

**Revitalising  
Democracy in  
South  
Yorkshire**  
The Report of  
Assembly North

January 2016

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## Executive Summary

Assembly North was a citizens' assembly for South Yorkshire.

- A citizens' assembly is a gathering of citizens who are chosen randomly (with stratification) to be representative of the local population.
- They meet over a period of time to discuss and make recommendations on a particular issue. Their work comprises three phases: they learn about the issues on their agenda and the options available, consult with experts and witnesses holding a diverse range of views, and then deliberate on the issues in order to reach decisions.

Assembly North was part of a project called Democracy Matters that ran two citizens' assemblies: Assembly North based in Sheffield and Assembly South in Southampton. The project had two objectives:

1. To assess whether creating citizens' assemblies could strengthen democracy in the UK and to build knowledge on how such assemblies might best be run;
2. To investigate what members of the public in England think about devolution when they are given the opportunity to learn about and debate the issue in depth.

Assembly North focused on how the South Yorkshire region should best be governed.

- It comprised 32 citizens from the four local authority areas of South Yorkshire.
- It met over two weekends in October and November 2015 to discuss whether a new regional body should be formed and, if so, what form it should take.
- Given the broader political context at the time, the starting point for discussion was the proposed 'devolution deal' for the Sheffield City Region that was announced in early October. Assembly members heard from several of the key negotiators of that proposal as well as from representatives of many other viewpoints. They developed considerable knowledge and understanding of the issues and options before reaching conclusions.

In summary, Assembly North makes the following recommendations:

1. The majority of the members advocate a directly elected assembly for Yorkshire with substantial powers, including some tax-raising and law-making powers.
2. Members also support a range of measures designed to enhance public participation in local and regional decision-making.
3. The majority of members do not support the proposed devolution deal in its current form.
4. Nevertheless, the majority also conclude that, given the options currently on the political agenda, local councils should remain engaged with current devolution discussions and should seek a deal promoting stronger democracy and perhaps encompassing enhanced powers.

Detailed analysis of the work of the Assembly will take some time. It is nevertheless already clear that the Assembly has demonstrated that citizens can be ready, willing and able to engage with complex policy and governance debates when given appropriate support and opportunity.

## Introduction

Assembly North was part of an important new experiment in how to run democracy effectively. It was a group of 32 South Yorkshire citizens who met in Sheffield over two weekends in October and November 2015 to discuss the future of local governance. The aim was to select the citizens randomly so that they would be representative of the local adult population. During the two weekends, they learnt about the different options, consulted with advocates of a range of views, deliberated on what they had heard, and reached conclusions.

Assembly North was one of two citizens' assembly pilots organised by Democracy Matters, a collaboration of university researchers and civil society organisations<sup>1</sup> supported by the Economic and Social Research Council. The second pilot assembly, Assembly South, ran over the same period in Southampton and has produced its own report.

These pilots had two objectives:

1. To assess whether the creation of citizens' assemblies could improve the operation of democracy in the UK and to build knowledge on how such assemblies might best be run;
2. To investigate what members of the public in England think about devolution when they are given the opportunity to learn about and debate the issue in depth.

Assembly North was particularly timely because, just prior to its first meeting, the civic leaders of the Sheffield City Region agreed the outline of a devolution deal with Chancellor George Osborne. This proposal (which has not yet been ratified by the local councils) became a central topic of discussion amongst Assembly members. Nevertheless, while Assembly North concluded that local councillors should continue to engage with the 'devolution deal' process, they rejected the deal that is currently on the table. The Assembly recommends a much more ambitious long-term devolution project, leading to the creation of an elected regional assembly for Yorkshire and the Humber as a whole.

This report sets out the background to the creation of Assembly North. It describes the Assembly in terms of its composition and working methods. It then presents a detailed outline of the Assembly's discussions and recommendations. It concludes by briefly reflecting on lessons learned and next steps.

Detailed analysis of the Assembly's work will take some time and will be presented in subsequent reports. It appears clear to the Democracy Matters research team, however, that the Assembly was a tremendous success: it demonstrates that regular citizens can be ready, willing and able to engage with complex policy and governance debates when given appropriate support and opportunity. We therefore look forward to advancing the citizens' assembly model further as a part of the democratic system in the UK.

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<sup>1</sup> These included the University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London, the University of Westminster and the Electoral Reform Society.

# The Background to Assembly North

The introduction set out the two core goals of the Democracy Matters project. This section gives background to these two goals: why did we choose to focus on citizens' assemblies, and why did those assemblies focus on the subject of devolution?

## Why a Citizens' Assembly?

The issue of how best to engage citizens in democratic processes is pressing. Dissatisfaction with existing democratic systems is widespread, participation in elections is below historical levels, and the quality of public debate is low. Supporters of existing systems suggest that, in complex and diverse societies, it is not possible to hear the voice of every citizen on every issue, particularly where many citizens may have limited interest, information or understanding. Meanwhile, critics of current arrangements argue that citizens (and particularly members of minority groups) are often poorly represented and that opportunities for democratic engagement should be both extended and deepened.

### What is a citizens' assembly?

A citizens' assembly is a group of citizens who gather to deliberate on an issue.

The members are not self-selected: they are chosen randomly, with stratification, to ensure they are broadly representative of the population as a whole.

Discussions are structured so that members can consider issues in depth and learn about a wide range of options and views before reaching conclusions.

Such assemblies have been used as part of democratic processes in Canada, Ireland, and the Netherlands.

Citizens' assemblies offer one solution to this challenge. They bring together a random selection of citizens who are broadly representative of the wider population. These citizens learn about the issues under consideration, hear evidence from experts and other interested parties, deliberate amongst themselves and then come to recommendations. Such assemblies ensure not only a diversity of experience and perspectives, but also deep and considered engagement with complex policy issues among citizens. In some cases, their recommendations provide leaders with guidance by identifying new alternatives or options, and in others they become the focus of direct forms of democracy (e.g., referendums).

There are also practical advantages to citizens' assemblies. Through random selection, they can give voice of less politically active citizens who are hard to access in usual public consultation processes. Further, assembly members can be asked to consider the full range of arguments available to decision-makers, and their deliberations can approximate how a diverse community might respond to information on complex political issues.

Citizens' assemblies have been conducted on single issues (such as electoral reform) in Canada and the Netherlands and on multiple constitutional issues in the Republic of Ireland. The Irish case led, most notably, to a referendum and subsequent changes in the law on same-sex marriage.

Most citizens' assemblies have involved citizens only. However, the Irish assembly was innovative by including one-third politicians among the members, which may have increased the political impact of assembly recommendations. In recognition of the growing interest in both of these approaches in the UK, the Democracy Matters project tested both designs: Assembly North comprised citizens only; Assembly South included citizens and local councillors.

## Why Devolution?

Assembly North focused on devolution because this is a highly topical constitutional issue in South Yorkshire – as in much of the country – today. 'Devolution deals' are a major plank of government policy. They entail significant constitutional reshaping, but have so far been driven mainly by concerns about economic development, particularly in the north of England. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority was the first to agree a devolution deal with the previous coalition government in 2014 and additional powers (including in health and social care) were announced in 2015. A number of further devolution deals have been either proposed or finalised across England, including in Sheffield, West Yorkshire, Liverpool, and Cornwall.

These deals are negotiated between central government and leaders of local authorities. The government typically (but not always) requires an elected mayor as a precondition of a deal. However, the announcement of an agreement between the Chancellor and city region leaders does not immediately constitute new arrangements: public consultation and support from local councils are needed for a final deal. Critics claim that these deals have been made behind closed doors, that local leaders will use party discipline to ensure that they are 'done deals' and that any consultations will be superficial. Advocates say that the practicalities of negotiating between levels of government mean they cannot be carried out effectively in public, while coming months will provide an important opportunity to consult and strike stronger deals.

The announcement of a proposal for a Sheffield City Region Deal in October 2015 made Assembly North very timely. The Assembly offers insights into the views of citizens on the local implications of devolution. We will feed its deliberative responses to the proposed deal into the ongoing public consultation on the matter.

## Assembly North: Composition and Working Methods

Two aspects of a citizens' assembly are crucial to any judgements about its success: the degree to which its members are representative of the broader population in their area; and the degree to which their work fosters informed, considered thinking about the issues in hand. We address these two points in this section.

### Who Participated in Assembly North?

Assembly North comprised citizens from the four South Yorkshire local authority areas: Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham. Whatever area is chosen for an exercise such as this is likely to have some effect on the outcome. We chose this area for its relative neutrality: it is not strongly associated with currently prominent reform proposals. The goal was to have 45 Assembly members selected randomly to represent the local population in terms of various socio-demographic characteristics (including gender, age and ethnicity).

The project team did not necessarily expect to achieve this goal as members were not offered an honorarium and there was no established avenue for Assembly outcomes to have direct political influence (both features of citizens' assemblies in other countries). However, the project was able to offer hotel accommodation, meals and compensation for travel costs.

Members were selected from the YouGov online panel. Invitations to complete an initial survey were sent to all members of this panel in the South Yorkshire area. This survey asked about attitudes towards politics and whether respondents would be interested in taking part in a citizens' assembly. Respondents did not know what the topic of the assembly would be, and so were not able to opt in or out on that basis. A second survey of those who initially expressed interest provided more detail on the assembly and asked if they would be available to attend on the proposed dates. Finally, those who responded were contacted by telephone via YouGov to explain more about the event and to answer their questions.

On the day before the first Assembly North meeting, 43 people had indicated to YouGov they would attend. Of these, 32 did attend the first weekend. Of them, 31 returned for the second weekend, and we understand that only illness prevented 100 per cent retention.

The 32 members contained an exact balance of 16 women and 16 men. They were also broadly representative in terms of their political persuasions. However, because the response rate to the filtering survey was low, it was not possible to meet quota targets to ensure that the assembly was representative in terms of age or ethnic background. Members also displayed, on average, higher levels of political interest than the general population, although the group included many who were not already engaged in formal

party politics. Nevertheless, the retention rate from the first weekend to the second was exceptionally high and reflected very strong engagement among members.

## What Did Assembly North Do?

Both assemblies were structured into three phases: learning, consultation, and deliberation/decision. This was designed to ensure that final recommendations were carefully considered and well informed. Successful discussions of this kind require three resources: access to information, expertise, and diverse viewpoints; capacity for inclusive, considered deliberation; and a strong sense of community among members. We worked hard to build each of these.

In order to provide a bedrock of information, the academic team prepared a set of detailed briefing papers that introduced the issues that the Assembly would be discussing. These were vetted by a range of experts with varying perspectives to ensure neutrality. Assembly members were given copies at the start of the first weekend; the papers were also posted on the Assembly website, where they remain freely available.

Building upon this foundation, members received interactive talks by academic team members during the first weekend outlining the current local government system and various reform options. Members then heard from witnesses with diverse backgrounds, who expressed a very wide range of views. Witnesses at the first weekend were selected by the academic team to represent the full range of options that are currently advocated. Those at the second weekend were invited in response to requests from Assembly members.

Between the weekends, the support team pursued Assembly members' questions and requests for further information, assisted by Sheffield City Council, the House of Commons Library, local politicians and Assembly witnesses. Over thirty such requests were addressed; responses were posted to the Assembly's closed Facebook group (see below) or presented at the second weekend.

To maximise opportunities for effective and inclusive discussion, we alternated between small-group discussions chaired by facilitators and whole-group plenaries. Facilitators worked to ensure that all members were both heard and genuinely listened to. We also used interactive presentations, group simulations, advocate Q&As and expert 'speed dating' with small groups. Discussion continued through the Facebook group between the weekends.

To build community, we embedded a range of team-building activities into the weekends, particularly during breaks and in the evenings. Early in the first weekend, Assembly members discussed the values that they wanted to underpin their working methods. A range of support team roles were identified to address any problems or concerns that Assembly members had. We also sought to engage and retain members through the Facebook group. 77 percent of Assembly North members joined this group, and 52 percent contributed to discussions. This is well above the 20 per cent that is the standard engagement result for online communities. At the end of the second weekend, members were asked whether they



wished to be involved in future assembly-related events, and there was a 100 per cent positive response.

We summarise below the schedule of Assembly North during the two weekends.

### Weekend 1: Learning and Consultation

Saturday (10–17.30)	Sunday (9.30–15.00)
<i>Morning</i>	<i>Morning</i>
Survey of members	Introduction to reform options (plenary and small groups)
Introductions (small groups)	Hearing and questioning witnesses* on options (plenary)
Setting values and ground rules (small groups and plenary)	Generating further questions for witnesses (small groups)
Reflection on experiences of local government (small groups and plenary)	
<i>Afternoon</i>	<i>Afternoon</i>
Introduction of core questions (plenary)	Question time with witnesses (plenary)
Expectations of local government (small groups)	Reflections on options (small groups)
Local government now (lecture and small groups)	Requests for further information (small groups and plenary)
	Survey of members

\* **Witnesses:** John Mothersole (Chief Executive of Sheffield City Council); Mike Emmerich (ex-Chief Executive of think tank New Economy); Arianna Giovannini (Huddersfield University); Cllr Sioned-Mair Richards (Sheffield City Council); Andy Mycock (Huddersfield University); Nigel Slack (community advocate).

### Weekend 2: Further Consultation, Deliberation and Decision-Making

Saturday (10.30-17.00)	Sunday (9.30-15.00)
<i>Morning</i>	<i>Morning</i>
Survey of members	Governing structure of a devolved body (small groups and plenary)
Thoughts since Weekend 1 (small groups and plenary)	Vote on governing structures
Recap and report on members' requests (plenary)	Discussion of additional issues for voting (small groups and plenary)
Hearing from witnesses** (plenary)	
Witness speed dating (small groups)	
<i>Afternoon</i>	<i>Afternoon</i>
Hopes and fears for devolution (small groups)	Vote on further issues
Prioritising powers for a devolved body (small groups and plenary)	Discussion of proposed Sheffield deal (small groups and plenary)
Geographical scope of a devolved body (small groups and plenary)	Vote on proposed Sheffield deal
Vote on geographical scope	How can we take the message out? (small groups and plenary)
	Reflections on the process (small groups and plenary)
	Survey of members

\*\* **Witnesses:** Peter Davies (former Doncaster Mayor); Sir Stephen Houghton (Leader, Sheffield City Region); Dr Tim Moorhead (Sheffield Clinical Commissioning Group); Diana Wallis (former MEP and representative of Yorkshire First).

## Assembly North's Discussions and Recommendations

Assembly North focused on the question of how the South Yorkshire area should be governed. We structured this discussion into three broad areas:

1. *Scale*: If a tier of government is to be created above the level of the current local authorities, what area should it cover: for example, South Yorkshire, or a broader definition of the Sheffield City Region including parts of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, or Yorkshire as a whole, or the North of England?
2. *Structures*: If a tier of government is to be created above the level of the current local authorities, what should the structure of decision-making be within that tier: for example, should there be an elected mayor held to account by local councillors, or a mayor accountable to an elected assembly, or an elected assembly without a mayor?
3. *Powers*: What powers – if any – should be exercised at each of the current or possible future levels of government: at the national level, at a regional level, at the level of current local government areas, and at the level of communities smaller than the current local councils?

In addition, Assembly members were able to place further aspects of the system of local governance on the agenda. Finally, given that the Assembly opted for a system that would be substantially different from the one currently proposed in the devolution deal, the Assembly also voted on its stance towards the proposed Sheffield City Region deal.

The Assembly discussed all of these issues in detail. During the second weekend, it voted on them in a series of ballots. The results of these votes are explained below.

### The Scale of a Regional Tier

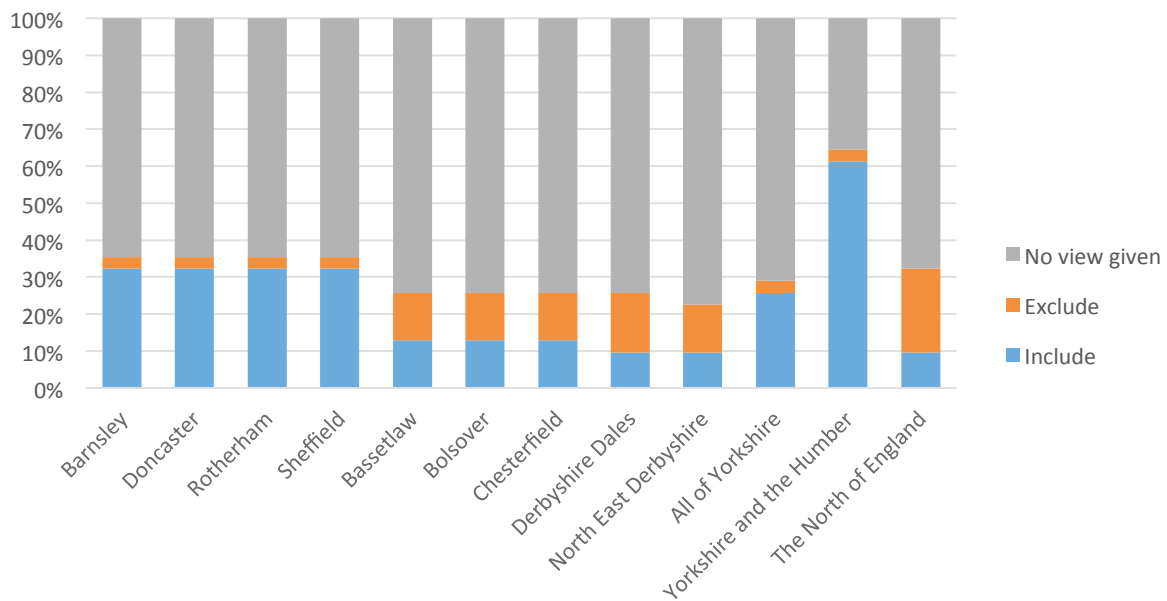
The first question to be voted on asked 'If a regional body is to be created in our area, what parts of the region should it include?' The decision to take this vote first reflected the wish of the Assembly members: the Democracy Matters team originally envisaged that a vote on powers would come first, but it became apparent that this would be incompatible with how many members' preferences were structured.

The system currently proposed by government and local council leaders is for a devolution deal covering the Sheffield City Region. The four local council areas of South Yorkshire – Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, and Sheffield – are full members of the Sheffield City Region, while one council in north Nottinghamshire – Bassetlaw – and four in Derbyshire – Bolsover, Chesterfield, Derbyshire Dales, and North East Derbyshire – are associate members. The Assembly members therefore discussed and voted on whether to include each of these areas. In addition, interest was expressed by Assembly members in both a Yorkshire-wide tier of government and a tier covering the whole of the north of England. These options were therefore included in the discussions and votes.

The results of the vote on these issues are shown in Figure 1. In summary:

- The results reveal a clear majority preference for a regional tier of government covering Yorkshire as a whole.
- The vote included two options for the definition of this area: Yorkshire in its traditional boundaries; or Yorkshire and the Humber, including North and North East Lincolnshire. The majority favoured the latter.
- Nevertheless, a sizeable minority did not support the Yorkshire-wide option. The other option that attracted significant support was that of a South Yorkshire body.
- There was little support for inclusion of any parts of Derbyshire or Nottinghamshire. This represents, of course, the view of a group from South Yorkshire. The case for including neighbouring areas to the south was raised by some witnesses and discussed to some degree, but not debated in detail.
- There was also little support for a body covering the whole of the North of England.

Figure 1. Voting on the Scale of a Regional Tier



Note: Assembly members were able to vote for as many or as few options as they wished. Some options were left blank by most members. The figures are percentages of the 31 members present for the second weekend.

On the basis of this vote, the Assembly proceeded to devise a plan for a body covering Yorkshire and the Humber. That a significant minority preferred a South Yorkshire body should, however, be recognised.

### The Structure of a Regional Tier

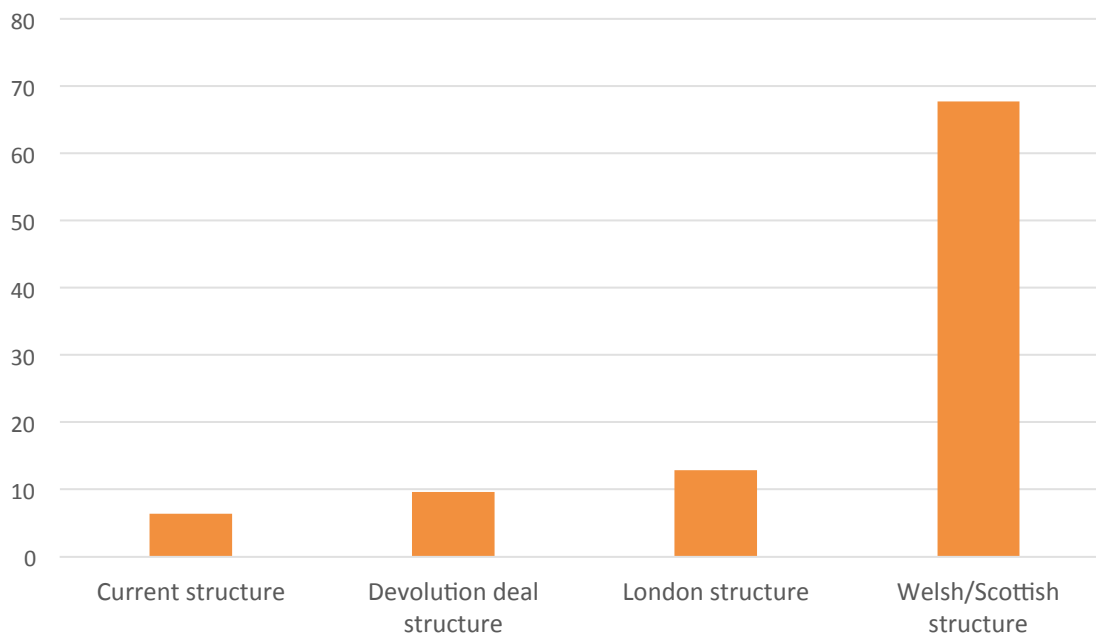
The Assembly voted next on the structure that a Yorkshire regional tier should have. Building on the preceding discussions, four options were taken to the vote:

- The **current structure** before the implementation of any devolution deal: a combined authority, in which the leaders of local authorities in the area make decisions together, with scrutiny from other councillors;
- The structure proposed in the **devolution deal**: a directly elected mayor heading a combined authority with council leaders, and with scrutiny from other councillors;
- The **London structure**: a directly elected mayor who works closely with local councils but is not formally tied to them, with an elected regional assembly holding him or her to account;
- The **Welsh/Scottish structure**: an elected regional assembly, which votes on major issues, and which chooses a 'First Minister' to form the regional executive.

In order to ensure that the result of the vote accurately reflected members' preferences, this vote was held using the alternative vote (AV) electoral system. Members were therefore able to rank the options in order of preference.

A clear majority preference emerged on the basis of first preferences: two thirds of the Assembly members (21 of the 31 present) voted for an elected regional assembly on the model of the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly. The second preference, with four votes was the combination of an elected mayor and an elected assembly, as in London. The current system and the system proposed in the current devolution deal received only two and three votes respectively.

Figure 2. Voting on the Structure of a Regional Tier



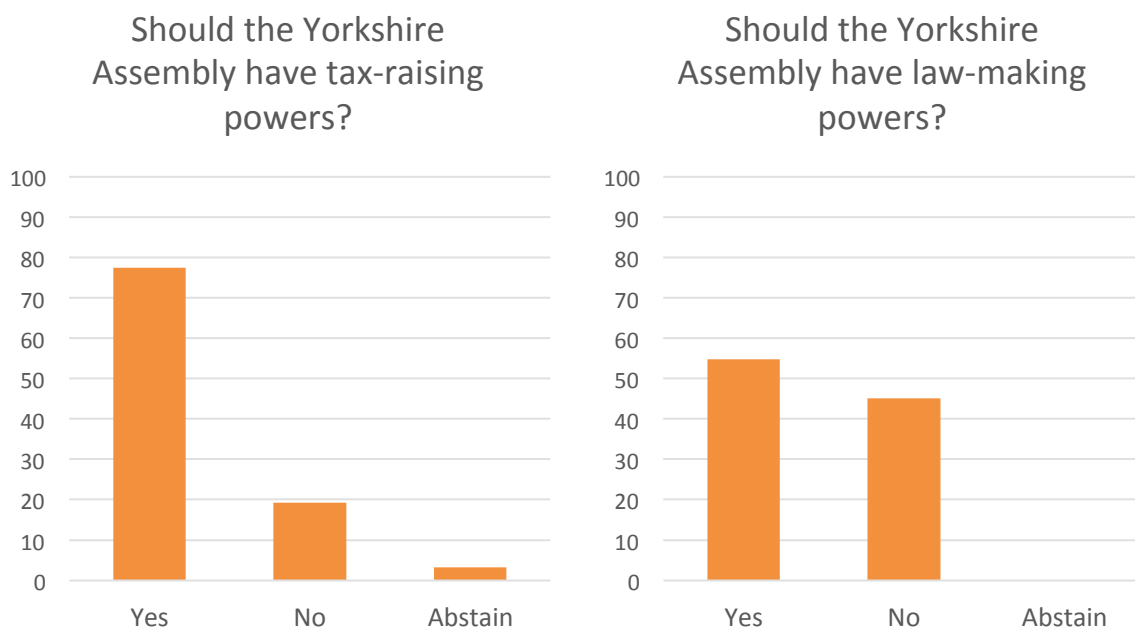
Note: Only first preferences are shown. Numbers are percentages of the 31 members present during the second weekend.

## The Powers of a Yorkshire Regional Assembly

The Assembly then considered the appropriate powers for an elected Yorkshire Assembly. Two general questions were considered: whether such an Assembly should have law-making powers (that is, powers to make primary legislation – as in Scotland and Wales) or not (as in London); and whether it should have tax-raising powers (as, increasingly, in Scotland) or simply receive a block grant from central government (as in Wales and London).

The results of these votes are shown in Figure 3. A substantial majority of members favoured tax-raising powers. There was not time to examine the complex question of what taxes should be devolved or how far the Assembly should be self-financing, and it was clear that initial opinions on these matters varied among Assembly members. A majority, but a much narrower one (17 votes to 14) favoured law-making powers. Some members expressed concerns that giving too much power to the regional assembly could create either a ‘race to the bottom’ or a ‘postcode lottery’. The general mood was nevertheless clearly for significant devolution beyond what is currently on offer.

Figure 3. Voting on Law-Making and Tax-Raising Powers



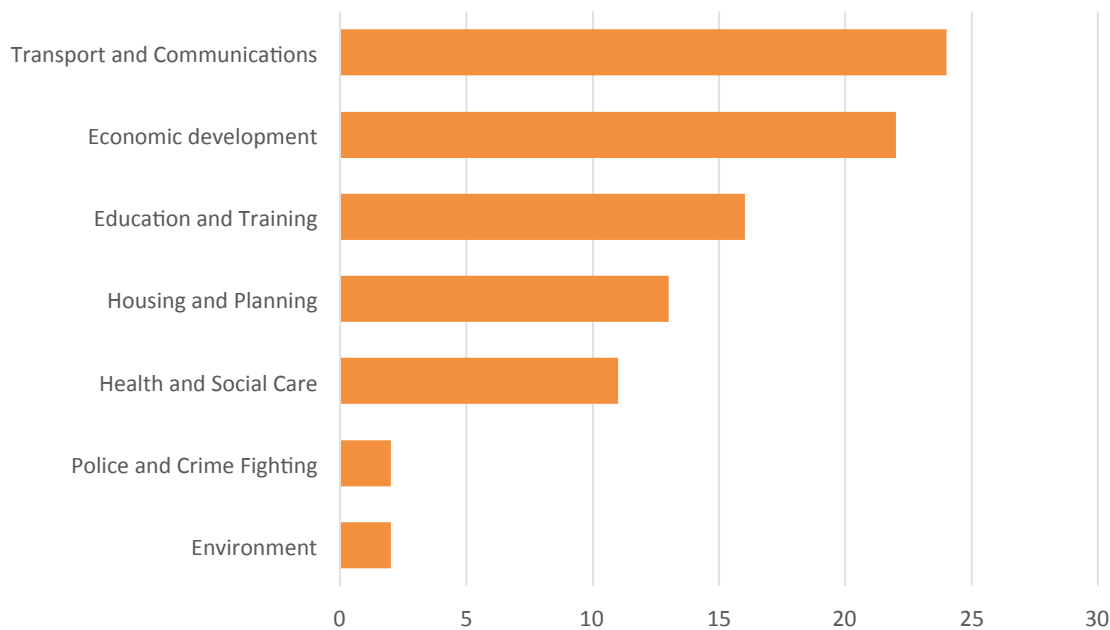
Note: Numbers are percentages of the 31 members present during the second weekend.

Assembly North also considered the sorts of issues that it would particularly want an elected Yorkshire Assembly to deal with. It was not possible to examine the full range of issues in depth. Nevertheless, a wide-ranging discussion and an indicative vote took place. Small-group discussions yielded a range of policy areas that at least some Assembly members thought would be particularly important. The vote then allowed members to indicate which three of these would be their highest priorities. The results are shown in Figure 4. They

show that most members attached priority to the areas of transport and communications, economic development, and education and training.

There was also discussion that some but not all powers should be devolved in each of the policy areas. An example is the area of education. There was discussion of the differences between pre- and post-16 education and between academic and vocational education. There was most interest in devolution of real powers in relation to post-16/vocational education and training. But there was also some interest in devolution of powers over academies and free schools.

Figure 4. Voting on Policy Priorities



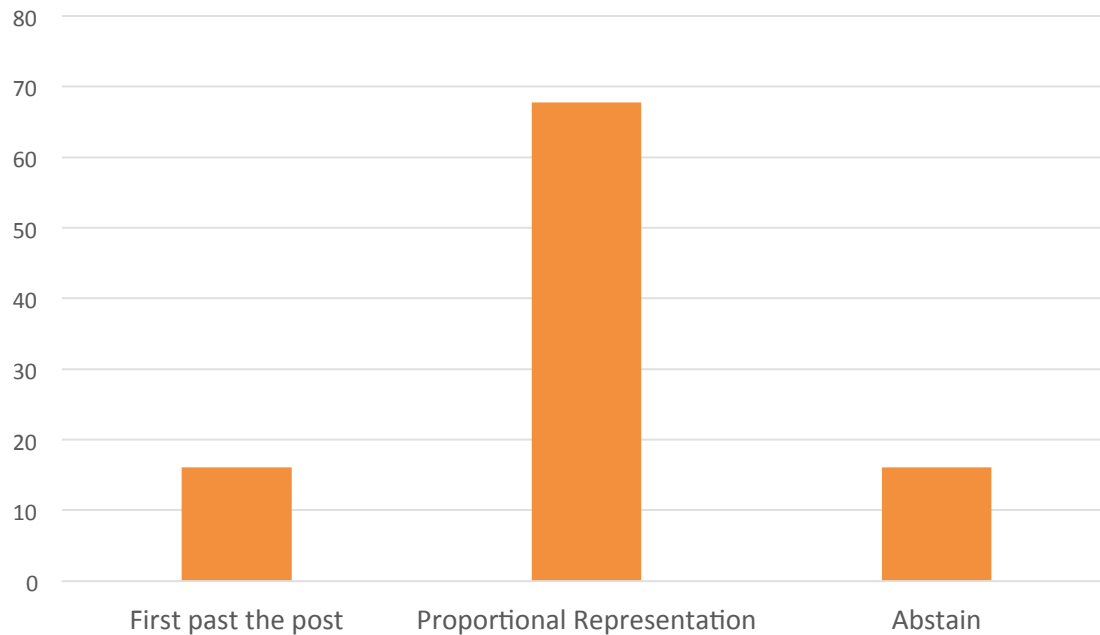
Note: Assembly members were able to vote for up to three priority areas. The numbers shown are raw vote numbers for each of the options.

### Further Aspects of Democracy and Governance

Many further aspects of local democracy and governance were raised during the Assembly’s meetings. Discussion of these took place on the final day and a series of votes were held.

One question was the core issue of the electoral system for the Yorkshire Assembly. As Figure 5 shows, members voted overwhelmingly for the principle of proportional representation rather than a first past the post system as used for elections to the House of Commons.

Figure 5. Voting on the Electoral System for the Yorkshire Assembly



Note: Numbers are percentages of the 31 members present during the second weekend.

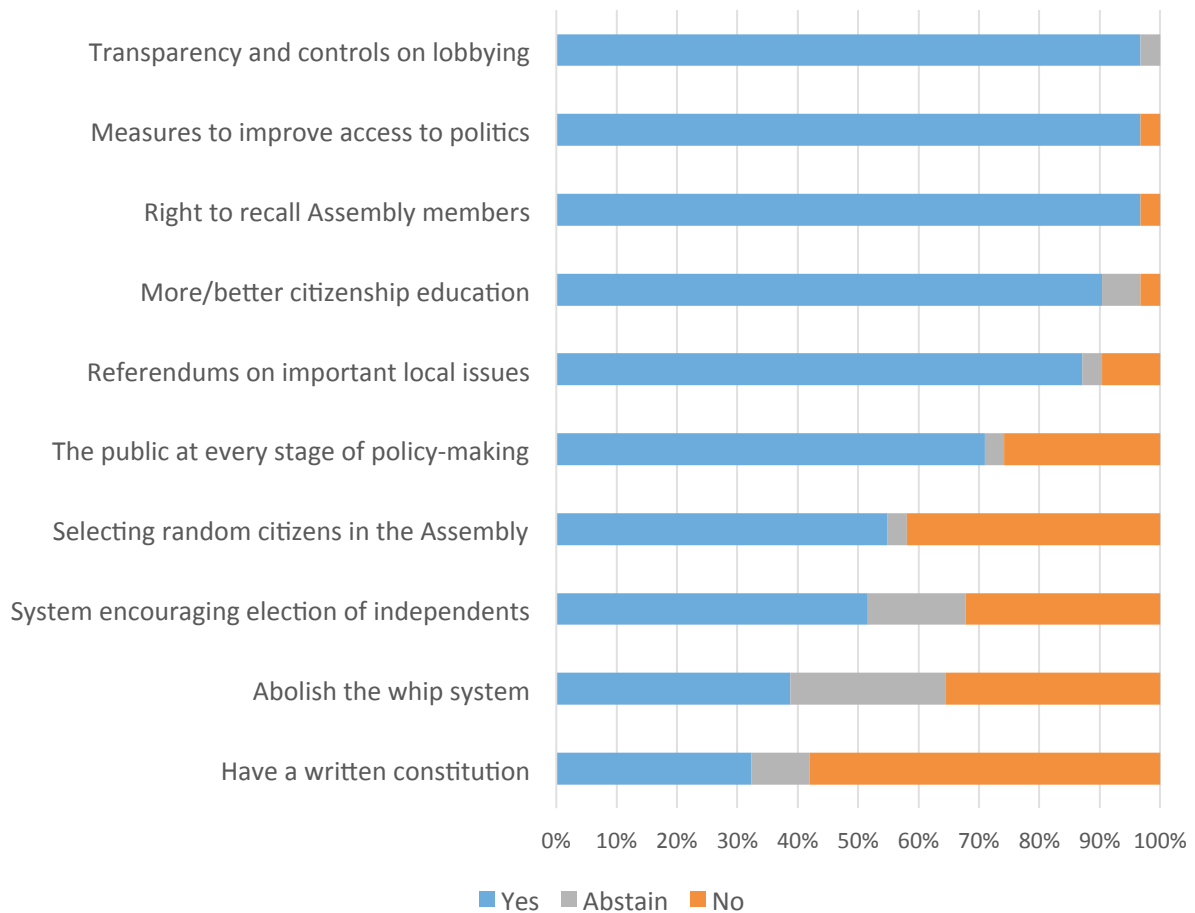
A series of Yes/No votes were then held on a range of further issues, as shown in Figure 6:

- Five proposals were backed by overwhelming majorities of Assembly members: proposals to ensure transparency and to control lobbying in local and regional government; to improve public access to politics, particularly among younger citizens, through measures such as electronic voting and improved online information; to allow citizens to recall members of the Yorkshire Assembly ahead of scheduled elections; to improve citizenship education in schools; and to hold referendums on important local issues.
- Another three proposals were supported by smaller majorities: to ensure direct public participation in decision-making at every stage of the policy process; to include randomly selected members of the public among the members of the Yorkshire Assembly; and to introduce an electoral system for the Yorkshire Assembly that would encourage the election of independents rather than just party representatives.
- Two further proposals did not receive majority backing. A proposal to abolish party whipping was supported by more members than opposed it (12 votes to 11). But a significant number of members (eight) abstained, perhaps reflecting the fact that there had been limited time to discuss the idea. A proposal for a written constitution was also rejected, though, again the topic was not discussed in depth.

Assembly discussions revealed important nuances in relation to some of these points. Notably, in relation to random selection of citizens into the Yorkshire Assembly, members acknowledged that this would need to be done carefully. There was general agreement that citizens selected in this way would need to be paid in some way. One idea was that people could indicate when registering to vote whether they would be available for such service.

Another was that such participation might be limited to serving on particular committees rather than being long-term members of the whole assembly.

Figure 6. Voting on Further Aspects of Democracy and Governance



Cutting across a number of these points, it was emphasized that random selection, referendums, hyper-localism and other mechanisms allowing citizens to engage more would work only if citizens were also helped to engage more, through better citizenship education, improved use of the internet to engage (in particular) younger voters, and other such measures.

Votes were also held on three possible structures for local government below the level of the Yorkshire Assembly. There was considerable interest among members in strengthening the powers of local communities below the level of the four current local authorities in South Yorkshire. Three options were discussed:

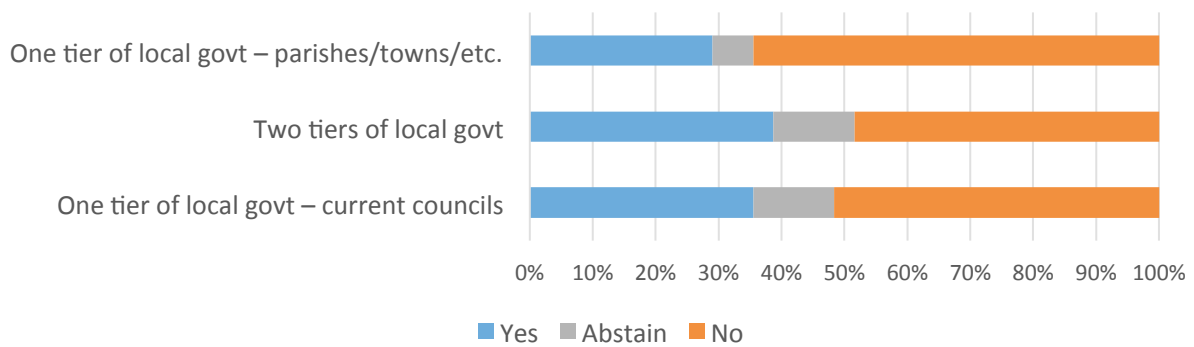
- That a one-tier structure of local government should be retained, based on the four existing local authorities;
- That a two-tier structure should be established, including both the current local councils and a lower tier of parish, town, or community councils;



- That the existing local authorities should be abolished and a one-tier structure of local government introduced at the level of parishes, towns, or communities; the existing councils’ powers would then be transferred either down to this tier or up to the Yorkshire Assembly.

Figure 7 shows the voting on these options. None received majority support. In order to reach a clear view, more discussion time would have been needed, followed by a ballot using the alternative vote. Such time was not, however, available.

Figure 7. Voting on Structures of Local Governance



## Response to the Proposed Devolution Deal for the Sheffield City Region

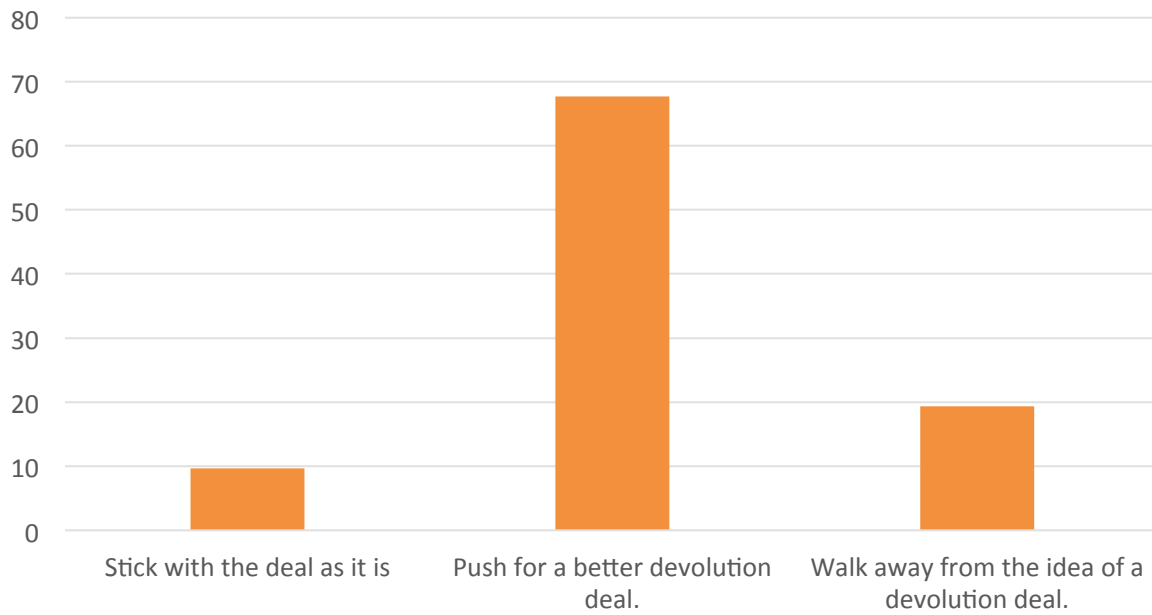
Finally, Assembly North considered its response to the devolution deal that is on the table for the proposed Sheffield City Region. Two votes were held on this.

The first vote asked whether members thought that council leaders in South Yorkshire should accept the deal in its current form, try to push for a better deal, or walk away from the idea of a devolution deal. As Figure 8 shows, a substantial majority voted to push for a better deal.

There was only limited time to discuss the elements that an improved deal should contain. But there were clear concerns about the proposed elected mayor: many members felt the accountability of a mayor would be limited, that a bad mayor could do much damage, and that there could be gridlock if the mayor and local councillors disagreed strongly. There was also concern that the mayoral model was apparently being imposed from outside, even though part of the proposed city region (Sheffield City itself) had previously voted against a proposal for a (different) mayoral system in a referendum in 2012. Some members also wanted to see greater powers in areas such as health and social care and the environment, though there was insufficient time to gauge the overall balance of opinion.

This vote reflects a nuanced view among Assembly members: while their ideal was for a much more ambitious programme of devolution to Yorkshire as a whole, they also recognised that this option is not currently on the government’s agenda and that, in the shorter term, it would be desirable for policy-makers to continue their engagement with the current devolution process. While some witnesses had argued that the region should not allow itself to be pushed into accepting a weak devolution settlement by central government, several others had highlighted the additional funding and powers could be lost if the region walked away from the current offer.

**Figure 8. Voting on How Local Councils Should React to the Devolution Deal**



Note: Numbers are percentages of the 31 members present during the second weekend.

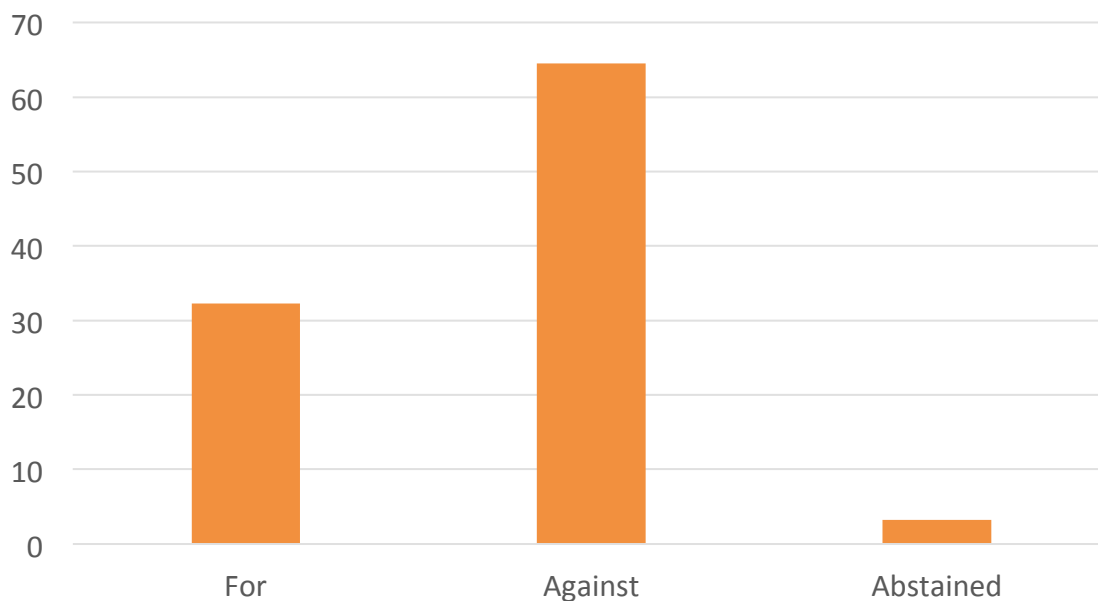
The second vote asked the question ‘If a referendum were held tomorrow on the Sheffield Devolution Deal as currently proposed and the local councils said this is the best they can get, would you vote for it or against it?’ The results for this vote are shown in Figure 9. As is apparent, a substantial majority of Assembly members would vote against the current deal, though a significant minority did express the contrary view.

## Summary of Assembly North’s Decisions

In summary:

1. The majority of the members of Assembly North advocate a directly elected assembly for Yorkshire with substantial powers, including some tax-raising and law-making powers.
2. Members also support a range of measures designed to enhance public participation in local and regional decision-making.

Figure 9. Voting on the Current Devolution Deal



Note: Numbers are percentages of the 31 members present during the second weekend.

3. The majority of members do not support the proposed devolution deal in its current form.
4. Nevertheless, the majority also concluded that, given the options currently on the political agenda, local councils should remain engaged with current devolution discussions and should seek a deal promoting stronger democracy and perhaps encompassing enhanced powers.

## Lessons Learned about Citizens' Assemblies

Detailed analyses of how well Assembly North operated and what lessons can be learned will take some time to complete and will therefore be presented in future reports. For now, we offer observations that are based on feedback from Assembly members and the impressions of the members of the Democracy Matters team. We report on four broad lessons from Assembly North at this time.

The first and most important lesson is that the citizens involved with Assembly North were willing and able to deal with highly complex contemporary governance issues. By their own assessment, all members agreed that they had 'learned a lot' during the process, while many went out of their way to write strongly complementary statements in the final survey at the end of the final day. The Democracy Matters team was deeply impressed by the extent of members' commitment and the quality of their engagement during the weekends. Between the two weekends, members' questions and information requests were taken to politicians, parliamentary researchers, policy officers and academics. All of these professionals noted the insight and rigour of the citizen requests put before them. Equally important, Assembly members have become more involved in local governance debates. Many have reported through the Facebook group on their activity in taking the outcomes of Assembly North to their elected representatives.

Second, the Assembly showed the importance of ensuring members could hear a broad range of informed views on the issues under deliberation. They gained access to key decision-makers, and additional witnesses were secured between the weekends at their request. Members welcomed the diversity of views on display and the (at times passionate) disagreement amongst witnesses. They embraced the opportunity to question key figures directly. In particular, 'Witness Speed Dating' was a great success: witnesses circulated around the small-group table, spending eight minutes at each, allowing members to question them in depth according to their own agenda – though we learned that more time was needed to gain the most from this activity. These experiences address a common criticism of other forms of citizen engagement: that members of the public lack the information and expertise to produce robust recommendations.

Third, some of Assembly North's conclusions were unexpected by the research team. Most notably, it was assumed that the regional assembly option would attract little interest because of the previous prominent failure of similar ideas in the North East referendum of 2004. However, interest in a Yorkshire regional assembly became apparent early in the first weekend, and members specifically requested more information about regional assemblies at the second weekend. This interest was based not solely on affiliation with a Yorkshire identity, but also on economic grounds: many members did not believe South Yorkshire alone had the size or infrastructure to rival the global economic centre that is London. This indicates that Assembly North was successful in fostering a deliberative community and that the final recommendations were independently and thoughtfully crafted by Assembly members.

Finally, Assembly North highlighted important issues around the future sustainability of citizens' assemblies at the local government level. Although more effective from a democratic perspective than many other consultation mechanisms, they remain expensive. Quality deliberation takes considerable time. Members deserve to be treated well during that time, requiring good hotels, meeting facilities, food, and refreshments. The success of Assembly North depended on a team of over twenty student facilitators and helpers who gave their time freely, who would not be available to local bodies on a regular basis. Involvement in a citizens' assembly is also time-consuming for its members. While engagement and retention was exceptionally high for Assembly North, it is unclear how regularly this success could be replicated by local government. These challenges highlight the need for careful thinking about timing and strategic choice of issues, as well as matters of scale and resources. But the success of the Democracy Matters citizens' assembly pilots demonstrates that the conditions for future sustainability at the local level are worthy of further examination.

## What Next?

As outlined previously, Assembly North was a key part of a wider project – Democracy Matters – that has two objectives: to investigate the value of citizens’ assemblies as part of democracy in the UK; and to contribute to debates about devolution in England. While detailed analysis of the Assembly’s work will take some time, the initial impression both of Assembly members and of the Democracy Matters team is that it operated with great success. Its conclusions therefore deserve to be listened to by politicians and others in South Yorkshire and beyond.

Since the conclusion of the Assembly’s formal work, many members have contacted local representatives, engaged local community groups, and spoken with ordinary local people about the current devolution proposals and the ways in which Assembly members find they fall short. Members of the Democracy Matters team have also communicated the key findings to local councils and other interested parties. This report is an important element in that communication process.

Indeed, though Assembly North is part of an experiment in democratic practice, the project team has sought throughout to ensure that, as well as providing insights into what works best, the Assembly also has as much real-world impact as possible. To that end, the team contacted a range of democratic practitioners, both local and national (including NGOs, parliamentarians, government ministers and civil servants), to highlight the importance of the Assembly’s work. Those who spoke to the Assembly – including former Home Secretary and local MP Lord Blunkett of Brightside and Hillsborough, the Chief Executive of Sheffield City Council, John Mothersole, and the Leader of Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Sir Steve Houghton – were able not just to present their views to Assembly members, but also to hear what an informed citizenry thought about the plans for devolution. This was complemented by endorsements of the process by several local Members of Parliament, and representatives from all the main political parties.

This work will continue throughout 2016. Meetings are ongoing with those involved in the discussions around the proposed devolution deal. Further workshops are planned that will involve Assembly members, politicians, policy officers and civil society groups. And, in the coming months, detailed analyses of the Assembly will be conducted and published in publicly accessible reports, practitioner guides and academic publications.

In addition, in early 2016, the Democracy Matters project will bring together the members of Assembly North and South in a single event. The purpose is to celebrate both Assemblies’ achievements and share their outcomes with politicians, practitioners and the media across the UK. This event will be held at St George’s House, Windsor Castle, and the organisers of Democracy Matters are deeply grateful for their hospitality.

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