

# THE STATE OF DEVOLUTION

An insight report from YASPER



**YASPER™**

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Our polling concluded that the Labour Party candidates were on track to win the mayoral race in both West Yorkshire and Tees Valley. While this isn't a surprise in West Yorkshire, the result would be a seismic shock in the Tees Valley area after Mayor Houchen won a two-horse race with a 73% vote share in 2021.

Polls always come with health warnings. Although rigorous steps are taken to ensure compliance and validity, any survey is a snapshot in time. To give the broadest possible view, a range of candidates were included – and not all will actually stand for election.

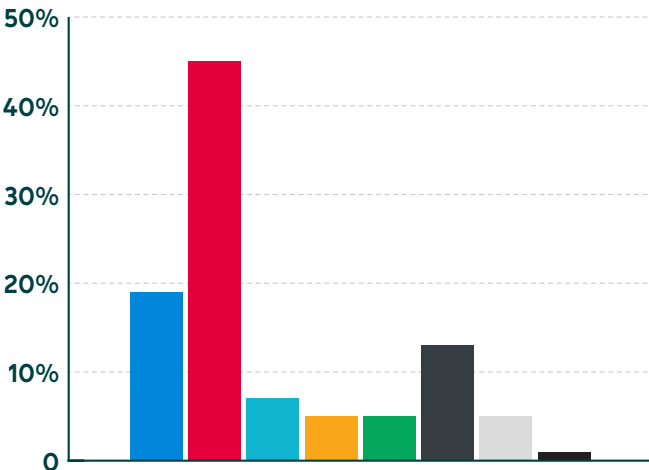
Reform UK, for example, received significant vote share in both areas, and it is conceivable that these votes might naturally revert to the Conservative Party candidate should Reform not field a candidate.

Other than voting intention, the standout statistic gathered from our polling was the inability of respondents to name their mayor, even though we provided a list of potential names, including the mayor of their area.

**While 33% of voters in the Tees Valley correctly identified Mayor Houchen, 47% selected 'don't know'. The figures were even more stark in West Yorkshire, with only 28% correctly identifying Mayor Brabin, while a staggering 52% selected 'don't know'.**

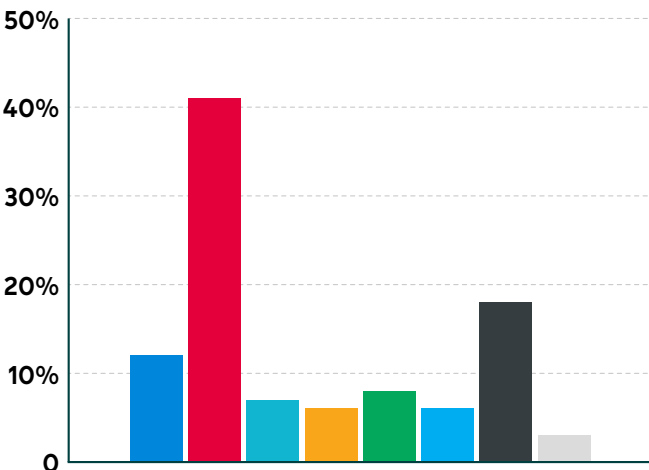
One explanation for this might be that the Tees Valley mayoralty is more established, reaching the end of its second term in 2024, as opposed to West Yorkshire being in its first term.

## Tees Valley voting intention



Conservative Candidate	19%
Labour Candidate	45%
Reform UK Candidate	7%
Liberal Democrat Candidate	5%
Green Candidate	5%
Don't know	13%
Prefer not to say	5%
Other	1%

## West Yorkshire voting intention



Conservative Candidate	12%
Labour Candidate	41%
Reform UK Candidate	7%
Liberal Democrat Candidate	6%
Green Candidate	8%
Yorkshire Party Candidate	6%
Don't know	18%
Prefer not to say	3%

Successive governments have told us that devolution is the answer to many of our problems. Indeed, since Labour's landslide win in 1997, the transfer of power from central government to the regions has gathered pace, and while the specifics are always up for debate (hands-up who remembers 'One Yorkshire') the march towards devolved power under mayors seems inexorable.

But while devolution is rarely challenged as anything other than progress, precious little is known about the thoughts and views of those who really matter – the electorate.

For this report, Yasper has commissioned exclusive polling from British Polling Council member Censuswide, gathering a robust dataset of 1,000+ respondents from two key mayoral battlegrounds that will be contested on 2nd May 2024.

**By asking the people of West Yorkshire and Tees Valley combined authority areas for their views, we can gather a wider sense of attitudes towards devolution, how specific issues and challenges play into people's perception of success – or otherwise – and what the wider course of devolution can and should be.**

When commissioning this study, we wanted to ensure that the data was accurate and actionable. In selecting these two areas, we included one with a Labour incumbent (in West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin became the inaugural mayor in 2021) and one Conservative (Ben Houchen was first elected as Tees Valley mayor in 2017, and re-elected with a huge majority in 2021).



**By Julian Pearce**

Founder and MD of Communications Agency, Yasper.

Our data and the analysis that sits alongside it is intended to be a call to action for politicians and a tool for businesses, to better understand what can be learned for the future.

**2024 will also see the first mayoral election for York and North Yorkshire, the most rural mayoralty to date. Our report explores how the perception of devolution differs for different areas and regions, and is broken down by age, gender and other demographic factors.**

It's important to remember that this data isn't an outright judgement on the effectiveness of existing mayors or on devolution, rather it represents the public's perception of the themes polled. Perception and reality might differ – which brings up some interesting topics in its own right.

The questions were co-authored with authoritative figures who have extensive knowledge of the areas surveyed, including major businesses, representative organisations and journalists.

What has been gathered is a robust and extensive set of insights, which can not only be used to ensure better outcomes for individuals and businesses from the 2024 elections, but well into the future too.

Despite talk of 'levelling-up' and the 'red wall' in national debate, relatively little data has been gathered about people's attitudes to the topic in the North. Yasper commissioned Censuswide to carry out a survey of 1,000 general consumers in each of two key 2024 mayoral battlegrounds: West Yorkshire and Tees Valley combined authority areas.

This survey sought to investigate the extent to which residents of West Yorkshire and Tees Valley areas were aware of their current mayor and how the current mayors' policies and pledges were being received.

**While levelling-up has become a core part of political discourse, certainly among the two parties that dominate Westminster politics, there has been relatively little data gathered about the English regions, citizen's attitudes to devolution, and specifically to the role of a mayor.**

The data this survey has provided gives, in our view, some fascinating insights into a demographic who not only have a say on the two key mayoral positions, but will also get to vote in the General Election that is expected later this year.

Perhaps most surprising is that just under half (49.46%) of respondents across the two areas answered 'I don't know' when asked who they thought the incumbent mayor of their mayoral authority was, despite being given a list of potential options.



**By James Green**  
Censuswide.

**A third (33%) of respondents in Tees Valley correctly selected Ben Houchen, whereas only 28% of respondents in West Yorkshire were able to do the same for Tracy Brabin.**

Ultimately, however, a majority (59%) of respondents across the two areas felt that devolution (specifically the role of a mayor) as a force for levelling-up the UK was working; 12% said it was fully working, and 47% said it was somewhat working.

1,001 complete responses were gathered for each region, providing a total of 2,002 respondents, generating an extremely robust sample size. This survey was carried out during February 2024, through the method of an online survey, using double opt-in panels (respondents were pre-screened, and then screened again at the point of fieldwork, using non-leading questions to ensure validity).

Additionally, rigorous data quality checks were carried out, with sub-standard respondents removed from the final dataset. This provided a significant sample size, giving an estimated confidence interval of +/-2.19%, or an overall confidence level of c.95%.

Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society, which is based on ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

Some polls that look to represent voting intention are weighted by pollsters. As voting intention was only a small part of what we were looking to capture, the top line results from this survey are presented unweighted and represent the actual responses we received from those polled. However, we have taken steps to weight voting intention metrics retrospectively, and the results do not materially differ. For weighted voting intention statistics or further information on methodology, please contact us.



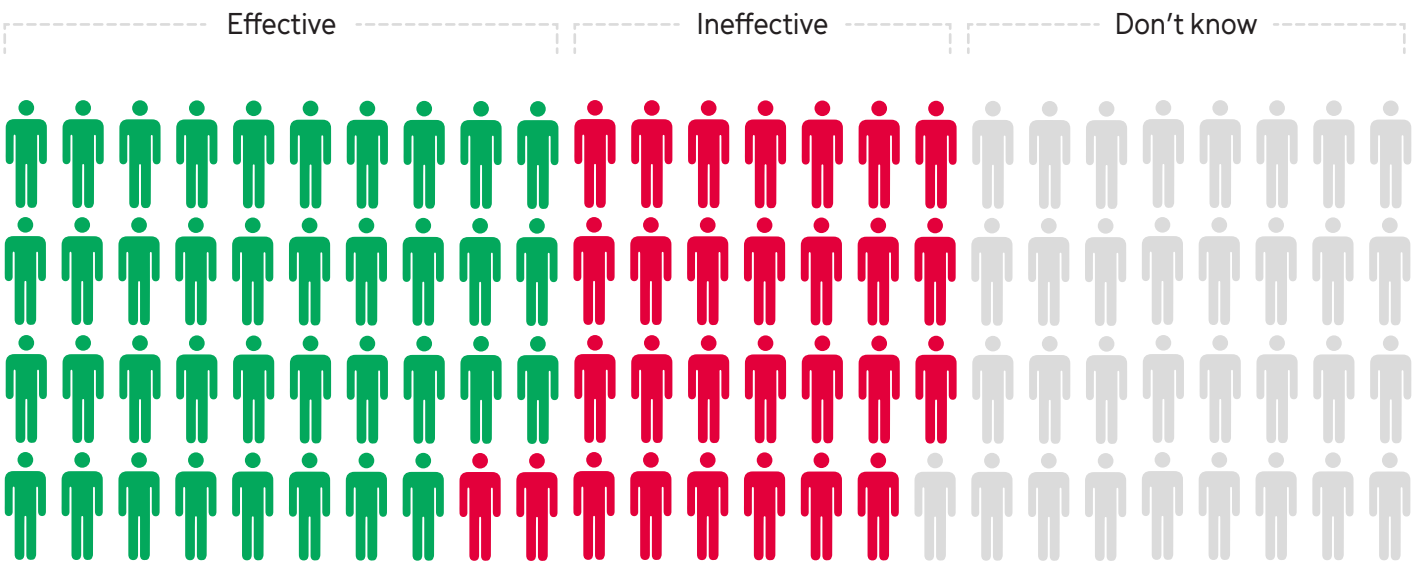
Given that the current Conservative mayor, Ben Houchen, was elected with 73% of the vote, against the Labour candidate's 27% in the 2021 elections, our survey results predicting a Labour victory might seem extraordinary to the point of questioning their validity.

However, there are several factors we should take into account. The 2021 vote was a two-horse race, which took place in a Covid-skewed world. Just 15 months earlier the Conservative Party under Boris Johnson had just increased their majority in parliament in the 2019 General Election, and several of the parliamentary constituencies in and around the Tees Valley had returned Conservative members of parliament for the first time in living memory. The Tories were still well ahead of Labour in national polls.

If you look at current polling, every parliamentary seat in the Tees Valley area currently looks set to return a Labour MP at the next General Election – sentiment has shifted significantly, with massive swings predicted that are not unlike the one our polling forecasts.

There are also a number of hyper-local factors that should be considered, such as the controversy around Teesworks. However, despite much interest and associated media coverage, 38% of respondents counted the current mayor's handling of the Teesworks redevelopment as 'positive', with a further 38% selecting 'neither positive or negative'. Just 12% had a 'negative' perception, with 11% selecting 'don't know'.

**Despite the overwhelming voting intention for a Labour candidate, 38% of the people polled thought that the current Conservative mayor had done an effective job, against 29% thinking they hadn't. However, 33% selected 'don't know' in answer to this question.**



Mayoral effectiveness

# Understanding the results in West Yorkshire

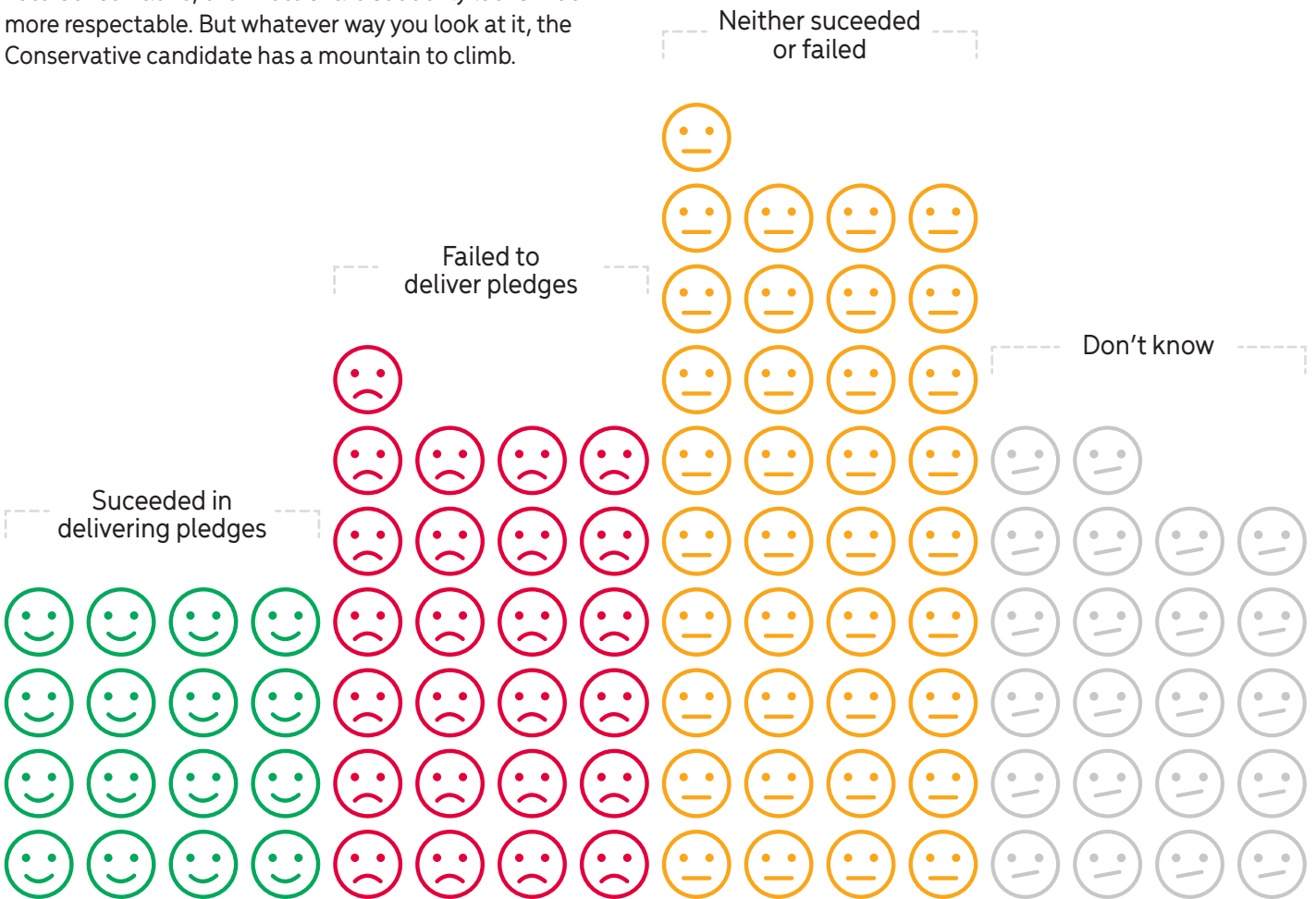
Our results point to an overwhelming victory for the incumbent Labour mayor, meaning that Tracy Brabin is very likely to be elected for a second term. However, critics will point out that her vote share in this poll (41%) is actually down on the proportion of first round vote share she received during the 2021 mayoral elections (43.1%).

**18% of people who stated that they intend to vote hadn't yet decided who for, meaning both that there is scope for a much-enhanced Labour victory, but also a potential route for the Conservative candidate to make gains.**

If a large proportion of undecided voters turn out to vote Conservative, and if votes from those who in our poll selected Reform UK or the Yorkshire Party decide to vote Conservative, their vote share suddenly looks much more respectable. But whatever way you look at it, the Conservative candidate has a mountain to climb.

A requirement for an expected Labour second term will be a focus on addressing public perception on delivery. Given a list of the current mayor's 2021 election pledges, only 16% felt that the mayor had succeeded in delivering on these. This was massively outweighed by 25% saying the mayor had failed to deliver against those pledges.

On a different metric of whether people's lives were better or worse when thinking about the mayor's remit, younger age groups tended to be more optimistic, with 37% of under 24s and 38% of those between 25 and 34 saying their lives were better.



Performance on 2021 pledges

**From May, York and North Yorkshire will have a mayor for the first time. Yasper approached the Labour and Conservative candidates for that role, inviting them to submit their thoughts about what devolution can do for that region. Below we publish the response received.**



**David Skaith**

**Labour Candidate for Mayor of York and North Yorkshire.**

*"Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a time where local authorities are struggling. They are struggling due to record high cuts in funding, the record high number of people needing support and the record high cost of delivering that support. Regions all over the country have been impacted by this, but the north always seems to get hit harder."*

*"The lack of investment we have seen for house building and transport, to adult skills and job creation, has left York and North Yorkshire in a place where people can't afford to live here and are finding it ever more difficult to travel round the region."*

*"A mayor can change this. A 30-year devolution deal means we can look long term and invest. In partnership with the private sector, we can build the housing we need, we can develop a transport plan that works for all forms of travel, we can train our workforce in the skills we need, and we can attract world leading businesses while still developing homegrown enterprises."*

*"Having a small business myself, I have seen how hard it has been to survive. Having long term support and investment is what the region needs, and this is exactly what I would deliver as Mayor of York and North Yorkshire."*



**Keane Duncan**

**Conservative Candidate for Mayor of York and North Yorkshire.**

*"There is a new divide in Britain. No longer north vs south, but a divide within the north, between the big cities and rural regions."*

*"North Yorkshire is great and glorious, with so much potential. We feed, power and defend Britain. We're home to 40,000 businesses, unrivalled hospitality and cutting-edge industry. But for too long we've been disadvantaged, overshadowed, our contribution to the UK economy overlooked."*

*"This May, everything changes, with an unprecedented transfer of power from Westminster. This is a first for a predominantly rural region. With just one shot to get it right, I'm seizing this opportunity with a uniquely 'North Yorkshire' campaign."*

*"I am on tour in campervan 'Peggy', visiting 1,000 communities, towns, villages and remote hamlets, representing every corner of England's largest county. And I'm standing up for people of every generation, particularly the next generation, my generation who feel frozen out of our future prosperity."*

*"I want to ensure everyone, of every background, can achieve their potential here. That doesn't require special treatment, just our fair share of funding, attention and resources."*

*"So let's embrace the collective strength of our vast, diverse county and all who call it home. Let's show Britain what we can achieve: Britain's first rural powerhouse."*



Overall, our poll didn't present an optimistic view of mayoral devolution, with most people being unable to name their mayor.

Profile should be something that all major parties with designs on becoming mayor should seek to focus on, if they want to be heard and understood by their constituents.

In West Yorkshire, opinion is divided about whether having a mayor is succeeding as a force for levelling-up (55% say it is working and 45% say it is failing). Rural voters were most optimistic about mayoral devolution being a positive force for levelling-up, with 63% saying it was working.

It was a different picture, however, in Tees Valley, where respondents seemed to be much more optimistic overall about mayoral devolution as a force for levelling-up, with 63% saying it was 'working' against 37% who felt it was 'failing'.

There were mixed views between the regions about what powers a mayor should have, but in both areas combined, respondents felt that mayors should keep the same amount of power as they have now (52%); 23% felt that mayors should have more power, and 10% felt they should have less.

**15% across the two regions felt that the position of mayor should be abolished, although there was a significant difference between regions (18% in West Yorkshire vs 12% in Tees Valley).**

What can these results tell us about wider devolution and what can newly devolved areas learn from them? Our data points to a degree of apathy towards mayors – ensuring that their roles are not only effective, but are seen to be effective, should be a key focus.

It is likely that the wide disparities in mayoral remits between different regions is adding to confusion, and there is a clear communications challenge both at local and national level to better explain devolution and its potential benefits.

Mayoral devolution cannot be seen – or communicated – as a one-size-fits-all solution. The needs of different parts of the country vary wildly, as do demographics and population breakdown. What is right for Greater Manchester cannot be, by nature, right for North Yorkshire.

**National politicians have a role to play in this. Devolution cannot be a homogenised byword for levelling-up, and whoever forms the next government will have to carefully consider their approach.**

Visit the insights section of our website for further reports with more information and in-depth analysis of the results in both areas: The State of Tees Valley; and The State of West Yorkshire.

## About Jasper

Jasper is a communications agency, backed by experience. We adopt a geography and tactic agnostic approach to the briefs we work on, underpinned by a commitment to deliver value to our clients.

Our services include media relations, stakeholder engagement, marketing, and digital communications. For more information on this report, additional analysis of the two areas, or to hear more about our work, please contact us below.



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