hooks in the deal that will make it easier to develop further asks in future.
- Government departments can be wary of setting precedents, so may be averse to radical or innovative proposals unless they can be described as a pilot or trailblazer and accommodated within the funding constraints imposed by the current Comprehensive Spending Review period.
- Different government departments may display different levels of preparedness for engaging in negotiations and willingness to devolve much.
- DLUHC is the key department and is a potential ally, so your devolution strategy narrative must speak to them and get them on side in dealings with other departments.
- Cross-reference to other official strategies and reports e.g. the Skidmore review has a lot of useful arguments about the economic opportunities and benefits of net zero.
- Government won't know your local place, its challenges and opportunities, and its governance structures very well, you will need to spell it out for them and explain the implications for the devolution ask. Local context and evidence are important, demonstrate what the issues are locally in relation to each of the 12 Levelling Up missions, show local variations and hidden need.
- If your bid covers more than one local authority area it is important to be able to demonstrate political commitment across the authorities involved and show clear leadership for the negotiations that has full support.
- Evidence is important. Need to have a pipeline of projects underpinning the bid and be able to demonstrate that these are prioritised across the whole area (if multiple authorities are involved).
- Capacity is important – put together a good team with the right people (at officer and member levels) to build effective relationships, communicate back into the organisations, and have the clout and flexibility to work at pace.

In discussion there were a number of subjects that people would be interested to follow up at further events such as 'deep dives' into one or more of the recent devolution deals or specific themes such as natural capital, a common framework for environmental and net zero asks, further work on leveraging in private investment to help deliver deals, how to achieve local political alignment to support a successful deal, and talking to government departments about how to improve the process in future. These options will be discussed with the ADEPT Leadership Team to help plan further events. We are also talking to the LGA to ensure that our plans work successfully alongside their support for the authorities involved in the earlier rounds of devolution deals.