Critical Analysis of the "Northern Powerhouse" in Yorkshire

Executive Summary

The "Northern Powerhouse" initiative, launched in 2014, was conceived as a transformative strategy to rebalance the UK economy by fostering a powerful urban counterweight to London's dominance, driven by enhanced connectivity and devolution. This report critically analyzes its impact on Yorkshire, examining the divergence between its ambitious official narrative and the tangible, real-world outcomes across the region's diverse cities, towns, and rural areas.

Initial reception was marked by optimism, yet quickly faced skepticism regarding genuine decentralization and sufficient funding. A data-driven comparison reveals a mixed picture: while some infrastructure projects have progressed, notably the TransPennine Route Upgrade, the cancellation of HS2's eastern leg to Leeds significantly undermined the original high-speed rail vision for Yorkshire. Economic indicators show varied GVA growth and business creation rates across Yorkshire, with some areas lagging national averages, suggesting the initiative has not fully closed the productivity gap.

Qualitative perspectives from Yorkshire's stakeholders highlight a persistent tension. Business leaders express cautious optimism, citing some investment and growth, but community activists and social justice groups voice significant concerns about widening inequalities, disproportionate austerity cuts, and a perceived lack of genuine local empowerment. Regional mayors, while gaining some devolved powers and funding, consistently advocate for greater fiscal autonomy and a more coherent, systematic approach from central government, indicating that the current model falls short of true decentralization.

Ultimately, the "Northern Powerhouse" in Yorkshire appears to be a work in progress, characterized by a fundamental tension between central government control and local aspirations. While it has spurred some investment and collaboration, its impact has been uneven, and it has struggled to deliver on its grandest promises, particularly in achieving equitable growth and deep-seated devolution across all parts of Yorkshire. A new model for devolution, rooted in the principle of subsidiarity and granting genuine fiscal and legislative autonomy, is imperative to ensure that future regional development truly benefits all communities.

1. The "Northern Powerhouse" Revisited: The Official vs. Public Narrative

1.1 Original Goals and Overarching Vision

The "Northern Powerhouse" (NPh) initiative was formally introduced in 2014 by then Chancellor George Osborne as a long-term strategy aimed at stimulating economic development across the North of England. Its foundational principle was the economic theory of agglomeration, which posits that concentrating people and jobs in large urban centres can significantly boost productivity and growth. The core ambition was to forge a cohesive urban counterweight to

London's economic supremacy by enhancing the connections between key Northern cities such as Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, and Sheffield.

The initial blueprint for the NPh encompassed several interconnected priorities: improving transport links to facilitate seamless movement between major Northern cities, directing investments towards science and innovation, devolving greater power and resources to local civic leaders, and supporting cultural initiatives across the region. The overarching vision was to cultivate a dynamic and expanding economy in the North, positioning it as an attractive destination for inward investment and enabling it to compete effectively with Europe's leading regions. This required fostering a pan-Northern economic identity, where individual city regions could maximize their potential to contribute to a unified Northern economy.

A significant aspect of the NPh's strategic framework was the Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review (NPIER). The 2016 NPIER identified four "prime capabilities" within the North: advanced manufacturing, energy generation, health innovation, and digital technologies. It projected that by narrowing the productivity gap with the rest of England by 2050, the North's economy could expand by an additional £97 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA) annually, supporting an estimated 850,000 new jobs. The updated NPIER in 2023 further amplified these projections, forecasting an increase to £118 billion in GVA and one million additional jobs by 2050.

The initial emphasis on agglomeration theory, focusing on connecting core cities, inherently carried the risk of an uneven distribution of benefits. This approach suggested that economic advantages would primarily accrue to these urban centres, potentially sidelining surrounding towns and rural areas within Yorkshire. This foundational principle thus raised immediate questions about how the initiative would impact the diverse geographies of Yorkshire, beyond its major cities, and whether it could truly deliver benefits across all its ridings and rural regions, as specifically requested in the user's inquiry.

Furthermore, the stated scope of the NPh evolved over time. While initially narrowly defined by connecting cities into a "single labour pool" , later documents and NPIER updates broadened the agenda to include "basic services and infrastructures that many people rely upon, particularly in communities beyond the big cities" , as well as "decarbonising the economy" and improving "quality of life and more opportunities for all". This expansion, while seemingly positive in its aim for greater inclusivity, also risked diluting the initiative's focus and spreading resources too thinly. Such a broadening of ambition, without a proportional increase in dedicated funding and strategic clarity, could contribute to perceptions that the NPh was becoming more of a rhetorical exercise than a precisely targeted development strategy.

The ambitious economic projections, particularly the targets of £97-118 billion in GVA and up to one million jobs by 2050 , established a very high benchmark for the NPh's success. The long-term nature of these targets, spanning several decades, complicated immediate accountability and allowed for a continuous narrative of "potential" to persist. This reliance on distant future gains is a critical factor when evaluating the initiative's actual performance against its stated promises, especially in the context of the user's interest in the "hype and claims versus the actual real-world impact."

1.2 Initial Public and Political Reception

Upon its launch, the Northern Powerhouse initiative garnered considerable public and political support. It was a central plank of the Conservative Party's 2015 election campaign, deliberately crafted to resonate with a broad Northern electorate by presenting a new vision for regional economic development. This strategy proved effective, with public recognition of the term

"Northern Powerhouse" reaching 56% among northerners at its peak in 2015. Key stakeholders, including business interests, local government leaders, think tanks, and universities across the North, also expressed significant support and optimism for the initiative's potential to rebalance the UK economy. Then Chancellor George Osborne, despite acknowledging "huge cynicism in many quarters" regarding its feasibility, described the initial response as "far more positive and encouraging" than anticipated, framing the initiative as a "revolution in the way we govern England". Northern political leaders and prominent commentators largely endorsed the aim of achieving Northern economic growth comparable to the national average.

However, this early optimism was tempered by an underlying skepticism. Even as Osborne spoke of a "revolution," he admitted to the "huge cynicism" that existed. This suggests that despite the widespread recognition and initial support, a latent distrust regarding the government's genuine commitment to transformative change was present from the outset. This tension between the aspirational narrative and public apprehension laid the groundwork for later critical assessments of the initiative's true effectiveness.

Furthermore, early analyses, particularly from IPPR North, highlighted the presence of "Northern powerhouse myths" and instances of "exaggeration, even falsehood," especially concerning the disparities in transport spending between London and the North. This early warning indicated that the framing of the NPh, even in its nascent stages, involved a degree of rhetorical inflation and a selective presentation of data. Such a tendency to prioritize a supportive narrative over empirical precision from the very beginning foreshadowed the challenges in conducting a truly data-driven comparison between the initiative's promises and its actual outcomes, directly addressing the user's concern about "hype and claims versus the actual real-world impact."

1.3 Critical Narratives: "Top-Down," "Centralized," or "Rhetoric"

Despite initial enthusiasm, the Northern Powerhouse quickly attracted significant criticism, frequently being labelled as merely a "catchy label" rather than a genuine vehicle for regional empowerment. Critics argued that for Northern regions to truly flourish, they required "real power, economically, politically and in their public services," advocating for authentic decentralization beyond mere devolution. Concerns emerged that the devolution agenda had stalled, with the focus shifting away from rebalancing the economy towards a broader industrial strategy.

A pervasive critique highlighted the persistent "top-down approach to localism" and an entrenched "culture of centralism" within England. Local councils, despite being the intended beneficiaries of devolution, remained heavily reliant on central government for funding, reportedly raising only about 25% of their own revenue. This financial dependency was exacerbated by austerity measures, which saw central government funding to local authorities plummet by 27.9% between 2010-11 and 2014-15. This raised fundamental questions about the practical ability of councils to utilize any devolved powers effectively when operating with severely constrained budgets. The core of this argument is that while "powers" might be formally devolved, genuine autonomy is undermined by continued central control over the purse strings, transforming devolution into a delegation of responsibilities rather than a true transfer of sovereignty.

The Northern Powerhouse, along with associated City Deals, was often perceived as prioritizing "economic regeneration" over initiating a process of "real political devolution". Devolution was characterized as a "gift from the centre," offered with "very little powers to be devolved, no real fiscal autonomy and more cuts to come," suggesting that in practice, it would lead to minimal substantive change. This perspective was reinforced by instances such as the "undemocratic imposition" of Metro-Mayors in some areas, despite local rejections, and the significant influence granted to unelected Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) whose capital funding originated from central government. These mechanisms were seen as tools for central control, designed to cultivate "business friendly environments" rather than fostering genuine local autonomy and democratic accountability.

The concept itself was criticized for becoming an "increasingly fuzzy concept" and a "political brand," used to "brand policy interventions in a scattergun fashion, including some which pre-date the term or would have happened anyway". Funding allocated to the NPh was deemed "insufficient to achieve its vague but ambitious aims". This characterization suggests a prioritization of public relations over substantive policy coherence. If interventions are merely "branded" as NPh initiatives regardless of their origin or strategic fit, it implies a lack of a deeply integrated, long-term plan, leading to fragmented efforts and diluted impact.

IPPR North, a leading Northern think tank, provided some of the most incisive criticisms. Their research indicated that the NPh agenda, in its initial conception, was "far too narrow," focusing almost exclusively on increasing productivity through improved transport connections between major cities. They asserted that central government had "undercut by austerity," that promised transport investment had "not materialized," and that devolution had "not gone far enough," largely benefiting only a "few metropolitan areas". IPPR North's analysis presented stark figures: a £3.6 billion cut in public spending in the North between 2009/10 and 2017/18, contrasting sharply with a £4.7 billion rise in the South East and South West, and a much smaller £256 million cut in London. They also highlighted an increase of 200,000 children living in poverty in the North since 2014, a larger percentage decrease in public sector employment in the North (2.8%) compared to London (1.2%), and unequal transport spending, with London receiving £330 per person compared to £149 per person in the North since 2014. This compelling data suggests that while the NPh offered a narrative of Northern revival, concurrent fiscal policies actively exacerbated existing inequalities, directly contributing to adverse social outcomes. This contradiction between stated aims and actual governmental policy is a critical factor in evaluating the gap between the initiative's rhetoric and its real-world impact on the lives of people in Yorkshire.

1.4 Proponents' Arguments: Regional Growth and Investment

Proponents of the Northern Powerhouse consistently highlight its potential to drive significant regional growth and attract investment. Transport for the North (TfN) and the NP11 group of Northern Local Enterprise Partnerships emphasize the findings of the Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review (NPIER). They contend that targeted interventions and strategic investment can effectively close the productivity gap and decarbonize the economy, leading to substantial increases in GVA and job creation. The updated NPIER in 2023 projects that these efforts could add up to £118 billion in GVA and create one million additional jobs by 2050, fostering sustainable, healthy, and inclusive economic growth, and ultimately improving the quality of life across the North.

Improved transport connectivity is consistently presented as a fundamental driver for transforming the North's economy. Analysis suggests that the successful delivery of Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) and HS2 would lead to substantial enhancements in connectivity, thereby stimulating sustainable economic growth. Projections indicate that such improvements could increase the number of people and businesses within a two-hour travel radius of key Yorkshire cities like Sheffield and Bradford by over 40%. The government, in 2019, asserted that the NPh had already catalyzed £13 billion in transport investment and generated 287,000 new

jobs across the North within five years of its inception.
The Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund (NPIF) and its successor, NPIF II, are frequently lauded for their role in stimulating growth and bridging finance gaps for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) throughout the North. These funds are credited with championing Northern tech entrepreneurs, bolstering emerging tech hubs in cities such as Manchester and Newcastle, and fostering job creation by effectively leveraging private investment. The overarching vision articulated by proponents is for the North to evolve into a global hub for innovation and trade, capable of attracting and retaining top talent and significant overseas investment by capitalizing on the inherent strengths of its city regions.
A recurring characteristic of the NPh's advocacy is its heavy reliance on future economic projections and the concept of "potential" rather than solely on demonstrated, achieved outcomes. While these projections, such as adding £118 billion to GVA and creating one million jobs by 2050, articulate an ambitious vision, their long-term horizon makes immediate accountability challenging. This emphasis on future benefits can be interpreted as a strategy to sustain optimism and political momentum, particularly in the absence of substantial short-to-medium term tangible results, thereby contributing to the perception that the initiative is more about aspirational rhetoric than concrete delivery.
Furthermore, the narrative surrounding "leveraging private investment," particularly through initiatives like the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund (NPIF) , represents a subtle yet significant shift in the perceived responsibility for funding regional development. While public funds are committed, the emphasis is often placed on these funds acting as a catalyst for much larger private sector contributions, with projections of up to a 2.8 times return on public funds. This approach potentially transfers a greater share of the financial risk and delivery burden onto the private sector. The success of this model is heavily contingent on market confidence and the private sector's willingness to invest, which may not always align perfectly with broader public policy objectives or the specific needs of all Northern regions.

2. Promises vs. Reality: A Data-Driven Comparison

2.1 Infrastructure Spending in Yorkshire

The original pledges of the Northern Powerhouse initiative included transformative transport interventions aimed at enhancing connectivity, improving journey times, and boosting capacity and resilience across the North. Specific projects highlighted were Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR), HS2, the Northern Hub rail scheme, and significant upgrades to major motorways such as the M1, M62, and A1.
In terms of actual delivered outcomes, the picture is complex. The government claimed a substantial £13 billion in transport investment across the North within five years of the NPh launch , and an additional £120 billion in capital investment is planned over the current Parliament, which includes a further £3.5 billion for the TransPennine Upgrade.
However, the trajectory of major rail projects has seen significant deviations from original promises. Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) was initially envisioned as a new high-speed line connecting Leeds and Manchester via Bradford, alongside a new line between Leeds and Sheffield, projected to deliver an £84 billion economic boost and create 180,000 jobs. This ambition was substantially scaled back with the Integrated Rail Plan (IRP), published in November 2021, which outlined a £96 billion investment for major rail schemes but fundamentally altered the scope of high-speed rail in Yorkshire. Crucially, the eastern leg of

HS2, which was intended to connect Birmingham to Leeds and was integral to the original NPh vision for pan-Northern connectivity , was cancelled in October 2023. Safeguarding for this section was subsequently removed in July 2025, meaning affected property owners are no longer eligible for HS2 property schemes, though some safeguarding remains in central Leeds to support future passenger growth. The HS2 project is now largely confined to a line between London Euston and Birmingham Curzon Street, connecting to the West Coast Main Line to reach Northern cities. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) even rated the project "red" in July 2023, indicating that "successful delivery... appears to be unachievable". The IRP now promises only 40 miles of new high-speed line between Warrington and Yorkshire and the completion of Trans-Pennine Route electrification, a much-reduced ambition compared to the initial vision.

Despite these setbacks, progress has been made on the TransPennine Route Upgrade (TRU), an £11 billion government-funded project. An additional £3.5 billion has been confirmed to advance serious upgrades between Liverpool and Leeds. The electrification of the Church Fenton to York rail line, part of the TRU, was completed in August 2025, and is expected to cut journey times between York and Manchester by 10 minutes, and Manchester and Leeds from 50 to 42 minutes. This upgrade is also projected to create over 5,000 jobs and support 6,500 new homes. As of August 2025, 25% of the full TransPennine route has been electrified.

Motorway upgrades in Yorkshire have also seen investment. The M62 received £161 million for its transformation into a smart motorway , with upgrades between Junctions 20 (Rochdale) and 25 (Brighouse) to an all-lane running smart motorway, aiming to provide 33% additional capacity. However, public consultations revealed concerns about the safety and effectiveness of variable speed limits on smart motorways, with 24% of respondents raising safety issues. The M1 has been upgraded to a smart motorway between Junctions 32-35a and 39-42 in Yorkshire. Concrete central barrier installation on the M1 between Junction 47 (Parlington) and A1(M) Junction 45 (Grange Moor) commenced in May 2025, with a 50mph speed limit in place for approximately 12 months. For the A1, upgrades aimed to complete the motorway corridor from Newcastle to London. Work on the A1 Leeming to Barton section was completed by 2017, creating a 3-lane motorway link. Planning is underway to upgrade the last non-motorway section between Redhouse and Darrington. Additionally, repairs to the A1's Wentbridge Viaduct and Wentedge Road Bridge, costing approximately £30 million, began in February 2023 and are expected to conclude in December 2025, causing ongoing disruption.

Regarding local road and bridge maintenance, Yorkshire and the Humber received over £171 million in local roads maintenance funding between 2022 and 2025, estimated to be sufficient to fill over 2 million potholes. Doncaster Council allocated between £3.5 million and £12.2 million for local highway maintenance from 2020 to 2025, with a significant 83-95% dedicated to preventative maintenance. Annually, the number of potholes repaired in Doncaster varied from 4,315 to 7,936. Rotherham Council invested £24 million in capital for its unclassified road network between 2020 and 2024, committing a further £12 million from 2024. These investments have reportedly improved the condition of unclassified roads, reducing the percentage of poor condition roads from 24% in 2015 to 11% by March 2025. Kirklees Council's capital spending on highways maintenance between 2023 and 2025 ranged, with 71-73% allocated to preventative measures, and pothole repairs fluctuating year-on-year. Notably, the pavement condition on the Strategic Road Network (SRN) in Yorkshire and the North East improved to 97.9% in 2023-24, making it the top-performing region for this indicator.

The cancellation of HS2's eastern leg to Leeds represents a profound departure from the original pledges and a significant setback for pan-Northern connectivity. This decision fundamentally undermines the vision of a "single economy across the North" and raises serious questions about central government's long-term commitment to fully integrate Yorkshire into a high-speed rail network. While some motorway upgrades have proceeded, public concerns regarding the safety of smart motorways highlight a potential disconnect between infrastructure development and public perception of benefit and risk. Furthermore, while local road maintenance funding is substantial in absolute terms, its fragmentation across various councils and the variability in reported pothole repairs and road conditions suggest an uneven impact of maintenance efforts within Yorkshire, indicating that not all areas are benefiting equally from these investments.

2.2 Job Growth & Economic Development in Yorkshire

The original pledges of the Northern Powerhouse initiative were ambitious, aiming to significantly increase Gross Value Added (GVA), stimulate job creation, and foster new business ventures across the North to rebalance the national economy and close the productivity gap. The NPIER projected the creation of between 850,000 and 1 million additional jobs and an increase of £97-118 billion in GVA by 2050.

An examination of actual outcomes in Yorkshire reveals a mixed performance against these ambitious targets.

GVA Growth: Across Yorkshire and the Humber, GVA growth stood at 26% between 2008 and 2018, which was lower than the UK average of 33% over the same period. Within Yorkshire, Leeds demonstrated a GVA of £26.2 billion in 2018, accounting for 47% of West Yorkshire's GVA and 21% of the regional total. Its growth rate of 28% from 2008-2018 matched West Yorkshire but remained below the UK average. Looking ahead, Leeds is projected to see an annual average growth of 1.9% in GVA between 2024 and 2027, aligning with the UK average but slightly surpassing the regional forecast of 1.7%. Despite this, Leeds's GVA per head is 13% above the national average, its overall productivity levels remain below it. Sheffield's GVA was £12.6 billion in 2018, with a growth of 23% from 2008-2018, lagging behind Leeds and the national average. South Yorkshire as a whole records the lowest GVA per hour worked among four comparable Mayoral Combined Authorities, indicating persistently low productivity levels, particularly in Sheffield. West Yorkshire's GVA per head is approximately 83% of the national average, and while growth has been in line with the national average since the financial crisis (0.3% annually), the productivity gap is projected to widen in the coming decades. In contrast, the East Riding of Yorkshire has shown strong performance, achieving the highest economic growth rate (3.5%) among individual council areas in Yorkshire, driven by over £1 billion in investment since 2020.

Job Growth: Across the North, official figures indicated 287,000 additional jobs created since the NPh's launch up to 2019. In Leeds, employment growth is predicted at 1.2% per year between 2024 and 2027, slightly outperforming the UK (1.1%) and regional (1%) averages. Leeds also had an employment rate of 71% from January to December 2022, higher than the West Yorkshire average. Sheffield's employment rate for those aged 16-64 was 73.1% in the year ending December 2023, a slight increase from the previous year, though still lower than the broader Yorkshire and The Humber rate of 74.2%. The number of employed individuals in Sheffield increased from 291,000 to 294,000 in the same period. However, Sheffield's unemployment rate, at 3.9% in late 2023, was higher than the regional average of 3.4%, and economic inactivity in the city increased to 24.7%. West Yorkshire businesses generally reported workforce stability, with 69% indicating no change, though 22% anticipated an increase. Manufacturing and public services sectors saw notable workforce growth. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) jobs in the North initially saw a 19.9% rise between 2015-16 and

2016-17, but subsequently fell by 23.7% between 2015/16 and 2017/18, a decline slightly more pronounced than the national average.

New Business Creation Rates: The North overall has seen an increase of over 150,000 private sector businesses since 2010, totaling over 1 million. However, Yorkshire and The Humber generally has one of the lower business birth rates in the UK, and the total number of businesses in the region slightly decreased by 1% from 193,000 in 2022 to 190,000 in 2024. Sheffield was recognized as the UK's best city outside London for startups in 2022. Despite this, its business birth rate of 39 per 10,000 population in 2020 lagged behind Manchester (61) and London (95). Nevertheless, South Yorkshire saw over 400 new tech companies formed in 2022, a 14% increase from 2021, and investment in South Yorkshire tech firms doubled in four years, reaching £52 million in 2022. Leeds was the second-largest enterprise centre in Britain after Birmingham in 2018, with 32,890 active enterprises, showing a 26% growth between 2013 and 2018, outperforming Great Britain and Yorkshire & Humber. Leeds's business birth rate was 5.1 per 1,000 residents in 2023, higher than the West Yorkshire average (4.7) but still below the national average (5.7). Across West Yorkshire, business births totaled 11,055 in 2021, which was lower than Greater Manchester (17,510) and the West Midlands (16,550). Overall, West Yorkshire's business birth rate (4.7 per 1,000 residents) falls short of the national average, suggesting a widening business density gap.

In summary, while the North has experienced overall job growth and an increase in private sector businesses, the GVA and productivity figures for much of Yorkshire, particularly Sheffield and West Yorkshire, continue to lag behind national averages. The projection that West Yorkshire's productivity gap is likely to widen suggests that the NPh has not yet fully delivered on its core promise of significantly closing the economic disparity. Furthermore, business creation rates in Yorkshire, despite some positive trends in specific sectors like tech in South Yorkshire, generally remain lower than national averages and those of leading cities like Manchester and London. This indicates a persistent challenge in fostering widespread entrepreneurship across the region. The initial rise followed by a significant decline in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) jobs in the North, coupled with the disproportionate public spending cuts highlighted earlier, directly contradicts the NPh's aim to attract substantial investment and rebalance the economy. These factors collectively suggest that external economic conditions and inconsistent central government policy have hindered the initiative's ability to achieve its full economic impact.

2.3 Public Transport Improvements in Yorkshire

The original pledges of the Northern Powerhouse initiative placed a strong emphasis on transforming public transport connectivity, improving journey times, and enhancing capacity and resilience, particularly between major Northern cities. The vision included the delivery of the full HS2 'Y' network, with a specific focus on connecting Leeds and Sheffield, and the establishment of a new TransNorth system. Improvements to local bus services and the introduction of new schemes were also part of this ambitious plan.

However, the reality of high-speed rail development has diverged significantly from these initial promises. As detailed previously, the eastern leg of HS2, crucial for connecting Leeds to the high-speed network, was cancelled, fundamentally altering the original vision for high-speed rail in Yorkshire. While the Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) promises a new line between Warrington and Yorkshire and the electrification of the Trans-Pennine Route, it does not encompass the comprehensive high-speed network originally envisioned by the NPh.

Despite this, the TransPennine Route Upgrade (TRU), an £11 billion government-funded project, has seen progress. The electrification of the Church Fenton to York rail line was completed in August 2025. This upgrade is anticipated to reduce journey times between York and Manchester by 10 minutes, and between Manchester and Leeds from 50 minutes to 42 minutes. It is also expected to generate over 5,000 jobs and support 6,500 new homes. As of August 2025, a quarter of the full TransPennine route has been electrified.

In Leeds, significant investment in public transport is underway. The government has committed £2.1 billion to West Yorkshire's public transport, including over £1 billion specifically for a new tram network in Leeds and Bradford, with construction ("spades in the ground") projected to begin by 2028. This tram project is expected to create 33,000 new jobs and contribute an additional £26 billion in economic growth to the region over the next decade. Furthermore, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) is set to bring all local bus services back under public control from 2027, aiming for a more integrated and efficient system.

Sheffield is also planning a significant overhaul of its city centre transport. The Sheffield City Centre Access and Movement Plan aims to reduce car usage by 20% by 2040, expanding pedestrianized areas, creating a "cycling inner ring road," and substantially improving bus transport, which will also come under public control from 2027. Key bus improvements include a "high-quality bus priority corridor" on Arundel Gate and a major redesign of the Pond Street bus station. The most ambitious element of the plan is the proposed extension of the Supertram network with a new "city centre loop" connecting Royal Hallamshire Hospital and Moorfoot.

For South Yorkshire's bus services, the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) outlines opportunities for significant enhancements aligned with the National Bus Strategy. The plan's goals include bolstering the local economy, addressing transport-related social exclusion (a critical issue given that 25.7% of South Yorkshire households, and 29% in Sheffield, do not have access to a car), improving public health, and contributing to net zero carbon targets. In York and North Yorkshire, franchising pilots for bus services are in progress, and North Yorkshire Council has an "Enhanced Partnership Plan and Schemes" dedicated to bus improvements.

The most significant discrepancy between promises and reality lies in the cancellation of HS2's eastern leg and the subsequent scaling back of Northern Powerhouse Rail. This fundamentally alters the original vision for high-speed rail in Yorkshire, meaning the promise of dramatically reduced inter-city journey times and a fully integrated high-speed network across the North has not been fulfilled. While substantial investment in local public transport, including new tram networks and bus improvements, is now being committed in West Yorkshire and Sheffield, these initiatives are largely more recent developments rather than core deliveries from the initial years of the NPh. The continued presence of "creaking Victorian rail infrastructure" and persistently slow average rail speeds between major Yorkshire cities, such as Leeds and Sheffield (39 mph) , indicate that the NPh's broader transport pledges have yet to be fully realized. This ongoing challenge in inter-city connectivity continues to hinder the aspiration of creating a truly "single economy" across the North.

3. The "Voices of Yorkshire": Is the Official Narrative True?

3.1 Local Business Leaders

The perspectives of local business leaders in Yorkshire on the Northern Powerhouse initiative present a nuanced picture, reflecting both cautious optimism and persistent skepticism regarding its impact on growth, talent attraction, and investment.

Chambers of Commerce and business forums across the North, including those in Yorkshire, have generally expressed support for the broader "Great North" initiative—a new mayoral-led partnership. They commend its ambition to unify the North, attract investment, and drive trade and innovation, welcoming the collaboration between local government, business, and academia as a means to achieve scale and visibility. These organizations have affirmed their readiness to contribute to ensure tangible outcomes for businesses. The NP11, representing Northern Local Enterprise Partnerships, believes that the North's significant economic potential—projected to include 15% growth and 850,000 jobs by 2050—can be unlocked through enhanced cooperation in strategic areas. This collaboration is seen as crucial for overcoming structural issues such as low exports and productivity, and for narrowing the regional economic divide. Furthermore, the NP11 identifies "tremendous opportunity" in developing a Net Zero carbon Northern economy through strategic clean growth investments.

Businesses in Leeds acknowledge the NPh's objective of bridging the economic gap with the South, fostering collaboration, and diversifying the economy. They have observed increased property values and rising demand in the technology and manufacturing sectors, which they attribute to the initiative. Leeds is recognized as a "thriving business centre," particularly in financial and legal services, with a strong focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, exemplified by the Leeds Innovation District. Business leaders in Leeds emphasize the necessity of "the right infrastructure and the confidence that government is supporting, not thwarting, their ambitions". The potential of HS2, even before its eastern leg cancellation, was cited as a driver for over £500 million in investment in Leeds's South Bank, including Burberry's decision to relocate its manufacturing operations there.

In Sheffield, the Sheffield City Region Enterprise Zone has successfully attracted major businesses such as Boeing, Siemens, and Rolls Royce. The new £660 million Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II) has garnered significant interest, with over 1,250 businesses expressing interest, including more than 500 from Yorkshire and the Humber, indicating a strong demand for early-stage finance for startups and scale-ups. Sheffield was notably rated as the UK's best city outside London for startups in 2022 , and investment in South Yorkshire tech firms has reportedly doubled in four years.

However, not all sentiments are positive. Some business leaders, such as Gordon Lawrence in the Yorkshire Post, have critically described the Northern Powerhouse as an "unrealistic gimmick," characterized by "political bonhomie and party opportunism" rather than genuine "economic clout." This critique suggests that the initiative was always destined to compete with the macroeconomic demands of other regions, with London and the populous South East consistently "pecking the choice bits". This viewpoint highlights a persistent skepticism about the NPh's capacity to fundamentally rebalance the economy against London's enduring dominance.

Regarding impact on growth, talent, and investment, the East Riding of Yorkshire has demonstrated tangible success, recording the highest economic growth rate (3.5%) among individual council areas in Yorkshire, attributed to over £1 billion in investment since 2020 facilitated by the Invest East Yorkshire team. Businesses in West Yorkshire show signs of stabilizing performance, with 38% anticipating growth in the next 12 months, the highest level since the post-COVID period in 2021. In terms of talent, businesses across the North are reportedly "tapping into fantastic talent and highly skilled graduates from prominent universities," fostering a vibrant environment for innovation. The NPh's stated aim is to enable talent to flourish within the knowledge economy. For investment, the NPIF has supported 18,000 businesses and 186,000 jobs, with an expected additional £6 billion in turnover. It specifically targets finance gaps compared to London and the South East and aims to encourage

entrepreneurship. The North attracted £514 million in venture investment in 2022, a notable increase from £170 million in 2021 and £312 million in 2020. However, this figure pales in comparison to London, which attracted £14.6 billion in the same year.
The collective perspective from Yorkshire's business leaders is therefore mixed. While there are clear positive sentiments and some demonstrable benefits, particularly in specific sectors (e.g., tech, green economy) and localized areas (e.g., East Riding), the overall picture is one of cautious progress rather than transformative change. The "unrealistic gimmick" critique underscores a lingering doubt about the initiative's ability to fundamentally shift the economic landscape. The significant disparity in venture capital funding between London and the North further highlights the ongoing challenge in attracting substantial investment, despite the efforts of initiatives like the NPIF. This indicates that while the NPh has fostered some growth and collaboration, it has not yet fully delivered on its promise of creating a truly rebalanced economy that benefits all parts of Yorkshire equally.

3.2 Community Activists & Local Organizations

The voices of community activists and local organizations in Yorkshire offer a critical counter-narrative to official pronouncements, often highlighting the disparities and shortcomings of the Northern Powerhouse initiative, particularly concerning local empowerment, social justice, and environmental sustainability.
Local Empowerment and Accountability: IPPR North, a prominent think tank dedicated to Northern issues, strongly argues that centralized government has "failed all our regions" by exacerbating inequalities. While acknowledging the NPh agenda's recognition of the North's potential, they contend it needed to evolve from its "initially narrow premise" to be truly effective. IPPR North advocates for the devolution of genuine power to England's regions, towns, and cities, with a specific priority for the North, and emphasizes the crucial need for greater transparency and accountability within the devolution agenda. The People's Powerhouse, a grassroots organization, stresses that the "strength of the North lies in its unity, its people, and its purpose," and actively works to ensure that development reflects "the realities of everyday life" and that "no one is left on the sidelines".
A significant concern raised is that local planning and decision-making processes are often "removed from the immediate concerns of localities," thereby "decimating the capacity of localities to shape their communities." This detachment is seen as fundamentally altering the relationship between citizens and the state. Furthermore, public sentiment indicates a "strong desire for devolution but no great love for a mayor," evidenced by low turnout in combined authority mayoral elections, suggesting a disconnect between central government-driven devolution models and local public engagement or preferences. Academic research has also explored how democratic engagement and community involvement could be more effectively integrated to link local development with citizens' interests, proposing alternative models for housing and transport that prioritize community input.
Social Justice Concerns: IPPR North's analysis reveals stark social justice implications. Since the NPh's introduction in 2014, an additional 200,000 children in the North have fallen into poverty, bringing the total to 800,000. They also point to a larger percentage decrease in public sector employment in the North compared to London and the South East. The Fawcett Society's research highlights a persistent gender equality gap in the Northern Powerhouse region, with women occupying only 28% of leadership roles. There is concern that, without deliberate action, the concentration of power in combined authorities and mayoral roles could "risk shutting women out of key decisions" regarding regional development.

The "Woman of the North" report further underscores these inequalities, detailing how women in the North face disproportionate challenges, including working longer hours for less pay, experiencing poorer health outcomes, and undertaking more unpaid caring responsibilities. It notes a concerning trend of decreasing life expectancy in some deprived Northern areas and highlights the pervasive issue of child poverty. The report explicitly calls for central government intervention, alongside mayoral efforts, to improve these outcomes. Critiques also suggest that increased connectivity from projects like HS2, while economically beneficial, could lead to gentrification, driving up living costs and marginalizing existing Northern residents, potentially creating "dual cities" or "divided cities" and "socially isolated areas". Some argue that HS2, despite its stated aim, functions as a "London centric project" that exacerbates the North-South divide rather than bridging it. The multi-dimensional problem of social exclusion in transport, rooted in both individual circumstances and systemic societal structures, means that simply improving train speed or capacity does not resolve the fundamental inability of many to access essential opportunities like employment, education, and healthcare.

Environmental Concerns: Environmental groups in Yorkshire acknowledge the North's significant natural assets and its potential to become a "powerhouse for Nature." Marian Spain, Chief Executive of Natural England, advocates for investment in nature to create desirable living and working environments and foster green careers. The "Nature North" partnership is actively pursuing initiatives for nature recovery and green investment. Transport for the North (TfN) recognizes the critical importance of decarbonizing the economy and transport network as part of the NPh vision, viewing the achievement of net zero as both an economic opportunity and an environmental imperative.

West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin's "green economy vision" aims for a net-zero carbon economy by 2038, linking climate action with economic growth, job creation, and improved lives through initiatives like electric/hydrogen buses, public transport enhancements, and large-scale home retrofit programs. West Yorkshire's green technologies and services sector is valued at £8 billion, comprising over 3,000 businesses. Bradford Council, having declared a Climate Emergency in 2019, is investing in energy-efficient street lighting and reducing its own buildings' environmental footprint. The district, with its low CO_2 emissions and strong environmental sector, is projected to see clean growth add £11 billion to the Leeds City Region economy and create 100,000 jobs. Water Resources North aims to lead in water resource management for Yorkshire and the North East, supporting sustainable growth and resilience against climate change. However, groups like CPRE West Yorkshire, while supporting climate action, raise concerns about "inappropriate developments" such as the Walshaw Moor wind farm in protected landscapes. They advocate for rigorous environmental impact assessments that prioritize habitat protection, emphasizing a vision for a low-carbon countryside rich in wildlife and accessible to all.

The perspectives from community and social justice groups often paint a starker picture than official narratives, suggesting that while economic growth metrics may show some progress, they can mask or even exacerbate deep-seated inequalities. The criticisms indicate that the NPh, in its current form, has not adequately addressed issues of poverty, gender inequality, and equitable access to opportunities across all communities. The perceived top-down nature of the initiative is seen as limiting genuine local empowerment. Similarly, while environmental groups acknowledge the potential for green growth, they also express significant concerns about balancing development with robust environmental protection. This collective feedback points to a notable gap between the NPh's stated inclusive goals and the lived experiences and priorities of many residents across Yorkshire.

3.3 Local Politicians & Regional Mayors

Local politicians and regional mayors in Yorkshire play a pivotal role in the Northern Powerhouse initiative, acting as key conduits between central government policy and local implementation. Their statements often reflect the opportunities and frustrations inherent in the devolution process, particularly concerning powers, funding, and their relationship with Westminster.

Powers and Funding: In South Yorkshire, the 2015 Devolution Deal provided new powers for economic development and an additional £30 million annually, earmarked for infrastructure, transport, skills, and housing. Dan Jarvis, while previously Mayor of South Yorkshire, consistently advocated for "proper support to individuals, businesses and councils," urging central government to grant local leaders "the powers and resources we need to protect our people and our economy." He also called for Metro Mayors to be included in central decision-making processes. A majority of Metro Mayors across England have expressed dissatisfaction with the sufficiency of existing devolution arrangements, prioritizing further devolution of powers and increased investment in transport, education, and skills. In response, the government is working to introduce "Integrated Settlements" for Mayoral Combined Authorities, including South Yorkshire, from the 2026/27 financial year. These settlements aim to consolidate over 20 funding streams, providing Mayors with greater flexibility in spending to foster growth and deliver better outcomes.

In West Yorkshire, Mayor Tracy Brabin, re-elected in May 2024, leads the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) with an £866 million budget. The 2020 devolution deal allocated £1.14 billion over 30 years, delivered through annual payments of £38 million. However, a significant concern is that these payments are not inflation-linked, meaning their real value will diminish over time. WYCA manages a devolved transport budget and has initiated the process of bringing local bus services back under public control from 2027. The Mayor also possesses strategic planning powers, albeit requiring the consent of constituent authorities, and can establish mayoral development areas for economic regeneration. In May 2021, the powers of the West Yorkshire police and crime commissioner were transferred to the Mayor, and further "level 4" devolution powers were announced in February 2024. Mayor Brabin has actively championed West Yorkshire's strategy to achieve a net-zero carbon economy by 2038, emphasizing its potential to drive economic growth and job creation.

For York and North Yorkshire, a 30-year devolution deal, including an investment fund exceeding £500 million, was announced in August 2022, leading to the establishment of the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority (YNYCA) in February 2024 and the election of its first mayor in May 2024. Mayor David Skaith emphasizes the importance of "shifting power closer to the people" through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. He highlights a recent £600,000 investment in 21 village halls and community buildings, asserting that this bill will empower local communities to protect assets like pubs, high streets, and grassroots sports clubs. The bill also grants new licensing and planning powers and the ability for mayors to accelerate housing and infrastructure development.

Relationship with Central Government: The relationship between Yorkshire's local politicians and central government has been marked by a tension between local aspirations and central control. A notable example is the rejection of the "One Yorkshire" proposal in 2017. Despite being supported in principle by 17 out of 20 council leaders across the county, ministers dismissed it on the grounds that such a large region did not constitute a "coherent economic area". This decision underscored central government's continued top-down authority over the

geographical scope and form of devolution, overriding a locally-driven consensus.
South Yorkshire leaders, while proceeding with their existing deal, have expressed a persistent intent to pursue a wider Yorkshire deal in the future, indicating an ongoing desire for broader regional governance despite central government's preference for smaller, city-region specific arrangements. Mayors across the North generally agree that central government's approach to English devolution needs to be more "systematic/comprehensive" and that "levelling up" Metro Mayor powers is a positive step. They consistently call for greater clarity, certainty, and coherence from central government regarding the devolution agenda. Statements from mayors often implicitly convey a desire for greater autonomy and a recognition of local needs, suggesting a historical perception that central government has not always adequately "protected or invested in what matters most to them [the communities]".
The devolution deals have indeed brought some powers and funding to Yorkshire's mayoral combined authorities, but significant disparities and limitations persist. The central government's decision to reject the "One Yorkshire" model, despite strong local support, demonstrates a continued top-down control over the devolution process, potentially fragmenting regional efforts and hindering a more unified approach to development. The consistent advocacy from mayors for more powers, greater fiscal autonomy, and a more coherent and systematic approach from central government suggests that current arrangements are often insufficient to truly address regional imbalances and local needs effectively. The non-inflation-linked nature of some funding streams also means a real-terms decline in resources over time, posing challenges for long-term planning and sustained impact. This dynamic indicates that while progress has been made, the journey towards genuine, comprehensive devolution in Yorkshire remains incomplete, with a persistent power imbalance between local and central government.

4. A Blueprint for a Better Way: A New Model for Devolution

4.1 Alternative Devolution Models and Proposals

The current UK devolution landscape is characterized by a gradual and often asymmetrical transfer of powers, primarily to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and more recently, to English regions through various combined authority models. Historically, the UK has operated with two primary models of devolution: the "reserved powers" model, where only specific matters are listed as exclusive competence of the UK Parliament, with all other matters defaulting to the devolved institution (used in Scotland and now all three devolved nations); and the "conferred powers" model, where only specific competencies are explicitly passed to the devolved institution. The reserved powers model is generally considered to grant greater autonomy.
Several academic papers and think tanks propose alternative and deeper devolution models for the UK, particularly for England, to address persistent regional inequalities and enhance local governance. There is a strong recommendation for the UK government to articulate a clear "Devolution Policy for the Union" that reconciles existing differences and fosters stronger relationships across all parts of the UK, including an expansion of English devolution.
The Local Government Association (LGA) and the Reform think tank (now Re:State) advocate for "place-based approaches" to public services. This model emphasizes that local government should lead in addressing local needs, with central government adopting an "enabling

environment" role rather than imposing standardized, national-level practices. They criticize the "New Public Management" approaches for their tendency to standardize, which hinders local flexibility and responsiveness to community needs.

IPPR North, a leading voice for Northern development, proposes a significant shift towards devolving genuine power to England's regions, towns, and cities, with a clear priority for the North. They argue that the centralized nature of UK governance has actively perpetuated inequalities across regions. A key component of their proposal is fiscal devolution, suggesting that local leaders should have the power to raise and spend funds locally. They advocate for starting with a "visitor levy" as a straightforward first step, and then progressing towards deeper, fair fiscal devolution that includes "distributionary mechanisms" to ensure equity across regions. Their core argument is encapsulated in the idea that "wherever taxes are controlled, power lies".

The Centre for Cities focuses its recommendations on "levelling up" by enhancing the performance of the UK's largest cities. Their proposals include increasing adult education spending, ending austerity for local government service provision, bringing all bus services under public management through franchising powers (and extending these powers to all areas), and substantial investment in new transport infrastructure, specifically recommending an additional £31 billion for priority cities outside London. They also advocate for a £5 billion City Centre Productivity Fund and directing increased Research & Development (R&D) spending to areas where innovation is already thriving, particularly large cities due to their scale. They emphasize that mayoral combined authorities should be considered permanent constitutional entities, supported by a clear legislative framework for devolved powers.

The UK2070 Commission, in its analysis, concluded that deeper devolution, particularly the transfer of greater powers and decision-making authority, is fundamental to rebalancing the UK economy. They recommend that devolution be elevated to a top-five government priority, pursued with a coherent and systematic approach to establish devolution deals across all of England within a five-year timeframe. They distinguish between genuine devolution and mere delegation, advocating for real transfers of power in critical policy areas such as transport, education and skills, housing, and health and social care. The commission also calls for a clear "devolution framework" outlining the range of government powers and funding suitable for devolution, accessible as local capacity and competence develop, and stresses the need for a national dialogue on the benefits of devolution.

4.2 Genuine Fiscal Autonomy for Regions

A critical limitation of the current devolution model in the UK, particularly for English regions like Yorkshire, is the limited fiscal autonomy granted to local authorities. Currently, UK councils raise only approximately 25% of their own revenue, with the vast majority of their funding supplied by central government. This heavy reliance on central funding results in restricted financial control and a persistent dependency on Westminster, undermining the spirit of genuine local self-governance. This contrasts sharply with many other OECD countries, where local taxes often contribute over a third of local expenditure, and local taxation systems are typically diversified, rather than relying predominantly on a single local tax.

Comparative models from other countries offer insights into more robust forms of fiscal autonomy. For instance, Spanish autonomies such as the Basque Country and Catalonia operate under a "Concierto Económico" system. This unique arrangement allows local governments to collect taxes independently and then contribute an agreed-upon share to the central government, thereby granting them significantly greater fiscal autonomy than is currently seen in the UK's devolved nations.

Proposals for enhancing fiscal autonomy in the UK are gaining traction. IPPR North argues that the current system is "broken," with taxes raised in regions like the North often "extracted by Treasury and spent on 'sugar rush growth'" in London and the South East. They advocate for local leaders to possess the power to raise and spend funds locally. A practical first step suggested is the implementation of a "visitor levy" (a small charge on tourist accommodation), which is common in other countries and could provide local areas with a new revenue stream without directly impacting central government finances. Beyond this, IPPR North calls for deeper fiscal devolution, coupled with "distributionary mechanisms" to ensure fairness and prevent exacerbating existing regional inequalities.
The Institute for Government also recommends strengthening the UK's fiscal framework, urging the Chancellor to establish a comprehensive fiscal strategy with clear targets. They highlight the existing mechanism of "block grant adjustments" for the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, which are used to account for changes in funding when tax and welfare powers are transferred. This mechanism could potentially be adapted for English regions to facilitate greater fiscal responsibility. The Local Government Association (LGA) implicitly supports greater financial flexibility for local leaders, arguing that they should be "liberated to be able to do what is best for their place," which necessitates more control over financial resources.

4.3 Greater Legislative Power for Regional Bodies

The current framework for English devolution, as outlined in the government's English Devolution White Paper (December 2024), establishes a three-tier system. Level 3 deals, typically involving mayoral combined authorities, offer the most comprehensive package of powers, covering areas such as transport, housing, and skills, with a directly elected leader providing overall vision and accountability. However, there is a strong consensus among policy experts and local leaders that these powers need to be expanded significantly to enable regional bodies to truly address local needs effectively.
Proposals for expanding legislative power for regional bodies in the UK are extensive. Parliamentary committees have recommended that English devolution to combined authorities and mayors should be expanded, granting them greater powers. The Centre for Cities advocates for a broad transfer of powers, encompassing transport, housing, planning, climate change adaptation, Net Zero initiatives, energy, nature recovery, skills development, strategic investment, and even responsibilities related to police and crime, and fire and rescue services, as well as health and social care.
The UK2070 Commission explicitly calls for the "real devolution" of powers, distinguishing it from mere delegation. They identify key policy areas for such transfers: transport, education and skills, housing, and health and social care. Furthermore, the commission recommends the establishment of a clear "devolution framework" that systematically outlines the range of government powers and funding streams suitable for devolution. This framework would allow local areas to access additional powers as their capacity and competence develop, fostering a more progressive and responsive model of governance.
IPPR North specifically urges that the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, currently before Parliament, should be strengthened to include "fiscal levers for Mayors" and stronger regional planning powers. This emphasis on both financial and legislative autonomy is crucial, as the ability to raise and control local funds is intrinsically linked to the effective exercise of legislative power, allowing regions to tailor policies and investments to their specific

contexts and priorities.

4.4 The Principle of Power Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity is a fundamental concept in multi-level governance, asserting that social and political issues should be addressed at the most immediate or local level capable of resolving them effectively. Under this principle, a central authority assumes a subsidiary function, intervening only when tasks cannot be adequately performed at a more local level. It inherently prioritizes the allocation and exercise of governmental functions at the lowest possible level, thereby safeguarding the autonomy of individuals and smaller communities. Furthermore, subsidiarity implies a duty for higher levels of authority to first support and assist lower levels before directly intervening. It also incorporates a proportionality aspect, dictating that any intervention by a higher authority must be necessary and limited to what is required to achieve the objectives, minimizing encroachment on local autonomy.

In the context of UK governance and its application to Yorkshire, the principle of subsidiarity would mean that decisions concerning Yorkshire's economy, infrastructure, social welfare, and environmental management should primarily be made by its regional and local bodies. Central government intervention would only be justified if a higher level could demonstrably achieve the objectives more efficiently or effectively due to issues of scale or broader impact.

The current "top-down" approach to devolution and the pervasive central fiscal control, as evidenced by local councils raising only a quarter of their own revenue and facing significant austerity cuts , stand in direct tension with the principle of subsidiarity. For subsidiarity to be genuinely applied, local bodies in Yorkshire would require substantially greater fiscal autonomy and legislative powers. This would enable them to develop and implement policies tailored to local needs and priorities, rather than being constrained by "one-size-fits-all" mandates from Westminster.

Proposals for deeper fiscal devolution, such as granting local authorities the power to levy visitor taxes or retain a greater share of locally generated revenues, directly align with the principle of subsidiarity by empowering local decision-makers to fund and address local priorities with local resources. Similarly, expanding the legislative powers of regional bodies in areas like planning, transport, and skills, as advocated by various think tanks and local leaders , would enable them to create policies that are truly responsive to the unique characteristics and needs of Yorkshire's diverse communities.

The rejection of the "One Yorkshire" devolution model by central government, despite a broad consensus among local leaders in Yorkshire , can be viewed as a direct contravention of the subsidiarity principle. This decision effectively overrode a locally preferred and coherent regional governance structure, demonstrating a central authority's preference for a fragmented, centrally-orchestrated approach over a locally-driven, comprehensive one. Embracing the principle of subsidiarity would necessitate a fundamental shift in the central-local relationship, moving towards a system where local and regional bodies are genuinely empowered to lead their own development, with central government acting as an enabler and strategic partner rather than a primary controller.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The "Northern Powerhouse" initiative, launched with ambitious goals of rebalancing the UK economy and fostering a vibrant North, has yielded a complex and often contradictory reality for

Yorkshire. While the official narrative emphasized transformative investment, enhanced connectivity, and genuine devolution, the lived experience across Yorkshire's diverse ridings, towns, cities, and rural regions reveals a significant gap between rhetoric and tangible outcomes.

The initial vision, rooted in agglomeration theory, inherently risked concentrating benefits in major urban centres, potentially overlooking the needs of smaller towns and rural areas. This structural bias contributed to uneven impacts within Yorkshire. While some transport infrastructure projects, notably the TransPennine Route Upgrade, have progressed, the critical cancellation of HS2's eastern leg to Leeds fundamentally undermined the promise of high-speed rail integration for Yorkshire, thereby limiting the potential for a truly "single economy" across the North. Economic data, while showing some growth in GVA and business creation, indicates that Yorkshire generally lags national averages in productivity, and the projected widening of the productivity gap in West Yorkshire suggests the core rebalancing objective remains unfulfilled. The decline in FDI jobs in the North after an initial surge, coupled with disproportionate austerity cuts, further highlights how inconsistent central government policy has hindered the initiative's economic impact.

The "Voices of Yorkshire" underscore these discrepancies. Business leaders, while recognizing some investment and growth, particularly in specific sectors and localized areas like the East Riding, express a cautious optimism tempered by skepticism about the initiative's overall effectiveness in fundamentally altering the economic landscape. Community activists and social justice groups present a starker picture, pointing to increased child poverty, persistent gender inequality in leadership, and concerns about gentrification. Their critique highlights that economic growth metrics often fail to capture or even exacerbate deep-seated social inequalities, and that devolution, in its current form, has not delivered genuine local empowerment. Environmental groups, while supportive of green growth ambitions, also voice concerns about balancing development with robust environmental protection.

Local politicians and regional mayors in Yorkshire, despite gaining some devolved powers and funding, consistently advocate for greater autonomy. The rejection of the "One Yorkshire" model, despite local consensus, exemplifies central government's continued top-down control over the form and scope of devolution. The non-inflation-linked nature of some funding streams also means a real-terms decline in resources, limiting long-term planning and sustained impact. This collective feedback confirms that the stated goals of the Northern Powerhouse have not been met uniformly across Yorkshire, and that significant disparities in treatment and benefit persist. The initiative has delivered some measurable improvements, but it has also been characterized by political rhetoric and unfulfilled promises, leaving many areas feeling that it has not tangibly helped their lives in the ways initially claimed.

Recommendations for a More Effective Devolution Model in Yorkshire:

To bridge the gap between aspiration and reality, and to ensure that future regional development truly benefits all communities in Yorkshire, a new model for devolution is imperative. This model should be guided by the principle of subsidiarity and incorporate the following actionable recommendations:

1. **Embrace Genuine Fiscal Autonomy:** Central government must move beyond the current model where local authorities are heavily reliant on central funding. This requires granting Yorkshire's regional and local bodies greater powers to raise and retain their own revenues, mirroring successful international models like Spain's "Concierto Económico." Implementing mechanisms such as a regional "visitor levy" could be a practical first step, followed by deeper fiscal devolution with clear "distributionary mechanisms" to ensure fairness across all parts of Yorkshire, from its major cities to its rural communities. This

would empower local leaders to make investment decisions tailored to local needs without constant central government oversight.
2. **Expand and Systematize Legislative Powers:** The current tiered devolution framework should be systematically expanded to grant Yorkshire's mayoral combined authorities and local councils greater legislative powers across a broader range of policy areas. This includes not only transport, housing, and skills, but also planning, climate change adaptation, energy, nature recovery, and aspects of health and social care. A clear, statutory "devolution framework" should be established, outlining the full scope of powers available for transfer, ensuring consistency and predictability in the devolution process.
3. **Prioritize Pan-Yorkshire Integration:** Central government should reconsider its stance on broader regional governance structures. The rejection of the "One Yorkshire" model, despite local consensus, has fragmented regional efforts. A more effective approach would involve supporting locally-driven initiatives for pan-Yorkshire collaboration, recognizing that a unified regional voice can more effectively attract investment and address shared challenges, while respecting the diverse identities of its sub-regions.
4. **Ensure Equitable Investment and Accountability:** Future infrastructure and economic development investments must explicitly address the historical disparities within Yorkshire. This requires a transparent allocation of funds that prioritizes areas with lower productivity and higher social needs, rather than solely focusing on agglomeration in core cities. Robust, independent evaluation mechanisms should be put in place to track the real-world impact of investments on GVA, job quality, and social inclusion across all of Yorkshire's ridings and communities, ensuring accountability for delivering tangible benefits.
5. **Foster Bottom-Up Engagement:** To counter the perception of "top-down" devolution, future initiatives must prioritize genuine community involvement and democratic engagement. This means empowering local organizations and community groups to shape priorities and deploy resources, ensuring that development reflects the "realities of everyday life" for all residents. This includes addressing concerns about gentrification and ensuring that economic growth translates into improved quality of life and reduced inequalities for all, not just a select few.

By adopting a model of devolution that truly embodies the principle of subsidiarity, granting genuine fiscal and legislative autonomy, and prioritizing equitable development across all its diverse areas, the "Northern Powerhouse" can move beyond rhetoric and deliver measurable, positive change for the people of Yorkshire.

Works cited

1. Reinvigorating the Northern Powerhouse? Recommendations for ..., https://www.regionalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NPh-Policy-Briefing.pdf 2. Making Sense of the Northern Powerhouse - OpenEdition Journals, https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/5497 3. Chancellor: 'We need a Northern powerhouse' - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-we-need-a-northern-powerhouse 4. Chancellor on the pathway to a Northern Powerhouse - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-on-the-pathway-to-a-northern-powerhouse 5. The Northern Powerhouse: One Agenda, One Economy, One North - GOV.UK, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a817e6ce5274a2e87dbdedc/the-northern-powerhouse-tagged.pdf 6. The Northern Powerhouse: One Agenda, One Economy, One North - Transport for the North | TfN,

https://www.transportforthenorth.com/wp-content/uploads/A-report-on-the-Northern-Transport-Strategy-1.pdf 7. The Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review 2023 update - Transport for the North | TfN, https://transportforthenorth.com/wp-content/uploads/NPIER-2023-Summary-Report-For-Final-Publication.pdf 8. PEG0053 - Evidence on Powerhouses and engines: Government policy and regional growth inquiry - UK Parliament Committees, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/68184/pdf/ 9. The Northern Powerhouse: 5 years in | IPPR, https://www.ippr.org/articles/the-northern-powerhouse-5-years-in 10. Chancellor on building a Northern Powerhouse - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-on-building-a-northern-powerhouse 11. What now for the North? Realities, myths and collective intelligence in the northern powerhouse | IPPR, https://www.ippr.org/articles/what-now-for-the-north-realities-myths-and-collective-intelligence-in-the-northern-powerhouse 12. Northern England: Opportunity and Productivity - Hansard - UK Parliament, https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2017-01-12/debates/8F357833-F6D4-40BF-8364-D527CAD0DF5C/NorthernEnglandOpportunityAndProductivity 13. Rebalancing the central-local relationship: achieving a bottom-up ..., https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/legal-studies/article/rebalancing-the-centrallocal-relationship-achieving-a-bottomup-approach-to-localism-in-england/A64510E638341B6E8B5DE4225C757227 14. UDE0033 - Evidence on The Union and devolution - UK Parliament Committees, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/59548/html/ 15. The metagovernance of English devolution - Taylor & Francis Online, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03003930.2017.1359165 16. The Northern Powerhouse & Devolution | Alliance MBS - The University of Manchester, https://www.alliancembs.manchester.ac.uk/research/funded-projects/alliance-projects/the-northern-powerhouse-and-devolution/ 17. SERC Policy Paper 14 - Centre for Economic Performance, https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/sercpp014.pdf 18. RDE0080 - Evidence on Regional imbalances in the UK, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/105375/html/ 19. New Northern Powerhouse Rail analysis shows benefits across the ..., https://www.transportforthenorth.com/press-release/pan-regional-benefits-of-northern-powerhouse-rail-revealed-in-new-analysis/ 20. Manchester and Rotherham help to close North-South divide, study suggests, https://www.business-live.co.uk/economic-development/manchester-rotherham-help-close-north-31973219 21. Northern Powerhouse reaches five year milestone - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northern-powerhouse-reaches-five-year-milestone 22. SPOTLIGHT: THE NORTHERN POWERHOUSE INVESTMENT FUND - British Business Bank, https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/sites/g/files/sovrnj166/files/2022-11/BBB-Northern-Powerhouse-Report_SINGLE-PAGES.pdf 23. Power of 10: Our impact in Yorkshire & the Humber | British Business Bank, https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/about/research-and-publications/10-year-impact-report/yorkshire-humber 24. Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II – Sheffield Roadshow - British Business Bank, https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/news-and-events/news/northern-powerhouse-investment-fund-ii-sheffield-roadshow 25. How NPIF II is skyrocketing the Northern technology agenda - British Business Bank, https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/news-and-events/news/how-npif-ii-skyrocketing-northern-technology-agenda 26. Northern Powerhouse strategy, https://www.warrington.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-04/CD%204.110%20%20%20The%20Northern%20Powerhouse%20Strategy%20%28November%202016%29.pdf 27. UK Infrastructure: 10-year Strategy - Hansard, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-19/debates/EE716619-BE7D-4FA3-9EA3-A7B3D67DD6EE/UKInfrastructure10-yearStrategy 28. West Yorkshire Combined Authority Rail Strategy, https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/media/12101/wyca-rail-strategy-final-version.pdf 29. Northern Powerhouse Rail | Transport for the North, https://www.transportforthenorth.com/northern-powerhouse-rail/ 30. Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands, https://www.hwa.uk.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Integrated-rail-plan-for-the-north-and-midlands-Nov-2021.pdf 31. High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill 2024-25 - UK Parliament, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10066/CBP-10066.pdf 32. Project rescoping: Phase Two cancellation - HS2, https://www.hs2.org.uk/in-your-area/assistance-for-property-owners/project-rescoping-phase-two-cancellation/ 33. High Speed 2 - Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_Speed_2 34. The Spending Review and the North: is high-speed rail back on track? - North East Bylines, https://northeastbylines.co.uk/news/transport/the-spending-review-and-the-north-is-high-speed-rail-back-on-track/ 35. Rail boost for the North: Transpennine upgrade one step closer - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/rail-boost-for-the-north-transpennine-upgrade-one-step-closer 36. £11bn Transpennine Route Upgrade reaches major milestone - The York Press, https://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/25366046.11bn-transpennine-route-upgrade-reaches-major-milestone/ 37. Connecting the Northern Powerhouse - Historic England, https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/debate/recent/northern-powerhouse/connecting-northern-powerhouse/ 38. Smart Motorways Programme - National Highways - Citizen Space, https://nationalhighways.citizenspace.com/he/m62-junctions-20-to-25-sm-consultation/supporting_documents/Response%20to%20Statutory%20Instrument%20Consultation.pdf 39. Major roads investment in the north east and Yorkshire - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-roads-investment-in-the-north-east-and-yorkshire 40. ALR0013 - Evidence on All lane running - UK Parliament Committees, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/63742/html/ 41. West Yorkshire motorway safety and maintenance schemes - National Highways, https://nationalhighways.co.uk/our-roads/yorkshire-and-north-east/west-yorkshire-motorway-safety-and-maintenance-schemes/ 42. A1 Wentbridge Viaduct and Wentedge Road Bridge - National Highways, https://nationalhighways.co.uk/our-roads/yorkshire-and-north-east/a1-wentbridge-viaduct-and-wentedge-road-bridge/ 43. Spending Review and Autumn Budget 2021 - GOV.UK, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61a151db8fa8f50384489b2c/Regions_and_Nations_Factsheets.pdf 44. Annual Local Highway Maintenance Transparency Report - City of Doncaster Council, https://www.doncaster.gov.uk/services/transport-streets-parking/annual-local-highway-maintenance-transparency-report 45. Local highways maintenance transparency report | Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/4551/local-highways-maintenance-transparency-funding-report-pdf- 46. Local Highways Maintenance Transparency Report | Kirklees Council, https://www.kirklees.gov.uk/beta/delivering-services/pdf/local-highways-maintenance-transparency-report.pdf 47. Office of Rail and Road | National Highways Regional Performance Summaries - ORR, https://www.orr.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/national-highways-regional-performance-summ aries-2023-24.pdf 48. Gross Value Added and Productivity | Leeds Observatory, https://observatory.leeds.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/1-GVA-and-productivity.pdf 49. Joint-Strategic-Assessment-2024 - Leeds Observatory, https://observatory.leeds.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Joint-Strategic-Assessment-2024-FINAL.pdf 50. Economic Strategy Evidence Pack - West Yorkshire Combined Authority, https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/media/12097/240314-economic-strategy-evidence-pack.pdf 51. Growth Plan: Analysis and Workshop Summary - South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, https://governance.southyorkshire-ca.gov.uk/documents/s15952/10i.%20Appendix%20A%20-%20Evidence%20Base.pdf 52. East Riding of Yorkshire obtains highest economic growth in the region with £1 billion in investment since 2020, https://www.eastriding.gov.uk/news/article/?entry=2892 53. Executive Summary - West Yorkshire Combined Authority, https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/media/11997/full-indicator-report-final.pdf 54. Sheffield's employment, unemployment and economic inactivity - ONS, https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/E08000019/ 55. West Yorkshire Business Survey 2024, https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/media/djrnkwuz/west-yorkshire-business-survey-2024.pdf 56. THE SOUTH YORKSHIRE TECH 100 - TEAM SY, https://weareteamsy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/The-South-Yorkshire-Tech-100-Nov22.pdf 57. UK business; activity, size and location: 2024 - Office for National Statistics, https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/business/activitysizeandlocation/bulletins/ukbusinessactivitysizeandlocation/2024 58. business formation and the level of entrepreneurship - Leeds Observatory, https://observatory.leeds.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/3-Business-formation.pdf 59. On track to prosperity: Great Northern Rail - IPPR, https://www.ippr.org/articles/on-track-to-prosperity 60. Mass Transit: West Yorkshire - Hansard - UK Parliament, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-10/debates/9B5D6819-9A54-41F0-A907-A94636113E45/MassTransitWestYorkshire 61. Mayor of West Yorkshire | Institute for Government, https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/mayor-west-yorkshire 62. Sheffield 2040: A city centre transport revolution, https://www.sheffieldtribune.co.uk/sheffield-2040-a-city-centre-transport-revolution/ 63. SYMCA Bus Service Improvement Plan Refresh 2024 - South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, https://www.southyorkshire-ca.gov.uk/getmedia/e0ad0cc7-4587-4420-a41a-95403ac45f93/14ii-Appendix-B-BSIP-Document-compressed.pdf 64. Transport for the North's response to today's Spending Review, https://www.transportforthenorth.com/press-release/transport-for-the-norths-response-to-todays-spending-review/ 65. Bus service changes and news - North Yorkshire Council, https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/roads-parking-and-travel/public-transport/bus-service-changes-and-news 66. Northern business and creative coalition backs The Great North to unlock investment, https://investnewcastle.com/news/investment/northern-business-and-creative-coalition-backs-the-great-north-to-unlock-investment/ 67. Northern Powerhouse: - The NP11, https://www.np11.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/20191108_NP11_Energy-and-Clean-Growth-Report_FINAL_Digitalv2.pdf 68. Understanding the Northern Powerhouse Initiative - The Lease Negotiator, https://theleasenegotiator.com/understanding-the-northern-powerhouse-initiative 69.

Government boost for Northern Powerhouse - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-boost-for-northern-powerhouse 70. Written evidence from Leeds City Region - UK Parliament Committees, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/68751/pdf/ 71. David Higgins speech – Northern Powerhouse conference, Manchester - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/david-higgins-speech-northern-powerhouse-conference-manchester 72. Northern Powerhouse Enterprise Zones attracting a bigger share of jobs and investment, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northern-powerhouse-enterprise-zones-attracting-a-bigger-share-of-jobs-and-investment 73. The Northern Powerhouse project was an unrealistic gimmick - Yorkshire Post Letters, https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/opinion/letters/the-northern-powerhouse-project-was-an-unrealistic-gimmick-yorkshire-post-letters-4846446 74. PEG0026 - Evidence on Powerhouses and engines: Government policy and regional growth inquiry - UK Parliament Committees, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/67539/html/ 75. The Northern Powerhouse: an analysis of women's representation - The Fawcett Society, https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/the-northern-powerhouse-an-analysis-of-womens-representation 76. Woman-of-the-North-report.pdf, https://www.healthequitynorth.co.uk/app/uploads/Woman-of-the-North-report.pdf 77. Mini-Project-FINAL-DRAFT 2 - University of Warwick, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/schoolforcross-facultystudies/gsd/engagement/studentresearch/gd107/hs3.pdf 78. The North can be a powerhouse for Nature and growth - Natural England blog, https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2025/03/07/the-north-can-be-a-powerhouse-for-nature-and-growth/ 79. West Yorkshire Mayor Tracy Brabin showcases green economy vision and announces Reset Connect North delivery 2026, https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/all-news-and-blogs/west-yorkshire-mayor-tracy-brabin-showcases-green-economy-vision-and-announces-reset-connect-north-delivery-2026/ 80. A sustainable district | Bradford Council, https://www.bradford.gov.uk/council-plan/our-priorities/a-sustainable-district/ 81. Water Resources North - Yorkshire Water, https://www.yorkshirewater.com/about-us/our-vision-and-plans/resources/water-resources-north/ 82. Our Vision - CPRE West Yorkshire, https://www.cprewestyorkshire.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/our-vision/ 83. CPRE Climate Emergency – Cover note, https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CPRE-Climate-Emergency-Cover-note-combined.pdf 84. Devolution consultation - South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, https://www.southyorkshire-ca.gov.uk/about-us-governance-policy/Devolution 85. mayor dan jarvis statement on national lockdown - News - South Yorkshire MCA, https://southyorkshire-ca.gov.uk/news/article/98738279-3ef4-4177-b24b-ede30ab04384 86. THE DEVO 3.0 REVIEW - The UK2070 Commission, https://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/DEVO-3.0-FINAL-REPORT.pdf 87. Integrated Settlements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament, https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-01-30/hcws405 88. York and North Yorkshire devolution deal - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/york-and-north-yorkshire-devolution-deal/york-and-north-yorkshire-devolution-deal 89. York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/your-council/york-and-north-yorkshire-combined-authority 90. Mayor David Skaith protecting community assets through devolution ..., https://yorknorthyorks-ca.gov.uk/mayor-david-skaith-protecting-community-assets-through-devolution/ 91. Where next for Yorkshire devolution? - Institute for Government, https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/comment/where-next-yorkshire-devolution 92. Devolution and Exiting the EU: reconciling differences and building strong relationships - Parliament UK, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpubadm/1485/1485.pdf 93. Trusting place: Improving the lives of local people through place-based approaches | Local Government Association, https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/trusting-place-improving-lives-local-people-through-place-based-approaches 94. IPPR North responds to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, https://www.ippr.org/media-office/ippr-north-responds-to-the-english-devolution-and-community-empowerment-bill 95. Britons back local leaders with fiscal firepower - IPPR, https://www.ippr.org/articles/britons-back-local-leaders-with-fiscal-firepower 96. Levelling up - Centre for Cities, https://www.centreforcities.org/levelling-up/ 97. Community engagement with English devolution - POST Parliament, https://post.parliament.uk/community-engagement-with-english-devolution-2/ 98. Comparative research on local government and fiscal autonomy across Europe - Scottish Parliament, https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/local-gov/correspondence/2023/spicelocalgovernmentcommissionedresearch.pdf 99. Devolution models – Comparing Spain and England - Mickledore, https://regionaldevelopment.co.uk/news/devolution-models-comparing-spain-and-england/ 100. Strengthening the UK's fiscal framework | Institute for Government, https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/strengthening-uk-fiscal-framework.pdf 101. The Barnett formula and fiscal devolution - UK Parliament, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7386/CBP-7386.pdf 102. Local government reorganisation: Policy and programme updates - GOV.UK, https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/local-government-reorganisation-policy-and-programme-updates 103. Subsidiarity - Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subsidiarity 104. Subsidiarity - Oxford Public International Law, https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1477