

Cumbrian Mayoral Election Delay Saves £1 Million

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In a pragmatic move, the Government has approved a joint request from Cumberland and Westmorland & Furness councils to postpone a proposed mayoral election originally slated for May 2026. The delay, which could push the vote to May 2027, is expected to save taxpayers an estimated £1 million by aligning the election with scheduled local polls, according to the councils.

This decision marks a setback for the Labour Government's initial devolution timeline, raising questions about the pace of its regional empowerment agenda. The two Cumbrian councils must now decide by September whether to establish a mayoral combined authority, a process that will consider public consultation feedback and local priorities.

In a written statement, Local Government Minister Jim McMahon claimed a Cumbrian mayoral authority would enhance "economic, social, and environmental well-being" while reflecting local identities. However, the Government's consultation summary, based on more than 1,300 responses from individuals, businesses, and community organisations, reflects mixed views that will shape the councils' deliberations.

Should the councils proceed, the mayoral authority would become a legal entity in early 2026, with leadership drawn from the two councils until a potential 2027 election. The Government's recent English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill outlines the authority's powers covering transport, skills, housing, economic regeneration, health, and public safety, while also introducing a new layer of governance that some have questioned.

Cumberland Council leader Cllr Mark Fryer hailed the delay as "another step forward" for Cumbrian devolution. "This is about unlocking funding and powers, with decisions made here, not in Westminster," he said in a recent interview. Westmorland and Furness leader Cllr Jonathan Brook echoed this, noting the deferment allows "careful consideration" of public and partner feedback to ensure decisions serve local interests.

Cumbria is among six regions, including Cheshire and Warrington, Greater Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, eyed for devolution under Labour's priority programme. Housing Secretary Angela Rayner earlier this year described these regions as gaining a "fast-track ticket" to local empowerment, promising improved transport and increased disposable income for residents. Critics, however, argue the rhetoric oversimplifies the complexities of devolution, with concerns about cost-effectiveness lingering.

A Cumbrian mayor would hold powers over transport, skills, housing, and economic development, with representation on national devolution bodies to amplify the region's voice.. Unlike metro mayors elsewhere, decisions would require majority backing from local council leaders, although the mayor would retain a veto in most cases. Success stories like Greater Manchester's bus nationalisation under Andy Burnham or Teesside's investment surge under Lord Houchen highlight the potential, but detractors point to added bureaucracy and questionable value for money.

No candidates have been confirmed for a potential 2027 election, but Reform UK's Cumbrian chair, Matthew Moody, confirmed the party's intent to field a contender, capitalising on their recent electoral momentum. The contest could serve as a litmus test for Labour's regional standing, with the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, and Reform UK all expected to field candidates.

As Cumbria weighs its devolution path, the delay offers breathing room to ensure decisions reflect local needs, though it also underscores the challenges of balancing ambition with fiscal restraint.